

Thurston County Voluntary Stewardship Program Work Plan

Appendix K – VSP Individual Stewardship Plan Methodology

1.1 The NRCS Nine-Step Conservation Planning Process

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service has developed a Nine-Step Planning Process that has been used for many years by conservation districts across the county to create conservation plans, including the primary Technical Assistance Provider of the Thurston VSP Work Plan, the Thurston Conservation District.

This process is well-accepted nationally, specifically created for the development of voluntary stewardship agreements, and readily adaptable to conservation planning projects taking place on a watershed level. The purpose of the Nine-Step Process is to develop and implement plans that can protect, conserve, and enhance natural resources while at the same time meeting social and economic development goals.

The VSP Workgroup agreed that the NRCS conservation planning process, standards, and practices are the preferred model for implementation of the Individual Stewardship Plans (ISPs). However, the nine-steps outlined below are not rigid requirements for planning but rather a general guideline and may need to be adapted to individual circumstances during the development of site-specific ISPs.

The Process - The Nine Steps of Conservation Planning.

Preplanning. The conservation planner prepares for a site visit by anticipating the conservation problems that may be encountered. This may require research and self-improvement study. They also assemble the basic information for the planning area such as soil surveys, plant yields, water quality issues, and other related information.



Source: NRCS (2014). *National Planning Procedures Handbook (NPPH), Edition 1.* <http://directives.sc.egov.usda.gov/ViewerFS.aspx?hid=33232>

Step 1. Identify Problems. The conservation planner assists the client in determining the resource problems, opportunities, and concerns in the planning area. This includes an early identification of all natural resource problems. This will be further clarified as the process continues.

Step 2. Determine Objectives. The conservation planner must record the client's objectives. This might include how the area is to be used, what is the intended use of the property over the long term, what are the family considerations, and other factors that might influence the choice of conservation practices to be applied.

Step 3. Inventory Resources. A comprehensive inventory will be completed of the natural resources, such as the soils, plants, animals, physical structures, available labor, equipment, and anything else that might be needed to solve the conservation problems.

Step 4. Analyze Resource Data. The information gathered in Step 3 will be analyzed to clearly define the conditions of the natural resources along with the economic and social issues. The causes and effects of conservation problems will be summarized.

Step 5. Formulate Alternatives. One or more conservation alternatives are prepared that will achieve the client's objectives, solve the natural resource problems, and take advantage of opportunities to improve or protect resource conditions. Clients will be provided any products explaining the details of the conservation practices being considered. This would include job sheets, fact sheets, standards, or similar materials.

Step 6. Evaluate Alternatives. Each of the alternatives is evaluated to determine if it is addressing the client's objectives and the natural resource problems. The effects of the alternatives should be evaluated both for on-site and off-site impacts. The alternative should also be acceptable to the client. Special attention will need to be given to those ecological values protected by law or Executive Order.

Step 7. Make Decisions. The client selects the alternatives that will best serve their business. The conservationist then prepares the conservation plan of operations (CPO) for the client which includes the practices to be implemented and the schedule. The CPO is a record of conservation decisions made by the client.

Step 8. Implement Plan. The conservation planner delivers the plan to the client and reviews it for accuracy and clarity. The plan contains a listing of the conservation practices and a schedule for implementation. Included with these practices should be a description of the impacts of the selected practices on their natural resources. Plans usually include a map, field boundaries, soil map, and other items specific to the client's property. The conservationist may also include other alternatives that the client has not or is not ready to make a decision on, but are needed to protect the resource. The client then requests needed assistance from the NRCS to implement the practices.

Step 9. Evaluate the Plan. NRCS will assist the client to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan as it is implemented. Conditions often change and may bring about the need to adjust the plan. NRCS will use

information gathered during evaluations to "fine-tune" our conservation practices in meeting natural resource needs.

Maintaining the Process. The NRCS conservation planning process is dynamic because people and natural resources are dynamic. These nine steps should not be regimented and it may be necessary to go back through the process at any time because of unanticipated changes. The client should always be aware that the conservation plan is their plan and can be adjusted as needs change.¹

¹ Further information on NRCS conservation planning available at:
<https://aglearn.usda.gov/customcontent/NRCS/Consplan/module3/3phase9step.html>