



August 11, 2009

Norman Widman  
National Agronomist  
USDA/Natural Resources Conservation Service  
1400 Independence Avenue SW, Room 5234  
Washington, DC 20250

**Re: Conservation Practice Technical Assistance RIN 0578-AA48**

Dear Mr. Widman:

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition is pleased to make these brief comments in response to the June 12 Federal Register notice (Vol 74, No. 112, pages 27995-98) concerning conservation practice TA and standards.

**1. Resource Concerns.** The immediate context of conservation practice standards are the macro and micro resource concerns and their accompanying resource management system quality criteria. For a long time, the agency has expressed the macro resource concerns as soil-water-air-plants-animals or SWAPA, occasionally adding an H for humans or an E for energy to the end of the acronym. Our first recommendation, one we have articulated previously over the years in a variety of different settings, is for the agency to scrap the continued use of plants and animals in this formulation and switch to biodiversity and wildlife.

There are multiple problems with plants and animals, not the least of which is that it is out of synch with farm bill conservation program statutory purposes. Another oft-mentioned problem is the remaining residue of production-related rather than conservation-related considerations within those two categories. A third and not unimportant problem is the confusion the terms create at the ground level where technical and financial assistance programs are implemented. These two terms are not similar to the other terms and their meaning is not immediately obvious. One can think of practices to optimize soil conservation or water quality, but how does one optimize plants or animals? In short, these are anachronisms in need of change to make the whole enterprise of conservation practice standards more relevant and appropriate to current programs.

We recommend the following with respect to Resource Concerns:

- Energy should be permanently added to the registry of resource concerns and appropriate energy conservation and production activities be added to the technical guide as quickly as possible.
- Plants should be changed to biodiversity and animals should be changed to wildlife.
- Remaining conservation practices from within plants and animals that do not fit under biodiversity or wildlife should be transferred to the resource concern that most closely

matches their purpose. If a plant or animal practice does not address soil, water, air, or energy, and does not fit within biodiversity or wildlife, it perhaps should be eliminated.

- The resulting product could be referred to as SWABEW or whatever else the agency prefers to call it if there must be an acronym.
- Beyond the short-hand acronym, references to the resource concerns longer than a sentence or short paragraph should use the more complete rendition of the macro concerns: soil conservation, soil quality, water conservation, water quality, air quality, energy conservation, energy production, biodiversity, and wildlife habitat. In our view, this is the more relevant listing of resource concerns.
- Serious consideration should also be given to adding specific references in a majority of written publications related to resource concerns to detail that soil quality includes carbon sequestration and air quality includes greenhouse gas emissions reduction as they relate to climate change mitigation.
- The agency should initiate a process whereby genetic resource conservation (both plants and animals) can become part of the macro resource concerns of the NRCS. There can be no serious doubt that genetic resource conservation is one of the most serious natural resource concerns faced by the country and the world. There can also be no doubt that farmers and resource professionals can play a critical role in conserving and improving the quality of the very basis of our food and agricultural system. By the same token, there is no excuse to fail to use the agency's considerable know-how, infrastructure, and technical and financial assistance programs to serve this vital natural resource objective. We appreciate the fact that a new resource concern cannot be added overnight and that a process to add genetic resource conservation and related conservation practice standards will take time. But we also believe that now, right now, is the time to start the process.
- Finally, the important strides made in recent years to rid the conservation practice standards of measures that are primarily production rather than conservation related should be continued, eliminating remaining items that do not conform to that important standard.

**2. *Prevention, Ecological Design, and Environmental Management.*** For historical reasons, the agency almost exclusively uses the terminology of conservation “treatment” with respect to conservation practice standards. We submit that this term should be used only in specific instances where it is in reality the most appropriate word choice. For many conservation practice standards, especially the increasingly programmatically important management practices, there are better, more appropriate terms. We suggest three such preferable terms are pollution prevention, ecological design, and environmental management, though of course there are certainly other terms to consider as well.

