

# NATIONAL CAPACITY REPORT

NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF



DECEMBER 2020

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# **National Capacity Report**

## **Resource Conservation & Development Councils**

Assessing the capacity of local RC&D Councils to assist with outreach and technical support for the delivery of USDA Farm Bill Programs, with emphasis on NRCS EQIP and RD REAP programs and underserved populations.

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National Association of RC&D Councils  
871 South Country Club Road  
Chanute, KS 66720  
[www.narcdc.org](http://www.narcdc.org)

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# Executive Summary

This report is prepared as a deliverable to agreement NR183A750007C004 between the US Department of Agriculture-Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS or NRCS) and the National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils (NARC&DC). This agreement required that a national capacity report be prepared for the NARC&DC and NRCS on the ability of local Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D) Councils to assist with the outreach and technical support to help deliver USDA Farm Bill Programs, with an emphasis of engaging underserved populations in NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Rural Development (RD) Renewal Energy for America Program (REAP).

Organizational capacity is generally seen as an organization's "ability to perform work". In the nonprofit sector an entity's capacity includes the set of processes, management practices and other attributes that assist that entity to carry out its mission. The attributes we considered in evaluating an RC&D's capacity to assist USDA include:

- Leadership** – Communications and vision
- Strategy** – Clear mission and purpose
- Structure/Governance** – Organizational and program development
- Skills and Human Capital** – Ability to perform key functions
- Accountability** – Strong practices, procedures and policies

Information for this report was gathered through available information on the history of RC&D and the working relationships with USDA agencies, a survey of RC&D Councils across the nation, interviews with program leaders from NRCS and RD, and specific exchange of information with RC&D Councils who have shown wonderful success in the attributes assessed.

There are RC&D Councils with great strengths in all of the attributes discussed. They are highly successful and have strong working relationships with NRCS and/or RD. They are providing assistance to fill the staff needs identified by USDA agencies and filling very important gaps in program delivery. We heard high praise of these RC&D Councils in discussions with NRCS and RD program leaders. Likewise, there are some RC&D's with limited capacity and operating entirely with volunteer help, or who have limited capacity in one or more of the capacity attribute areas. We can say that the historical relationships, organizational structure, and nonprofit status of RC&D Councils lend itself to working closely with USDA in a very successful way.

Additionally, there are some recommendations that can be made at an organizational level that would improve the partnerships between USDA and RC&D Councils. These overarching recommendations are included in the report. Some require attention at the national level, others for consideration at a state or council level. Our hope is that, for those interested in partnering to deliver Farm Bill Programs, we can provide some ideas

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to help that strategy be successful. There are a number of self-assessment tools available that may also be helpful at the individual council level but the scope of these tools is outside this report's purpose.

You will also find a series of success stories related to the capacity attributes identified. These are Councils identified by USDA leadership and others familiar with the strengths of those Councils. They definitely demonstrate that the capacity of RC&D Councils can be developed to provide needed assistance to USDA- if it isn't already there.

## *Key Recommendations*

1. At one point in time the NARC&DC had access to USDA through the USDA Advisory Team, which was comprised of representatives from multiple agencies and focused on RC&D program initiatives. While the new governance model may not allow that specific tool, a strategy should be developed nationally to frequently and effectively collaborate with USDA agencies including but not limited to NRCS, RD, and the Forest Service (USFS).
2. As time passes, more USDA NRCS leadership comes into their job with no experience to draw from related to RC&D. NARC&D should carry out a strategy where RC&D is visible and frequently collaborates with NRCS, marketing its value in program delivery.
3. To the extent possible, communications should be simplified through use of liaisons, authorized entity representatives, key contact persons, or other means that makes it easy to reach each other and share communications.
4. Be sure to collaborate and partner with the correct level of USDA agencies, recognizing the changes in program delivery and agency organizations. These changes have shifted responsibilities from local to regional, or to state, or even national centralized systems in some cases due to USDA reorganizations.
5. RC&D Associations and Councils at all levels should carry out a strategy to meet frequently with USDA - NRCS and RD to share information both directions, market the value of RC&D in program delivery, and convey information of the strengths of the RC&D program. This strategy might include joint meeting attendance, participation in training of new employees, participation in program planning and state technical committees, and inviting USDA to RC&D meetings and events.
6. The National Conservation Planning Partnership is an excellent collaborative opportunity and NARC&D should strive to increase its value and level of participation in that partnership.
7. NARC&D should work with USDA agencies to improve awareness of and seek improvements to certain administrative functions including contracting options and procedures, alternatives to the *de minimus* rate for indirect costs, improved understanding of direct cost, and use of technologies to assist with reporting requirements.

8. Continue to expand in the arena of using on-line adult learning techniques for services and educational efforts.
9. NARC&D should consider a marketing strategy that emphasizes strengths of the RC&D program including potential for RC&D cash and in-kind contributions, partnerships, innovative approaches, skilled employees, nimble business model that can respond to USDA needs, a reliable and long-standing partner, capacity to provide outreach and first hand relationships with many underserved communities, community awareness, and sharing our many success stories.
10. There remain some differing opinions on how closely RC&D and USDA agencies can work together. In some states, agency employees are still directed to not partner or participate with RC&D's. The relationship to RC&D as both a partner and as a vendor should be clarified for all to understand. (Meeting attendance, sharing rides to meetings, involvement in strategy development are some of the areas that differ). USDA guidance on participation in outside organizations should be shared with USDA personnel and RC&D Councils.
11. RC&D Councils should strive for a well-balanced program that provides greater depth in resources, staffing and leadership in order to create a more attractive nonprofit for funding and partnering.

	<b>NARC&amp;DC</b>	<b>Local RC&amp;D Councils</b>	<b>USDA Agencies</b>
<b>Communication</b>	Conduct outreach campaign highlighting the benefits of partnering with RC&Ds, including examples of success.	Identify local liaison(s) to serve as point of contact for Agency staff.	Include RC&D's on the delivery of information regarding Agency priorities and opportunities.
<b>Collaboration</b>	Actively participate in the National Conservation Planning Partnership and share opportunities with RC&D councils.	Regularly meet with Agency leadership at the state or regional level to discuss local priorities and needs.	Ensure agency staff are familiar with the RC&D program authorization and recognize RC&D as a valued partner.
<b>Contracting</b>	Advocate for USDA funding opportunities and emphasize the need to cover true costs.	Ensure sound policies and adequate staff capacity to deliver programming and meet reporting requirements.	Allow greater flexibility with cooperative and contribution agreements, including recovery of full "indirect" expenses.

*Overview of recommendations to enhance collaboration and strengthen working relationships between RC&Ds and USDA agencies.*

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# Introduction

## *What is organizational capacity?*

Organizational capacity is generally seen as an organization's "ability to perform work". In the nonprofit sector, an entity's capacity includes the set of processes, management practices and other attributes that assist that entity to carry out its mission. Some of the key attributes commonly considered in evaluating an organization's capacity include:

- **Leadership** – Communications and vision
- **Strategy** – Clear mission and purpose
- **Structure/Governance** – Organizational and program development
- **Skills and Human Capital** – Ability to perform key functions
- **Accountability** – Strong practices, procedures and policies

In developing this report, we asked USDA program leaders to identify the organizational strengths they sought when partnering with nonprofits, including RC&D Councils. Their responses included:

- **Human Capital** - organizations with, or readily secured, capable staff that can work closely with field staff to provide technical assistance, administrative support (including grant writing and management), and outreach and communications to target audiences.
- **Community Connections** - organizations that are knowledgeable of their communities, are trusted locally, and can facilitate connections with community leaders and local contacts.
- **Relevant Experience** - organizations with established education / outreach programs, experience in conducting demonstration projects and energy audits, and other technical skills.
- **Return on Investment** - organizations offering services at a cost below government staffing rates, and the ability to leverage match and in-kind contributions benefiting USDA programs.

It is with these measurements of organizational capacity and USDA desires that this report assesses the capacity of local RC&D Councils to assist with outreach and technical support, helping deliver USDA Farm Bill Programs, with emphasis on NRCS EQIP and RD REAP programs and underserved populations.



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## *What is a Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D) Council?*

A USDA-RC&D Program was established in the Agriculture Act of 1962, with responsibility for the administration of the program placed within the Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Successive Farm Bills provided for the further development of the program, including deepening the partnership between RC&D Councils and the NRCS. However, in 2011 this USDA program funding was rescinded, and RC&D Councils were forced to adapt their business models in order to continue their important services to local communities.

RC&D Councils are 501(C) 3 non-for-profit corporations. They are not governmental entities, so the typical policies and constraints of local, state, and federal government programs do not limit the types of issues they address, nor the means they use. Within their respective areas (typically covering 5-15 counties), RC&D Councils have a high degree of independence to carry out activities that will achieve their most important goals. RC&D Council volunteers are leaders and community stakeholders involved in multiple roles in local government, school boards, businesses, churches, and other civic activities. At RC&D Council meetings, they draw from their professional expertise and community connections to determine the needs of their RC&D Council area, address those needs, and make their communities better places to live, work, and play. Nationwide, over 25,000 volunteers serve on local RC&D Councils.

### *The Evolution of a Partnership: USDA and RC&D*

Once a program within USDA-NRCS, RC&D was a part of the federal government and benefited not only with appropriations and administrative support, but also from the oversight and leadership within the agency and USDA. Partnerships of local RC&D Councils were helpful to USDA success. There were also USDA Advisory Teams with program interest from many USDA agencies that benefited from the partnership. Those relationships changed with the loss of appropriations in 2011, and many in agency leadership roles now have no experience with the RC&D program of old, and are not acquainted with its modern business model.



Despite the current lack of appropriations, the RC&D program is still recognized as a partner to USDA and there remains a strong linkage that can serve both USDA and RC&D's well into the future. Many of the RC&D Board (Council) members are also county commissioners or SWCD Supervisors. RC&D is an active member of the National Conservation Planning Partnership. The mission statements and priority issues addressed by many RC&D Councils are natural resource protection related. And RC&D's have strong



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partnerships at multi-county levels that can benefit USDA and other conservation partners. Today, there are approximately 180 active RC&D Councils in 47 States, most of which are interested in partnering with USDA agencies on Farm Bill Delivery.

### *What is a typical RC&D Council/Office in 2020?*

While there is no “typical” RC&D office, if there was it would look something like this: This 501(c)(3) organization has a general operating budget of about \$40,000 plus funds dedicated to specific projects. There are three fulltime employees and 2 part-time employees. Some of the “employee” roles may be performed by contractors rather than “employees”. Many of them will have grants or agreements with USDA, probably NRCS, USFS, or RD. They will have priority projects in both natural resource protection (water quality, soil health, etc.) as well as rural economic development. They meet somewhat frequently with USDA-NRCS and less frequently with other agencies of USDA. They also have strong relations with various State and local entities. They have strong community connections, grant management capacity, relationships with numerous agencies, project development skills and grant writing capacity.

But... they may have no employees and operate solely through the efforts of Board and other volunteers. Or, they may have more than ten employees with multi-million-dollar budgets. Their projects may be funded entirely by government grants, they may have significant corporate or foundation funding, or a combination. There is no typical RC&D, but there are RC&D's who are very interested in making a difference in their communities and working with USDA to make it happen.

## **Background and preparation of this report**

This report is prepared as a deliverable to agreement NR183A750007C004 between the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils (NARC&DC). This agreement required that a national capacity report be prepared for the NARC&DC and NRCS on the ability of local RC&D Councils to assist with the outreach and technical support to help deliver USDA Farm Bill Programs with emphasis on the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and Rural Development (RD) Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) to underserved populations.

Through a competitive bidding process NARC&DC accepted the proposal from Hiawatha Valley RC&D in Minnesota to perform this work. The primary author is John Beckwith, Executive Director of Hiawatha Valley RC&D. John has extensive experience both with USDA-NRCS and also RC&D initiatives at many levels of those organizations. Hiawatha Valley also contracted the services of a retired USDA-RD employee to assist with the assessment related to RD programs and partnerships.

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This assessment is a compilation of information gathered from individuals and agencies in the following manners:

- An on-line survey was prepared and all RC&D Councils were requested to participate in that effort. Forty-eight councils responded.
- Interviews were conducted with seven USDA-NRCS and seven USDA-RD employees knowledgeable of program needs and opportunities to partner in program delivery.
- The USDA-NRCS project liaison was provided the draft report for comment and to share with National leadership as appropriate. Positive comments received.
- Two other work products of this agreement, mini-grants to RC&D Councils for the purpose of improving state level National Conservation Planning Partnership, and grants provided to RC&D Councils for the purpose of outreach and training on USDA Farm Bill, were assessed to determine what was successful in these efforts and to determine transferability of those projects to other areas of the country.

The intended use of this report is to share with USDA and RC&D leadership the capacity of RC&D Councils to assist with program delivery, and also to share with leadership and RC&D Councils success stories and provide ideas for capacity building in order to better partner with USDA in areas of common interest.

## *Survey of RC&D Councils*

An on-line survey was developed to gain a baseline understanding of RC&D capacity and to assess current engagement with USDA programs, including opportunities to add narrative comments in several areas. All councils were invited to provide information, and a total of 48 councils responded (represents ~27% of active councils). The survey responses can be found in their entirety in Appendix One, with key recommendations listed here.

