The Conservation Reserve Program Readiness Initiative (CRPRI)

Final Report
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Table of Contents

I. Introduction

A. Program Background

The Conservation Reserve Program Readiness Initiative (CRPRI) is a training program funded by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The purpose of the program is to build a pool of conservation professionals to assist NRCS state and field offices with the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) enrollments and re-enrollments, CRP plan development and implementation, and mid-contract management. CRPRI was designed and implemented under a contract with the University of Wisconsin-Extension's Conservation Professional Training Program (CPTP). The initial contract timeline spanned late September 2011 to December 31, 2012. Two no-cost extensions were awarded and the CRPRI project was extended to December 31, 2014.

The Technical Service Provider (TSP) program was authorized in the 1985 Farm Bill, with the purpose of empowering the private sector, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and conservation partners to provide conservation technical assistance to landowners. The 2008 Farm bill expanded the initiative, requiring the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to allow producers the opportunity to receive technical assistance by individuals and entities other than NRCS. This provision is designed to ensure NRCS has the capacity to address the significant workload associated with implementing Farm Bill programs.

What is a TSP? TSPs are individuals or businesses that have a wide range of technical expertise in conservation planning and design. TSPs are hired by farmers, ranchers, private businesses, nonprofit organizations or public agencies to provide these services on behalf of the NRCS. Each certified TSP is listed on the NRCS TSP online registry, TechReg. The TSP registration and approval process involves required training and verification of essential education, knowledge, skills and abilities. The guidance also requires that TSPs must be competent to perform technical services related to many aspects of conservation including conservation planning, design and layout, and the installation and review of installed conservation practices.

TSP use by NRCS has varied from state to state, with some states taking greater initiative to recruit and work with TSPs than others. TSP use has been focused primarily on EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentive Program) practices.

B. Primary Purpose of CRPRI

Realizing that NRCS's current staffing levels and partner capacity may have been insufficient to address future CRP general and continuous sign-up demand, the agency and the Conservation Professional Training Program (CPTP) at the University of Wisconsin-Extension created the CRP Readiness Initiative (CRPRI). CRPRI was created to help the NRCS accomplish the work involved with managing CRP enrollments and re-enrollments, CRP plan development and implementation and the follow up management of developed plans.

A national team of Extension staff, NRCS and FSA staff and representatives from NRCS partner agencies and organizations collaborated to develop a multi-faceted training program to meet the needs of the initiative. Independent conservation professionals, registered TSPs and members of agencies and associations with NRCS Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) were encouraged to participate in the training development process.

II. General Approach to Project

The project was initiated in October of 2011. The project team, led by co-directors Kevin Erb and Rebecca Power of the University of Wisconsin-Extension, developed an implementation strategy designed to ensure stakeholder involvement, deliver high-quality training and integrate evaluation throughout the process to ensure that plans developed by the trained TSPs met or exceeded NRCS expectations.

A. Needs Assessment of State CRP Workloads and TSP Involvement

In order to develop an effective and responsive program, the CRPRI team needed to understand: a) current involvement by non-NRCS personnel in CRP work; b) NRCS and FSA experiences with using non-NRCS personnel in CRP work; and c) obstacles, gaps and barriers which exist that diminish both rates of involvement and quality of work by these Technical Service Providers. By identifying these issues, the components of the training program could be designed to reduce or eliminate them, creating new opportunities for TSP assistance.

During the startup phase of CRPRI, the CRPRI team surveyed CRP program staff at the NRCS state office level to determine how CRP is implemented by NRCS across the U.S. The survey examined anticipated workload related to CRP, whether NRCS has sufficient internal and external capacity to meet the CRP demand, interest in and concerns about working with TSPs to develop CRP plans and quality assurance issues. The survey found that there is a great range in CRP workload and the overall number of CRP contracts (Fig 1 and 2). Half of all states indicated they use non-NRCS personnel to meet CRP workload.

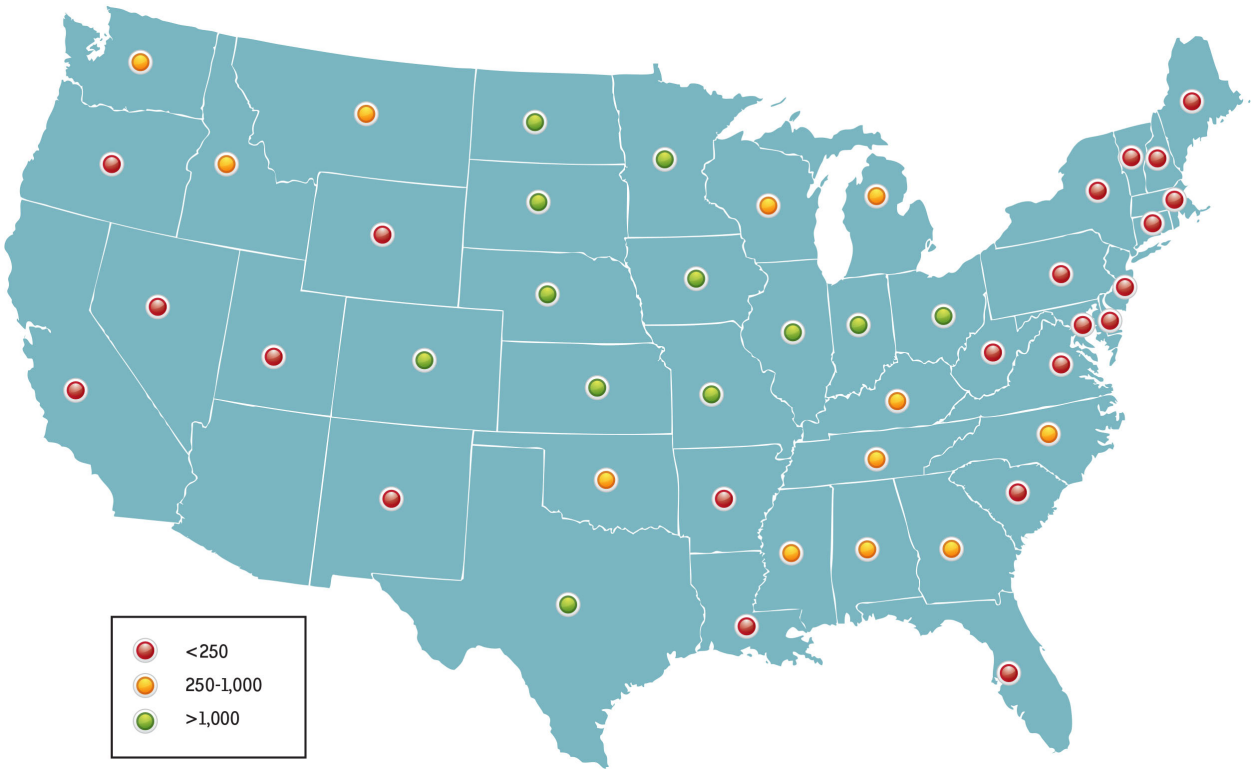

Fig 1. Average annual number of CRP general contracts by state as reported by NRCS State Conservationist designated CRP contacts.

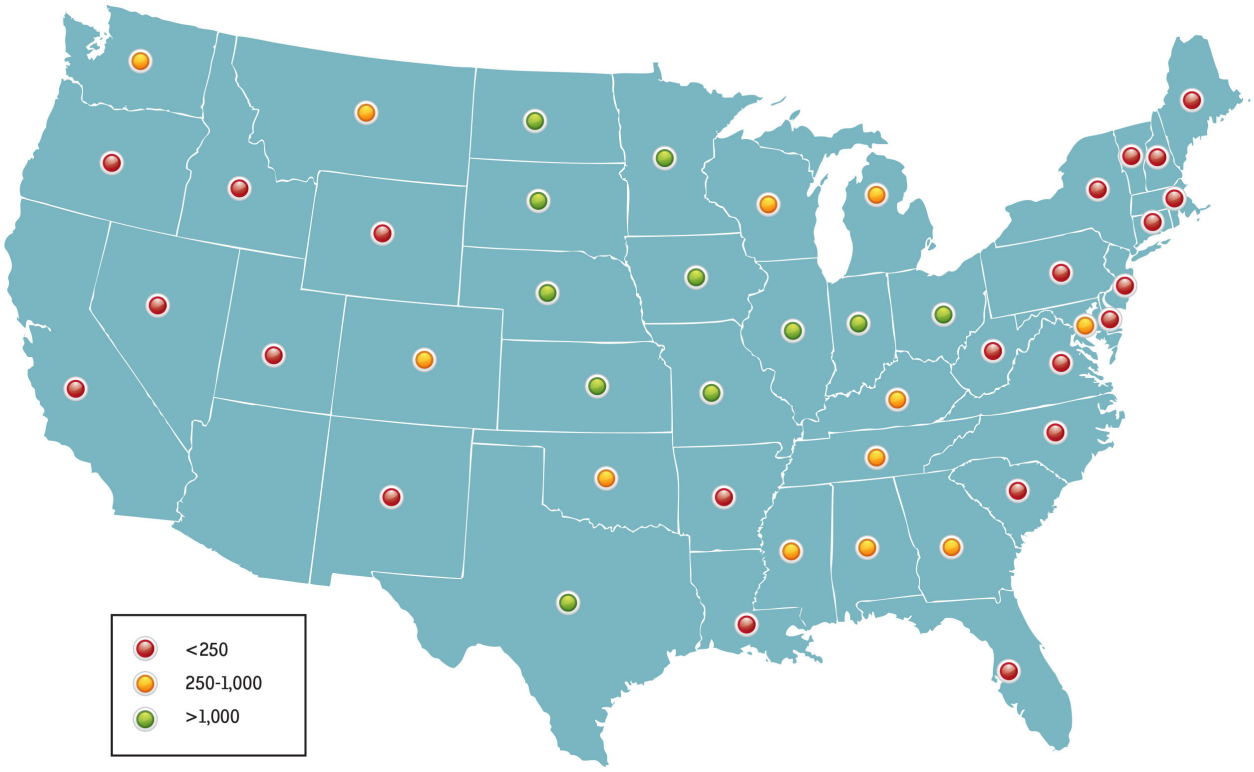

Fig 2. Number of annual CRP Continuous contracts by state as reported by NRCS State Conservationist designated CRP contacts.

While a majority of respondents felt they had sufficient internal staff to meet the CRP workload, many of these states were those with lower CRP workloads. Fewer than half of the respondents said they would make use of highly trained non-NRCS personnel if those personnel were available. Comments reflect reluctance by many states to seek out assistance from TSPs to manage their CRP workload, even when faced with a potential lack of internal capacity to meet that workload. A majority of respondents (61%) said they would not use or only minimally use additional non-NRCS personnel in the future.

This reluctance to hire non-NRCS personnel is recognized by many TSPs. Several individuals who contacted the CRPRI team about the training program specifically asked about the likelihood of being hired to do CRP work upon conclusion of the training. When told there were no guarantees of work, many potential trainees declined to participate in the training. In post-workshop surveys, many who did participate in the Core Curriculum workshops expressed concern about the lack of certainty from their state NRCS offices about if, how and when they might hire TSPs.

The results of the initial baseline assessment, as well as comments from NRCS staff and Technical Service Providers, suggested to the CRPRI team that the initiative needed to not only provide comprehensive, effective training for TSPs, but also needed to incorporate elements that would assure NRCS that graduates of the program would be fully capable of producing CRP products equal to or exceeding the quality of those produced by NRCS personnel themselves, and that their involvement would reduce total NRCS FTE staff time invested in CRP.

B. Project Leadership

Once the initial needs assessment data were collected and analyzed, a nationwide partnership of conservation planning experts and adult education professionals was created to develop and implement the training program. Four University Extension partners were chosen, and each was asked to create a regional team comprising experts with knowledge of local ecosystem concerns and conservation expertise needed to implement CRPRI in the region. They were:

- Pennsylvania State University (Northeast/Chesapeake)
- University of Georgia (Southeast)
- University of Minnesota (Midwest)
- Montana State University (West)

At the same time, a Steering Team (see Appendix A) comprising FSA and national, state and local NRCS staff recommended by the project leads at NRCS was formed. A similar Advisory Team (see Appendix B) was also formed comprising representatives of agencies and organizations that have or are likely to have worked under cooperative agreements with NRCS to conduct CRP work. These two bodies have been instrumental in raising awareness of the program across the country and providing guidance related to their respective constituencies.

C. Major Project Deliverables

- Gather baseline information on the workload related to CRP and the current use of TSPs by NRCS to meet that workload.
- Develop and deploy training curriculum in 20 self-selected states to prepare non-NRCS service providers to develop high quality CRP plans.
- Ensure that the plans developed by the trained TSPs meet or exceed NRCS requirements.
- Provide mentoring of new planners and take active steps for quality assurance.
- Track CRPRI trainees to aid in the contracting of CRP service providers by NRCS.
- Develop and deliver a suite of practice-specific supplemental trainings related to CRP management. The priorities set forth by the Steering Team and NRCS state office staff surveys include native pollinators, habitat guides, CPA-52/resource assessment, invasive species management, mid-contract CRP management and practice-standard implementation for forestry, riparian buffers, range management, wildlife enhancement, wind erosion and plant ID.
- Transition national CRP core training and selected supplemental courses to a distance learning delivery platform, while maintaining critical field experiences.
- Provide all trainees access to additional tools to assist in professional development, including networking forums, instructional webinars and an e-portfolio to manage and promote CRP planning capabilities.
- Create specific recommendations to help address issues of internal and external barriers to the use of non-NRCS service providers in CRP planning and implementation.

D. Integrated Training Program

The CRPRI training program consists of a suite of classroom, field, webinar and online courses, a process of mentoring trainees in the program, a Community of Practice to allow trainees to share information and resources, and facilitated interactions among stakeholders in CRP – NRCS, FSA, TSPs, cooperative agreement agencies and trainers.

The first component of the CRPRI Training was the face-to-face Core Curriculum. This two-day workshop was developed based on key input from an NRCS Advisory team and a stakeholder team. Based on trainee feedback and suggestions from NRCS and FSA staff attending the first Core workshops, trainers began integrating a field component at selected locations, allowing trainees to use the classroom skills in the field as a part of the training.

Core trainees were offered the opportunity to meet and work with a Mentor as part of the CRPRI process. Mentors were experienced CRP Conservation Planners (typically retired NRCS staff or SWCD staff) who could work one on one with trainees after the training to ensure their first plan met NRCS standards. Trainees could also interact with other trainees nationwide via an online forum (Community of Practice), however, this options was not highly utilized, as the trainees preferred one on one contact. In the Western Region, the Community of Practice was replaced by a small group cohort approach that allowed trainees to interact with the mentor and each other in a team environment.

After the initial face to face training, trainees were given the option of participating in a "quality assurance" workshop – either in a face to face environment (Southeast, Western) that allowed them to compare their plans with other TSP's work or via webinar (Midwest, Northeast) that allowed direct interaction with NRCS CRP experts and other TSPs.

The second phase of the CRPRI training included the development of a suite of supplemental courses and moving the Core CRP course to an online delivery format. Working with technical and adult learning experts, courses were broken down into several formats: Online only (including interactive components to re-enforce training concepts and webinars), Hybrid (online followed by a classroom/field component) and Classroom/Field. More details on which courses were offered in each format can be found in the following sections.

Integrating online, classroom and field components allowed a greater number of trainees to participate, as it reduced overall travel costs while delivering the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities. The CRPRI Team provided the deliverables outlined in our contract with NRCS, and provided additional deliverables based trainee, partner, and NRCS feedback.

E. Core Curriculum – In-Person Classroom

The curriculum development process began with a two-day meeting of the Steering and Advisory Teams in late November / early December, 2011. During this meeting, we identified the critical Knowledge, Skills and Abilities that had to be included in a Core Curriculum. Our approach was to answer the two questions: "What makes a ***quality CRP plan***?" and "What makes a ***quality CRP planner***?" The responses included the following:

What makes for a quality CRP Plan?

- ✓ Understandable by producer (landowner/manager)
  - Simple language - high school level comprehension
  - Clear details for establishing practices
  - Step-by-step so landowner/manager can follow
- ✓ Must be complete
- ✓ Does not require corrections or additional work by the NRCS Field Office
- ✓ Covers activities over the length of contract, including mid-contract management
- ✓ Communicates timeline for activities (Form 1155 – Schedule of Practices)

- ✓ Narrative that person signs needs to be consistent with other parts of plan - such as job sheets, etc.
- ✓ Practices need to be cost shareable
- ✓ Provides materials list
- ✓ Information and data are consistent across elements of the final plan - numbers on maps, forms, etc.

What makes for a quality CRP Planner?

- ✓ Working knowledge of local farm conditions
- ✓ Knows FSA or NRCS program parameters
- ✓ Understands the CRP Handbook – how to use handbook, how to find info
- ✓ Understands site eligibility determination
- ✓ Can assess resources and present landowners with alternatives – should be comfortable with different practice options
- ✓ Able to communicate with landowners, NRCS and FSA
- ✓ Follows through on actions and communications
- ✓ Respectful of partners, agencies and diversity
- ✓ Cares about land and landowners

Information that fell outside of this core knowledge was set aside and included in the series of Supplemental Curriculum courses.

In January 2012, we took the results of the Steering & Advisory Team meeting to a two-day meeting of the National Team. The National Team was responsible for developing and delivering the Core Curriculum workshops. It was made up of the four regional teams subcontracted by UW-Extension to conduct trainings, coordinate mentors and assist in the overall development and evaluation of the CRPRI program goals.

The National Team reviewed the KSAs (Knowledge, Skills and Abilities) to be included in the Core Curriculum and brainstormed a draft agenda for the Core Curriculum workshop. The approach the National Team took was to start with background information about the Conservation Reserve Program and an overview of the information required to complete a CRP plan, then to introduce a "mock farm" for which the course leaders would walk the trainees through the a CRP enrollment cycle (see Fig 3), including the process of gathering information (resource concerns and landowner objectives), completing forms, and compiling a completed plan. Each Regional Team was assigned a section of the agenda to develop into a full module for the course. During this period of development, the Core Team met remotely with each Regional Team on a weekly basis and held a weekly web conference for the full National Team to coordinate progress and planning.

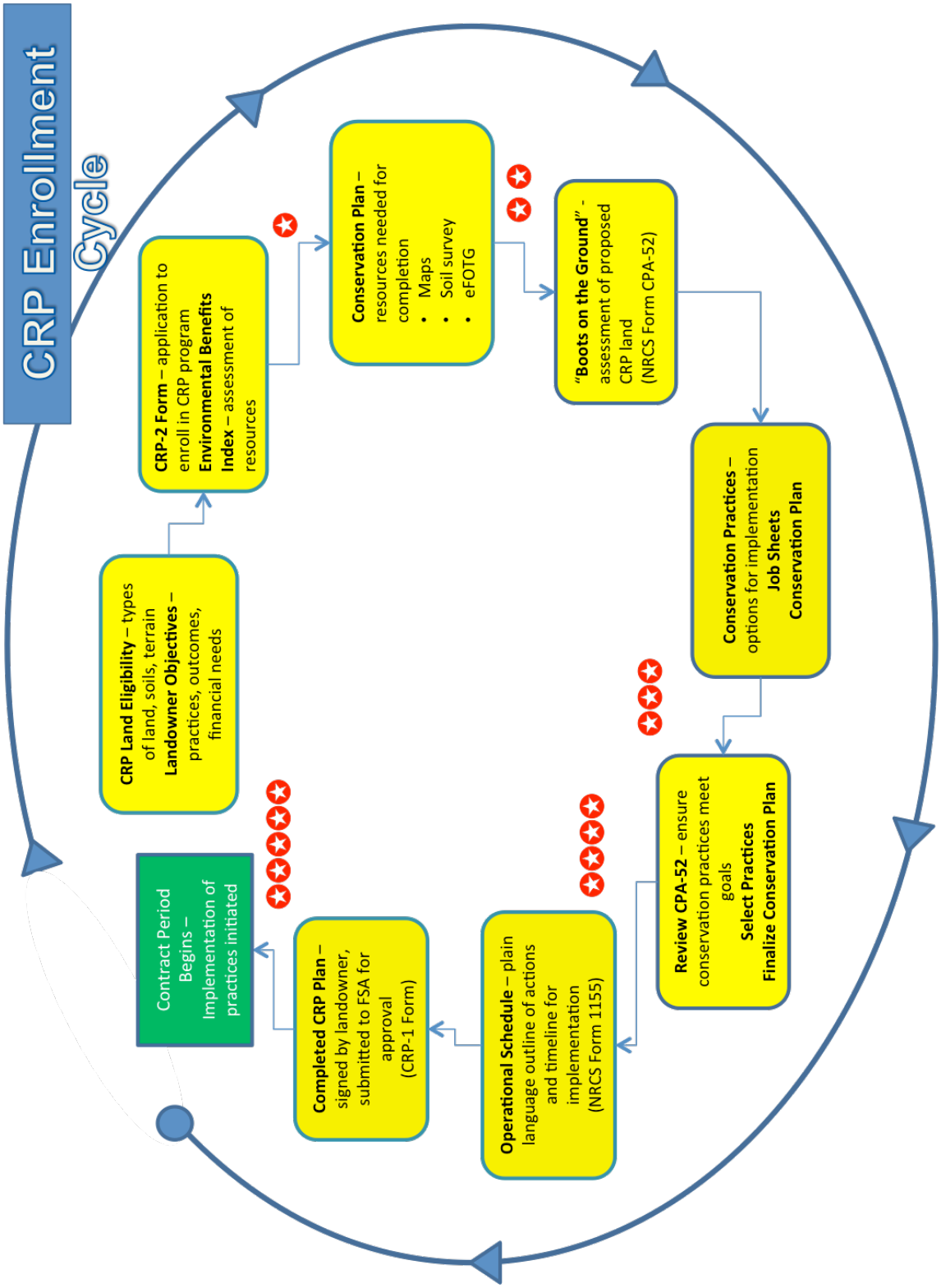

Fig 3. CRP enrollment cycle diagram developed for the Core CRP training.

A pilot of the Core Curriculum workshop was held in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The full National Team attended to run through the full agenda, gather feedback and revise the workshop format and content. Once revisions were complete in early 2012, each Regional Team took the Core Curriculum course on the road, delivering it in five locations in each region including Lancaster, PA; Detroit Lakes, MN; Orangeburg, SC; Marysville, OH; La Crosse, WI; Tifton, GA; Great Falls, MT; Montgomery, AL; Denison, IA; Cambridge, MD; Jackson, MS; Quincy, IL; La Junta, CO; Memphis, TN; Auburn, NY; Sioux Falls, SD; Pullman, WA; Charlottesville, VA; Dickinson, ND and Logan, UT. An additional two Core Curriculum courses were added at the request of organizations with cooperative agreements with NRCS state offices: Springfield IL and Montgomery, AL focused on forestry CRP practices. In total, there were 22 in-person Core Curriculum trainings held in 2012, with a total of 345 potential TSPs attending (see Fig 4).

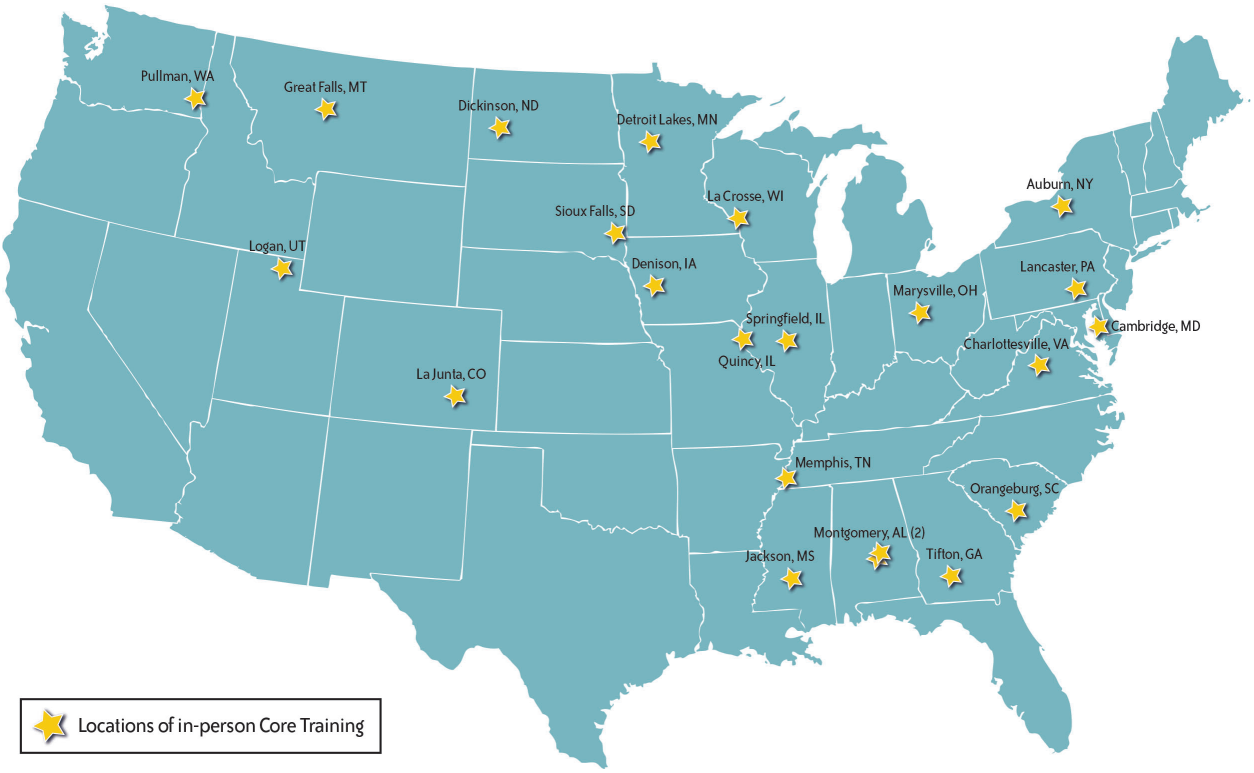

Fig 4. Locations of 22 in-person Core Curriculum trainings.

For each in-person workshop, the Regional Teams initiated contact with staff at NRCS and FSA state offices to obtain input on CRP details specific to that state, and to solicit the involvement of NRCS and FSA staff in the workshop to ensure local considerations were explained. Where Core trainings were near state lines and likely to draw from multiple states, the team contacted each State Office. While the basic agenda remained the same for all workshops, the Regional Teams tailored each one with details and data specific to the state and the eco-region. For example, the mock farm information was based on local geographic, habitat and agricultural features, and Electronic Field Office Technical Guide (e-FOTG) training included practices applicable to area.

At all workshops, NRCS representatives were available to answer questions and provide a welcome and overview of CRP in their state for the trainees. In addition, USDA staff completed the Level 2 e-Auth process to make sure trainees could create their TechReg profile before leaving the training session. FSA staff attended many of the workshops, offering on-the-spot answers to technical and logistical questions.

As the Regional Teams became more comfortable in their delivery of the agenda materials, they realized that they did not need the full two days to complete all of the modules. As a result, for several workshops in the Northeast and South, the course leaders were able to add a field site visit during the afternoon of the second day. During this site visit, the trainees were able to put into action what they had learned about completing the CRP-1 form and identifying appropriate conservation practices to recommend for the site. These site visits also provided an opportunity for trainees to meet and start interacting with their mentors in the field.

Prior to the workshop, trainees were surveyed about their knowledge and familiarity with CRP and conservation planning; after the workshop, they were surveyed about their satisfaction with the content and format. Those results helped the National Team identify topics to include in the Supplemental Courses and to address via facilitated web conferences for CRPRI trainees.

F. Moving Core Curriculum Online

Once the 22 in-person Core Curriculum trainings were completed, the CRPRI Team transitioned the content to an online format to increase accessibility and provide a longer-term training product. The self-guided, web-based course provided a comprehensive overview of the Conservation Reserve Program and CRP conservation plan development. The CRPRI Team also worked with NRCS staff, Steering and Advisory Team members and content experts to create learning modules focused on topics like the history of CRP, the contracting process, CRP conservation plan development (including tools, resources and the 9 Step Conservation Planning Process), CRP plan implementation and CRP plan follow-up/mid-contract management. Each module featured interactive activities and learning objectives to enhance the training experience.

The CRPRI Online Core training guides trainees through the process of creating a viable Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) conservation plan. The course covered the various sub-programs of the CRP (General, Continuous and CREP), resources available to planners and strategies for stakeholder interactions when developing a conservation plan. The NRCS 9-Step Planning process and its application to the Conservation Reserve Program is covered in detail. The course was designed to cover the learning objectives in NRCS's Conservation Planning Part I (modules 1-5).

Throughout the course, trainees were immersed in the CRP enrollment cycle. The course explored the CPA-52 form for creating a baseline environmental evaluation as it relates to the Conservation Reserve Program. Internet resources, like the electronic Field Office Technical Guide (e-FOTG) and Web Soil Survey, were used to generate job sheets and soil maps. The course concluded with next steps for becoming a certified Technical Service Provider and suggestions for additional professional development. Core Training was available free of charge to all trainees until mid summer, 2014. Estimated completion time is about 16 hours, although some trainees finished sooner.

III. Supplemental Course Curricula

Since the professionals taking the Core CRP workshop and the Online Core course were from a variety of professional and educational backgrounds, the CRPRI team knew that some would need more specialized training after the Core workshop. To meet these needs, the project included the development of a suite of 8 supplemental training curricula to build the KSAs of the CRPRI trainees. Supplemental courses were free of charge to those who completed either the classroom or the Online Core curriculum. The selection of topics for the suite of supplemental trainings was begun at the Steering and Advisory Team meeting and was further refined through input from Core Curriculum workshop trainees, the certification requirements for TechReg certification as a CRP planner and discussions within the Core and National Teams.

The resulting list of supplemental topics represents those areas where more in-depth knowledge would be essential to the development of a CRP plan that meets NRCS and FSA standards and is appropriate to the site being enrolled. These topics were developed into full curriculum and offered either online or in person, or as a mix of online and in-person (hybrid). Each NRCS State Office in a state where a classroom Core Curriculum course was held was given the choice of selecting three online and up to two classroom/hybrid supplemental courses based on their local needs (see Fig 5).

Interest and enrollment in the supplemental courses varied widely from state to state. CRPRI set a minimum enrollment of 3 trainees to offer a hybrid or classroom/field supplemental course in a state. In certain states, enrollment never reached the minimum, while in others, courses filled and additional sections were offered. CRPRI re-allocated resources to offer additional courses and sections in states where interest was high.

Significant interest in providing training to FSA and NRCS staff was expressed in some states. During the last phase of CRPRI, open spaces not filled by the target audience were offered at no charge, and provided a professional development opportunity for these USDA employees

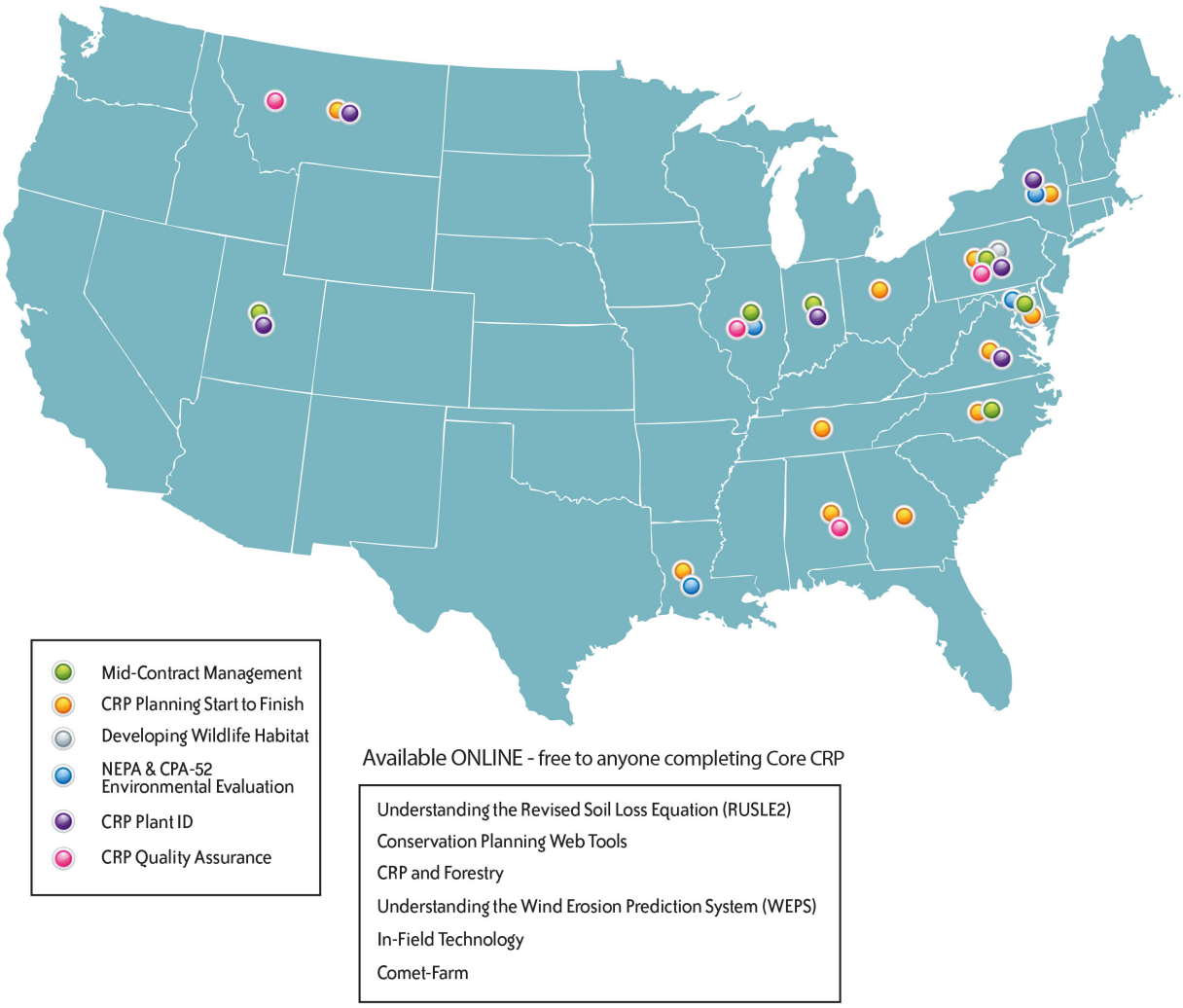

Fig 5: States where supplemental courses were delivered. Online courses were available in all states.

Supplemental courses are as follows:

A. CRP Start to Finish (Classroom and Field)

Background: This course provides trainees with more detailed need-to-know information for developing a CRP conservation plan from start to finish. This includes where to find information to assist them in working with the landowner, identifying USDA-NRCS practices that correspond to the USDA-FSA CRP practices used to protect the land and developing a comprehensive plan that can be submitted to NRCS for approval to complete the contract between the FSA and landowner.

Description: Building on what was learned in the Core CRP course, trainees walk through the CRP conservation planning process step by step. Beginning in the classroom and moving into the field, trainees will learn how to develop NRCS-required maps, use online tools to evaluate

soils and choose the best conservation practices, assess installation and maintenance specifications and develop a timeline so landowners can meet all CRP program requirements. Key Learning Objectives: Function in a field environment. Successfully interact with the landowner to complete the CRP plan. Prepare a quality and completed CRP plan. Know how to submit the completed CRP plan.

B. Mid-Contract Management (MCM) (Online, Classroom and Field)

Background: One of the primary outcomes of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is the development or enhancement of wildlife habitat. Mid-contract management activities are required on most CRP contracts to ensure high quality habitat throughout the life of the contract, document the effectiveness of the original plantings and identify improvements or areas where original contract goals are not being met. Mid-contract management requirements are often misunderstood and not fully implemented. This course provides an overview of mid-contract policy requirements and the type of activities landowners may use to maintain exceptional habitat on their CRP stands.

Description: This course covers the purpose, benefits and limitations of mid-contract management in the CRP conservation planning process. Trainees will learn to assess quality, quantity, composition and structure of plants and trees in the stand as well as other resource conditions within the broader ecological landscape. Data will be used to develop a mid-contract management conservation plan that meets landowner objectives and creates exceptional wildlife habitat when properly applied. This course consists of individual work completed online and participation at a field day.

Key Learning Objectives: Identify and describe basic plant growth and plant classifications (native, non-native, invasive and noxious). Describe and use different types of plant identification keys. Explain in plain language the differences between mid-contract management and maintenance activities. Describe at least three benefits of doing mid-contract activities. Identify sources of state-specific practice or activity lists and cost-share rates. Give examples of mid-contract management activities for your state. Describe the relationship between the national and state policies. Explain how to use national and state policies to guide the development of recommendations for mid-contract management activities. List and describe several planning considerations that should be reviewed before developing mid-contract management recommendations. Develop an outline of questions to use as a guide in conversations with the landowner. Review actual CRP plans and recommendations.

C. Completing the Environmental Evaluation for NEPA Compliance: CPA-52 (Online, Classroom and Field)

Background: NEPA (the National Environmental Policy Act) is the overarching law that requires federal agencies to complete an environmental evaluation prior to providing government assistance to assure no significant environmental harm will result and to protect any environmentally sensitive areas. The U.S. Department of Agriculture uses the NRCS-CPA-52 form to comply with NEPA requirements and document agency findings prior to implementing conservation practices.

Description: This hybrid course provides an introduction to NEPA and related acts, and delves into the specifics of using the NRCS-CPA-52 environmental evaluation for conservation planning. The rest of the course explores the recently revised NRCS-CPA-52 form, including the sections and links to other sources of information needed to complete the environmental evaluation.

Key Learning Objectives: Understand NEPA requirements and what Technical Service Providers (TSPs) must do to comply with NEPA. Locate state-specific websites with information needed to complete the CPA-52 "environmental evaluation." Document resource special environmental concerns and develop alternatives that create benefits for all stakeholders.

D. Understanding the Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE2) (Online)

Background: In conservation planning, erosion estimates are made for an existing management system and compared with the planned alternative system, with the goal to be at or below the critical soil's tolerable (T) value. In addition, RUSLE2 outputs can be used for soil health estimates and to evaluate the effectiveness of conservation programs and land treatment. RUSLE2 is the most widely used tool for estimating soil erosion due to water, and are a critical part of some states' Phosphorus Index.

Description: This online introductory course teaches principal concepts of the soil water erosion process. The course also provides guidance for the installation and setup of RUSLE2 software and databases. Trainees have the opportunity to observe the use of the software and practice using it in pre-determined scenarios.

Key Learning Objectives: Install software and associated databases. Compare sheet and rill erosion with other forms of water erosion. Describe the RUSLE2 factors. Discuss practical usage of RUSLE2 in conservation planning. Run the RUSLE2 model and determine soil erosion rate for example fields. Interpret RUSLE2 results and translate them into recommendations for farmers.

E. Understanding the Wind Erosion Prediction System (WEPS) (Online)

Background: TSPs must be able to identify resource concerns on a tract to determine the best mix of practices to recommend to the landowner. Wind-induced soil erosion is a critical resource concern in certain regions of the U.S., and understanding how wind erosion occurs, how to assess the problem and compare alternative management strategies is a necessary TSP skill.

Description: This online introductory course teaches principal concepts of the soil wind erosion process. The course also provides guidance for the installation and setup of WEPS software. Trainees have the opportunity to observe the use of the software and practice using it with predetermined scenarios, and compare their model runs to the instructor's.

Key Learning Objectives: Install WEPS software. Describe the key components of the soil wind erosion process. Model soil wind erosion for example fields. Discuss practical usages of WEPS in conservation planning. Interpret WEPS results and translate them into recommendations for landowners and operators.

F. Developing Wildlife Habitat (Online, Classroom and Field)

Background: One of the primary outcomes of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is the development of wildlife habitat. Land managers have varying goals in mind. It is important to be able to study and evaluate the surrounding landscape to be able to determine what components are needed to enhance the existing habitat opportunities. This course introduces wildlife management concepts and existing resources as well as suggests a possible process to use when working with landowners.

Description: This course covers important basic concepts of wildlife habitat management such as edge and interspersion. Trainees will learn how to "read the landscape" to evaluate existing conditions and make recommendations. They will also review potential resources to use for gathering data about a site and have the chance to apply them to field scenarios. This course consists of individual work completed online and participation at a locally held field day.

Learning Objectives: Use appropriate key terms and concepts to discuss essential concepts behind wildlife management techniques. List and describe tools to use to "read the landscape". Discuss ways to interview the landowner to gather data about the site. Compare the process of developing a habitat management plan for different goals. Develop a list of resources for the local region. Practice the process of gathering data and developing a habitat management plan.

G. CRP Plant Identification (Classroom and Field)

Background: TSPs must be able to competently identify target weeds commonly found in CRP- (i.e. noxious weeds, invasive plants) as well as desirable forbs, grasses and trees, and determine their frequency within each field. It is important for program integrity and successive contract rental payments that the contracted planting mix or desirable vegetation (i.e. native grasses, forbs and trees) exist on the CRP land. The assessment will help trainees to determine whether CRP plantings have succeeded or failed, and whether remedial actions, such as species plantings, are necessary. Recognizing and identifying both desirable and invasive vegetation are critical skills for TSPs as they work with landowners to develop conservation plans. TSPs, whether they are novice, intermediate or advanced in plant identification, will be able to use the knowledge gained from this course to assist landowners in evaluating their existing or proposed enrollment of acreage into CRP.

Description: The Plant Identification Course is designed to provide TSPs with the tools needed for identifying common plants on CRP lands. The course is divided into five modules: 1) Introduction, 2) Plant Morphology and Terminology, 3) Plant Growth Form Characteristics, 4) Lab Practicum using identification keys and 5) Field Practicum. Trainees will develop practical knowledge of plant terminology and morphology, learn the diagnostic characteristics of plant groups typically found on CRP lands, practice using keys for plant identification, identify plant specimens in classroom and field settings and evaluate a CRP planting. The course emphasizes weedy and invasive plants, as well as plants that are desirable for CRP plantings.

Key Learning Objectives: Comprehend plant morphological characteristics and associated terminology. Describe characteristics of major plant groups. Identify plants (grasses, forbs, shrubs and weeds) present in CRP plantings and extrapolate their frequency for contract compliance. Proficiently use a dichotomous key, other regional plant identification guide or key to identify unknown plants in both laboratory and field settings. Implement state-accepted vegetation measurement techniques and determine the appropriate number of specimens required for a representative sample.

H. Conservation Planning Web Tools (Online)

Background: To complete a CRP Conservation Plan, TSPs need to be able to access and understand basic soils information and the NRCS Technical Practice Standards and associated documents. Understanding the capabilities and limitations of a site's soils is the essential first step to determining whether a CRP goal (wildlife habitat, type of vegetation best suited to a site) will be successful. Likewise, knowing where in e-FOTG to quickly find and how to use technical standards, references, statements of work and job sheets specific to the desired practices will save the TSP time and effort.

Description: A hands-on exploration of the Web Soil Survey and electronic Field Office Technical Guide (eFOTG), two tools used by conservation professionals in a variety of conservation programs. This is an online course, designed to be completed on the trainee's own schedule.

Key Learning Objectives: Explore Web Soil Survey (WSS). Learn how to locate a site and define an Area of Interest (AOI), and retrieve soil information. In the eFOTG modules, trainees learn how to access state specific data, maps, job sheets, and environmental resources to complete a viable conservation plan. Trainees become knowledgeable of eFOTG and WSS intent and limitations. In the planning process, trainees utilize data, maps, and reports from eFOTG and WSS to develop conservation plans.

I. CRP and Forestry (Online)

Background: Trees benefit both the environment and people in a variety of ways, including revenue for harvested wood, improved water quality, sequestration of carbon and greater availability of food and habitat for land and aquatic species. This course explores these benefits and the requirements for establishing and maintaining trees over the life of a CRP contract.

Description: Using three case studies, this online course illustrates NRCS practices and activities used in CRP conservation plans for forests, riparian forest buffers and windbreaks for: longleaf pine forest in Georgia, riparian forest buffer in Illinois and windbreak in Colorado. Each case study uses its state's locally adapted NRCS conservation practice standards, job sheets and technical notes. The CRP and Forestry course features a mix of reading activities and videos covering prescribed burning, windbreak design and riparian forest buffer zones. Trainees use the NRCS practice standards and job sheets for each case study.

Key Learning Objectives: Understand major NRCS conservation practices used for CRP forestry practices. Plan the site preparation, establishment and all maintenance activities for a pine forest. Analyze and choose appropriate mix of practice standards for a multi-zone riparian forest buffer. Design a windbreak for a farmstead. Locate state-specific invasive species resources and forestry best management practices (BMPs).

Table 1 lists completion rates for all trainings and webinars. Completion rates for the training were the highest where the training was entirely face to face, where it was a hybrid course that included a face to face component (such as NEPA/CPA 52), or where a local partner took an active role in encouraging enrollment in the course (Mid-Contract Management). Completion rates in the online-only courses were the lowest, with a portion of the trainees who enrolled never actually entering the online portion. This is typical of no-fee online professional development training (even small fees can increase completion rates). Of those who took the time to use their login and access the course, about half completed a CRPRI course (Online Core @55%, WEPS @ 44%), which is at or above comparable online training courses.

Table 1. Core CRP and Supplemental Training Enrollment (As of 7/29/14)

Course	Delivery	Registered	Passed Learn@UW Training or signed attendance sheets[1]	Completed in Registration System*
Core Training	In-Person	394	345	322
Core Training	Online	428	235	235
Mid-Contract Management	Hybrid	165	135	103
CRP Planning Start to Finish	Field	95	88	70
Understanding the Revised Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE2)	Online	148	65	33
Conservation Planning Web Tools	Online	83	29	18
CRP and Forestry	Online	60	23	19
Understanding the Wind Erosion Prediction System (WEPS)	Online	78	8	10
NEPA & CPA-52 Environmental Evaluation	Hybrid	56	42	42
Developing Wildlife Habitat (DWH)	Hybrid	47	46	32
In-Field Technology	Webinar	19	10	10
Comet-Farm	Webinar	7	2	2
CRP Start to Finish	Webinar	12	12	12
CRP Plant ID	Field	118	107	107
Totals		**1624**	**1033**	**979**

[1] In order to receive Continuing Education credit (CCAs, SAF, SRM, etc), trainees were required to complete not

IV. Webinars

In addition to the classroom, online, and hybrid courses, CRPRI developed a set of shorter trainings in the form of webinars to provide additional technical information to CRP TSPs and conservation partners.

A. In-Field Technology Webinar

Description: This one-hour course cover handy mobile phone and tablet-based applications for conservation planning fieldwork. A variety of applications were introduced for such tasks as slope determination, data gathering/management, navigation, plant ID and soils information.

B. COMET-FARM™ Webinar

Description: This two-hour webinar focused on explaining the Comet-Farm (CF) tool is a whole farm and ranch carbon and greenhouse gas (GHG) accounting system. It introduces trainees to on-farm GHG emissions, how they are calculated, and the existing and potential future values associated with productivity, government accounting, corporate sustainability, and the environment. It also describes how the CF tool accounts for GHGs in crop, livestock, pasture and forestry systems, as well as how it can be used to evaluate GHG changes as a CRP field is potentially converted to a grazing system, biomass production, corn/soy cropping system or if it is re-enrolled in CRP.

C. CRP Start to Finish Webinar

Background: There was an attendee of the In-Person CRP Start to Finish course held in Louisiana from Arkansas Game and Forest Commission. He recognized that the course would be quite valuable to others in his agency who were unable to obtain funding to attend the course in Louisiana. As a result, a distance-learning version of the CRP Start to Finish course was developed and presented to Arkansas conservation professionals. The learning objectives were the same as the face to face version of the course.

V. Trainee Rating of Training Value

The typical CRPRI trainee reacted positively to their CRPRI training experience. One week after completing a 2012 Core Training workshop, nearly all (95%) of those who completed the survey (198) were satisfied or very satisfied with the workshops. Likewise, on a survey with identical questions nearly all of the online 129 survey respondents (99%) in 2013 said that they were satisfied or very satisfied.

Six month follow-up surveys showed that high percentages of both in-person and on-line trainees would recommend their training. Eight percent (80%) of those from the in-person core

training and who responded to the question (170) answered in the affirmative. This compares to 91% of the 64 on-line respondents who answered the question.

VI. TechReg CRP Certification

TechReg is the NRCS's registry of Technical Service Providers who have been certified to work on one or more of the agency's conservation programs. Individual TSPs or organizations may register, and then provide evidence that they meet the certification criteria for those programs they are interested in working on.

Choosing to become registered on TechReg is at the discretion of each trainee. Since many organizations and state agencies already have memoranda of understanding (MOUs) or contribution agreements to do CRP work, individual certification may or may not be required to do CRP work. Becoming registered on TechReg does provide some tangible benefits, however, including a listing on the NRCS TechReg website was highly recommended to ensure that each NRCS State Office knew of qualified TSPs available in their state.

Participation in the CRPRI Core Training and submission of a completed CRP plan will satisfy the Knowledge, Planning and Training requirements under the CRP Conservation Planner TechReg category. CRPRI trainees who choose to work with mentors to complete a CRP plan may submit that plan as part of the certification requirements. Conservation professionals new to TechReg will also need to complete the basic TSP requirements as outlined by NRCS.

According to Technical Service Provider program staff, as of December 1, 2014, 46 CRPRI trainees were certified for the CRP Conservation Planning category and now registered in TechReg.. All 46 either submitted a sample CRP plan or had the requirement waived since they were experienced Conservation Planners (instructors, mentors or retired NRCS/SWCD staff).

VII. Stakeholder Participation

While the CRPRI team regularly engaged stakeholders at the national, state, and local levels, the CRPRI project reconstituted our Steering and Advisory Teams to meet the needs of the next phase of the project. The most critical need was integrating new information into curriculum as it became available. NRCS technical experts from the Conservation Effects Assessment Project and the Ecological Sciences Division, as well as results from the Conservation Innovation Grant program were engaged to advise the project. FSA was represented, as were key external groups such as the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the National Association of Conservation Districts, the Society for Range Management, Pheasants Forever and the Soil and Water Conservation Society. The online Core course and a majority of the supplemental courses were improved as a result of this approach.

VIII. Quality Assurance

A. Mentoring

The CRPRI leadership team, along with the Steering and Advisory teams, felt strongly that a rigorous quality assurance program is essential to the project's success. Therefore, a mentoring program was developed to ensure that each in-person Core Curriculum trainee would have a technical expert to answer questions, help them thorough the development of their first plan, and review that first plan for completeness and technical accuracy before submission to NRCS as part of the TechReg certification process. These CRP plans could be done as part of an existing cooperative agreement or contract to provide CRP work for NRCS, or they could be done on a representative site familiar to both mentor and mentee.
Mentors were recruited based on a set of qualifying criteria:

- ✓ Recent experience in CRP planning or Conservation Planning
- ✓ Working knowledge of CRP and NRCS policy
- ✓ Existing, positive relationship with NRCS at the state or local level
- ✓ Current Conservation Planning certification (if required in that state) or comparable experience
- ✓ Familiarity with the tools of CRP planning

In most cases, mentors were recently retired NRCS staff who worked on CRP during their careers. Mentors were provided checklists to use in evaluating the completeness and accuracy of their mentees' plans, and when they were satisfied with the quality of those plans, they recommend that the mentees submit the final draft to NRCS as one of the requirements for certification on TechReg as a CRP planner. Mentors were compensated per trainee they advised, and also per trainee when they submitted a completed CRP plan to NRCS as part of the TechReg process.

