



Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

NRCS **STRATEGIC PLAN** **2023–2027**

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MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF

At NRCS, we have a long history of working with farmers, ranchers, and landowners to identify and address the natural resource challenges they face. Our agency was founded on helping people help the land through locally led conservation that leverages the passion and commitment of agricultural producers. From controlling soil erosion to improving water and air quality, NRCS uses the most advanced science available and a comprehensive conservation planning process to provide producers the technical and financial assistance necessary to meet their objectives. For nearly 90 years, we have continued to fulfill this conservation legacy while adapting to changing priorities and assuming new responsibilities to address current and future opportunities.

Even with our exceptional legacy and commitment to conservation, we still have work to do. We must continue our efforts to remove bias and barriers from our policies, processes, business tools, and technical documents. We must commit to serving all potential customers regardless of size, location, or operation type, and provide equitable access to financial and technical assistance. We must work to hire employees reflective of the communities they serve.

In addition to infusing equity principles throughout the NRCS strategic plan, the goals incorporate the full scope of agency work; therefore, it will take everyone working together to successfully implement this strategic plan. With this in mind, we thought about how each of you can connect your work to this plan. The five goals of this strategic plan focus on our scientific and technical expertise, workforce, customer engagement and experience, partnerships, and operational health and performance.

At the heart of our mission is our commitment to working with agricultural producers and private forest landowners to improve natural resources using science-based tools and technology to create, plan, and implement conservation practices and activities. We are at the forefront of addressing climate change by helping producers mitigate, adapt to, and build resilience against climate extremes. To achieve these goals, we are committed to improving employee wellbeing so that our workforce remains healthy, engaged, and responsive to the customers we serve.

As our customer base expands, we must adjust our outreach activities to reach new and underserved customers, including urban and small farm producers. We are committed to strengthening our customers' experience and will continue to explore new ways to use technology to improve communications, while maintaining the connection achieved through in-person interactions. Partnerships have always been important to our work, and we will continue to expand and maintain conservation partnerships that focus on locally led conservation. As a Federal agency, NRCS has a fiduciary duty to tribal nations. Through ongoing tribal consultations, we will help tribes with conservation efforts on tribal lands based on their specific needs. We are committed to managing the agency efficiently, incorporating internal and external feedback into operational processes, promoting a policy focused culture, and monitoring performance to ensure that we continue to achieve our mission through delivery of science-based conservation solutions.

This strategic plan relays NRCS's goals and objectives to our employees, partners, and the public as we address the nation's conservation needs and continue to help all people help the land.

YOURS IN CONSERVATION,



Chief Terry Cosby | Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Conservation Service

MISSION/VISION

NRCS Mission:

We deliver conservation solutions so agricultural producers can protect natural resources and feed a growing world.

NRCS Vision:

A world of clean and abundant water, healthy soils, resilient landscapes, and thriving agricultural communities through voluntary conservation.



CORE VALUES

NRCS Core Values:

NRCS is committed to providing the highest level of service through the following core values.

Science-based: We base our decisions and policy on science and data that is reliable, timely, and relevant.

Equity and Inclusion: We treat all people with courtesy and respect, and we value the inherent dignity of every individual. We seek to increase awareness of our services and expand access and opportunities to underserved people and communities across America.

Relationships and Partnerships: We listen to internal and external customers and work with partners through a locally led process that prioritizes local conservation needs. We consult with leaders of tribal nations and collaborate with other agencies, organizations, and individuals to implement conservation solutions.

Valued and Productive Workforce: We care about the wellbeing of our employees and are committed to fostering a safe, healthy work environment. We provide the tools necessary for employee success through training and growth opportunities.

Integrity and Trust: As employees, we are accountable for our actions. We are fair, consistent, and impartial, dealing with all customers in an honest and open manner. We are stewards of taxpayer dollars and safeguard the public trust. We act in a manner that is deserving of the public's trust and with the utmost integrity in everything we do as public servants.

Commitment to Conservation: We are committed to delivering conservation services in a manner that provides for positive impacts to natural resources.

Ethic of Excellence: We are known for our passionate commitment to conservation and for developing and delivering valuable science-based conservation assistance and solutions.



INTRODUCTION

The strategic plan is the foundation for all NRCS activities. It sets the direction for NRCS to accomplish its core mission and goals, and it provides the agency a 4-year focus. It is dynamic and focuses on results. NRCS will use the strategic plan to develop specific actions in the agency's annual business plans to meet natural resource challenges and opportunities. The strategic plan provides a roadmap for achieving an integrated budget and performance accountability process.

