

Overview of the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service

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Outline

- Overview of NRCS & Programs
- Linking OSPs with NRCS plans
- Assessing soil conservation practices



Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

United States Department of Agriculture



- NRCS Services

- Soil Survey
- Technical Assistance
 - Conservation Planning
 - Practice Implementation
- Farm Bill Programs
 - Financial Assistance
- Emergency Assistance
- Conservation Partnership Efforts
- Information & Outreach



What are NRCS resource concerns?



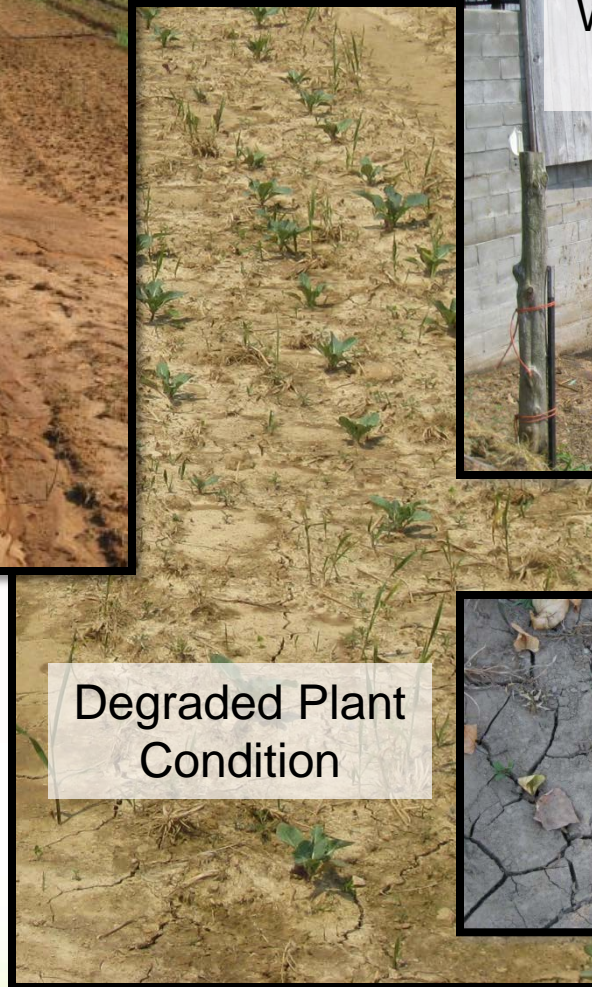
Soil Erosion



Water Quality Degradation



Inadequate habitat for wildlife



Degraded Plant Condition



Soil Quality Degradation



NRCS Resource Assessments

- Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation - RUSLE2
- Wind Erosion Prediction System – WEPS
- Rangeland Health Assessment Protocol
- Pasture Condition Scoring
- Energy Estimators
- Windows Pesticide Screening Tool -WIN-PST
- Environmental Evaluation
- And many more!



Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)

Technical and 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.



EQIP Organic Initiative

- Eligible producers- certified organic, transitional, and exempt
 - Certified producers: Submit Certification\Proof of Good Standing
 - Transitional and Exempt – Submit Self-Certification
- Statutory Payment limits: \$20 million annually and \$80 million/contract



Self-Certification

3. Transitioning to Organic

I, _____, hereby acknowledge that in order to receive technical and financial assistance through EQIP Organic Initiative as a Transitioning to Organic producer, I agree to develop and implement an organic system plan to standards established in the National Organic Programs (NOP) Act (7 U.S.C. Sections 6501-6522).

