Part 307 – Instructions for Implementing National Program and Landscape Conservation Initiatives

Subpart A – Purpose and Background

307.0 Purpose

This instruction provides State Conservationists (STCs) and Caribbean and Pacific Islands Areas Directors, with guidance for administering national program and landscape conservation initiatives funded through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) where authorized. Guidance for administering the Agriculture Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) under these initiatives is issued under a separate directive.

307.1 Background and Policy References

A. To support efficient delivery of these focused opportunities to eligible producers, this instruction consolidates guidance for certain national program and landscape conservation initiatives to be offered through EQIP and AMA. State Conservationists (STC) are to use this instruction and exhibits to prepare to offer these opportunities in a timely manner when program funding is allocated each year.

B. This instruction establishes routine actions to be completed by STCs to support program initiatives. Delivery and management of these initiatives are subject to all agency program rules and policies including—

(1) Title 440, Conservation Programs Manual (CPM), Part 512, “Conservation Program Contracting”
(2) 440-CPM, Part 515, “Environmental Quality Incentives Program”
(3) 440-CPM, Part 521, “Agricultural Management Assistance”

307.2 General Instructions

In order to support approved national program and landscape conservation initiatives, STCs are to complete the following actions in a timeframe that is consistent with State application period announcements, internal State ranking deadlines and national obligation deadlines:

(1) ProTracts Subaccounts and Application, Evaluation, and Ranking Tool (AERT).—States must establish subaccounts and populate the ranking evaluation criteria in the ProTracts AERT and other actions as follows. The following information is imperative in building the ProTracts subaccounts (ProTracts "FA Fund Pool"), which facilitate electronic application entry, management, and tracking of conservation program contracts.

(i) Subaccounts.—Unless already populated in ProTracts by National Headquarters (NHQ), States are to establish an iteratively named and separate subaccount in ProTracts for each initiative offered and assign the appropriate account type as noted in the exhibits. States may not establish subaccounts with “Locally Led” or “State” account types to support national initiatives unless specifically allowed according to guidance in the initiative exhibits.

(ii) Approved Land Uses.—States must designate land uses for each initiative subaccount as indicated in the exhibits.

(iii) ProTracts Resource Concerns.—States must assign natural resource concerns in AERT for each subaccount established in ProTracts, as noted in the exhibits. States should be aware of the primary resource concerns targeted by the initiative during planning to identify opportunities to utilize the initiatives.

(iv) Approved Conservation Practices – Core and Supporting Practices.—The initiative exhibits identify conservation practices that are approved to support each national program or landscape conservation initiative. For purposes of this instruction, if required, core or supporting practices are used for an approved initiative, the following definitions apply:

- Required Practice.—A conservation practice listed in the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) that is required to be offered in a State to support a national program or landscape conservation initiative.
- Core Practice.—A conservation practice listed in the FOTG that is essential to address the natural resource concerns identified by an initiative.
- Supporting Practice.—A conservation practice listed in the FOTG that may be needed to facilitate the implementation of a core practice or, along with other approved practice, needed to address the natural resource concerns identified by the initiative.

Note: All practices offered in the following national landscape conservation initiatives will be tracked at the national level as contributing toward the EQIP wildlife 5 percent target: Driftless Area Landscape Conservation Initiative, Honey Bee Pollinator Initiative, and the Working Lands for Wildlife Projects. National Instruction 440-306 describes how other specific practices or subaccounts are tracked as contributing toward the wildlife 5 percent target.