In several cases, mentors attended the Core Curriculum workshop in their state, and met their mentees at that time. In some cases, mentors and mentees were able to start work on the sample CRP plan during the field component of the workshop.

According to the six-month follow-up survey of the 2012 in-person workshops, 31% of the 179 survey respondents either had already worked with a mentor or were working with one at the time of the survey. Another 13% were planning to use a mentor in the future. All known trainees in the 20 original core workshops received the web-based survey. Thirty-eight (38) of the 56 who had a mentor rated their mentor as essential to achieving their goal of becoming a successful CRP planner.

There were several reasons why trainees chose not to have mentor. Approximately one-third of the 124 who answered the question either did not want a mentor or felt that they did not need one. Ten percent (10%) wanted a mentor but did not know that one was available. Fifteen percent (15%) of the 124 respondents felt they did not need a mentor because they were unlikely to ever do a CRP plan. Mentors were not budgeted beyond the in-person Core Curriculum portion of the project.

B. Community-of-Practice Forum

A second way to support CRPRI trainees was the establishment and maintenance of a community-of-practice (CoP) online forum so trainees could ask questions, share information, download resources and access news related to CRP. The forum was also intended to encourage interaction between trainees while they developed plans and to allow them to learn more about the technical service provider role from their peers. The CoP forum had two components: online discussion groups and resources and template documents for plan development and other informational materials pertaining to CRP.

The CoP online discussion groups offered the opportunity for Core CRP trainees to review classroom material, post questions for instructors and communicate with fellow trainees from their regions. They were used to foster discussions among trainees, based on questions that came up during work with mentors, during webinars and as CRPRI trainees began to do work as TSPs for NRCS. The CoP forum housed a set of materials collected by the CRPRI Team and others that are useful for CRPRI trainees. These materials include:

- ✓ Sample documents for trainees to use in developing CRP plans
- ✓ Links to outside resources available nationally, regionally or locally for conservation planning
- ✓ Information about other training opportunities
- ✓ Articles and press releases about CRP

The Core Team continued to gather and post information relevant to CRP work on the CoP site throughout the remainder of the training phase of the CRPRI project. In a six-month follow-up survey of 2012 Core trainees, 55% of the 173 respondents indicated they did not participate in the community practice even though they were aware of the opportunity. Another 35% were unaware of the community. Sixteen of the 173 respondents reported that they had "occasionally" participated in the community of practice. The CRPRI project chose to invest more resources in developing mentoring than the CoP forum. More resources needed to be invested in the CoP to attract trainees and achieve the desired impact.

C. Other Quality Assurance

In addition to mentoring, each region implemented a Quality Assurance (QA) workshop or webinar. The purpose of the QA was to allow TSPs to see CRP plans developed by other TSPs, to learn directly from NRCS and FSA staff where improvements in plans needed to be made and to provide feedback to NRCS/FSA staff at the state level.

Due to the distances involved that discouraged TSP participation, two of the regions chose to focus their QA workshop on a particular high-participation state, while the other two regions chose to go region-wide with a webinar. While the trainees ranked the quality of these events highly, participation was not as high as expected. In informal discussions, several trainees cited the lack of TSP work available as the reason they did not attend the QA training.

IX. Communications

A. Project Management Communications

Throughout the development and delivery of the training components, there has been ongoing communication among all partners and stakeholders at all levels of the various organizations. Communications have focused on building awareness and involvement in the CRPRI among stakeholders, including NRCS and FSA staff, cooperating organizations, potential trainees in training and national team members. Communication between NRCS staff and CRPRI Team members in particular was essential to ensuring that the trainings offered were successful and beneficial to trainees, and that they resulted in a pool of TSP candidates who can produce plans and documentation up to NRCS standards.

Regular weekly conference calls were held between Core Team members and NRCS HQ TSP and CRP staff to update on activities and discuss issues and opportunities identified during workshops and in discussions with state NRCS representatives.

B. External Communications

1. National Marketing Strategy

For CRPRI to be successful, a national marketing strategy was developed. The strategy had two phases: Phase 1 laid the groundwork for CRP trainings within NRCS and with training partners and in-person Core to target audience. Phase 2 was designed to motivate training participation and NRCS utilization of CRP trainees in participating states. Input from our steering and advisory teams and guidance from the national NRCS and FSA offices have helped pave the way for our Phase 2 marketing plan.

Phase 1 goals included:

- Build awareness of CRPRI course offerings.
- Create collaborative relationships between CRPRI and USDA agency staff (FSA/NRCS) in the Core training states.
- Educate target audience about the potential of adding CRP planning competency to their professional qualifications.
- Strengthen relationships among conservation partners.
- Gain valuable insight on our target audiences.
- Track web traffic sources, pre- and post-workshop survey data, baseline and post-baseline evaluation data.

Input from our steering and advisory teams and guidance from the national NRCS and FSA offices have helped pave the way for our Phase 2 marketing plan.

Phase 2 goals included:

- Demonstrate the value of working with TSPs trained through CRPRI.
- Encourage Core Curriculum trainees to sign-up for online and supplemental trainings and complete their TechReg process.
- Highlight existing positive relationships between TSPs and state NRCS offices.
- Define clear avenues of success for trainees based on the unique considerations in each geographic region.
- Illustrate the diversity of conservation professionals engaged in CRP work.
- Positively influence the opinions of NRCS and FSA staff related to the use of CRP TSPs.

Outreach efforts targeted an extensive network of national and regional conservation professionals from state and federal agencies, NGOs and private sector employers. Our short initial timeline required us to lean heavily on word-of-mouth and peer-to-peer communication strategies such as save-the-date emails, press releases and regionally specific initiative summaries. These communications worked in conjunction with the CRPRI website to inform, engage and inspire potential program trainees. These core efforts, in addition to other support mechanisms, helped us recruit 394 program registrants.

In addition to recruiting registrants, we also informed and engaged key NRCS and FSA staff throughout our training regions. NRCS and FSA staff members were present as resources at the Core workshops. These representatives provided valuable input on state and national topics and helped facilitate honest discussions about the future of third-party CRP collaborations. While the long-term impacts of these contributions are still unknown, it is safe to say that many doors were opened and many relationships were forged during the workshops. It is our hope that positive workshop experiences translate into peer-to-peer testimonials and ultimately to a culture of acceptance within NRCS and FSA offices across the country.

Recruiting trainees and engaging key NRCS and FSA staff may have been the primary objectives of marketing efforts, but we also gained valuable insight on our target audiences and the messages that resonate with them.

The following sections summarize our marketing outputs and outcomes. Our target audiences for marketing were existing Technical Service Providers, members of professional associations such as the Society for Range Management, Conservation District staff and other agency staff, non-profit conservation organizations and recent graduates in ecology, conservation, agriculture, forestry and related fields.

2. Marketing Outputs

The CRPRI Marketing Team, in coordination with the four Regional Curriculum Teams, produced news releases announcing local workshops in order to boost attendance and create visibility for future training opportunities. To maximize media coverage, we partnered with public affairs staff from FSA, NRCS, area universities/Extension as well as local extension agents who already have relationships with local agricultural media.

We used the Steering and Advisory Team members' own contacts and media to deliver our messages, and compiled a national contact list from the contacts and resources each regional team had in place. We also made use of the TechReg TSP listings for other categories outside of CRP. We created template emails with links to the project website, and press releases tailored for each workshop location. Finally, we prepared a comprehensive Press Kit, including background information, photographs, contact lists and storyline ideas, which was sent to the national contact list, the NRCS public affairs staff in each participating state, FSA's national office and NRCS State and Regional Conservationists.

3. Marketing Outcomes

We are confident that we have been directly responsible for at least 400,000 "impressions" related to CRP training opportunities. This number is based on the estimated reach of our contact lists, our website stats, free advertising in the National Association of Conservation District's monthly newsletter and paid advertising in the American Society of Agronomy and Soil and Water Conservation Society's newsletters. This number does not include any hits related to social media or word-of-mouth promotion. Based on publicly available national site ranking data, we can surmise that the 70+ websites that have featured CRPRI content have also been responsible for hundreds of thousands of additional impressions.

In 2012, the first year of implementation, 125 NRCS and FSA state decision makers were informed through email and phone about CRPRI and the training being offered. Fifty (50) attended the in-person core workshops as observers. In addition, online and print announcements were secured in 85 agricultural media publications across the country, and relationships were built with 115 public affairs partners from 25 states.

Marketing included use of Constant Contact® to track the project's marketing efforts. Constant Contact offers a suite of tools that can be utilized to reach, engage and acquire new customers through email, events and social media. According to Constant Contact tracking capabilities, the project reached 42,469 people through 63 national and local CRPRI electronic newsletters. Contacts were in positions to encourage participation in CRPRI courses. The first CRPRI national email in early 2012 was sent to 1,149 recipients, and that number had grown to nearly 3,000 contacts as of June, 2014.

X. CRP Workload Analysis Element of CRPRI

A workload analysis was included as part of the CRPRI contract. Our workload analysis efforts were four-fold:

a. Needs assessment survey
b. NRCS personnel interviews
c. Data gathering on existing NRCS workload analysis processes
d. Assessment of NRCS workload analysis processes

A. Needs Assessment Survey

Our first effort to address NRCS's stated workload analysis need was completed in the project needs assessment. Primary NRCS contacts at the state level were asked, based on their state's contract workload (Fig 6 and 7), to assess the sufficiency of NRCS and partner capacity to address the CRP workload. The majority of states said they had sufficient internal (NRCS staff) and external (non-NRCS staff) capacity to manage enrollment workload. However, written comments suggest more complexity, which will be addressed below.

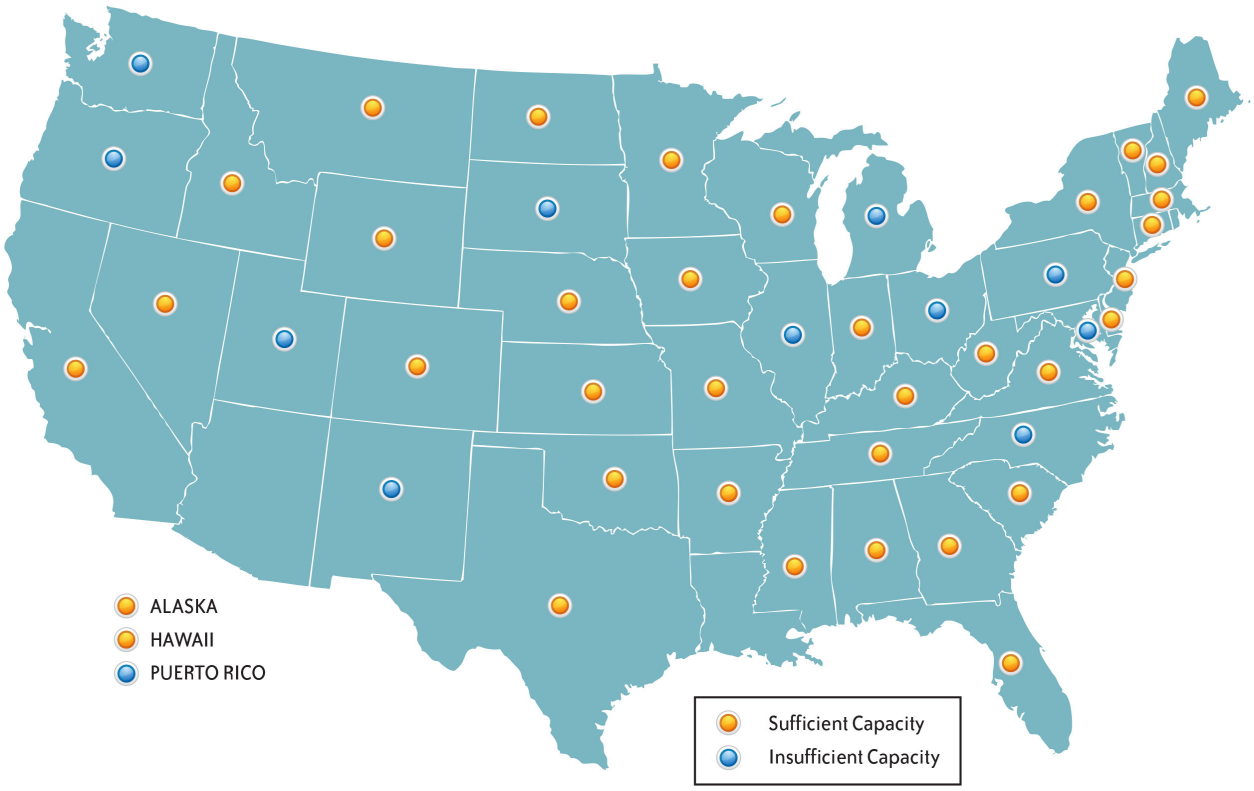

Fig 6. Sufficiency of capacity for NRCS staff to address CRP workload by state as reported by State Conservationist designated NRCS CRP contacts in fall 2011.

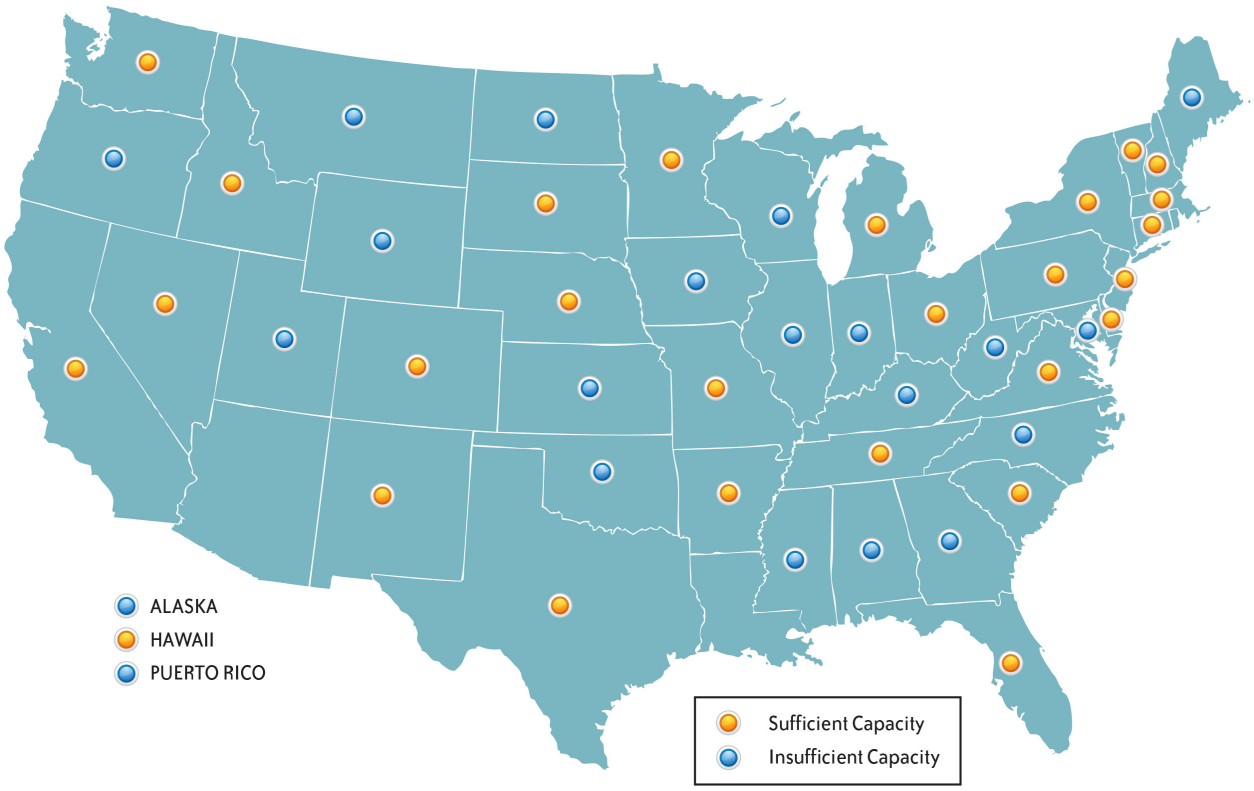

Fig 7. Sufficiency of capacity for NRCS partners and TSPs to address CRP workload by state as reported by State Conservationist designated NRCS CRP contacts in fall 2011.

B. NRCS Personnel Interviews

NRCS personnel interviews were conducted to better understand the level of impact training could have on CRP workload, given the institutional context the training was taking place in. During the interviews, NRCS personnel indicated a commitment to getting the job done, however they cited several issues that in some cases are compromising quality:

- Unpredictability – From the field perspective, CRP workload is unpredictable, with little ability to predict or control when the CRP workload would occur
- Deadlines coincide and conflict with other programs for which NRCS has responsibility
- Workload increases due to new initiatives, coupled with staff reductions, have reduced time available for all programs, leading to greater uncertainty in implementation and quality control.

Some NRCS personnel expressed a concern about the quality of plans produced by non-NRCS employees. In some cases, they also indicated a willingness to use non-NRCS personnel if available and of high enough quality to produce plans that meet NRCS guidelines. The following quote exemplifies the view of one respondent that would be willing to use non-NRCS personnel to meet CRP workload demands.

> *"We must do what we have to do to get the task completed. We will temporarily detail people to the high CRP workload areas. If I could alleviate this task to a TSP I would be willing to do so. We would also like to increase the Continuous CRP program participation. TSPs may assist in this manner to promote the program."*

In summary, interviews indicated that training could help increase the number of non-NRCS personnel able to produce quality CRP plans. However, the unpredictability associated with CRP workload is a systemic issue that will not be solved by training alone. More detailed information from NRCS personnel interviews is available in the CRPRI End of Project Evaluation Report.

C. Data Gathering on Existing NRCS Workload Analysis Processes

University of Wisconsin-Extension and NRCS staff from the CRP and TSP programs met several times to 1) assess the type of information NRCS already had related to workload and 2) what additional information was needed to inform decision-making in states and at HQ. The group determined that there was sufficiently detailed numeric data to inform budgeting, but that more information about strengths and challenges of the workload analysis and budgeting process at the CRP program level would be helpful.

D. Assessment of NRCS Workload Analysis Processes

Every year NRCS provides a workload analysis to FSA on how much it costs NRCS for each type of contract assistance. After FSA and the Office of Management and Budget approve and turn over the funds, NRCS in turn allocates funds to State NRCS offices, and many states allocate funds to field offices. In addition, states also allocate funds to partners with MOUs and cooperative agreements, including soil and water conservation districts, Technical Service Providers (TSPs,) and non-profit partner organizations, which also provide technical assistance and education support for CRP.

The CRP workload analysis performed by NRCS has evolved over the years. One method, Activity Based Costing (ABC), was used from approximately 2006 to 2011, and another method, the Hybrid Averaging Approach, was used from 2012 to the present. In the future, the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative (CDSI) will likely make ABC obsolete, as it will use mobile tools to both automate data on staff time spent on tasks, as well as make staff much more efficient than they are now by reducing administration time. Parts of this initiative will be

implemented in 2015, with a full rollout in 2016. The system could be developed in a way that allows analysis of continuously updated CRP workloads, and also allows analysis by average state size, farm size, contract size, and according to different conservation issues. Targeted statistical sampling of contemporaneous experience with technical assistance workloads could provide an audited and defendable estimate. A full report outlining workload analysis issues and recommendations can be found in Appendix D.

XI. Project Evaluation

Evaluation was a key component of the CRPRI, and was initiated even before project staff were hired. As noted earlier, a pre-project survey was completed with State Office level CRP program staff, and pre- and post-workshop evaluations have been done with the trainees. The project had evaluation components that assisted in formation of the training approach and curriculum as well as components to evaluate the impact of training.

The CRPRI evaluation plan called for an evaluation guided by the following questions. The plan was developed in the early months of the project and reviewed by CRPRI staff.

1. Was CRPRI implemented as intended?
2. To what extent did CRPRI achieve the following primary outcomes:
    a. Increase in the quantity and quality of a pool of conservation professionals available to help NRCS carry out CRP tasks and especially developing CRP plans;
    b. Increase in knowledge of issues regarding the role of non-NRCS personnel as CRP technical service providers and their training;
    c. The extent a national training TSP curriculum and delivery system useful for supporting other conservation programs besides CRP was developed and in place.
3. How do those serving on the four national training teams, the National Steering Committee, the National Advisory Committee, observers of the 2012 in-person Core Training workshops, and the four NRCS staff serving as liaisons perceive and value CRPRI?
4. To what extent are conservation professionals from CRPRI's 20 targeted states aware of CRPRI and what are their perceptions of the project?
5. What are the implications of CRPRI on the use of training as a strategy for strengthening NRCS's technical-assistance capacity?

All surveys were web-based using Qualtrics, a commercially available surveying program and were conducted following research-based methods, which included three reminders during the administration of surveys. Data analysis, assisted by Qualtrics, involved identifying patterns and relationships within survey data with the unit of analysis being individuals and survey questions. Data from open-ended survey questions began with the identification of categories based on patterns or commonalities within the data. Relationships within and across

categorized information were then studied, with the ultimate results being findings. AtlasTi, a commercially available narrative analysis software program, assisted in the analysis.

A. Formative Evaluation

To improve understanding of current use of non-NRCS service providers to address CRP workload and to create specific recommendations to help address issues preventing use of non-NRCS service providers in CRP planning and implementation, CRPRI staff conducted detailed interviews with NRCS, FSA and CRP partners at the state and national level. Individuals from the 15 states were asked to participate in the interviews or to select a designee. Interviewees were designated as CRPRI contacts for purposes of the project. In some states CRP partners were also interviewed. Interviews were typically one hour long.

Results of the interviews and needs assessment data were synthesized into two products: 1) a profile for each state that showed factors influencing use of non-NRCS service providers and 2) case narratives that described how each state meets the CRP workload challenge. The strength of these stories is that they offer a systemic view of the strengths and challenges in each state's approach.

B. Final Evaluation

We engaged program trainees in evaluations, both via electronic survey and in-person review of completed CRP plans, to assess the effectiveness of the training in preparing them to work as TSPs on CRP planning and implementation. This section addresses evaluation question number 2 above: To what extent did CRPRI achieve the following primary outcomes:

a. Increase in the quantity and quality of a pool of conservation professional available to help NRCS carry out CRP tasks and especially developing CRP plans,
b. Increase in knowledge of issues regarding the role of and training of non-NRCS personnel as CRP technical service providers. "Non-NRCS" personnel was adopted to cover the different types of personnel, other than those listed on NRCS's TechReg, who are regularly involved in supporting CRP. Many are not officially certified.
c. The extent a national training TSP curriculum and delivery system was developed and in place useful for supporting other conservation programs besides CRP.

1. Quantity and Quality of Available Pool of Conservation Professionals

Demographics of CRP Trainees: Completing Core training was essential for becoming a certified CRP technical service provider. The 2012 Core training in-person workshops were replaced with online formats offered in 2013 and 2014. Trainees of the in-person workshops and the 2013

online core shared many common characteristics. However, for the online core training a greater percentage (47% of 116 respondents) said that they represented themselves versus 24% of the 206 respondents from the in-person workshops. The higher percentage representing themselves while participating online most likely reflects that individuals were completing training on their own free well rather than at the employer's behest.

Those attending in-person core training were slightly older (average age 42) than who received online core training (average age 39). Percentages of being self-employed were similar for both groups; 20% for online trainees (116 respondents) and 24% of those from in-person workshops (206 respondents). Likewise, as Table 2 shows, most trainees from the twenty 2012 in-person core training and online core training were affiliated with governmental agencies or non-profits.

Table 2. Organizational Affiliation of In-Person and Online Trainees

	State Governmental Agency with Natural Resource Responsibilities	**Non-Governmental Agency/Non-Profit, Such as Pheasants Forever**	**Local Soil and Water Conservation District**	**Private Sector**	**Other: Opened ended response (Primarily Federal, State, Local, Government)**
Online	29%	17%	27%	10%	17%
In-Person	37%	20%	19%	15%	9%

Most online and in-person trainees did not consider themselves as being TSPs (70% and 61% respectively). Twenty-one (21%) of the in-person trainees said that they were a TSP listed on NRCS' TechReg while 18% were a TSP but not listed on TechReg. This compares to 18% of the online trainees who were already NRCS certified and on TechReg with 12% saying they were a TSP but not listed on TechReg.

Larger percentages of both online and in-person trainees had college degrees (93% and 91% respectively). More online trainees had a master degree, master degree plus credit or a Doctorate then in-person trainees; 42% compared to 33%.

Both online and in-person trainees had experiences and backgrounds helpful for being a CRP TSP. Eight-one percent of the in-person trainees and 78% of the online trainees completed college level education in agriculture. However, online trainees had less conservation planning and agricultural advising experiences compare to in-person trainees. Fifty-five percent of the in-person trainees had already done conservation planning other than CRP compared to 38% of the online trainees. Forty-four percent of the in-person trainees had some experience in CRP planning while 26% of the online trainees had these experiences. Likewise, lower percentages

of the online trainees had prior experience in agricultural advising other than conservation planning compared to in-person trainees (44% versus 54%).

As Table 3 shows, before receiving Core Training in-person and online trainees were somewhat familiar with CRP. Except for understanding the Environmental Benefits Index, majorities rated their level of knowledge of CRP as being at the moderate level or higher.

Table 3. Prior Knowledge Online and In-Person Trainees: Aspects of CRP (208 In-Person Survey Respondents and 119 Online respondents)

Aspects of CRP	Very High/High In-Person (Online)	Moderate In-Person (Online)	Low In-Person (Online)
Purpose/goals of CRP	60% (43%)	32% (39%)	8% (18%)
Two kinds of CRP contracts: continuous and general	34% (21%)	38% (35%)	28% (28%)
Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) and its purpose	20% (16%)	36% (29%)	44% (55%)
Role of FSA in CRP	43% (25%)	39% (45%)	18% (30%)
Role of NRCS in CRP	47% (36%)	40% (44%)	13 % (13%)
Eligibility criteria for general and continuous sign-up	27% (18%)	37% (33%)	36% (49%)

In contrast, as Table 4 shows Core trainees, regardless of delivery method, tended to be less familiar with CRP planning resources and CRP planning forms. Ratings tended to be at the low level except for knowledge about Field Office Technical Guides.

Table 4. Prior Knowledge Online and In-Person Trainees: Planning Resources and Forms (208 In-Person Survey Respondents and 119 Online respondents)

CRP Planning Resources	Very High/High In-Person (Online)	Moderate In-Person (Online)	Low In-Person (Online)
Field Office Technical Guides	34% (24%)	30% (40%)	36% (36%)
GIS options for CRP plan map such as Toolkit, CRPlanner and ARC Explore	17% (19%)	28% (26%)	55% (55%)
CRP planning resources such as CRP notes and cost sharing	19% (13%)	41% (31%)	40% (56%)
CRP Planning Forms	21% (13%)	34% (30%)	45% (57%)

Quantity of Professionals Certified in the CRP Conservation Planning Category**:** The pool of conservation professionals available to help NRCS carry out CRP tasks and especially CRP Planning has been increased as a result of CRPRI. However, the extent of the increase is open to interpretation. Depending on what is counted and considered important influences the interpretation regarding attainment of this outcome. Completing the core training was an

essential step in becoming qualified as a CRP technical service provider. Five hundred fifty-seven conservation professionals completed Core Training and these in theory are available to support CRP. However, not all CRPRI trainees are certified. Trainees had the option of certification as CRP TSP by following NRCS certification procedures. Other requirements, unless waived, included submitting either an actual or mock plan for review by a staff of the NRCS Technical Service Provider Program.

As of Dec 1, 2014, 46 CRPRI trainees were certified for the CRP Conservation Planning category and as certified TSPs registered in TechReg, the NRCS on-line database. All 46 individuals either submitted a sample CRP plan as part of certification requirements or the plan was waived if they were an instructor or mentor or worked directly with the Montana NRCS

On a two year follow-up survey, done in April 2014, 24 of the 101 respondents from 2012 Core-in-Person training reported that they had gained CRP technical service provider certification and were listed on TechReg. Another 34 indicated that they were still working on certification while 28 said that they did not want certification. Another 55 planned to register in the future. Fifteen said that they were registered on TechReg prior to training. Sixty-one reported that they were prohibited from registering because they work for a state or county agency that has a cooperative agreement and/or contract with NRCS

Those trainees who completed Core training either in person or online could choose to take one of the supplemental courses free of charge. Of all who completed Core training, 42 completed at least one supplemental with 24 having participated in the 2013 online course, and the remainder (18) attended the 2012 in person workshops.

Quality of Professionals Certified in the CRP Conservation Planning Category**:** Identifying results of training was one of the purposes of the one week follow-up survey completed by CRPRI core trainees. The one week after training surveys asked the extent trainees were comfortable about developing a CRP plan as a result of the training. As Table 5 shows, nearly all online trainees were either “Very Comfortable” or “Comfortable” developing a plan compared to 89% of the in-person trainees. Ten percent of those who were trained during the 2012 twenty in-person workshops remained uncomfortable with developing a CRP plan.

Table 5. CRPRI Trainees’ Comfort Level Developing a CRP Plan

Comfort Level Developing a CRP Plan	In-Person (Online)
Very comfortable	30% (48%)

Comfortable	59% (52%)
Uncomfortable	10% (0%)
Very uncomfortable	1% (0%)

Trainees on the one week after training surveys were asked if they felt they were capable of explaining CRP to an interested landowner, another expected results of training. Table 6 shows responses of Core trainees (both online and in person workshops). While a majority of all CRPRI Core trainees reported being capable of explaining CRP related information to an interested landowner, higher percentages of online trainees compared to in-person trainees responded "Yes." Higher percentages of those trained on-line compared to in-person trainees reported being capable of explaining the four items related to information about CRP.

Table 6. Percentages of Core Trainees Capable of Explaining CRP Related Information to an Interested Landowner
(198 In-person Course Survey Respondents; 97 Online Course Respondents)

CRP Related Information	In-Person (Online) Scale of "Yes/No"
Purpose/goals of CRP	98% (100%)
The two kinds of CRP contracts: continuous and general	93% (99%)
Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) and its purpose	77% (98%)
The role of FSA in CRP	90% (98%)
The role of NRCS in CRP	92% (100%)
Eligibility criteria for general and continuous sign-up	74% (95%)

Likewise, as Table 7 shows high numbers of Core Trainees reported on the one week survey that they had sufficient understanding as a result of training to use planning resources and required planning forms when developing a CRP plan. Once again higher percentages of those trained on-line compared to in-person trainees reported said "Yes" on the related survey items.

Table 7. Percentages of Core Trainees Capable of Using CRP Planning Resources and Forms When Developing a CRP Plan
(198 In-person Course Survey Respondents; 97 Online Course Respondents)

CRP Planning Resources	In-person (online) Scale of "Yes/No"
Field Office Technical Guides	86% (99%)
GIS options for CRP plan map such as Toolkit, CPlanner and ARC Explore	58% (73%)
CRP planning related resources such as CRP notes, cost share information, and forms	77% (93%)
CRP Planning Forms	
Conservation Reserve Program Worksheet (CRP-2)	88% (97%)
Eligibility worksheets/ranking forms	78% (94%)
Conservation plan map and legend	94% (99%)
Environmental Evaluation Form (CPA-52)	79% (97%)
Soil map	97% (99%)
Soil interpretive information	91% (97%)
Schedule Operations/contract support document (NRCS-CPA-1155)	75% (93%)
Job sheets	87% (96%)
Conservation Reserve Program Contract (CRP-1)	58% (97%)

C. Selected State Success Cases

These cases were selected by the CRPRI team to highlight because they represent a substantial capacity increase. In the Montana case, because of the availability of high quality training, there was also a substantial change in attitudes toward the use of TSPs to address CRP workload.

1. Alabama

In the southeastern U.S., forestry practices are a key and critical component of CRP plans. Long leaf pine plantations, in particular, can provide significant wildlife habitat benefits if the practice is properly planned, implemented and maintained. The importance of forestry as a CRP practice was heighted by the announcement and implementation of the Conservation Reserve Program - Longleaf Pine Initiative during CRPRI.

NRCS in Alabama has relied on the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC) via a cooperative agreement to provide technical assistance to landowners enrolled in the CRP program. NRCS and FSA staff prepare the basic paperwork, and AFC's forestry professionals provide the technical expertise to develop the CRP Forestry Plan, ensuring that plans developed are in agreement with other state level forestry programs, such as the Forest Stewardship and Tree Farm programs.

When the CRPRI team approached NRCS in Alabama to offer CORE training in 2012, State Office staff immediately recommended working with the AFC to offer this training to their forestry staff. The response to this invitation was overwhelming —

of the initial CRP Core class's 16 trainees, 12 were affiliated with the Forestry Commission. The AFC requested a second offering specifically targeting AFC staff, and all 40 of the attendees were from AFC. A total of 50 unique AFC-affiliated staff attended the CORE CRP classroom training session. During the 2012 and 2013 CRP signups, a CRPRI-trained AFC staff assisted NRCS on 540 CRP plans.

As of the end of the project, 7 individuals, 1 agency and 1 business that participated in the training are listed on TechReg under the CRP category. Many more are working on CRP plans under these TSPs, but are not registered on TechReg. Those trained are more equipped and better prepared to develop high quality plans.

2. Montana

Montana provided an example of a substantial change in attitude towards TSPs as a result of CRPRI participation. Montana was one of the 15 states selected for the intensive qualitative CRP study because of its baseline survey responses indicating strong negative experiences using TSPs for CRP in the past. Interviews with NRCS state office staff, as part of the qualitative study, confirmed these negative experiences involving TSP from outside of the state that completed CRP plans under the auspices of an early 2000 FSA pilot. Interviewed staff vividly described the poor plans, reasons why they were poor and the need for field staff do redo most of the plans. They doubted if they would use ever use TSPs in the future.

Faced with the likelihood of an overload of greater magnitude then in the past, the NRCS office, despite its doubts about TSPs, decided to support and participate in CRPRI. After training, five independent contractors were hired and four were CRPRI trainees. These 5 CRP TSPs assisted with the completion of 364 CRP plans in 2012 and 2013. In communications with CRPRI staff, NRCS staff felt very positive about the plans and work of all contractors including the CRPRI trainees.

As a measure of program success, it will be important to see how the use of TSPs by NRCS offices changes in the future. We developed a baseline picture of the use of TSPs in the CRP general sign-up, both in terms of numbers and in the types of CRP-related work they were involved with, to set a benchmark against which TSP roles in future CRP sign-ups can be evaluated.

XII. NRCS Use of CRPRI Trainees To Address CRP Workload

A. NRCS Demand for TSPs

Several sources indicated that the demand for additional non-NRCS personnel to meet the needs of CRP, especially for General CRP, was not strong. The baseline survey completed by designated CRPRI contacts from 46 state offices and Puerto Rico was one source. Eight-six percent (86%) reported that they would use "some" or "minimal" additional CRP trained personnel while 13% checked "Not at All" and 2% checked "Extensively (2%)."

The survey also found that non-NRCS personnel involved in CRP fulfilled what one respondent referred to as a "technical application niche." The niche included "engineering and CNMP (Conservation Nutrient Management Planning) development," forest management planning, and implementing "WIP II goals." Serving a niche meant that the demand for trainees capable of completing full CRP plans was likely low.

The qualitative study of the CRP program, planning and the use of non-NRCS personnel in CRP concluded that the demand for more non-NRCS personnel to support General CRP was low. Several factors accounted for the low demand. These included a shrinking general CRP program, NRCS personnel were the principal planners, non-NRCS personnel would be used when NRCS field staff faced work overloads, and a strong NRCS preference for expanding existing cooperative agreements rather than contracting.

In contrast, the demand for technical service providers capable of working on continuous CRP programs was higher. Recently developed FSA policies regarding mid-contract management practices was one factor stimulating demand. Despite not being responsible for carrying out practices specified in the CRP plans, states such as Ohio, Kentucky, Maryland, Montana and Wisconsin were expecting increased demands for information and advice and felt obligated to respond. In some of the states, existing partners such as Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists or state agency staff were already involved in mid-contract management practices.

A survey of conservational professionals from the targeted states conducted during March and April 2014 also indicated that the demand for trained CRP technical assistance providers was likely low. Nineteen percent of those who felt that they knew enough to answer the question (366 of a total of 524 respondents) rated the need as being "High" or "Very High." Another 19% considered the need to be "Very Low" or "Low". About a third (32%) checked "Neither High Nor Low (Mid-Level)."

The survey of those a role in CRPRI other than staff provided further information that the demand for additional CRP technical assistance providers was not strong. Respondents expressed their opinion about NRCS' need, at the state level, for more technical service providers available to do CRP related work. They were only to consider CRP and no other

Federal conservation program. Eight-four answered the question. Twenty-eight percent who felt they knew enough to answer the question rated the need as being "Very High" or "High." Another 30% rated the need as "Very Low" and "Low" (15% for each response). Twenty-six percent considered the need for more CRP technical assistance providers as being "Neither High Nor Low (Mid-Level)."

B. Use of CRPRI Trainees to Complete CRP Plans

A minority of CRPRI trainees worked on CRP after being trained. The six month follow-up survey of 2013 online trainees showed 17 of the 64 respondents had developed, for a client or an organization, a CRP general plan, part of a general plan and/or any continuous CRP plans. This compares to 50 of the 179 survey respondents who completed Core training through attending one of the 2012 twenty in-person workshops.

According to the six-month post survey a total of 50 of the 2012 Core trainees (attending in-person workshops) did CRP work since being trained with 49 developing a full general plan. The same 50 did some work on continuous plan. Of the 50 who developed plans 42 were employees of a governmental agency or a non-profit organization. Thirty-one of the 50 had been compensated as part of their normal job duties under a cooperative agreement with NRCS. Another six were compensated because of being an employee of an organization without a cooperative agreement. Only four had received a direct payment as an individual technical service provider.

The two-year follow-up survey of the same 2012 CRPRI trainees revealed more information about use of CRPRI trainees. Altogether 102 trainees who responded to the survey question had a role in 2780 general and continuous CRP contracts since being trained. The time period includes general signups 43 and 45. CRPRI trainees were used in 15 of the twenty targeted states. Alabama had the most CRPRI trainees who completed the most plans during the 2012 and 2013 General signups. Minnesota was second for number of contracts completed and the one CRPRI trainee completed all 530 plans.

Many plans had forest covers or forestry related practices. Most trainees, regardless of state in which they did CRP work, came from agencies with existing agreements or partnerships with the NRCS state office. A few trainees who did CRP work were employed by Pheasants Forever. Montana hired CRPRI trainees as independent contractors to do CRP planning in counties with an overload of CRP contracts.

Table 8 shows the six states with the highest number of contracts in which CRPRI trainees had a role. Numbers ranged from 540 (Alabama) to 341 plans in South Carolinian. Table 9 shows the other eight states using CRPRI trainees. Numbers ranged from 105 in Mississippi to one in Nebraska.

Table 8. NRCS' Use of 2012 In-Person CRPRI Trainees: Top Six States

State, Involved Organization and Number of CRPRI Trainees	Plans (2012 & 2013) General Sign Ups	Support
Alabama: Forestry Commission (12)	540	General plans with forest cover. In 2012, did not complete the Cultural Resources section of the CPA52.-E In 2013, completed all sections
Minnesota Soil and Water Conservation District (one)	530	53 General plans and 273 CCRP. 194 contract revisions (ownership, practices, management), hay & grazing management
Georgia: State Forestry Commission and employee of a university extension (2)	413	Commission completed 400 general plans with forest as a cover (part or entire)
Montana: Four independent contractors and one private conservation business (5)	364	2012 and 2013 general plans (part or entire)
Illinois: State Association of Conservation Districts employee and 2 Pheasants Forever employees (3)	344	Pheasant Forever did 143 "general plans" with grass covers and 7 continuous and they were filter strips and quail buffers
South Carolina: Department of Natural Resources (2)	341	One staff member did 40 General plans forestry cover and 200 continuous with forestry practices

Table 9. NRCS's Use of 2012 In-person CRPRI Trainees: Remaining Eight States

State and Involved Organization	Plans (2012 & 2013) General Sign Ups	Support
Mississippi: Forestry Commission (one)	105	• General CRP plans with forest covers (part or entire)
Pennsylvania: Two Pheasant Forever employees, independent contractor, and volunteer/un-paid intern (4)	65	• 63 continuous (part or entire)
Missouri: Department of Conservation (one)	50	• Parts of general and continuous plans and not any complete plans
Arkansas: Game and Fish Commission (one)	11	• Parts of general plans • Parts or entire continuous plans
New York: Soil and Water Conservation Districts (two from different districts)	7	• General CRP plan (entire) • Part or entire continuous plans
Ohio: Volunteer (one)	5	• General plan (entire) • Part or entire continuous plan
Virginia: Chesapeake Bay Foundation (one)	4	• Part or entire general and continuous
Nebraska: President of full service environmental consulting firm (one)	1	• Continuous plan

A survey of the four national training teams confirmed the above information about which states used CRPRI trainees. All of the states listed in the above table where mentioned in response to a related question. Twelve members completed the survey. Alabama had used the highest number of CRPRI trainees (20 according to the survey).

C. High Interest in Being a TSP and in Doing CRP Planning

Many CRPRI Core trainees were interested in being a TSP and in doing CRP planning at the time of the survey of in the future. The six-month survey of Core trainees (2012 in-person workshops and online) showed high levels of interests in being a TSP at the time of the survey or as potentially providing future part-time or supplemental income. Respondents were informed to assume that the new Farm Bill would fund CRP at or near existing levels. At the time of the survey Farm Bill legislation was not passed. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the 174 in-person workshop trainees who answered the question checked "Yes." This compares to 67% of the 67 online trainees who checked "Yes."

The six-month survey also asked 2012 in-person Core trainees to rate their current level of interest in working with NRCS and others to develop CRP plans in the foreseeable future. A larger majority (65%) of those answering the question (175) rated their level of interest as being "High" Or "Very High." Another 27% rated their interest as being "Neither Low Nor High" with the remainder (8%) as have "Low" or "Very Low" levels of interest.

On the six month follow-up survey 2013 online Core trainees were asked if there was a general CRP enrollment in 2014 or 2015, did they intend to be available for CRP planning. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the respondents (67) answered in the affirmative.

A final six month survey question addressed by both 2012 in-person Core trainees and 2013 online trainees involved their interest in working with landowners to develop CRP plans given the goals and purposes of CRP. As the Table 10 show a slight majority rated their interest levels as being "High" or "Very High."

Table 10. Core Trainees Interest Levels in Working with Landowners to Develop CRP Plans

	Very High and High Interest Levels	Neither Low Nor High	Very Low and Low Interests Levels
2012 In-Person Workshop Core trainees (175)	53%	37%	10%
2013 Online Core trainees (67)	54%	34%	12%

D. Obstacles To Using CRPRI Trainees

During the staff debrief, CRPRI staff members were pleased with the number of conservation professionals who completed Core training. They also expressed concerns about obstacles CRPRI trainees faced in actually getting to do CRP work. One expressed the concern by saying "We definitely built the cars but where are the highways?"

According to a two-year follow-up survey of the 2012 in-person Core trainees 62 or 60% of the 103 respondents to the question still had not assisted NRCS to develop any type of conservation plans. They had no role in supporting CRP since completing CRPRI training including the 2013 general signup, number 45.

Both the six-month and two year surveys showed that trainees from governmental agencies and organizations having cooperative agreements or a relationship with NRCS faced little or no obstacles. Existing agreements and partnerships facilitated the use of CRPRI trainees. Furthermore, in some cases such as Alabama, training was provided to those who knew that they would be completing CRP plans beforehand and as part of their ongoing job responsibilities.

On the same two year follow-up survey, those who were unable to do any CRP related work since completing training were asked to select a statement that best explains why. Fifteen of the 63 respondents selected lack of opportunities to do contracted work on their own. These were most likely independent contractors. Another 13 who were representing their organization or agency during training reported that afterwards possible opportunities do CRP work never happened.

Twenty-two said that none of the survey options were appropriate and some listed their reasons. Analysis of these statements and other opened ended responses showed frequently mentioned reasons included reluctance of NRCS state and district offices to use TSPs, preferences to hire retired NRCS staff, the effects of the stalled Farm Bill, general lack of demand for TSPs, and systemic factors as illustrated by the following two responses.

> *"No states were actually hiring private TSPs for CRP contracts because of legal issues. I contacted a number of district conservationists that were interested in my services and even said they needed additional help with writing contracts, but no infrastructure or precedence was set for hiring an independent contractor."*

> *"I believe the training on CRPRI was very good. The problem is currently there is no avenue for a TSP in Ohio to get paid to do CRP plans. This was discussed during the training and so far this hasn't changed."*

XIII. Recommendations

Based on both the formal and informal evaluation data, and a post-project debrief with key staff, partners and stakeholders, the CRPRI project developed the following set of recommendations/best practices. The recommendations focus on 1) TSP training and 2) other contextual factors that influence NRCS's ability to address NRCS workload in an efficient and effective manner.

TSP and Partner Training and Professional Development Recommendations

1. Training Development/Process
    a. Integrate mandatory AgLearn training into program [for example, the CORE CRP courses included "Conservation Planning Part I (modules 1-5)] to avoid the impression that "additional requirements" are being placed on TSPs post-training
    b. Provide a complete sample plan to TSPs, with annotations noting important features, common errors and program requirements
    c. With the compressed timeline for this project, having adequate funding to bring partners onboard quickly made a significant difference. The funding levels gave each partner the ability to devote a full time staff to coordination/implementation, and that was a critical factor to our success.
    d. Identify other EQIP practices and TechReg opportunities that the training would be beneficial to, and modularize the training to permit rapid adaptation to other programs and practices (for example, from CRP to other easement programs).
    e. A specific, targeted marketing approach to likely TSPs, including stakeholder outreach, provided significant dividends.
    f. Identification of a key NRCS individual in each state to promote and champion CRP training (e.g. Shannon Zezula in Indiana, Wendy Williams in Montana, Steve Musser in Alabama and Evelyn Whitesides in South Carolina).
    g. Identification of and focused ongoing communication with a key contact in stakeholder groups and TSP organizations.

2. Moving TSPs from Training to Certification
    a. Mentoring of CRP in-person Core Training trainees was valuable for their learning and for their ability to create quality plans. Having mentoring funded through CRPRI reduced workload on NRCS staff while ensuring TSPs understand and are able to create a quality plan. Mentoring should be continued as part of future training programs.
    b. TSPs and NRCS partners expected to access NRCS information should leave training programs with both Level2 e-Auth and their profile set up in TechReg. CRPRI included an LRA at each location to set up the Level2 e-Auth. Time at the end of the training to set up the profile should be included.

3. Maintain the quality and availability of the TSP Pool for CRP
    a. Provide ongoing professional development for CRP TSPs
    b. Provide integrated QA/QC training/webinars to keep TSPs engaged and ensure quality improvement

Addressing Other Barriers to Meeting CRP Workload and Conservation Goals

1. NRCS Collaboration with FSA to ensure adequate availability of CRP planners
    a. Uncertainty about CRP timing and short timelines from an FSA sign-up decision to enrollment opening make it hard for state offices to plan for CRP workload and write agreements with TSPs and other partners. Work more closely with FSA to plan ahead for signups and other deadlines, and share information down to the local offices and with TSPs and partners with as much lead time as possible. Use contracts and agreements with TSPs and partners that provide flexibility across fiscal years to smooth out uncertainty and allow for faster response times.
    b. FSA and NRCS should consider jointly analyzing how demand for CRP is likely to shift in the next few years.
    c. Request to FSA that they provide real-time applicant and contract tracking for use by FSA and NRCS state office and field staff in providing follow-up services.
    d. Propose to FSA that compensation be paid to NRCS for applications that require significant staff work but don't result in a contract because the applicant does not follow through. Alternatively, make sure this workload is already included in the Hybrid Averaging approach to workload analysis (see Appendix D).

2. NRCS Engagement With TSPs and Partners
    a. Use contracts and agreements with TSPs and partners that provide flexibility across fiscal years to smooth out uncertainty and allow for faster response times.
    b. Provide regular communication from NRCS to TSPs with category-specific information. For example, when a CRP sign up is to be announced, an email to all trained and TechReg certified TSPs
    c. Highlight stories of successful use of TSPs to continue growing the confidence state NRCS staff have in using CRP TSPs
    d. Explore how more CRP TSPs could receive security clearance and training to enter their work into the customer service toolkit, to save local NRCS staff time.

3. NRCS Improvements to Workload and Financial Systems
    a. Consider more careful accounting of time and expenses for various follow-up and evaluation activities so that these activities are appropriately accounted for in budget requests.
    b. Ensure that emerging CDSI systems are developed to collect and share data specifically for the purpose of monitoring and averaging CRP workloads, and that such future systems are transparent and made available to state NRCS offices to use for their own budgeting purposes.

c. Clarify how State Resource Assessments should deal with CRP, given its importance in the NRCS conservation toolbox and the amount of staff time it requires, but also the lack of control NRCS has over its delivery.

4. Facilitate Sharing of Efficient and Effective Approaches to CRP Administration Across States
    a. Consider how state efficiencies can be spread to help other states be more efficient in CRP technical assistance delivery. The sheer variety of state approaches to working with and funding partners and TSPs suggests that states may benefit from sharing experiences with each other, if they have not already done this.
    b. An approach adopted by some states that increased efficiencies was an emphasis on RMS level Conservation Plans as a foundation for other assistance to landowners, including CRP. Having an RMS level Conservation Plan in place seemed to increase the efficiency of other conservation efforts ensured that a holistic approach to conservation was used.

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Appendix C. End-of-Project Evaluation Report Executive Summary

The Conservation Reserve Program Readiness Initiative

June 30, 2014

Dr. Jacob Blasczyk, Senior Evaluator

The Conservation Reserve Program Readiness Initiative (CRPRI) is a training program funded by the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS), an agency of the United States Department of Agriculture. CRPRI was created to build a pool of conservation professionals to help NRCS accomplish the work involved with the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) enrollments, CRP plan development and implementation, and the management of developed plans. CRP is one of the United States Department of Agriculture's conservation programs. CRPRI was designed and implemented under a contract with the University of Wisconsin-Extension. The initial contract timeline spanned late September 2011 to December 31, 2012. Contract extensions resulted in the contract's new ending date of December 31, 2014.

Workshops and courses that prepared conservational professionals were the primary feature of CRPRI. Core Training prepared enrollees to develop the required CRP conservation plan and support NRCS in implementing CRP. Optional supplemental courses provided training on topics related to developing, implementing and maintaining CRP conservation plans and contracts.

CRPRI featured continuous evaluation throughout the contracted period and concludes with this final end-of-project evaluation report. Early in the project a baseline survey was conducted, and during the first year a qualitative study of the CRP program, CRP planning, and the use of non-NRCS personnel in CRP was completed. "Non-NRCS personnel" was adopted because there are individuals from agencies and organizations other than NRCS-certified technical service providers (TSPs) involved in supporting federally sponsored conservation programs. The qualitative study was based exclusively on interview data while findings of this report are based on data from web-based surveys and a debriefing with UW Extension CRPRI staff.

