

**§ 650.6 Categorical exclusions.**

(a) Some NRCS programs or parts of programs do not normally create significant individual or cumulative impacts on the human environment. Therefore, an EA or EIS is not needed. These are data gathering and interpretation programs and include:

- (1) Soil Survey—7 CFR part 611;
- (2) Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasts—7 CFR part 612;
- (3) Plant Materials for Conservation—7 CFR part 613;
- (4) Inventory and Monitoring—Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance—10.908; and
- (5) River Basin Studies under section 6 of Pub. L. 83-566 as amended—7 CFR part 621.

(b) The environmental evaluation performed by the RFO when any new action under these programs is planned is to identify extraordinary circumstances that might lead to significant individual or cumulative impacts. Actions that have potential for significant impacts on the human environment are not categorically excluded.

**§ 650.7 When to prepare an EIS.**

The following are categories of NRCS action used to determine whether or not an EIS is to be prepared.

(a) *An EIS is required for:*

- (1) Projects that include stream channel realignment or work to modify channel capacity by deepening or widening where significant aquatic or wildlife habitat exists. The EE will determine if the channel supports significant aquatic or wildlife habitat;
- (2) Projects requiring Congressional action;
- (3) Broad Federal assistance programs administered by NRCS when the environmental evaluation indicates there may be significant cumulative impacts on the human environment (§ 650.7(e)); and
- (4) Other major Federal actions that are determined after environmental evaluation to affect significantly the quality of the human environment (§ 650.7(b)). If it is difficult to determine whether there is a significant impact on the human environment, it may be necessary to complete the EE and prepare an EA in order to decide if an EIS is required.

(b) The RFO is to determine the need for an EIS for each action, program, or regulation. An environmental evaluation, using a systematic interdisciplinary analysis and evaluation of data and information responding to the five provisions of Section 102(2)(C) of NEPA, will assist the RFO in deciding if the action requires the preparation of an EIS. In analyzing and evaluating environmental concerns, the RFO will answer the following questions:

(1) *Environmental impact.* Will the proposed action significantly affect the quality of the human environment (40 CFR 1508.14)? For example, will it significantly alter or destroy valuable wetlands, important farmlands, cultural resources, or threatened and endangered species? Will it affect social values, water quality, fish and wildlife habitats, or wilderness and scenic areas?

(2) *Adverse environmental effects that cannot be avoided.* What are the important environmental amenities that would be lost if the proposed action were implemented?

(3) *Alternatives.* Are there alternatives that would achieve the planning objectives but avoid adverse environmental effects?

(4) *Short-term uses versus long-term productivity.* Will the proposed actions, in combination with other actions, sacrifice the enhancement of significant long-term productivity as a tradeoff for short-term uses?

(5) *Commitment of resources.* Will the proposed action irreversibly and irretrievably commit the use of resources such as important farmlands, wetlands, and fish and wildlife habitat?

(c) Criteria for determining the need for a program EIS:

(1) A program EIS is required if the environmental evaluation reveals that actions carried out under the program have individually insignificant but cumulatively significant environmental impacts.

(2) A project EIS, in lieu of a program EIS, is required if the environmental evaluation reveals that actions carried out under the program will have both individually and cumulatively significant environmental impacts. (7 CFR Parts 620 through 623 and 640 through 643).

(d) The RFO, through the process of tiering, is to determine if a site-specific EA or EIS is required for an individually significant action that is included in a program EIS.

**§650.8 When to prepare an environmental assessment (EA).**

An environmental assessment (EA) is to be prepared for:

(a) Land and water resource projects that are not included in §650.7(a) (1) through (4) for which State and local units of government receive Federal technical and financial assistance from NRCS (7 CFR parts 620 through 623; and 640 through 643); and

(b) Other actions not included in a program EIS nor categorically excluded that the EE reveals may be a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment.

**§650.9 NEPA and interagency planning.**

(a) *Lead agency.* (1) NRCS is to be the lead agency for actions under programs it administers. If the actions affect more than one State, the NRCS Administrator is to designate one NRCS state conservationist as the RFO.

(2) NRCS normally takes the role of lead agency in actions that share program responsibilities among USDA agencies if NRCS provides the majority of funds for the actions. If the lead agency role is in question, the role of NRCS and other USDA agencies is to be determined by the USDA Environmental Coordinator, Office of Environmental Quality Activities.

(3) If NRCS and Federal agencies outside USDA cannot agree on which will be the lead agency and which will be the cooperating agencies, the procedures in 40 CFR 1501.5(e) are to be followed.

(4) NRCS, as lead agency, is to coordinate the participation of all concerned agencies in developing the EIS according to the provisions of 40 CFR 1501.6(a).

(b) *Cooperating agencies.* (1) NRCS is to request, as appropriate, the assistance of cooperating agencies in preparing the environmental evaluation. This assistance will broaden the expertise in the planning and help to avoid future

conflict. NRCS is to request assistance in determining the scope of issues to be addressed and identifying the significant issues related to a proposed action from Federal agencies that have jurisdiction by law or special expertise.

(2) NRCS is to act as a cooperating agency if requested. NRCS may request to be designated as a cooperating agency if proposed actions may affect areas of NRCS expertise, such as prime farmlands, soils, erosion control, and agricultural sources of nonpoint pollution. NRCS, as a cooperating agency, is to comply with the requirements of 40 CFR 1501.6(b) to the extent possible depending on funds, personnel, and priority. If insufficient funds or other resources prevent NRCS from participating fully as a cooperating agency, NRCS is to request the lead agency to provide funds or other resources which will allow full participation.

(c) *Scoping.* See 40 CFR 1501.7 for a definition of scoping.

(1) NRCS is to use scoping to identify and categorize significant environmental issues in its environmental evaluation. Formalized scoping is used to insure that an analytical EIS can be prepared that will reduce paperwork and avoid delay. Scoping allows NRCS to obtain the assistance and consultation of affected agencies that have special expertise or legal jurisdiction in the proposed action. If early environmental evaluation identifies a need for an EIS, NRCS is to publish a notice of intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS. The NOI is to request the assistance of all interested agencies, groups, and persons in determining the scope of the evaluation of the proposed action.

(2) Normally a scoping meeting is held and Federal, State, or local agencies that have special expertise or legal jurisdiction in resource values that may be significantly affected are requested to participate. The scoping meeting will identify agencies that may become cooperating agencies.

(3) In the scoping meeting, the range of actions, alternatives, and impacts to be evaluated and included in the EIS as defined in (40 CFR 1508.25) are to be determined. Tiering (40 CFR 1508.28) may be used to define the relation of the proposed statement to other statements.