



Strengthening Conservation with Regional Partnerships

Watershed Planning and National Environmental Policy Act Requirements (NEPA) When Using Watershed Program Authority in the Regional Conservation Partnership Program

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service offers voluntary Farm Bill conservation programs that benefit agricultural producers and the environment.

Watershed Authority

For designated Critical Conservation Areas (CCAs), NRCS implements the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) through several conservation authorities, including Public Law 83- 566 Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (hereafter referred to as "watershed program authority"). RCPP projects in CCAs may use all PL 83-566 authorized purposes except watershed rehabilitation.

Watershed Planning Overview

Watershed plans document social, cultural, environmental, and economic conditions in the watershed; describe all alternative solutions considered; describe and assess the environmental, economic, and social impacts of all alternatives; describe the extent to which each alternative achieves the stated purpose; and set forth arrangements and responsibilities for financing, installation, and operation and maintenance of project measures.

Who is Responsible for Completing Planning?

Partners, engineering consulting firms, and/or NRCS may complete the watershed plan and NEPA documents. RCPP applications for program funding must identify who will be responsible for completing the plans and must set aside adequate financial resources and time to complete the required documents.

Watershed Planning and NEPA Requirements

Applicants requesting use of Watershed Authorities must follow all statutory and programmatic rules as outlined in 7 CFR Part 622 and the NRCS National Watershed Program Manual (Title 390, Parts 500-506), including the development of a watershed plan and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The combined watershed plan-EA/EIS document must include (see NWPM Section 501.31):

- Purpose and need for action;
- Watershed agreement between NRCS and sponsoring local organization(s);
- List of alternatives including a no-action alternative, the agency preferred alternative, other reasonable alternatives, the most cost-effective alternative, a summary and comparison of alternative plans, and any relevant issues and concerns identified through scoping, including direct, indirect, and cumulative actions and impacts;
- Evaluation of all reasonable alternatives. The Plan-EA/EIS is developed following NEPA procedures. The Plan EA/EIS lays out the assessment of the environmental benefits and consequences for each alternative; how benefits may be enhanced; and how consequences will be mitigated;

- A thorough economic evaluation according to the Principles and Requirements for Federal Investments in Water Resources (March 2013) to address benefits and costs of each alternative in order to document the selected alternative;
- A complete and thorough description of the preferred alternative including the rationale for alternative preference, measures to be installed, mitigation, permits and compliance, costs and cost-sharing, installation and financing, operation, maintenance and replacement, economic tables, structural tables; and
- Performance outcome measures that are quantifiable and can be evaluated at completion of the project that will be used to assess the success of each performance measure.

If a proposed project already has an NRCS-approved PL 83-566 plan, the RCPP applicant should review the plan and date completed. By NEPA and NRCS policy, plans older than 5 years will need to be updated to evaluate current environmental conditions and reaffirm economic feasibility.

Time Required for Planning

New Watershed Plans and EA/EIS can take significant time to complete. The length of time to complete all planning and NEPA requirements should be considered when requesting watershed program authority. All RCPP proposed work must be completed and operational within five years of the RCPP agreement approval.

Additional Requirements

As per NRCS policy, all watershed plan-EA/EIS documents must be reviewed by NRCS's National Water Management Center to ensure compliance with applicable Federal laws and NRCS policy. Congressional approval is not required for RCPP-funded projects.

All projects must follow NRCS standards and engineering criteria.

More Information

For more information on the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act, the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act authorities may be found in Public Law 83-566 (16 U.S.C. Parts 1001-1008, and 1010) and Codified Rule 7 CFR part 622.

Specific information on how PL 83-566 authorities are implemented can be found in the National Watershed Program Manual and National Watershed Program Handbook at the NRCS Website:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/landscape/wfpo/>

NRCS Point of Contact

Jan Marie Surface
Watershed Planning Specialist
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
National Water Management Center
jan.surface@wdc.usda.gov

nrcs.usda.gov

Natural Resources Conservation Service