



Cape Cod Cranberry Growers' Association

GROWER ADVISORY

Conservation Farm Plans: Benefits, Content, and Use

What Is a Conservation Farm Plan?

A conservation plan is a tool to help you manage your land profitably while protecting the natural resources on your farm. It is used to schedule improvements, document conservation practices, and provide access to USDA cost-share programs. It can also assist you in remaining in compliance with local, state, and federal regulations.

All of the information developed in the farm plan belongs to you. Farm planners provide you with technical assistance to develop and implement your plan. You make the decisions. You implement the plan. You are responsible for actions and natural resource management on your farm. It does not provide public access to your property. You control right of entry and use.

Who Is a Farm Planner?

The Plymouth County Conservation District (PCCD) and USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), with a joint office in West Wareham, work closely together to complete farm plans throughout the cranberry growing region. The PCCD employs two full-time planners who work almost exclusively on cranberry farm plans. They assist three planners with the NRCS who work on farm plans for all agricultural sectors. Alternatively, a grower may be able to hire a private "Technical Service Provider," recognized and paid for by NRCS, to develop a farm plan.

Benefits of a Farm Plan

- Saves money over the long term as your land becomes more productive.
- Ensures better natural resource quality for you and your community.
- Increases your property value.
- Enhances open space and wildlife habitat.
- Contributes to plant health and vigor.
- Makes your place more attractive and promotes good neighbor relations.

The Conservation Planning Process

Conservation planning implies a change in your management. Physical or structural practices are designed to accelerate and facilitate the management changes. These are the steps and processes that you need to be involved with in the development of a farm plan.

1. Identify resources
2. Identify your objectives
3. Inventory resources
4. Analyze resource inventory
5. Develop alternative solutions
6. Evaluate alternative solutions
7. Make your decisions
8. Implement plan
9. Evaluate plan success and adjust as necessary

The Conservation Partnership

Grower Responsibilities

- Provide access to property
- "Walk" the property with planner
- Participate in each planning process step
- Voluntarily follow conservation plan
- Choose and apply conservation practices
- Monitor effects and revise plan if necessary

Planner Responsibilities

- Develop conservation plan with grower
- Provide technical assistance
- Provide information about possible financial assistance
- Assist farmer with monitoring progress and providing documentation
- Evaluate monitoring and provide technical assistance in revising the plan if necessary.

Use of Farm Plans as Compliance Documents

Often a conservation plan is requested as a demonstration of compliance for a number of regulated and non-regulated activities. These may include water supply protection, water conservation, fisheries and wildlife concerns, gravel removal permitting, and wetlands projects. In most cases, it is the participation in the planning process itself rather than the resulting farm plan document that is required.

There are only four situations in which a grower must provide the Town Conservation Commission with a portion of his or her approved farm plan. These all involve work that will impact a wetland or an area within 100 feet of a wetland. If a grower is planning to:

- 1) reconstruct or expand an existing pond or reservoir,
- 2) reconstruct an existing dike,
- 3) construct a new tailwater recovery pond, or
- 4) construct a bypass canal

and the project will impact a wetland, the grower is required by state law to provide the conservation commission with only that portion of their plan that relates to the project, prior to beginning the work. **No regulation other than the Wetlands Protection Act gives towns the authority to request a copy of a farm conservation plan.**

Although a completed conservation plan can be seen as a “compliance” document, indicating that a grower followed an approved planning process; it should not be seen as an “enforcement” document. That is, the NRCS and PCCD do not verify for regulatory purposes that a grower is completing projects according to the schedule outlined in the plan or following management practices. (The NRCS and PCCD do, however, keep in close contact with growers to remain updated on their progress). It is up to the grower to choose to implement their plan responsibly and contact their planner to make revisions if necessary.

Standards and Specifications in Farm Plans

The design of any structural practice in a farm plan must follow NRCS Technical Standards and Specifications. The public (including town boards) may view these standards and specifications either by visiting the local USDA Field Office to see the printed version, or by viewing them on the following website:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/efotg/>

- On the map of the United States, click on Massachusetts.
- Click on the county of interest.
- On the left side of page, click on “Section IV” – then “Conservation Practices.”
- Click on the practice of interest.

To begin conservation planning on your property, please contact:

Mia Halter, District Conservationist
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
8 Thatcher Lane, Suite 2
Wareham, MA 02571
774-678-7234 x3
mia.halter@ma.usda.gov