

# Resource Conservation and Development Program Reaches a Milestone

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*The Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) program has grown both in number of areas covered and in funding since its inception in 1964. In 2002, RC&D received permanent authorization. The RC&D program's success springs from the individual initiative granted to and shown by local RC&D volunteer councils, whose decisions for their communities have upheld economic advancement and the conservation of natural resources.*

The Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) program is designed to expand economic opportunities in rural areas within a defined geographic area by encouraging and stimulating the growth of local income and employment amid a healthy and sustainable environment. While administered nationally by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), RC&D areas are locally initiated by interested citizens. Sponsored activities promote the orderly conservation and wise use of natural resources and are determined by citizen volunteers and locally selected civic leaders, who coordinate with public agencies and private interest/civic groups. Through a nationwide competitive process, local citizens formally apply for USDA designation as an "area."

RC&D areas (368 as of August 2002) are located in all 50 States, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Basin. Areas average about 7 counties, and their boundaries occasionally cross State lines to better address shared natural resource and economic needs. A total of

2,164 U.S. counties are included in RC&D areas, representing 85 percent of all U.S. counties and more than 77 percent of the U.S. population. RC&D areas have grown substantially from the first 10 authorized pilot areas in FY 1964 (table 1). Twenty areas were added in January 2002, though the total is limited to 450 by the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981.

## 2002 Farm Bill Enhances Environmental Management

The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill, PL 107-171) provided for the RC&D program's permanent authorization. This authorization validates the RC&D program's contributions to regional, citizen-based conservation and development, and its growing importance to the rural and suburban countryside. The 2002 Farm Bill redefined local leadership councils and acknowledged the participation of Native American tribes. Permanent authorization allows local volunteers to proceed with greater assurance that

resources will be provided and also makes it easier for RC&D to attract outside funding. A program evaluation of RC&D (with a report) is due to the U.S. House and Senate by 2005 regarding progress and future needs for program support. The program was funded for \$48 million in FY 2002, an increase of over 10 percent from the previous year's budget.

In a larger sense, the 2002 Farm Bill represents the single most significant commitment of resources toward conservation on private lands in the Nation's history (see <http://www.ers.usda.gov/features/farmbill/>). The legislation responds to a broad range of emerging challenges faced by farmers and ranchers, including soil erosion, preservation of wetlands and of wildlife habitat, and farmland protection. Private landowners can benefit from a variety of voluntary assistance, including cost sharing, land rental, incentive payments, and technical assistance for using conservation practices. The Farm Bill emphasizes the conservation of

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working lands, ensuring that farmland remains both healthy and productive. The RC&D program, with its broad geographic coverage, will play a significant role in meeting the conservation objectives of the 2002 Farm Bill.

### Pilot Program Laid a Solid Foundation

The RC&D program began as a pilot program (1964) with the passage of the Food and Agriculture Act of 1962. The RC&D program was one of a number of farm and rural development programs started in the 1960s to confront the problems of rural America. U.S. agriculture at the beginning of the 1960s was in turmoil. More than half of the counties in the Nation lost population in the 1950s and these counties were predominantly rural, with 6.7 million people moving from rural to urban areas in that decade. Farmers were leaving agriculture and small-town storefronts were being boarded up. USDA planners saw these trends and believed that long-term programs were needed to stimulate and diversify growth in rural areas and to help buffer them against losses to community leadership capacity, rural services, and economic infrastructure.

With RC&D, Federal and State planners were able to draw upon ideas from farm programs of the 1930s, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Acts and the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act. This earlier legislation had helped provide the tools that restored the purchasing power of farmers and landowners through cost-sharing, loans, and other sources of support. These tools, planners felt, might be used to engage currently underused rural resources of land, labor, and capital. New infusions of capital and

technical assistance could be targeted to generate new income and employment, which could have a positive economic impact on these rural economies. Still, RC&D

program framers needed economic knowledge about the effects of public investments on rural resources. For this, they came to the newly created Economic

Table 1  
**RC&D program annual appropriations, and number of designated councils, FY 1964-2002**

