

Sponsor: NASCA Policy Committee
Title: Urban Agriculture and Conservation
Date: October 13, 2022
Subject: A Holistic Approach to Urban Agriculture & Conservation

Background

The National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA) has long been a key proponent of the nine steps of conservation planning and looking at any parcel's resource concerns on a holistic basis. NASCA believes that moving more into the urban environment and assisting agricultural producers and residents to address the set of resource concerns that exist in the urban landscape should be addressed as holistically as possible as well.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) identified urban agriculture as one of its top three priorities in 2021. In fact, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offers assistance for urban growers in the areas of

- Soil health
- Irrigation and water conservation
- Weeds and pests
- High tunnels

There is good reason for this focus on urban agriculture, as these practices can also 1) improve the local economy by creating jobs and increasing property values, 2) provide nutritional health and physical benefits of underserved communities by providing access to nutritional foods, and 3) connect residents to their food supply and their environment by providing greenspace to enjoy.

In supporting urban agriculture, we must take a holistic approach and support a broader conservation perspective in urban settings rather than focusing solely on food production. Food production is essential and any urban conservation effort must provide technical and financial assistance to urban producers, of course. Urban conservation in a broader view should also include assistance to private landowners with all aspects of resource concerns existing in the urban environment where gaps are found to exist such as stormwater management and water conservation, energy efficiency, and nutrient and pest management. Many of our nation's watersheds' environmental impairments are the cause of all human development and use impacts in that watershed including the urban impacts as well.



Just as we have provided technical and financial assistance for more than 80 years to holistically manage rural natural resources, we must take a similar approach to provide thorough conservation planning and financial assistance for the many resource concerns found in urban environments.

Soil and water conservation districts are uniquely positioned to provide technical assistance leadership in the urban environment. The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) reports that 70% of conservation districts have been involved in urban and community conservation in recent decades, so this is hardly uncharted waters for conservation districts. Conservation district personnel provide outreach, education, technical assistance, and in some cases inspection and oversight in the urban environment. Additionally, soil and water conservation districts leverage technical and financial resources to further locally-led, voluntary, incentive-based natural resource conservation delivery that benefits all citizens.

Action requested to be taken by NASCA

- Urge NRCS to make federal technical and financial assistance funding available to address the full range of urban resource concerns and practices, and recognize that flexibility with practice standards and payment rates is important to address urban conservation resource concerns on potentially very small parcels
- Continue to advocate for local- or state-level flexibility and authority to determine what is needed to address local or regional urban ag and conservation resource concerns rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach nationwide.
- Increase training opportunities to build capacity, even considering specialized positions, to deliver urban agriculture and conservation technical assistance
- Support continued and increased funding for urban agriculture and conservation from any and all potential sources. Flexibility must be available to federal and state funding administrators and recipients to dovetail programs together to fully address resource and agricultural needs in an urban environment.
- Promote a broad and holistic view to addressing urban resource concerns
- Partner with agencies or organizations that provide information, training, shared learning, and financial resources to urban agriculture and conservation efforts