**3. *Conservation Systems.*** Another general problem with conservation practice standards is their seemingly *a la carte* nature. Conservation takes place in the context of a farming system. Solving our most serious resource concern challenges requires changes in farming systems. It is all fine and good for the agency to provide *a la carte* mitigation band-aids to broken systems if and when those mitigating strategies provide significant conservation benefit. However, the real mission of the

agency and its programs should be to actually solve problems, and in many cases that requires more profound changes to the underlying farming systems than the current conservation technical assistance and practice standard arrangement is designed to address.

Conservation practice standards as expressed into Resource Management Systems have a good deal to contribute to this core mission, but to do so adequately there needs to be greater attention to comprehensive conservation systems. While attention to systems has increased in recent years, too often what is portrayed as a systems approach is actually just a small suite of discrete practices. This is good as far as it goes, but in our view it does not go far enough. NRCS research, technical services, and conservation practice standard infrastructure needs to be retooled to be able to address whole farm systems approaches to the country's major resource and environmental concerns. We strongly urge the adoption of this mission as part of the core work of the agency and its partners.

**4. Conservation Activities.** The advent of the Conservation Security Program and now the Conservation Stewardship Program has shed some important light on conservation practice standards. One enormously beneficial contribution of the first CSP was the thorough updating of the quality criteria that it stimulated. Another contribution has been the advent of the terms conservation activity and conservation enhancement.

These are important advances, but they have also caused great confusion. The current farm bill-directed review of conservation TA is the perfect time to consider how conservation practices need to be updated and modernized to take CSP activities and enhancements into account. The medium-term goal should be to bring all of the enhancements, management measures, activities, and practices under one roof. That will require a fresh look at the current practice standard infrastructure, including the review process. In the short-term, the terminology of the technical guides needs to be immediately updated to reflect the new terms and activities.

**5. Management Intensity.** Another issue that CSP has raised and help crystallize is the multiple levels of conservation performance that might be contained within any single management or vegetative conservation practice. The original CSP dealt with this issue in part through the concept of management intensity, and the new CSP is relying more on the concept of enhancements. Again, these advances have not come without a good deal of confusion. Much of that confusion could be erased if the conservation practice standards themselves incorporated graduated management intensity levels.

We recently heard that the latest revision to the Pest Management practice will explicitly include levels, which we believe is an important advance. This same advance now needs to be undertaken across the board. It is no longer adequate for conservation practice standards to be lowest common denominator propositions, nor is it adequate for them to just be a laundry list of possible optional considerations. While there always needs to be sufficient flexibility within conservation practice standards to deal with the wide diversity of agriculture in this country, there nonetheless needs to be sufficiently robust standards and graduated performance criteria to point in the direction of solving our major ag-related resource and environmental problems through the adoption of advanced conservation systems. We recommend that every review of every conservation practice standard from this point forward include management intensity considerations.

**6. Revision Process.** The public notice and comment system for revising conservation practice standards on a regular iterative schedule is good as far as it goes. We have appreciated being able to

participate through public comment in the past when practices of particular interest to our constituency have come up for review. However, we do not believe this is ultimately the most efficient and effective manner for public participation. Rather, as particular practices (and in the future, we hope, particular activities and enhancements) that are of key concern to sustainable and organic farmers are up for review, we urge you to include sustainable farming practitioners, researchers, educators, and technical service providers directly in the revision process from the outset. We believe this would lead to better outcomes and would help ensure that conservation practice standards adequately address sustainable farming systems and not be written solely from the standpoint of conventional systems.

**7. *Jump Start to Revision Process.*** We are encouraged by indications that agency personnel from science and technology and from programs might soon join with sustainable, organic, and integrated pest management leaders to scope out an overall revision process to more fully incorporate these alternative systems into both programs and standards.

We endorse this idea. We believe the time is ripe for a process to ensure the basic infrastructure of all federal conservation programs work as well for sustainable and organic producers as they do for more conventional operations. The objective should be to make NRCS Conservation Practice Standards relevant to and implementable on farms and ranches using sustainable and organic agricultural systems.

Conservation practice standards that are applicable to sustainable and organic farm management in many instances do not actually include specifications based on sustainable or organic systems or specify practices that are part of alternative methods of farm management. In addition, there are certain practices in organic and sustainable farm management relevant to NRCS resource concerns that are not accounted for in the practice standards. Financial assistance payment rates also do not always reflect the costs and forgone income calculus of alternative systems. There are also shortcomings with respect to NRCS field staff training in alternative systems and with a shortage of currently available TSPs for alternative systems.

