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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Natural Resources Conservation Service

7 CFR Parts 600 and 601

Organization and Functions

AGENCY: Natural Resources Conservation Service, USDA.

ACTION: Final rule.

SUMMARY: The Natural Resources Conservation Service revises the information on the organization and functions to reflect changes as a result of the USDA reorganization and the agency's headquarters reorganization.

EFFECTIVE DATE: January 31, 2000.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Mary Cressel, 202-690-0547.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: *Rulemaking Analyses:* EO 12291: Non-major.

Regulatory Flexibility Act: No significant impact.

Paperwork Reduction Act: No significant impact.

National Environmental Policy Act: Exempt.

List of Subjects in 7 CFR Parts 600 and 601

Functions and organization (Government agencies).

For the reason stated in the preamble, CFR Chapter 7 is amended by revising Parts 600 and 601 to read as follows.

7 CFR, Chapter VI

SUBCHAPTER A—GENERAL

PART 600—ORGANIZATION

Sec.

600.1 General.

600.2 National headquarters.

600.3 Regional offices.

600.4 State offices.

600.5 Area offices.

600.6 Field offices.

600.7 Specialized field offices.

600.8 Plant materials centers.

600.9 Major land resource area soil survey offices.

Authority: 7 U.S.C. 6962.

§ 600.1 General.

(a) The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) was authorized by the Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994 (Pub. L. 103-354, 7 U.S.C. 6901 note) and established by Secretary's Memorandum 1010-1 (2.b.6), *Reorganization of the Department of Agriculture*, to provide national leadership in the conservation, development, and productive use of the Nation's natural resources. Such leadership encompasses the conservation of soil, water, air, plant, and animal resources with consideration of the many human (economic and sociological) interactions. NRCS is the Federal agency that works with landowners on private lands to help them conserve their natural resources. NRCS employees are highly skilled in many scientific and technical specialties, including soil science, soil conservation, agronomy, biology, agroecology, range conservation, forestry, engineering, geology, hydrology, wetlands science, cultural resources, and economics. NRCS was formerly the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) which was established by the Soil Conservation Act of 1935 (Pub. L. 74-46, 49 Stat. 163 (16 U.S.C. 590 (a-f))). NRCS has responsibility for three major areas:

(1) Soil and water conservation;

(2) Natural resource surveys including soil surveys, resources inventory, snow surveys, and water supply forecasting; and

(3) Community resource protection and management including watershed projects, river basin studies and investigations, resource conservation and development areas, land evaluation and site assessment, and emergency watershed protection. In addition, NRCS has leadership for the Wetlands Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, Farmland Protection Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Forestry Incentives Program, and Conservation Farm Option. NRCS provides technical

support for the Conservation Reserve Program.

(b) The NRCS organization consists of a National Headquarters located in Washington, D.C.; six regional offices; 50 state offices and two equivalent offices in the Caribbean Area and the U.S. Trust Territories of the Pacific Basin Area; approximately 2,500 field offices and 300 specialized offices; 26 plant materials centers; 17 major land resource area soil survey offices; nine national centers; and seven national institutes. A Chief who reports to the USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment heads NRCS.

§ 600.2 National headquarters.

(a) *Chief.* The Chief, with assistance of the Associate Chief, is responsible for administering a coordinated national program of natural resource conservation; planning, directing, and coordinating all program, technical, and administrative activities of NRCS; developing policies and procedures; correlating NRCS conservation programs with other agencies; accepting departmental leadership for programs for other activities assigned by the Secretary of Agriculture; and serving as Equal Employment Opportunity Officer for NRCS.

(b) *Deputy chiefs.* Five deputy chiefs assist the Chief as follows:

(1) *Deputy Chief for Management.* The Deputy Chief for Management is responsible for policies, guidelines, and standards for management services, human resources management, financial management, information technology, administrative support (providing a coordinated administrative management program for National Headquarters activities), NRCS outreach, training, and correspondence management. This deputy chief also is responsible for the activities of three national centers: business management, information technology, and employee development.

