

HELPING PEOPLE HELP THE LAND:

How Conservation Takes Root in Georgia



Photo courtesy of Calvin Perry, UGA

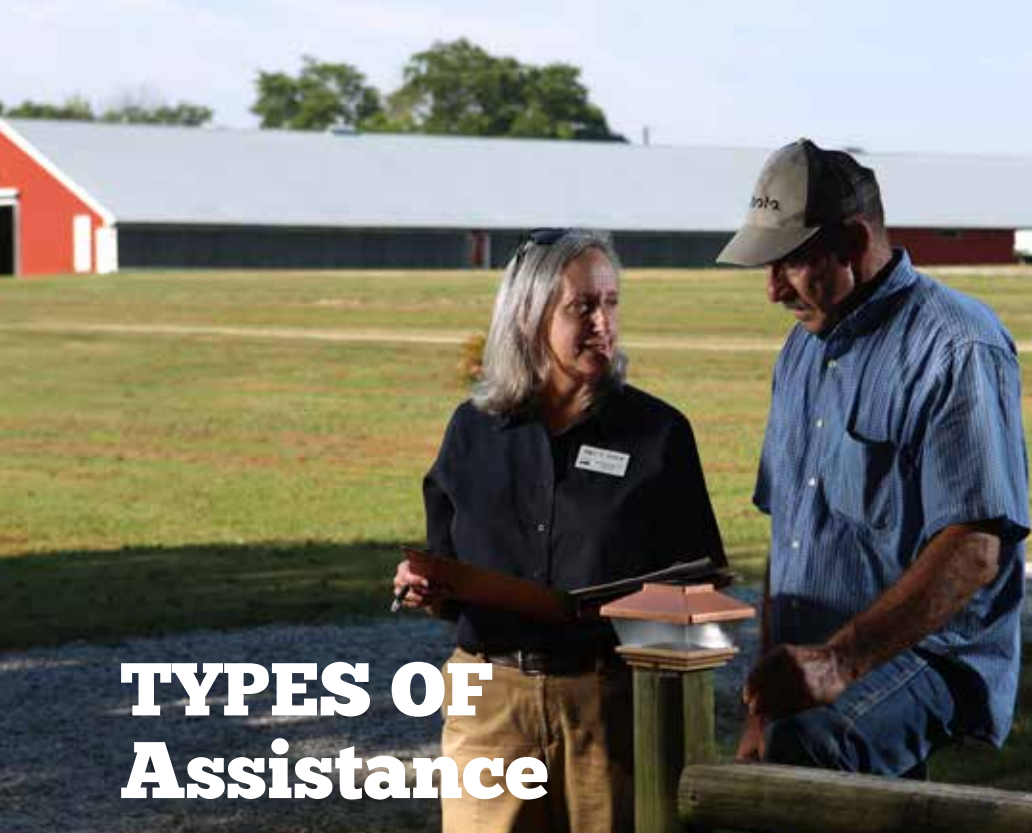


Our Mission

Our Tools

Our Service

| **Special Outreach Section** |



TYPES OF Assistance

GEORGIA'S NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Georgia works hard to keep the state's privately owned land thriving.

Offering services for more than 80 years, the agency's mission is "Helping People Help the Land."

Whether working with individual farmers, ranchers, non-industrial timber producers or wildlife enthusiasts, NRCS promotes science-based solutions to Georgia's natural resource related challenges.

HERE TO HELP

The 2014 Farm Bill reauthorized NRCS to help farmers and landowners implement the best practices for their purposes through two types of assistance – technical and financial.

Through technical assistance, customers can meet with a representative of the agency

and create a tailored conservation plan. NRCS will discuss the health of the soil and other natural resource concerns like water, animals, plants, air quality and energy. Then it is better equipped to identify which programs can best help to achieve a customer's conservation goals.

Participants can choose to address their concerns on their own or apply for one of the

agency's programs. If selected, the participant receives financial assistance to offset some of the costs to install needed conservation practices or, if applicable, to establish a conservation easement.

By working together to meet the needs of the land and the participant's management objectives, NRCS is playing its role in the conservation partnership.



