



United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Orientation

For Earth Team Volunteers



Helping People Help the Land

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Helping People Help the Land

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Congratulations and welcome to the Earth Team!

As an Earth Team volunteer, you will be working side by side with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's corps of professional conservationists. Like you, they are committed to NRCS' mission: "Helping People Help the Land." We appreciate the generous contribution of your time, energy, and abilities. I hope you will enjoy sharing your skills, learning new ones, meeting new people and being part of a dedicated, national conservation effort. The Earth Team Orientation Guide was designed to assist you with understanding the program and provide you with an overview of the agency. If you have questions after reading this document, discuss them with your supervisor. Thank you for joining the Earth Team. You are one of us. Welcome to the team!

Michele Eginoire
National Volunteer Coordinator



NRCS Mission Statement: Helping People Help the Land

Earth Team Mission Statement

The Earth Team provides volunteer leadership in a partnership effort to help people conserve, maintain, and improve our natural resources and environment.

The job of conserving natural resources cannot be done by government alone. The collective talents and energies of private individuals and groups are also needed. Since 1981, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has provided an opportunity for volunteers to use their talents and abilities on behalf of conservation. These volunteers are known as the “Earth Team.”

General Information

As a volunteer, you will receive no salary or wages from NRCS. However, NRCS can pay for incidental expenses you may incur as you give your time and talents to further the mission. You may also be authorized to perform official travel and will be reimbursed accordingly.

While you are not considered a Federal employee, you are offered protection under the Workers’ Compensation Program and Tort Claims Act.

Qualifications

- NRCS Earth Team volunteers must be 14 years old or older.
- Volunteers do not have to be a citizen of the United States, but should be a citizen of an allied country.
- Family members and other relatives of NRCS employees are eligible to serve as volunteers, as are employees of other Federal agencies or departments.
- NRCS employees can also volunteer, but, as volunteers, they cannot perform services which they were hired or appointed to do.
- Hosted volunteers may also serve as Earth Team volunteers. A hosted volunteer is defined as any volunteer who receives pay from a source other than NRCS.
- Earth Team volunteers may be signed up as individuals or as a member of a group. The group leader is responsible for completing the group application form and will be asked to provide the names and ages of each group member.



Tour of Duty

The tour of duty is negotiated between you and your NRCS supervisor. The hours will depend on your availability and NRCS priorities.

Timekeeping

It is very important for you to keep an accurate record of the actual hours worked since you are protected under the Workers' Compensation Program and the Tort Claims Act. One timekeeping method is the NRCS-PER-004, Time and Attendance (see Appendix A).

Supervision and Work Performance

You are responsible to perform the work described in your job description and other duties as agreed to by your supervisor. Your supervisor must ensure you are adequately trained for work assignments and that supervision and guidance are provided as necessary for a safe work environment.

Safety

NRCS is concerned about safety. No job is so urgent that it cannot be completed safely. Volunteers must follow the same safety precautions and use the same safety equipment as NRCS employees.

Injuries

If you are injured on the job, you must immediately report the injury to your supervisor. This should be done regardless of how insignificant the injury may initially appear. This will protect you if complications develop later. You will also need to complete Form CA-1, Employee's Notice of Injury. You may be eligible for benefits under the Workers' Compensation Program.

Use of Tools, Equipment, and Vehicles

You may be issued tools, equipment, a vehicle, or other government property needed to perform your job. It is your responsibility to return all assigned items or to immediately report all losses or damaged property to your supervisor. If you lose or damage equipment through negligence, you may be required to pay for the loss or damage.

The State Conservationist has established a policy on types of computer work which volunteers will be allowed to perform. Your supervisor will work with the State computer security officer to identify specific computer projects.

Some tips for computer security include: log-off when you leave a computer terminal, keep food and drink away from the computer, keep your password secret, and do not download, create, or use illegal software.

To drive a government vehicle, you must have a valid State driver's license, written authorization, and a document identifying you as a volunteer. An Earth Team volunteer ID or USDA Government ID clearly marked as "volunteer" may be used for this purpose.

You must report any vehicle accidents to your supervisor immediately; this includes minor scratches or dents.

Please note that whatever a volunteer produces, as a result of their time with NRCS, is government property and cannot be sold or copyrighted. This includes software, printed material, and photographic images.

Credit for Work Experience

Earth Team volunteers will receive credit for their work on any future NRCS job applications if it represents qualifying experience for the position for which they are applying. A case file is established for each volunteer. This case file can be used as documentation of volunteer duties for government or non-government employment. A complete job description and documentation of any special training received are essential documents to the case file.

Training

As a volunteer, you have the same training opportunities as Federal employees. If you and your supervisor decide formal training is needed for you to perform your job, your supervisor should submit this information for approval.

Volunteer Responsibility and Conduct

Because NRCS has a responsibility to maintain public confidence in our role as professional conservationists and public support for NRCS programs, volunteers are expected to dress and conduct themselves in a way that reflects positively on the agency. While serving as a NRCS Earth Team volunteer, you are subject to the same responsibilities and guidelines for conduct to which Federal employees are expected to adhere.

Overview

NRCS is an agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). On April 27, 1935, Congress approved and established a national policy for soil and water conservation. Public Law 74-46 established the Soil Conservation Service within the Department of Agriculture for the development and implementation of a long-term program of soil and water conservation.

In October 1994, as part of the USDA reorganization, the Soil Conservation Service became the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Since the Dust Bowl of the 1930's, NRCS has worked with conservation districts and others throughout the U.S. to help landowners, as well as Federal, State, Tribal, and local governments and community groups.

NRCS has six mission goals: high quality, productive soils; clean and abundant water; healthy plant and animal communities; clean air; an adequate energy supply; and working farms and ranchlands.

To achieve these goals, the Agency implements these strategies:

- Cooperative conservation: seeking and promoting cooperative efforts to achieve conservation goals.
- Watershed approach: providing information and assistance to encourage and enable locally-led, watershed-scale conservation.
- Market-based approach: facilitating the growth of market-based opportunities that encourage the private sector to invest in conservation on private lands.



Conservation Assistance

Our locally-based NRCS staff works directly with farmers, ranchers, and others, to provide technical and financial conservation assistance. Our guiding principles are service, partnership, and technical excellence.

NRCS helps landowners develop conservation plans and provides advice on the design, layout, construction, management, operation, maintenance, and evaluation of the recommended, voluntary conservation practices.

NRCS activities include farmland protection, upstream flood prevention, emergency watershed protection, urban conservation, and local community projects designed to improve social, economic, and environmental conditions.

NRCS conducts soil surveys, conservation needs assessments, and the National Resources Inventory to provide a basis for resource conservation planning activities and to provide an accurate assessment of the condition of the Nation's private lands.

As the leading source of technology as it applies to natural resource conservation on private lands, NRCS develops technical guides and other Web-based tools to help enhance natural resource conservation efforts.

Organizational Structure

NRCS is an agency of the United States Department of Agriculture. The NRCS Chief reports to the Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment who reports to the Secretary of Agriculture. The Secretary of Agriculture is a Cabinet position and is appointed by, and reports directly to, the President.

An NRCS State office is located in each of the 50 States as well as the Caribbean Area and Pacific Basin Area. The top NRCS official in each State is the State Conservationist who is responsible for operations within his or her State or area and reports to one of three Regional Assistant Chiefs.

Headquartered at State offices are various specialists who give technical support and guidance to field offices. Some States are divided into areas, each with an area office. Area offices are headed by area conservationists or assistant State conservationists and staffed with specialists who assist field offices.



As mentioned earlier, the nearly 3,000 conservation districts are units of government organized by local residents under State law. Districts operate on the premise that local people know more about local issues than anyone else. Consequently, a nationwide soil and water conservation program is largely under local control.

The laws governing districts vary among States, but most are considered legal subdivisions of State or County government. Geographically, most districts follow county borders, although some cover parts of counties or two or more counties.

Under State law, each conservation district is responsible for natural resources work within its boundaries. District governing boards generally consist of five district directors. Their job is to plan and carry out long-range programs based on the conservation work needed in their area.

At the request of the district board, NRCS assigns a staff to provide technical assistance to the district and its cooperating land users. To receive most kinds of NRCS assistance, a land user, organization or agency simply requests it.

The land user usually signs a cooperative agreement with the district. On-site assistance is provided to farmers, ranchers, foresters, and others in planning and carrying out a long-term conservation program to meet their needs and the needs of their land.

NRCS employees must work closely with employees of other USDA agencies. The main agencies are the Farm Service Agency (FSA), Forest Service (FS), Rural Development and Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service. NRCS often works closely with agencies within the United States Department of Interior.

The USDA Farm Service Agency administers various conservation programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program and parts of the Environmental Quality Incentive Program.

The USDA Forest Service administers programs for applying conservation practices to natural resources of the national forests and grasslands and for carrying out extensive forest and range research.

The USDA Rural Development provides loans for single-family housing, multi-family housing, water and sewer, community facilities, and business loans. Rural Development (RD), also helps communities with strategic planning, financial assistance, developing partnerships, and technical assistance.

The Extension Service provides information and education to land users.

NRCS also works with State and local governments and public schools.

In addition to working with land users using the one-on-one approach, NRCS employees use many public information activities to educate and inform the public. Newspapers, radio, television, group meetings, tours, and demonstrations are some of the media tools used by NRCS to inform and educate the public about NRCS conservation programs and assistance.

Through his vigorous public speaking activities, Hugh Hammond Bennett, the founder of the soil conservation movement, set an example of working with the media that continues today – his speeches inspired action for soil conservation around the country, whether at farm-field demonstrations, scholarly gatherings, or in the Congress. NRCS public information activities are carried out through all geographical and organizational levels of NRCS by professional public information personnel and employees.

Bill of Rights for Volunteers

- The right to be treated as a coworker, not just free help.
- The right to a suitable assignment, with consideration for personal preference, temperament, life experience, education, and employment background.
- The right to know as much about the agency as possible - its policies, people, and programs.
- The right to training for the job that is thoughtfully planned and effectively presented.

Bill of Rights for Volunteers cont.

- The right to continuing education on the job, as a follow-up to initial training, information about new developments, and training for greater responsibility.
- The right to sound guidance and direction by someone who is experienced, patient, well-informed, and who has the time to invest in giving guidance.
- The right to a variety of experiences through advancements, assignments or more responsibility.
- The right to be heard.
- The right to be recognized.
- The right to receive enabling funds when needed for official travel or other matters.

Code of Responsibility for Volunteers

Be sure. Look into your heart and know that you really want to help other people.

Be convinced. Do not offer your services unless you believe in the value of what you are doing.

Accept the rules. Do not criticize when you do not understand. There may be a good reason for a particular rule or policy; find out what it is.

Speak up. Ask about things you do not understand. Do not harbor your doubts and frustrations until they drive you away.

Be willing to learn. Training is essential to any well-done job.

Welcome supervision. You will do a better job and enjoy it more if you're doing what is expected of you.

Be dependable. Your word is your bond. Do what you have agreed to do. Do not make a promise you cannot keep.

Be a team player. Find a place for yourself on the team.

Appendix A



Form Approved — OMB No.0578-0024

NRCS-PER-004
Exp. 05-31-2009

THE EARTH TEAM Natural Resources Conservation Service Volunteer Program TIME AND ATTENDANCE

A. Volunteer Name:	B. Locator
C. E-Mail Address:	
D. Pay Period:	E. Supervisor Name:
D. 1. Month:	D. 2. Year:

F. Calendar

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

G. Total Number of Hours _____

OMB Disclosure Statement

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB control number. The valid OMB control number for this information collection is 0578-0024. The time required to complete this information collection is estimated to average 2 minutes per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection information.