

Zone 4 Quality Review
October 28-30, 2003

COMMENDABLES

Operations Management

Zone 4 prepared a Zone wide needs assessment of critical information prior to the quality assessment. The needs assessment identifies natural resource issues, workload, program activities, and demographics. The report was well prepared.

It was noted during the review that one office had a significant workload that was very complex. The field staff had done an excellent job of managing the workload, while maintaining the quality of work. News articles were used to publicize farm bill programs and other activities. For this the staff is commended.

One field office utilized the locally led process to identify water quantity as a resource concern. The conservation district and field office personnel then elevated the water quantity need to NRCS for a possible watershed rehabilitation project. The project has been approved and is in the process of being planned for rehabilitation. For this the conservation district and field staff is commended.

Confidentiality of Records

Field office participants expressed some frustration regarding the change in confidentiality law, regulation, and policy this past year. The new processes for working with conservation districts in board meetings regarding executive sessions and open records created some concern and tension as the new policy was conveyed to district boards. Observation of selected board meeting agendas and minutes indicate the policy and procedures are being implemented correctly. Interviews with NRCS personnel indicate a strong desire to maintain and protect the agencies working relationship with our customers. The field offices are commended for their vigilant implementation of, and work with our conservation partners, on confidentiality of NRCS client records.

Bio-security Awareness

Zone 4 employees are very much aware of the potential threats to bio-security. The kits are properly equipped and in each vehicle. Employees demonstrated knowledge of policy and awareness to this issue. They seemed to be well prepared should a potential threat become imminent.

Personnel Management

All three offices are commended for their working knowledge in EEO and the recognition of who the Special Emphasis Program Managers are. More than one employee named all the current SEPM and their Civil Rights representatives. All offices had all the required posters in a visible location.

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

Administrative Services

All offices are to be commended for the utilization of the mandatory purchasing vendor, Boise Cascade. All real property files were in good order with PCMS records being reconciled. It is apparent that all offices are working very closely with their OA on all reconciliation of purchases made on the purchase card. It also appeared that all inventory was accounted for with proper documentation recorded and attested to.

Safety and Physical

Commendable the physical protection plan (Field Office Emergency Plan) was posted in all offices with maps showing exit routes over all key door ways. All offices had fire extinguishers mounted in proper locations.

Leading and Innovation in Cost Sharing Conservation Programs

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) in Oklahoma has been built on the foundation of early work completed in the Idabel Field Office. Initially, the field office staff worked to promote the WRP with limited program guidance and no experience with this new type of conservation program. Also, NRCS experience and technology for wetlands restoration was limited in availability, understanding of ecological processes, and contained many unknowns regarding long-term management and enforcement. The field office staff embraced all of the challenges and acquired the knowledge and skills to initiate wetland restoration activity in the county. They continue to apply adaptive management principles and integrate partnerships into planning, decision-making and implementation. This pioneering approach has benefited all of Oklahoma as early lessons learned in McCurtain County have shaped program implementation across the state.

The review team observed two Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) contracts in Hughes and McCurtain Counties, one in each county. Although, they lacked some key planning information regarding wildlife species habitat requirements, the actual implementation of conservation practices and practices cost-shared were accomplished in a manner that is exemplary in the management of natural resources for the benefit of wildlife species. The use of prescribed burning, localized use of herbicides, and innovative design and placement of firebreaks, reflected a wildlife habitat goal oriented approach to use of the WHIP. This approach and use of the WHIP to facilitate natural resource conservation for wildlife requires initiative on the part of the field office staff, as well as, an above average perspective on conservation planning with our customers.

These offices are commended for delivering these programs in manner that enables our customers to achieve conservation of the natural resources at a conservation level higher than the status quo.

Interagency Relationships

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

Each office visited had examples of interagency participation and coordination in the implementation of conservation programs and activities within their counties. There was evidence of excellent communication and shared responsibility in delivery of programs, dissemination of information, and participation in local workgroup activities. These offices are commended for their continued work in building and strengthening the local conservation partnership.

Employee Development

Several offices in Zone 4 have fairly new technicians. Coalgate was without a technician for approximately nine years, with that vacancy recently having been filled. During the period of time without a technician, the zone utilized experienced technicians from neighboring counties to handle conservation practice workload in Coal County. In addition, training to new technicians within Zone 4 has been handled in a similar manner, with qualified technicians from neighboring counties providing training in the team. Zone 4 is to be commended for their efforts in utilizing abilities from team members in handling engineering workload and training needs for technicians, and in some cases even using experienced technicians across team boundaries.

