USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF RC&D COUNCILS
Resource Conservation & Development For Healthy Communities, Ecosystems & Enterprise

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE CONSERVATION AGENCIES

NCDEA
National Conservation District Employees Association

National Association of Conservation Districts

National Conservation Planning Partnership

Resources Available for Leadership & Employee Engagement

NATIONAL CONSERVATION PLANNING PARTNERSHIP

THE CONSERVATION ASSESSMENT RANKING TOOL (CART)

The Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) is a program-neutral, efficient application evaluation tool to facilitate conservation delivery. The new tool is intended to help producers and conservation staff begin an ongoing discussion about how to achieve land and water stewardship goals. It will modernize and streamline NRCS' conservation planning and program delivery, reduces workload on field staff, and improves the customer experience by creating an efficient application process.

CART is part of the NRCS of the Future effort, which is making meaningful changes and improvements to all programs and services to streamline processes, introduce efficiencies, incorporate technology, and improve communication and data availability. The tool will assist but not eliminate the need for on-farm assessments and resource planning.

HOW WILL CART BENEFIT EMPLOYEES AND CUSTOMERS?

Field staff will have more time to provide technical assistance and producers will have less paperwork and fewer burdens in accessing our programs and services. CART reduces time spent managing conservation plans, program applications, and program contracts. The anticipated deployment for CART will be in 2020.

WHAT WAS THE PROCESS BEFORE CART?

NRCS assessed, evaluated, and prioritized conservation programs differently. The Conservation Stewardship Program used the Conservation Activity Evaluation Tool, while the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Agricultural Management Assistance Program rankings were completed using the Application Evaluation & Ranking Tool. That meant that a producer was required to submit multiple applications for the same land -- one for each program.

HOW WILL THE NEW CART PROCESS IMPACT ME?

- Planners will see streamlined delivery of services and integration of all Financial Assistance Programs, resulting in one application and one contract, regardless of program. Less time will be spent on application and ranking processes, allowing for more time on conservation planning and resource inventory.

- Employees will experience a one-stop shop for financial and technical assistance as CART will be a centralized system that will include: planning, applications, and ranking.

- Planners will experience a simplified integrated planning and program application process.

- A program neutral resource assessment, evaluation of alternatives, and application ranking through one unified system will increase planners' abilities to improve conservation delivery.

- Planners will experience reduced time between program applications and conservation implementation by eliminating duplicative data entry processes.

- Employees will have more time for planning due to automation of CPA-52 documentation that is in sync with assessment of resource concerns, planned practices, and program ranking.

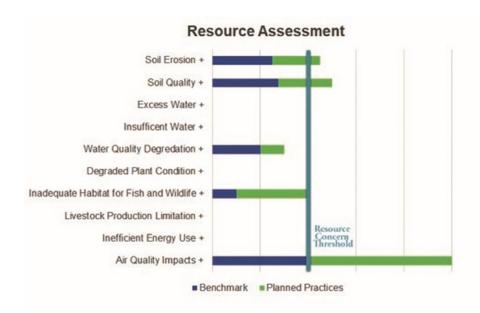NATIONAL CONSERVATION PLANNING PARTNERSHIP

HOW DOES CART WORK?

- Planners will use CART to assess a client's request(s) for assistance by evaluating the resource concerns, planned practices, and site vulnerability, while also ranking a client's request(s) for assistance in multiple funding pools for NRCS program funding consideration.

- To start a CART assessment, field staff will select land units for evaluation in CART (all land uses will be available for selection). A base land inventory will be completed and the tool will use geospatial analysis to identify resource concern potential and vulnerabilities, as well as identify resource concern priorities, intersecting program ranking pools, and special resource concern areas (such as priority watersheds).

- Planners can also identify and assess resource concerns not captured by geospatial analysis. After the inventory assessment, planners can select conservation practices to create alternative plans for the client to address any resource concerns.

- Clients will then have the opportunity to select which ranking pools they would like to apply for to be evaluated for funding. CART simultaneously ranks the program neutral request for assistance in multiple funding pools and programs.

Resource Assessment

This example CART graph highlights the client's score for different resource assessments and their score after implementing planned conservation practices.

WHEN WILL CART BE READY AND WILL TRAINING BE PROVIDED?

User testing and training has been completed this spring and summer of 2019 for deployment to the field. Training on the tool will include conservation partners who assist with conservation planning and program delivery. The anticipated deployment for CART will be in 2020.