



Conservation Reserve Program and Conservation Technical Assistance Initiative 40 New Conservation Planner Positions (Statewide)

Overview

Producers across Illinois are on the front lines of ensuring global food security and protecting the state's land, water, and other natural resources for future generations. Conservation districts along with the Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) play a critical role in achieving this goal by providing producers with technical assistance, resources, and tools to implement effective conservation practices on their lands. IDOA through the Partners for Conservation program supports all 97 Conservation districts across the state. These Conservation district professionals are trusted advisors within their local communities and play a key role in educating producers, facilitating the conservation planning process, and working with producers to design and implement the most effective conservation systems for their operations. These proven conservation practices – such as cover cropping, nutrient management, and forest stand improvement – can increase production, enhance resilience, and improve biodiversity, land, and water quality in communities across the state.

The USDA's Natural Resource Conservation (NRCS) staff, in coordination with partners such as state departments of agriculture and conservation districts, implement critical USDA working lands conservation programs, like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). These programs provide resources that allow farmers, foresters, and ranchers to conserve land and water, protect water quality, and improve soil health. NRCS employees often work hand-in-hand with IDOA and conservation district staff to inform producers about conservation opportunities, develop conservation plans, and ultimately help landowners implement effective conservation practices.

As producer demand for conservation grows, resources and staff for our federal and local conservation workforces are often stretched thin. Over the past decade, USDA and their conservation partners have struggled to keep staffing levels on pace with attrition. Although NRCS has made progress by adding 3,000 workers over the past two years, there remain critical staff shortages at NRCS. This capacity issue has a very real impact on the administration of conservation programs, conservation planning, and producers' access to technical assistance, as well as staff morale.

Conservation staffing concerns also extend beyond NRCS. Other state, local, and private conservation professionals, including conservation districts, often struggle to reach and maintain adequate staffing levels. A 2021 Soil and Water Conservation Society poll of 1,715 public and private conservation practitioners found that 90 percent of respondents reported that a lack of conservation practitioners negatively impacts conservation momentum. Seventy-eight percent agreed that a lack of field staff reduces an organizations' capacity to get conservation on the ground.

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We need to inspire, educate, and provide more opportunities for the next generation to enter the conservation workforce. From elementary school to college – we need young people to understand the importance of conservation and provide them with the requisite tools and pathways to secure conservation careers.

IDOA in partnership with its Partners for Conservation program is already taking action to bolster the conservation workforce pipeline. With funding from the state legislature, IDOA is positioned to work closely with NRCS to develop a capacity building program to prepare high school and college students for conservation careers. The program will promote NRCS and conservation districts as employers of choice for diverse populations and develop future leaders in agriculture and conservation. Although IDOA in partnership with the state legislature has taken steps to address this growing issue, we recognize that there is much more left to do. Inspiring young professionals to become passionate about conservation, providing additional education opportunities, introducing students to conservation careers, bolstering training programs, and increasing compensation for conservation professionals are just some of the things we need to make progress on if we are going to address this challenge.

The purpose of this agreement is to allow the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) to tackle the conservation staffing capacity challenges and expand Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy efforts in Illinois, increase Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) technical assistance to Illinois CRP participants, and to increase general conservation planning assistance to Illinois landowners, users, and producers.

The project will allow the addition of up to 40 conservation planners across the state of Illinois. The conservation planners will be recruited and supervised by IDOA and hired by a subcontract hiring agent (Sangamon County Soil and Water Conservation District). The staff will be located in NRCS or IDOA offices across the state (see map below for initial locations). Staff locations will be evaluated based on NRCS and IDOA conservation planning workload needs, space availability, and the local office's capacity to engage the additional staff. The conservation planners will increase CRP technical assistance for planning, implementation, and maintenance. They will increase capacity to develop new conservation plans and to conduct conservation implementation follow-up to improve conservation successes.

The conservation planners will also support the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy (NLRs) efforts as the latest bi-annual report indicates an increase in overall nutrients being lost to Illinois streams and rivers. In addition, the new planners will be able to assist with the IDOA conservation programs to increase overall producer opportunities to participate in state and federal conservation programs.

Job Details: 40 positions statewide (see map for locations)

Employment type: Contractual position with benefit package

For more information or to apply, contact:

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Job Title: Conservation Planner

Job Status: Contractual (Sangamon County Soil and Water Conservation District)

Start Date: ASAP

Reports to: IDOA Division of Natural Resources Manager/Project Coordinator

Salary Range: \$40,000 - \$44,000

Benefits: Full benefit package available

Primary Location: Various statewide locations (see attached map)

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Job Description: Conservation planners provide environmental resource management advice, consult about land use and protection, and engage with multiple stakeholders. Each project is different, but all conservation planners should be familiar with the following duties:

