



Resource Conservation and Development

Partnerships Serving America's Communities

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Resource Conservation And Development (RC&D) Program

The Resource Conservation and Development Program (RC&D) is based on a number of concepts that make it a truly unique government program. These concepts include:

- The value of **public/private partnerships** in making the best use of limited resources.
- The value of **grass-roots involvement** in making decisions about local areas.
- Bringing **USDA agencies together** to focus on the same problems and opportunities.
- **Leveraging limited federal dollars** with private funds to accomplish goals.
- Working toward the goal of **community sustainability**.
- Achieving a **balance between rural economic development and natural resource protection**.

The following pages provide more detailed information regarding the program, its origins, and its current accomplishments.



WHAT IS THE RC&D PROGRAM?

The RC&D Program is a **unique blend of private enterprise and creative federalism:**

- (1) Program activities are initiated and directed at the local level by volunteers**
- (2) It is a USDA interagency program that encourages the blending of natural resource use with local economic and social values**
- (3) Its customers have a major voice in how the program activities are carried out in their respective communities and**
- (4) Economic and sociological rationales have been considered in selection of RC&D Areas, and their continued funding and support.**

The RC&D Program has capitalized on the growing awareness on the part of America's national and community leaders that local areas can best control elements of their economic and social destinies, as well as the conservation and wise use of their natural resources. RC&D involves more than a single project effort and builds upon long-range resource development plans aimed at improving entire areas or regions based on local needs and priorities. RC&D combines resources to provide an effective and efficient forum for local decision makers to manage change.

To implement RC&D, diverse groups of local volunteers are brought together in a unique partnership, a RC&D Council, to find solutions to their problems. This process is based on the premise that local people are best able to determine needs and create solutions for their own communities. The strength of RC&D is in the commitment of people to solve their own problems. The RC&D commitment emphasizes one or more of the following areas:

**Natural Resource Conservation
Resource Development
Community/Economic/Business Development
Environmental Education**

Resource Conservation And Development (RC&D) Program

The RC&D Program has outgrown its humble beginnings from a mere 10 pilot effort in 1962 to 277 authorized areas nationwide at the present time. There continues to be great potential for communities to become part of an RC&D Area and more than 50 applications currently await authorization from the Secretary of Agriculture when funding becomes available. Many of these Areas are actively pursuing the goals of the program.



WHAT ARE THE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF RC&D?

The purpose of the RC&D Program “...is to accelerate the conservation, development, and utilization of natural resources to improve the general level of economic activity, and to enhance the environment and standard of living in authorized RC&D areas.”

The basic objectives of the RC&D Program remain as they were in the initial Secretary’s Memorandum:

The orderly development, improvement, conservation, and utilization of natural resources within the project area, thereby providing employment and other economic opportunities to the people of the area.

To provide to local leadership the opportunity to more fully coordinate and utilize the facilities and techniques available under current agricultural programs, including those made available by Public Law 87-703, and any applicable new programs as may be instituted to aid in planning and carrying out a balanced program of development and conservation of natural resources to meet local, state and national needs.

The orderly extension of this program, where needed, project by project as local leadership is able to effectively plan and carry out the activities necessary to achieve the goals of the program.

Current program objectives focus on:

- Improvement of quality of life achieved through natural resource conservation and community development to lead to sustainable communities.
- Prudent use (development), management and conservation of natural resources.

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- Social, economic and environmental improvement.
- Local leadership providing program decision making.
- Strengthening of local citizens' abilities to utilize available sources of assistance through USDA agency partnerships.

The policies of the program, like the objectives and definitions, have been modified and changed over time. They have and continue to be derived from the legislative and administrative authorities.



WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF RC&D?

RC&D began in the 1960's as a pilot USDA umbrella effort under which a number of conservation and development activities might be performed in geographic areas where major economic and social downturns had occurred. Conditions in these rural areas were grim, as were their prospects for the future. When the report on rural poverty came out in 1967, there was a strong correlation between the location and designation of rural poverty counties identified by the commission and the recently identified RC&D areas, both authorized pilot areas and applicant counties.

Some credit the late Gladwin Young (1900-1973), Deputy Administrator of SCS, as having observed a multitude of unsolved natural resource problems in rural America at the same time as the number of farmers and farms were disappearing. Young believed that the RC&D areas possessed under utilized resources. He also thought that significant economic impacts could be generated by infusions of capital and technical assistance. These sizable impacts have not occurred because large amounts of capital have not been provided to RC&D as a national strategy. However, the RC&D program has been significantly successful in terms of providing local people with the means to solve problems and create wealth from natural resources at the local level.

HOW IS THE RC&D PROGRAM CARRIED OUT?

The Local Level

At the local level, the program is carried out by the **RC&D Council and the Coordinator**, within the context of the **RC&D Area**.

An **RC&D Area** is a multi-county area locally defined, sponsored and directed to carry out a program that encourages land conservation and utilization, accelerated economic

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development and/or improvement of social conditions where needed to foster a sound local economy.

RC&D Areas include one or more adjacent counties that are big enough to have substantial natural resources to use for economic improvement and community betterment. Each RC&D Area establishes an *Area plan*, a resource conservation and utilization plan, which provides direction for the council in making community improvements and conducting activities.

RC&D Councils, the centerpiece of the RC&D Areas, are comprised of more than 20,000 volunteers. Councils have discovered the advantages of becoming non-profit corporations, resulting in 243 Councils having that current designation. RC&D Councils are comprised of an Area's sponsors and community members which provide grassroots involvement in the program. This grassroots involvement is highly valuable as it provides Councils decision-making at the local level.

The Council holds community meetings to identify concerns, needs and problems within the Area. The Council's resource committees, with assistance from agencies, collect information about identified problems, develop alternatives and recommend solutions to achieve goals and objectives of the Council. Objectives, priorities and projects which outline the Area plan are also incorporated into the Council's annual plan of work.

Councils implement projects and conduct activities that achieve the goals and objectives of their Area plan. Each Council has a process for review and approval of the projects to insure that projects undertaken meet the community's needs. The implementation of a project may include one step or a full range of steps, such as problem identification, development of alternatives, plan development, funding and coordination of the implementation.

The RC&D Coordinator

The RC&D Area Council is one of two very special features of the RC&D program. The other feature is the presence and role of the RC&D Coordinator. It is almost as if each RC&D Area has its own local community affairs specialist to address community needs. The Coordinator is a motivator for the local people to build and implement their individualized and democratically determined program as reflected in their Area plan. Coordinators work closely with Councils to plan, develop and carry through their goals and expectations. The importance of innovation and the Coordinator's role cannot be discounted. The Coordinator sees opportunities and is able to help the Council and local citizens capitalize on these opportunities. Coordinators are expeditors; with knowledge about individual people and their situations, as well as, local institutions. The Coordinator must be aware of and know where power relationships must be linked. It is also important for Coordinators to communicate with sponsors, the media and other supporters. The key role of a Coordinator is of an unelected and undesignated leader who builds the community image without seeking visibility for himself or herself and only for those he or she serves. The Coordinator is also a vital and important link between the RC&D Council and the State, Regional and National Offices. This connection provides for an opportunity for clarifications on policy authorities, directions, opportunities and possible restrictions on joint program and project activities.



Non-USDA Partnerships

While USDA agencies play key roles implementing RC&D Area plans, many non-USDA agencies including federal, state and local units of government are involved in the planning, funding and implementation of many projects.

RC&D projects usually involve a number of local and state agencies as well as foundations and private businesses.

Other federal agencies, outside of USDA are also involved in assisting Councils. These agencies include Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Defense, Housing and Urban Development, Bureau of Reclamation, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geographical Survey, Economic Development Agency, Health and Human Services, Department of Transportation, Department of Labor and AmeriCorps.

State agencies involved in assisting RC&D councils may include Environmental or Natural Resources, Agriculture, Fish and Wildlife, Economic Development, Forestry, Transportation, Health Services, Historic Preservation Office, Department of Planning, Water Boards and Departments of Education.

Local government agencies involved in assisting RC&D Councils include County Boards, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Planning Commissions, Road Departments, School Boards, and Town and City Agencies, Commissions and Boards.

The State Level

The RC&D Program at the state level is managed by the NRCS State Conservationist, in cooperation with the state rural development agencies and state and regional offices of federal agencies such as Rural Development and the Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture, the Department of the Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Non-government organizations can include state rural development councils, non-profit organizations, universities and colleges, foundations and private businesses.

Most states also have organizations of RC&D Councils, called State Associations.

