National Association of State Conservation Agencies
In Completion of Requirements
Of
Contribution Agreement Number 68-3A75-6-53

Final Report
On the
Evaluation of the Nation's Conservation Delivery System
Phase Three

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To

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Executive Summary

Under a third contribution agreement with and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA) has continued progress in the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project. The purpose of the cooperative project is to identify ways that the conservation delivery system can be made more effective, more efficient, and more innovative. NASCA conducted this third phase effort as an extension of the project's completed phases of data collection and evaluation in 2005 and 2006, to begin implementation of recommendations from the two earlier phases.

To implement project recommendations, NASCA proceeded with two categories of further action, based on whether action could be taken directly by NASCA and its member state conservation agencies, or whether a recommendation required the action and support of multiple organizations within the conservation partnership. First, NASCA secured endorsement by membership for recommended actions in support of state conservation agency capacity to improve conservation delivery in their states. As a result, many recommended direct NASCA actions have been incorporated into a larger NASCA initiative for NASCA member services, to focus on providing services to states that request assistance in implementing endorsed recommendations and expanding state capacity to support improvements.

Second, NASCA consulted with conservation partners and interested parties about their opportunities to implement recommended improvements, and about ongoing and potential improvements to service delivery. NASCA has identified a number of areas of common interest for further collaboration. NASCA supports partners' actions to make improvements in consolidating programs, reaching new customers, streamlining conservation program procedures, emphasizing a "resource-based" system, improving use of public and private personnel resources, and applying innovative funding, information management and communication/outreach measures.

NASCA notes the importance of recognizing and accommodating social and geographical aspects of improving conservation services delivery, such as regional differences, added natural resource concerns, outreach to new and non-traditional customers, non-traditional communication methods, and new technology. NASCA emphasizes that these aspects must become a part of any changes that are made to the delivery system.

NASCA will continue to focus the ideas and recommendations from this project on leadership within the conservation partnership, and with new partners, including initiatives such as the ***Partners Statement Plan of Action*** developed at the November 2006 Leaders Conference in Nashville, TN. As partnership leaders in 2007 and beyond refine their goals and priorities for cooperation, NASCA will continue to promote endorsed improvements to the conservation delivery system.

The joint NASCA/NRCS project has contributed to a better understanding of what the conservation delivery system can and should be. It is a meaningful part of a larger effort now underway within and surrounding the conservation partnership to make changes to improve the conservation delivery system.

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Background - What did NASCA Learn from Phases One and Two?

Under a third agreement between the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) (Contribution Agreement Number 68-3A75-6-53) NASCA continued progress in the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project, expanding on work from the project's earlier two phases, and covering a period from June 2006 through September 2007. NASCA conducted the Phase Three effort as an extension of the project's completed phases of data collection and evaluation in 2005 and 2006, to begin implementation of recommendations from the two earlier phases.

The purpose of the overall project was to identify ways that the nation's natural resources conservation delivery system can be made more effective, more efficient, and more innovative. As a result of two phases of information gathering, NASCA can claim the following lessons learned (or *re*-learned):

- People who wish to participate in conservation programs and receive services want less complicated, streamlined, and more user-friendly services and programs. New customers expect communication, outreach and services beyond traditional delivery system approaches. Removing impediments to participation will make the delivery system more effective.

- People who are responsible for providing services to customers want more direct decision-making with respect to conservation funding and greater flexibility in determining how services are delivered. Service providers recognize that better use must be made of technology and human resources. Helping local districts to become an improved gateway for services, together with greater local flexibility and improved application of the private sector, can help result in more efficiently delivered services to meet local needs.

- The customer base for conservation services continues to change. Greater outreach is needed to identify new customers, to locate them, to develop a conservation message that they will listen to and understand, to apply innovative communication and outreach tools, and to provide services that meet their changing natural resource conservation and operational needs.

- State conservation agencies have a key role to play in improving delivery, and each NASCA member has a different capacity to improve delivery in its state. As an organization, NASCA may provide meaningful services to members by assisting states in building their desired capacity to improve services. States identified a number of important services needed during the project that may now be incorporated into a larger NASCA member services strategy.

- NASCA is uniquely suited to help advance improvements in delivery, because of members' position in the conservation partnership and their state-authorized responsibilities. NASCA should continue to take a lead in promoting and supporting changes to improve the delivery system.

- To achieve meaningful results, NASCA must build internal actions into its organizational planning and operational practices, and it must focus its partner relationships to support partner actions to improve delivery.

Readers may refer to the NASCA Phase Two Final Report, July 10, 2006, for more detailed information about earlier project phases. Final reports for phases one and two are available on the NASCA website (www.NASCAnet.org). Please see also *Appendix A* to this report – *Executive Summary,* NASCA Phase Two Final Report, July 10, 2006.

At the completion of Phase Two of the project in May 2006, NASCA encouraged involved organizations who share interests in the implementation of recommendations and action steps (described in the report) to proceed at their level of interest and capacity with implementation of any recommendations that apply to their agencies or groups.

Design of Phase Three

The primary task for NASCA under Phase Three was to begin action to implement project recommendations. NASCA first found it necessary to separate recommendations into two categories for further action, based on whether action could be taken directly by NASCA and its member state conservation agencies, or whether a recommendation required action by others and support of multiple organizations within the conservation partnership. NASCA then prepared plans for further action based on these two general categories of recommendations.

Based on these two groupings of recommendations, and as proposed in the July 2006 Phase Two Final Report, NASCA took the following actions under Phase Three:

- NASCA secured its membership's concurrence on Phase Two recommendations to endorse for specific actions to be ***taken directly by NASCA*** in support of its member state conservation agencies. This membership concurrence process was carried out through a full membership survey compiled over the summer of 2006 and acted upon at the 2006 NASCA Annual Business Meeting.

  The membership survey also compiled information on services sought by NASCA membership to assist them in implementing CDS recommendations to improve the conservation delivery system in their states.

- NASCA prepared a plan to consult with conservation partners about recommendations that may apply to them and about the best approach to implementation. NASCA began the consultation process with development of ***a "modularized" set of recommendations relating to individual partners' areas of responsibility***, to communicate to partners the opportunities to contribute to implementation of these improvements.

  NASCA also made plans to participate in partners' professional and business meetings, to encourage dialogue about cooperative implementation approaches, and to include the project in discussion at regular partnership meetings.

- NASCA followed opportunities to promote and track implementation actions by all involved parties regarding recommended improvements developed under this project.

Securing NASCA Membership Endorsements for Action

In July 2006, NASCA developed and conducted a full membership survey (*see Appendix B*) to obtain input from member state conservation agencies about which Phase Two recommendations should receive high priority for action. Member responses were compiled (*see Appendix C*) and discussed at the NASCA Annual Business Meeting in San Antonio, TX, in September 2006.

Survey results set the stage for NASCA endorsements for further action either independently or in consultation with partners. NASCA membership endorsed a number of actions, and advised the NASCA Phase Three Committee on how to proceed with implementation under Phase Three (*see Appendix D*), as reported in categories *A, B* and *C* (*other*) below.

Category A - Actions endorsed to be taken directly by NASCA:

NASCA membership endorsed five recommendations for further direct action by NASCA leadership and member state conservation agencies –

1. **Expand the role of local Soil and Water Conservation Districts to serve as a gateway and clearinghouse for customers, and to perform technical and administrative services.**

2. **Empower local conservation boards and councils to be the conservation gateway for services; develop local board and council members' understanding of their powers and responsibilities, and use of recruitment techniques and strategies for new and diverse partners.**

3. **Develop training and credentialing systems for local boards and staff.**

4. **Locally-led: Keep decision-making local, within a nationally set framework; strengthen the role of local working groups.**

5. **Create a USDA NRCS "block grant" process to state conservation agencies, whereby state conservation agencies receive federal funds for program implementation and for distribution of conservation services through local conservation districts.**

Discussion:

Membership indicated that these actions represent recommendations that NASCA should implement directly with its member agencies. Of these five endorsed for further action, four (1-4) include activities in which NASCA state agencies are already engaged to some degree (with considerable variation among states). The NASCA CDS Phase Three Committee developed action steps to inquire of state conservation agencies how the organization can support states in these activities, and to offer states assistance in improving delivery under these actions. NASCA solicited member state conservation agency input through inquiries by the seven NASCA regional directors, to ensure that the process accounted for important regional differences.

Before outlining a plan to address the "state block grants" concept (5), the NASCA Phase Three Committee reviewed previous NASCA initiatives and policy on the concept, and considered how things have changed since the concept was first formulated in 2001 (*see page 12*). The Phase Three Committee modified the earlier concept to mesh with recommendations from the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project and current NASCA policy initiatives (e.g., organizational work plan, NASCA Farm Bill positions). The committee produced a model for national block grant implementation together with a template for state conservation agency participation.

For item 4, it was recognized that independent NASCA action cannot direct other partner roles in supporting local decision-making (see next section). However, NASCA agencies have a direct support role in strengthening local working groups and improving outreach to potential customers within their states, and it is this component that is included here.

Likewise, the terminology "empower" in item 2 relates here *not* to granting authority or delegation of partner programs, but to providing training and support (e.g., board and staff training) to help local boards fulfill their role and become a better gateway for services.

Category B - Actions endorsed to be taken by or in partnership with others, requiring consultation:

Five recommendations from Phase Two were endorsed for NASCA consultation with partners –

1. **Simplify program rules and regulations and allow greater state/local decision-making.**

2. **Simplify conservation program delivery processes.**

3. **Reverse the current trend of "program-driven" conservation, toward more flexible "resource-driven" conservation.**

4. **Develop a single working lands conservation program, with resource protection targets and applying aggregated federal, state and local resources.**

5. **Locally-led: Keep decision-making local, within a nationally set framework.**

Discussion:

These endorsed actions involve considerable consultation with core conservation partners. In Phase Three, NASCA communicated these priorities to partner leadership in NRCS and the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), and to the project External Advisory Group, and strongly solicited their action and collaboration. NASCA emphasized that it will take strong leadership support in several organizations to affect changes in this category, as these are strategic and programmatic in nature and require significant actions by other organizations to be accomplished.

NASCA membership also identified a number of ideas as to how NASCA should promote action by partners:

- Keep this information fresh and in front of partners.
- Develop a new executive partnership (or leadership) agreement.
- Work more closely with other state-focused organizations such as National Governors Association, Western Governors Association, and the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture.
- Demonstrate implementation via a pilot project.
- Engage at the leadership level, developing action strategies.
- Hold forums and workshops
- Work with NRCS state conservationists

Details about NASCA communication and consultation with conservation partners are described in pages 13-18.

Category C - Other survey responses:

Two other important responses were obtained in the 2006 membership survey:

- ***Building NASCA Member Services***

NASCA membership survey respondents identified the types of services that the organization should provide to assist state conservation agencies in making such (endorsed) improvements to the conservation delivery system in their states. In general, these services relate to expanding NASCA information networking and sharing, developing templates and models of successful state approaches to making improvements of one kind or another, and to providing national leadership, input and coordination on delivery system policy, regulations and legislation.

Some examples of services indicated are (*see Appendix E for a full list*):

1. Sharing information on
    a. States' experiences, success stories
    b. Use of contribution agreements, contracts
    c. How states remove inconsistencies in delivery
2. Templates/models and training materials - distribution; clearinghouse; website; CDs.
    a. State leadership (commission, state association, partners); working relationships; outreach
    b. Board training – responsibilities; opportunities; business planning
    c. Local Working Groups/stakeholders
    d. Communication with elected officials
    e. Accountability methods
    f. Applying technology
    g. Structure (multi-district; watershed)
    h. Staffing plans
    i. Private sector
3. Evaluate existing state programs; build state member agency capacity.
4. Establish a process for a NASCA Rapid Response Team to assist states.
5. Communication and guidance on national efforts; secure national support.

Because many of these CDS project-related member service requests reflect state conservation agency capacity needs in general, ***NASCA has incorporated them into a larger strategy for building NASCA member services***. The services identified and requested by the membership survey respondents have helped NASCA to formulate this new strategy to better respond to NASCA member capacity needs – needs that determine a state conservation agency's ability to help improve the delivery system.

- ***Capturing Innovations***

NASCA also recognized that, during Phase Two, a number of very important innovations in information resources and communication/outreach were identified as needed or under consideration by diverse sources, and that these should be retained and promoted as action is taken on larger, strategic recommendations (*see also page 20*). These include:

Information Resources

Available via downloadable format from the NASCA website
Use of List Serve, DVDs, IPODs
Develop on-line "practice" conservation program application(s)

Communication/Outreach

Absentee landowners
Women landowners
Various ethnicities
Deliver a multi-lingual message
Employ a Welcome Wagon concept for new customers
Help local districts employ a mentoring system
Improve local public relations

Readers may refer to the NASCA Phase Two Final Report, July 10, 2006, for a more detailed description of these innovations.

State Block Grants – A New Model for Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds

In June 2001, NASCA distributed a report titled *A Conservation Initiative for America's Private Working Lands*. In this report, NASCA described a concept for **state block grants**, through which state conservation agencies would receive federal funding to administer conservation programs. Based on membership's 2006 endorsement for further action on recommendations from the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project (Category A-5), the NASCA Phase Three Committee modified this concept in December 2006 into a proposal for what was termed ***Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds***. The recommendation endorsed by NASCA membership was to create a federal/state funding process whereby state conservation agencies receive federal funds for conservation program implementation and for distribution of conservation services through local conservation districts.

