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(2) Operated by cooperating agencies with financial and technical assistance from NRCS: Meeker, CO—White River and Douglas Creek Soil Conservation Districts with partial funding from NRCS.

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PART 614—NRCS APPEAL PROCEDURES

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AUTHORITY: 5 U.S.C. 301; 7 U.S.C. 6932 and 6995; and 16 U.S.C. 3822(a).

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§ 614.1 General.

This part sets forth the informal appeal procedures under which a participant may appeal adverse technical determinations or program decisions made by officials of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), an agency under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). These regulations reflect NRCS policy to resolve at the agency level, to the greatest extent possible, disputes arising from adverse technical determinations and program decisions made by NRCS. Once a decision is rendered final by

NRCS, participants may appeal to the National Appeals Division (NAD) as provided for under 7 CFR part 11, or the FSA county committee pursuant to 7 CFR part 780 for decisions rendered under Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 3801 et seq. (Title XII).

§ 614.2 Definitions.

The following definitions are applicable for the purposes of this part:

(a) *Agency* means NRCS and its personnel.

(b) *Agency record* means all documents and materials, including documents submitted by the participant and those generated by NRCS, upon which the agency bases its program decision or technical determination. NRCS maintains the agency record and will, upon request, make available a copy of the agency record to the participant(s) involved in the dispute.

(c) *Appeal* means a written request by a participant asking for review (including mediation) of an adverse NRCS technical determination or program decision under this part. An appeal must set out the reason(s) for appeal and include any supporting documentation. An appeal is considered filed when it is received by the appropriate NRCS official as indicated in the decision notice.

(d) *Chief* means the Chief of NRCS or his or her designee.

(e) *Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC)* means a wholly owned Government corporation within USDA.

(f) *Conservation district* means any district or unit of State or local government developed under State law for the express purpose of developing and carrying out a local soil and water conservation program. Such district or unit of government may be referred to as a conservation district, soil and water conservation district, natural resource district, conservation committee, or similar name.

(g) *County committee* means a Farm Service Agency (FSA) county or area committee established in accordance with section 8(b) of the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act (16 U.S.C. 590h(b)).

(h) *Designated conservationist* means the NRCS official, usually the district

conservationist, whom the State Conservationist designates to be responsible for the program or compliance requirement to which this part is applicable.

(i) *Final technical determination* means a decision by NRCS concerning the status and condition of the natural resources and cultural practices based on science and best professional judgment of natural resource professionals concerning soils, water, air, plants, and animals that has become final through the informal appeal process, the expiration of the time period to appeal, or waiver of the appeal process.

(j) *Hearing* means an informal appeal proceeding that affords a participant opportunity to present testimony and documentary evidence to show why an adverse program decision is in error and why the adverse decision should be reversed or modified.

(k) *Mediation* means a process in which a neutral third party, the mediator, meets with the disputing parties, usually the participant and the agency. Through mediation, the parties have the opportunity to work together with the assistance of the mediator to: Improve communications, understand the relevant issues, develop and explore alternatives, and reach a mutually satisfactory resolution.

(l) *Mediator* means a neutral third party who serves as an impartial facilitator between two or more disputants to assist them in resolving a dispute. The mediator does not take sides or render decisions on the merits of the dispute. The mediator assists the parties in identifying areas of agreement and encourages the parties to explore potential options toward resolution.

(m) *Participant* means any individual or entity who has applied for, or whose right to participate in or receive, a payment or other benefit in accordance with any program administered by NRCS to which the regulations in this part apply is affected by a decision of NRCS. The term does not include those individuals or entities excluded in the definition of participant published at 7 CFR 11.1.

(n) *Preliminary technical determination* means the initial written decision by NRCS on a technical matter concerning the status and condition of the

natural resources and cultural practices based on science and best professional judgment of natural resources professionals concerning soils, water, air, plants and animals, which has not become final under this part.

(o) *Program decision* means a written decision by NRCS concerning eligibility for program benefits, program administration or program implementation and based upon applicable regulations and program instructions. Program decisions are issued as final decisions.

(p) *Qualified mediator* means a mediator who is accredited under State law in those States that have a mediation program certified by the USDA pursuant to 7 CFR part 785, or, in those States that do not have a mediation program certified by the USDA, an individual who has attended a minimum of 40 hours of core mediator knowledge and skills training and, to remain in a qualified mediator status, completes a minimum of 20 hours of additional training or education during each 2-year period. Such training or education must be approved by USDA, by an accredited college or university, or by one of the following organizations: State Bar, a State mediation association, a State approved mediation program, or a society of dispute resolution professionals.

(q) *Reconsideration* means a subsequent consideration of a preliminary technical determination by the designated conservationist or the State Conservationist.

(r) *Secretary* means the Secretary of Agriculture.

(s) *State Conservationist* means the NRCS official, or his or her designee, in charge of NRCS operations within a State.

(t) *Title XII* means Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 3801 et seq.

(u) *Verbatim transcript* means the official, written record of proceedings of a hearing of an adverse program decision appealable under this part.

§ 614.3 Decisions subject to informal appeal procedures.

(a) This part applies to NRCS adverse program decisions and technical determinations made with respect to: