



United States Department of Agriculture

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS)

DELAWARE FY 2016 Accomplishments Report



Helping People Help the Land

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State Conservationist's Message

Fellow Conservationists and Friends,

I am proud to share the 2016 Accomplishments Report for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Delaware. As the Acting State Conservationist of Delaware since August, I was engaged in all areas of the state and saw firsthand how vital everyone is in getting conservation on the ground—from those behind the scenes on the administrative side to the field employees that work directly with our farmers.

Reflecting back on fiscal year 2016, what immediately comes to mind is the tremendous amount of conservation that was achieved. Through our Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) alone, more than \$8 million dollars went to conservation practice implementation—this figure is significantly higher than our traditional annual allotments. Meaning we were able to help landowners voluntarily do more for soil health, water quality, air quality and wildlife habitat than we ever have before in any given year.

At the national level, conservation planning has been and continues to be a priority among NRCS and our national conservation partners. The following objectives were agreed upon to improve conservation delivery: 1) reinvigorate conservation planning; 2) improve the conservation partnership's capacity to deliver conservation planning assistance; 3) ensure the delivery of technically sound science-based assistance; and 4) build a workforce of strong conservation planners. At the state level, Delaware is moving forward with these objectives as staff and partners have fully been engaged in the conservation planning process. We will continue to ensure field staff have the right expertise and have the tools to work effectively with our diverse customers to help them meet their conservation, production and economic goals.

As my detail as State Conservationist comes to an end, we move into FY 2017 maintaining our core priorities:

Soil Health Management is a key to the long-term production and sustainability of our farmers' working lands. Without the proper care of soil, farmers would not be able to efficiently produce the crops that provide food and nutrients to all.

Conservation Delivery looks at the implementation side of conservation planning and ensures that our landowners understand this comprehensive approach to conservation land application. In conservation planning, our technical experts work with landowners to identify problems and opportunities, determine objectives, analyze resource data, and then formulate and evaluate alternatives to achieve their desired goals.

Long-Term Planning ensures that we are effectively helping farmers address their conservation goals not only today and in the near future, but over the long-haul. We will need to stay in tune with farming changes into the future.

Employee Development is needed to meet the complexities that arise with technology advancements to keep our technical leadership strong. This ensures we continue being a subject-matter expert for our customers in technical assistance and planning.

I encourage you to review this report to gain a better insight into our delivery of technical and financial assistance and the importance of voluntary conservation for all Delawareans.

Yours in conservation,

Ann Baldwin
Acting State Conservationist, Delaware

Inside this issue:

- **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)**
 - *Agricultural Land Easements Component*
 - *Wetlands Reserve Component*
- **Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA)**
- **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)**
- **Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) and Conservation Planning**
- **Engineering**
- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)**
- **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**
- **Soil Sciences and GIS**



Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) has two components--one for agricultural lands (ACEP-ALE), one for wetlands (ACEP-WRE)--in which financial and technical assistance is provided to conserve these lands and their related benefits.

Agricultural Land Easements

(ACEP - ALE) - Under this component, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) helps partners protect working agricultural lands and limit non-agricultural uses of the land.

NRCS works with approved state or local units of government and certain nongovernmental organizations who arrange for the purchase of development rights through conservation easements on private lands. The entity holds and manages these conservation easements in perpetuity.

NRCS may contribute up to 50 percent of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement on approved parcels. All parcels are ranked individually on their own merit. Funds will be awarded to the highest ranked eligible parcels through a statewide competitive process. Entities must bear the cost of appraisals, surveys when needed, title search, legal and closing costs, and monitoring and enforcement of the easement.

2016 Accomplishments

Delaware NRCS has historically partnered with local partners to purchase easements on agricultural lands. When the ACEP - ALE was established in the 2014 Farm Bill, it brought changes that were atypical from previous farm bills.

Changes that affect partner entities directly impact NRCS' ability to provide funding to place an easement.

Although no easements were funded in FY2016, Delaware has sat down with both entities to find a path forward to address challenges and place agricultural easements in the future.

Wetlands Reserve Easements

(ACEP - WRE) - Under this component, NRCS helps to restore, protect and enhance enrolled wetlands. Through the wetlands reserve enrollment options, NRCS may enroll eligible land through:

Permanent Easements – Permanent easements are conservation easements in perpetuity. NRCS pays 100 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the easement. Additionally, NRCS pays between 75 to 100 percent of the restoration costs.