This proposal (*see Appendix F*) describes a federal/state funding process for a coordinated, ***regional***, shared (i.e., ***match-based***), multi-agency system to support state (and inter-state) and local program implementation and delivery of conservation services. Under such a system, state conservation agencies would take a lead, working with their state and local partners, in addressing priority state/local watershed and related conservation issues within their states – and in

cooperation with neighboring states on regional approaches - applying for funding from NRCS, and from other USDA agencies and other federal agencies.

Such a regional and multi-state-driven process fits well with many basin and watershed-based strategies, and helps to promote a more "resource-driven" approach to natural resource conservation – a key Phase Two recommendation.

NASCA has held limited discussions with conservation partners about this proposal in 2007 (*see page 16*), and is tracking opportunities to incorporate the proposed concept into Farm Bill negotiations.

Consulting with Conservation Partners on Action

As noted above, many NASCA-endorsed actions from the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project involve the need for considerable consultation with core conservation partners. Therefore, under Phase Three, NASCA developed a plan for consulting with conservation partners about (external) actions requiring collaboration among partners. This plan (*see Appendix G*) outlined the steps needed to communicate a proper message to conservation partners about the results of the project's two earlier phases, and to follow-up with partners to promote implementation (by them) of recommendations that fall under their jurisdiction or areas of interest.

To that end, in November 2006, NASCA outlined to NRCS and NACD the project recommendations that may apply to their organizations, and requested further discussion and cooperation in implementation. NASCA conducted follow-up meetings with NRCS and NACD in January 2007, to discuss partnership efforts to move ahead, and to identify ongoing activities of partners that provide good opportunities to implement project recommendations. From these discussions, a number of ***points of common interest*** were identified from among activities underway or policies adopted by these partners.

As one might expect, many partner efforts reflected recommendations developed under this project. Current NACD policy statements include actions consistent with many CDS project recommendations. Also, USDA included in its Farm Bill proposal (released January 2007) a number of actions that are consistent with recommendations outlined in the 2006 NASCA Phase Two Report.

NASCA also held introductory discussions with the National Governors Association (NGA), Western Governors Association (WGA), and the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA) about project recommendations. In exchange, NASCA received information from these organizations about their policies and proposals for conservation programs under a new Farm Bill. NGA, WGA and NASDA have adopted Farm Bill position

papers in 2006 and 2007 that include points of similar interest to certain recommendations of this project (*see page 16*).

NRCS and NACD contributed updated information to this report, to help describe ongoing actions by their organizations to improve delivery of conservation services. Many of the USDA-proposed 2007 Farm Bill improvements were first proposed (or hinted at) in a July 2006 USDA report titled *Reform and Assessment of Conservation Programs: A Report to Congress* (*see Appendix H for report title page, contents, preface and executive summary; source – U.S. Congress, Senate Agriculture Committee*). This report describes actions taken or underway by USDA during 2004-2006 to "eliminate redundancy, streamline program delivery, and improve services" as mandated in the 2002 Farm Bill, Section 2005. The report includes both programmatic reforms (consolidated programs, common easement provisions, conservation planning signup pilot project) and procedural, or program-neutral, reforms (common database, web-based application, self-assessment and self-servicing components, customer service toolkit).

Appendix I includes a brief description of NACD actions and policies related to specific Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project recommendations. It also lists NACD reference sources for described actions and policies. The reader is encouraged to consult these references for more detailed information about these partners' ongoing efforts to implement improvements to the conservation delivery system.

Five examples of points of common interest identified during partner discussions are described below by topic.

- ***Example One - Consolidating conservation programs***

The NASCA Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project strongly recommended a consolidation of conservation programs. Recommendations supported consolidating programs into a single "working lands" program, or, alternatively, consolidation into three program types – a single cost-share program, a single easement (or land retirement) program, and a single entitlement or CSP-type program. These recommendations also supported streamlining and simplification of programs, with greater flexibility and improved local decision-making to make a fewer number of programs work better.

The consolidation theme is reflected in the policy recommendations of NACD (2/04/07). NACD policy includes greater emphasis on locally led implementation, focus on working lands conservation, streamlining conservation programs, creation of an enhanced Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) that combines working lands programs (WHIP, FLEP, AMA, GRP), and restructuring of easement programs into a Farm Land Protection Program and the Healthy Forest Reserve Program.

USDA's January 2007 Farm Bill proposal contains actions in line with this recommended consolidation approach:

- Consolidate conservation title cost-share programs into an enhanced Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) - including EQIP, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Agricultural Management Assistance Program, Forest Land Enhancement Program, Ground and Surface Water Conservation Program, and Klamath Basin Program.

- Consolidate three easement-type programs for working lands into a single Private Lands Protection Program. (NRCS has already developed consistent policy for the easement program process where it cuts across multiple easement programs.)

- Consolidate floodplain easements program of the Emergency Watershed Program into a reauthorized Wetlands Reserve Program.

Consolidation of cost share and easement programs was supported by conclusions in the referenced July 2006 USDA report to Congress. Further, USDA proposed to consolidate two emergency response programs (Emergency Watershed Program and Emergency Conservation Program) into an Emergency Landscape Restoration Program.

Overall, the opportunity for continued collaboration on this subject with NACD and NRCS is very good, as the Farm Bill proceeds through Congress and towards authorization, and as NRCS undertakes rulemaking to implement authorized changes.

- ***Example Two - Reaching additional potential conservation customers***

The Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project included strong recommendations about the need for additional outreach to different groups of underserved and potential conservation customers, including minority and women landowners, absentee landowners, tribes, limited resource farmers, beginning farmers and ranchers, and others. The project captured ideas on how to identify these groups, and how to develop and deliver the conservation message in different languages, using different media and different styles of communication, to reach them and to increase their participation in conservation programs and services.

The 2006 USDA report to Congress noted progress in making available a self-assessment tool for the Conservation Security Program via hard copy, CD-ROM and via the Internet. NRCS translated the self-assessment tool into Spanish, and has noted success in promoting its use by the Hispanic community. The report also noted that there is much work left to do.

USDA's 2007 Farm Bill proposal sets aside 10% of all financial assistance funding in the conservation title for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. This set-aside will be effective only if the partnership is able to identify and reach these women, minority and absentee landowners, tribes, limited resource farmers, and beginning farmers and ranchers. Public agencies, private sector and non-governmental organizations can all play important roles in implementing the innovative recommendations from this project that will contribute to success in achieving the goal of this set-aside provision if enacted.

The NACD 2007 Farm Bill position recommended that all private landowners be able to access conservation programs, and NACD emphasized a theme in its 2007 annual meeting Farm Bill discussion that "every acre is important." NACD sponsored a workshop in July 2007 entitled, *Urban, Community and Coastal Conservation: A Special Forum on An Emerging Clientele*, to focus attention on new potential customers in those environments, and on the need for change to adapt to this changing customer base.

- ***Example Three - Creating state block grants for federal conservation funds***

As reported above, the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project recommended creation of state block grants for federal conservation funding. NASCA's concept of ***Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds*** is not the only proposal being advanced for state block grant federal funding.

Another partner, NASDA, has called for "state stewardship grants" in its Farm Bill policy (9/18/06), to receive federal conservation funds through state departments of agriculture. This proposal applies the state block grant idea successfully employed by NASDA in the area of specialty crops to new proposals in 2007 for conservation funding and agriculture viability projects. (Many NASCA member state conservation agencies reside in state departments of agriculture.)

State governors, in both NGA and WGA Farm Bill positions (8/10/06 and 6/13/06, respectively) call for state block grants in federal funding to afford states a greater role in implementing conservation programs, and to target areas of highest priority to states. These organizations ask Congress to provide conservation block grants to states to "*allow governors, state departments of agriculture, state environmental protection agencies, and state conservation agencies to work closely with their agricultural communities…to implement practices and services beneficial to the public*."

Although USDA does not propose such a process associated with its proposed addition of $7.8 billion in new federal conservation title funding, the agency does include under its proposal for the forestry title a grants program for innovative local forest management.

The above recommendations of NASDA, NGA and WGA demonstrate that the concept of greater state and local access to federal conservation funding is gaining support among state-level officials. Within NASCA, the concept has evolved since it was first proposed in *A Conservation Initiative for America's Private Working Lands*, issued June 2001, to build on recommendations developed as part of the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project. NASCA invites partners to continue the dialogue on this issue as action on the Farm Bill proceeds.

- ***Example Four - Streamlining conservation program procedures***

NRCS has taken steps to improve efficiency and effectiveness of federal conservation program management and payment procedures. These include employment of a web-based software tool (ProTracts) to manage contracting information, and to provide real-time access to conservation program contracting data, via standardized reports, custom queries and available financial transaction data. In a May 16, 2007 report to the Office of Management and Budget, titled Success Stories of Efficiency and Effectiveness, NRCS describes this and other improvements, including consolidated contracting and contract administration policy, and a standard application form for all Financial Assistance and Planning Division programs, standardized contract terms and conditions, a transition from cost-share cost lists to payment schedules for cost-share programs, streamlining of easement acquisition and management procedures, modifying program allocation formulas and posting allocation formulas to the NRCS website, and administrative improvements related to the Conservation Reserve Program and Rapid Watershed Assessments.

- ***Example Five - Emphasizing a more "resource-based" system in place of the current "program-driven" system of conservation***

The Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project endorsed this recommendation, as well as several related action steps (e.g., greater effort and resources applied to conservation planning, funding for adequate technical assistance, funding to pay for developing conservation plans). NASCA also received valuable recommendations on how to improve use of the private sector and non-governmental organizations in delivery of increased technical assistance for services such as conservation planning, to help place greater emphasis and focus on the land's resources (*see page 18*).

A review of NACD policy indicates support for the development of comprehensive conservation plans for all private working land participating in Farm Bill programs, and for adequate technical assistance funding to develop these plans, including increased use of technology and self assessments. NACD supports continued flexibility in the use of technical service providers and third party vendors in delivery of conservation technical assistance. NACD also supports addressing all resource concerns including coastal, urban, developing lands and public lands.

In its 2006 report to Congress, USDA described application of Rapid Watershed Assessments, GIS mapping, and web-based landowner self-assessment tools, together with their benefits in focusing on land resources when planning for and participation in conservation programs. USDA's 2007 Farm Bill proposal includes greater use of self assessments (such as used in the Conservation Security Program), and continued reliance, in part, on technical services providers to deliver needed technical assistance. The USDA proposal also includes a commodity crop option to forgo commodity payments (for the life of the Farm Bill) on a voluntary basis, in exchange for an enhanced conservation payment, where land is placed and operated under an appropriate conservation plan.

Together with proposed consolidation and streamlining of programs, implementation of these ideas (particularly greater use of conservation planning) would contribute to more of a "resource-driven" system. The greatest challenge in this area is likely to be the ***technical assistance*** issue – maintaining adequate and reliable funding to NRCS, states and local districts for technical assistance, together with improvements in employment of the private sector and non-governmental organizations to get the job done.

Improving Use of Technical Services Providers

As part of Phase Two, NASCA solicited and received substantial input from ***Technical Services Providers*** (TSPs) engaged in technical services for conservation programs. This input included ***public agencies*** acting in a TSP role (e.g., local soil and water conservation district, or state conservation or other agency), ***non-profits*** (e.g., wildlife groups), and ***private sector*** businesses performing conservation work involving landowners in multiple states. NASCA believes that this input added good value to Phase Two findings, as important ideas and recommendations received from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector provided balance and breadth to input received from public sector conservation services providers.

However, because of strong differences in experiences involving employment of private sector TSPs in different states, NASCA membership was not able to reach a consensus about how far to go in endorsing the Phase Two report's TSP recommendations. Some state conservation agencies have long and productive experience with NGOs and private sector service providers, while others lack experience or have encountered problems. NASCA members in some states have reported a shortage of qualified and certified private sector service providers, slowing progress at involving the private sector. Also, many of the TSP-related recommendations were directed to federal programs under NRCS.

Therefore, instead of including private sector TSP recommendations as part of those endorsed for priority action, NASCA included them in the final report to NRCS with the comment that NRCS may find value in the ideas and problem solutions presented in the Technical Services Provider appendix to the Phase Two Final Report, as the agency continues working with the private sector and non-governmental organizations to improve the Technical Services Provider process.

Since that time, further communication with TSP contacts indicates that improvements have been made in certain procedural areas (e.g., national TechReg certification), but that improvements are still needed in other areas, such as consistency in technical certification, increasing efficiency in utilizing the private sector, batching of individual conservation jobs into larger packages for bidding by private sector TSPs, and increased employment of non-governmental organizations and TSPs for overall conservation planning as a pre-requisite to design and installation of specific conservation practices. (*Please also see page 24 for additional comments by project participants on this issue*.)

Acknowledging Social Aspects of Improving Conservation Delivery

Conservation is as much about people as it is technical practices and land conditions. And the demographics of our nation are undergoing important changes that must be addressed as improvements are made to the delivery system. (*The reader is encouraged to refer to references on page 22 to access detailed information about some of these changes and their associated issues*.)

Almost immediately in the project's first phase, invited participants called attention to the need to reach out to people with different backgrounds and cultures, and to people with different conservation and land management goals and interests. NASCA received a very strong message that expanded outreach was a crucial part of improving the delivery system. When, at the end of the project's first phase, NASCA brought the External Advisory Group together to review Phase One findings, the group emphasized that "social aspects" should be strongly considered as changes were proposed.