Quality Reviews

The technical service offices in Zone 4 have been using the quality review process to identify training needs and provide consistency among offices in practice implementation. It is apparent by review of the case files that instructions being provided during the quality review process are beginning to be implemented in field offices across Zone 4. All field offices in Zone 4 and the technical service offices in the zone are to be commended for utilizing the quality review process to raise the quality of technical assistance being provided by NRCS.

Implementation of Conservation Plans

Practices contained in plans reviewed in the field were the appropriate practice for the site location. No practices were found that were a misuse of the practice or an improper application of the practice. This is commendable.

Progress Reporting

Teams in Zone 4 were actively meeting to discuss performance goals, establish goals, and review progress throughout the year. Team efforts were made to achieve adequate progress within the team. This is commendable.

Team Meetings

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

Team meeting minutes were being recorded. Minutes included agenda topics, member present, topics discussed and decisions reached. Teams are commended for taking a positive approach to discuss priority items and record discussions.

Team Building

Zone 4 aggressively pursued team building opportunities during the fiscal year to improve employee's skills and knowledge. One example is a tour of the Tallgrass Prairie in Osage County to improve Grazing lands skills. The Zone is commended for taking the initiative to promote team building.

Timekeeping

Personnel in the Zone had developed a work sheet for the purpose of recording work accomplishments as a means of supporting time and attendance records. The tool is an excellent method for assisting the field in recording work accomplishments in support of direct charge activities. The Zone is commended for taking the initiative to develop a method to efficiently track work activities.

Animal Waste Planning

One field office has developed an excellent tracking system to identify client's requests for animal waste management plans, date of the request, and actions taken to complete the plans. The system is easy to use and is utilized to assist clients with meeting requirements in a timely manner. This is a commendable approach to tracking client's needs.

Civil Rights

All offices are to be commended on their public notifications of Farm Bill Program announcements, and the overall number of news articles that were published to tell our story. All offices are to be commended on their knowledge of Special Emphasis Program managers, and how to assist someone on how to file a complaint.

ACTION ITEMS

Previous Audits and Appraisals

Finding: The dynamics of the Zone 4 Quality Assessment was changed by the State Conservationist without notification of the State Leadership Team and Zone 4 participants. This was initiated to observe how the various participants responded to the opportunity to showcase leadership, take the edge off of perceptions and organize a group for a learning experience from a different approach. The offices visited were provided the opportunity to lead the assessment by showcasing their best work. Participation opportunities by Zone 4 Team members, Team Coordinators, the ASTC (FO), and other SLT members were provided. Opportunities to fill leadership and discussion point voids were open and provided. There was little

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

if any interaction with conservation district employees, board members, OCC staff and customers. This format change was met with mixed results.

Action Item 1: Critically evaluate the way this assessment was conducted by getting feedback from all the participants. Each participant will provide feedback to the State Conservationist addressing the following:

- Positives
- Negatives
- What would you do to improve the process and learning opportunity?
- What are you going to do from your leadership role to make sure agreed to change becomes the way we do business?

This information will be presented to the QLT for discussion and shaping of the process to be utilized during the next zone assessment.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: STC/SLT

Action Item 2: A quality assurance process is in place through Engineering Job Class IV and higher 5% spot checks, program reviews, plan reviews, vegetative practice reviews and engineering practice reviews. This review was a process to show case what the field offices were doing and identified how field offices could do better. Quarterly, Field Office will share ideas of how they have improved at team meeting and document in team meeting minutes.

Required Action Date: September 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 3: Zone 4 team coordinators will do a presentation to the Quality Leadership Team on the QAR Process and document in QLT meeting minutes.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: SLT

Action Item 4: SLT members will provide a list of the most critical bulletins and instruction that resulted from the Zone 1 review to the ASTC (FO).

Required Action Date: May 31, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)/ASTC (O)

Action Item 5: Zone 4 will go over critical bulletins and instructions that came out since the Zone 1 assessment in Zone or team meetings. The Zone 1 assessment action items will be reviewed with the teams. This review will be documented for future reference in zone reviews.

Zone 4 Quality Review
October 28-30, 2003

Required Action Date: July 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Conservation Planning

Findings: Overall, conservation plans were generally found to be adequate with proper forms, maps (CPO and Soils), legends, job sheets, etc. In several cases, the conservation plan narratives were outstanding! They were explicit, detailed, and left no questions for the producer as to what, where, and how a practice was to be implemented. But even in these cases, often other fields within the operation were left untreated with little documentation as to alternatives discussed with the producer. They gave the impression of providing services “only” on the items requested by the producer. We (NRCS) must “sell” conservation and our services to producers. We must look at the total operation and suggest total Resource Management Systems for the whole farm. Future programs like the Conservation Security Program will emphasize this approach and be necessary for producers to gain the full benefits of the 2002 Farm Bill and future legislation.