30-year Easements – 30-year easements expire after 30 years. Under 30-year easements, NRCS pays 50 to 75 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the easement. Additionally, NRCS pays between 50 to 75 percent of the restoration costs.

Term Easements - Term easements are easements that are for the maximum duration allowed under applicable State laws. NRCS pays 50 to 75 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the term easement. NRCS also pays between 50 to 75 percent of the restoration costs.

2016 Accomplishments

Delaware completed one restoration site for 16.6 acres in Kent County.

Engineering designs were completed on four wetland restoration sites that together total more than 300 acres. Delaware staff began the process of obtaining restoration permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the projects that are slated to begin in the spring of 2017.

Outreach efforts to identify potential areas for restoration and preservation were conducted and will continue into FY2017.



Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA)

Agricultural Management Assistance provides financial and technical assistance to farmers to voluntarily address issues such as water management, water quality and erosion control by incorporating conservation into their farming operations.

Farmers may construct or improve water management structures or irrigation structures; plant trees for windbreaks or to improve water quality; and mitigate risk through production diversification or resource conservation practices (including soil erosion control, integrated pest management or transition to organic farming).

Historically underserved producers (limited resource farmers, beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged producers, and Veterans who are beginning farmers)

may be eligible for a higher practice payment rate for the implementation of conservation practices and conservation plans.

AMA is available in 16 states where participation in the Federal Crop Insurance Program is historically low: Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia and Wyoming.

2016 Accomplishments

Delaware received two AMA applications in 2016. Delaware approved both contracts, which cover 70.5 acres for a financial assistance total of \$9,629.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

The Conservation Stewardship Program is a voluntary program that encourages agricultural and forestry producers to address resource concerns by undertaking additional conservation activities, and improving and maintaining existing conservation systems. CSP participants are maintaining and enhancing the treatment of soil quality, soil erosion, water quality, water quantity, air quality, plants, animals and energy. Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, improved pasture land and nonindustrial private forestland.

Going into fiscal year 2017, NRCS initiated improvements that will make CSP easier to understand, more flexible and more accommodating to local priorities. A thorough review of the program led NRCS to add a significant number of enhancements and practices.

CSP is available to all producers nationwide, regardless of operation size or crops produced. Applications are accepted on a continuous basis with announced ranking cut-off dates when the ranking and funding of applications on file will occur. Applications need to include the applicant's entire operation and are

evaluated and ranked relative to other applications that address similar resource concerns in Delaware. In the ranking process, applicants receive credit for both--conservation measures they have already implemented and for new measures they agree to add. The applications addressing the most resource concerns to the highest degree will receive the highest rankings.

2016 Accomplishments

In FY 2016, Delaware NRCS provided \$774,275 in financial assistance through 14 new contracts and 8 renewals during the 2016 sign-up period. Renewals were offered to CSP program participants who signed up in 2011 and whose contracts were up for expiration. One of the new contracts for the 2016 CSP was for a beginning farmer.

All CSP contracts are for a term of five years. Overall, DE NRCS currently is providing technical and financial assistance to 86 active CSP contracts on 74,833 acres totaling \$1.14 million annually.

(Note: CSP payments are administered on an annual basis.)



Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA)

The Conservation Technical Assistance Program provides technical assistance supported by science-based technology and tools to help people conserve, maintain, and improve their natural resources. The CTA program provides the technical capability, including **conservation planning**, design and implementation assistance, that helps people plan and apply conservation on the land. This assistance is provided to individuals, groups and communities who make natural resource management decisions on private, tribal and other non-federal lands.

NRCS, through the CTA Program, provides conservation technical assistance that addresses natural resource conservation

issues at the local level that are of state and national concern.

The CTA Program provides the local delivery system and the foundational technical expertise for other NRCS programs. The CTA Program is unique because it provides a substantive level of technical expertise, background and support for Federal, State and local conservation programs. The working relationships that landowners and communities have with their local NRCS staff are unique. One-on-one help through flexible, voluntary programs occurs every day in local NRCS offices. It is the way that NRCS does business and it works.

