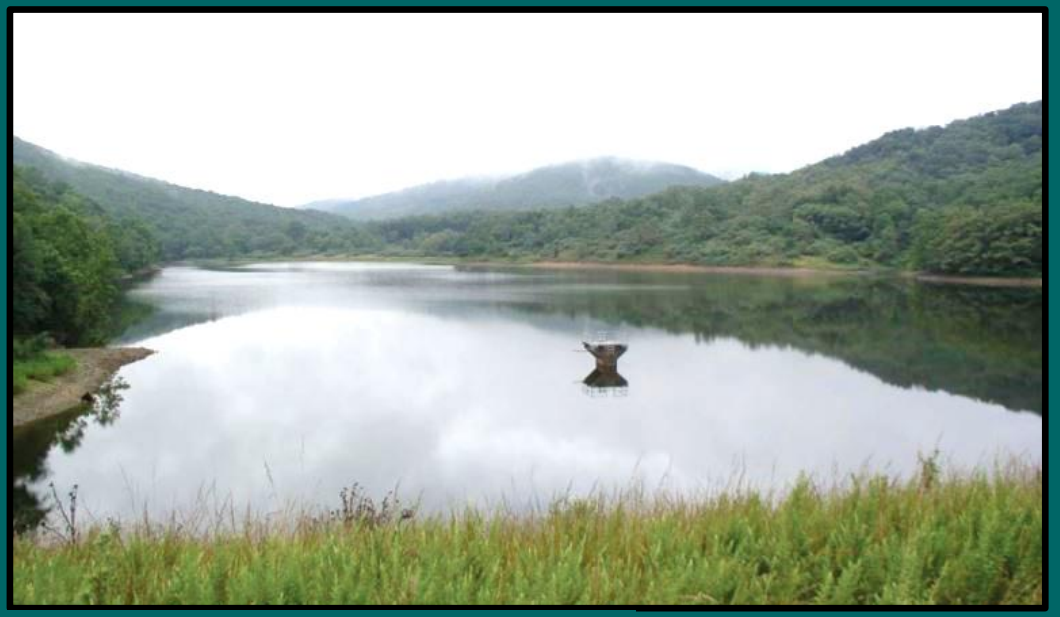
A Guide to the USDA Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program



There are over 2,000 USDA funded Watershed and Flood Prevention Watershed Program projects in the nation with projects in every state providing multiple benefits to local communities.

Thousands of conservation practices, other nonstructural measures, and more than 11,800 flood control dams have been installed in these watersheds that provide reduction in flooding; erosion control; water quality protection and improvement; recreation, ground water recharge; municipal and rural water supplies; andwildlife habitat.

The USDA Watershed and Flood Prevention Program has been tested by time (over 75 years) and the NWC believes it is one of the best resource management tools available for local communities to solve natural resource problems.

This guide provides information for community leaders who might be interested in considering a watershed project .Visit our website for more information. (www.watershedcoalition.org)

National Watershed Coalition Executive Committee

Introduction

The Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (Public Law 83-566) authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to provide technical and financial assistance to entities of state and local governments and tribes (project sponsors) for planning and installing watershed projects. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is the USDA agency responsible for program management.

The Act was passed on August 4, 1954, when Congress recognized the serious natural resource and economic damages suffered in our nation's watersheds from flooding, erosion, and sedimentation. The Act has been amended several times to address a broad range of natural resource and environmental issues. Today this authority can be used to assist communities to address almost any natural resource issue. The Act provides assistance to sponsors who develop projects for watersheds up to 250,000 acres (391 sq. miles).

The USDA Watershed and Flood Prevention Program is a unique and flexible approach to natural resources planning and management, focusing on proper land use and the installation of conservation practices. Watershed plans are developed by interdisciplinary teams of technical specialists who assist the project sponsors.

This pamphlet provides information for potential watershed project sponsors about eligible project objectives and purposes, and the steps in applying for USDA assistance and planning.

For additional information about the watershed program, go to the NRCS national website (www.nrcs.usda.gov) and click on Programs then Watershed Programs.

Eligible Project Purposes

The USDA Watershed and Flood Prevention Program can be used to address almost any natural resource problem. Project objectives include flood prevention, agricultural water management, fish and wildlife habitat development, public recreation development, groundwater recharge, water quality, conservation and proper utilization of land, and municipal and industrial water supply.

