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Limited Access

How a lack of conservation planning and technical assistance is limiting the ability of small farmers and specialty crop producers to participate in federal conservation programs

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Introduction

In many parts of the United States, for numerous crops and countless farmers, the availability of technical assistance is a key determining, and limiting, factor in whether growers are able to participate meaningfully in conservation programs. This is particularly true for specialty crop growers, who account for 40% of the crop value in the U.S. and for small farmers who account for half of all the farms in the nation. However, the issue of technical assistance in Farm Bill implementation has not received the same level of attention as other issues, such as the payment cap or overall appropriation levels.

This paper describes the limitations of current technical assistance mechanisms, explains the impacts of those limitations specifically for small farmers and specialty crop producers, and outlines some options for meeting their technical assistance needs. Providing sound technical assistance is central to our ability to deliver conservation programs to all farmers, and deserves serious policy attention now and in the deliberations on the next Farm Bill.

Background

Even though technical assistance issues have been hard to focus on with the tremendous pressure to ramp up existing programs and create new ones, technical assistance plays a vital role for farmers 1) at the beginning of a grower's participation in conservation programs and 2) in the application of practices on the ground. Both stages are important to ensuring grower access to the programs and to the implementation of conservation practices.

- At the beginning of a grower's participation in a cost-share or incentive program, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), technical assistance is critical for the initial assessment of resource needs and planning of conservation practices. Ideally such technical assistance would be provided through NRCS' ongoing Conservation Technical Assistance program before the grower applies for financial assistance. Identifying resource problems, evaluating technical alternatives, and determining the most appropriate conservation practices for the management system would be completed without the distraction of "programmatic" criteria or program administrative schedules. With a sound technical plan in place, the grower would then be in a position to select options for installing components of the system through appropriate federal, state, or local financial assistance programs or through the grower's own resources.

- Technical assistance is just as important in the implementation of practices on the ground after a contract is approved. Whether an engineer is designing a more efficient irrigation system, a crop advisor is designing and implementing an integrated pest management program, or a consultant is developing a comprehensive nutrient management plan, skilled technical assistance is essential to the effective implementation of conservation systems. The 2002 Farm Bill recognized that NRCS alone would not have sufficient staff to carry out all the technical assistance necessary for Farm Bill implementation and, while not making provisions for additional agency FTEs, did establish Technical Service Provider provisions, building on the third-party provider mechanism in the 1996 Farm Bill.

Problems

The vast challenges of implementing the range and scope of conservation programs authorized in the Farm Bill has exposed some significant problems in the delivery of the planning and technical assistance that are so important to sound resource conservation. Of particular concern are the effects of these problems on specialty crop growers and small and limited resource producers.

Conservation planning pressures

Conservation planning has been a cornerstone of NRCS' delivery of resource conservation and, has historically been conducted by NRCS and SWCD staff in concert with the landowner. There currently is no counterpart in the private sector to NRCS' conservation planning approach. Prior to the 2002 Farm Bill and its increased programmatic responsibilities, conservationists had more time to meet with growers and help them assess their needs, develop a conservation plan and apply to the right program. However, with the expanded scope of conservation programs, there is inadequate time built into the financial assistance program implementation process for NRCS to conduct sound planning.

Ideally this planning assistance is provided through NRCS' ongoing Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) program before the grower even applies for financial assistance. However, over the last ten years, CTA has not been keeping up with the increased cost of doing business. The situation has been exacerbated by the insertion of earmarks of almost \$100 million a year that further limit the program.

The impact of the problem was delayed immediately following the enactment of the 2002 Farm Bill, as NRCS was able to use the backlog of applications and plans that had been developed to implement numerous USDA conservation programs. However, as one senior state level NRCS official commented, the store of available conservation plans has been thoroughly mined. Now, virtually every grower who comes to NRCS lacks a conservation plan and, therefore, requires significant attention in preparing for and carrying out conservation work. Conservation planning under those circumstances often occurs in a rushed fashion as the grower makes an application or even after the contract is approved.

While it should be recognized that NRCS staff still conduct an enormous amount of work with individual producers, there are unprecedented demands on their time. Growers new to NRCS such as specialty crop producers or small farmers, with unfamiliar production and conservation

needs, pose an enormous workload challenge. These producers often need significant assistance in understanding the program opportunities just to prepare applications. In addition, taking advantage of conservation programs presents a fairly steep learning curve and significant transaction costs for those new potential clients. As a result, small farmers and specialty crop growers, most of whom have not previously participated in conservation programs, are finding it difficult to make use of the conservation programs.