NRCS's mission emphasizes the agency's commitment to improving natural resources through conservation planning and implementation of science-based conservation practices and activities. With the mission in mind, the NRCS strategic planning team developed this strategic plan

based on feedback from sub-teams comprised of a diverse group of employees that included field, area, state, and national level staff from various disciplines, grade levels, and lengths of service. Each sub-team focused on one of seven topic areas—climate change, customer service and outreach, Equity and Justice40, natural resources issues, NRCS workforce, tribal relations, and urban agriculture and innovative production—to develop objectives and implementation strategies specific to their assigned topic.

The NRCS strategic planning team used the information collected during sub-team meetings along with feedback previously received from partners and other stakeholders to establish five strategic goals that align with the USDA strategic plan for fiscal years 2022–2026.

STRATEGIC GOALS

Strategic Goal 1: Apply science-based solutions and technology to improve natural resources through conservation planning and implementation.

Strategic Goal 2: Cultivate the agency's diverse, well trained, and engaged workforce.

Strategic Goal 3: Advance the agency's high-quality customer experience.

Strategic Goal 4: Foster partnerships that strengthen locally led and tribal land conservation.

Strategic Goal 5: Optimize mission delivery by strengthening organizational health and performance.



STRATEGIC GOAL 1

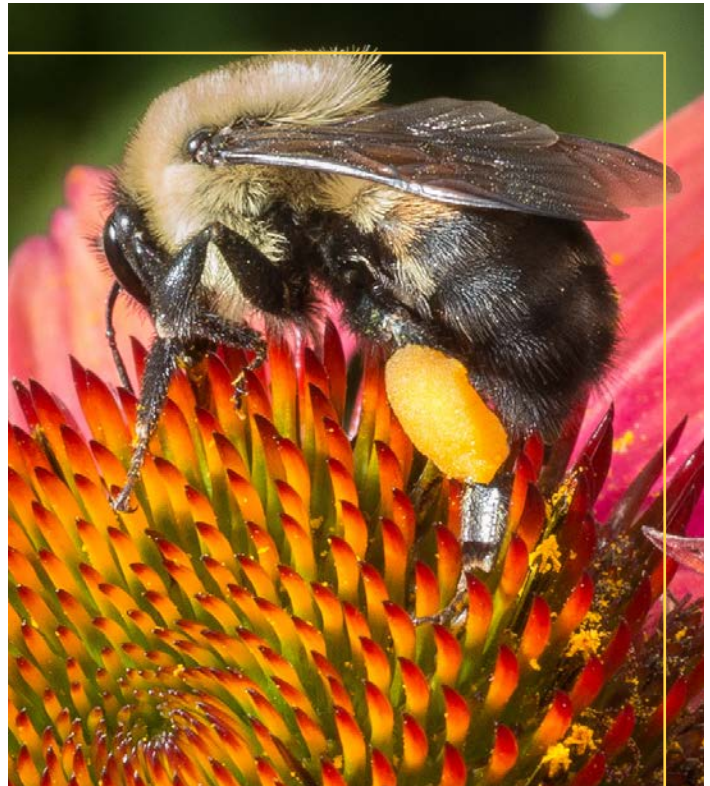
Strategic Goal 1: Apply science-based solutions and technology to improve natural resources through conservation planning and implementation.

Over the next several years, we will continue to maintain, develop, and review the agency's science-based conservation practice standards and activities, emphasizing broad applicability and intentional removal of identified bias or barriers to adoption. We will continue to address the challenges of climate change by helping our customers build resilience through mitigation and adaptation. Our robust conservation planning process and program funding opportunities will support our continued work with agricultural and forest producers. To better measure and monitor the effectiveness of conservation practices and activities, we will improve the quantification and evaluation methods directly tied to conservation implementation.

Objective 1.1: Maintain and develop science-based conservation practice standards and activities, incorporating indigenous stewardship methods where appropriate.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Evaluate conservation practice standards, activities, and technical guidance to remove bias and barriers to promote equitable implementation.
- ◆ Revise existing conservation practice standards, activities, and technical guidance to incorporate new or emerging technologies and methods and to remove obsolete criteria and considerations.
- ◆ Design new conservation practice standards and activities to address emerging natural resource issues.
- ◆ Engage with leaders of indigenous communities to identify where indigenous stewardship methods or traditional ecological knowledge can inform conservation practice standards and activities.



Objective 1.2: Lead efforts to help customers mitigate and adapt to climate change and build resilience.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Adopt the actions identified in the NRCS Climate Change Adaptation Plan.
- ◆ Provide agricultural and private forest producers with the technical and financial assistance needed to implement conservation practices and activities that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase carbon sequestration.
- ◆ Build long-term resilience at the farm and forest scale through investments in science-based adaptation practices.
- ◆ Assist urban, rural, and tribal communities with implementing sustainable and climate-smart strategies.
- ◆ Research innovative tools, technologies, and management strategies to quantify benefits associated with adoption of climate-smart practices.
- ◆ Assess and address disproportionate climate change impacts on vulnerable communities through intentional engagement, conservation planning, and technical and financial assistance.