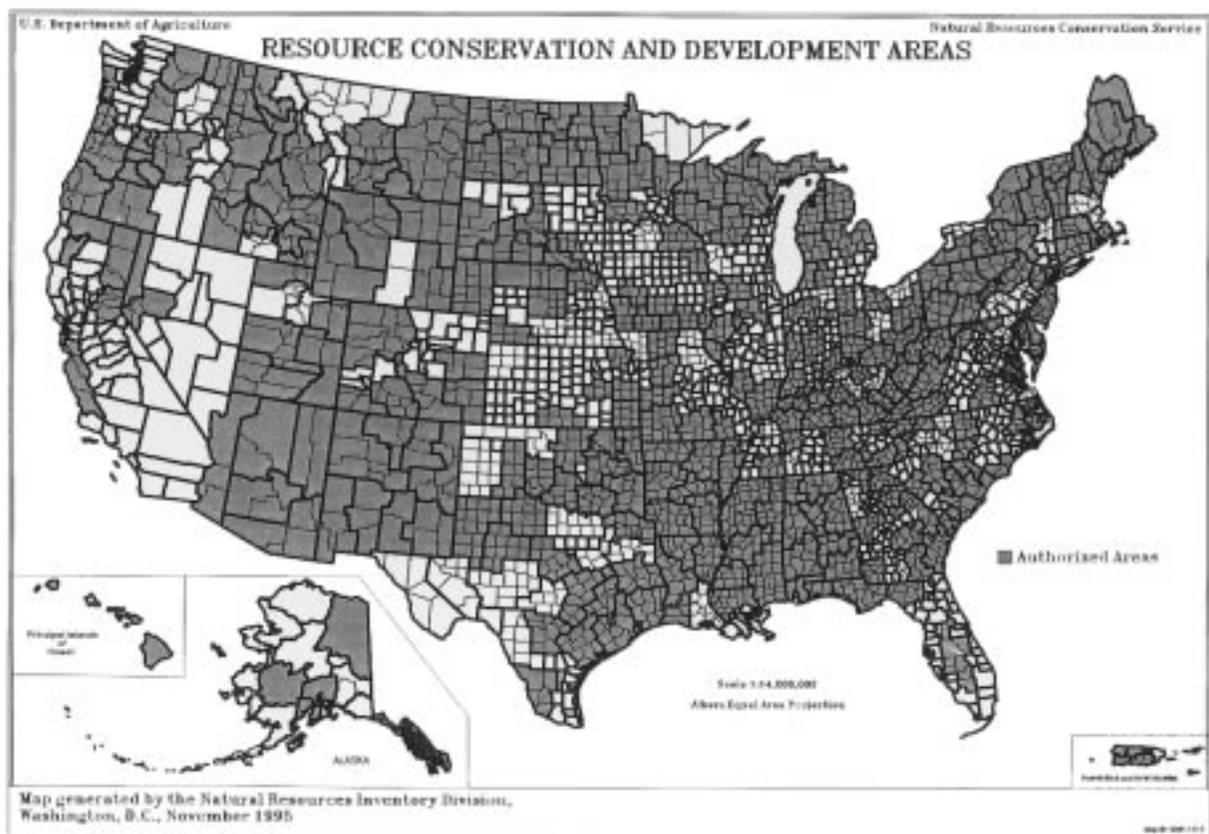


The National Level

In the Department of Agriculture, several entities are concerned with the management of the RC&D program and the formulation of RC&D policy.

Lead management responsibility has been designated to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, where the **RC&D Division** has oversight for the program, as well as technical assistance responsibilities. The NRCS staff provides technical assistance to the **USDA RC&D Working Group**, which provides department leadership and coordination for the program and the **USDA RC&D Policy Board**, which provides high-level department policy leadership.

The **National Association of RC&D Councils (NARC&DC)** has recently been formed to represent the interests of local and state Councils at the national level. The USDA Working Group and the NRCS RC&D staff work closely with NARC&DC to assure good communication and cooperation on all program activities. The formation of the National Association of RC&D Councils (NARC&DC) has successfully increased the strength of the RC&D program by providing a national voice for local RC&D Councils.



Resource Conservation And Development (RC&D) Program

The Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Program was authorized by the Food and Agriculture Act of 1962. It expanded opportunities for State and local units of government, local non-profit organizations, conservation districts, and individuals to improve their communities in multicounty areas. While the basic Program Authority for the RC&D Program is conducted under the authority of Section 102 of the Food and Agriculture Act of 1962 (P.L. 87-703), other authorities are involved in the Program. They are:

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

| <u>Public Law No.</u> | <u>Title</u> |
|-----------------------|---|
| 74-46 | Soil Conservation Act |
| 75-210 | Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act (1937) |
| 89-796 | Agriculture Land Conservation and Utilization Provision (1966) Amending Section 31 and Section 32 (e) of Title III Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act |
| 91-343 | Land Conservation and Utilization Provision (1966) Amends Section 32 (e) of Title III Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act |
| 91-343 | Land Conservation, Development Projects, Financial Assistance (1970) Amending Section 32 (e) of Title III Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act |
| 92-419 | Rural Development Act of 1972 Amending Section 32 (e) of Title III Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act |
| 97-98 | Agriculture and Food Act of 1981, Sections 1528-1538 |
| 104-127 | Federal Food and Agricultural Improvement and Reform Act Section 383 |

The RC&D Program was reauthorized with the passage of the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1995.