**The three highest ranked actions that RC&D could take to improve partnerships with USDA agencies are:**

- **Meet together more frequently**
- **Share more RC&D information with key contacts from agencies**
- **Invite USDA participation in RC&D meetings and events**

Other key actions noted include:

- Identify a key point of contact that can serve as a liaison between local RC&Ds and USDA agencies
- Clear process governing allocation of competitive funding
- With new employees, establish a partnership approach
- Improve on the de minimus rate for overhead on USDA grants and agreements

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- Improve RC&D brand related to fundraising
  - Improve national advocacy and brand recognition
  - Increase contract work delivering USDA programs

The three highest ranked actions that USDA could take to improve partnerships with RC&D Councils are:

- **Meet together more frequently**
- **Share more program and priority information with RC&D Councils**
- **Invite RC&D participation in USDA meetings and events**

Other key actions noted include:

- Identify key contacts with RC&D in their state
- Provide shared travel resources with agency and RC&D personnel when traveling to same meeting if joint participation is desirable.
- Use cooperative agreements like Forest Service and BLM, not contribution agreements. NRCS should be willing to pay true cost of doing business.
- Be more flexible in some of their employee/program policies.
- Need to provide a favored exception on overhead to RC&Ds, similar to what FHWA does with metropolitan planning organizations who can bill for their overhead. A standard overhead rate allowed for all RC&Ds nationally (30% minimum) would justify partnership with USDA programs.
- Develop MOU and MOA for a plan of work

## *Agency Interviews*

The raw results from Agency interviews are available in Appendix Two (NRCS) and Appendix Three (RD). Information gleaned during the Agency interviews was combined with RC&D responses to gain additional understanding into RC&D capacity and opportunities to assist with outreach and technical support for the delivery of USDA Farm Bill Programs.

## *What we learned*

Key recommendations are included in the Executive Summary and the remainder of this report examines RC&D capacity in the areas of Leadership, Strategy, Structure / Governance, Skills and Human Capital, and Accountability.

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# Leadership

## *Communications and vision*

Predictably, a desire for improved communications was voiced by respondents. Knowing who each entity has as a spokesperson seems to be a good start. Is there an assistant state conservationist in that role? Is there a liaison between agencies and RC&D's such as provided by an RC&D State Association? Or, do communications require discussion with each of the RC&D's individually?

RC&D respondents clearly voice interest in improving communications, and see that this is an element that will be best served if all parties make a concerted effort to improve. Let's identify key spokespersons, invite each other to meetings and training, and generally become better acquainted again. Let's communicate more often, and with purpose. Let's learn how to relate to each other in a respectful manner, knowing that the RC&D role can now be both that of a vendor and of a conservation partner.

In the agency interviews the value RC&D's can bring to communications and outreach were clearly conveyed. However, it was also pointed out that it is very important that agency staff are involved in such events unless the RC&D is up-to-date and knowledgeable of the agency and its programs. Problems have arisen when wrong information is presented to outside groups or persons. The value of working with a liaison of RC&D's at the state level makes communications easier than coordinating with several individuals and entities. This is sometimes accomplished through a state RC&D association, and sometimes with a "lead council". And lastly, timely grant reporting is important as NRCS often works with audits and a separate administrative area and is accountable for timely reporting of information.

Rural Development state energy coordinators reported that they had had limited contact with RC&D's since 2011. They did have positive memories of partnering and working relationships in the past and felt that working together on outreach and information activities would be helpful.

## ***SUCCESS STORY: Glacierland RC&D Provides Leadership to Implement Farm Bill Programs***

Glacierland RC&D in Wisconsin demonstrates several of the ways that RC&D's assist in delivery of Farm Bill programs to achieve a common vision. <https://www.glacierlandrcd.org/>

### **Conservation Collaborative**

In partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Glacierland is providing technical assistance to agricultural producers in eastern Wisconsin. Glacierland's Soil Conservationists are located at the NRCS service centers in Appleton, Chilton, Green Bay and Fond du Lac, and serve

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the surrounding counties. A Conservation Specialist and a GIS Specialist are located in Appleton and serve the northeast and southeast regions by providing additional support to NRCS staff and clients. These employees work collaboratively with NRCS to enroll private landowners in Farm Bill programs which support implementation of conservation practices resulting in improved soil health, water quality and wildlife habitat.

### **Grazing Technical Assistance**

Glacierland employs two grazing specialists that have collectively written more than 1,000 grazing plans covering more than 4,000 acres, in addition to providing technical assistance on another 6,000 acres of farmland. Both are NRCS Certified Technical Service Providers in Wisconsin. Grazing specialists work with farmers in eastern Wisconsin to convert agricultural row crop land into functional and restorative pasture systems, as well as working with existing graziers to enhance their pasture management. During on-farm consultations they discuss overall farm goals, budgets, time frames, and available human and farm resources so that they can provide workable, economical solutions tailored to specific farm needs. Consultations and plans are written to ensure that producers can properly implement managed grazing and become financially viable, conservation-minded grazing farmers. Funding for this work is provided by the National Association of Conservation Districts, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, and private landowners.

### **Grazing Education & Outreach**

Glacierland works collaboratively with farmers, agency staff, researchers, educational institutions, conservation groups, and consumers to enhance and increase restorative agriculture. Educational activities include: Farmer-led round table discussions to determine local educational needs and encourage networking and mentoring between local graziers; workshops to bring the latest grazing technologies and research data to local farmers and agency staff through both regional and national experts, and on farm pasture walks tailored to various graziers' experience levels and to the general public. Funding for this work is provided by the National Association of Conservation Districts and Grassworks.



*Glacierland RC&D and USDA-NRCS employees work side by side to deliver Farm Bill Programs with a common vision, including outreach events that demonstrate runoff impacts with a rainfall simulator.*

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# Strategy

## *Clear mission and purpose*

Within the RC&D community there remains a pride in the rich history of RC&D's working closely with USDA agencies and particularly USDA-NRCS. It would be overstating the truth to say the relationship was without challenges, but overall RC&D provided resources to assist in delivery of traditional programs and also an opportunity to try new and innovative projects on a regional scale. RC&D's often brought new partners to the table and had employees skilled at community planning techniques.

There remains a strong belief amongst the respondents that RC&D still has a lot to offer USDA through its partnerships, innovative approaches, and employees skilled at project development and project management. The new business model for RC&Ds, as they've become self-reliant, is a nimble model that can expand or shrink to meet the ongoing project needs. This makes RC&D a cost-effective partner to consider. The capacity of RC&Ds has been proven over the years as a reliable partner able to assist in multiple capacities from outreach to technical service to project development and more, and they would love the opportunity to continue to foster that partnership with NRCS and other USDA agencies.

In the agency interviews the RC&D Councils were recognized as having a rich history of addressing conservation goals consistent with the priorities of NRCS. Where RC&D's remain, they are often a valued partner of NRCS in program delivery. All NRCS offices contacted are using a variety of nonprofits very successfully for program delivery. In assessing a nonprofit's likelihood of success NRCS considers many factors, one of which is the depth of staff numbers and expertise and whether they have the skillset that will lead to successful project implementation. Very consistently in our discussions the RC&D strengths in community awareness and providing meaningful education and outreach efforts was noted as an asset.

Rural Development suggested that energy should be considered as part of the strategy where consistent with the mission of the RC&D. Finding the most useful participation area will take some strategizing. There are opportunities and often times the RD energy coordinators will know the needs and have funding opportunities to meet the needs.

## ***SUCCESS STORY: Connecticut RC&D has Clear Strategy to Deliver Energy Programs***

Connecticut RC&D works closely with Rural Development to employ a strategy that increases use of alternative and renewable energy for farms and agribusinesses. <https://ctrcd.org/>

### **Farm Energy Opportunities**

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The Connecticut Farm Energy Program (CFEP) began in May 2009 as a partnership between USDA Rural Development and Connecticut RC&D. CFEP provides technical assistance to agricultural producers and raises awareness about energy conservation and efficiency through the CFEP website (<https://ctfarmenergy.org/>), email updates, publications, workshops and events.

### **Information and Technical Assistance**

CFEP serves as a resource and clearinghouse for information about on-farm energy opportunities in relation to grant opportunities, financial incentives, loans, audits, educational opportunities and events for agriculture producers & agriculture based rural small businesses located in Connecticut. CFEP works closely with federal, state and local partner organizations, and provides grant writing assistance to apply for USDA Rural Development Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) Grants. REAP Grants, which are part of the USDA Farm Bill, provide assistance to those who are eligible with energy efficiency and renewable energy projects.

### **Guidance for Additional Opportunities**

In addition to the REAP grant writing assistance, the CFEP can direct farmers to other appropriate state and federal programs for funding, incentives and financing available for energy projects.

### **A History of Supporting Connecticut Farms**

Since 2010 the CFEP has secured over \$2.41 million dollars in REAP grants and loans. Grant dollars cover 25% of project costs, and when combined with local sources of funds over \$9.67 million in energy efficient and renewable energy projects have been implemented in Connecticut. Additionally, the CFEP assists with securing other incentives, rebates, grants and financing to help CT farms and rural small businesses become energy sustainable.



*With assistance from the Connecticut Farm Energy Program, Lost Acre Vineyards installed a 12.4 kW roof mounted solar array in 2016, offsetting approximately 80% of the Vineyard's electrical usage.*

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# Structure/Governance

## *Organizational and program development*

The relationship of USDA to RC&D Councils was significantly altered in 2011 when appropriations for the RC&D program were rescinded. While much has changed since that time, the RC&D program is still officially authorized and identified as a partner of USDA, and it is important to come to some consistent understanding of the new relationship.

While some RC&D Councils proclaim a strong relationship with NRCS, assisting them with outreach and program delivery, others shared that NRCS leadership in their State does not allow participation or significant communications with RC&D's, and in some cases USDA employees are unfamiliar with RC&Ds and simply don't know how an RC&D can assist with program delivery. Several comments were received that support a clarification of the USDA/RC&D partnership, opportunities to "cross train" and otherwise familiarize with each other, improve understanding of how each operates and their respective capacity to provide assistance, and generally improve collaboration in areas of common interest.

In the agency interviews it was reported that RC&D Councils and staff were valued partners largely due to their local knowledge, understanding targeted groups, and local partnerships. This can be a great asset to USDA. Also, RC&D's have become very efficient in their services and can provide cost-effective assistance. On the other hand, some are seen as too dependent on a single person and concerns exist regarding their capacity to function if that person leaves.

## ***SUCCESS STORY: O'ahu RC&D is Organized for Success***

O'ahu RC&D in Hawai'i utilized succession planning to maintain strong relationships with local partners. <https://oahurcd.org/>

### **Change as an Opportunity**

O'ahu RC&D is an organization that has not only endured many changes over the past decade; it has strengthened with each change. Oahu RC&D is now led by a self-governing Board of Directors rather than a member-based council. While it seems like a minor change, it also came with a new structure that recruits Board Members with experience and expertise that wasn't tapped into with the old structure, providing new ideas and excitement.

### **Board Governance**

O'ahu RC&D is governed by a diverse and dynamic Board of Directors who provide broad geographic representation from both the public and private sectors. Board members volunteer their time,



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working to oversee the policy, direction, and activities of O’ahu RC&D. The board’s oversight and direction were evident during the past year as they worked through the succession of the Executive Director position. At the resignation of a highly successful Executive Director the Board sought a replacement. Finding the ideal candidate in a current employee, who had limited exposure to the Board and to the responsibilities of an Executive Director, they made the hire.

### **Executive Director Transition**

The strength of the Board showed through in their support of the new Executive Director through: requesting a strategic transition plan be developed for the year following selection; setting up monthly check-in meetings with the Executive Director and two Board members allowing both oversight and a wonderful opportunity to get to know each other; supporting transition costs including attendance of the Executive Director to any and all meetings of related organizations which allowed the expansion of his professional network; supported the on-boarding of three new staff members; and supported consulting with the past Executive Director as needed to help with the transition.

### **Plan for Success**

O’ahu RC&D’s capacity related to structure and governance demonstrates how self-strengths result in an organization that others want to partner with and support. They also have retained a strong cooperation with the NRCS Pacific Islands Area office in order to fulfill their mission, and still work closely with the O’ahu Soil and Water Conservation Districts. They have a new MOU with NRCS to define their relationship; they have a cooperative agreement with NRCS to help fund a conservation planner as well as to assist with long range planning with the SWCD’s; and the RC&D participated in the NRCS strategic planning sessions as a respected partner.

*O’ahu RC&D engages with local partners on conservation and issues important to local communities.*



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# Skills and Human Capital

## *Ability to perform key functions*

There are many great examples of RC&D Councils providing leadership in educational efforts and outreach to traditional and nontraditional clients of USDA. Also, RC&D's are substantially involved in grants and agreements that provide the resources needed to be a key provider of technical assistance for programs, and special initiatives.

Overwhelmingly, RC&D Councils would like to engage in projects where they can assist USDA in program delivery. RC&D Councils have the potential to provide both technical and financial assistance to land users at a lower cost than traditional agency employment. Often RC&D Councils have close ties to the community's minority populations and conduct business with veterans, youth, and beginning farmers and ranchers. These are strengths that RC&D Councils can bring to the table to assist USDA deliver programs for natural resource conservation as well as rural development.