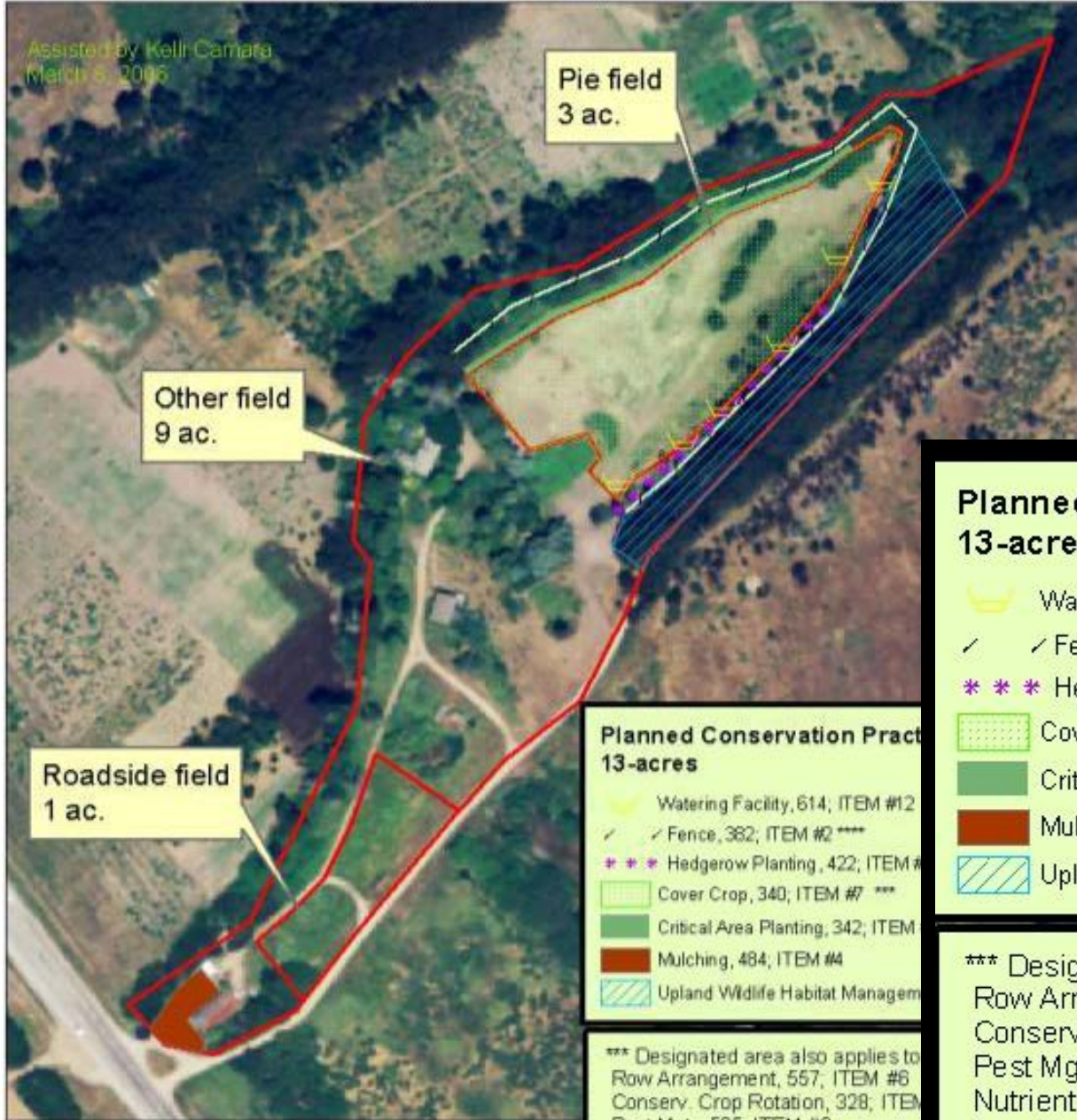
2. Exempt from Certification (Organic Producers selling less than \$5000 organic products annually)

I, _____, hereby acknowledge that in order to receive technical and financial assistance through EQIP Organic Initiative as an Exempt producer, I agree to develop and implement an OSP that meets standards established in the National Organic Programs (NOP) Act (7 U.S.C. Sections 6501-6522) for the life of this contract. I understand my application will be ranked with certified organic producers provided I meet eligibility



What are NRCS 'conservation practices'?





Pie field
 3 ac.

Other field
 9 ac.

Roadside field
 1 ac.


**Planned Conservation Practices
 13-acres**

-  Watering Facility, 614; ITEM #12
-  Fence, 382; ITEM #2 ****
-  Hedgerow Planting, 422; ITEM #3
-  Cover Crop, 340; ITEM #7 ***
-  Critical Area Planting, 342; ITEM #1
-  Mulching, 484; ITEM #4
-  Upland Wildlife Habitat Management, 645; ITEM #5

*** Designated area also applies to:
 Row Arrangement, 557; ITEM #6
 Conserv. Crop Rotation, 328; ITEM #8
 Pest Mgt., 595; ITEM #9
 Nutrient Mgt., 590; ITEM 10
 Land Smoothing, 466; ITEM #13