Conservation Planning in Delaware

Conservation planning is a process from which conservation plans are developed by first understanding the resource needs and the landowner's desired land use goals. Based on sound scientific practices, NRCS provides hands-on assistance to help the landowner develop a conservation plan.

The benefits for the producer to develop a conservation plan are many. Conservation plans provide a strategic guide for reaching land-use and natural resource goals and provide a complete assessment/inventory of a landowner's resources. Implemented conservation plans have a positive impact on the bottom line and help improve the condition of their natural resources.

Conservation planning is a priority among NRCS and national conservation partners to improve conservation delivery. To ensure planning continues to be successfully integrated into technical assistance approaches, some of the following efforts are underway or in process:

- boot-camp training sessions that will expand on conservation planning for conservation district and NRCS employees;

- Program Support Specialists to assist field offices by completing administrative tasks related to contract management, allowing field staff more time in the field planning; and
- Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative that combines tools and processes such as assessing soil erosion, wind erosion, etc...

Delaware NRCS along with state and local partners are fully on board with these efforts and are moving them forward within the state. Several district planners have attended the conservation planning boot-camp and NRCS staffers continue to engage district conservationists and soil conservationists in the conservation delivery streamlining initiative.

Conservation partners within the state include the three Delaware Conservation Districts, Delaware Department of Agriculture, the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, the Delaware Conservation District Employees Association and the First State Resource Conservation and Development Council.

Engineering

The Delaware NRCS Engineering Staff provides sound technical leadership and principles to producers and customers to implement conservation systems and practices on the land. Assistance is provided through evaluation, survey, design, and construction layout and supervision of practices implemented to address natural resource concerns.

Quality assurance is an important role of the Delaware Engineering team. Engineering oversight of projects implemented through public funding assures they meet NRCS Standards and Specifications and function properly to solve the resource concern as intended.

The engineering team is also responsible for training field staff as new technology emerges, new conservation practices are introduced, or as new employees are hired. Advances in survey equipment, computer-aided design and drafting, and engineering software require that the staff master this technology and be able to train field personnel so they can most efficiently implement conservation programs.

All of the implementation accomplishments included in this report have, in some way, been assisted by the Delaware NRCS Engineering Team.

During 2016, DE experienced the construction of many new poultry farms, which kept the engineering staff fully engaged in the technical roles and responsibilities associated with Delaware's traditional waste management practices including manure storage structures, composters and heavy use area pads.

In addition to these popular practices, the staff was also involved with designing and installing the first Denitrifying Bioreactor in the state. The goal of the bioreactor is to reduce nitrate levels and improve water quality. It does this by diverting ditchwater flowing downstream through the bioreactor which then removes the nitrates. The water is then diverted back into the ditch to continue its path downstream.

The engineering staff helps get conservation on the ground.



Denitrifying bioreactors reduce the amount of nitrate in drainage water before it is released downstream. Woodchips provide a carbon source to sustain bacteria which convert nitrate to nitrogen gas through respiration.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers through contracts up to a maximum term of ten years in length. These contracts provide financial assistance to help plan and implement conservation practices that address natural resource concerns and for opportunities to improve soil, water, plant, animal, air and related resources on agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland. In addition, a purpose of EQIP is to help producers meet Federal, State, Tribal and local environmental regulations.

EQIP provides financial assistance payments to eligible producers based on a portion of the average cost associated with practice implementation. Additional payments may be available to help producers develop conservation plans which are required to obtain financial assistance.

Historically underserved (HU) producers (limited resource farmers, beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged producers, and Veterans who are beginning farmers) may be eligible for a higher practice payment for the implementation of conservation practices and conservation plans. HU producers may also be eligible for advance payments up to 50 percent of the estimated contractual payment in order to begin installation of approved conservation practices with an NRCS approved design.

Producers may use a certified Technical Service Provider (TSP) for technical assistance needed for certain eligible activities, services and the development of conservation plans.

Delaware's EQIP incorporates environmental priorities as identified at the state level (State Technical

Committee) and local levels (Local Work Groups) into the selection of what specific program options will be offered, and what factors, questions and screening tools will be used in the application ranking process. Ranking worksheets for each program option include evaluation questions that reflect national, state and local priorities.

2016 Accomplishments

Delaware received 508 EQIP applications for fiscal year 2016.