Trainees of courses completed a pre-survey, followed by another survey within a week of course completion and a six- to nine-month follow-up survey. Those who attended the first 2012 Core Training in-person workshops completed a two-year follow-up survey administered during April of 2014. Two more web-based surveys were conducted during April of 2014: Nearly 1,200 conservation professionals from the initial 20 CRPRI target states were surveyed to learn about their perceptions of CRPRI, level of awareness of CRPRI, number who considered participating in training and reasons for not following through, views of TSPs in general and the extent lack of training was a problem, and the need for additional CRP technical service providers.

The second web-based survey involved a sample size of 150 people who had a role in CRPRI other than staff. These included members of the four regional training teams, content developers, members of the Steering and Advisory Committees, four federal-level NRCS liaisons

to the project, and observers of 2012 Core Training workshops. The purpose of this survey was to learn about overall perceptions of CRPRI; satisfaction levels with how CRPRI was managed, developed and implemented; satisfaction levels with CRPRI staff support; and learn about perceptions regarding the extent the primary goal was achieved.

The evaluation plan was drafted early in the project and based on key questions. The evaluation spans from 2011 through 2013 and does not include 2014 evaluation data from 2014 courses still underway. However, registration and completion data as of the end of May 2014 are included. The results of addressing the key questions are as follows:
The first question focused on the extent plans as stated in the initial contract were implemented. The evaluation concluded that CRPRI is substantially implemented as intended in the initial contract and on a tight timeline, especially during the first year of the project. After hiring additional staff, implemented features included:

- Four regional training teams (14 total members) from the Extension systems of four universities: University of Georgia, University of Minnesota, Montana State University, and Penn State University;
- A National Steering Committee and a National Advisory Committee;
- Twenty in-person Core Training workshops (two days long) held in 20 states that prepared 248 conservation professionals to do CRP work; two additional core workshops were added, serving 74 additional trainees.
- Online version of Core Training with 98 conservation professionals completing the first online offering between September 2012 and December 2013. As of May 31, 2014 another 113 of the current 229 registrants competed the online Core Training course now underway. Therefore as of this report, a total of 459 (248 from in-person workshops, 98 from 2012/13 online training, 113 current registrants) are available to do CRP work.
- Seven supplemental courses with a total of 606 class registrations between December 2012 and May 31, 2014 and with a total of 272 completed courses. Courses were still being offered at the time of this report and so numbers of course completions may increase.
- A marketing campaign.

Mentoring and a community of practice to support CRPRI trainees were attempted. However, by the second year these two features were minimally implemented. A policy-related deliverable regarding customer service delivery by TSPs and another about the number of TSPs required to support CRP were changed after discussions with the federal-level NRCS project liaisons.

The second evaluation question addressed CRPRI's intended outcomes:

- Increase the quantity and quality of a pool of conservation professionals available to help NRCS carry out CRP tasks;
- Create a greater understanding of issues regarding the role and training of non-NRCS personnel as CRP technical service providers;

- Put in place a national training TSP curriculum and delivery system for supporting other conservation programs besides CRP.

The pool of conservation professionals available to help NRCS carry out CRP tasks, and especially to develop CRP plans, has increased as a result of CRPRI. However, the extent of the increase is open to interpretation depending on how the outcome is defined. To date, including 2014 online Core Training, 459 conservation professionals completed Core Training and these in theory are available to support CRP. However, as of June 23, 2014, forty-two (42) CRPRI trainees were certified for both the CRP Conservation Planning category and as a CRP Technical Service Provider and listed on TechReg, the NRCS on-line database. While CRPRI staff supported certification, it was an option that trainees could pursue. Furthermore, after completing Core Training, trained individuals could work on CRP, including conservation plans, without TechReg certification.

While CRPRI staff considered the quality of in-person Core Training workshops and CRPRI online courses to be high, they also expressed some concerns about how tight timelines affected quality. However, data about training results indicated CRPRI trainees felt that they were prepared for doing CRP planning while being positive about their training experiences. Ascertaining the quality of the pool of available CRPRI-trained conservation professionals was difficult because the number of trainees who did CRP work post-training was still relatively low. In addition, data on state agency satisfaction with CRPRI trainees who did CRP work were minimal. Thus, to adequately address questions of quality of the pool further study is required.

On the second intended outcome of CRPRI—greater understanding of issues regarding the training and use of non-NRCS personnel as technical service providers-—the evaluation concluded that the outcome will likely be achieved at a higher level with the distribution of a monograph from the qualitative study. Data from four NRCS federal liaisons to the CRPRI project suggested that CRPRI has already increased the agency's knowledge of the issues and, for at least two liaisons, personal understanding of the issues has increased as a result of participating in CRPRI. Distribution of the monograph, which includes information about eleven issues regarding training as a strategy to increase NRCS's technical assistance capacity, should help others to understand the involved issues.

The third intended outcome was the development of a national training TSP curriculum and delivery system to support other conservation programs besides CRP. Staff of CRPRI considered the curriculum, and specifically the online courses, as the lasting legacy of their efforts and the delivery methods as a potential model that could be applied to other conservation programs. About 58% of those who had a role in CRPRI other than staff agreed that CRPRI has the potential of being a model applicable to other conservation programs.

After the discussion of the three outcomes, the report presents findings that help understand attaining the goal and use of a pool of conservation professionals capable of assisting NRCS with CRP. These findings are:

1. Pool members are primarily from state agencies and non-profits that already had some relationship with NRCS state offices while independent contractors from the private sector are underrepresented. Members are in their late thirties to early forties, highly educated, and with backgrounds helpful to being a CRP technical service provider.

2. Numbers of CRPRI trainees who worked on CRP after training was low. According to 2012 and 2013 follow-up surveys, only 58 of the then trained 350 conservational professionals worked on CRP after being trained,

3. The demand for CRP technical service providers was not strong.

4. Fourteen states used CRPRI trainees to develop CRP plans, with numbers of involved plans varying from a high of 540 in Alabama to one in Nebraska.

5. CRPRI trainees, even when not used, were still interested in doing CRP planning.

6. Several obstacles, some systemic, prevented CRPRI trainees from doing CRP work.

Two more evaluation questions involved the impressions and/or reactions to CRPRI on the part of members from two samples; those having role in CRPRI other than staff and a sample of conservation professionals from the 20 targeted states. Members of both samples tended to have positive views of CRPRI, while some had concerns about CRPRI. Concerns included the inability of CRPRI trainees, especially from the private sector, to find CRP work after training and the unwillingness of some states to use CRPRI trainees.

The final evaluation question addressed the implications of CRPRI for increasing the capacity of NRCS's Technical Assistance through training. Findings are presented under these headings:

- CRPRI Illustrates the Capacity and Limitations of Training
- Capitalizing on the Expressed High Interest to be a CRP Technical Service Provider
- Demonstrates the Realities of a National Approach to Training
- Potential of CRPRI as a National Model
- The Challenges of Designing Online Courses
- Capacity Building: An Alternative

Appendix D. Assessment of CRP Workload Analysis and Recommendations

Conservation Reserve Program Readiness Initiative

By Loni Kemp, Kemp Consulting

Foreword

The University of Wisconsin-Extension (UW) contracted with Kemp Consulting to explore the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) workload analysis process at state and national levels in order to identify problems, opportunities, and options for improvement, as part of the Conservation Reserve Program Readiness Initiative (CRPRI). A work group of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and UW personnel was created, and a total of nine NRCS individuals (seven from state offices and two from headquarters) plus the two CRPRI co-directors were personally interviewed for this assessment and recommendations. The input was compiled, organized, and assessed to identify problems and opportunities. Policy options suggested by one or more work group members are compiled in the final section, and presented in order of suggested priority, for consideration by NRCS CRP leadership.

Background on CRP Workload Analysis

The Conservation Reserve Program is unique for USDA. First, it is a program administered by two separate agencies. The Farm Service Agency (FSA) was designated when the program was created in1985 to be the lead administrative agency for the program. FSA handles all of the funding provided by Congress, program rules, administration, and delivery of checks to landowners. NRCS handles technical practice eligibility determinations, conservation planning and practice implementation. A second distinct feature of CRP is that Congress approves the total number of acres to be enrolled, and does not set a budget.

From the start, FSA signed annual memoranda of understanding with NRCS to provide a negotiated amount of funding for NRCS technical assistance to farmers to develop conservation plans, complete applications for the land to be enrolled, implement conservation practices, and conduct other follow-up activities.

Every year NRCS provides a workload analysis to FSA on how much it costs NRCS for each type of contract assistance. After FSA and the Office of Management and Budget approve and turn over the funds, NRCS in turn allocates funds to State NRCS offices, and many states allocate funds to field NRCS offices. In addition, states also allocate funds to partners, including soil and water conservation districts, Technical Service Providers (TSPs,) and non-profit partner organizations, which also provide technical assistance and education support for CRP.

The CRP workload analysis performed by NRCS has evolved over the years. One method, Activity Based Costing (ABC), was used from approximately 2006 to 2011, and another method, the Hybrid Averaging Approach, was used from 2012 to the present. In the future, NRCS may continue to adjust their methods of calculating workloads and costs.

Using the ABC method, in each of the fiscal years 1999, 2006 and 2010, NRCS requested elaborate data from every state in order to calculate exactly how many hours were spent on every step of technical assistance as well as the costs. This data was collected for many conservation programs, but in the case of CRP, ABC data was used to justify to FSA what their workload and funding need was for each year. ABC used a massive spreadsheet to compile this data coming in from all states, and attempted to accurately tally all work that went into their costs. For CRP, it broke costs down according to new general sign-up contracts, renewal of general contracts, new continuous sign-ups (for partial-field, non-competitive contracts) and renewal of continuous contracts.

Problems with ABC arose, and a particular challenge was that the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the White House office which oversees all programs, as well as FSA, repeatedly challenged or questioned NRCS estimates when determining funds to pay NRCS for CRP technical assistance.

In the years 2012, 2013 and 2014 NRCS successfully used a different and simpler estimation method, the Hybrid Averaging Approach, which had also been used prior to ABC. NRCS used past year national data already in their system to compute a national average cost per CRP contract, by contract type. In the case of the general sign-up, a five-year average cost was used to even out erratic sign-up dates. NRCS simply divides the total funds obligated nationally in the prior year to provide the services for each category of CRP contract by the number of contracts completed for that year, resulting in an average cost per contract. NRCS also tallies the number of staff hours spent on each type of contract, resulting in an average cost per hour. General sign-ups generally require less hours of technical assistance because engineering plans are not required.

Each year FSA projects the numbers of continuous and general contracts expected to be enrolled and renewed for the coming year. NRCS multiplies next year's number of contracts by the average cost per contract, to come up with their estimate of NRCS funds needed to carry out the program for the next year. FSA and OMB have accepted the methodology, which had also been used prior to the ABC method, and raised no questions about it. NRCS plans to continue to use this method.

After NRCS receives its annual allocation of CRP technical assistance funds, the funds are reallocated to the states. The NRCS CRP program manager proposes a total funding amount for each state. NRCS discusses with the states whether their funds might be too high or too low, and adjusts a final allocation.

State NRCS offices then decide how to allocate their state CRP funds to local offices, state level staff, as well as partner organizations to provide technical assistance for CRP. Partners may include Conservation districts, which provide technical assistance at the local offices, technical service providers who can provide professional private technical assistance, or partners such as nonprofit organizations, which may provide outreach and promotion, as well as technical assistance.

State Resource Assessments (SRA) were instituted in 2011, when NRCS required each state to prepare an overall assessment of their natural resource concerns and priorities, in order to better tie that information into budget priorities. That first year each state plan was approached differently, and NRCS was unable to compile, compare or tally the data. By 2013 a Task Force had prepared guidance on what information to submit, so the same information could be compared nationally. The 2014 State Resource Assessments were collected via an online document tool. How CRP fits into these assessments for planning purposes at the national and state level continues to evolve.

Findings

The following findings and recommendations were compiled from telephone interviews with eleven individuals on the CRPRI workgroup; see the Appendix. Previously, the workgroup conducted a CRP workload analysis scoping meeting in June, 2013 which provided additional input. Workgroup members also reviewed this report.

1. Activity Based Costing (ABC)

State staff knowledge and experience with the former ABC method of compiled workload information varied from state to state. Now that it is not being used by headquarters for CRP funding purposes, we explored whether states were still using the most recent 2010 data, and what its continuing value is.

Two of the seven states (and possibly more that were not interviewed) report that ABC consists of good data that captures all levels of staff work and is inclusive of all costs. They use the most recent 2010 ABC data for developing their state budgets and State Resource Assessments. They believe the data is good, and allows them to compare CRP to other programs. One felt that the 2010 data will remain useful for quite some time, since it refers to staff hours required for different tasks, which does not necessarily change over time, like dollar figures would. The other felt that ABC should be updated every 3-5 years to be more useful in their state level budgeting.

At least one state still refers to ABC data when developing CRP Partner agreements. The time estimates remain useful, and they make adjustments to salaries, travel and other changing costs each year.

Most respondents do not use ABC at the state level at all. They gather workload information from other means, such as polling local offices for hours put in per CRP contract, per acre or per conservation practice. Several mentioned that ABC never had good source data in the first place. One expert said that he has no confidence in ABC data, because it was recorded after the fact, relying upon people's memory of what they did and how long it took. The methodology was flawed, in that information was collected retrospectively based on memory. Samples were not statistically significant, and the overall process could not be audited for accuracy. One source admitted that the ABC numbers were sometimes adjusted "manually" by program leadership to make it work out with the overall budget. While it served a purpose, ABC data wasn't rigorous enough to be relied upon for accuracy in calculating staff time used for CRP technical assistance tasks.

In the future, the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative (CDSI) will make ABC obsolete, as it will use mobile tools to both automate data on staff time spent on tasks, as well as make staff much more efficient than they are now by reducing administration time. Parts of this initiative will be implemented in 2015, with a full rollout in 2016. The system could be developed in a way that allows analysis of continuously updated CRP workloads, and also allows analysis by average state size, farm size, contract size, and according to different conservation issues. Targeted statistical sampling of contemporaneous experience with technical assistance workloads could provide an audited and defendable estimate.

Options:

- Continue allowing states that choose to make use of the latest 2010 ABC data, for their own budgeting purposes, to do so.
- Do not plan to update ABC data for CRP workload analysis purposes.
- Ensure that emerging CDSI systems are developed to collect and share data specifically for the purpose of monitoring and estimating average CRP workloads, and that such future systems are transparent and made available to state NRCS offices to use for their own budgeting purposes.

2. Hybrid Averaging Approach

It was generally recognized by all work group members that the Hybrid Averaging Approach is perceived to be working well, in part because for the past three years the methodology and resulting numbers were well received by OMB and FSA. It works for negotiating the amount of funds to transfer from FSA to NRCS.

It was also reported to be working out right for paying states an appropriate amount of money for their CRP technical assistance services. The calculations seemed to apply correctly, from the viewpoints of those interviewed. Many reported that they try to live within the funds they are allocated, and by and large they feel they are efficient, while not cutting corners on the quality of CRP service. Year-end shuffling of funds between states (described in the next section) provides a fix when problems arise.

The currently used breakdown of costs according to categories of new general sign-up contracts, renewal of general contracts, new continuous sign-ups (for partial-field, non-competitive contracts) and renewal of continuous contracts still seems appropriate to all respondents.

However, there were a few questions about how the averages are computed and what data is used. No state or headquarters staff member interviewed was sure how the CRP program manager came up with the average number of staff hours or funds spent on each type of CRP contract. A few staff really wanted to know what went into the numbers, while others accepted them without question. Some headquarters staff hoped that the fundamental data was dependable and that the Hybrid Averaging approach was clear and transparent to those doing the calculations.

The actual computation used is quite simple, and would be easy to explain to colleagues within the agency. NRCS divides the total funds obligated nationally in the prior year for each category of CRP contract by the number of contracts completed for that year, resulting in an average cost per contract. NRCS also tallies the number of staff hours spent on each type of contract, resulting in an average cost per hour.

Fund allocations are made to the states once NRCS receives an apportionment from FSA and the appropriate budget procedures are complete at Headquarters. NRCS seeks additional apportionments during the year from FSA if the workload is greater than was projected by FSA at the beginning of the fiscal year, such as an additional sign up or new initiative, or if OMB decides to give less than the full apportionment in the beginning of the fiscal year. If additional apportionments are received, then additional allocations are made to states, which can often be late in the fiscal year.

One area of confusion is how CRP funding covers NRCS follow-up work, once the initial contracts are approved. Follow-up over the life of the contract can include status reviews, mid-contract management, emergency haying and grazing, early outs, and contract modification. Most said they thought the Hybrid Averaging approach is supposed to include all follow-up required in future years after approval of the contract, but no one was clear on how follow-up workloads were arrived at or factored in. Some states expressed a concern that funds are allocated in the enrollment year, and are no longer available when mid-contract issues arise, and work on CRP contracts is charged to non-CRP funds because a CRP source is not available.

Several mentioned the ways in which contract follow-up workloads are unpredictable. For example, during the widespread drought of 2012, many farmers came in for emergency haying and grazing information and planning. Another pointed out that they are doing more high-quality work on monitoring these days, such as grassland transects to monitor species, which was not necessarily budgeted for. Timing can be difficult too, as peaks and valleys occur when hundreds of clients all need year six- and seven-year status reviews. There was a desire by one to do more personal consulting with farmers, to refine their management practices such as controlling trees growing in fields or grass growing in new tree plantations. One respondent pointed out the final step of evaluation of environmental effectiveness and follow-up with the landowners is rarely done, possibly leaving the CRP less effective than it could be. While this may be equally true of other NRCS programs, full analysis of outcomes and benefits of each CRP contract and better program management could provide important information to improve the program.