In agency interviews RC&D assistance was praised for its flexibility and timeliness in providing staff support. Support includes all aspects of technical assistance from planning to practice checkout, as well as training, outreach, public affairs, and administrative assistance. Often this staff support is experienced or retired professionals who can step in and do the job with little training or oversight. RC&D staffs are also supporting unique program areas such as high tunnels, grazing and prescribed burns. NRCS is using RC&D support in most financial assistance programs. RD emphasized that RC&Ds need to fully understand programs in order to speak knowledgeably and deliver accurate information.

## *SUCCESS STORY: Capital RC&D Provides Skills and Technical Staff for USDA-NRCS Statewide*

Capital RC&D in Pennsylvania utilizes cooperative agreements to employ a team of technical staff working closely with NRCS to deliver Farm Bill programs. <https://www.capitalrcd.org>

### **Technical & Program Staff**

Capital RC&D currently works with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to provide technical staff to NRCS offices. These remotely-stationed Capital RC&D staffers work with NRCS staff to support the implementation of best management practices on farms and natural land. They also provide educational outreach to producers.

### **Optimizing Impacts**

During 2020 Capital RC&D employed 21 different staff members who were stationed in 16 different NRCS offices. These employees provided a wide variety of assistance that ranged from crucial administrative and educational outreach functions, to technical support for wildlife conservation and best management practices that improve soil and water health. In providing the additional support to NRCS offices, employees optimize local, state and regional benefits of Farm Bill programs.

*A team of employees provides technical assistance and administrative support to NRCS offices in Capital RC&D's seven county region.*



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# Accountability

## *Strong practices, procedures and policies*

The reengineering of the RC&D Councils and their programs has brought them to a new level of business acumen and most RC&D's that haven't increased and diversified funding are no longer operating.

For an RC&D to be involved in any program it either has to fully cover expenses with the USDA agreement, or the RC&D needs supplemental resources to cover expenses, plus funds needed to operate a respectable nonprofit organization. USDA has high expectations in regard to project reporting and financial management, as they should. However, agencies also need to understand that RC&D's bring efficiency to operations in other ways, and expenses for administrative and core support functions need to be paid as well. Several RC&D respondents to the survey stated they do not seek agreements with USDA because of the lack of adequate funds for administrative "indirect" costs.

There is a desire by all to work more closely together, and there are a number of examples of highly successful collaborative projects, where the agencies and RC&D have used cooperative agreements and some competitive agreements to obtain services of RC&D Councils. Cooperative agreements provide flexibility in obtaining the services and also leverage matching funds or in-kind services for the programs. Occasionally RC&D Councils struggle with the match requirements.

## ***SUCCESS STORY: Alabama's Mountains, Rivers and Valleys RC&D Prioritizes On-Time Reporting and Accountability***

Alabama's Mountains, Rivers and Valleys RC&D uses established policies, electronic tools, and qualified staff to track project finances and deliverables. <https://amrvrcd.org/>

### **Inventory of Strengths**

Alabama Mountains, Rivers and Valleys RC&D have revenue in excess of \$500,000 and assets nearly \$800,000. They have a diverse revenue portfolio including contributions, grants, program service revenue, and investment income. They have assets in property, buildings and equipment. They have a talented staff managing diverse programs and administration of grants. They are a very successful organization, with clear priorities documented in their strategic plan, project application processes, annual reports, and other business-related functions.

### **Project Management Tools**

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When a project is adopted the RC&D has some standards they follow in management of that project. Key dates are noted on individual Google Calendars and more detailed actions and deadlines are managed with a project management tool called "ClickUp". Project managers coordinate with budget specialists to acquire all of the needed information for reporting. The budget specialist uses QuickBooks for accounting purposes and reporting. These technologies provide needed information, accuracy, and ease of communications between staff members for timely reporting. Standard Project Folders typically include: a flyer and marketing material; meeting agenda, sign in sheets, handouts, and evaluation forms; list of funder and agreements/contracts; and invoices with supporting expenditures. Consistency in folder content and project development make accountability easier with greater accuracy.

### **Accurate and Timely Reporting**

AMRVRCD is an organization that is accountable to the public, its funders, and to its own mission. It is said that "the difference between mediocrity and perfection is attention to detail." Paying attention to detail means financial and program reporting to the level expected of the funder as well as yourself. AMRVRCD was a recipient of funding from NARC&DC this past year and every report and expectation was met in an accurate and timely manner. Practices listed above result in an organization that funders and others want to work with, and more important to AMRV RC&D, they are accountable to the project recipients by providing the best product with the resources available.



*Alabama's Mountains, Rivers & Valleys RC&D engages youth in the reasonable and responsible protection of natural and human resources of the Tennessee Valley.*

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## Summary

There are numerous examples of highly capable RC&D Councils assisting in the delivery of USDA Farm Bill Programs, when considering their capacity through the lenses of:

**Leadership** – Communications and vision

**Strategy** – Clear mission and purpose

**Structure/Governance** – Organizational and program development

**Skills and Human Capital** – Ability to perform key functions

**Accountability** – Strong practices, procedures and policies

This report provides some insight into how the most successful Councils are using various tools and processes to secure that capacity. It also provides some actions and recommendations that would improve on that capacity for all RC&D Councils and for USDA leadership team members.

It is clear that there is interest on both sides to benefit from each other in order to meet common goals. Interest was expressed in improving the partnership, a key factor being to work at improving communications at appropriate levels.

As writers of this report, Hiawatha Valley RC&D thanks the numerous USDA and RC&D contributors. It was a privilege to visit with you on the topic of RC&D Capacity, and encouraging to hear the strong interest in building improved partnerships.

Thank you.

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# Appendix One: Results from On-Line RC&D Survey

## Demographics of survey participant Councils:

There were 48 survey respondents from 24 states.

What is your previous three year average operations budget (exclude programs or otherwise restricted funds)?

- Less than \$10,000 ..... 21%
- \$10,000 to \$25,000 ..... 17%
- \$25,000 to \$50,000 ..... 21%
- Over 50,000 ..... 41%

Number of full time employees

- 47 reporting RC&D's total 125 full time employees
- Average number of full time employees is 2.72
- 10 of 46 respondents had no full time employees
- 4 of 46 respondents had 10 or more full time employees

Number of part time employees

- 48 reporting RC&D's total 95 part time employees
- Average number of part time employees is 2.02
- 9 of 47 respondents had no part time employees
- 1 respondent had 10 or more part time employees

17 of 48 respondents (36%) contract management and administrative services rather than having employee status for those positions.

All but one respondent RC&D are 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations

## Programs, Projects and Priorities

All but one respondent report that they have active programs and projects.

- 35 respondents (73%) report having active projects with a USDA agency.
- Percent of RC&D's reporting projects with specific agencies:
  - NRCS ..... 57%
  - Forest Service ..... 34%
  - Rural Development ..... 28%
  - Farm Service Agency..... 6%
- Other USDA Agencies reported:
  - ....Ag Marketing Services
  - ....Risk Management Agency

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▪....NIFA

What priority level is placed upon programs dealing with water quality or other natural resource concerns?