Technical assistance and the limitations of the Technical Service Provider option

A number of concerns about issues, such as the not-to-exceed rates, have been raised about the TSP option for technical assistance. Even so, there are places where the TSP program has worked well, such as eastern North Carolina. Eastern North Carolina has significant acreages of corn, cotton, soybean and wheat acreage for which about a dozen independent crop consultants provide agronomic, pest management and other technical services. In this region TSP provisions have been successful in making EQIP opportunities available to growers and in the implementation of a wide range of conservation practices.

However, the success of TSPs in eastern North Carolina is due to several factors specific to the region and its crops. Eastern North Carolina is characterized by crops and conservation issues that are familiar to NRCS, and growers are well versed in and well-integrated into USDA programs. There is significant acreage of crops grown in the region -- large enough to sustain a number of crop consultants.

By contrast the rest of the agriculture in the state is characterized by smaller farms, a higher percentage of part-time farmers, and a wide range of fruit, vegetable and horticultural crops (Christmas trees, nursery crops). These specialty crops and their unique production and conservation needs are often less familiar to NRCS staff and typically require intensive management and technically complicated nutrient and pest management practices. The producers of these crops are largely unfamiliar with USDA programs and are unlikely to have developed conservation plans. Neither NRCS nor Cooperative Extension Service (CES) are typically staffed with specialists to provide this accelerated technical assistance at levels to support or encourage increased farm bill program participation.

At the same time, due to the smaller acreages and increased diversity of the area, there are virtually no private sector crop consultants available who are dedicated to this region or its cropping systems. The fact that specialty crops need specific technical assistance in specialized areas such as pest, nutrient, and irrigation management also means that virtually no CCAs are likely to possess the skill to provide those services. Thus, the lack of private sector consultants, along with the complexity and intensity of low acreage, high value crop production means that the TSP program is not a legitimate option for meeting the technical assistance needs of producers in this part of the state.

This is the case not just in North Carolina, but in a large number of growing regions nationwide, especially those where specialty crops are concentrated. In states such as Michigan there are a few consultants who are available for some crops such as apples and cherries in seven or eight intensive fruit growing counties. However, in other parts of the state and for other crops, such as grapes in the southwestern counties, there are no consultants available. For example in

California, where there are more than a thousand certified Pest Control Advisors (PCAs), less than 10 TSPs are available for pest management despite the intensity of pest management practices for dozens of crops grown throughout the state and they have received no inquiries from growers requesting their services. Until recently very few of the PCAs have had sufficient familiarity with NRCS programs to provide even informal assistance to growers.

Consultants and, therefore, the TSP option are also unlikely to be available for small and limited resource farmers. The economic returns from providing services to those producers are not sufficient to sustain a private consulting business. Thus, for most of these producers, TSP is also not a viable option. In short, for the majority of farmers who produce specialty crops and for small and limited resource farmers, technical assistance through a TSP is not likely to be available to meet their needs for participating in EQIP and other Farm Bill conservation programs.

With limited availability of planning assistance and no access to TSPs, small farmers and specialty crop producers have a difficult time participating in conservation efforts through NRCS programs. This poses at least three major problems. An enormous opportunity to conserve natural resources is lost, to the detriment of the land and the long-term sustainability of farmers' operations. The opportunity to create a larger conservation constituency and ethic among those producers who have not participated is also lost. Just as important, the lack of effective access to conservation programs creates significant equity problems. This is particularly true for small, minority and limited resource growers. Even the establishment of an earmark for financial assistance will not be effective if there is insufficient technical assistance available for growers to actually take advantage of the opportunity.

The access issue is even more problematic in the case of the Conservation Security Program (CSP). Experience has shown that participation in EQIP can be critical to qualifying for CSP especially among those growers who are just beginning to participate in conservation programs. In those situations the inability to use EQIP, due to the lack of technical assistance, could very well serve as a *de facto* barrier to participation in CSP, which is an entitlement program. These reasons, individually and collectively, provide considerable incentives for overcoming the challenges that limit participation in conservation programs and the application of sound resource conservation on the ground.

The availability of high quality technical assistance in the planning and application of practices is critical to achieving high levels of conservation. In the long run this is a problem that affects all farmers and the overall ability of NRCS to deliver conservation programs. Failing to direct sufficient energy and attention to the problem will have increasing consequences for resource conservation now and well into the future.

Crafting solutions

Growers and NRCS have mutual and complementary needs for sound planning and technical assistance. Growers need an understanding of how to use the programs and sound planning for conservation practices along with the knowledge and technical support necessary to implement the practices. NRCS needs to know that the practices used by the growers will produce the conservation benefits that justify the financial assistance. It is important to ensure that program

opportunities and requirements are widely and well understood, that the planning is done comprehensively and in a way that is compatible with a farmer's operation, and that the technical assistance is available when and where the grower needs it.