Objective 1.3: Deliver high-quality technical support and information for conservation planning and program administration.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Continue to use current science-based tools and incorporate innovative technology into conservation practice standards and business tools.
- ◆ Follow the NRCS planning process to ensure conservation practices and activities are planned accurately for successful program implementation.
- ◆ Manage technical and financial assistance funds to maximize opportunities for conservation implementation that aligns with agency priorities.

Objective 1.4: Evaluate the effectiveness of conservation practices and activities.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Collect and use field-based data to quantify the benefits and effectiveness of conservation practices and activities at small, medium, and large scales.
- ◆ Adjust agency technical and programmatic documents and policy to address deficiencies based on collected data and feedback.
- ◆ Continue to monitor and maintain NRCS controlled long-term practices and activities (e.g., easements, dams, etc.) to ensure expected environmental benefits are achieved.



STRATEGIC GOAL 2

Strategic Goal 2: Cultivate the agency's diverse, well-trained, and engaged workforce.

NRCS's continued success requires us to maintain a high performing, diverse, well trained, and engaged workforce. Through continuous training and career development opportunities, we will develop and maintain staff competency in critical agency priorities and operate with an emphasis on employee health, safety, and wellbeing.

Objective 2.1: Continue to build and retain an inclusive, high-performing workforce representative of the diverse communities we serve.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Develop and implement an NRCS hiring strategy.
- ◆ Improve alignment between NRCS and the civilian labor force as identified in the NRCS Equity Action Plan and hire accordingly.
- ◆ Use all hiring authorities available to the agency to fulfill staffing needs at all levels of the agency.
- ◆ Adopt targeted, data-driven recruitment strategies to meet staffing needs at all levels of the agency.
- ◆ Explore opportunities and provide incentives to effectively recruit and retain staff.

Objective 2.2: Maintain a well-trained workforce.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Explore opportunities to provide NRCS training in a consistent manner, including an option to create an NRCS training center, and implement identified strategies.

- ◆ Identify employee training gaps agencywide using available tools (such as the NRCS Career Planner Tool) to assess an individual employee's specific training needs.
- ◆ Provide consistent and continuous training, considering the needs of employees agencywide, to ensure staff maintains competency in critical agency priorities, including in the areas of climate change, soil health, urban and small scale agriculture, equity, customer service, tribal relations, conservation planning, and program implementation.
- ◆ Partner with employee and professional organizations on training, mentoring, and coaching opportunities.
- ◆ Support career and leadership development opportunities for employees at all levels of the agency.

Objective 2.3: Promote employee wellbeing and engagement.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Provide ongoing opportunities to learn about available employee benefits such as retirement planning, flexible schedules, leave, and the employee assistance program.
- ◆ Establish and expand the NRCS employee wellness program.
- ◆ Encourage employee participation in mentoring programs and coaching opportunities to support professional development, networking, and improve wellbeing.
- ◆ Continue to promote the Innovation Portal to engage employees and provide an avenue for sharing ideas and innovations.



STRATEGIC GOAL 3

Strategic Goal 3: Advance the agency’s high-quality customer experience.

Meeting the needs of our expanding customer base is important to maintaining a high-quality customer experience when implementing conservation solutions. We will continue to increase awareness of the technical and financial assistance opportunities available to all potential customers and we will explore and acquire new technology to improve interactions with our customers. By engaging with potential customers, including those in urban and underserved communities, and listening to their needs, we will receive valuable customer feedback that will help us to eliminate barriers to program participation and improve policies and procedures.

Objective 3.1: Communicate and engage with new and existing customers to increase awareness of NRCS technical and financial assistance opportunities.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Investigate and implement new and creative approaches to reach new customers particularly in urban and underserved communities.
- ◆ Engage with underserved communities, listen to their experiences, and consider their needs when making agency decisions.
- ◆ Identify and expand outreach to urban and underserved communities and producers using demographic and natural resources data.
- ◆ Institute a feedback mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of outreach efforts and share best practices.

Objective 3.2: Enhance the customer’s experience by using new technology and eliminating barriers to program participation.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Implement the actions outlined in the NRCS Equity Action Plan.
- ◆ Encourage in-person communication to build and improve relationships with customers.
- ◆ Improve how NRCS interacts electronically with customers.

- ◆ Explore developing an NRCS mobile application (app) that could improve communication and interaction with NRCS customers.
- ◆ Continue to evaluate and revise NRCS policies and processes to remove barriers, improve equity, and minimize the complexity of program application and contracting requirements.



STRATEGIC GOAL 4

Strategic Goal 4: Foster partnerships that strengthen locally led and tribal land conservation.

We are committed to maintaining existing partnerships while simultaneously building relationships with new strategic partners to expand engagement with underserved customers and communities. Working together with our partners, we will facilitate conservation planning and program implementation and will strive to improve equity through the identification and removal of barriers. As a Federal agency, NRCS has fiduciary obligations to protect and maintain the lands, resources, and traditional use areas of American Indians and Alaska Natives, and we must engage in consultations with tribal nations to ensure that tribal needs are understood and incorporated into agency decisions.

Objective 4.1: Maintain and build relationships with partners to facilitate conservation planning and NRCS program implementation.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Use agreements to provide conservation planning and implementation assistance.



- ◆ Implement strategies to improve conservation planning as identified in the National Conservation Planning Partnership Strategic Plan.
- ◆ Provide technical and programmatic training to partners assisting NRCS with conservation delivery.
- ◆ Explore opportunities to partner with employee and professional organizations for assistance with program outreach and implementation.
- ◆ Evaluate the effectiveness of previous agreements and improve strategies based on results.

Objective 4.2: Increase the number of strategic partnerships to improve engagement with underserved customers.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Use the NRCS Equity Action Plan to develop equity and inclusion partnerships that provide technical and financial assistance to underserved customers.
- ◆ Work with partners representing underserved communities to identify and reduce barriers.
- ◆ Integrate equity principles into decision making to ensure that all potential partners can fairly compete and access contracts and agreements.

Objective 4.3: Protect and maintain the lands, resources, and traditional use areas of American Indians and Alaska Natives according to the fiduciary Tribal Trust obligations required of Federal agencies under treaties and statutes.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Commit to government-to-government consultation, collaboration, and coordination when developing or improving policy and program activities that have direct and substantial effects on tribal nations and their citizens.
- ◆ Listen to and fully consider tribal perspectives, priorities, and goals during agency decision-making processes.
- ◆ Work with tribal nations and tribal producers to increase program participation.

STRATEGIC GOAL 5

Strategic Goal 5: Optimize mission delivery by strengthening organizational health and performance.

Conducting NRCS business at the highest level requires that we continuously monitor and manage our processes in a healthy and responsible way. We have an obligation to deliver programs and services that are consistent with our mission and to make necessary adjustments as we receive feedback. Ultimately, we must demonstrate and report on the benefits of our conservation efforts through quantifiable outcomes.

Objective 5.1: Ensure the agency operates in a manner that supports the mission, delivers programs and services, and meets customer needs.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Develop the Work Environment Plan incorporating ways to improve, measure, and monitor organizational health and performance.
- ◆ Assess organizational business needs and fully incorporate these functions into the NRCS business structure (e.g., information technology and software development).
- ◆ Explore alternative business processes to allow for improved flexibility in conservation planning and program administration.
- ◆ Integrate equity into agency decision-making at all levels to prevent disproportionate burdens within agency policies, procedures, and business tools.
- ◆ Foster an environment that encourages and supports open and honest communication and respect between all employees.
- ◆ Establish guidelines for working effectively online when conducting internal business and providing training.

Objective 5.2: Measure the agency's effectiveness in achieving its mission through continual program evaluation and process improvement.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Establish outcome-based metrics to capture the benefits of conservation implementation and other work NRCS performs.
- ◆ Develop a strategy for incorporating data updates and software improvements into the business tools (e.g., CART, CD, ProTracts, etc.).

- ◆ Improve queries and reporting capabilities in the business tools to document agency metrics and facilitate responding to data calls.
- ◆ Establish expectations for employee accountability at all levels of the agency.
- ◆ Manage how workplace flexibilities are used and, when necessary, adjust to meet evolving customer needs.

Objective 5.3: Bolster policy development and implementation through enhanced collaboration, communication, and accountability across the agency.

Implementation Strategies

- ◆ Conduct a comprehensive review of agency directives to identify misalignment with current authorities or agency structure, barriers to equitable implementation, and inconsistencies with other internal or departmental policies.
- ◆ Revise or rewrite directives to correct identified discrepancies.
- ◆ Develop and implement an iterative process that engages appropriate subject matter experts from across NRCS or other agencies (e.g., FPAC Business Center) to routinely review, revise, or rewrite directives.
- ◆ Implement a quality assurance process that holds employees accountable for implementing policies consistently and equitably.

REFERENCE DOCUMENTS

USDA Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2022–2026
(<https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda-fy-2022-2026-strategic-plan.pdf>)

NRCS Climate Change Adaptation Plan
(https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1_FPAC_NRCS_ClimateAdaptationPlan_2022.pdf)

NRCS Equity Action Plan
(<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/resources/guides-and-instructions/nrcs-equity-action-plan>)

National Conservation Planning Partnership Strategic Plan
(<https://nrcs.app.box.com/s/0qiyehixvs1zgid3gj071ih6m7vah70>)

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