



Attention USDA Conservation Program Participants!!

Did you know that you now have another option besides the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to provide technical assistance for conservation programs?

You can always count on NRCS for technical assistance; however, if you have an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) or other contract with NRCS, you may now choose to use a certified private business or individual to provide the technical assistance for practices in your contract. These certified persons are called Technical Service Providers, or TSPs for short.

What is a TSP?

TSPs are individuals or groups *outside* the U. S. Department of Agriculture that help producers put conservation on the land. These certified professionals provide quality work, convenient access, and professional one-on-one technical assistance to landowners who participate in USDA conservation programs. TSPs must maintain the same quality standards and specifications of NRCS. In order to receive funding for a TSP, the use of a TSP must be pre-approved by NRCS and included in the participant's program contract.



Why would a USDA program participant elect to obtain the services of a TSP?

The current staffing levels of NRCS are insufficient to adequately meet the increased need for technical assistance under the conservation programs authorized or reauthorized by the 2002 Farm Bill. Technical assistance from NRCS may not meet your timetable or schedule due to prior commitments and workloads. A certified TSP provides greater flexibility to contract holders. With a number of TSPs available, you should be able to get the technical assistance when you need it.

What does a TSP do?

Depending on the certifications a TSP has, TSPs can:

- Plan, design, and lay out conservation practices
- Review completed conservation practices



What are the responsibilities of a TSP?

A TSP has many responsibilities including:

- Providing high-quality technical assistance that meets NRCS standards and specifications
- Giving the producer and NRCS signed certification that shows the TSP's services comply with all federal, state and local laws and requirements
- Developing, maintaining and providing the producer with complete documentation for technical services provided
- Maintaining the client's confidentiality

Does the TSP actually install the practice?

A TSP provides technical assistance, not actual practice installation assistance, although the TSP may oversee the practice installation. Technical assistance includes planning, design, layout, overseeing the installation and check-out of a practice. Although some TSPs may also be able to provide actual installation of a practice, this is not considered TSP work for USDA program contracts.

Actual installation of approved practices will receive cost-share assistance, sometimes referred to as "financial assistance". Technical assistance payments will be paid in addition to cost-share payments if a TSP is hired by a program participant. Use of a TSP must be pre-approved by NRCS and included in the participant's program contract.

Who pays for the TSP?

The program participant (land user) negotiates directly with the TSP and agrees to a contract for the provided services. Once the TSP's work is completed, documented, and approved, NRCS will make the technical assistance payment (as included in the participant's program contract) directly to the participant. The participant then pays the TSP based on the terms agreed to with the TSP.

NRCS has established maximum payment rates (called "Not To Exceed" rates) for categories of technical services for TSPs in each state. These rates reflect current market conditions for the delivery of these services, and can be found at <http://www.tsp-nte.nrcs.usda.gov>.

What happens if the "Not-to Exceed" rate is not adequate to reimburse the USDA program participant for the amount charged by the TSP?

The program participant selects, hires, contracts with, and pays for the technical services provided by TSPs. The amount above the "Not-to-Exceed" rate would be the responsibility of the program participant.

Will their assistance be as good as NRCS technical assistance?

TSPs must maintain the same quality standards and specifications of NRCS.

The TSP certification process is based on self certification where the TSP indicates how they meet the criteria for certification. The resume of TSPs can be reviewed at <http://techreg.usda.gov>. The TSP is required to sign a Technical Service Provider Certification Agreement as a condition of certification. The agreement constitutes a warrant in writing that the TSP will meet the conditions of the agreement. Random periodic quality assurance checks will be performed and certification discrepancies could result in decertification.

The terms and conditions of the agreement can be reviewed by going to <http://techreg.usda.gov/> and clicking on "View the Technical Service Provider Certification Agreement." NRCS will review as appropriate, the quality of the technical services provided by TSPs.

How do I go about using a TSP?

If you have a program contract, and you are interested in using a TSP, inform your local NRCS district conservationist. Once it is determined for which practices you will utilize a TSP, funds will be made available to your contract to pay the TSP. These funds will show as an item in your contract.

After the TSP technical assistance funds are included in a program contract, and the contract is finalized, you may select and utilize the services of a TSP. Once you hire a TSP, you will work with that person, not NRCS, for your technical assistance on the practice or practices for which they were hired.

How do I find a TSP?

A list of approved TSPs is available by state at <http://techreg.usda.gov/CustLocateTSP.aspx>. If you do not have access to the Internet, you may also request a listing from your local NRCS field office.

Who is responsible if something should go wrong, the practice fails, or the technical assistance provided by a TSP is inadequate?

The TSP is required to warrant in writing that the technical services they render complies with all laws and requirements; meets applicable USDA standards, specifications, and program requirements; are consistent with and meet the particular conservation program goals and objectives for which the program contract was entered into by the participant; and incorporate, where appropriate, low-cost alternatives that address the resource issues.

TSPs are legally responsible for the technical services they provide.

Although prior to practice installation, the program participant is responsible for obtaining all approvals, authorities, rights, permits, and easements necessary for implementation, operation, and maintenance of the conservation practice, TSPs are required to work with program participants to secure these items as appropriate.

Reapplication of a conservation practice that failed due to no fault of the program participant or the technical assistance provided by a TSP may be eligible for reapplication in accordance with the applicable USDA program.

How did this all begin?

The 2002 Farm Bill expanded the role of conservation in protecting the nation's natural resources. This legislation increased the funding to meet the demand for technical assistance from NRCS. In order to better serve landowners, the 2002 Farm Bill included language that encouraged USDA to use outside individuals and organizations to help landowners meet their conservation goals.

For more information, contact your local NRCS field office.