Without addressing some of the structural issues at NRCS that have inhibited sustainable and organic farm participation in conservation programs over the years, initiatives aimed at increasing their participation will not fully meet their goals. Lower participation will result in lower environmental benefits. We therefore strongly support the effort to jump start a process to overcome these structural barriers.

**8. *Organic Comments.*** We applaud the excellent comments submitted to you from Organic Farming Research Foundation, endorsed by a variety of organic and conservation organizations. We urge you to give those comments serious and detailed consideration.

**9. *More Information Needed on Internal Review and December 2008 Public Meeting.*** The FR notice does not include any information about the substantive method(s) by which NRCS technical discipline leaders evaluated the applicability of the practice standards to organic farming, specialty crops, pollinator habitat, managed rotational grazing or any other sustainable farming system. There is no indication from the FR notice that the process was data-driven or employed any systematic criteria. This lack of information about the methodology for the evaluation makes it very difficult for stakeholders to engage the findings themselves, or to present data that would be

pertinent. Therefore, we recommend that NRCS publish the methodology, evaluation criteria applied, and substantive contents of its 2008 internal review.

In addition, we are surprised by the FR notice reference to a December 2008 meeting with outside groups. As the leading sustainable agriculture policy organization in D.C. with over 20 years history of working on federal policy for farmers using sustainable agriculture systems in general, and on conservation programs and policies in particular, we are concerned that such a meeting occurred without our knowledge. The FR notice mentions that no comments were received as a result of that meeting. Had we known that there was a meeting and a follow-up comment period, we would certainly have submitted comments. We request that a list of invitees and attendees for the December 2008 be sent to us.

Finally, the FR notice states that the agency's "preliminary determination" is that the practice standards "have the *flexibility* to address the resource needs on all types of farming operations" (emphasis added). We agree generally that the practice standards tend to be open to a relatively wide range of interpretations and applications. However, this openness to interpretation does not necessarily facilitate the new entry of farming systems with which some NRCS staff have little direct experience. To the extent that the applicability of a given practice standard is dependent on the interpretations of District Conservationists and field staff, the "flexibility" of the CPS to be "all things to all systems and crops" without more specific guidance can result in a CPS being irrelevant or unworkable with many farming systems, cropping systems and practices that can provide significant conservation benefits. We recommend that all relevant practice standards include specific sections describing the application of the standard in the context of sustainable and organic production systems, specialty crops, pollinator habitat, forestry, and energy conservation and production.

**10. Adoption of Conservation Practice Standards at the State and Local Level.** We appreciate this opportunity to comment on national level conservation practice standards but we emphasize that the real work of ensuring that practices and standards meet the needs of organic farmers, specialty crop farmers, rotational grazers, pollinator and pollinator habitat protection and other needs happens at the state and local level. NRCS should direct its State and District Conservationists to reach out to state and local sustainable and organic farming groups and others with expertise in these farming systems and practices. These groups should be encouraged to join the State Technical Committees and Local Working Groups.

In addition, as a routine matter, their advice should be sought on revising Field Office Technical Guides or adopting interim practice standards to meet the needs of farmers using a diversity of systems and practices within a state. This will help overcome the barriers to first adopters of farming systems in finding sufficient expertise and assistance from NRCS on relevant conservation practices and systems.

We further recommend that NRCS consider the development of regionally-based groups of NRCS experts and others with expertise in sustainable and organic systems, specialty crops, pollinators, intensively managed grazing systems, pasture-based dairy, high level IPM, etc. who can work across state lines with State and District Conservationists in reviewing Field Office Technical Guides for their relevance to these systems in the region and state. Members of these teams could be drawn from non-profits and academic institutions. Individuals with expertise - most importantly farmers

and ranchers in the region who have adopted the farming systems and practices - should also be included.

Thank you for your consideration of our views and recommendations.

Sincerely,

*Ferd Hoefner*

Ferd Hoefner  
Policy Director  
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition