



Conservation Technical Assistance

People Powering Conservation

The Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS), an 80-year-old organization dedicated to fostering the science and art of natural resource conservation, serves as the premier international platform for conservation professionals. Through cultivating a diverse community, SWCS empowers its members and partners to offer climate-smart solutions to a wider audience. Beyond membership, SWCS aims to promote conservation's value to stakeholders reliant on soil, water, and related resources, advocating for its integration as a global standard practice.

We support our community of more than 2,000 conservation professionals that represent nearly every academic discipline and many different public, private, and nonprofit institutions around the world. **A conservation professional** is an unwavering advocate for conservation with steadfast curiosity and deep passion for our world's natural resources. Conservation professionals are **scientists and practitioners** who represent all aspects of soil and water conservation, from the lab to the field.

The Challenge Ahead

There is a heightened sense of urgency and a unique opportunity for conservation initiatives, practices, and programs in today's context. Nevertheless, farmers find themselves inundated with a multitude of offerings and conflicting messages from both public and private sectors.

***Conservation practitioners**, responsible for providing planning, technical expertise, and financial assistance for conservation efforts, play a critical role in supporting farmers through these challenges.*

Who Provides Conservation Technical Assistance?

Conservation practitioners are the delivery system for natural resource conservation across the nation. Employees of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Soil and Water Conservation Districts and Departments, state conservation agencies, and nongovernmental conservation organizations work directly with farmers and landowners to implement conservation practices through technical assistance, conservation planning, and program implementation. Recent research has found that interaction with a conservation professional over time is a consistent predictor of farmer adoption of conservation practices.

Conservation practitioners providing conservation technical assistance (CTA) are guardians of our natural environment, playing a pivotal role in preserving biodiversity, protecting ecosystems, and promoting sustainable land management practices across the United States. The vast

majority of conservation practitioners are stationed in field offices and conservation districts in rural areas and nearly 75% have a close connection to agriculture beyond their profession.¹ At the same time, conservation practitioners also support historically underserved farmers from non-traditional farming backgrounds.

Conservation practitioners exude passion and practicality to continuously bridge the interests of agricultural productivity and natural resources conservation.

Supporting Conservation Practitioners

There has never been a greater need for CTA as we face unprecedented climate challenges, an influx of funding for conservation programs, and emerging carbon and ecosystem services markets. However, employers across the public and private sectors are facing a conservation workforce shortage and challenges in supporting conservation practitioners.

*Congress can help to address these workforce challenges by providing **robust funding** for the following programs:*

- **USDA Conservation Technical Assistance:** The NRCS field staff and conservationists serve as the foundation of conservation efforts across our country with 90% of NRCS employees based outside of Washington, DC.
- **EPA Nonpoint Source (Sec. 319) Program:** Funding provided directly to states, territories, and tribes supports operational capacity and personnel to implement locally-led efforts to protect water resources.
- **Soil and Water Conservation Research:** Intra- and extramural research programs at USDA, such as the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG), and Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SARE), support the fundamental understanding of best management practices and effective conservation delivery strategies.

*Additionally, Congress can support CTA through the following **policy solutions**:*

- Preserve Inflation Reduction Act funds for Conservation Technical Assistance
- Grant direct hiring authority to NRCS Field Offices
- Authorize higher wages for NRCS employees
- Lessen barriers to hiring retirees for NRCS positions
- Support employee professional development, particularly involvement in societies
- Support public-private partnerships in conservation, such as the Technical Service Providers program

¹ Morris, C., J.G. Arbuckle, C. DeLong, and C. Lindahl. 2021. Conservation Practitioner Poll 2021 Summary Report. Ankeny, IA: Soil and Water Conservation Society.