These often unpredictable follow-up activities take staff time, or should take even more staff time, but it is unclear to respondents if the Hybrid Averaging approach ends up providing sufficient funds at the right time to pay for the activities.

Another possibly overlooked problem is that there doesn't seem to be any way for NRCS to be compensated for applicants who apply for CRP, but end up dropping out before signing the final contract due to ineligibility or other personal preference. Staff work on eligibility and a conservation plan can be very time-consuming, but there is no payment for application work if a contract is not ultimately implemented.

On the question of how FSA predicts numbers of contracts by state and even for each county, not one interviewee knew how FSA figured out the estimation. Of course, Congress sets the total acreage for each year, but there was some interest in a more transparent process for FSA projections of the next year's number of contracts. While curious, respondents reported no complaints about the projections themselves.

It was noted that the continuous CRP is evolving quickly, especially as Congress reduces general sign-up acreage, and in 2014 there will be no general sign-up at all. The desirability of enrolling partial fields in the continuous sign-up is growing, especially with new focuses on Highly Erodible Land included in conservation compliance, pollinator habitat, and water quality. The lack of a general sign-up drives more trainees to the continuous signup. For those farmers considering a one-year extension of their general contract with ten-year-old payment rates, many trainees are choosing new partial field continuous enrollments instead of renewal. These changes, along with widely vacillating crop prices, may make it harder for FSA to predict numbers of contracts.

Options:

- Share information from Headquarters with interested NRCS staff about how the Hybrid Averaging Approach calculates national average workloads and costs for CRP technical assistance, to increase understanding and comfort with CRP workload analysis.
- Clarify to staff how follow-up costs for contracts are now included in the national averages, and how the funds flow to states to cover that work.
- Consider more careful accounting for time and expenses for the various contract follow-up and evaluation activities within the Hybrid Averaging method.
- Request that FSA share information with NRCS about how they develop their contract projections for each year.
- Propose to FSA that compensation be paid to NRCS for applications that require significant staff work but don't result in a contract because the applicant does not follow through. Alternatively, include this workload in the Hybrid Averaging approach.
- FSA and NRCS should consider jointly analyzing how demand for CRP is likely to shift in the next few years.

3. Allocation of CRP Funds to State NRCS Offices and Field Offices

All respondents felt that the allocations made to states in recent years have been better than in the past, and they saw no complaints or great inequities. It was reported that headquarters is open to questions and discussion with states, and that states generally felt they could live within their allowance. This comes despite the fact that no one was clear on precisely how headquarters came up with the state allocations and adjustments.

In fact, state allocations for work on existing contracts are based on workload estimates that the states provide for the next fiscal year, and new sign up workloads are projected by FSA. In the future, the plan is to incorporate State Resource Assessment data into the allocation process.

The redistribution that happens in the fourth quarter of every fiscal year is a safety valve, allowing any funds that states feel are likely to remain unspent to be shuffled to other states that need to secure more funds. This system provides a backup to correct any allocation problems or unforeseen circumstances. The amount of redistribution varies from year to year, due in part to state errors in their estimates for existing contracts or other program changes. The downside is that these last minute adjustments, if very large, could be over-relied upon and cause anxiety, delays or disruptions in technical assistance. If the redistributions are relatively small, there would be less of a concern, according to one respondent.

Use of the Hybrid Averaging approach has resulted in some shifts of funding between states, compared to the years using the ABC method. Several states particularly in the Midwest with high CRP workloads reported that they used to be highly funded under ABC, and they often did not need to use all their funding for specific CRP staff work. This was due to efficiencies they developed over the years, including having staff temporarily reassigned to address CRP workloads, partners that specialize in CRP, standardized yet modifiable narratives for common practices, prepared seed lists matched to different site conditions, technology such as LIDAR that reduces onsite staff time, and administrative systems that reduce time spent per contract. These states had been using their "extra" CRP money to fill holes in other program budgets, which amounted to an incentive for efficiency with CRP work. Under the current Hybrid Averaging approach, these states are called on to give their unspent money back later in the year for redistribution to other states with remaining CRP financial needs. This represents a significant financial hit for their overall budgets compared to earlier years.

On the other hand, other states felt that under ABC they had to cut some corners to get the job done. Under the current system they are more fully funded for their CRP workloads. Despite the funding shifts with the averaging system, no one suggested a change to the current system, other than recognition that some big CRP states are now facing budget problems in their other programs due to the change.

One wonders whether the Hybrid Approach, which more accurately reflects CRP costs and eliminates "excess" allocations that some states used for other programs, will remove what amounted to an incentive to be more efficient in delivering CRP technical assistance, resulting in negative repercussions on overall agency efficiency. Overall, respondents seemed to take pride in the creative ways their states have made CRP delivery as effective and efficient as possible, and there was no mention of stepping back from that attitude.

The fairly recent change to CRP funding arriving at the beginning of the fiscal year, implemented in the second quarter of fiscal year 2014 due to a decision by the Office of the Chief Financial Officer for USDA, now brings an advantage to state budget officers. In the past when CRP was paying on a reimbursable basis, there was a tendency to focus on staff hours only, and draw on other program funds to pay for necessary CRP equipment, office and travel/fuel expenses. With the new system states can more easily include necessary non-staff CRP expenses. Note that total costs may go up a little because of this. Yet several respondents felt this was a great change.

While calculating the average national workload cost works well for projecting total national funding needed, it necessarily becomes less exact when allocating funding for each state. A number of points were made about how regional differences ought to be taken into account. Given the tremendous variations in average farm size, state size, landscapes, resource needs, and workload efficiencies, several wondered if regional differences could be better reflected and factored into state allocations.

These regional differences could possibly be addressed in part by computing regional average costs, to be considered in making state allocations. The question is whether there is any systematic way to factor in all these differences, and whether resulting allocations would be significantly better than the current system. Several of these unique factors were identified:

- Conservation practices that require engineering, such as grass waterways, wetland restoration, and filter strips, require much more NRCS oversight and staff time. Do some states use substantially more engineered practices than others, and thus need more staff hours covered?
- Some conservation practices are fairly uniform, and conservation plans can take advantage of "copy and paste" text rather than time-intensive customized plans, thus resulting in efficient technical assistance in high-use states at less cost.
- States that use LIDAR reduce the amount of time needed for costly field surveys. Are these efficiencies recognized as requiring less funding?
- Differences in landscapes, travel, costs and employees vary at the regional level.

State Allocation to Field Offices

Most states use their state CRP allocations to reallocate funds to their field offices to carry out CRP technical assistance. A similar process to the national one of looking at past workloads and factoring in costs is used to make the next year's allocations. Some states handle all of the funding from the state level, reimbursing local offices as needed. While states differ on how they administer their funds, there were no problems or concerns identified.

Options:

- Consider whether the level of reallocations between states done in the fourth quarter of each year are at an acceptable level, or whether they are so large as to reflect flaws in the state allocation process.
- If the annual state reallocations are covering up ineffective original state allocations, then consider moving to a refined regionalized system for state allocations, to reflect variations in state situations that result in greater than average costs or lower than average costs.
- Consider how state efficiencies can be spread to help other states be more efficient in CRP technical assistance delivery.
- Keep an eye on whether the switch from reimbursable payments to beginning year payments inadvertently triggers large increases from states in non-staff expenses; and if so, whether those expenses are justifiable CRP costs.

4. Reallocations of CRP Funds to Partners

States vary widely in using partner agreements. Among NRCS state offices, there seems to be general satisfaction with the current process. As a whole, satisfaction was reported with how NRCS leverages other local and state agencies, non-profits and professional Technical Service Providers to accomplish its CRP workload.

Partner organizations may include local conservation districts, which provide technical assistance at the local offices, technical service providers who provide professional private technical assistance, or partners such as wildlife nonprofit organizations and state government agencies like departments of natural resources, which provide outreach and promotion, as well as technical assistance. Partners may help with program work and even out the workflow, or provide enhanced services beyond what NRCS staff can manage.

Some states use no partners at all. Other states renegotiate annual agreements with partners, or form agreements with state associations of conservation districts, which line up qualified personnel. Other states call upon partners and TSPs when there is a work crunch or extra funds near the end of the fiscal year. States try to forecast their needs and line up partners and funding agreements in advance. Upcoming clumps of status reviews, renewals or a general sign-up can be triggers for lining up partner assistance. In at least one state, 30-40 percent of CRP technical assistance is provided by partners rather than NRCS staff.

There is also wide variety in reimbursement payments to partners. Some partners are prepared to simply volunteer using their own financial resources, such as well-funded local conservation districts. Others can match the CRP funding with an equal amount of their own funding in a contribution agreement. TSPs are fully paid at standard preset rates.

Because partners bring their own resources to the table, and may also have lower overhead costs, partners can often do work cheaper than NRCS can. Several states mentioned that they use their CRP funds first to fund their own staff, and turn to partners second to make use of available funds. Many partners know exactly how to step in to assist NRCS staff when called upon.

Options:

- Although no problems were identified, the sheer variety of state approaches to working with and funding partners and TSPs suggests that states may benefit from sharing experiences with each other, if they have not already done this.
- Encourage agreements with partners when it increases financial and workload efficiency.

5. State Resource Assessment Process

The State Resource Assessment (SRA) process, in which states provide annual reports to headquarters to be compiled to aid in budget development, is only a few years old, and reactions from respondents range from regarding it as a continuously improving process of great importance to their state, to indifference regarding its usefulness. The overall intent is to build on identified resource priorities to come up with national NRCS budgets.

One problem is being better addressed each year, which is to give clear guidance to states on what information should be submitted and in what format. Currently states are using a national

on-line system to input their information on resource needs and workloads in a consistent format, which will comprise state 2014 SRAs.

But deeper problems remain, according to respondents. One inherent challenge respondents indicated is that NRCS faces potentially conflicting missions. On the one hand they are called on to prioritize resource concerns so that funds and programs can be targeted to problems and show progress in solving them. At the same time, the historical NRCS mission is to serve land managers' own voluntary conservation choices. And the reality is that Congress funds NRCS largely through specific conservation programs, each with its own priorities, methods and benefits. How is the agency to align these different missions?

Furthermore, compiling a national resource assessment out of state assessments can greatly simplify and blur a whole lot of diversity in landscapes, resource needs, and state approaches.

CRP is especially orphaned in this process, because unlike other programs NRCS administers, FSA controls CRP signups and funds, while NRCS can only make limited projections about its technical assistance work. The first year the SRA did not include CRP at all, although it is included now and regional staff has worked with the states to collect more detailed CRP information.

Trainees indicated that SRAs could be very useful if NRCS can articulate how it will mesh national resource-driven analysis with its complicated program-based funding system. In the end, there is support for the aspiration, but skepticism about headquarters being able to figure it out.

Options:

- Clarify how SRAs should deal with CRP, given its importance in the NRCS conservation toolbox and the amount of staff time it requires, but also the lack of control NRCS has over its delivery.
- Clarify to state staff how prioritizing resource concerns within the State Resource Assessments can help shape NRCS's overall budget. Help staff understand how to balance the missions of customer-driven conservation planning with resource-driven priorities.

6. Other CRP Issues Identified

Beyond the specific CRP workload analysis and funding focus of this project, respondents were invited to highlight other CRP issues for the report. Four very specific concerns were raised by one or more respondents.

First, the biggest challenge respondents reported was predicting the timing of CRP workloads and funding in relation to the fiscal year. Announcements of CRP general sign-ups are often on very short notice and late in the fiscal year, and that makes planning ahead difficult. Local

offices often receive a short period of notification and their workforce must scramble and set other work aside for a time to handle the CRP workload. There are several logical reasons for these challenging timelines. FSA may not get clearance to announce a general signup until later in the fiscal year, and then FSA needs NRCS to complete conservation plans for each application that will be converted into a contract in time for them to obligate the contracts by the end of the fiscal year. If an additional sign up or new initiative is announced or the workload is greater than projected by FSA at the beginning of the fiscal year, NRCS may seek additional apportionments during the year, and additional funding allocations made to states can often be late in the fiscal year. The redistribution of funds between states necessarily occurs in the last quarter of the fiscal year. Finally, states are often advised by headquarters not to work on CRP until the funds arrive, but if the funds come late in the fiscal year it can be almost impossible to obligate those funds by the end of the fiscal year.

While the timing of sign-ups and funding is usually out of NRCS's control, nevertheless there is a recurring plea from state and local offices to try to time sign-ups more carefully and make their planning horizon significantly longer.

A second issue raised is that mailing lists are often difficult to impossible to obtain from FSA, for purposes like sending postcards to expiring contract holders. This may be due to FSA concerns about privacy rules. NRCS may be able to work at the national level to smooth the way for sharing of local mailing lists for managing CRP technical assistance, or agreeing upon FSA outreach strategies to contract holders.

Third, FSA provides no easy way to track applicants in real time, the way ProTracts does for other programs. One state finds mid-contract management is now clumsy and time-consuming, as they have to search for each contract to determine what work needs to be completed. This state created their own spreadsheet, but suggests that FSA should provide on-line, searchable access to NRCS personnel for monitoring CRP contract status. Privacy concerns will have to be managed. This would greatly help NRCS at state, area and local offices to better plan annual workload, as well as plan longer-term workload needs over the life of the CRP contract.

Fourth, TSPs and/or conservation partners in some states have security clearance so they can directly enter information into the Customer Service toolkit. In other states, NRCS staff has to manually enter the plans after TSPs are finished, which can be time consuming and expensive.

Options:

- Work more closely with FSA to plan ahead for sign-ups and other deadlines, and share information down to the local offices with as much lead time as possible.
- Explore how the process of sharing mailing lists of CRP contract holders between FSA and NRCS can be smoothed out, taking into account applicable privacy measures.
- Request to FSA that they provide real-time applicant and contract tracking for use by FSA and NRCS state office and field staff in providing follow-up services.

- Explore how more CRP TSPs and conservation partners could receive security clearance and training to enter their work directly into the customer service toolkit, to save local NRCS staff time.

Summary of Options

All of the bulleted policy options raised above have been grouped into three general areas for NRCS consideration, in suggested order of importance. First are options that involve FSA collaboration; second are options for NRCS headquarters leaders to take on; and third are options for NRCS to include in staff education and training.

NRCS Collaboration with FSA to resolve problems

1. Work more closely with FSA to plan ahead for signups and other deadlines, and share information down to the local offices with as much lead time as possible.
2. Request that FSA share information with NRCS about how they develop their contract projections for each year.
3. FSA and NRCS should consider jointly analyzing how demand for CRP is likely to shift in the next few years.
4. Request to FSA that they provide real-time applicant and contract tracking for use by FSA and NRCS state office and field staff in providing follow-up services.
5. Propose to FSA that compensation be paid to NRCS for applications that require significant staff work but don't result in a contract because the applicant does not follow through. Alternatively, make sure this workload is already included in the Hybrid Averaging approach.
6. Explore how more CRP TSPs could receive security clearance and training to enter their work into the customer service toolkit, to save local NRCS staff time.
7. Explore how the process of sharing mailing lists of CRP contract holders between FSA and NRCS can be smoothed out, taking into account applicable privacy measures.

NRCS Improvements to Workload and Financial Systems

1. Consider more careful accounting of time and expenses for various follow-up and evaluation activities within the Hybrid Averaging method.
2. Consider whether the level of reallocations between states done in the fourth quarter of each year are at an acceptable level, or whether they are so large as to reflect flaws in the state allocation process.
3. Ensure that emerging CDSI systems are developed to collect and share data specifically for the purpose of monitoring and averaging CRP workloads, and that such future systems are transparent and made available to state NRCS offices to use for their own budgeting purposes.
4. If the annual state reallocations are covering up ineffective original state allocations, then consider moving to a refined regionalized system for state allocations, to reflect variations in state situations that result in greater than average costs or lower than average costs.

5. Clarify how SRAs should deal with CRP, given its importance in the NRCS conservation toolbox and the amount of staff time it requires, but also the lack of control NRCS has over its delivery.
6. Keep an eye on if the switch from reimbursable payments to beginning year payments triggers large increases from states in non-staff expenses; and if so, whether those expenses are justifiable CRP costs.
7. Continue allowing states that choose to make use of the latest 2010 ABC data, for their own budgeting purposes, to do so.
8. Do not plan to update ABC data for CRP workload analysis purposes.

NRCS Education and Training of Staff

1. Clarify to staff how follow-up costs for contracts are now included in the national averages, and how the funds flow to states to cover that work.
2. Share information from headquarters with interested NRCS staff about how the Hybrid Averaging Approach works to come up with national average workloads and costs for CRP technical assistance, to increase understanding and comfort with CRP workload analysis.
3. Consider how state efficiencies can be spread to help other states be more efficient in CRP technical assistance delivery.
4. Encourage agreements with partners when it increases financial and workload efficiency.
5. Clarify to state staff how prioritizing resource concerns within the State Resource Assessments can help shape NRCS's overall budget. Help staff understand how to balance the missions of customer-driven conservation planning with resource-driven priorities.
6. Although no problems were identified, the sheer variety of state approaches to working with and funding partners and TSPs suggests that states may benefit from sharing experiences with each other, if they have not already done this.

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