SETTING THE TONE

State Conservationist Terrance O. Rudolph, who joined the Georgia NRCS in mid-2014, has focused on making sure our customers all have a voice at the table.

Rudolph's goal of getting back to the basics of sound conservation planning begins with good communication and creativity that innovates.

"Our partners have walked these fields for generations. They have raised families, built houses and communities on these lands, and know what is needed," Rudolph says. "It is our job to listen to them and encourage new producers to speak up so we can hear their needs, too. By doing so, we know better what programs and services are needed."

SOLID PARTNERSHIPS

Since the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s, the secret to NRCS's success is the local partnerships and stakeholders. Georgia's local stakeholders, such as the Georgia Association of Conservation Districts (GACD), provide vital insight and feedback to local staff and national policy makers alike.

"Representing 40 Soil and Water Conservation Districts with a very diverse set of challenges and needs, we are in tune with the needs across Georgia," says GACD President Dan Bennett. "But as local leaders, we actively seek the perspective of new partners who help keep our vision fresh

and nimble to meet the emerging needs of the land."

Lending a hand to meet the new challenges to the districts and the state's residents is the Georgia Soil and Water Conservation Commission. "2015 has brought new changes to the Conservation Commission, including new state board membership and administrative attachment to the Georgia Department of Agriculture," says Executive Director Brent Dykes. "However, the Conservation Commission remains a strong partner with GA NRCS in meeting the conservation needs of landowners across the state."



TECHNICAL Assistance



SOUND ADVICE

Farmers have been working for centuries to protect natural resources – their lives depended on it.

To aid in the challenging landscape of Georgia's agriculture and forestry industry, NRCS offers suggestions about which conservation practices can benefit each producer's overall management plan. Together, this win-win relationship helps the customer thrive while providing public benefits such as abundant wildlife, clean water and air.

IT STARTS WITH A PLAN

At the core of what NRCS does is conservation planning. All customers begin by visiting with local USDA Service Center staff to have their property registered and request assistance.

Afterward, NRCS representatives walk the land with the producer to talk about how the customer wants to utilize the land. The agency offers suggestions to address concerns and discusses which conservation practices can help. These suggestions are compiled into the land's conservation plan, which can include engineered designs or simple how-to guidance.



LOOKING DEEPER

Farming begins from the ground up. Therefore, conservation planning focuses on the foundational aspects of farming, such as soil health. Without healthy, productive soil, crops can't flourish.

A main priority for NRCS is to educate producers and consumers about the importance of healthy soil, the impact it has on the agriculture industry and how to help keep the state's working lands productive.

In Madison County, a cattleman dedicated his career to helping reverse soil erosion on his farm with the help of Georgia NRCS.

Together, they decided on planting several varieties of forage in the cattleman's pastures. Using a rotational grazing system, his cows would graze for a short period of time in one specific area, then move to another. This forage production approach provided live roots year round that lend to healthier soils.

"The technical support part was really the true value for me," the livestock farmer says.

Soils play a role in another crop that Georgia is known for – pine trees. In particular, the Longleaf pine tree prefers sandy soil that is found in certain parts of Georgia and the Southeast, and provides critical habitat for threatened and endangered

species. As a result, with the help of NRCS, an Appling County farmer is working to restore the native longleaf pine trees, which helps perpetuate wildlife habitat, prevents soil erosion and improves air quality. The landowner met with a soil technician from NRCS, who explained to him how certain programs could help with meeting his goals.

"EQIP technical and financial assistance was encouragement for me to plant longleaf," the producer says. "It's very expensive. I would have probably planted slash pine without NRCS assistance."

For more producer success stories, visit the Newsroom topic tab at ga.nrcs.usda.gov.



FINANCIAL Assistance

PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

For generations, NRCS has provided science-based technical assistance. In recent decades, the agency has been able to accelerate the adoption of those recommended conservation practices by offering financial incentives to help offset some of the cost of implementation through different programs.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is the one that is applied for most among several programs that NRCS offers. EQIP helps producers address natural resource concerns and deliver environmental benefits such as improved water and air quality, conserved ground and surface water, reduced soil erosion and sedimentation, and improved or created wildlife habitat. Through EQIP, NRCS helped a new cattle farmer in Fulton County install additional watering facilities and cross fencing as part of his rotational grazing system.