NASCA concluded from Phase One that outreach would be key to Phase Two, and the second phase included outreach efforts related to ethnicities, tribes, minority farmers, gender (women landowners), traditional customers (informed landowners and land users familiar with conservation programs and benefits), limited-resource farmers and ranchers, urban and urban boundary landholders, absentee landowners, and non-participating landowners and land users, and other potential customers. (For detailed descriptions of these outreach workshops and interviews, please refer to appendices in the NASCA Phase Two Final Report, July, 2006.)

In addition to reaching out to diverse customers and potential customers, NASCA believed that input must also be received from a number of different sectors that ***provide*** the conservation services and benefits. NASCA included outreach to public sector agencies at the federal, state and local level, non-governmental organizations (non-profits, wildlife groups, farm organizations) and for-profit private sector technical services providers. NASCA sought to bring these diverse groups together - or at least obtain input from each of them - as the project proceeded.

During Phase Three partner consultations, primary emphasis was placed on strategic recommendations such as consolidating programs, streamlining procedures, etc. As a consequence, some project participants became concerned that many of the detailed recommendations for improving outreach and increasing participation by potential customers were in danger of "being lost in the shuffle". NASCA has taken care to point out, during Phase Three, that those detailed recommendations are embodied in the larger, strategic improvements discussed among conservation partners and NASCA membership, and NASCA has included in its reports references to these innovations.

This report describes innovative suggestions received about how to improve ***information resources*** and ***communication/outreach*** involving potential customers. Some of these innovations are new ideas; others are already underway at some scale. These innovations, and others like them, are needed to improve the delivery system's capacity to find and serve new customers. NASCA believes that these ideas warrant continued attention as improvements are made to the conservation delivery system.

For example, as conservation programs are streamlined and made more user-friendly, changes should incorporate new ideas about how to identify, communicate with, and serve new customers, including those that now cannot - or choose not to - participate in conservation programs. As greater local flexibility and decision-making is added to the conservation delivery process, state conservation agencies should assist local districts in incorporating recommendations for involving local stakeholders, including local interests in planning activities of the local district, and developing a conservation message for local customers in a manner that they will listen to and to which they will respond.

For its part, NASCA will adapt its website and other services to promote as many of these ideas as are feasible in developing and delivering member services to assist state conservation agencies in making improvements in their states. NASCA also encourages partners to incorporate these ideas in outreach and participation as they make improvements of their own. NASCA recognizes that electronic services have limitations in reaching limited resource farmers without direct access to websites or computers, and that such "other services" will be a key to states reaching these customers.

Maintaining Momentum and Participation by Interested Parties

Many groups and interests provided input to NASCA during the project's two earlier phases. In an effort to continue to inform and engage these interests, NASCA distributed and posted to the NASCA website a number of project reports and updates. NASCA maintained a project contact list, and distributed project updates in December 2006 and February 2007 (*see Appendix J*).

NASCA also reconstituted its ***External Advisory Group*** (*see Appendix K*) to include persons who were interested in serving on the advisory group during Phase Three, and to retain persons who wished to continue their participation from earlier phases (e.g., Phase Two national conference, April 2006). The External Advisory Group was invited to provide input to NASCA about NASCA efforts, and to identify how their organizations can contribute to implementation of important changes to the conservation delivery system.

One important reason that NASCA wished to maintain contact with and encourage continued participation by these interests is that many of their very good ideas were built into the project's recommendations. Many of these ideas (described earlier) involved use of technology or details of delivery that can, unless care is taken, be overlooked in efforts dealing with major strategic items (e.g., consolidating programs, employing new funding approaches). In fact, it was these interested persons who first called attention to the fact that this may occur, and who were responsible for NASCA taking extra care to carry forward these innovations and ideas as things moved ahead.

NASCA shared a draft of this final report with the External Advisory Group and other project contacts in July 2007 to solicit input. Some very good comments were received, and are worth noting as part of this report. ***Comments are summarized below*** (grouped together by topic):

- **Capturing Innovations in Communication and Outreach** – Commenter(s) reported that ***additional methods*** are in use to reach new customers of different cultures and capabilities. These included interactive online web-casting and video which can be archived and watched at a later time, You-tube, and "electronic extension" which compiles information from different universities into one website. Cooperative Extension Service employs websites in Spanish and using other multilingual materials, as well as totally pictorial and low literacy options.

  Commenter(s) suggested that use of ***computers and electronic communication*** may facilitate additional streamlining of conservation services for some emerging landowner groups (urban-rural transition zones). Other commenter(s) cautioned that use of computers and electronic-only applications may pose a barrier for other groups, such as limited resource farmers, unless assistance is provided in gaining access to electronic media and completing applications electronically. Communication about federal

conservation programs needs to be done in conjunction with state, other federal and non-governmental organization programs so the landowner/operator can compare options and make choices as a consumer.

- **Reaching New Customers** – Commenter(s) noted that outreach and education are the precursors to any successful delivery of on-the-ground technical assistance, yet they (along with monitoring) are the very components of the delivery system for which funding and support is most difficult to acquire. ***New and emerging clientele*** and the trend to smaller acreages and locally grown products both demand that the delivery system re-think itself and re-direct its energies to serve all of the acres and all of the willing landowners for whom conservation has not yet been a priority.

  Commenter(s) provided several ***references*** that contain detailed information about changing customer demographics and their associated issues. The reader is encouraged to refer to the following websites for information and reports provided or recommended by commenter(s).

  http://www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/CustomData/index.html The USDA, NRCS **Limited Resource and Beginning Farmer Data Set** includes information on the base population of Limited Resource Farmers and Beginning Farmers at the county level.

  http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/RaceAndEthnic/ USDA, Economic Research Service, **Race & Ethnicity in Rural America**, provides an overview of demographic and economic trends and characteristics of non-metropolitan minority residents, including rural minorities, marital status and household structure, educational attainment, labor force activity, measures of economic well-being, and future implications.

  http://www.joe.org/joe/2005october/a2.shtml **Exploring Agricultural Census Undercounts Among Immigrant Hispanic/ Latino Farmers with an Alternative Enumeration Project**; Garcia, Victor; Marinez, Juan, Journal of Extension, Volume 43, Number 5, October, 2005.

  http://www.nercrd.psu.edu/Diversity/index.html **Demographic Dimensions of Diversity Relevant for Extension Educators, What To Look For, Why, and Where To Find the Data on The Web**, Stephan J. Goetz, Ph.D., Director, The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development and Professor of Agricultural and Regional Economics, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA. This document lists basic demographic variables related to diversity that are relevant for Extension educators, discusses why the variables are important, and provides links to data sources for the different variables at different levels of geographic detail.

One commenter noted that the report incorrectly includes Tribes with others who have special concerns (ethnic groups, minorities, women, absentee landowners), in that ***Tribes are different*** - they are sovereign and have different relationships with levels of government. [*The Phase Two report did note that Tribal issues are much more complex than can be addressed by this project alone, but that Tribes share some common concerns with others who have difficulty participating in the conservation delivery system*.]

Commenter(s) also emphasized the increase in ***rented land*** (e.g., often as high as 60 percent in many mid-western counties), where practices are often not maintained from year to year by tenants and are often not functioning after 5 years. Commenter(s) suggested that outreach to tenants is critical, as are incentives (owner and tenant) to help maintain a practice on rented land.

One commenter provided a web link to the Center for Absentee Landowner website his organization created (referenced in the Phase Two Final Report). This site is informational and very user friendly, particularly for absentee landowners. It also includes project summary reports and other useful information under the "Agency Only" & "Media Center" tabs. The site will continue to be posted with surveys, outreach implementation (i.e. state pilots), evaluations, etc., as they are completed. http://www.absenteelandowners.org

Commenter(s) noted the increasing importance of the ***transitional zones*** between urban and rural landscapes, and that new techniques and programs are needed to alert this new and emerging group of landowners to the opportunities and necessities of conservation on their land. This could include re-connecting previously unified property now divided in this transitional zone, for the purposes of planning and delivery of services. Re-aggregation of newly divided properties may expedite conservation planning, and may lead to further sharing of technical and financial services among landowners organized into associations along interest lines (e.g., woodlots, livestock) or geographic boundaries (e.g., watershed).

- **Conservation Districts as a "Gateway"** - Commenter(s) noted that the emphasis on conservation districts as the "***gateways***" to conservation programs, technical assistance and to other agencies is heartening and correctly analyzed. The needs for capacity enhancement, training, improved outreach techniques and tools, and the enlistment of additional help through technical service providers all deserve real attention.

  Other commenter(s) suggested that the report's call for expansion of the role of local conservation districts will create problems unless steps are taken to remove persistent and long-held discriminatory ***attitudes*** related to tribes, minorities and non-traditional customers. While acknowledging the report's recommendation for a focused approach at the state/local level to build capacity in board functioning and technical assistance, commenter(s)

suggested that this expanded role, while on its face appearing admirable, may take years of trial and error and training for local boards to develop capacity to run large programs. If federal and state-led efforts are further devolved to locally-led boards, the result may be wildly different capacity levels within states, from state to state, and region to region.

Commenter(s) indicated that training and credentialing systems for local boards and staff should ***include emphasis on outreach*** to diverse audiences and limited resource farmers and ranchers, and that efforts to strengthen local decision-making should ensure the ***inclusion*** of minorities and limited resource farmers and ranchers. [*Phase Two recommendations included outreach to all local potential customers and improving their participation in local planning and program decision-making*.]

- **Role of Conservation Planning** – Commenter(s) indicated that conservation planning should be incorporated into overall ***farm business planning***, such as tax and revenue planning (with increasing size of program payments), workload and maintenance scheduling, and environmental liability and insurance planning. No amount of locally-led efforts will work unless the business implications of conservation planning are adequately addressed. Collaboration with Cooperative Extension Service and private farm business management planning such as Farm Managers and Rural Appraisers, the Center for Farm Financial Management (MN) and certified crop advisors should be strongly encouraged.

- **Applying the Private Sector (Technical Service Providers)** – Commenter(s) recommended a ***more innovative use*** of the private sector in providing conservation services. One example noted is to employ the private sector more heavily in conservation planning as a pre-requisite to landowners' overall participation in conservation programs, perhaps providing expanded, dedicated funding to allow landowners a choice in use of the private sector. Another is to employ private sector and non-governmental organizations to reach and assist identified new and non-traditional customers. Commenter(s) echoed the need for further efforts to ensure consistency in the national TechReg certification process.

  Commenter(s) suggested that NASCA include information relating to private sector technical service providers (TSPs) on the NASCA website, and that NASCA educate its membership about the expertise and experience that private sector and NGO service providers bring to the table [*particularly due to a lack of experience with TSPs in some states*].

  Commenter(s) indicated that any approach that divests federal involvement in conservation planning and program administration and federal technical assistance will only ***exacerbate the problem*** already existing in some regions - there simply aren't enough technical service providers available.

One reason suggested is that TSPs cannot get adequate insurance coverage for their work without pricing themselves totally out of the "expert" market, meaning that many TSPs will not write plans in some areas on environmental-impacting activity, because of risks of litigation from the landowners and because their services cannot be billed at a reasonable rate.

- **State Block Grants** – Commenter(s) suggested that state block grants are ***not realistic*** given current federal reporting requirements for funds, unless a rigorous reporting mechanism is put in place. Commenter(s) suggested that NASCA had not provided enough detail about how state conservation agencies would do better (or as well) in managing funds as do federal agencies. It would also need to be determined if states will accept liability if conservation practices fail. Others suggested that states include specifics on the role of the private sector as a partner in delivering services under proposed state block grants.

  One commenter with experience in state block grant transitioning suggested that a critical problem is the loss of federal input and direction at the state/local level. This may result in a ***patchwork*** of policy in action, and in some cases, no action at all, unless carefully monitored against firmly established protocol, standards and expectations, and with strong federal oversight in place. States do not always do a good job of communicating with one another, and often may be involved in conservation-related litigation (e.g., AR/OK). These types of modern-day realities (litigation battlefields over conservation) need to be contemplated in the development of such a state-based approach.

  Commenter(s) questioned whether the state block grant concept included separate ***Tribal Block Grants***, or whether states receiving block grant funds for conservation will be able to properly include Tribal lands in participation in state-based activities. How will state level conservation folks be able to determine the appropriate practices on Tribal land, as opposed to Tribal members? Will it be any better for Tribal lands if these funds are administered at the state-level?

  Other commenter(s) suggested that the [report's] suggested step for the creation of regional partnership funding is essential to both maintain and to strengthen the conservation delivery system, and that the regional block grant concept could ***re-energize and stimulate*** the regional, state and local components of the delivery system, and bring together state agencies and state associations to work in partnership for the overall fulfillment of the vision of this project. Commenter(s) stated that support for the "gateway" concept for conservation districts and for state conservation agencies is critical in this entire initiative, and it will not be forthcoming under traditional appropriations such as those involved in Farm Bill programs.

- **Regional and Local Focus, Lack of** – Commenter(s) suggested that local conservation districts and the locally led process are suffering from a lack of support as ***[Washington] DC-centric prioritization*** is occurring in agencies and associations. Continued unbalanced focus on federal legislative and policy level issues that drive the financial side of the delivery system will leave regions, states and districts without the full representation and strength which they need to fulfill their missions, and may neglect certain regions of the country and their issues.