Action Item 6: District Conservationists will review the importance of documenting Conservation Planning alternatives and share ideas on documentation of alternatives at a Team Meeting. Discussions will be documented in Team minutes.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)/ Resource Specialist

Action Item 7: The State Resource Conservationist will work with the Ecological Sciences Staff to provide additional information to field offices related to the importance of documenting planning alternatives. One item will be a renewed emphasis during the Level 2 Conservation Plan Quality Assurance/Maintenance.

Required Action Date: May 1, 2004

Certification: Resource Specialist/ SRC

Finding: The quality and process of implementing conservation practices under the state cost share program seems to carry much less emphasis in Oklahoma NRCS offices than conservation practices completed under other programs, mostly federal. There is indication at some locations that NRCS technical assistance is different for state cost share or non-cost shared practices from other cost share programs. Some locations indicate a reluctance to get involved in technical aspects, follow-up, etc. This should not be the case and needs to be clarified for field staffs. Some practices reviewed on site were not well constructed, vegetated, etc. and in fact may have been more damaging to the resource concern than what existed previously. NRCS field personnel must apply technical standards, planning principles and consistent

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

follow-up on all assisted conservation practices regardless of the practice funding program.

Action Item 8: The BOT and ASTC (P) will discuss the issue of technical standards for completed practices with staff of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission to confirm NRCS' role and responsibilities in the State Cost Share Program. NRCS intends for technical assistance and follow-up to be the same for all programs. A bulletin will be developed for the field to reemphasize the NRCS role in this program and non-cost shared practices for which NRCS provides technical assistance.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: BOT and ASTC (P)

Action Item 9: Where technical assistance for conservation practice implementation under the state cost-share program is provided by NRCS field personnel, the NRCS conservation planning and practice certification standards will be applied. It is recognized that NRCS employees do not have administrative responsibility or final determination of awarding cost-share for practices completed. However, NRCS personnel will advise the local conservation district, in writing, of all practice deficiencies and corrective actions necessary for practices to meet specifications.

Required Action Date: September 30, 2004

Certification: TSO staff and ASTC (FO)

Action Item 10: If conservation district personnel are approving practices that do not meet NRCS technical standards, the district conservationist will work jointly with the district staff and conservation district board to provide clarification and training on the particular conservation practice standard. This action will be documented in writing to the district board by the district conservationist. Completion of this item will be documented through the quality review and conservation planning quality reviews completed by TSO staff this fiscal year and by the review of conservation district board minutes.

Required Action Date: September 30, 2004

Certification: TSO staff and ASTC (FO)

Finding: Southeast Oklahoma has the potential to make major strides in grazing lands management but many plans lack the basic essentials to good grassland management. Items such as forage inventories, long term nutrient management (fertility) plans, prescribed grazing plans, etc. were often absent.

Action Item 11: Team Coordinators will stress grassland management needs in team meetings and work with TSO specialists to schedule training courses or work

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

individually to help staff be better prepared to deliver this type assistance to Southeast Oklahoma producers.

Required Action Date: September 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)/TSO Specialists

Action Item 12: Create a Grazing Land Specialist (pastureland background) position for Southeast Oklahoma.

Required Action Date: September 30, 2004

Certification: State Conservationist

Action Item 13: Grazing Land Specialists will provide training to all field offices on grassland management topics including forage inventories, nutrient management and prescribed grazing plans.

Required Action Date: September 30, 2004

Certification: SRC

Action Item 14: Review the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) application evaluation criteria for applicability to grassland issues in Southeast Oklahoma and other under represented areas of the state as they conform to the national program rules and requirements. ASTC (FO) and selected District Conservationist from across the state will be assembled to review and provide recommendations for the criteria.

Required Action Date: Thirty days following publication of the Interim Final Rule.

Certification: ASTC (Programs)

Technology Development

Findings: During a tour of conservation work in the field it was revealed that field staff was having difficulty with beaver activity on conservation projects.

Action Item 15: The State Conservationist will get the plans for the low tech beaver guard from the Penobscot Nation – ME.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: STC

Administration:

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

Finding: The office space at Idabel is unacceptable for conducting agency business. Negotiations have been conducted with the lessee on several occasions the past two years with unsatisfactory results.

Action Item 16: The SAO will work with the leasing agent to begin the process of soliciting for improved space.

Required Action Date: March 31, 2004

Certification SAO

OKIE One-Call System

Findings: Personnel had some questions about use of the OKIE one-call system. Why is it used only for engineering practices? Concern was raised that we should use the one call system for fences as well.

Action Item 17: The SRC and SCE will review state statutes for the "Underground Facilities Act" and issue appropriate guidelines clarifying use of the one-call system for non engineering practices such as fencing.

