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Conservation Practice Standards

Introduction

A Conservation Practice Standard (Practice) contains information on why and where a specific Practice can be adopted and sets forth minimum criteria for implementation, operation, and maintenance of that Practice. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS), at the national level, initially develops the Practice and supporting documents, such as the Statement of Work and Implementation Requirements. Each state then modifies the national Practice to meet local criteria, such as climate, soil types, and water resources.

National Practice criteria should not be used for implementation. Instead, the version adapted and modified by the state in which the Practice is to be implemented should be used. Each state maintains its own list of Practices, which can be found in Section 4 of a [State's Field Office Technical Guide](#).

In addition to reducing soil erosion and improving water quality, a subset of Practices delivers quantifiable climate mitigation benefits such as increased soil carbon, soil health, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions. This subset has been defined as Climate-Smart. Three of these

Practices are eligible for Financial Assistance (FA) through this Project:

1) No-Till (CPS 329)

No-till limits soil disturbance to manage the amount, orientation, and distribution of crop residue on the soil surface. Farmers forgo tillage, maintain crop residue throughout the year, and plant directly into the previous year's residue. No-till increases soil carbon, reduces greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel use, and improves soil health.

2) Reduced-Till (CPS 345)

Reduced-till minimizes soil disturbance to manage the amount, orientation, and distribution of crop residue on the soil surface. Reduced-till allows some tillage, however, the tillage intensity must be minimized to meet a Soil Tillage Intensive Rating (STIR) of less than 80. Reduced-till also builds soil carbon, decreases greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel use, and improves soil health.

3) Cover Crop (CPS 340)

Cover crops are grasses, legumes, and other broadleaves planted for seasonal vegetative cover, typically winter cover. Cover crops are not cash crops (e.g. winter wheat). Instead, they are planted to reduce erosion, build soil carbon, and improve soil health. Cover crops may also deliver co-benefits of improved water quality, suppressed weeds, and broken insect and disease cycles.



In addition to the previous Practices, three more are eligible to receive Technical Assistance (TA):

4) Conservation Crop Rotation (CPS 328)

Conservation crop rotation means growing crops in a planned sequence, on the same field, over a series of crop years. Essentially, it's an extended cash crop rotation. Typically, this means including a small grain or forage crop in the rotation. Conservation crop rotation increases soil carbon and improves soil health. It also can deliver the co-benefits of reducing plant pest pressures, providing feed or forage for livestock, and improving water quality.

5) Nutrient Management (CPS 590)

Nutrient management involves the careful planning of nutrient application, focusing on source, rate, timing, and placement. Practices like enhanced efficiency fertilizers, split applications, reduced rates, and precision agriculture can improve nitrogen use efficiency, reducing nitrous oxide emissions. These methods also offer co-benefits such as healthier plants, improved water quality, lower input costs, and the maintenance or enhancement of soil organic matter.

6) Soil Carbon Amendments (CPS 336)

Soil carbon amendments are materials derived from plant materials or treated animal byproducts, including biochar, compost, and other carbon-based materials. Soil carbon amendments may increase carbon sequestration while delivering co-benefits of improved soil organic matter, improved aggregate stability, and improved habitat for microorganisms.

Practices 1-3 are eligible to receive both Financial Assistance and Technical Assistance. Practices 4-6 are only eligible for Technical Assistance.

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