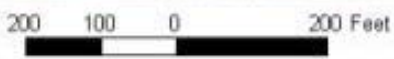
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NRCS Organic Initiative

bit.ly/2013EqipOI

The screenshot shows the NRCS website interface. At the top left is the USDA logo and the text "Natural Resources Conservation Service". Below this is "United States Department of Agriculture". Navigation tabs include "Topics", "Programs", "Newsroom", and "Contact Us". On the right, there are links for "About NRCS", "Careers", "National Centers", and "State Offices", along with a search bar and "Browse By Audience", "A-Z Index", "Advanced Search", and "Help" options. A breadcrumb trail reads: "You are Here: Home / Programs / Financial Assistance / Environmental Quality Incentives Program / 2013 EQIP Organic Initiative". Social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr are present under the heading "Stay Connected". The main content area is titled "2013 EQIP Organic Initiative" and features a large photograph of a green field under a blue sky with white clouds. A sidebar on the left lists various programs under the heading "Programs": "Farm Bill", "Landscape Initiatives", "Financial Assistance" (with sub-items: "Agricultural Management Assistance", "Agricultural Water Enhancement Program", "Air Quality Initiative", "Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative", "Conservation Innovation Grants", "Conservation Stewardship Program", and "Environmental Quality Incentives Program").



Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)



CSP encourages producers to address resource concerns in a comprehensive manner by:

- Undertaking additional conservation activities; and
- Improving, maintaining, and managing existing conservation activities.

Under CSP, participants are paid for conservation performance: the higher the operational performance, the higher their payment.



CSP Enhancements

"Enhancement" means a type of conservation activity used to treat natural resources and improve conservation performance. Enhancements are installed at a level of management intensity that **exceeds the sustainable level.**



Soil Quality Enhancement Activity – SQL08 – Intercropping to improve soil quality and increase biodiversity

This enhancement involves the use of intercropping principles (i.e., growing two or more crops in close proximity to each other during part or all of their life cycles) to promote interactions that improve soil and water quality via increased biodiversity and contribute to pest management.



NRCS Support for Organic Producers

- Technical assistance
- Financial assistance
- Only supports conservation
 - NOT production, marketing, finances, business planning, etc.
- Buffers
- Building soil organic matter
- Crop rotation
 - Including cover crops
- Nutrient management
- Minimizing erosion
- Increasing biodiversity
- Natural resource management
- Structural Practices (High tunnels, manure storage, watering facilities etc.)



CAP 138: Conservation Activity Plan Supporting Transition to Organic

- Evaluates resource concerns such as erosion, soil quality/organic matter, water quality, plant health, soil fertility, pest management, biodiversity status and others.
- Completed by Technical Service Providers (TSPs)
- Not an OSP



Reducing Redundancy: Linking Plans

OSP

Land Use History
Affirmations
Production practices
Recordkeeping
Commingling/contamination

CAP 138

Maps
Natural resource assessment
Planned practices
Pest management
Soil Fertility Management
Crop rotation
Inputs



Assessing Soil Conservation Practices



Background

Highly Erodible Land (HEL) provisions have been required since 1985. To access some USDA program benefits producers must self-certify that they are in compliance by agreeing:

- NOT to plant or produce an agricultural commodity on HEL unless actively applying an approved conservation plan or maintaining a fully applied conservation system.

ISSUE: Instances have been reported where certified organic operations, meeting the NOP regulations, are out of compliance with HEL provisions.



What is HEL?



Highly erodible land can erode at an excessive rate due to the climate factors, soil type, field slope and slope length. If the maximum annual rate of soil erosion causes a decline in sustainability, it is highly erodible. NRCS routinely makes HEL determinations for program participants and can make an HEL determination upon request.



What does compliance mean?



- Conservation Compliance on HEL lands allow for twice the tolerable soil erosion than that of a basic conservation systems.
- Producers who are found out of compliance with the HEL provisions have a year to work with NRCS to get into compliance.



Questions to consider



- How big of an issue is this?
- How are ACAs assessing soil erosion?
- Are visual assessments and one annual inspection sufficient?
- Is soil erosion by ACAs being assessed consistently?
- Should producers report HEL determinations to their ACAs?
- How and when do ACAs determine a non-compliance?
- Do outdoor access requirements contribute to non-compliances?





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