Required Action Date: July 30, 2004

Certification: SRC, SCE

Safety

Findings: One office had one fire extinguisher that had lost its charge and needs to be replaced. Adequacy of vehicle accident kits, fire extinguishers and bio hazard kits for new vehicles was discussed and identified as an action that SLT needed to address.

Action Item 18: Purchase new fire extinguisher rather than having one recharged. Replace the discharged unit.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 19: The SAO will work with State purchasing agents to secure new vehicle accident kits and fire extinguishers for new vehicles before they are assigned to the field. Field personnel will fully equip vehicles with bio hazard kits.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

Cost-Sharing Conservation Programs

Findings: The review found a lack of continuity in the outreach and promotion of certain conservation programs. All offices had contracts under the EQIP and there was some activity relating to WHIP. However, there was limited understanding of the applicability and use of all conservation programs in addressing conservation issues on individual lands. In particular, field offices lacked the understanding of how to use the conservation operations program in the establishment of a strong locally led and prioritized conservation effort. In some locations, programs such as Continuous CRP, WRP and WHIP were not being actively promoted because of a perceived lack of interest or need for the programs. Field offices will actively promote the availability of all conservation programs where eligible lands exist within their county. Applications will be accepted, recorded and properly processed regarding eligibility determinations and evaluation. As federal employees, NRCS personnel must advertise the availability and conduct outreach regarding all programs for which potentially eligible land resides in their service area.

In addition, the application of some programs such as the EQIP, WHIP, and state cost-share, to the natural resources of a particular farm/ranch has taken a limited and traditional view of single conservation practice implementation. In this "Golden Age" of conservation program funding, NRCS must take the opportunity to establish our agency and conservation districts as leaders in conservation. This can be accomplished by using the full latitude of these programs to encourage and deliver the highest level of natural resource conservation on the land. Some examples of overlooked opportunities observed in the field included conservation tillage on croplands, nutrient management for crop and pasture, limited livestock access to water to preserve water quality and animal health, prescribed grazing to improve grassland condition and water quality, and multi-year prescribed burning for cost-effective brush management.

Action Item 20: Program Liaison will provide news articles for all programs and discuss promotion of programs at Team meetings. District Conservationists will tailor articles to ensure they provide information relevant to the local natural resource needs and priorities.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 21: ASTC (P) will provide short and brief guidance to field offices to insure all programs are announced annually. Program Liaison will follow up with field offices to insure they have followed this guidance.

Required Action Date: June 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (Programs)

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

Action Item 22: District Conservationists will utilize the conservation needs assessment, conservation action plan, and the approach to resource conservation planning described elsewhere in this report to target delivery of conservation program funding in a manner that will encourage and assist landowners in delivering resource management systems of the highest level of conservation on the ground. Progress on this item will be determined through the conservation planning review process and conservation program reviews completed this fiscal year.

Required Action Date: September 30, 2004

Certification: TSO, Program Liaison, and ASTC (FO)

Action Item 23: The Program Liaison will coordinate programmatic training with Team Coordinators as needed to ensure clear understanding of the natural resource objectives, applicability to the land, and policy, as needed. Assistance for program training from the state programs and state or TSO technical staff will be coordinated through the Program Liaison. The initial priority, as defined by the review participants, will be for team training of eligible lands for the WRP.

Required Action Date: June 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO), and ASTC (P)

Civil Rights

Finding: Field staff identified a lack of continuity in working with ODA and their grant program. There needs to be better coordination between ODA, State NRCS staff and Field personnel in delivering this program.

Action Item 24: The ASTC (Outreach) will work with ODA on organizing the grant program and coordinating with the field offices. ASTC (Outreach) will coordinate feedback sessions with ODA and Field personnel semi annually.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (Outreach)

Finding: All offices reviewed had conducted and or participated in outreach meetings. However, there was not a consistent well developed action plan to facilitate broad based outreach efforts. Field offices could not provide sufficient documentation to verify who was invited, who attended what the agenda items were or topics discussed. In addition field offices did not have a consistent tracking system to verify client requests and actions taken to meet those requests

Action Item 25: Zone 4 will institutionalize the outreach techniques utilized by Zone 2 in formulating and conducting a broad based outreach program.

Zone 4 Quality Review
October 28-30, 2003

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 26: Zone 4 offices will begin utilizing the client sign in sheet provided by the State Leadership Team immediately. The sign in sheets will be maintained in such a manner to protect the privacy of information provided by clients.

Required Action Date: April 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 27: District Conservationist will use sign in sheets as documentation for District staff fulfilling receptionist duties in the OCC agreement.