- Most important priority..... 62%
- A top priority, but not most important..... 31%
- Not very, or not important at all..... 7%

What priority level is placed upon programs dealing with alternative energy, energy conservation, or other energy related issues?

- Most important priority..... 4%
- A top priority, but not most important..... 52%
- Not very important ..... 36%
- not important at all..... 8%

### **RC&D relationships with USDA**

What is your current annual project budget related to USDA programs?

- Less than 10,000..... 30%
- \$10,000 to 100,000 ..... 33%
- Over \$100,000 ..... 37%

46% of the respondents have projects assisting in delivery of NRCS-EQIP program.

About 9% of the respondents have projects assisting in delivery of the RD-REAP program.

All but one respondent who is not currently partnering with USDA agencies are interested in doing so.

How frequently do you meet with state level leadership of USDA-NRCS?

- Less than annually ..... 33%
- 1 or 2 times per year ..... 38%
- Over 2 times per year ..... 29%

How frequently do you meet with state level leadership of USDA-RD?

- Less than annually..... 69%
- 1 or 2 times per year ..... 19%
- Over 2 times per year ..... 12%

42% of the RC&D respondents have a single point of contact for state level USDA leaders to communicate with and reach out to the RC&D community, and they know who that contact is.

The five greatest strengths of RC&D identified that could benefit USDA agencies are:

- Community connections
- Grant management capacity
- Relationships with other agencies
- Project development capacity



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- Grant writing capacity

Other strengths of RC&D's identified include:

- Local volunteer network
- Facilitate and coordinate local work groups
- Extension and education events
- Manage larger programs
- Regional outreach
- Provide contract employees to USDA offices and field work
- Years of trust and good will in partnership
- Highly qualified and competent staff valuing the work for those we serve
- Organization capacity building
- Financial management
- Link rural economics and conservation to create living wage jobs in rural areas.

75 % of the respondents report they have provided outreach to communities considered traditionally under-served, veterans, or impoverished in the past 3 years.

The three highest ranked actions that RC&D could take to improve partnerships with USDA agencies are:

- Meet together more frequently
- Share more RC&D information with key contacts from agencies
- Invite USDA participation in RC&D meetings and events
- Other key actions noted include:
  - ....Identify key RC&D contact with USDA agencies
  - ....Clear process governing allocation of competitive funding
  - ....With new employees, establish a partnership approach
  - ....Improve on the de minimus rate for overhead on USDA grants and agreements
  - ....Improve RC&D brand related to fundraising
  - ....Improve national advocacy and brand recognition
  - ....Increase contract work delivering USDA programs
  - ....Would be nice to have someone in the RC&D community that would be a liaison with NRCS and be able to communicate opportunities with the RC&D community. Most of us have to work other jobs so we are not that free

The three highest ranked actions that USDA could take to improve partnerships with RC&D Councils are:

- Meet together more frequently
- Share more program and priority information with RC&D Councils
- Invite RC&D participation in USDA meetings and events
- Other key actions noted include:
  - ....Identify key contacts with RC&D in their state
  - ....Provide share travel resources with agency and RC&D personnel when traveling to same meeting if joint participation is desirable.
  - ....Use cooperative agreements like Forest Service and BLM, not contribution agreements. NRCS should be willing to pay true cost of doing business.
  - ....Be more flexible in some of their employee/program policies.

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- ....Need to provide a favored exception on overhead to RCDs, similar to what FHWA does with metropolitan planning organizations who can bill for their overhead. A standard overhead rate allowed for all RCDs nationally (30% minimum) would justify partnership with USDA programs.
  - ....Develop MOU and MOA for a plan of work

In your own words, what are the things that you would most like to improve in regard to partnerships with USDA agencies?

- The understanding of USDA Staff on the topic of Direct vs Indirect Costs in Cooperative agreements needs to improve where RC&D is providing technical and financial assistance to supplement agency staff at a much lower cost than what the agency would spend to hire federal employees to do the same work. Many Councils are struggling to remain financially viable and stable in order to be in a position to accept more responsibility in supporting USDA programs.
- More funding with accessible matching fund requirements
- More communication and a reminder that we're still out here and still available to assist. At least one new USDA initiative that looks and sounds a lot like RC&D Program that they kicked to the curb, but now they see the need for what we do, and are trying to recreate it.
  - ....Increased communication and availability from USDA state leaders.
  - ....Availability, scheduling, appearance at workshops
  - ....Improved communication and partner opportunities
  - ....More communication of program needs.
  - ....Contact
  - ....Communication
  - ....Better and more frequent communication.
  - ....Regularly scheduled meetings with key contacts.
  - ....I would like to improve communication with USDA agencies to see where we could collaborate on our shared goals.
  - ....More frequent communication about USDA funding opportunities or project priorities so we could work more closely with over-arching goals
  - ....Collaboration and communication
  - ....Communication, collaborations, partnerships
  - ....Have better communication on projects available and the training to be in compliance with grant guidelines to apply for funds and required grant reporting.
- Cooperative Opportunities
  - ....Program collaboration and partnership for funding
- Continued opportunity to partner and consistency in communication despite leadership changes. We develop good working relationships with NRCS leadership, then they change and it feels like we start over again.
- The RC&D brand overall has been diminished since the loss of funding in 2011, with many entities thinking that we no longer exist nationwide. Locally, we are still co-located in a USDA building, which is a great benefit, and we are part of the Local Working Group, which meets regularly. Based on recognizing the value of such partnerships, I would like to see those and similar partnerships strengthened.
- Partnership communication toward an increase in understanding of the other agency.