Delegations of Authority

The Secretary of Agriculture has delegated the responsibility to administer the RC&D Program to the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The Secretary of Agriculture has reserved the authority to approve expansions of authorized RC&D Areas, designate new RC&D Areas and to withdraw authorization for assistance.

Equal Opportunity in RC&D

The RC&D Program continues to be conducted in compliance with the nondiscrimination provisions in Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as amended, the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987 and other nondiscrimination statutes.



Authorization of an RC&D Area by the Secretary allows federal RC&D funds to be spent in the designated Area. These funds provide for establishing and staffing an RC&D office, development of an RC&D Area plan and financial assistance.

The Forest Service (FS), Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES) and Rural Development (RD) have Memorandums of Understanding with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that establish inter-agency working arrangements for carrying out their responsibilities to support RC&D programs. Other agencies may provide technical and/or financial assistance to RC&D Councils.

RC&D Coordinators are predominantly NRCS employees, however, some Coordinators are provided by the Forest Service and state and private agencies. Numerous RC&D Areas receive funding for specific project activities from Rural Development, Forest Service and the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service. It is a goal of the USDA RC&D Working Group to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of these fund transfers by increasing awareness of RC&D potential among the USDA agencies.

A better understanding of numerous USDA program and funding authorities will build linkages that will help RC&D Coordinators and Councils provide implementation at the local level, access to funding and assistance throughout USDA.

USDA Program Participants and Their Respective Roles

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS) and the RC&D PROGRAM

The NRCS provides a significant amount of assistance to the RC&D Program. Administrative leadership for the program has been delegated to NRCS by the Secretary of Agriculture.

NRCS provides RC&D program management functions, recommends policy, allocates funds and evaluates and monitors program progress to insure that it is in line with program purposes. NRCS provides assistance to local leaders in preparing applications for RC&D program assistance. Acting RC&D Coordinators have been placed in a number of RC&D Areas that have yet to receive authorization from the Secretary. Upon authorization of an RC&D Area, the NRCS provides staff in the form of a Coordinator, as well as, support staff and overhead. Although most Coordinators are employees of NRCS, there are Coordinators from other USDA agencies, particularly the Forest Service.

NRCS plays a lead role in coordinating the activities of the USDA RC&D Working Group and the USDA RC&D Policy Board and provides staff assistance to both. The USDA agencies serving on the Working Group include: Economic Research Service (ERS), Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES), Forest Service (FS) and Rural Development. These agencies working together provide creative cross-agency support to the RC&D Program.

There are many benefits to NRCS from working in cooperation with other USDA agencies. Multi-agency support is created by acknowledging the RC&Ds as an additional delivery vehicle for USDA rural development programs and resources. Communications across agencies and opportunities for USDA agencies to participate in the RC&D program are enhanced. Opportunities exist to share training resources, facilities, data and expertise among agencies in an effort to meet each agency's goals and the common goals of the RC&D Program.

This partnership benefits NRCS and participating agencies by closer contact with communities and councils, a broader audience and increased efficiency in coordinating needed USDA services at the local level.

NRCS expects to continue in its administrative role, as well as, supporting the RC&D program as a USDA-wide program, emphasizing natural resource conservation and community development.

FOREST SERVICE (FS) and the RC&D PROGRAM:

The FS provides technical and financial assistance to the local RC&D Councils regarding forestry and related resource issues. Technical assistance provided by the FS strengthens the Councils ability to meet the goals of their long-range plans. FS has been an active long-term partner with NRCS in providing technical assistance in the area of forestry. This assistance is provided through State Foresters and FS field staff nationwide. The FS role has helped new RC&D Councils to form and existing RC&D Councils to meet their responsibility to “encourage and improve the capability of State and local units of government and non-profit organizations in rural areas to plan, develop and carry out programs for resource conservation and development”. Working relationships with RC&D Councils are strengthened by the transfer of administrative assistance dollars to the FS. These leveraged dollars support and encourage State Forester’s interaction and ability to provide technical resources important to RC&D Councils. FS encourages all parts of FS and the State Forester to be an integral part of the RC&D program.

As additional RC&D Areas are approved by the Secretary, the demand for forestry assistance will continue to be even greater than in previous years. This increase is due to RC&D Areas seeking diversification options relative to forestry. RC&D administrative funding support to the FS builds and strengthens the RC&D Councils working relationship with State natural resource agencies, especially in forestry. In natural resources assistance, as in any partnership, consistency and trust allows each partner to invest more for their shared goals.