Required Action Date: September 30, 2004

Certification: District Conservationist

Finding: A better working agreement is needed to improve working relations between Langston University outreach employees and NRCS field personnel. Protocols need to be established to improve announcement of outreach meetings and coordinating invitations.

Action Item 28: The ASTC (Outreach) will initiate actions to develop a cooperative working agreement with Langston University to define roles and responsibilities of Langston employees and NRCS field personnel.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (Outreach)

Finding: During a review of outreach efforts it was noted that the Amish community was not included in outreach efforts.

Action Item 29: The District Conservationist will take immediate steps to identify lead contacts with the Amish community and begin developing outreach plans to provide the Amish community technical assistance and program information.

Required Action Date: April 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Finding: The three offices were reviewed for adequate accessibility to all facilities. Two of the three offices reviewed had adequate access to all facilities. However, one

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

office did not have access for disability parking due to street improvement by the city, and the bathroom in this office was being utilized for storage of supplies.

Action Item 30: A letter will be written to the landlord advising them of the requirements in the lease agreement about office accessibility, and demanding that steps be taken immediately to correct accessibility issues in the parking lot and rest rooms.

Required Action Date: Immediately

Certification: ASTC (FO), SAO

Action Item 31: ASTC (FO) will write a letter to State Conservationist to identify all offices in Zone 4 that do not meet disabilities. Attached to letter will be copies of letters sent by DC to landlords. A courtesy copy of the letter will go to SAO.

Required Action Date: April 1, 2004

Certification: State Conservationist

Finding: Parity was reviewed in the three offices during the review process. The parity report revealed that certain groups did not receive any assistance during the review period. The DC in one office stated that these groups did receive assistance, and he could not understand why it was not captured in PRMS. The DC in another office stated that he did not know who these individuals are, and there were no records of the DC attempting to locate these individuals. Efforts to locate these individuals could include review at a district board meeting, visit with FSA or the extension office, working with Tribal Conservationist or Tribal Contacts etc.

Action Item 32: DC'S will review parity reports quarterly, and take steps to correct any disparities found. DC'S will also document efforts made to identify these individuals if their identity is unknown to the field office staff, and keep a record in the civil rights file.

Required Action Date: June 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (O/CR)

Action Item 33: SLT will provide direction to field offices about how to use SCIMS/PRS to record parity information. District Conservationist will document actions taken to identify and service clients in protected groups.

Required Action Date: June 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (O/CR)

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

Finding: Each of the three offices was reviewed for adequate public notifications. All required poster was posted in a location visible to the public. All offices had adequate documentation of news articles being published announcing FB Programs and other topics. However, a majority of the news articles did not have the nondiscrimination statement published in the text. In many cases a copy of the original article was not in the files to show what was presented to the publisher for publication to verify that the nondiscrimination statement was omitted by the publisher.

Action Item 34: All offices will keep a copy of the original news article submitted for publication and the date it was submitted to be published.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Findings: Each of the three offices reviewed had all performance standards in place and had communicated the standards to their employees. It is apparent that few employees know or have reviewed the Employee Responsibility and Conduct, Appendix 1. The reference material was found in the 360 folder but had not been routed for employees review. All employees had marked that they had reviewed the standards of conduct on their Performance Work Standards.

Action Item 35: The State Administrative Officer working with IT places the following items on the OKLAHOMA NRCS home page, Employee Responsibility and Conduct, Appendix 1 and the Federal Executive Department Standards of Ethical Conduct. These items will have a self certification form that will be completed by the employee, then printed off and presented to their supervisor.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 36: Employees Responsibility and Conduct will be reviewed at a Zone/Team meeting and documented in meeting minutes.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Needs Assessments

Finding: Each of the three offices reviewed had completed the basic conservation needs assessment, and had provided additional assessment inventories to support EQIP and other conservation priorities. The basic conservation needs assessments will serve as the foundation for future development of resource data and visual identification of resource issues. However, further development of resource concerns as required by the Zone 1 review such as, severity classification, and quantification

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

are needed to build an accurate picture of the conservation needs. For example one office had identified water quality as a resource concern. There was no description of water quality type, severity, location, or extent of the problem. Water quality was probably a resource issue, but it could not be discerned what or where the issue existed in the county. The ultimate utility of the conservation needs assessment is to capture inventory the natural resources of the county, describe significant conservation problems, and set the conservation agenda for the county/conservation district.

Action Item 37: This is a repeat item. District Conservationists will continue to update conservation needs assessments based on concerns identified during the locally led process or observed through field work. Specific resource concern identification and quantification as well as development of visual identification must be strengthened in each field office's needs assessment. Each natural resource concern identified through the locally-led process should be included in the needs assessment and should include a description of the resource condition, the quantification of the concern and visual identification of location(s) within the county. Each District Conservationist will lead the local conservation movement and use this tool to set and the local conservation agenda. (Reference CPM 500.03 & 500.04 as well as Zone 1 assessment Oklahoma Bulletin 0k330-3-1).