Delaware approved 189 contracts covering 30,640 acres for a financial assistance total of \$8,500,689. Included in these numbers are 40 approved contracts covering 973 acres assisting beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged and limited resource producers with financial assistance totaling \$3,893,598.

EQIP funding options:

- Beginning Farmers
- Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI)
- Energy Initiative
- Limited Resource Farmers
- National Water Quality Initiative
- Organic Initiative
- Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative
- Socially Disadvantaged Producers
- Veterans

Top Practices:

- Heavy Use Area Pads
- Waste Storage Structures
- Energy
- Irrigation (Water Management)
- Cover Crops
- Nutrient management
- Composters



Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program is the newest conservation tool of USDA NRCS created in the 2014 Farm Bill.

RCPP encourages multiple partners—such as private companies, local and tribal governments, universities, non-profit groups and other non-government partners—along with farmers, and forest landowners to design conservation-based solutions that work best for their region. Local partners and the federal government both invest funding and manpower to projects to maximize their impact.

RCPP allows local partners the opportunity to design and invest in conservation projects that are specifically tailored to make an impact well beyond what the Federal government could accomplish on its own.

RCPP Funding - Funding for RCPP is allocated to projects in three different categories:

Critical Conservation Areas (CCA)- Each CCA has an overarching goal that includes addressing priority resource concerns that are common throughout the area.

There are eight geographic areas chosen by the Secretary of Agriculture as CCAs. These receive 35 percent of funding. The Chesapeake Bay Watershed CCA encompasses about a third of Delaware.

National - For nationwide and multistate projects that further the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of natural resources. These receive 40 percent of funding.

State - For projects in a single state that address state-specific or national priorities. These receive 25 percent of funding.

2016 Accomplishments

Delaware funded one proposal out of its state funding pool. The proposal, ***Assisting Beginning Farmers with Poultry Headquarters Best Management Practices***, was submitted by Sussex Conservation District along with six other key agricultural partners. The goal is to improve water quality by reducing nutrients entering surface and ground water by implementing composters or mortality freezers.

With the rapid growth of the poultry industry, mortality grows as well. Because of the large number of poultry farms in Sussex County and with 228 poultry houses planned to be built in the next two years, the potential to pollute the ground and surface waters with excess Nitrogen and Phosphorus is high. This project will ensure proper mortality management.



Soil Sciences and Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

The main goal of the soils staff in Delaware is to provide scientifically defensible and timely delivery of technical soils information to internal and external partners to meet their ever changing resource challenges. Accurate soils information is the foundation on which NRCS and many partners base their resource initiatives on.

Over the last year the soils staff in Delaware in cooperation with the soil survey division updated 69,924 acres of soil information to more accurately reflect our understanding of these soils. Included in this update was the amendment of the yields table to better replicate typical yields recorded by farmers through improvements in seed varieties, better nutrient management and increased use of irrigation. These types of edits will occur yearly as the soils data is updated in real time. Accurate soils information is currently available online for the whole state through [Web Soil Survey](#), [SoilWeb apps](#), [Geo-Spatial Data Gateway](#) and the electronic [Field](#)

[Office Technical Guide eFOTG](#).

Moreover, Technical Soil Services (TSS) remain the largest work load for the staff in Delaware. Requests range from onsite geo-technical investigations for agricultural structures and best management practices to environmental compliance requirements associated with Farm Bill Programs.

In addition, the GIS staff is preparing the partnership and producers for the transition to the new Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative (CDSI). This platform, in the future, will allow producers to request technical conservation assistance online through a computer or smartphone application. Producers will be able to monitor progress on their technical and financial assistance requests in real time, and ask questions or submit feedback to the appropriate NRCS staff.

**The Natural Resources Conservation Service is an agency of
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**For more information, contact Dastina Wallace, public affairs specialist, at
302-678-4179. Or visit Delaware NRCS online at www.de.nrcs.usda.gov.**



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Note:

All data included in this report has pulled by NRCS' program specialists through the Program Contracts System, known as ProTracts or through the National Easement Staging Tool (NEST). ProTracts is a web-based system used to manage program data for AMA, CSP and EQIP; NEST is a web-based system used to manage program data for NRCS' easement programs including ACEP-ALE and ACEP-WRE.