(2) *Deputy Chief for Strategic Planning and Accountability.* The Deputy Chief for Strategic Planning and Accountability is responsible for policies, guidelines, and standards for strategic and performance planning, budget planning and analysis, and operations management and oversight.

(3) *Deputy Chief for Programs.* The Deputy Chief for Programs is responsible for policies, guidelines, and standards for conservation operations,

resource conservation and community development, watersheds and wetlands, international programs, conservation compliance activities, conservation programs funded by the Commodity Credit Corporation, and animal husbandry and clean water programs.

(4) *Deputy Chief for Soil Survey and Resource Assessment.* The Deputy Chief for Soil Survey and Resource Assessment is responsible for policies, guidelines, and standards for NRCS technical activities, and provides leadership for soils, resource inventory, and resource assessment. This deputy chief also is responsible for the activities of two national centers (soil survey and cartography and geospatial) and two national institutes (soil quality and natural resources inventory and analysis).

(5) *Deputy Chief for Science and Technology.* The Deputy Chief for Science and Technology is responsible for policies, guidelines, and standards for the agency, and provides leadership for resource economics and social sciences, conservation engineering, and ecological sciences. This deputy chief also is responsible for the activities of four national centers (water and climate, water management, soil mechanics, and plant data) and five national institutes (grazing lands technology, social sciences, watershed science, wetlands science, and wildlife habitat management). This deputy chief, working closely with the deputy chiefs for Management and Soil Survey and Resource Assessment, provides overall direction for the National Science and Technology Consortium.

(c) *National Science and Technology Consortium.* The consortium consists of three divisions, four centers, five technical institutes, and several cooperating scientists under the Deputy Chief for Science and Technology; two divisions, two centers, and two technical institutes under the Deputy Chief for Soil Survey and Resource Assessment; and one division and three centers under the Deputy Chief for Management.

(1) *Centers.* The nine centers provide specific products and services that maintain and enhance the technical quality of the agency. The centers are: water and climate, water management, soil mechanics, plant data, soil survey, cartography and geospatial, information technology, business management, and employee development.

(2) *Institutes.* The seven institutes are: soil quality, natural resources inventory and analysis, grazing lands technology, social sciences, watershed science, wetlands science, and wildlife habitat management. The institutes provide

training; develop technical materials; and acquire, develop, and transfer needed technology in special emphasis areas so field employees can better serve their customers. The institutes often establish partnerships with other Federal agencies, universities, and public and private organizations.

(3) *Cooperating Scientists.* Cooperating scientists work in the areas of soil erosion and sedimentation, air quality, and agroforestry. These scientists are located at various universities and research centers.

(d) *Civil Rights.* The Civil Rights staffs provide coordination, assistance, and recommendations to the Chief on civil rights employment and program compliance issues.

(e) *Legislative Affairs.* The Legislative Affairs Staff provides coordination and assistance to the Chief on legislative affairs issues and activities.

(f) *Conservation Communications.* The Conservation Communications Staff is responsible for communications, volunteer programs, conservation education, and public affairs activities.

(g) *Strategic Natural Resource Issues.* The Strategic Natural Resource Issues Staff is responsible for coordinating priority strategic issues as determined by the Chief.

§ 600.3 Regional offices.

Each regional office is under the direction and supervision of a regional conservationist. Regional offices are responsible for

- (1) Providing agency leadership, guidance, coordination, and partnering for solutions to regional resource issues;
- (2) Program implementation, consistency, and accountability;
- (3) Region-wide strategic planning, performance measurement, and operations management;
- (4) Administrative operations and support;
- (5) Fund integrity and accountability;
- (6) Technical quality of work; and
- (7) All NRCS activities in the region.

Regional offices are located in Beltsville, Maryland; Atlanta, Georgia; Fort Worth, Texas; Madison, Wisconsin; Lincoln, Nebraska; and Sacramento, California.

§ 600.4 State offices.

