

(d) *Small area of noncropland.* Small areas of noncropland within or adjacent to the boundaries of existing highly erodible crop fields such as abandoned farmsteads, areas around filled or capped wells, rock piles, trees, or brush which are converted to cropland are considered to meet the requirement of § 12.5(a)(2) if they are included in an approved conservation plan for the entire highly erodible field.

[61 FR 47025, Sept. 6, 1996; 61 FR 53491, Oct. 11, 1996]

§ 12.23 Conservation plans and conservation systems.

(a) *Use of field office technical guide.* A conservation plan or conservation system developed for the purposes of § 12.5(a) must be based on, and to the extent practicable conform with, the NRCS field office technical guide in use at the time the plan is developed or revised. For highly erodible croplands which were used to produce agricultural commodities prior to December 23, 1985, the applicable conservation systems in the field office technical guide are designed to achieve substantial reductions in soil erosion. Conservation systems shall be technically and economically feasible; based on local resource conditions and available conservation technology; cost-effective; and shall not cause undue economic hardship on the person applying the conservation system. Any conservation plans or systems that were approved prior to July 3, 1996, are deemed to be in compliance with this paragraph.

(b) *Substantial reduction in soil erosion.* For the purpose of determining whether there is a substantial reduction in soil erosion on a field containing highly erodible cropland which was used to produce an agricultural commodity prior to December 23, 1985, the measurement of erosion reduction achieved by applying a conservation plan or system shall be based on a comparison of the estimated annual level of erosion that is expected to occur on that portion of the field for which a conservation plan or system was developed and is being applied, to the estimated annual level of erosion that existed on that same portion of the field before the application of a conservation plan

or system. On a field that is converted from native vegetation after July 3, 1996, and where any crop production will result in increased erosion, in no case will the required conservation plan or system permit a substantial increase in erosion.

(c) *Field trials.* NRCS may allow a person to include in the person's conservation plan or a conservation system under the plan, on a field-trial basis, practices that are not currently approved but that NRCS considers have a reasonable likelihood of success. These trials must have prior approval by NRCS, and must be documented in the person's conservation plan specifying the limited time period during which the field trial is in effect. If, at the end of the conservation field trial period, NRCS finds that the practice does not meet conservation compliance requirements, the person will not be ineligible for USDA program benefits during the period of the field trial.

(d) *Highly erodible land previously under a Conservation Reserve Program contract.* Any person who owns or operates highly erodible land that was under a Conservation Reserve Program contract as authorized by section 1231 of the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended, shall have 2 years after the expiration of termination of the contract to fully apply a conservation system if the conservation plan for such land requires the installation of structural measures for the production of an agricultural commodity. NRCS officials may extend this period one additional year for circumstances beyond the control of the person. The person shall not be required to meet a higher conservation standard than the standard applied to other highly erodible cropland located within the area served by the field office technical guide for the area in which the field is located.

(e) *Information regarding conservation options.* NRCS, in providing assistance to a person for the preparation or revision of a conservation plan under this part, will provide such person with information concerning cost-effective and applicable erosion control alternatives, crop flexibility, or other conservation assistance options that may be available.

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(f) *Timely request for assistance.* Persons who require NRCS assistance for the development of a conservation plan or the installation of a conservation system are encouraged to request this assistance well in advance of deadline dates for compliance; otherwise the person may not be able to comply with these provisions and maintain eligibility for USDA program benefits.

(g) *Action by conservation districts.* Conservation districts approve or disapprove conservation plans or conservation systems after NRCS determines that the plans or systems conform to the NRCS field office technical guide. If a conservation district fails, without due cause, to act on a request for conservation plan or conservation system approval within 45 days, or if no conservation district exists, NRCS will approve or disapprove, as appropriate, the conservation plan or system in question.

(h) *Application of a conservation plan or system.* A person is considered to be applying a conservation plan for purposes of §12.5(a) if the conservation system or plan being applied achieves or exceeds the substantial reduction in soil erosion as described in paragraph (b) which the conservation system or plan was designed to achieve. It is the responsibility of the person to:

(1) Certify that the conservation plan or system is being applied; and

(2) Arrange for a revision of the conservation plan with NRCS, if changes are made in land use, crop rotation or management, conservation practices, or in the original schedule of practice installation that would affect the achievement of substantial reduction in soil erosion in a given crop year.

(i) *Appeal to FSA.* Persons who are adversely affected by the determinations made under this subpart and believe that the requirements of this subpart were improperly applied may appeal the decision to FSA under §12.12.

(j) *Undue economic hardship.* After a technical determination has been made, the FSA county committee shall, if a person asserts that the application of the person's conservation system would impose an undue economic hardship on the person, make a recommendation to the State FSA Committee as to whether or not the appli-

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cation of the conservation system would impose an undue economic hardship. The State FSA Committee may provide the person with a variance on the basis of the hardship. Under this variance, and any conditions that may be required in the variance, the person will be considered to be in compliance with the applicable provisions of this part. The State FSA Committee will consider relevant factors, such as the cost of installation of required conservation practices and benefits earned through programs subject to compliance with this part, and the person's general economic situation.

Subpart C—Wetland Conservation

§ 12.30 NRCS responsibilities regarding wetlands.

(a) *Technical and coordination responsibilities.* In carrying out the provisions of this part, NRCS shall:

(1) Oversee the development and application of criteria to identify hydric soils in consultation with the National Technical Committee for Hydric Soils and make available to the public an approved county list of hydric soil map units, which is based upon the National List of Hydric Soils;

(2) Coordinate with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and others in updating the National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands;

(3) Make or approve wetland determinations, delineations and certifications, functional assessments, mitigation plans, categorical minimal effects, and other technical determinations relative to the implementation of the wetland conservation provisions of this part;

(4) Develop and utilize off-site and on-site wetland identification procedures;

(5) Assure quality of service and determinations through procedures developed by NRCS in consultation with other Federal agencies that have wetland responsibilities;

(6) Investigate complaints and make technical determinations regarding potential violations;

(7) Develop a process at the state level, in coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, to ensure that these provisions are carried out in