Required Action Date: July 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 38: SLT will provide to field offices what types/kind of information is available to be used in a need assessment.

Required Action Date: April 1, 2004

Certification: SLT

Action Item 39: ASTC (FO) will work with other ASTC (FO) s to obtain examples of needs assessment that have been developed by other field offices outside of the Zone.

Required Action Date: April 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 40: ASTC (O) and ASTC (P) will provide training on Needs Assessments at team meetings.

Required Action Date: June 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Zone 4 Quality Review
October 28-30, 2003

Plan of Operations

Plans of Operations reviewed in the field offices revealed that the partnership had made significant improvement in the quality and quantity of measurable action items. Objectives, goals, and action items had a direct correlation in most cases to concerns identified during the locally-led process and to a lesser extent the District's Long Range Plan. The documentation of progress was being documented somewhat in the Plan of Operations, but lacked definite documentation of actions taken to meet the action item in two of the offices reviewed. It was noted in at least two of the offices reviewed that progress made by NRCS employees in completing actions were not shared consistently with District Directors at official meetings. It was also noted that in at least two offices all Farm Bill Programs (specifically WHIP, and /or WRP) were not identified with action items.

Action Item 41: District Conservationists will review and revise Plans of Operations to ensure all Farm Bill Programs applicable to Oklahoma have at least one action item. ASTC (FO) will check at mid year review.

Required Action Date: June 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 42: District Conservationists will provide District Directors monthly or quarterly updates of progress toward meeting Plan of Operations action items assigned to NRCS. Reports may be verbal or written and noted in the official minutes. Further actions taken to meet each action item in the plan of operations will be fully documented in the plan of operations or support documents.

Required Action Date: June 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 43: Place on the report calendar quarterly review of plan with conservation district. ASTC (FO) will check at mid year review to see that plan have been reviewed and progress is up to date.

Required Action Date: May 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Employee Development

Finding: Team training plans had been developed for each of the teams reviewed. However, not all elements of a team training plan as identified in the Zone 1 quality review had been institutionalized. Some training items identified in the action plans were not specific as to the kind of training needed, dates the training would be

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

scheduled or team members needing the training. A review of team minutes indicated that some training was being completed in team meetings, but not necessarily the training identified in the action plan. Team members indicated that some training was provided on a Zone basis, but documentation of what training was provided, or who attended was not available in the field offices reviewed. It was unclear if deficiencies identified for training was being met, or, if technology transfer was taking place to the specific individuals who needed the training.

Action Item 44: This is a repeat item. Team Coordinators in collaboration with the ASTC (FO) and Technical Office specialists will review this report and the previous Zone quality review reports for items identified as training needs. All realms of grazing management; goat; buffalo; ranch economics workshops will be included in the training plans. In addition employee's individual training plans, quality reviews, spot checks, planning reviews, and program reviews will be used to determine new specific training needs within the team. Trainers will be identified, tentative training dates established according to priority of need, and individual team members who need the training identified. Person responsible for providing training will sign off on training plans.

Required Action Date: June 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 45: Training needs identified in the Team's guidance/Training Action Plan will be concurred in by the State Leadership Team. Technical Specialists and Team Coordinators will then develop a schedule to implement the plan.

Required Action Date: July 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (O)

Action Item 46: Develop training schedule for the state.

Required Action Date: April 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (O)

Scheduling Systems

Finding: General Manual Section 330 Part OK404.3(b)(1)(iv)(2) requires NRCS field employees to maintain a weekly schedule that includes duty hours, full week's work, and full day's work for each employee, what is to be done, who it is to be done with, and confirmed time and dates. GM Section 330 Part OK 404.3(c) further requires time and attendance records are supported by a document that contains hours of work/leave and actual work performed. Documents in each field office were found to be significantly improved over previous reviews. However, it was noted that, in some instances, documents used to record weekly schedules and/or work performed

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

lacked full documentation. In at least one instance an employee was utilizing a calendar blotter to record his official work activities and there was no record reference to verify what supported time and attendance. In another instance weekly schedules of the District Conservationist lacked definite appointments and did not verify work actually scheduled (who or what) for each day checked.

Some employees were utilizing a locally developed spreadsheet in addition to the weekly schedule to record actual work performed to support time and attendance. At least one of the employees utilizing this system was recording basically the same information that was on his weekly schedule. This appeared to be redundant and was not completed to include who or what work was actually performed. It is apparent that, because of direct charge accounting, improved guidance is needed to ensure adequate documentation to support time and attendance. It is possible that the new conservation journal to be released later this fiscal year will adequately provide for complete documentation.