Protecting Natural Resources

Watershed projects developed through this program include land management practices installed by landowners. Regardless of other project objectives that may be served, every watershed project contains a watershed protection component.

Land and water conservation practices keep raindrops as close to where they fall as possible. They protect and restore the watershed and reduce the rate and amount of runoff and erosion. Downstream flood peaks are reduced, as is the delivery of sediment and other materials carried by floodwater. Examples of practices would include terraces, strip cropping, waterways, fencing, and water distribution systems for livestock. Land conservation practices.

Conservation practices like terraces, waterways, and strip cropping are important components of watershed project plans.

Reducing Damages From Flooding

Flood damage reduction, or flood control as some call it, includes conservation practices that reduce the damages caused by flooding. Where completed watershed projects are in place, damages from natural disasters are greatly reduced.

A variety of measures are used in watershed projects. Some are larger, more complex and often costly practices that require group action to plan, install, operate and maintain.

Structural measures may include levees, dikes, floodways, floodwater diversions, and flood control dams.

Other measures can also be used to reduce the impacts of flooding. These measures can include proper zoning, enforcing building codes and other regulatory measures, relocation, flood proofing buildings, land acquisition, and preparing emergency action plans consisting of flood warning and response systems.

Water Management

Agricultural water management consists of measures to increase or conserve water supplies and improve water quality. Water conservation practices may include sediment control and land stabilization measures, diversion dams, flumes, canals, water supply reservoirs, pumping plants, and any other measures that would improve water management for improved agricultural efficiency.

Wetland restoration practices can improve water quality, provide wildlife habitat and provide groundwater recharge.

Practices such as this buffer along a riparian area are used in projects to protect water quality.

- Water based recreation could be a project objective and federal cost share assistance may be available to help develop public recreational facilities.

- Fish and wildlife habitat measures may include water level control structures, fish ladders, fish shelters, marsh development, and nesting areas for waterfowl. Restoration of wetlands is an important feature of the watershed program.

- Water for municipal and industrial uses may be included in multipurpose lakes, along with flood damage reduction and other purposes. Water may also be stored in reservoirs for release when needed to improve downstream water quality.

- Groundwater recharge practices may be needed in areas where there is an identified shortage of groundwater. Practices might include storage of water in impoundments, diversions, injection wells and other water spreading techniques.

Applying for Program Assistance

Project sponsors must be entities of state or local government or a tribe. Sponsors submit a request for USDA technical assistance that must include the following information:

- Size of the watershed.
- Location of the watershed.
- Description of the problems in the watershed.
- Estimate of damages suffered.
- Source of local funds for cost sharing
- Commitment to project operation and maintenance

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can assist sponsors in developing their request for assistance.

Field Examination

Depending on the problems identified in the application, specialists from NRCS and other federal and state agencies may assist in conducting an analysis of the problems and opportunities of the watershed.

Watershed Planning Assistance

After a project sponsor initiates a request for assistance, NRCS develops a preliminary investigation findings report (PIFR) which helps determine the scope of the potential watershed project. The PIFR also provides a reasonable assurance that a feasible plan can be developed.

The NRCS State Conservationist ultimately determines if the project has the potential to meet the requirements of the program. If all the conditions are met, the state conservationists' requests funds to begin the formal watershed project planning process.

Developing Your Watershed Plan

NRCS and other federal and state agencies may assist the local organization in conducting detailed field studies. These studies further define resource problems to be addressed and estimate the project's costs and benefits.

Using these studies, NRCS and others may assist in the preparation of a watershed project plan that would include an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.

The completed watershed project plan would include:

- Resource problems to be addressed;
- Practices to be installed;
- Environmental effects;
- Methods of financing.

After the watershed plan is technically and programmatically reviewed and approved by the state conservationist it is submitted for authorization. Once authorized, projects sponsors gain access to NRCS's financial and technical resources to help implement their plan.

Public comment and input is solicited throughout the planning process.

Authorizing Your Plan

The Chief of NRCS has the authority to approve some plans that do not exceed certain statutory limits. Those plans exceeding these limits will be submitted to Congress for approval.

Funding Your Plan

When a watershed plan calls for watershed protection and flood damage reduction:

- NRCS provides engineering and construction costs for larger flood control measures such as flood control dams.
- Local sponsors provide all land rights and permits.
- NRCS provides cost-share funds for needed land conservation practices for water-quality, and erosion and sediment control.
- NRCS can provide engineering services and cost-share funds for construction for irrigation, drainage, public recreation, and fish and wildlife habitat development.
- Other costs, including additional costs for municipal and industrial water supply, are provided by sponsoring local organizations.