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- Partnership on focused programs such as water quality and community development.
  - Educational outreach of new conservation technologies and demonstrations. Such as Organic Aquifer Enhancement. Improved soil health and resiliency.
  - More urban Ag programs. Backyard conservation, youth education programs. Working with public education to teach conservation and skilled trades.
  - It would be nice to have a point of contact at the NRCS State Office.
  - Sometimes it is hard to have open discussions when RC&Ds have a vendor status and considered as outside NGOs.
  - Be as open and transparent with the agency as to what we could deliver for the agency. Stay in contact with each other concerning what we have to offer and how we can partner to best improve the lives of those in the communities.
  - Years ago, USDA paid for a RC&D administrator that worked with RC&D councils, NRCS and RD. Ever since we lost that, we have struggled to fulfill our objective and mission.
  - The local USDA offices do not participate in or attend any of the local RC&D meetings. When the USDA funding was cancelled in 2011 it seems as if the local NRCS office was directed to eliminate time spent with the local RC&D. Since then, when USDA personnel changes occur it appears that new staff do not know about or understand how RC&Ds might assist with programs or outreach. I do not believe USDA staff receive any information regarding our RC&D meetings and programs. I am not familiar with how other RC&Ds are providing assistance or partnerships within other regions, and do not know if the local USDA office do either.
  - I would like it clarified that employees can work with RC&D without fearing reprisal, and even that they be encouraged to participate with us to see how we can benefit them.
  - USDA agencies could better use the RCD services and the first step in doing so would be to more clearly identify capacity and ability to achieve deliverables.
  - Some agencies have stepped back from the plate, while others have forged forward with us assisting with projects. We have to keep that close connection to "work together to make things happen."
  - We would like to learn about opportunities to partner with USDA agencies other than NRCS.
  - We would benefit by expanding beyond our connections with NRCS.
  - We have a great relationship with our state conservationist. That said, NRCS equip grants as well as many other grants that could foster innovation are ham-strung by rules and policies that make implementation difficult and are designed to maximize use of funds toward NRCS staff time. As a partner to NRCS, innovation. We tend to avoid these grants as they are sometimes too complex to implement for the funds received.
  - work more closely together to assist the USDA with community outreach. Have USDA agencies propose projects to RC&Ds to help achieve the outreach instead of RC&D proposing on its own.
  - Change leadership (sad, but true).
  - Clearer responsibility of the partnerships
  - Working together to deliver jobs and projects in rural communities

Do you have any other comments related to RC&D capacity to assist USDA deliver Farm Bill Programs (esp. NRCS-EQIP, RD-REAP)?

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- Stable RC&D Councils have the potential to provide both technical and financial assistance to landusers at a lower cost than traditional agency employees and could do more outreach to the public if RC&D and USDA could enter into a stable support mechanism.
  - RD-REAP we could do more, however their reimbursement and reporting are very onerous.. We had one agreement, reimbursement requests and time to get the reimbursement cost more than what we were able recoup from the grant. We would be in a position to assist farmers write Value Added grants, however, the farmers who are looking at those grant can't afford to pay us, and there doesn't seem to be a mechanism through RD or other to be reimbursed for that service. We've had to start charging for what we used to provide for free, since USDA quit funding RC&D, to keep the doors open. If USDA willing to pay for the service, we can't help them (i.e. I'm not going to enter into any agreement that is going to cost the RC&D money or require work done out of our precious GA funds. Breaking even is o.k. But with the potential agreements I've seen recently from NRCS that's not possible.
  - We'd be happy to assist if it makes sense for our Council's priority, staffing and region
  - We would need to have fiscal support to deliver, allowing us to have the capacity for such outreach.
  - Our two counties are geographically isolated. The RC&D has a presence and recognition to be able to network with local organizations to deliver education and outreach by partnering with USDA in a cost efficient partnership.
  - RC&D's still rely on grants to cover their staff time.
  - Many programs are delivered as "silo" efforts. The RC&Ds can do a good job to do an integrated approach with multiple organizations for a single project.
  - We have a long history of working in agriculture, conservation, and economic development in our region and have developed and maintained the partnerships that allow us to sustain the work that we do in these areas.
  - The RC&D has the tools needed to help the USDA deliver these programs in an efficient and timely manner.
  - We have participated in several NRCS programs in the past, REAP, EQUIP and others
  - Inspections for ACEP/WRP programs
  - Our capacity has been proven over the years as a reliable partner able to assist in multiple capacities from outreach to technical service to project development and more and we would love the opportunity to continue to foster that partnership with NRCS.
  - RC&D could help with workshops, field days, etc. to promote the Farm Bill Programs.
  - Most councils are very limited on local contributions and would need help on expenses.
  - RCDs are nimble and can meet USDA needs in ways that they are possibly unaware of. Further discussions are warranted.
  - We would like to learn more about the possibility of assisting USDA with the REAP program.
  - We have had strong support from NRCS and have been able to support EQUIP delivery. This survey has made me curious about the RD-REAP program.
  - It a new day a anew year and it is still the same old farm bill. Same old programs. We need to step up and look at the urban as well as the rural area.
  - Avoiding Equip at this time, but great success with RD and REAP... with exception of overhead rate. This is a major issue as we are losing money with every grant received and cannot sustain long term without fundraising. Add to that, our current council

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- member make up cannot fundraise as they work for conservation districts, government, and other non profits. Need a new model to survive.
- we have a very strong relationship with NRCS and assist them with many outreach programs and we are ready when they are to deliver Farm Bill programs using our extensive community partners in our work area, the entire state, and the Appalachian region of NC and VA. We always include NRCS in our programs for farmers and landowners.
  - The State Con and her Chief Deputy have actively denigrated RC&D participation in our area. We used to be able to work hand in hand. RC&D programs provide grass roots contacts, connections and impacts where it counts most...in our rural areas near home!
  - Communication and training
  - We used to do Community Development. Our local Agency stopped it. Other States still do it. We need this restored.

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# Appendix Two: Program Leadership Interviews, NRCS

1. *Are there nonprofits you typically work with in program delivery? Which? How so? What are their strengths that benefit you most?*
  - a. Yes, we have agreements for technical assistance including: planning assistance and practice checkout. Currently not having others use computers. RC&D's have hired a number of retired employees of ours with a great deal of experience.
  - b. They are trained to conduct meetings and to reach the important community gatekeepers. They are successful in reaching communities of need.
  - c. Yes, we work with nonprofits. Benefits are match dollars and in-kind contributions. It helps get conservation on the ground. Their staff and boards already know the local producers and are talented in their area of expertise.
  - d. Yes, there are probably 45-50 RC&D contractors/employees of RC&D working to support our programs. This assistance includes program assistants, engineering, Desktop/Protracts assistance and public affairs. Their ability to bring on needed staff to a particular area is very helpful. They are flexible in their policies and work very well with us on meeting program demands. They also bring on experienced staff at an affordable cost to us.
  - e. We regularly partner with a multitude of nonprofit organizations for the purpose of outreach and conservation technical assistance delivery. Many environmental nonprofit organizations share similar conservation goals as NRCS.
  - f. We do work with nonprofits but the RC&D's in our state have faded away. One remaining has very focused program area.
  - g. We have been very successful in working with nonprofits in specific program areas such as monarch butterfly, waterfowl and other wildlife species habitat, prescribed burns. This has been very good for us. Also we work with nonprofits in outreach to traditionally underserved populations.
2. *What contracting/agreement tools do you use when obtaining these services?*
  - a. Cooperative agreements (6 responses)
  - b. Competitive agreements (3 responses)
3. *Are there disadvantages to nonprofit collaboration that affect your level of participation with them?*
  - a. Entities that are more efficient, and get things done are preferred for future contracts.
  - b. None if partner is well informed.

