SECTION III

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (RMS) AND QUALITY CRITERIA

INTRODUCTION

Conservation planning is a natural resource problem solving and management process. The process integrates economic, social, and ecological considerations to meet private and public needs. This approach, which emphasizes desired future conditions, helps improve natural resource management, minimize conflict, and address problems and opportunities. The nine step planning process used by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is discussed in detail in the National Planning Procedures Handbook (NPPH).

The first step in the nine step planning process is an initial determination of the customer's problems, opportunities, and concerns related to natural resources and human considerations within the planning area. Then the customer's objectives for the desired future conditions in the planning area are compared to existing resource conditions.

Resource inventories and then an analysis of resource data are completed. The results of the analysis are compared to the quality criteria to document the kind, amount, and extent of existing and potential resource problems.

A broad range of technically feasible conservation alternatives is developed with the customer. The purpose of formulating alternatives is to provide the most effective, efficient, and economical conservation treatments that address resource concerns and are acceptable to the customer in solving problems, addressing opportunities, and meeting the stated objectives. Alternatives may include structural and management practices as well as measures that mitigate potential adverse impacts on the resources.

The conservation alternatives are developed to a RMS level. A RMS is a combination of practices that, when installed, will meet or exceed established quality criteria for identified soil, water, animals, plants and air resource problems for resource sustainability. The installation of the planned practices will provide for the long-term conservation, protection, and/or improvement of the resource base. When one or more of the resource concerns do not meet the minimum requirements for sustainability, planning is considered progressive. Planning is considered to be done at the progressive level when a customer is ready, willing, and able to make some, but not all, of the decisions necessary to achieve a RMS level of management.

Then the conservation alternatives are evaluated to determine their effectiveness in addressing the customer's problems, opportunities and objectives. Attention is given to those ecological values protected by law or Executive Order.

The customer then decides which alternative(s) to implement and the planner prepares the necessary documentation. As the conservation decisions are implemented, the customer may require technical assistance for installing conservation practices and obtaining permits, funding, surveys, final designs and inspections for structural practices.

Conservation planning is an ongoing process that continues after the plan has been implemented. The last step in the planning process is evaluation of the implemented plan to determine if it is functioning as planned and if it is achieving the desired objectives. When the actual results differ from those anticipated, the information provides feedback into the planning process. The process of monitoring, evaluating, and experimenting in order to add to resource management information and modify decisions is known as adaptive management.

The challenge in conservation planning is to balance the short-term demands for production of goods and services with long-term sustainability of a quality environment. The success of conservation planning and implementation depends on the voluntary participation of clients and the development, implementation and evaluation of reasonable and sustainable resource management alternatives.