- Apply the theories and practices of land use planning
- Source and apply relevant legislation and engineering best practices
- Apply the practices of natural environmental management
- Identify, analyze and remediate environmental issues and conflicts
- Promote environmental concerns, advocate for pollution prevention and land conservation
- Consult on legislative and policy rulings
- Make land use and conservation advice and recommendations to a variety of parties
- Identify and evaluate conservation issues and conflicts
- Develop and deploy solutions to logistical, ethical or process problems from a conservation standpoint
- Stay up to date on all correspondence, briefing notes, reports, field surveys and other documentation
- Promote environmental management through reports, interactions with clients and the public and presentations
- Commit to building a better community and environment
- Engage with community members at the local and state levels
- Exercise strong interpersonal skills to create pathways to more partnerships
- Work with interdisciplinary government agencies, officials, and community groups

Primary responsibilities include:

Develops Conventional Conservation Plans (35%)

- Receives training in professional farm planning methods and procedures; soil interpretations and properties; and in conservation application to develop a well-rounded experience in resource conservation planning and to better understand the interrelation of the various functional fields within the resource conservation program.
- Assists in gathering and assembling preliminary data for all resource concerns for use in developing complete basic farm conservation plans. Prepares draft drawings identifying problem areas in the field, delineates watershed areas, assesses soil types and performs preliminary layout of conservation practices on aerial photos. Completes assigned plans using most current NRCS web-based programs. Utilizes soil erosion tools such as RUSLE and WEPS and the Pesticide Risk Assessment tool; and other technology tools as part of conservation planning process. Completes the CPA 52, NRCS environmental assessment during the planning stages. Assembles completed farm plan folders according to NRCS procedure. Completes Conservation Planning course as part of requirement to become certified as a conservation planner.

- Conducts engineering surveys and lays out conservation practices and prepares drawings for conservation practices common to the area. Performs engineering surveys under the direction of a NRCS Soil Conservation Technician and/or Engineer. Assists preliminary surveys and practice lay out, measurement, and certification. Maintains accurate field notes, reduces and plots notes, and performs preliminary drafting and simple designs as assigned. Assists with construction checks of conservation practices installed to assure adherence to NRCS standards and specifications. Deviations from plans or standards are reported to supervisor for corrective action.
- Keeps daily records of time and work accomplishments and summarizes time and accomplishments for periodic and special reports.
- Receives intensive and specialized training in all phases of the soil and water conservation programs, including information and education activities, working relationships with district governing body, and other state, federal, and local groups at the county level.
- Travel as needed to complete the assigned duties.

Implements Farm Bill Programs (25%)

- Understands all applicable NRCS, State and Farm Bill programs available to address resource concerns and explains cost share programs and payment procedures to applicants and contract holders. With supervision provides technical assistance to farmers and ranchers about Farm Bill conservation programs.
- With supervision utilizes most current technology programs in the documentation and management of conservation plans and technical assistance by the service center. Utilizes current technology including electronic data collection and geographic information systems to perform duties.
- With supervision provides assistance in administrative, fiscal, and technical responsibilities for a wide variety of farm bill, NRCS and IDOA state programs carried out at the field office which may include but are not limited to Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), easement programs and Partners for Conservation initiatives.

Contract Review for Compliance with Schedules and Practice Requirements (25%)

- Carries out a follow-up schedule for applying soil conservation practices in accordance with plan and contract schedules. Under the direction of the Grant Program Coordinator, makes minor changes in farm plans as necessary to comply with changes in farm operations, change of ownership, or to provide a more workable plan for the farm operation. Assists with contract reviews as assigned and notifies District Conservationist when contracts are technically non-compliant.

Conservation Objectives and Programs Promotion/Assistance to District Conservationist (15%)

- Carries out various duties which enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of soil conservation operations carried out by the field office. Writes news articles and stories, conducts tours, speaks to groups and collects pertinent information to be used to further agency programs.
- Consistently communicates and treats customers (America's farmers, ranchers and forest landowners, their representatives, visitors, and all IDOA/NRCS staff and leadership) in a courteous, tactful, and respectful manner. Incumbent provides the customer with consistent information according to established policies and procedures. Handles conflict and problems in dealing with the customer constructively and appropriately.
- Works with IDOA state team and NRCS District Conservationist to conduct environmental education on natural resource issues, water quality, and general conservation at workshops, seminars, fairs, and/or assist the Conservation District staff in these activities.
- Participates in meetings with IDOA staff and District Conservationist to coordinate work and prioritize where technical assistance will be provided.

- Communicates and works directly with landowners and operators through face-to-face contact, telephone, written correspondence or e-mail.

Other Position Factors:

Equal Employment Opportunity and Civil Rights: Actively supports the Equal Opportunity and Civil Rights Programs and assures the delivery of agency programs and services are carried out in accordance with policy and procedures without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation and marital or family status.

Safety and Health: Performs duties in a supportive manner of a safe and healthy work environment. The incumbent exercises caution and maintains all safety requirements when exposed to dangerous objects, chemicals, and extreme temperatures.

Condition of Employment: Motor vehicle operator: Must possess and maintain a valid state motor vehicle operator's license for the type of vehicle(s) operated to perform the duties of this position. This may require the operation of a motor vehicle in both public and private roads during daylight hours and occasionally after dark.

Condition of Employment: The incumbent is required to obtain Conservation Planning Certification in accordance with the guidelines in General Manual 180 Part 409.3. State specific supplement requirements, if issued, will apply.