Another program is the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). This program allows customers to maintain and improve current conservation systems, plus implement new practices to address resource concerns they have beyond the typical practices available through EQIP. Olive farmers in Lanier County used this program to improve conservation efforts. It helped them to determine specific nutrient needs in the soil, leading to more precise fertilizer uses.

PROTECTING OUR RURAL LANDSCAPE

Under the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), NRCS helps protect agricultural lands from being used for non-agricultural purposes and wetlands for their related benefits.

In Jenkins County, a landowner enrolled land in the Big Dukes Pond area, aiming to achieve the greatest wetlands value and create a thriving wildlife habitat. NRCS helped improve water quality, reduce flood risk, and create waterfowl and shorebird habitats through the use of conservation easements available now through ACEP.



NEW ERA OF CONSERVATION

As the latest tool in the conservation toolbox, the NRCS is investing in conservation alongside outside groups through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). This is a boldly different commitment to finding locally led solutions to national, regional and state-level resource concerns that allows non-federal groups and their partners to leverage federal assistance to get more conservation on the ground.

This new program combines aspects from former regionally focused programs and works through current Farm Bill programs, such as ACEP, CSP, EQIP and the Healthy Forest Reserve Program. The first round of RCPP is helping Georgians conserve water, reduce soil erosion, preserve farmland and wetlands, as well as restore the historic longleaf pine forests.



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Steps to Assistance

How to Get Assistance from NRCS for Farms, Ranches and Forests

1

PLANNING

Visit your local NRCS field office to discuss your goals and work with staff on a conservation plan.

2

APPLICATION

With the help of NRCS, complete an application for financial assistance programs.

3

ELIGIBILITY

Find out if you're eligible for NRCS variety of financial assistance programs.

4

RANKING

NRCS ranks applications according to local resource concerns.

5

IMPLEMENTING

Put conservation to work by signing a contract and implementing conservation practices.

Get Started with NRCS

Do you farm or ranch and want to make improvements to the land that you own or lease?

Natural Resources Conservation Service offers technical and financial assistance to help farmers, ranchers and forest landowners.

1

Planning

To get started with NRCS, we recommend you stop by your local NRCS field office.

We'll discuss your vision for your land.

NRCS provides landowners with free technical assistance, or advice, for their land. Common technical assistance includes: resource assessment, practice design and resource monitoring. Your conservation planner will help you determine if financial assistance is right for you.

2

Application

We'll walk you through the application process. To get started on applying for financial assistance, we'll work with you:

- To fill out an AD 1026, which ensures a conservation plan is in place before lands with highly erodible soils are farmed. It also ensures that identified wetland areas are protected.
- To meet other eligibility certifications.

Once complete, we'll work with you on the application, or CPA 1200.

Applications for most programs are accepted on a continuous basis, but they're considered for funding in different ranking periods. Be sure to ask your local NRCS district conservationist about the deadline for the ranking period to ensure you turn in your application in time.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

3

Eligibility

As part of the application process, we'll check to see if you are eligible.

To do this, you'll need to bring:

- An official tax ID (Social Security number or an employer ID)
- A property deed or lease agreement to show you have control of the property; and
- A farm tract number.

If you don't have a farm tract number, you can get one from USDA's Farm Service Agency. Typically, the local FSA office is located in the same building as the local NRCS office. You only need a farm tract number if you're interested in financial assistance.

4

Ranking

NRCS will take a look at the applications and rank them according to local resource concerns, the amount of conservation benefits the work will provide and the needs of applicants.

5

Implementing

If you're selected, you can choose whether to sign the contract for the work to be done.

Once you sign the contract, you'll be provided standards and specifications for completing the practice or practices, and then you will have a specified amount of time to implement. Once the work is implemented and inspected, you'll be paid the rate of compensation for the work if it meets NRCS standards and specifications.