- **Effectiveness of Programs/Environmental Outcomes** – Commenter(s) suggested that entitlement programs such as CSP will need to begin to document outcomes, such as ecosystem services, through some form of ***monitoring and verification*** process. Recordkeeping for documentation of environmental outcomes will also be critical, and this needs to be communicated to conservation participants.

  Cooperative Extension Service reports that new conservation ***targeting*** investigations show that the most effective practices may be those installed by landowners who are located at a position in the landscape where they have the most effect, but who may not be interested in participating in conservation programs. Reaching these people and offering incentives will be important to achieve the expected outcomes.

- **Web Links** - A number of commenters provided web links for access to further information about their efforts to improve conservation service delivery. These have been referenced in the report text and/or in the above comment section, or will be posted as project-related web links on the NASCA website in a location associated with the conservation delivery system project (www.NASCAnet.org).

NASCA appreciates the continued input and participation by advisory representatives and interested parties.

2007 Summer Regional Meetings

Beginning in January 2007, NASCA focused an effort through the seven NASCA regional directors to identify needed state member conservation agency services related to project recommendations. Regional directors queried their region's state conservation agency directors about how they plan to implement project recommendations endorsed under NASCA direct actions, and what was needed in the way of NASCA member services to assist state conservation agencies in taking action in their states. Members proposed that issues relating to implementation of recommendations be taken up at the 2007 summer regional NASCA meetings (held in conjunction with regional NACD meetings).

NASCA members identified the recommendation for local district official and staff training and district official accreditation as a key topic of interest for regional meetings. NASCA sought to coordinate the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project recommendation on this issue with an ongoing pilot project by the NACD District Operations Committee involving one state from each of the NACD regions. These projects share similar goals with respect to training and informing local district officials (e.g., to empower local officials to become the gateway for conservation services, and develop training and credentialing systems for local boards and staff – *see page 8*).

At the time of this report's preparation, other CDS topics considered for discussion at regional meetings include developing NASCA member services, conducting assessments of state conservation agency program effectiveness, improving NASCA communication and information technology, data sharing, and upcoming NASCA state team-building workshops in each of the NASCA seven regions.

Further Actions

Progress is being made on many of the recommendations from the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project, by NASCA, by partners, and by interested participants in the project. Success in improving the conservation delivery system, however, will occur only if the partnership works together to focus on those ideas that make the most sense given today's opportunities. Debate on the Farm Bill provides one avenue for action, as do ongoing efforts to adapt services to meet demands associated with managing our urban, coastal and community resources, and responding to the needs of new customers. Success also depends on the partnership's continuing effort to coordinate the efforts of leadership, to be responsive to each other's strengths and weaknesses, and to be inclusive of new ideas and new partners.

At the close of Phase Three, NASCA is poised to produce and deliver member services to assist state conservation agencies in building capacity to improve delivery of conservation services in their states. It is through this member services initiative that NASCA will carry out its direct actions endorsed under Phase Three. NASCA will also continue to consult and cooperate with partners in matters that require joint action or action by others.

Perhaps most importantly to the future of NASCA, many of the delivery system ideas developed under this project have been brought into the NASCA mainstream - into the organization's planning and operating processes. The project has helped to focus NASCA leadership on the need to develop and deliver a strong member services program, and on the critical role of state conservation agencies in supporting needed improvements in delivery at all levels. For example, NASCA has made ***improved networking and communications*** part of its annual work plan for 2007. The project has also

reinforced the organization's desire to play a larger role in influencing national policy on conservation programs.

NASCA will continue to focus the ideas and recommendations from this project on leadership within the conservation partnership, and with new partners, to maintain momentum and to act on points of common interest. NASCA believes that this should be a priority issue for partnership discussions today and in the future. For future partnership efforts, NASCA will focus on continuing collaboration through leadership follow-up actions to the ***Partners Statement Plan of Action*** developed at the November 2006 Leaders Conference in Nashville, TN. As partnership leaders in 2007 and beyond refine their goals and priorities for cooperation under such an agreement, NASCA will continue to promote endorsed improvements to the conservation delivery system.

As a contribution to further action on expanding conservation delivery to reach new customers and to include all natural resources, NACD will post to its website (urban conservation section) the results from its July 2007 workshop on *Urban, Community and Coastal Conservation: A Special Forum on An Emerging Clientele,* illustrating how the conservation delivery system is adapting in some locations to meet future delivery system needs associated with urban, coastal and community conservation. NACD has distributed a national questionnaire to conservation districts soliciting ideas about the urban conservation issue, and will develop the topic as part of its February 2008 NACD annual meeting agenda.

It is expected that the conservation delivery system will continue to receive strong attention from government, landowners, business and interests groups in the near future as national decisions are made about the Farm Bill and related public agency organization and operation. Also, as conservation partners adapt to accommodate changing demands for the conservation delivery system, such as serving new customers and responding to needs of urban, coastal and community conservation, further change will be inevitable. NASCA believes that the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project has made significant contributions to the knowledge base for creating a national vision of what the conservation delivery system can and should be – and to the methods for how to accomplish such a vision. NASCA views this project as one piece of a larger and dynamic process of change now going on within and surrounding the conservation delivery system.

NASCA invites partners – new and old – to bring forward ideas about how improvements can be accomplished, working together. NASCA invites interests brought together through this project to collaborate in seeking funding to implement the innovative ideas identified in the NASCA project reports. NASCA encourages all interested parties and organizations to do their utmost to directly implement improvements under their influence and jurisdiction, and to make the improvement process an ongoing and dynamic partnership effort.

Acknowledgements

The activities and work-products of Phase Three of the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project were made possible in part by a contribution agreement between NASCA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (Contribution Agreement Number 68-3A75-6-53). NASCA appreciates the cooperation and assistance offered by NRCS leadership and staff during this project.

NASCA thanks those individuals and organizations that have participated in the work of the External Advisory Group, or who have otherwise participated in the project's three phases, and who took the time and effort to play an active and continuing role in advancing ideas and recommendations received throughout this three-year project.

NASCA thanks NRCS and NACD for their contributions to this report. NASCA thanks member state conservation agency representatives that provided leadership in the Phase Three Committee and earlier committees, and to NASCA regional directors, in working to maintain progress in the implementation phase of the delivery system evaluation process.

NASCA appreciates the consulting services of David Vogel, NASCA Program Consultant, in managing the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project through its three phases, and in supporting the efforts of NASCA leadership and members in making this important effort a success.

List of Appendices

Appendix A

Executive Summary *from* NASCA Final Report on the Evaluation of the Nation's Conservation Delivery System (Phase Two), July 10, 2006

After hosting two regional listening sessions in mid-2005 in Ohio and Utah to obtain input from interested parties as part of a project to evaluate the nation's conservation delivery system, the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA) conducted an extensive program of outreach and state and local follow-up under a second phase of the project. This continuing project is a partnership initiative by NASCA and the US Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, to determine how to improve the conservation delivery system, making it more effective and efficient in achieving results in conserving our natural resources and serving our nation's citizens.

The purpose of a second phase was to follow-up on four key areas for improvement that emerged from the two listening sessions, including ***improved local decision-making and added flexibility***, ***streamlined and simplified programs***, ***reduced delays and inconsistencies***, and ***improved use of personnel and technology***. NASCA also identified the need for further work to solicit input from interests that were under-represented at the listening sessions, and conducted outreach to these groups under the second phase, including tribes, multi-cultural interests, women landowners and operators, wildlife managers, and service non-recipients, as well as private sector technical service providers. NASCA conducted additional work with groups and individuals representing these interests, and with states and national partners, to develop more fully recommendations from the listening sessions into more detailed final recommendations and action steps by May 2006.

Phase Two reinforced the four general areas of improvement identified in Phase One, with these re-emerging with additional support and detail. Phase two outreach also added further value to the project's findings by including a more diverse perspective on recommendations, and by providing specific examples of how various partnerships are working to overcome shortcomings and improve delivery of conservation services to a more diverse customer base and local community.

NASCA concluded the second phase of the project with a national conference at which it presented findings and recommendations via a series of panel discussions involving many partners and interests to whom NASCA had reached out, and at which attendees developed specific action steps to assist implementation of recommendations supported by those in attendance. NASCA consolidated and reported all information collected from the second phase into a final report.

Phase two findings indicated strong and diverse support for improved flexibility in local decision-making, accommodating regional and geographical differences, providing local decision-makers with more direct access to funding and greater input to program development, more comprehensive conservation planning, streamlined and simplified programs and procedures, greater outreach to potential customers considering changing land ownership trends and diversity, improved participation by private sector and other non-governmental organizations in delivering conservation services, improved training of all delivery system personnel, application of new and existing technology to aid in communicating with and informing different potential customer groups, and other recommendations. The national conference attendees further developed a number of action steps that can assist in implementation of strongly supported recommendations.

NASCA plans further work to secure NASCA membership and partnership concurrence on the recommendations received and on the best approach to implement recommended improvements to the conservation delivery system. NASCA will track improvements implemented, and will continue to communicate with new and traditional partners to maintain progress.

Appendix B

Phase Three
NASCA Membership Survey
On Project Recommendations

(without appendices)
July 14, 2006

Background

A critical task under CDS Phase Three is to secure NASCA membership's concurrence on recommendations that NASCA will endorse for action in general (e.g., by any partner), and for action to be taken directly by NASCA as part of implementation of Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project recommendations and action steps. This process begins with distribution of the final report to members, continues with the analysis of your responses to this survey, and will be completed at the NASCA Annual Meeting in September, 2006.

All recommendations received by NASCA have been reported in detail in two phase Final Reports - November 2005 and July 2006. Members are encouraged to review these reports in detail prior to completing this survey. To aid members in completing the survey, the top priority recommendations from Phase One, and strategic priorities and action steps from Phase Two, are organized for easy reference in Appendix A according to the three primary categories of improvements identified in the phase two report:

1. To improve flexibility and local decision-making to advance locally-led as a means of accommodating regional and local differences and priorities;

2. To simplify and streamline the delivery process, and make it more "user friendly" to improve participation, and reduce delays and inconsistencies in programs and agencies that slow the process and impede participation; and,

3. To better apply technology and human resources in staffing, distribution and training, and improve use of the private sector, to increase capacity to properly deliver conservation services.

The purpose of this survey is to identify which of the recommendations and action steps proposed under phases one and two that ***NASCA membership wishes to endorse for action*** - both action directly in support of activities among or within state conservation agencies, as well as action developed in consultation with conservation partners. It is also intended to identify your highest priorities for action, and to identify what services NASCA members believe are needed from NASCA to assist in accomplishing any actions endorsed.

Your responses to this survey will help to define what NASCA – your organization - does next with respect to what we have learned through the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project, and how NASCA can work with others to implement a NASCA vision of the conservation delivery system.

Your responses will help distinguish between two different ways of handling the recommendations received:

- First, to identify "core" recommendations that NASCA can fully embrace and endorse for action (either independently or in partnership); and,

- Second, to identify significant recommendations that NASCA can report as provided by others that partnering groups should take the lead in addressing.

Your responses also will share information about what different states might be interested in doing – as individual members, at their own pace – within their states, and about what assistance state members believe they need to be successful in improving the conservation delivery system.

Survey Design

This survey has *three parts*. First is a "fill-in-the-blanks" section in which you can easily insert your preferences and priorities in some detail, and describe your view of what you consider should be "core" endorsed NASCA recommendations. You can select your priorities from the recommendations listed in Appendix A, and list them either by text, or by category and number (e.g., **I**-*9*, or **II**-*18a-d*, or **III**-*21 & 25, and so on*).

Second is a written response section to allow you to add, in your own words, what you think is the best course for NASCA to follow, and to identify the services that you believe NASCA must provide to help member state directors and staff accomplish the most important improvements to the conservation delivery system. Last is a single question about your vision for a conservation delivery system.

NASCA staff and contractors will analyze responses to the survey to determine:

- Core recommendations endorsed for NASCA action
- Highest priority actions
- NASCA role with external partners
- NASCA services needed by members
- NASCA vision of a conservation delivery system

This analysis will be reviewed and acted on by the NASCA Board and membership at the annual business meeting in San Antonio in September.

Thank you for your time and effort in reviewing and completing the survey. NASCA officers appreciate your understanding of the importance of each member playing an active part in establishing NASCA's course as the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project moves to the implementation phase.

The survey is designed to allow you to insert your responses directly into the Word document, save it as your response, and return it by e-mail reply.

Please contact David Vogel at DVOGEL6@nc.rr.com or by calling 919-833-5405 if you have any questions or need assistance in completing and returning the survey. Please also return the survey via e-mail to that address.

Please return the survey by **August 4**, 2006.

*****

Appendix B *continued*

Section 1 – Fill-in-the-blanks

Please insert your responses directly into spaces provided (typing within the underlined space). Please refer to recommendations listed in Appendix A as necessary.

1. The most significant shortcoming to the delivery system for which good recommendations were received is ____.

2. My top priority for NASCA action as part of a "core" set of recommendations that NASCA can embrace includes ____.

3. The recommendation with which I most strongly disagree and would support no action by NASCA is ____ .

4. The reason I strongly disagree with this recommendation is ____.

5. The recommendation within Category One that I most strongly agree with endorsing is ____.

6. The recommendation within Category Two that I most strongly agree with endorsing is ____.

7. The recommendation within Category Three that I most strongly agree with endorsing is ____.

8. NASCA can best *independently* pursue the recommendation to ____.

9. NASCA should incorporate into its annual work plan the recommendation(s) to ____.

10. The most feasible and meaningful recommendation(s) that NASCA should consult with conservation partners about includes ____.