Each office is under the direction and supervision of a State conservationist. Each State conservationist is responsible for NRCS programs in a State. The Pacific Basin Area Office, under the direction and supervision of a director, serves the U.S. Trust Territories in that area. The Caribbean Area Office, under the direction and supervision of a director, serves the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Directors of the Pacific Basin and Caribbean areas have the same responsibility and authority as a State conservationist. All references to State conservationists in this chapter include the directors of the Pacific Basin and Caribbean areas.

§ 600.5 Area offices.

Each area office is under the direction and supervision of an area conservationist or assistant State conservationist for field operations who is responsible for NRCS activities in the geographical area served by the area office. Usually the geographical area includes multiple field offices and counties. Many area offices now consist of teams working on a watershed or other geopolitical basis.

§ 600.6 Field offices.

Each field office is under the direction and supervision of a district conservationist who is responsible for NRCS activities in the geographical area served by the field office. Usually the geographical area of a field office includes one or more conservation districts and one or more counties. Field offices are generally collocated with other USDA agencies in USDA Service Centers.

§ 600.7 Specialized field offices.

Other field offices serve specialized activities, such as watershed protection and flood reduction projects, construction projects, resource conservation and development areas, and soil survey activities. State conservationists designate direction and supervision of these offices.

§ 600.8 Plant materials centers.

Plant materials centers (PMC) assemble and test plant species for conservation uses. Usually a PMC serves two or more States, and is under the jurisdiction of the State conservationist where the center is located. Each PMC is directed and supervised by a manager who is responsible to a State office specialist/manager as designated by the State conservationist.

§ 600.9 Major land resource area soil survey offices.

The United States is divided into 17 major land resource areas (MLRA) for the purpose of soil survey production. Major land resource area soil survey offices (MO) provide the technical leadership, coordination, and quality assurance for all soil survey project activities within the respective MLRA. Each MO serves two or more States (except for the MO in Alaska), and is under the jurisdiction of the State conservationist where the office is

located. Each MO is directed and supervised by a leader who is designated by the State conservationist.

PART 601—FUNCTIONS

Sec.

601.1 Functions assigned.

601.2 Functions reserved to the Secretary of Agriculture.

601.3 Defense responsibilities.

Authority: 7 U.S.C. 1010–1011; 16 U.S.C. 590a–590f, 1001–1008, 2001–2009, 2203–2205, 3801 *et seq.*; 33 U.S.C. 701b–1.

§ 601.1 Functions assigned.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is the Federal agency that works with private landowners to conserve their natural resources. NRCS employees help land users and communities approach conservation planning and implementation with an understanding of how natural resources relate to each other and to people—and how human activities affect those resources. The agency emphasizes voluntary, science-based assistance, partnerships, and cooperative problem solving at the community level. The mission of NRCS is to work on the Nation's non-Federal lands to conserve, improve, and sustain natural resources. The following functions support the mission.

(a) NRCS facilitates and provides conservation technical assistance at the local level that helps people assess their natural resource conditions and needs, set goals, identify programs and other resources to address those needs, develop proposals and recommendations, implement solutions, and measure their success. The agency's role is to assist with:

- (1) Resource inventories,
- (2) Resource assessments,
- (3) Planning assistance, and/or
- (4) Technical assistance.

(b) NRCS provides technical assistance through local conservation districts to land users, communities, watershed groups, Federal and State agencies, other partners, and customers.

(c) NRCS provides assistance on a voluntary basis.

(d) The agency's work focuses on soil, water, air, plant, and animal conservation including erosion reduction, water quality improvement, wetland restoration and protection, fish and wildlife habitat improvement, range management, stream restoration, water management, and other natural resource issues.

(e) Through the conservation operations program, NRCS maintains a cadre of conservationists and interdisciplinary technical experts who provide landowners with advice and

recommendations. Science based procedures and techniques are based on new knowledge and research provided by the Agricultural Research Service and others. NRCS developed and maintains a system of directives—including manuals, handbooks, and technical references—to institutionalize new methods, procedures, and standards used to deliver technical assistance at the field level.

(f) NRCS has general responsibility for administration of the following programs:

(1) Conservation operations, authorized by the Soil Conservation Act of 1935 and the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977.

