

(b) Complaints involving discrimination in program delivery are not appealable under this part and are handled under the existing USDA civil rights rules and regulations.

(c) Appeals related to contractual issues that are subject to the jurisdiction of the Agriculture Board of Contract Appeals are not appealable under the procedures within this part.

(d) Enforcement actions under conservation easement programs administered by NRCS.

§ 614.5 Reservation of authority.

The Secretary of Agriculture, the Chief of NRCS, if applicable, or a designee, reserve the right to make a determination at any time on any question arising under the programs covered under this part within their respective authority, including reversing or modifying in writing, with sufficient reason given therefore, any decision or technical determination made by an NRCS official.

§ 614.6 Agency records and decision notices.

(a) All NRCS decisions under this part are based upon an agency record. NRCS will supplement the agency record, as appropriate, during the informal appeals process.

(b) NRCS notifies participants of the agency's preliminary and final technical determinations and program decisions through decision notices. By certified mail return receipt requested, NRCS will send to the participant a decision notice within 10 working days of rendering a technical determination or program decision. In lieu of certified mail, NRCS may hand deliver notices to participants with written acknowledgment of delivery by the participant. Each decision notice contains the following:

- (1) The factual basis for the technical determination or program;
- (2) The regulatory, statutory, and/or policy basis for the technical determination or program decision; and
- (3) Information regarding any informal appeal rights available under this part; the process for requesting such appeal; and the procedure for requesting further review before the FSA county committee pursuant to 7 CFR

780 or NAD pursuant to 7 CFR part 11, if applicable.

§ 614.7 Preliminary technical determinations.

(a) A preliminary technical determination becomes final 30 days after the participant receives the decision, unless the participant files an appeal with the appropriate NRCS official as indicated in the decision notice requesting:

- (1) Reconsideration with a field visit in accordance with paragraphs (b) and (c) of this section; or
- (2) Mediation as set forth in § 614.11.

(b) If the participant requests reconsideration with a field visit, the designated conservationist, participant, and, at the option of the conservation district, a district representative will visit the subject site for the purpose of gathering additional information and discussing the facts relating to the preliminary technical determination. The participant may also provide any additional documentation to the designated conservationist. Within 15 days of the field visit, the designated conservationist, based upon the agency record as supplemented by the field visit and any participant submissions, will reconsider his or her preliminary technical determination. If the reconsidered determination is no longer adverse to the participant, the designated conservationist issues the reconsidered determination as a final technical determination. If the preliminary technical determination remains adverse, then the designated conservationist will forward the revised decision and agency record to the State Conservationist for a final determination pursuant to paragraph (c) of this section, unless further appeal is waived in writing by the participant in accordance with paragraph (d) of this section.

(c) The State Conservationist will issue a final technical determination to the participant as soon as is practicable after receiving the reconsideration and agency record from the designated conservationist. The technical determination issued by the State Conservationist becomes a final NRCS decision upon receipt by the participant. Receipt triggers the running of the 30

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day appeal period to NAD, or, if applicable, to the FSA county committee.

(d) In order to address resource issues on the ground immediately, a participant may waive, in writing to the State Conservationist, appeal rights so that a preliminary technical decision becomes final before the expiration of the 30 day appeal period.

§ 614.8 Final technical determinations.

(a) Preliminary technical determinations become final and appealable:

(1) 30 days after receipt of the preliminary technical decision by the participant unless the determination is appealed in a timely manner as provided for in this regulation.

(2) 30 calendar days after the beginning of a mediation session if a mutual agreement has not been reached by the parties; or

(3) Upon receipt by the participant of the final technical determination issued on reconsideration as provided above in § 614.7(c).

(b) The participant may appeal the final technical determination to:

(1) The FSA county committee pursuant to 7 CFR part 780 if the determination is made under Title XII; or

(2) NAD pursuant to 7 CFR part 11.

§ 614.9 Program decisions.

(a) Program decisions are final upon receipt of the program decision notice by the participant. The participant has the following options for appeal of the program decision:

(1) An informal hearing before NRCS as provided for in paragraphs (b) through (d) of this section;

(2) Mediation as provided for at § 614.11; or

(3) A hearing before NAD pursuant to 7 CFR part 11 or, if the program decision is made under Title XII, appeal before the FSA county committee pursuant to 7 CFR part 780.

(b) A program participant must file an appeal request for a hearing with the appropriate State Conservationist as indicated in the decision notice within 30 calendar days from the date the participant received the program decision.

(c) The State Conservationist may accept a hearing request that is untimely filed under paragraph (b) of this

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section if the State Conservationist determines that circumstances warrant such an action.

(d) The State Conservationist will hold a hearing no later than 30 days from the date that the appeal request was received. The State Conservationist will issue a written final NRCS decision no later than 30 days from the close of the hearing.

§ 614.10 Appeals before the Farm Service Agency county committee.

(a) In accordance with 7 CFR part 780, a participant may appeal a final technical determination or a program decision to the FSA county committee for those decisions made under Title XII.

(b) When the FSA county committee hearing the appeal requests review of the technical determination by the applicable State Conservationist prior to issuing their decision, the State Conservationist will:

(1) Designate an appropriate NRCS official to gather any additional information necessary for review of the technical determination;

(2) Obtain additional oral and documentary evidence from any party with personal or expert knowledge about the facts under review;

(3) Conduct a field visit to review and obtain additional information concerning the technical determination; and

(4) After the actions set forth in paragraphs (b)(1) through (3) of this section are completed, provide the FSA county committee with a written technical determination in the form required by § 614.6(b)(1) through (2) as well as a copy of the agency record.

§ 614.11 Mediation.

(a) A participant who wishes to pursue mediation must file request for mediation under this part with the NRCS official designated in the decision notice no later than 30 days after the date on which the decision notice was received. Participants in mediation may be required to pay fees established by the mediation program.

(b) A dispute will be mediated by a qualified mediator as defined at § 614.2(p).