11. The best way for NASCA to promote action by partners to implement recommendations that apply to them is to ____.

12. I believe that my state agency (i.e., division, commission, or other equivalent unit) has the capacity to implement my suggested priorities.
    Yes ____. No ____.

13. My state agency is or may be interested in proceeding, at our own pace working with our state partnership, to implement the recommendation to ____.

Appendix B *continued*

14. In my state, if I am to take action to implement priority endorsed recommendations, I would like to receive help from NASCA to ____.

15. NASCA member state agencies have capacity to assist each other in accomplishing endorsed recommendations by ____.

16. While I may endorse a particular recommendation for direct action by NASCA, I may not be comfortable committing NASCA to action with an external partner for that recommendation. Agree ____ Disagree____.

17. Where endorsing certain recommendations dealing with external organizations might cause reservations among NASCA members, I would agree that these ideas should be the subject of consideration by an identified external organization other than NASCA (modular approach without a full endorsement). Agree ___ Disagree ____.

*In the next section, you can outline your **more detailed ideas** and suggestions in writing in the space provided, as necessary.*

Appendix B *continued*

Section 2 – Additional Detailed Responses

Considering your responses to questions in Section 1, please summarize or describe in your own words as necessary your top suggestions regarding recommendations you endorse under the three general categories.

Category One - To improve flexibility and local decision-making to advance locally-led as a means of accommodating regional and local differences and priorities.

- **In this category, I believe that NASCA should:**

- **To help with implementation of endorsed recommendation(s), I believe that NASCA should provide the following services and assistance to state members:**

Category Two - To simplify and streamline the delivery process, and make it more "user friendly" to improve participation, and reduce delays and inconsistencies in programs and agencies that slow the process and impede participation.

- **I believe that NASCA should:**

- **NASCA should provide the following services and assistance to state members:**

Category Three - To better apply technology and human resources in staffing, distribution and training, and improve use of the private sector, to increase capacity to properly deliver conservation services.

- **I believe that NASCA should:**

- **NASCA should provide the following services and assistance to state members:**

Section 3 – NASCA Conservation Vision

Finally, throughout this project, NASCA has been asked to describe its vision for conservation. So, if you were able to construct your ideal conservation delivery system, what would it look like? What would be its features; its improvements? (*Note if desired where these improvements are included in recommendations received*.)

Thank you for completing this important NASCA survey!!!

Appendix C

NASCA Survey Responses Summary of Priority Actions
(September 11, 2006) and **Supplement** (September 21, 2006)

NASCA CDS Survey Responses
Summary of Priority Actions
September 11, 2006

Background

On July 13, 2006 a membership survey was distributed to the full NASCA membership. This survey was conducted to secure members' concurrence on recommendations from the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project that NASCA will endorse for action either independently or in consultation with partners.

Survey Responses

As of September 6, seventeen states had responded to the CDS Survey (WA, SD, MT, MN, WI, MD, MO, DE, UT, MS, KY, NV, AR, MI, WV, NM, and SC). Most responses were complete, although a few limited their responses to the fill-in-the-blank section. Responses were received from all seven NASCA regions (2 PAC, 2 SW, 2 NP, 4 NC, 3 NE, 3 SE, 1 SC), due to efforts of Regional Directors. This is a 30% response rate (not including responses received after 9/6).

Outlined below are results of the survey responses as determined by the number of times a recommendation was listed as an answer to a question within each category (e.g., *With which do you strongly agree?*). Those actions listed three or more times to a question are included as priorities for a category and are listed below.

Respondents selected a broad cross-section of recommendations for their support and priorities. For example, different states supported (*agreed with or identified for NASCA action*) over 40 of the 60-odd recommendations listed in the survey and Phase Two final report, in all three recommendation categories (flexibility/locally led; simplify/streamline; technology/human resources). However, despite the spread and the small response percentage, answers overlapped in a number of important areas, as outlined below.

Respondents identified differences between independent action by NASCA and the need for consultation. A number of actions were listed for consultation with other organizations, and respondents suggested a number of ways to carry out such consultation. (A separate document describes a more detailed plan for partner consultation.)

It is also worth pointing out that some respondents did not agree with certain recommendations (a portion or all of 15). These deal mainly with the Technical Services Provider (TSP) issue, and indicate, as expected, a wide disparity in how that provision has worked in different states. These further include specific limitations identified for recommendations that caused respondents to have reservations (e.g., danger in oversimplification of programs, impact on regional priorities of a one-size-fits-all approach, or who should communicate with elected officials). Some of these same recommendations, however, were supported for action by other respondents. The TSP issue requires serious consideration about what approach might best represent a workable strategy for NASCA. The other reservations may be addressed by clarifying or limiting certain recommendations prior to any further action being taken.

A number of strongly supported actions were also suggested for inclusion in the NASCA work plan (noted below).

Listed below are five areas of ranked recommendations based on type of action and survey responses received:

- Actions supported
- Actions to be taken independently
- Actions to be taken by others requiring consultation
- Actions opposed
- Actions that may be included in the NASCA work plan

1. Actions strongly supported by responding NASCA members:

Of 34 recommendations receiving strong agreement, seven were listed three or more times -

1. Reverse the current trend of “program-driven” conservation, toward more flexible “resource-driven” conservation.

2. Expand the role of local Soil and Water Conservation Districts to serve as gateway and clearinghouse for customers, and to perform technical and administrative services.

3. Focus sufficient resources in the field to be able to deliver services.

4. Create a USDA NRCS “block grant” process to states for distribution of conservation services to meet natural resource priorities.

5. Simplify program rules and regulations and allow greater state/local decisions.

6. Simplify conservation program delivery processes.

7. CTA should fully fund the field office technical assistance workload. Separate technical assistance (TA) dollars from program funding (FA).

2. Actions to be taken independently by NASCA:

Of 22 recommendations suggested for independent NASCA action, five were listed three or more times –

1. Create a USDA NRCS "block grant" process to states for distribution of conservation services to meet natural resource priorities.

2. Expand the role of local Soil and Water Conservation Districts to serve as gateway and clearinghouse for customers, and to perform technical and administrative services.

3. Empower local conservation boards and councils to be the conservation gateway for services; develop local board and council members' understanding of their powers and responsibilities, and use of recruitment techniques and strategies for new and diverse partners.

4. Develop training and credentialing systems for local boards and staff.

5. CTA should fully fund the field office technical assistance workload. Separate technical assistance (TA) dollars from program funding (FA).

3. Actions to be taken by others, requiring consultation:

Of 31 recommendations identified as requiring consultation with partners, four were listed three or more times –

1. Simplify program rules and regulations and allow greater state/local decisions.

2. Simplify conservation program delivery processes.

3. Reverse the current trend of "program-driven" conservation, toward more flexible "resource-driven" conservation.

4. Develop a single working lands conservation program, with resource protection targets and applying aggregated federal, state and local resources.

Other Suggested Specifics for Consultation

Respondents identified the following as the best ways for NASCA to promote action by partners:

- Keep the information fresh and in front of them.
- Develop a new executive partnership agreement.
- Work more closely with other state organizations like NGA, WGA, NASDA.
- Demonstrate implementation via a pilot project somewhere.
- Engage at the leadership level, developing action strategies.
- Hold forums/workshops
- Work with state conservationists

4. Actions strongly opposed by responding NASCA members:

Of 15 recommendations opposed (or in part opposed) by respondents, 2 were listed three or more times –

1. Increase the number of certified TSPs as conservation planners to handle 80% of the planning workload.

2. Resolve the issue that TSPs are not yet embraced as equal partners in the delivery process.

5. Actions that may be included in the NASCA work plan:

Of 32 recommendations suggested for inclusion in the NASCA work plan, 4 were listed three or more times –

1. Expand the role of local Soil and Water Conservation Districts to serve as gateway and clearinghouse for customers, and to perform technical and administrative services.

2. Create a USDA NRCS “block grant” process to states for distribution of conservation services to meet natural resource priorities.

3. Emphasize communication with elected officials at all levels to support funding for conservation. Encourage interagency cooperation.

4. Empower local conservation boards and councils to be the conservation gateway for services; develop local board and council members' understanding of their powers and responsibilities, and use of recruitment techniques and strategies for new and diverse partners.

Limitations

Survey responses were received from 30% of NASCA membership. This is not an ideal response where the intent is to obtain full membership preferences and direction. However, it may be viewed as sufficient to identify areas that warrant continued progress, as well as those that represent a potential problem due to a lack of unanimity and to diversity of opinion by individual members.

In acknowledgement of this limitation, proposed NASCA actions based on decisions reached from this survey report may be shared with the full membership following the San Antonio meeting, to provide the full membership with an opportunity to comment prior to action being taken.

Requested NASCA Services

Respondents indicated a number of requested NASCA services associated with implementation of improvements in delivery:

1. Provide and support a conservation vision; underlying value
2. Sharing information
   a. States' experiences, success stories
   b. Use of contribution agreements
   c. Info on how states improve delivery, remove inconsistencies
   d. New programs and their benefits
   e. Contacts
   f. Quarterly newsletter or notebook
   g. Tracking CDS implementation progress
3. Implement state block grants
   a. Provide framework
   b. Establish pilot block grant project
4. Templates/models and training materials - distribute; clearinghouse; website; CDs; IPODs
   a. State leadership (commission, SWCDs)
   b. Board training – responsibilities; opportunities; business planning
   c. Ordinances (comprehensive planning)
   d. Local Working Group/stakeholders
   e. Planning and implementation
   f. Communication with elected officials
   g. Accountability methods

   h. Technology
      1. Transfer of field data
   i. Structure (multi-district; watershed)
   j. Staffing plans
   k. Private sector
   l. Contracts
   m. Public relations
5. Evaluate existing state programs and build state member capacity for actions that are not policy-restricted
   a. Conduct state staff training workshops
6. Host forums on conservation planning
7. Establish a process for a NASCA Rapid Response Team
   a. Match people from different states into a network of expertise
8. Communicate on national efforts; secure national support
   a. Expand NASCA presence in Washington, DC
   b. Work at national partnership leadership level
   c. Improve frank discussion among core partnership leaders
   d. Help unify voice of conservation
9. Contract regional staff assistance
   a. Organize regional support and cooperation

NASCA should consider which services should be provided and how to provide them. Several requested services relate directly to building capacity among and within states to improve delivery of conservation services, and may be incorporated into a developing ***NASCA capacity building initiative***.

Needed Action

This document is intended to serve as a basis for discussion at the NASCA annual meeting in San Antonio, and for making decisions about further action by NASCA, under Phase Three, on findings from the project's first two phases.

Although many different recommendations received support by survey respondents, several clearly enjoy common support, and may be considered as "core" recommendations that can be endorsed by NASCA. The top priorities in *Sections 1* and *2* may, therefore, warrant further direct action by NASCA. Also, NASCA is preparing a work plan for consultation with partners based on actions listed in *Section 3*.

Recommendations identified as opposed in *Section 4* represent a special challenge to NASCA, as membership is not in unanimity, and as individual members hold diverse views on how to proceed and why. In these cases, NASCA may choose to adopt the approach of *reporting a recommendation provided by others that partnering groups should take the lead in addressing*. This means that, even though individual members may choose to proceed differently in their own states, *corporate* NASCA may elect to proceed to share recommendations with a responsible organization *for its benefit* should it choose to act.

Results from the survey also have implications for refinement of the NASCA annual work plan (*Section 5*). Results also indicate an opportunity for NASCA to provide services requested by members associated with this project and state member capacity in general. These inputs should also be considered by the membership and officers at the San Antonio meeting.

NASCA CDS Survey Responses
Summary of Priority Actions
SUPPLEMENT
September 21, 2006

Background

A number of CDS Survey responses **were received after the September 11 report was prepared**. In general, these responses reinforce many of the prioritized actions presented in the report. However, due to added numbers from these later responses, four recommendations are added.

Added Recommendations

Four recommendations (two each from Categories I and III) are added to four sections of the survey report:

Actions strongly supported by responding NASCA members:

I.1. Locally-led: Keep decision-making local, within a nationally set framework; strengthen the role of local working groups.

III. 4. Provide adequate administrative staffing so technical staff does not have to do so much administrative work.

Actions to be taken independently by NASCA:

I.1. Locally-led: Keep decision-making local, within a nationally set framework; strengthen the role of local working groups.

Actions to be taken by others, requiring consultation:

I.1. Locally-led: Keep decision-making local, within a nationally set framework; strengthen the role of local working groups.

Actions that may be included in the NASCA work plan:

I. 12. Outreach and involvement of local people in informed decision making; conservation partners host conservation forums (broader than farm bill) co-sponsored by stakeholder groups, ethnic groups, and organizations (i.e., county elected officials, planning boards).

a. Develop a concept paper on how to engage local decision makers and a process design.

b. Develop a strategic planning process that includes people or groups that you would not normally work with.

III. 11. Institutionalize training of all partners, especially NRCS and conservation districts, on the art and science of conservation planning process. Strengthen expertise in all necessary disciplines.