COOPERATIVE STATE RESEARCH, EDUCATION and EXTENSION SERVICE (CSREES) and the RC&D PROGRAM:

The CSREES supports a much more in-depth level of technical assistance than is currently available to RC&D Councils directly. With true coordination and collaboration between CSREES programming and RC&D programming, there could be shared workloads and a more strategic division of labor for accomplishing program targets.

Currently, the CSREES does support County Extension Advisory Committees and most states have a State Advisory Committee. RC&D offers the benefit of a multi-county perspective and the potential to guide additional resources to priority programming.

There is a vast pool of untapped research and technology that needs to be directed to real world uses. The RC&D Councils and Coordinators could be enlisted to help extend this information and education to end-users.

The non-profit organizations created within a number of RC&D Councils could be very useful in supporting and enhancing CSREES county-level programming. The non-profits could become vehicles for extending innovative, non-traditional programming on a multi-county basis.

In some cases, it may be possible for a county-based Extension Professional to serve as an RC&D coordinator. With NRCS sharing in the cost of the FTE, this would benefit both the CSREES budget and the NRCS budget and enable a larger coverage of the nation with RC&D Councils.

CSREES has long standing experience with recruiting, training and managing volunteers and volunteer-led programs. Since RC&D Councils and related non-profit organizations depend on volunteers to carry out their programs, CSREES could provide considerable assistance to them in their volunteer functions.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT and the RC&D PROGRAM:

USDA's Rural Development mission area has many interests and activities in common with the RC&D Program.

The importance of the RC&D Program for Rural Development is that RC&D represents the customer's perspective on community needs and the best use of mission area programs. RC&D has a nationwide network of community leaders and citizenry who can be contacted with relative ease to obtain feedback from customers on rural needs and priorities. RC&D is a great vehicle for networking among interested parties at the State and local level.

Rural Development can tap into this established network in developing the State Strategic Plans that are required by the new Rural Community Advancement Program (in which flexible funding streams for Rural Development loan and grant programs are created; priorities for use of the funds are to be based on a written plan that reflects state and community perspectives).

RC&D Coordinators are trained to assist local community groups with strategic plans, to identify financing alternatives for community development projects and to solicit grant funds. These community development skills complement those of Rural Development staff and are the types of skills that many in the Rural Development mission area wish to build. Rural Development and RC&D can work together on local projects more effectively; RC&D specialists in Washington can join forces with Rural Development to produce training sessions for field personnel that build on the strengths of both groups. It may be possible to support one or more newly authorized RC&D areas by placing a mission area employee in the RC&D area to serve as a Coordinator.

Rural Development and RC&D can work together on community projects as well as being mutual sources of referral for program activities. The RC&D network can also be used as a source of feedback on the effectiveness of Rural Development programs and customer satisfaction with those programs.

ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE (ERS) and the RC&D PROGRAM:

The ERS has provided intermittent economic intelligence and planning assistance to the RC&D Program. Early in the Program ERS jointly participated in the initial planning and technical assistance process for new planning starts. ERS aided new projects by assisting in establishing policies, preparing planning guides and defining procedures which have aided steering committees and Coordinators in establishing standards to monitor progress of new projects. ERS also provided new areas with economic information such as, individualized area economic profiles, useful to local planners confronting area revitalization.

One of the most popular activities in which ERS has been involved deals with the process of selecting new project areas. This effort has been directed toward determining the areas which are most eligible for selection based on economic need. Currently, attempts are being made to insure the most important criteria are being selected in order to reflect the factors that are crucial to selecting areas with not only the greatest need, but also the areas with the greatest growth potential. This effort involves examining mass data and developing techniques so that currently active areas may be examined to determine those which may have matured, requiring fewer resources than newer areas currently struggling to reach a critical level of development.

ERS has performed numerous feasibility and special studies leading to the adaptation of new enterprises and activities. These studies were carefully selected in order for their results to be useful and applicable to the maximum number of different RC&D areas throughout the U.S.

ERS has also been active in assisting with projects in monitoring and analyzing overall economic progress of the activities of the RC&D program. Early in the RC&D program, ERS in cooperation with and assistance from the NRCS, completed field evaluations to determine the program impacts on local RC&D economies due to the activation of RC&D project measures, as well as, economic progress achieved.

ERS has been represented on the USDA RC&D Working Group and has aided in joint decisions useful in the program's overall growth and development. Also, as part of its service to the USDA RC&D Working Group, ERS regularly reviewed RC&D plans to determine if the plans were internally consistent, using economic considerations in planning and encouraging rational use of the Areas' resources, with their stated goals and objectives.



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