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- c. They do have a high frequency of roll-over or changes in personnel in our state.
  - d. It is important they know we have deadlines for reporting and need to be prompt in meeting the agreement needs.
  - e. It would be helpful to have a state RC&D association to work with. One of the councils has taken a lead role and others have extended areas of project consideration so entire state is covered.
  - f. We desire to develop new partnerships and expand existing collaborations with nonprofit organizations via contribution agreements. However, some nonprofit organizations have a challenge in providing a minimum contribution of 25% to 50% as required by NRCS policy for contribution agreements. NRCS contribution agreements do not require formal competition for awarding, thus this agreement instrument offers the greatest ability for NRCS to readily collaborate with partners to implement conservation activities and projects of mutual benefit.
  - g. In the area of outreach, using outside entities can be a problem if they are not well versed on our agency priorities and policies.
  - h. Depth of expertise, not a lot of staff.
  - i. Lack of knowledge of NRCS mission and program details.
4. *In the EQIP program specifically, what skillset/knowledge might make collaboration with a nonprofit beneficial to you and NRCS?*
- a. The partner understanding the target groups that need the information.
  - b. Outreach and conservation technical assistance (specifically assistance with survey, design, and conservation practice installation oversight)
5. *Are you familiar with the Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Program?*
- a. Yes (6 responses)
  - b. Vaguely
6. *Have you worked with RC&D in last 3 years? How so?*
- a. Yes outreach agreements
  - b. Probably, but I'm new in position.
  - c. Many times
  - d. Yes. Currently have active cooperative agreements with all 4 active RC&D Councils. RC&D's have also received subawards from other sources where NRCS is the original funding source. We have an active MOA with the State Association of RC&D.
  - e. No
7. *Describe any past experiences with RC&D? (type of collaboration, positives and negatives)*
- a. All positives (3 responses)
  - b. Provided excellent assistance in high tunnels, grazing and traditional field work.

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- c. In some cases the RC&D's lack depth in staff numbers or other resources. It is beneficial to work with nonprofits with balanced portfolio and adequate staffing, even if very talented.
  - d. When we can work with one RC&D as the statewide spokesperson there is a great deal of consistency in operations which is appreciated.
  - e. Working more in rural development areas in our state.
8. *Do you currently have any grants or agreements with any RC&D Council or Association?*
- a. Yes (3 responses)
9. *What programs do you feel collaboration with a nonprofit might be most beneficial?*
- a. Financial Assistance Programs, EQIP , CSP, ACEP WRE, RCPP, CIG
  - b. Nearly all Farm Bill Programs have an opportunity for potential collaboration with nonprofit organizations.
10. *Many RC&D's have close relationships with minority and underserved customers. Would this asset be of help to you in delivery of programs (EQIP)?*
- a. We have done this in the past.
  - b. Program rules change frequently so it is best if a knowledgeable agency person is involved.
  - c. Yes they already do this.
  - d. This is important to know in any proposal as it makes an entity more competitive.
  - e. Effective working relations with minorities, veterans, youth and women are important to us.
  - f. Yes
  - g. Hispanic outreach coordination is done with RC&D agreement very successfully.
  - h. This is important
11. *Education and outreach efforts are common activities of RC&D's. Would this skillset be helpful to NRCS? EQIP program?*
- a. We have done some outreach in past.
  - b. We have also included RC&D's in some appraisals related to this topic.
  - c. We already do this.
  - d. We do a lot of this and benefit from the skill set of nonprofit partners.
  - e. Yes. Our high tunnel and grazing projects are successful examples.
  - f. Yes for both.
12. *Any additional thoughts on RC&D capacity to assist NRCS in program delivery?*
- a. It is important that those with agreements have a good grasp of the program.
  - b. Outstanding group to engage on this mission of outreach.
  - c. I enjoy the partnerships and agreements and want to use them to get things done.



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- d. Their only limitation is their own mission and purpose statements which are consistent with our work in nearly all cases.
  - e. RC&D's in our State have a demonstrated history and proven track record of providing excellent assistance and services to help NRCS deliver conservation technical assistance and outreach to agricultural producers and landowners.

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# Appendix Three: Program Leadership Interviews, Rural Development

1. *Are there nonprofits you typically work with in program delivery? Which? How so? What are their strengths that benefit you most?*
  - a. yes Connecticut and Rhode Island are very active with RC&Ds, Both have received REDA grants and they open communication on at least a weekly basis on REAP and energy programs.
  - b. Not much with non profits but would like to. Georgia many times the EQUIP money runs out and there are some real chances to help that are lost.
  - c. Private contractors of which some are non profits packaging applications funded by applicants. West Virginia and Minnesota
  - d. Universities and colleges on projects Texas 95% profession contractors on REAP applications
  - e. no Ohio
  
2. *What contracting/agreement tools do you use when obtaining these services?*
  - a. Some MOUs Memo of Understanding with Universities and Colleges
  - b. Non that he was aware of Georgia
  
3. *Are there disadvantages to nonprofit collaboration that affect your level of participation with them?*
  - a. Only good thing was in the past great for setting up meeting West Virginia Not Really Ohio None that he knew of only positive Connecticut.
  
4. *In the REAP program specifically, what skillset/knowledge might make collaboration with a nonprofit beneficial to you and RD?*
  - a. Connecticut: training of the RC&D staff on the REAP application processing and Energy Audits. Georgia: sharing of information between agencies, Outreach and counseling.
  
5. *Are you familiar with the Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Program?*
  - a. Yes, but most referenced very limited contact in recent years except Connecticut which felt the RC&Ds were a very key part to their programs.
  
6. *Describe any past experiences with RC&D? (type of collaboration, positives and negatives)*
  - a. Connecticut: The RC&Ds are in contact on weekly basis and more often on nontypical projects. The RC&D improves the quality of application and provides complete application and address problems before applications are submitted.

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- b. Most common answer was nothing in the last 5 years but had a good relationship in the past.
7. *Do you currently have any grants or agreements with any RC&D Council or Association?*
- a. Connecticut REDAs with two RC&Ds
  - b. None of the other contacts had any agreement of contacts in place that they were aware of
8. *What programs do you feel collaboration with a nonprofit might be most beneficial?*
- a. REAP, where they do outreach and hold quarterly meetings and newsletters.
  - b. Any programs with outreach and local contacts are important.
9. *Many RC&D's have close relationships with minority and underserved customers. Would this asset be of help to you in delivery of programs (REAP)?*
- a. Yes: Outreach and Education
  - b. No (Texas)
10. *Education and outreach efforts are common activities of RC&D's. Would this skillset be helpful to RD? REAP program?*
- a. Yes Always good to get the word out and tell REAP success stories
11. *Any additional thoughts on RC&D capacity to assist RD in program delivery?*
- a. Connecticut: Cannot say enough good things about the RC&Ds of Rhode Island and Connecticut

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National Association of RC&D Councils  
871 South Country Club Road  
Chanute, KS 66720  
[www.narcdc.org](http://www.narcdc.org)