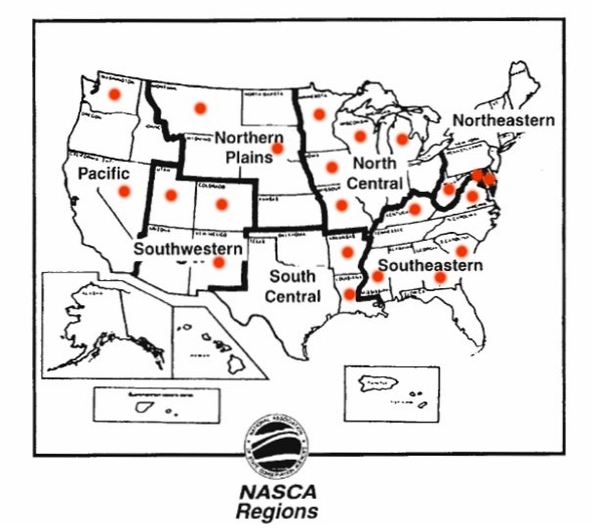
Appendix D

NASCA CDS Endorsed Actions
Summary of San Antonio Member Meeting Actions
October 16, 2006

Background

On September 26, 2006 NASCA membership in attendance at the San Antonio business meeting reviewed results of the July 13, 2006 full-membership CDS survey. Of the CDS Phase Three Committee, three members were present (Chair - Adrian Baber, Pete Jahraus, and Cindy Lair). Eleven of twelve NASCA Board members were among the 21 states who attended the San Antonio meeting.

Survey Responses



At final reporting, twenty-two states (shown by red dots) responded to the CDS survey - WA, SD, MT, MN, WI, MD, MO, DE, UT, MS, KY, NV, AR, MI, WV, NM, SC, IA, CO, LA, GA, and VA. Responses were received from all seven NASCA regions (2 PAC, 3 SW, 2 NP, 5 NC, 3 NE, 5 SE, and 2 SC), due to contacts and other efforts by Regional Directors and the NASCA contractor. This is a 40% response rate and represents fairly good overall national coverage.

Member Actions

CDS survey results (distributed to membership September 11, 2006) set the stage for endorsement for further NASCA action either independently or in consultation with partners. San Antonio attendees endorsed a number of actions, and advised the CDS Phase Three Committee on how to proceed with implementation under Phase Three. Outlined below are the endorsements and a discussion of next possible steps.

Actions endorsed to be taken independently by NASCA:

Of 6 recommendations suggested for independent NASCA action, 5 were endorsed for further action –

1. **Create a USDA NRCS "block grant" process to state conservation agencies for distribution of conservation services.**

2. **Expand the role of local Soil and Water Conservation Districts to serve as gateway and clearinghouse for customers, and to perform technical and administrative services.**

3. **Empower local conservation boards and councils to be the conservation gateway for services; develop local board and council members' understanding of their powers and responsibilities, and use of recruitment techniques and strategies for new and diverse partners.**

4. **Develop training and credentialing systems for local boards and staff.** *(Could be considered a subpart of 3.)*

5. **Locally-led: Keep decision-making local, within a nationally set framework; strengthen the role of local working groups.**

Discussion:

There are two ways of moving ahead with these endorsed actions. First, NASCA may support activities within states that implement improvements ***at the state level***. Second, NASCA may also take action to build support and cooperation, and possibly funding, ***at the national and regional levels*** for these initiatives.

Of these five actions endorsed for further action, four (2-5) include activities in which NASCA state agencies are already engaged. The NASCA CDS Phase Three Committee will develop action steps to support these state activities as part of NASCA implementation steps. NASCA may offer states assistance in developing improved delivery under these actions, working through NASCA Regional Directors. This activity will be coordinated with the larger NASCA Member Services strategy. In addition to activities at the state level, NASCA may communicate to national partners about its initiative(s) related to implementing these five actions, work to develop national/regional support and cooperation, and may seek funding to support member services efforts.

Before outlining a plan to address the "state block grants" concept (1), the Phase Three Committee will review previous NASCA initiatives and/or policy on the concept, and consider how things might have changed today (e.g., today's significant number and amounts of state earmarks in the federal budget). The Phase Three Committee will consider how to rename and recast this concept to fit related NASCA initiatives (NASCA work plan, other CDS recommendations, NASCA Farm Bill positions), and will recommend a course of action. NASCA may also propose a model for national implementation, together with a template for state participation in such a concept. NASCA may develop a Pilot Project on this idea as suggested by survey responses.

For item 5, it was recognized that independent NASCA action cannot control partner roles in supporting local decision-making (see next section). However, NASCA agencies have a direct support role in strengthening local working groups within their states, and it is this component that is included here.

Likewise, the terminology "empower" in item 3 relates here *not* to granting authority or delegation of partner programs, but to providing training and support (e.g., board training) to help local boards become a better gateway for services.

One recommended action – *Fully fund field office technical assistance workload via CTA* – was not included here, as it is not achievable under ***independent*** NASCA action.

Actions endorsed to be taken by others, requiring consultation:

Five recommendations identified as requiring consultation with partners were endorsed for further NASCA consultation action –

1. **Simplify program rules and regulations and allow greater state/local decision-making.**

2. **Simplify conservation program delivery processes.**

3. **Reverse the current trend of "program-driven" conservation, toward more flexible "resource-driven" conservation.**

4. **Develop a single working lands conservation program, with resource protection targets and applying aggregated federal, state and local resources.**

5. **Locally-led: Keep decision-making local, within a nationally set framework; strengthen the role of local working groups.**

Discussion:

These endorsed actions will involve considerable consultation with core conservation partners. As such, actions (except for building grass roots support) are not expected to be taken at the individual state level. Rather, action will occur at the national and regional levels, via NASCA leadership.

NASCA members in attendance emphasized that it will take strong NASCA leadership to affect changes in this category, as these are strategic in concept and require significant actions by other organizations to be accomplished. It was declared that these actions are worthy of strong NASCA leadership, and that NASCA should communicate these actions to partner leadership, and strongly solicit their action and collaboration.

In line with survey responses, NASCA members recognized the need for caution against over-simplification involving development of a single working lands program (item 4), and the need to embrace regional and local priorities and provide adequate local flexibility as programs are streamlined and simplified.

Attending NASCA members also supported the following survey response ideas as the best ways for NASCA to promote action by partners:

- Keep the information fresh and in front of them.
- Develop a new executive partnership agreement.
- Work more closely with other state organizations like NGA, WGA, NASDA.
- Demonstrate implementation via a pilot project.
- Engage at the leadership level, developing action strategies.
- Hold forums/workshops
- Work with state conservationists

Actions not endorsed for priority action:

Results of the CDS survey indicated that some NASCA members did not support further direct NASCA action on two recommendations involving Technical Service Providers (TSPs). These were presented and discussed for further NASCA consideration –

1. **Resolve the issue that TSPs are not yet embraced as equal partners in the delivery process.**

2. **Increase the number of certified TSPs as conservation planners to handle 80% of the planning workload.**

Discussion:

Because of diverse experience and opinion among NASCA membership regarding TSPs, NASCA must develop a thoughtful approach to managing the information received during the CDS project about private sector TSPs and the TSP process. Because TSP-related information received has both value and limitations, NASCA will work to find a way to communicate this information to partners (in particular to NRCS) carefully. To start, NASCA will review earlier NASCA position statements on technical assistance and TSPs. NASCA will also consult with NRCS about the best way to share this information (e.g., as side-bar to key NASCA consultation priorities 1-5).

All other items flagged (opposed in whole or part) in survey responses were briefly described in San Antonio. It was agreed that these other items can be addressed by adding limitations or cautions to endorsed actions as appropriate (see consultation item number 4).

Innovations endorsed:

Attendees agreed that several non-strategic innovations in information resources and communication proposed in the CDS project warrant continued attention as NASCA proceeds. NASCA may find ways to incorporate these innovative ideas into priority actions as appropriate –

Information Resources

Downloadable format from NASCA website
DVDs, IPODs, List Serve
On-line “practice” program applications

Communication

Absentee landowners
Women landowners
Ethnicities
Welcome Wagon concept
Mentoring system
Public relations
Multi-lingual message

NASCA Membership Services:

Members in attendance discussed a number of membership services requested in survey responses as part of CDS implementation. These services were then incorporated into the September 27 San Antonio Membership Services (aka Capacity-Building) Session, as a basis for developing plans for membership services in *information sharing, templates,* and *member response teams*. These CDS-related service issues may be built into the overall NASCA strategy for member services.

Further Information:

All reports used at the San Antonio meeting (9/11/06 Survey Response Summary and a 9/21/06 SUPPLEMENT including late responses, and a PowerPoint presentation) are available from David Vogel via e-mail. NASCA members are encouraged to respond to David Vogel at DVOGEL6@nc.rr.com with their thoughts and suggestions regarding this report – particularly those who were unable to attend the San Antonio meeting.

Appendix E

NASCA CDS Survey Responses
Summary of NASCA Services Requested
September 20, 2006

1. Provide and support a conservation vision; underlying value; advocate for recommendations
2. Sharing information
    a. States' experiences, success stories
    b. Use of contribution agreements
    c. Info on how states improve delivery, remove inconsistencies
    d. New programs and their benefits
    e. Contacts
    f. Quarterly newsletter or notebook
    g. Tracking CDS implementation progress
3. Implement state block grants
    a. Provide framework
    b. Establish pilot block grant project
4. Templates/models and training materials - distribute; clearinghouse; website; CD; IPODs
    a. State leadership (commission, SWCDs); working relationships; outreach
    b. Board training – responsibilities; opportunities; business planning
    c. Ordinances (comprehensive planning)
    d. Local Working Group/stakeholders
    e. Planning and implementation
    f. Communication with elected officials
    g. Accountability methods
    h. Technology
        1. Transfer of field data
    i. Structure (multi-district; watershed)
    j. Staffing plans
    k. Private sector
    l. Contracts
    m. Public relations
5. Evaluate existing state programs and build state member capacity for actions that are not policy-restricted
    a. Conduct state staff training workshops
6. Host forums on conservation planning
7. Establish a process for a NASCA Rapid Response Team
    a. Match people from different states into a network of expertise

Appendix E *continued*

8. Communicate and guidance on national efforts; secure national support
    a. Expand NASCA presence in Washington, DC (NRCS, NACD, etc.)
    b. Work at national partnership leadership level
    c. Improve frank discussion among core partnership leaders
    d. Help unify voice of conservation
9. Contract regional staff assistance
    a. Organize regional support and cooperation

Appendix F

Phase Three
Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds
December 11, 2006

Background

In June 2001, NASCA distributed a report titled *A Conservation Initiative for America's Private Working Lands*. In this report, NASCA emphasized the importance of our nation's privately owned, working lands to natural resource conservation, and recommended that the system used to achieve conservation goals be redesigned to work more effectively and efficiently as a partnership among federal, state and local governments and private landowners. Among several important components of this report was a proposal to establish a ***block grant program*** for qualifying state conservation agencies to provide funding to support such conservation efforts on private lands. This proposal was referred to in subsequent NASCA documents as "State Block Grants".

In July 2006, NASCA conducted a membership survey to determine the direction for Phase Three of the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project (CDS project). As a result of this survey, at the 2006 NASCA annual meeting, NASCA membership endorsed moving ahead with the block grant concept (in some form) as a priority action resulting from CDS project recommendations. The NASCA CDS Phase Three Committee decided to re-examine the organization's previous approach to this concept before proceeding, because a number of things have changed since the idea was first proposed.

In the 2002 Farm Bill, Congress made some progress toward recommendations contained in the 2001 NASCA report. For example, Conservation Security Program incentive payments reward farmers and ranchers based on the different levels of benefits their conservation practices provide to the land. Also, special funding mechanisms have been implemented. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has applied funding agreements (primarily contribution agreements) under the 2002 Farm Bill to provide matching funds to states and local conservation districts (and, of course, others) to carry out specified conservation delivery services. Meanwhile, in the commodity area, the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA - of which a number of NASCA state conservation agencies are members) has implemented a special funding process dealing with specialty crops. A precedent exists for developing innovative funding agreements.

Other changes have occurred since NASCA first proposed the block grant concept. Prior to and during implementation of the 2002 Farm Bill, a number of states began to work with their congressional delegations to establish state earmarks in federal conservation funding for specific state purposes (e.g., nutrient management). These earmarks continue to influence how Congress

allocates federal conservation funding and how states approach specific conservation needs. Also, collaborative or cooperative conservation is a new watchword in the federal administration, the subject of a 2006 national conference and further attention in coordinating work by federal agencies (e.g., USDA/EPA in water quality trading).

This concept paper recasts the original NASCA block grant proposal in a different structure to better fit these and other important background conditions and today's conservation delivery landscape, as well as building upon CDS project actions endorsed by NASCA membership, officers' work on the NASCA Annual Work Plan, and NASCA positions on the next Farm Bill.

A Revised Block Grant Concept Proposal

First, the NASCA focus for what will be called ***Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds*** will shift from a solely NRCS-funded program to a coordinated, shared, multi-agency federal-state funding system, to support state and local program implementation and delivery of conservation services to private landowners. Under such a system, state conservation agencies will take a lead, working with their local partners, in addressing priority state/local watershed and related conservation issues within their states – and in cooperation with neighboring states - applying for funding not just from NRCS but other USDA agencies and other federal agencies as well. Such a regional and multi-state driven process fits well with many watershed-based strategies, and promotes a more "resource-driven" approach to natural resource conservation.