Activities include:

(i) Conservation technical assistance to land users, communities, units of State and local government, and other Federal agencies in planning and implementing natural resource solutions to reduce erosion, improve soil and water quantity and quality, improve and conserve wetlands, enhance fish and wildlife habitat, improve air quality, improve pasture and range conditions, reduce upstream flooding, and improve woodlands. Assistance is also provided to implement the highly erodible land (HEL) and wetland conservation (Swampbuster) provisions and—on a reimbursable basis—the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in the 1985 Food Security Act, as amended by the Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act of 1990 and Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996. NRCS technical field staff make HEL and wetland determinations and assist land users to develop and implement conservation plans needed to ensure compliance with the law. NRCS is also the lead Federal agency for delineating wetlands on agricultural lands for purposes of implementing both the provisions of the Food Security Act and Section 404 of the Clean Water Act.

(ii) Soil surveys that provide the public with local information on the uses and capabilities of their soil resource. Soil surveys are based on scientific analysis and classification of the soils and are used to determine land capabilities and conservation treatment needs. Surveys are conducted cooperatively with other Federal agencies, land grant universities, State agencies, and local units of government. NRCS is the world leader in soil classification and soil mapping, and is expanding into soil quality.

(iii) Snow survey and water supply forecasts that provide western States and Alaska with vital information and

forecasts of seasonable variable water supplies. NRCS field staff in cooperation with partnering organizations manually collect data from 850 remote high mountain sites. Data is electronically collected from an additional 600 SNOTEL (automated snowpack telemetry network) sites. In cooperation with the National Weather Service, the data is assembled and analyzed. Then, NRCS staff develop seasonal water supply forecasts.

(iv) Plant Material Centers that assemble, test, and encourage increased plant propagation and usefulness of plant species for biomass production, carbon sequestration, erosion reduction, wetland restoration, water quality improvement, streambank and riparian area protection, coastal dune stabilization, and to meet other special conservation treatment needs. The work is carried out cooperatively with State and Federal agencies, private organizations, commercial businesses, and seed and nursery associations. After species are proven, they are released to the private sector for commercial production.

(v) National Resources Inventory (NRI) that is a statistically-based survey designed and implemented using scientific principles to assess conditions and trends of soil, water, and related resources on nonfederal lands in the United States. The NRI captures data on land cover and use, soil erosion, prime farmland, wetlands, habitat diversity, selected conservation practices, and related attributes at thousands of scientifically selected sample sites in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and some Pacific Basin locations.

(2) Conservation programs in the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996, most of which are funded by the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). NRCS provides leadership and technical assistance for the following programs:

(i) *Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)*. EQIP provides a single, voluntary conservation program for farmers and ranchers who face serious threats to soil, water, and related natural resources. Nationally, it provides technical, financial, and educational assistance, half of it targeted to livestock-related natural resource problems and half to more general conservation priorities.

(ii) *Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)*. WRP is a voluntary program to restore and protect wetlands on private property. It provides an opportunity for landowners to receive financial incentives to restore wetlands in

exchange for retiring marginal agricultural land.

(iii) *Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)*. WHIP is a voluntary program for people who want to develop and improve wildlife habitat on private lands. It provides both technical assistance and cost sharing to help establish and improve fish and wildlife habitat.

(iv) *Farmland Protection Program (FPP)*. This program provides funds to help purchase development rights to keep productive farmland in agricultural use. Working through existing programs, USDA joins with State, tribal, or local governments to acquire voluntary conservation easements or other interests from landowners.

(v) *Forestry Incentives Program (FIP)*. FIP supports good forest management practices on privately owned, non-industrial forest lands nationwide. FIP is designed to benefit the environment while meeting future demands for wood products. Although not funded by CCC, Section 373 of the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 extended the program under discretionary appropriations.

(3) Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Program, authorized by Section 102 of the Flood and Agriculture Act of 1962 (Pub. L. 87-702) and Sections 1528-1538 of the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981 (Pub. L. 97-98). This program is initiated and directed at the local level by volunteers who involve multiple communities, various units of government, municipalities, and grassroots organizations. RC&D is a catalyst for civic-oriented groups to share knowledge and resources in a collective attempt to solve common problems. The program offers aid in balancing the environmental, economic, and social needs of an area.

