



## Participating in AEM Tier 3A

This document is intended to clarify what is considered completion of AEM Tier 3A. Meeting or exceeding these minimum requirements will be the basis for acceptable utilization of state and federal AEM funding.

The development of a Tier 3A Conservation Plan is the initiation of a component conservation planning process. It is anticipated that most farms will develop their conservation plan progressively over time as they are ready, willing and able to make decisions on priority natural resource issues and opportunities. It should be the goal of each District to move each of their farms through the component planning process ultimately reaching the Tier 3B (CNMP/NMP) or 3C (Whole Farm Plan) level of conservation planning.

To meet the **minimum** requirements a Tier 3A Component Conservation Plan must address the “Core Conservation Planning Elements” and at least one of five planning components 1) Farmstead; 2) Cropland Conservation; 3) Nutrient Management; 4) Pasture Management; and/or 5) Pest/Pesticide Management.

### **AEM Tier 3A Progressive Conservation Plan Procedure**

- I. Before you visit the farm - Initiate the Core Planning Activities.
  - A. Collect and develop the required maps – all maps should have farm and field boundaries outlined; have proper labels, a legend, and a north arrow.
    1. farm location map (with watershed if possible)
    2. imagery for conservation plan map
    3. soils map with descriptions
    4. topographic map
    5. other useful maps such as wetlands, aquifers, surficial geology
  - B. Check office files and partners for existing plans and identify conservation programs the farm is participating in. Note specific fields and activities involved and incorporate information into appropriate section of the conservation plan such as field attributes chart, plan map and/or record of decisions (NRCS-CPA- 68 or equivalent form)
  - C. Determine the watershed concerns for the farm using the Watershed Site Evaluation Worksheet.
- II. Initiate On Farm Activities
  - A. Interview farm management:
    1. Establish the farms objectives related to issues such as farm business objectives, long term viability, quality of life, neighbor relations, and environmental stewardship.
    2. Develop a narrative/chart of farm facilities such as
      - a. Herd – groups/age, weights, numbers animal units.
      - b. Crops – types, acres, average or typical rotations.
      - c. Farm facilities – barns (freestall, tiestall, greenhouse, hutches, etc.), milk center, silos, manure handling & transfer, barnyard/feedlots.
  - B. Walk the entire farm.
    1. Verify priority concerns from AEM Tier 2 Summary Report.

2. Visit crop fields, hayland, and pasture and document the following: land use; waterbodies/wells; existing practices; orientation of farm roads & lanes; observed resource concerns such as gully/ephemeral erosion, drainage needs, concentrated flows, bedrock out crops, and sink holes; and opportunities for buffers/filters, conservation tillage, cover crop, etc.
  3. Document findings on a field attributes chart.
- C. Document the priority concerns (environmental risk) from AEM Tier 2 and confirmed through the field walk.
  - D. With farm management integrate **Farm Objectives** (II.A-1) with **Watershed Concerns** (I.C) and the confirmed **Priority Concerns** (II.C) (environmental risk) to establish the farm's **Natural Resource Issues and Opportunities** that will guide the development of the conservation plan (refer to sample plan for example).
  - E. Develop a narrative describing the farm's benchmark situation related to natural resource issues and opportunities that will be addressed through conservation planning and implementation (refer to sample plan for example).
  - F. With farm management determine which concerns/issues and opportunities will be planned hence determining which components (farmstead, cropland conservation, nutrient management, pasture management, and pest/pesticide management) will be planned initially and what should be planned in the future.

III. Component Planning - utilize the NRCS Conservation Planning Process to plan concerns within each component the farm has agreed to address. Concerns (and opportunities) where the farmer will make a decision on a course of action should be planned through step 7. Concerns where the farmer does not see the need to address, or is not ready to make a decision should be planned through at least step 5, and will hopefully be addressed in the future through progressive planning. Note – decisions made for one concern within a component may impact how other concerns or even whole components will need to be managed.

A. NRCS 9-Step Planning Process

1. **Identify Concerns & Opportunities** – has been addressed through completion of AEM Tiers 1 & 2, the farm walk, and Core Planning Elements I & II.
2. **Determine Objectives** – has been addressed through items II.A-1 of the Core Planning Package.
3. **Inventory Resources** – Additional data and information are gathered to understand the current condition of the natural resources in the planning area.
4. **Analyze Resource Data** – Data collected in step 3 above is analyzed to identify additional concerns, determine causes of the resource concerns, and document completion of an environmental evaluation (i.e. – RUSLE 2, WINPST, PI, NLI, mass nutrient balance, etc.).
5. **Identify Alternatives** – Use Section III of the FOTG to identify potential practices and systems for dealing with the resource concerns in the planning area. Alternatives should meet NRCS Conservation Practice Standards. Priority concerns where you can not get the farmer to make a decision should be documented on the *Record of Decision/BMP Implementation Schedule* (NRCS-CPA-68 or equivalent form) as a concern to be planned in the future, and the potential alternatives to address the concern should be listed.

6. **Evaluate Alternatives** for the component being planned:
  - a. Quantify the social, cultural resource, economic and ecological effects for each alternative using the NRCS-CPA-52, *Environmental Effects for Conservation Planning*.
  - b. If practice(s) considered could potentially cause a negative environmental impact on another resource, additional practices should be considered to mitigate the impact.
  - c. Planner should provide a preliminary (rough) cost estimate for each alternative and identify potential sources of financial assistance.
  - d. Planner should determine the basic O&M requirements for each practice being evaluated; also consider the potential costs of O&M and management changes that may be needed.
  - e. Present alternative management systems with estimated costs, O&M requirements along with potential costs, and any management changes the farm will need to adopt to make the practice(s) function properly to the farmer.
  - f. Document the discussions between the farmer and the planner in the *Conservation Assistance Notes*.
7. **Make Decisions** – The farmer selects a practice, or system of practices, for the concern being addressed. Decisions are needed for those priority concerns where there is a desire to move on to implementation.
  - a. Decisions should be recorded on a *Record of Decisions* form (NRCS-CPA-68 or your own equivalent form).
  - b. Develop a tactical plan for the implementation of conservation practices and management changes agreed upon. This part of the plan should describe what additional actions need to be taken to ensure the farmer is able to successfully carry out the needed management changes. Include appropriate job and information sheets for each practice that may help the farmer understand the steps involved in implementing the practice.
  - c. Provide customized operation & maintenance requirements for each conservation practice agreed upon.
  - d. Develop an Emergency Action Plan when any of the following practices or situations is present: manure/process waste water storage; manure transfer; manure and nutrient management; petroleum bulk storage; pesticide storage, mixing, and/or loading; and bulk fertilizer storage.
  - e. Have a section in the plan for other materials that support the plan such as a Cooperator's Agreement, contracts, program information, permits, etc. The Conservation Assistance Notes may also be stored in this section.

#### IV. Continue the Core Planning Elements

- A. Conservation Plan Summary Narrative – This narrative identifies the components that have been planned and those that should be considered for future planning.
  1. The conservation practices/systems to be installed are briefly reviewed and the appropriate NRCS Standards to be used may be identified. Include any practices that may be planned through Farm Bill Programs.
  2. Remaining priority issues in the planned component(s) where decisions were not made should also be identified.
  3. If ground disturbing practices have been selected then statements are needed that direct the farmer to address a Cultural Resources Review, Dig Safely NY, and an erosion and sediment control plan before the practice is undertaken.
- B. Implementation Schedule (NRCS- *Record of landowner Decisions and Progress in Application* CPA-68) – Developed into one document covering all of the components planned. Include practices that were planned through Farm Bill Programs.
  1. Include estimated quantities of each practice
  2. Include components and issues to be progressively planned.
- C. Conservation Plan Maps and Sketches cover all practices/issues on the Implementation Schedule. Map and sketches should include:
  1. FSA tract & field numbers
  2. Land use designations (cropland, hayland, pasture, farmstead) and resources (wells, waterbodies, etc.)
  3. North arrow, legend, & scale
  4. Planned practices labeled (corresponds with the Implementation Schedule).
- D. Operation & Maintenance (O&M) Schedule – arranges various O&M activities according to a time or event driven schedule (i.e. – weekly, monthly, annually, after each rainfall, after significant rainfall events, as needed, etc.)

#### V. Delivery and Documentation

- A. Provide the farmer with a copy of the plan that includes at minimum items shown on “Farmer’s Copy of an AEM Tier 3A Conservation Plan” and document that the plan was reviewed with the farmer.
- B. Document your accomplishments in any data management system maintained by the District.

### **Deliverables – Tier 3A**

- I. Submit a *Tier 3 Plan Requirements Checklist* for each farm completing a 3A plan.
  
- II. Document each farm that completes a Tier 3 Conservation Plan on the Final Report Form, and record the time spent in completing each plan in the Time Log. These forms will be reviewed and approved by your AEA at program close-out, and the Final Report Form will be submitted to the SWCC.