*RC&D has experienced renewed growth since 1990*

Fiscal year	Appropriations (\$ million)	Councils	Councils added/year
1964	1.5	10	10
1965	1.8	10	0
1966	4.3	20	10
1967	4.7	40	20
1968	6.2	49	9
1969	6.4	53	4
1970	10.8	66	13
1971	14.9	96	30
1972	20.9	119	23
1973	26.6	229	0
1974	17.2	143	24
1975	20.3	153	10
1976	37.5	163	10
1977	30.7	173	10
1978	31.9	173	0
1979	25.4	179	6
1980	32.0	185	6
1981	34.0	189	4
1982	26.5	189	0
1983	30.7	189	0
1984	26.0	189	0
1985	26.3	189	0
1986	25.0	189	0
1987	25.0	189	0
1988	25.1	189	0
1989	25.1	189	0
1990	27.3	194	5
1991	29.9	209	15
1992	32.5	236	27
1993	32.5	250	14
1994	32.9	277	27
1995	32.8	277	0
1996	29.0	289	12
1997	29.4	290	1
1998	34.4	315	25
1999	35.0	315	0
2000	35.2	315	0
2001	42.0	348	33
2002	48.0	368	20

Source: NRCS.

## RC&D Pilot Areas

	Acres
Upper Willamette, OR	2,925,890
Northern Rio Grande, NM	2,880,113
West Central, MN	2,404,320
Idaho-Washington, ID-WA	2,243,703
Pri-Ru-Ta, WI	2,028,000
Penn Soil, PA	1,518,080
Charles Mix-Bon Homme, SD	1,068,440
Lincoln Hill, IN	1,005,440
White River, VT	635,200
Gwinnett, GA	279,688
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,353,674</b>

Source: Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Research Service and asked for data on feasibility and economic impact studies.

ERS research, combined with work from the land-grant colleges, demonstrated how particular enterprises could help raise farm income and employment. ERS studies from that time ranged from economic feasibility studies of second-home developments to input-output analyses of rural recreation enterprises and their local impacts. A good deal of economic information was provided by the research community and applied to practical problems in the RC&D areas.

The first phase of RC&D's pilot program began in February 1964, with a sample of 10 widely dispersed areas (see box), covering more than 16 million acres. The pilot areas were largely agricultural-based and had problems with low income, declining population bases, deteriorating infrastructure, and few economic prospects.

These pilot areas began with an operating concept concentrating on locally initiated and sponsored activities. The purpose of these activities was to expand economic opportunities for the people of an

area through the orderly conservation, improvement, development, and wise use of their natural resources. An area with particular resource problems representative of conditions in other areas—for example, the recent closing of a local lumber mill or a mine—would be a strong candidate for selection as a pilot.

### Councils Ensure Local Initiative

The RC&D councils, as noted earlier, are composed of local unpaid volunteers selected to help carry out activities that increase the conservation of natural resources, support economic development, and enhance the environment and living standards in local communities. Typically, nearly half of the council members are already locally elected officials such as mayors, judges, or commissioners.

The councils set priorities, carry out the planning process (including public participation) for all projects, and ensure that local and State requirements are met, plans approved and accomplishments monitored. In effect, the councils are recognized by the Secretary of Agriculture to carry out

the development mission and implement the program at the local level. A recent news release from the Agriculture Secretary's office noted that "The focus on local direction and control has made RC&D one of the most successful rural development programs of the Federal Government (June 3, 2002)."

Each of the RC&D councils develops an approved Area Plan that catalogues an area's resources (based upon a sound economic inventory) and sets expectations for development. The area must be delimited in terms of a reasonably functional economic base as well as its fit into a regional economy.

As noted, RC&D areas start with an expression of interest and need by local individuals, associations, and businesses in a particular area. The motives for applying can be economic, environmental, or socially based. Typical sponsors are municipal, county, and State government, tribal councils, conservation districts, civic groups, or others seeking a regional structure to share knowledge and organizational resources. An application for a proposed RC&D area would typically include several counties and would be submitted to the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

NRCS has responsibility for administering the RC&D program, with technical assistance from other USDA agencies. These include the Farm Service Agency (FSA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), Agricultural Research Service (ARS), Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), Forest Service (FS), Economic Research Service (ERS), Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES), and the Rural Development mission area.

After a formal review by the above USDA agencies, NRCS presents the Secretary of Agriculture with a list of recommended applications to be designated as new RC&D areas. Upon an area's acceptance, a local council obtains a special guarantee for USDA assistance as long as an area's plan is maintained and local leadership is sustained. Upon approval of a council's plan, and under a charter of incorporation from the State, the council then directs that the plan be put into operation at the local level with the overall assistance of a USDA employee, selected as the coordinator for the area.

### RC&D Funds a Variety of Projects

Council members direct and use funding from a number of sources, including Federal, State, and local governments, as well as private sources. Funding includes appropriations, grants, loans, and cost-sharing funds. Activities funded include the construction/repair of community infrastructure such as local public water supply, farm irrigation, fire control, and transportation projects, as well as wildlife management, health, and welfare activities.

Some current projects show the broad scope of the program:

- Clinch-Powell Enterprise Community (an activity of the Clinch-Powell RC&D area) in Tennessee spearheaded an effort to develop a federally designated Empowerment Zone and in less than a year secured \$11 million for needed activities in their area plan, involving the expansion of a wide number of community services and education grants.

- Chariton Valley RC&D in south-central Iowa is adapting a CRP biomass harvesting method based on a successful joint USDA-Department of Energy effort, providing an innovative blend of conservation and rural development.
- Fish River Lakes Water Quality Association (St. John Aroostook Area) in Maine helped revive the economic and aesthetic value of Long Lake through volunteer work and by securing Federal funding.
- The Montana RC&D Association Affordable Housing Project helped provide assistance and support to first-time home buyers in sparsely populated zones through volunteer efforts and technical assistance.
- In Ohio, RC&D-supported Federal, State, and local groups are promoting a project to market wetlands for profit through the use of irrigation development for crops and wildlife habitat enhancement.
- The Glacial Hills Area in Kansas helped local entrepreneurs design and develop micro-enterprises of fewer than five employees by locating capital and providing technical assistance.

More detailed project descriptions can be found on the National Association of Resource Conservation & Development Councils website: <http://www.rcdnet.org/>.

### Some RC&D Achievements

NRCS reports that more than 20,000 unpaid volunteers are serving on or working with RC&D councils. In an average year, RC&D volunteers donate nearly 80,000 days to the program. NRCS estimates that nearly 40,000 projects have been completed in the nearly 40 years since the program began.

Most of the completed projects have been accomplished through the ability of local councils to secure financial assistance from a variety of public and private sources. In 2001, RC&D helped improve an estimated 5,000 miles of streams and over 880,000 acres of wildlife habitat, establishing large tracts of permanent vegetative cover.

Progress in economic development associated with the RC&D program has been equally impressive. In fiscal year 2001 alone, NRCS estimates that 500 new businesses were created and 1,800 expanded. It is also estimated that 283,000 people learned a new job skill and nearly 780,000 economically and socially disadvantaged people were served. The National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils has estimated that investments in RC&D leverage a 5-to-1 dollar return to local economies.

## Challenges, Problems, and Opportunities

The near-doubling of RC&D areas in the last 10 years has brought some problems and raised issues, among them:

- Accurate and timely economic information has become increasingly important in program management. Requests for up-to-date information on such subjects as income and employment and the distribution of that information to local areas has helped RC&D promote economic development at the local level.
- Congressional authority limits the number of new RC&D areas at 450. Many program managers believe that a new national strategy should be defined for the RC&D program once the current one is completed with the activation of all 450 areas.
- Along with a program cap, there has been a growing awareness of the need to redefine the process of integrating new urbanizing counties into the current program structure. This problem is complicated by the need to maintain links to a rapidly changing agricultural industry, which has many natural ties to the RC&D program.

- The national RC&D leadership is exploring the country's new entrepreneurial spirit. RC&D goals are to enhance the economic capacity of their areas, rural communities, and businesses. In order to achieve these goals, the RC&D information base must be expanded through technology, knowledge, and management resources. This makes the amassing of more capital and specialized resources a prime challenge. Technology and education might help accumulate capital, and RC&D leaders

are increasingly aware of the world market and its demand for the goods and services that are produced by many RC&D areas.

- Finally, RC&D leaders must continue to nurture effective working relationships with USDA agencies and other State and local partners. This has been, and remains, fundamental in integrating economic, cultural, and ethnic differences into an overall program strategy.<sup>RA</sup>

### For Further Reading . . .

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