(4) Rural Abandoned Mine Program (RAMP) and other responsibilities assigned under the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 (Pub. L. 95-87). Under RAMP, NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to landowners to reclaim certain abandoned coal-mined lands. This assistance can be used to reclaim these lands for approved uses, which include pasture, range, woodland, cropland, noncommercial recreation, and wildlife habitat. The program's first priority is to protect public health, welfare, safety, and property from hazards caused by past surface coal mining or by surface effects of deep mining.

(5) Watershed surveys and planning, authorized by the Watershed Protection

and Flood Prevention Act (Pub. L. 83-566, Section 6 (16 U.S.C. 1001-1008)). The 1996 appropriations act combined the Small Watershed Planning and the River Basin Surveys and Investigations programs into a new program called the Watershed Surveys and Planning Program. The program involves cooperation with other Federal, State, and local agencies to conduct watershed planning, river basin surveys and investigations, flood hazard analysis, and floodplain management assistance, which aid in the development of coordinated water resource programs, including the development of guiding principles and procedures.

(6) Watershed and flood prevention operations include several activities. Watershed operations are authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1944 (Public Law 78-534) and the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (Public Law 87-566) and amendments; both of which are addressed by 7 CFR 622. Since 1998, the appropriations act for the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (Public Law 83-566) has included funds, not to exceed a specified amount, that may be used for Public Law 78-534 projects.

(i) Public Law 83-566 and Public Law 78-534, jointly called the Small Watershed Program, authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to cooperate with State and local agencies to plan and carry out works of improvement for flood prevention; for the conservation, development, utilization, and disposal of water; and for the conservation and proper use of land in watershed or sub-watershed areas. Under Public Law 83-566, these areas shall not exceed 250,000 acres. There is no acreage limitation under Public Law 78-534.

(ii) The Small Watershed Program provides for cooperation with State and other public agencies (called project sponsors) in the installation of planned works of improvement and land treatment measures in authorized watershed projects. Eligible measures include flood prevention, water conservation, recreation, agricultural water management, floodplain easements, municipal and industrial water, and rural water supply.

(7) Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program, authorized by Section 216 of Public Law 81-516, 33 U.S.C. 701b-1, and Section 403 of the Agriculture Credit Act of 1978 (Public Law 95-334, 16 U.S.C. 2203), as amended by Section 382 of the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (Public Law 104-127, 110 Stat. 888, 1016). EWP provides assistance to reduce an imminent threat

to life and property caused by a sudden impairment of a watershed from a natural disaster. Emergency work includes such measures as removing debris from streams, stabilizing streambanks, repairing levees, critical area stabilization, and purchasing floodplain easements. Technical and financial assistance is available to sponsoring local organizations (units of government, Indian tribes and tribal organizations, and organizations formed by State law) for this disaster recovery work. Sponsors are required to provide the local share of the costs; obtain real property rights, water rights, and permits; and do any needed operation and maintenance.

§ 601.2 Functions reserved to the Secretary of Agriculture.

(a) Designation of new Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) areas. Once designated, these areas may receive RC&D Program assistance from NRCS.

(b) Administration of the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977 (Public Law 95-192) to conduct an appraisal and develop a national conservation program every five years.

§ 601.3 Defense responsibilities.

In the event of nuclear attack, NRCS is responsible for providing:

(a) Technical guidance, based upon results of radiological monitoring and the extent of radiological contamination to farmers, ranchers, and others relating to:

(1) The selection and use of land for agricultural production.

(2) The harvesting of crops.

(3) The use of crops stored on the farm.

(4) The use, conservation, disposal, and control of water to insure adequate usable water for agricultural purposes and to prevent floods.

(5) The safety of livestock.

(b) Basic soil information, land use guides, and onsite technical assistance in selecting land for production and in applying practices to increase production of food and fiber with maximum efficiency.

Danny D. Sells,

Associate Chief, Natural Resources Conversation.

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