Funding from USDA NRCS will remain, of course, the basis for the system, and will serve to leverage other participating federal sources of funding. Federal Farm Bill legislation and subsequent budgets should include a specific budget allocation to USDA for Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds, based on commitments and likely expansion of related agreements. This system of Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds should also be referenced by federal agencies in their inter-agency agreements. Such a system should also require an appropriate state/local government match incentive to ensure state and local investment in the partnership funds agreement.

Second, NASCA will work with the National Governors Association and related organizations to develop support among governors, and to outline the lead role of state conservation agencies (and NASCA) in defining improvements in services and in delivering these services in partnership with local conservation districts and their local partners. NASCA will emphasize with governors the importance of their states participating in the system, and will highlight the inter-state nature and capacity enhancement of the system, and the cooperative and collaborative aspects of conservation delivery within a regional, multi-state system.

Third, NASCA can develop the agreements, protocol, eligibility requirements and accountability measures needed to implement such a system, working in close partnership with state conservation agencies and local conservation districts. Conservation services and programs will be delivered to private landowners and land users through state conservation agencies and local conservation districts, taking advantage of added flexibility and decision-making at the local and state level provided through the Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds agreements.

The NASCA CDS project has identified a number of substantial needed improvements to the conservation delivery system. These include streamlining and simplifying the conservation delivery system – its programs, procedures, regulations and paperwork - and better applying resources. Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds can be used to help implement many of these recommendations, through greater simplification, improved local flexibility and decision-making, and state/local accountability measures. NRCS will continue to remain a critical "leg of the stool" with funding, technical standards, technical assistance and national oversight.

Therefore, the CDS action step for this concept has been revised to read:

- **Create a federal/state Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds process whereby state conservation agencies receive federal funds for program implementation and for distribution of conservation services through local conservation districts.**

NASCA will work with federal agencies to help establish eligibility standards by which states will qualify for participation in this system, and can work with the NASCA membership to prepare states for participation, and deliver training to state conservation agencies and local conservation districts. NASCA will work closely with other national organizations (e.g., NACD, NASDA) and federal agencies (NRCS, USFS, EPA) to build support and cooperation for the approach.

How will it work?

State conservation agencies – and their local conservation district partners – will become eligible for funding through a process established under Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds ***agreements*** developed between state governors and federal agencies (the basis of which will be USDA as approved by the Secretary of Agriculture) with NASCA assistance. Basic eligibility requirements will include a set of minimum capability standards for in-state conservation services delivery (considering state agency capacity, inter-agency partnerships, local conservation district capacity), fund management criteria (financial management, contracting experience, accountability methods), and

state commitment (via state governor). State Technical Committees and other stakeholder groups will play an important role in preparing the following support materials for agreements.

Agreements will outline:

- State/local conservation goals and media of interest (stewardship of water, land, air), as established using stakeholder input such as via State Technical Committees.
- Specific watersheds, basins and interstate locations to be addressed (e.g., degraded or vulnerable watersheds).
- Period of coverage (multi-year).
- Funding requirements.
- Match funding availability.
- "Roll-over" or carry-over of unused federal funds in a given year.
- State/local applied resources (including personnel).
- State/local non-federal sponsorships and partnerships.
- Progress tracking measurements.
- Authorities, and,
- Related parameters.

Agreements will further describe:

- Specific natural resource targets intended for attention under the Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds (e.g., water quality, watershed management planning).
- Tools to be used to meet those targets (including delivery of ***both*** federal and state services and programs).
- Landowner and land user incentives to be provided.
- Landowner and land user outreach and education to be undertaken (including innovative communication and information sharing techniques, such as recommended in the CDS project).
- Cooperation with local governments and other local, state and non-governmental organization partnerships, and,
- Related details.

Under the agreement, state/local partners will exercise enhanced flexibility and decision-making regarding federal programs, funding and services included under the agreement's "tools" section.

States (singly, or in conjunction with other states) will apply to USDA for Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds, in a multi-year format, and will apply annually for annual federal funding increments (not to exceed the original

award total multi-year budget). (States may apply to other federal agencies for funding as these are brought under federal inter-agency agreements.) States will concurrently provide annual progress reports describing activities and outcomes as measured by the approved tracking process. States may include environmental media monitoring reports where monitoring is applicable and included as part of funding received, or where states include non-federal funding for monitoring as part of match.

State governors will be responsible for ensuring that natural resource conservation targets are met under Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds, and that state match funding commitments are fulfilled.

Of course, Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds will operate where (or to the degree that) state/local conservation agencies have the capacity to implement programs and to deliver on targets and goals. Not every state will qualify to participate at first, nor will every state possess the same capacity. Where lack of capacity occurs, due to lack of resources or attention, federal conservation programs will continue to be delivered as is currently done. However, In cooperation with NRCS, and through joint funding provided by future NRCS/NASCA contribution agreements, NASCA will work with non-participating state conservation agencies to provide member services in the improvement of delivery-related areas, to help bring additional states under Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds agreements, and to help increase capacity of those already participating. Under these contribution agreements, NASCA will also train state conservation agency and local conservation district personnel, monitor state performance, and work with NRCS to address state performance issues.

Performance criteria

In line with NASCA-endorsed recommendations from the CDS project, there are a number of performance criteria (or goals) that should be applied under Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds. These include:

- Active role of State Technical Committees and (outreach to) other stakeholders in developing agreement materials and priorities.

- Provide incentives and rewards to landowners and land users to encourage stewardship and full participation (e.g., “critical mass” of landowners and land users in a watershed), including financial assistance, technical assistance, training, and innovative risk-reduction techniques.

- Target applied funds and resources to achieve local/watershed objectives, and ***increase*** technical assistance services provided.

- Measure and verify participation, conservation practices, full implementation of conservation plans and practices, and other parameters of success.

- Take advantage of state/local flexibility and decision-making provided under the agreement, to allow funding of locally-approved innovative and effective practices and approaches (e.g., implementing CDS recommendations, innovative partnerships, efficient use of private sector and non-governmental organizations in service delivery).

- Obtain local feedback and advice about services offered.

- Exercise partnerships with adjoining states, employing common or shared data collection techniques, tracking systems and planning tools.

- Effective sharing of innovative technologies, and application to stated objectives.

Appendix G

Phase Three
Modularization and
Partner Consultation Work Plan

(without appendices)
September 6, 2007

Background

Concurrent with surveying NASCA membership regarding NASCA endorsement of CDS recommendations, Phase Three includes a task to "modularize" recommendations into groups associated with different organizations, and to prepare a plan to consult and coordinate with partners about best approaches and actions for implementation. This task includes:

> *Prepare and implement a plan to consult and coordinate with partners about CDS recommendations and about the best approach to implementation. This will include traditional (core) partnership, but will extend with time to include newly formed partnerships with groups involved in Phase Two. This will begin in or before September, 2006, with preparation of a "modular" scheme for recommended improvements and action steps developed under phases one and two. In developing and communicating a modular implementation strategy, NASCA contractor will identify which recommended improvements to the delivery system apply to which organizations, and will assist NASCA in communicating this strategy to partners involved. Activities include support of NASCA officers and staff in coordinating and consulting with partnership, continued outreach to newly formed partnerships and follow-up as required with interest group partners involved in phases one and two, presentations and discussions about the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project, and attending meetings as required.*

Step One – Modularization (July – September 2006)

Different recommendations received apply to different organizations. Some may be unique; others overlapping. NASCA must identify and be able to communicate these to traditional as well as new partners if recommendations are to be implemented. NASCA has two reasons for doing this. First, NASCA membership will identify certain recommendations as requiring action and leadership by others – these must be communicated in a positive manner by NASCA to other organizations. Second, because many recommendations will require ***coordinated*** action to implement, NASCA must consult with partners about the best approaches to implementation, working together.

In addition to noting what action is to be taken (the recommendation or action step), the parameters of modularization include:

- Which actions are the highest priorities?
- Who must be responsible for taking action?
- With whom must this organization consult and coordinate?

This can best be done by assigning responses to these parameters for each recommendation where responsibilities are clear. This is presented for CDS project recommendations in Appendix A for the core partnership. Appendix B re-sorts recommendations by single organization. Appendix C lists recommendations with joint responsibility by the core partnership.

For other organizations, such as many new partners involved in the project, NASCA may not "assign" responsibilities or opportunities, but will share recommendations and inquire as to which recommendations appeal to them, or which recommendations might be acted on by their organization.

Results from CDS Survey responses indicate that recommended actions for NASCA consultation with partners include:

1. **Simplify conservation program delivery processes, rules and regulations, and allow greater state/local decisions; remove inconsistencies; simplify and expedite delivery of services.**

2. **Reverse the current trend of "program-driven" conservation, toward more flexible "resource-driven" conservation.**

3. **Develop a single working lands conservation program, with resource protection targets and applying aggregated federal, state and local resources.**

4. **Keep decision-making local, within a nationally set framework; strengthen the role of local working groups.**

5. **Expand the role for soil and water conservation districts to serve as gateway and clearinghouse for customers, and to perform technical and administrative services; empower local conservation boards.**

6. **Use other agencies/organizations to deliver conservation programs; develop business plans; provide training.**

7. **Emphasize communication with elected officials and agency cooperation.**

8. **Separate TA from FA funding, and fully fund technical assistance workload.**

9. **Cross train on programs and policy at state/regional/other levels.**

These actions are highlighted in Appendices A-C, and are presented in priority order in Appendices B and C.

Step Two – Communicating to Partners (September 2006 – March 2007)

NASCA must determine the best approach to reach different partners identified as having responsibilities (or opportunities) under step one, and must communicate this information to partners. Communication methods include:

- Regular partnership coordination meetings (e.g., QPM)
- Participation in partner business meetings and conferences (e.g., NACD)
- Formal written solicitation by NASCA
- Co-sponsored workshops
- Maintaining follow-up communication with interests participating in phases one and two
- Written materials, powerpoints, CDs, web-based information
- Circuit Rider-type approach

A number of specific actions were recommended by NASCA members responding to the ***NASCA CDS Survey***. These are summarized as:

1. **Develop a new executive partnership agreement that commits each of the partners to a set of measurable actions; hold each member accountable to implement those recommendations applicable to them.**

2. **Stay closely engaged with partners; keep information fresh and in front of them through presentation, meetings, etc.; put good ideas forward for partnership initiatives; work more closely with other state organizations (NGA, WGA, NASDA, etc.).**

3. **Engage at the leadership level. Assist in development of action strategies. Hold forums/workshops on implementation techniques.**

4. **Perform outreach to involve local people in informed local decision making; host forums (broader than farm bill) cosponsored by stakeholder groups, etc.**

5. **Work with other groups to develop a united message and target a manageable number of priorities to address; find ways to work with partners that result in benefits and credit to them as well as improved conservation programs for our citizens.**

6. **Demonstrate ideas - Do a pilot project somewhere in the country to implement many of the CDS recommendations.**

Step Three – Tracking (September 2006 – May 2007)

NASCA will need to track action taken by partners in response to the above communication, and this requires follow-up communication on a regular basis. This information will be maintained in a tracking database, for use in reporting to NASCA officers and membership and NRCS, and in consulting with external organizations on progress.

(**Appendices** – *Not included*)

Appendix H

USDA Report Reference Title Page
Contents, Preface and Executive Summary
Source: U.S. Congress, Senate Agriculture Committee

Reform and Assessment of Conservation Programs: A Report to Congress

A Report to Congress
Pursuant to Section 2005—Reform and
Assessment of Conservation Programs
Farm Security and
Rural Investment Act of 2002

U.S. Department of Agriculture
July 2006

Contents

Preface

Section 2005 of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 provides for the evaluation of conservation programs as follows:

(a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Agriculture shall develop a plan to coordinate land retirement and agricultural working land conservation programs that are administered by the Secretary to achieve the goals of—
   (1) eliminating redundancy;
   (2) streamlining program delivery; and
   (3) improving services provided to agricultural producers (including the reevaluation of the provision of technical assistance).

(b) REPORT.—Not later than December 31, 2005, the Secretary of Agriculture shall submit to the Committee on Agriculture of the House of Representatives and the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry of the Senate, a report that describes—
   (1) the plan developed under subsection (a); and
   (2) the means by which the Secretary intends to achieve the goals described in subsection (a).

For purposes of this report, the following definition of Agricultural Working Lands has been used:

> *All ecosystems modified or created by humans specifically to grow or raise biological products for human consumption or use and that are being actively utilized and conserved to produce such. This includes cropland, pasture, forest land, range, orchards, groves, vineyards, nurseries, ornamental horticultural areas, and confined animal feeding areas.*

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to inform Congress of activities and concepts developed from fiscal year (FY) 2002 to the present in order to reform certain Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation programs as required under Section 2005 of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (the 2002 Farm Bill). The 2002 Farm Bill directs the Secretary of Agriculture to develop a plan to coordinate land retirement and agricultural working land conservation programs that are administered by the Secretary to achieve the goals of eliminating redundancy and improving services provided to agricultural producers.