Funding from NRCS is dependent on funds provided to NRCS by Congress.

Land Rights

Watershed project sponsors are responsible for obtaining all necessary land, mineral, and other land rights, easements and permits needed for implementation of the planned project.

Power of Eminent Domain

At least one sponsor must have the power of eminent domain (except Tribal Sponsors) which is the process of acquiring real property, water, mineral and other land rights needed for a specific project.

Implementing Your Watershed Plan

Watershed project sponsors are responsible for working with landowners to get conservation practices applied in the watershed.

NRCS and other agencies and organizations can provide technical assistance to install the practices. NRCS may conduct field surveys and prepare designs and specification for practice installation.

Project Agreements

NRCS and project sponsors enter into an agreement covering each potential contract for construction.

Contracting/Construction/Installation

Project sponsors are responsible for advertising for bids and awarding contracts for construction unless the sponsors request NRCS to administer the contracts.

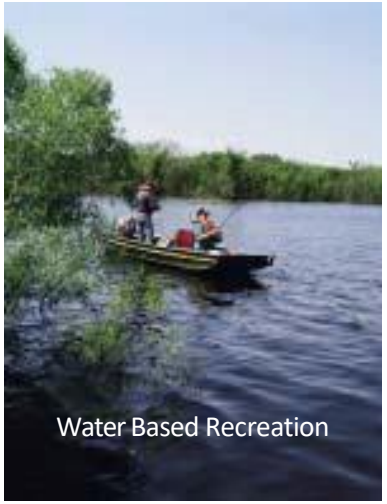
Operation and Maintenance

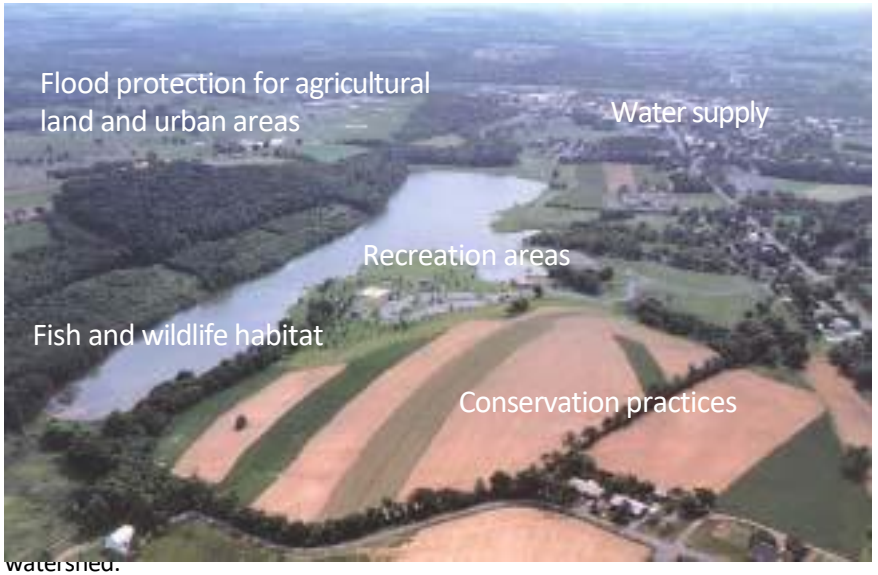
A sponsor must have the power and authority to ensure the installation, operation, and maintenance of the watershed project performs as planned.

Financing the Project

One of the sponsors will need the authority to levy taxes or have an alternative means of financing their share of the project cost as well as the operation and maintenance expenses.

The Watershed Program is Helping Communities Across the Nation Meet Local Resource Needs.





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National Watershed Coalition

This publication was developed by the National Watershed Coalition (NWC) in cooperation with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

NWC is a nonprofit coalition made up of national, regional, state, and local organizations, associations, and individuals that advocate the use of watersheds as the planning and implementation unit when dealing with natural resource problems and issues. (www.watershedcoalition.org)

Additional information about the USDA Watershed Program is available at local USDA NRCS field offices and on the NRCS website at https://www.nrcs.usda.gov

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Some photos provided by the USDA NRCS .
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