For specialty crop producers and small farmers these are particularly important needs that often require significant effort to meet. Meeting those needs for technical assistance in a meaningful way, particularly where TSPs are not available, will require the development of a range of options that can respond to the specific regional, economic, and agricultural circumstances. Innovative ways of providing assistance need to be developed that increase private sector capacity, create appropriate practice components for specialty crops, and improve opportunities for small farmers to conserve resources.

Increasing private sector capacity for planning and technical assistance

A new mechanism needs to be created that identifies, trains and utilizes a cadre of non-NRCS individuals (private sector, other agencies, farmers) who have expertise in completing an initial assessment of an operation, to identify existing resource concerns, discuss potential practices, introduce farmers to cost-share programs, and help them to complete program applications. The curriculum training will need to be at a level appropriate to the region, crops and resource needs, but somewhat less intensive than that of a full-fledged conservation planner. This would provide knowledgeable people who could go to the field, meet with the farmer, and assist in helping the farmer to embark on developing a conservation plan. These people would be available directly to farmers and would coordinate their work with NRCS staff. This would help fill the enormous gap for planning and technical assistance and provide private sector job opportunities.

Creating simplified and appropriate practice components

Components of certain management practices (e.g., pest management, nutrient management) could be designed and implemented by the farmer with less input from a technical specialist, particularly where neither Extension nor private consultants are available. This would primarily involve training and certification, and record-keeping to verify compliance. For example, an education/training program could be designed for growers to learn how to conduct nutrient or pest management according to protocols and performance standards consistent with NRCS cost share requirements. They would then have sufficient knowledge to carry those practices out in their own operations even though TSPs were not available to provide technical assistance.

Improving opportunities for small farmers to conserve resources

For farmers with small operations the work involved in planning and applying conservation practices is often not commensurate with the level of assistance that is available. This is particularly true for diversified operations where, for example, a grower might have several vegetable crops in combination with some pasture and livestock. The available cost-share for individual practices on fields as small as five acres or less would be insignificant compared to the work it would take to plan and implement those practices. As a result, small farmers either don't use all of the practices that would be useful on their farms or they don't participate in the program at all. One way to increase opportunities for small farmers would be to establish an integrated small farm resource management system. This would serve as a single umbrella practice and a single payment for all of the individual conservation activities that a small farmer would use in addressing the range of resource concerns on the farm. The integrated system

would also include an allowance for conservation planning assistance to ensure that the farmer had a sound basis for the conservation work. The single payment option, set at a sufficient rate to serve as a genuine incentive for a small farmer, would provide for the use of a flexible and appropriately scaled set of practices.

A particularly effective way of developing these new options would be to establish a program that initially creates pilot efforts to increase conservation program participation in targeted watersheds, in specific regions, for particular resource concerns or among specific groups of growers for whom planning and technical assistance is a key issue. In establishing this program, NRCS should engage private partners, such as cooperatives and non-profits, in creating models for providing services. The resources of Cooperative Extension and Conservation Districts are likely to play an important part in those pilot projects in many parts of the country. The emphasis in these pilots should be on developing appropriate and effective methods for providing technical assistance that can be sustained and replicated in other areas for other growers. These pilots can provide the means for demonstrating and testing different models and modifying, validating, and expanding them. In addition, they should provide a means to widely disseminate results from the pilots so that districts and states can learn from each other.

Conclusion Adequate technical assistance has become a persistent obstacle to participation in conservation programs for a large number of specialty crop and small farmers who have not previously participated in NRCS programs. Creating substantial resource benefits through conservation programs requires much more than just having ample resources for financial assistance. The advances in resource conservation over the past 70 years have capitalized on farmer initiative with sound conservation planning assistance and high quality technical assistance. Not only does diminished availability or capability in either of these areas pose a substantial threat to the delivery of conservation benefits, in the case of specialty crop producers and small farmers, an enormous opportunity to conserve natural resources and to create a larger conservation constituency and ethic is at jeopardy.

Just as important, the lack of effective access to conservation programs creates significant equity problems for small farmers. Experience has shown that their technical assistance needs can be met through innovative solutions that take advantage of public resources and private initiative. A deliberate and sustained effort to create innovations that increase access to technical assistance for growers, regardless of their circumstances, will improve delivery of conservation programs, increase equity of access to conservation programs and create a broader constituency for conservation in the years to come.

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