As a result of focused efforts since the enactment of the 2002 Farm Bill, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) have demonstrated significant progress in identifying and addressing ways to reduce impediments and improve services to agricultural producers. However, as this report indicates, there is much work left to do. While both agencies have applied rigorous internal reviews, controls, and oversight, many challenges and opportunities remain as demand for conservation program services continues to increase. At the same time, budgetary constraints and calls for simplicity and greater efficiency will require that policy officials develop programs that provide funding, achieve better service and desired conservation benefits on the landscape, and make more effective use of conservation dollars.

The report identifies efforts to eliminate redundancy, streamline program delivery, and improve overall services to agricultural producers and rural landowners—our customers—since implementation of the 2002 Farm Bill. Carryover activities from previous Farm Bills are cited if significant improvements have been made since enactment of the 2002 Farm Bill. The report also discusses possible options for the future, including consolidating certain programs and implementing other conservation programs more strategically.

Appendix I

NACD Actions to Improve Delivery
(*Prepared by NACD for inclusion in this report***)**
National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) actions and follow up to CDS Recommendations

Conservation Districts are an integral part of the national conservation delivery system. The NACD, representing conservation districts, continues to promote improvements to the system that help protect natural resources and improve service to their customers.

NASCA identified the following (numbered and **bold**) Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project recommendations as being applicable to NACD. The following examples describe current NACD policies and actions (including NACD references) that support the work of continually improving the conservation delivery system:

1. **Locally-led: Keep decision-making local, within a nationally set framework; strengthen the role of local working groups**.

NACD continues to champion this recommendation including actions to ensure language in the 2007 Farm Bill conservation title pertaining to state technical committees and local working groups. See references below for the NACD farm bill principles, core statements, letter to House Agriculture Committee Chair, and testimony over the last two years that includes support for locally led decision making. Lastly, see also NACD training materials on locally led conservation.

http://nacdnet.org/govtaff/07FarmBill/FarmBillPrinciples.htm

http://nacdnet.org/FB07/FBCoreStatements.htm

http://nacdnet.org/govtaff/07FarmBill/Sims%20letter%20House%20Ag.pdf

http://nacdnet.org/govtaff/testimony/

http://nacdnet.org/govtaff/FY08/index.htm

2. **Emphasize communication with elected officials at all levels to support funding for conservation. Encourage interagency cooperation**.

NACD encourages this kind of conversation on an almost daily basis through our Principal legislative Contacts (PLC), State Association Presidents, State Association Executives, and where appropriate state agency administrators. This year, NACD has lead an effort to establish a record by the

conservation partnership relative to national funding priorities. See current examples at the following site.

http://nacdnet.org/govtaff/FY08/index.htm

3. **Empower local conservation boards and councils to be the conservation gateway for services; develop local board and council members' understanding of their powers and responsibilities, and use of recruitment techniques and strategies for new and diverse partners**.

    a. **Application and routine revision of the recruitment techniques and strategies**.

A key activity underway is the NACD pilot program for district official accreditation, operating in 7 states and which will eventually be offered/encouraged on a voluntary basis to all states.

NACD has training materials designed to help recruit new supervisors. NACD and partners held a diversity conference two years ago which had a major section on recruitment. Materials are available on the NACD web site below and from NACD regional representatives.

http://nacdnet.org/resources/RGuide/

4. **Reverse the current trend of "program-driven" conservation, toward more flexible "resource-driven" conservation**.

NACD recognizes some acceptance and trends toward a resource driven approach. The adoption of community and watershed planning techniques to scope out resource needs and options in advance of program delivery is one of the better trends that NACD continues to support.

5. **Develop a single working lands conservation program, with resource protection targets and applying aggregated federal, state and local resources**.

NACD has Farm Bill positions to consolidate some programs - though not to one single program. Ultimately, there could be simpler and more streamlined program operations even without legislative program changes, if the NRCS continues to develop techniques like a single application form, a single assessment tool, and a requirement that one plan be used for all program contracts.

6. **Adequately fund (and implement) a marketing campaign to educate policy-makers, and to promote the conservation partnership based on needs and accomplishments**.

Communications to policy makers and the general public is one of three top priorities in the latest NACD strategic plan. NACD has recently added an additional communications employee.

7. **Partnership needs to address all resource concerns including coastal, urban, developing lands, public lands, etc**.

This is a part of NACD's overarching principles. The Conservation Partnership Leaders have agreed to spend some time on refining and reflecting on such overarching priorities/principles at the quarterly leaders meetings. This is a part of the partner statement plan that was signed at the Nashville leadership meeting in November, 2006. NACD includes actions under this principle in its urban strategy (*Urban, Coastal and Community Resource Strategy*, February 2007).

8. **Simplify conservation program delivery processes**.

    a. **Position Conservation Districts as a one-stop service center**.

NACD is calling for simplified conservation programs and delivery processes (*see above*). Districts are de facto service center access points, especially as federal staffs retrench and/or relocate or close their offices. Districts have a basis for being in the local community as a result of their enabling legislation.

9. **People set the conservation goals for their communities; flexibility in implementation is critical for dealing with local natural resource priorities**.

    a. **Provide for broad community involvement in locally-led conservation, including planning at the watershed level; encourage state and federal agencies to provide for greater program implementation flexibility. Train local staff on opportunities for flexible approaches**.

See above on locally led. Also note that NACD continues to support the engagement of a broad cross-section of all stakeholders in a given community to identify needs priorities and solutions.

10. **Develop national and local conservation marketing plans**.

There is work underway on this subject that will be a part of the NACD annual meeting in Reno in February, 2008.

11. **Develop a national directive challenging the state partnership level to employ communication and streamlining protocols**.

Although not likely a “directive”, a communication on the subject could come out of the work implementing the partner leaders’ statement. NACD recognizes that use of the term “directive” covers organizational “communication” systems.

12. **Diversify conservation funding by adding Interior or EPA as a funding source in addition to USDA**.

NACD’s funding priorities continue to reflect this principle. See NACD web site.

Appendix J

General Distribution Report on NASCA CDS Endorsed Actions
Summary of NASCA Actions
February 15, 2007

Background

The National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA) is continuing work on a project to evaluate the nation's conservation delivery system. This project, performed in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), is in its third phase, and is now focused on implementing recommended improvements to the delivery system. (Please refer to the NASCA website, www.NASCAnet.org, for reports on phases one and two.)

After receiving many good recommendations from a variety of interested parties, NASCA membership has endorsed certain recommendations as priorities for the organization to act on. Some are being acted on directly or independently by NASCA. Other recommendations, because they fall under other organizations' areas of jurisdiction or interest, have been communicated to partners, and NASCA is consulting with partners about the best way in which to proceed to implement these improvements. Outlined below are these key endorsements and a discussion of next steps by NASCA.

Actions endorsed to be taken independently by NASCA:

NASCA has endorsed five recommendations for direct NASCA action –

1. **Expand the role of local Soil and Water Conservation Districts to serve as gateway and clearinghouse for customers, and to perform technical and administrative services.**

2. **Empower local conservation boards and councils to be the conservation gateway for services; develop local board and council members' understanding of their powers and responsibilities, and use of recruitment techniques and strategies for new and diverse partners.**

3. **Develop training and credentialing systems for local boards and staff.**

4. **Locally-led: Keep decision-making local, within a nationally set framework; strengthen the role of local working groups.**

5. **Create a federal/state Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds process whereby state conservation agencies receive federal funds for program implementation and for distribution of conservation services through local conservation districts.**

Discussion:

These, then, are the priority recommendations chosen by NASCA membership for the organization's direct action. There are two ways that NASCA is moving ahead with these endorsed actions. First, NASCA is supporting activities by member state conservation agencies that implement improvements ***at the state level***. NASCA will seek funding to support related NASCA state member services efforts. Second, NASCA is also taking action to build support and cooperation ***at the national and regional levels*** for these initiatives.

Of these five actions endorsed for further action, four (1-4) include activities in which NASCA state agencies are already engaged to a varying degree. However, NASCA received many innovative ideas about how to provide improved support to enhance these state activities. These activities include supporting improved local decision-making, identifying new customers and expanding outreach to increase their participation, strengthening local working groups, providing training and support to help local boards become a better gateway for services, identifying new and expanded roles for local conservation districts, and many other related activities (as described in detail in NASCA project reports).

NASCA has also endorsed a proposal to add a new method of funding for enhanced delivery of conservation services and implementation of programs through state conservation agencies and local conservation districts. This proposal, called ***Regional Delivery System Partnership Funds*** (item 5) is linked to other recommended improvements to the delivery system, such as greater local flexibility and improved decision-making, greater emphasis on "resource-driven" conservation services, and simplification of delivery system processes and programs. In advancing this proposal, NASCA will develop a model for national implementation, together with a template for state conservation agency participation. NASCA may work to establish a Pilot Project on this idea in one or more states. Similar state block grant proposals have been advanced by the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, the National Governors Association, and the Western Governors Association.

Actions endorsed for NASCA consultation with partners:

NASCA also endorsed five recommendations requiring consultation with conservation partners –

1. **Simplify program rules and regulations and allow greater state/local decision-making.**

2. **Simplify conservation program delivery processes.**

3. **Reverse the current trend of "program-driven" conservation, toward more flexible "resource-driven" conservation.**

4. **Develop a single working lands conservation program, with resource protection targets and applying aggregated federal, state and local resources.**

5. **Locally-led: Keep decision-making local, within a nationally set framework; strengthen the role of local working groups.**

Discussion:

These five endorsed actions have been selected by NASCA membership as a priority for consultation with core conservation partners. NASCA recognizes that strong NASCA leadership is needed to help make changes in this category, as good support for ***partner actions*** will be required for these actions to be accomplished. NASCA has communicated these actions to partnering leadership, and has strongly solicited their action and collaboration in implementation. A number of actions in this category are planned or underway by conservation partners. Several similar actions have been included in the recent Farm Bill proposal by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (e.g., consolidation of programs).

Innovations and other useful information:

NASCA received some very good proposals for innovations in ***information resources*** and ***communication*** during the project's first two phases. Some of these innovations are new ideas; others are already underway at some scale. NASCA believes that these warrant continued attention as implementation proceeds. NASCA is working to find ways to incorporate these innovative ideas into the above priority actions as we proceed –

Information Resources

Downloadable format from NASCA website
DVDs, IPODs, List Serve
On-line "practice" program applications

Communication

Reaching and serving absentee landowners
Reaching and serving women landowners
Accommodating local ethnicities in message and services
Welcome Wagon concept for new customers
Mentoring system for local district leadership and staff
Public relations
Developing and delivering a multi-lingual message

Also, NASCA received substantial information and suggested improvements during the project's second phase about private sector and non-governmental organization Technical Service Providers (TSPs) and the federal TSP process. Detailed information on TSPs has already been provided to NRCS via NASCA project reports. Because TSP-related information received by NASCA has both added value and limitations, NASCA will consult with NRCS about the best way to take further advantage of this information.

Further Information:

Additional information about this project and NASCA activities is available from David Vogel, NASCA Program Consultant, via e-mail, at DVOGEL6@nc.rr.com, or at 919-833-5405. Comments are welcome. (*Please include in any e-mail message subject line a reference to the NASCA Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project*.)

Attachment K

NASCA Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project
External Advisory Group
Phase Three

Norm Berg	Soil and Water Conservation Society
Morse Brown[3]	M.L. Brown Consulting
Ray Brownfield	LandPro
Mike Brubaker[1a]	Landcare, USA
Kip Howlett	National Association of State Foresters
Craig Cox	Soil and Water Conservation Society
Robert Dobbs[a3]	National Conservation District Employees Association
Earl Dodson	Validus (TSP)
Rich Duesterhaus[1a]	National Association of Conservation Districts
Dick Gooby	Indian Nations Conservation Alliance
Andrew Gordon[a]	National Association of Resource Development and Conservation Councils
Lynne Hoot	State Executive Directors, MD
Charlie Ingram[3]	National Association of State Departments of Agriculture
Bart James[1]	Ducks Unlimited
Bobbi Jeanquart[1]	National Association of Resource Development and Conservation Councils
Tom Sommer	USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Stuart Lehman[a]	US Environmental Protection Agency
Juan Marinez[3]	Michigan State University
Rich McCabe	Wildlife Management Institute
Tanya Meyer-Dideriksen	NRCS/Women, Land and Legacy, IA
Don Parrish[1a]	American Farm Bureau Federation
Jean-Mari Peltier[3]	National Council of Farmer Cooperatives
Mary Ann Rozum[1a]	USDA, Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service
Luther Smith[1]	Certified Crop Advisors and others
Read Smith	25x25 Alliance
Johnny Sundstrom	Western Coalition of Conservation Districts

EAG Focus

National sounding board/input

1. Evaluating NASCA approach and status
2. What should be the focus of further work with external partners in support of changes (e.g., Farm Bill)?
3. How can we make sure to capture innovative ideas from project recommendations as we address more strategic actions?
4. New ideas; responding to new opportunities.

Appendix K *continued*

Organizational participation and support

1. Helping to maintain participation and to establish contact (*Who else needs to be involved?*)
2. Finding partners for specific actions at national/regional scales (*What can **your** organization do?)*
3. Forming a unified vision of what conservation delivery should be.

EAG Activities

Washington, DC meeting(s)
Teleconference(s)
Regional Workshop(s)
Review of written materials via e-mail
Submittal of written suggestions

Notes

[1] Attended January 19, 2005 EAG meeting
[a] Attended October 25, 2005 EAG meeting
[3] Attended April 11-12, 2006 NASCA Conference