- Practice Changes to Program Initiatives.—States must carefully review the exhibits for each initiative to determine which practices are required to be offered. If a State does not need to offer one or more of the required or core practices (e.g., the practice is not needed to address a resource concern), the STC must notify the appropriate Financial Assistance Program Division (FAPD) team leader, by email, which practices will not be offered.
- Practice Changes to Landscape Conservation Initiatives.—Carefully review the exhibits for each initiative to determine which practices are required to be offered. STC must send an email to the landscape conservation initiative coordinator with a cc to the Conservation Initiatives Team leader for any of the following changes:
  - A State does not need to offer one or more of the core practices (e.g., the practice is not needed to address a resource concern). The initiatives coordinator will seek approval from the initiative lead Regional Conservationist.
  - If supporting practices are not needed.
  - If additional supporting practices will be offered to support a core practice. Additional supporting practices offered by States must be consistent with each of the criteria below:
    -- The proposed supporting conservation practice is needed to directly support a required or core practice.
    -- The purpose of the proposed supporting conservation practice standard addresses one or more of the initiative’s natural resource concerns.
    -- The national Conservation Practice Physical Effects (CPPE) database indicates the proposed practice is assigned a “positive” value for the associated resource concern.
    -- Requests to add supporting practices for the Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) must be accompanied by supporting material, such as a letter of support from a State wildlife agency, which address how the requested practices will achieve habitat objectives for the target species. All requests must be emailed to the WLFW coordinator and national biologist, who will review the request in

consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other appropriate national leadership.

(v) ProTracts Application Type.—Select "Conventional" for all application types, with the exception of conservation activity plans, which have an assigned application type of "Planning." Select "Organic" or "Plan Organic" for CAP application type only for applications funded through one of the Organic Initiative subaccounts.

(vi) Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs).—The ProTracts application type of "planning" or "plan organic" must be associated with each EQIP CAP application and ranking of these applications is mandatory. Additional guidance for CAP administration will be issued under separate directive.

(vii) AERT.— States are responsible for associating required, core, and supporting practices with the nationally approved resource concerns in ProTracts AERT, as indicated in the exhibits.

(viii) Screening Criteria.—If included in the exhibits, States must utilize nationally approved screening criteria to manage workload associated with the initiative. All eligible applications must have an assigned application priority of "High," "Medium," or "Low" recorded in ProTracts when using a screening tool.

(ix) State Ranking Criteria.—State ranking criteria to support certain national program and landscape conservation initiatives have been established as shown in the exhibits. States are responsible for populating the ProTracts AERT with the approved State ranking criteria for each initiative offered in their State. States may not modify any initiative State-level ranking criteria provided in the exhibits.

States must establish one State ranking question to assign the maximum amount of points for a CAP application.

(x) Local Ranking Criteria.—States must populate local ranking criteria in ProTracts AERT. Refer to the exhibits for examples of local ranking criteria to support the initiative. If example local ranking criteria are not provided in the exhibit, States must develop criteria that support the goals of the initiative.

States must establish one local ranking question to assign the maximum amount of points for a CAP application.

(xi) Payment Schedules.—States must ensure that required, core, and any necessary supporting practices are included in the current program payment schedule cost lists uploaded to ProTracts. Cost lists uploaded into ProTracts must include both historically underserved (HU) and traditional participant payment rates. Payment rates for HU items must be prefaced with "HU" in the cost list in order to comply with new software controls for applicable participant types during contracting and quality assurance. Additional guidance can be found in 440-CPM, Part 512, Subpart D.

(2) Application Management and Cutoff Periods.—States must implement program opportunities for national program and landscape conservation initiatives according to National Instruction 440-306.

NHQ has approved States to use any third Friday in the months of October through August for application deadline or cutoff periods for the current fiscal year.

(3) Fund Management.—Once States have established their ProTracts initiative subaccounts, States must allocate the appropriate financial assistance funds to these subaccounts per the allocation letter.

(i) Obligation of Funds.—All program funds must be obligated per the State allocation letter.

(ii) Return of Unused Funds.—At the end of the last ranking period, any unused funds must be returned by submitting an allowance change Allowance Change Tool (ACT). Return of funds should be done in accordance with 440-CPM, Part 512, Subpart I, Section 512.84, “Fund Allocation Changes.” States will return the appropriate technical assistance (TA) funds with the return of any financial assistance. The TA return rate for each program will be provided in the State allocation letter.

STCs may add additional general program financial assistance to support the national program or landscape conservation initiatives provided an allowance change request has been entered into ACT.

(iii) Request for Additional Funds.—States may request additional funds when advised by NHQ.

(5) Program Outreach.—State Conservationists must announce application periods according to National Instruction 440-306 for national and program initiatives.