Action Item 47: The State Leadership Team will provide guidance on forms or gathering devices that will be used to properly schedule and record work performance. This guidance will be provided after reviewing the Conservation Journal. Field Office staff should continue to use forms approved by the ASTC (FO) to record required information until further guidance is provided.

Required Action Date: June 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 48: Zone 4 will be a pilot area for testing the Conservation Journal.

Required Action Date: September 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (O)

Finding: Field offices are well aware of and can articulate the processes and workload associated with conservation program delivery. There was concern expressed about the complexity of conservation program policies, last minute changes, cumbersome contracting procedures, and huge application workloads, to name a few. There was also dialogue and understanding that much of the problems and frustrations were outside of state and local control. In this light, we must learn and adapt to conduct business within the prescribed procedures to be effective in the use of our workforce and time to meet the core mission of our agency. Conservation programs must deliver tangible conservation benefits on the ground or they and our agency will falter.

Process such as advertising program availability, actively pursuing applications while in the field, gleaning local conservation issues, revising local evaluation criteria, and evaluating applications needs to be integrated into the normal business process and

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

work flow of our local offices. Offices should not be waiting until funding is delivered and deadlines are established to initiate field work on applications and contracts. Field offices can and should be conducting these activities and building "on-the-shelf" conservation plans and contracts for immediate funding.

Action Item 49: Develop field office priority of work plan at a team meeting that each field office could use to better manage work and office.

Required Action Date: September 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 50: ASTC (Programs) will work with Program Liaisons to develop a broad planning calendar for program activity and implementation for dissemination to field offices.

Required Action Date: May 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 51: District Conservationists will utilize the existing OCC agreement to explore the possibility that Conservation Districts provide leadership in releasing information and outreach publicity for all conservation programs at NRCS field offices. ASTC (FO) will review the OCC technical assistance agreement at team meetings to promote complete understanding of the agreement and latitude afforded District Conservationists in working with the local district boards.

Required Action Date: September 30, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Spot Checking

Finding: At least one office was not adequately recording each practice certified, who completed the practice, and under what program the practice was completed. One office was doing an excellent job of recording all cost share practices by program; however, some non cost share practices were not being captured. Current quality assurance policy requires that a list of all practices certified be maintained on the SCS-MGT-199 or other format that records the same information as the SCS-MGT-199.

Action Item 52: The ASTC (FO) will review Oklahoma quality assurance policy in a Zone meeting. District Conservationists will ensure that practices certified as complete will be captured according to Oklahoma policy.

Required Action Date: May 1, 2004

Zone 4 Quality Review
October 28-30, 2003

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Locally Led

Finding: Field employees appeared to be struggling with obtaining input through the locally led process. Offices were developing news articles to announce the locally-led meeting, and in some instances, sending letters to specific producers to encourage attendance. Little effort seemed to have been made to personally target and invite specific clients to the meeting, or to utilize other widely attended meetings as a venue for gathering locally-led concerns. Little follow up was provided to the public concerning the results of locally-led meetings, or actions taken to address resource concerns.

Action Item 53: The ASTC (FO) will provide training to District Conservationists on methods to ensure attendance and/or input from diverse clientele at a Zone or Team meeting. District Conservationists will develop action plans to ensure that diverse clients receive personal invitations prior to the locally led meeting. Further, District Conservationists will explore meetings held by other entities as a means of gathering locally led information. News releases will be developed through out the year to inform the public of results of locally led meetings and actions taken by the District and/or NRCS to address the concerns. Field offices will share ideas of how they are getting people to attend locally led meeting at a team meeting

Required Action Date: Sept 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Action Item 54: Program Liaison will work with Public Affairs and OCC to develop a canned new article that highlights follow up of the locally led process. Working with OCC will insure that Conservation Districts remain as the lead of the locally led process.

Date Completed: July 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (FO)

Communications

Finding: The partnership agreement between OCC, conservation districts and NRCS was discussed. During the discussions field personnel requested assistance from state staff in the methods used to distribute materials that need to be filed. If district personnel are to assist in the retrieval and filing of things such as bulletins, General Manual Supplements, technical notes, job sheets, manual updates, etc., the releases needs to be done in such a way that district personnel can access the document , download, and route it without NRCS field personnel's help.

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

Action Item 55: The SLT will work with IT staff to develop a consistent method for electronically transmitting bulletins, General Manual Supplements, technical notes, job sheets, manual updates, etc. in order that District personnel can download and print copies of material for NRCS personnel.

Required Action Date: July 1, 2004

Certification: ASTC (ER &IT)

Action Item 56: SLT will provide policy guidance to field offices on what items need a paper copy filed. (General Manual, FOTG, Standard Specifications, Bulletins, Technical Notes, Job Sheets, FSA Conservation Notices and Forms)

Required Action Date: June 1, 2004

Certification: State Conservationist

Finding: During a discussion on the proper use of forms field staff expressed frustration in being able to locate the most current electronic version of forms. They requested SLT develop a web site where all current forms be housed for easier retrieval.

Action Item 57: The ASTC (ER/IT) will work with SLT to identify all current forms used by the field and then develop a web site for storage of these forms for easier retrieval.

Required Action Date: March 31, 2004

Certification: ASTC (ER /IT)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Employee Development

Observation: Two technician's individual's training plans were not being documented by technical specialist providing the training, but were certified as complete by the District Conservationist.

Recommendation: Technical Specialists or higher graded technicians who have approval authority and responsibility for training technicians should be initialing the training plans, or providing letters documenting that required ASK levels have been achieved.

Conservation Planning

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

Observation: Cost-sharing conservation program contract files consistently lack brush inventory records, grazing land inventories and similar documentation that would support the need for delivery of conservation program dollars and the expected resource benefit from those expenditures. Resource inventories of this nature are necessary to communicate the need for and value of conservation to the participant and public. This is a repeat item from previous reviews.

Recommendation: District Conservationists will ensure that all required conservation planning supporting documentation is in place prior to the signing of a program contract. ASTC (Programs) will re-emphasize these requirements with the program review team. Performance on this item will be addressed in the quality review process.

Implementation of Conservation Plans

Observation: Payments are being made for practices that have not been signed as certified as to meeting NRCS standards on field sheets or in the conservation assistance notes. This was found on ponds and fences. Information was completed on the field sheets for these practices, however; no signature was provided on the field sheet to indicate the checkout meets NRCS standards and specifications.

Recommendation: Field offices will review General Manual 450, Part 407, Subpart B – Documentation and Certification. No payments for practices will be processed unless they have been certified to meeting NRCS specifications utilizing the supporting documentation requirements found in General Manual 450.

Implementation of Conservation Plans

Observation: Structural practices are being certified for payment without proper vegetation being established or information on vegetation being provided to the landowner. Any structural practice requiring vegetation to function properly or to provide protection does not meet NRCS standards until the vegetation is established. For landowner's convenience, NRCS can certify earthwork for payment purposes, but notes should be made on the field sheet that the practice is complete, except for vegetation. No follow-up is being provided to ensure the landowner is aware of the need for vegetation, or if vegetation is ever established for structural practices.

Recommendation: Field office staff will provide an OK-CPA-4 to the landowner when a structural practice requiring vegetation is certified for payment on earthwork. The landowner should also be informed of the importance of establishing and maintaining vegetative cover on structural practices. If a practice has earthwork certified for payment, the field notes should reflect that vegetation has not been established on the date of certification. Field office staff should provide follow-up on the practice until vegetative cover has been successfully established.

Timekeeping

Zone 4 Quality Review

October 28-30, 2003

Observation: Field offices appeared to be correctly recording time to the correct program. It was apparent that, in some instances, activities codes were not correctly recorded. In addition it appeared, in some instances, time may have been lumped into one program rather than splitting program activity out to properly reflect full work accomplishments.

Recommendation: The ASTC (FO) should review proper timekeeping techniques and policies at a Zone or team meeting. District Conservationists should review time keeping codes in staff meetings at least twice a year. Time sheets should be reviewed at the close of each pay period and compared with supporting work accomplishment records to ensure adequacy of time charges.

Cultural Resources

Observation: Some confusion exists regarding the documentation of Cultural Resource Compliance across different programs and practices.

Recommendation: The State Cultural Resource Coordinator will issue instructions to clarify this confusion.

Watershed Operations

Observation: On 2 of the 3 Flood Water Retarding Structures visited, 2 had trees growing on them. Evidence at these 2 sites indicates that previous attempts have been made to remove the woody vegetation. The woody vegetation has re-grown and needs to be removed.

Recommendation: The District Conservationist should work closely with the Watershed Project Sponsors to develop and implement a plan to bring O&M up to date.

Automotive Equipment

Observation: All vehicles were reviewed for equipment and general operating condition. The review showed that some vehicle had first aid kits that contained outdated supplies, one vehicle did not have a fire extinguisher, and one vehicle did not have a front tag.

Recommendation: The District Conservationist should work with the Zone Office Assistant to purchase new first aid kits to replace the outdated kits. The DC should contact Administrative Services about replacing the missing tag.