

The Land Improvement Contractors of America (LICA)

Dedicated to Professional Conservation of Soil and Water
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Position paper supporting USDA's adoption of innovative technologies which will improve conservation planning.

Members of the Land Improvement Contractors of America who specialize in installing conservation practices on our nation's rural lands, have long realized that over time, the LICA partner doing the technical conservation planning, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, has been hampered by personnel losses and declining conservation budgets. The speed with which producers can get a preliminary plan and cost estimate for a practice design has slowed to the point that often implementation decisions cannot be made in the same year, or even two years, after the plan was initially requested of NRCS.

NRCS has been encouraging development of new technical planning tools through the Conservation Innovation Grants Program. Additionally they have been deploying a mobile conservation planning tool that will use geospatial data, including light detection and ranging-derived topographic information, that should support landowner decision making and speed program delivery. This is being done under the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative (CDSI). LICA supports NRCS in this effort and encourages NRCS to work with third-party vendors to develop "plug-in" technologies that can be directly integrated into the CDSI system.

In 2011, LICA members have seen examples of one such third-party vendor's development of such technology. They are planning tools developed by Agren, a small company in Carroll, IA. These computerized online tools coupled with LIDAR and intuitive GIS-based technology look to have the potential to help landowners quickly see how practices such as farm ponds, grassed waterways, wetlands, and other structural practices will fit on their land, and just as quickly get some idea of the likely costs involved. Those LICA members that have looked at Agren's planning tools are excited about the potential they hold. We have also learned that NRCS has piloted the use of these Agren tools in Iowa, and is conducting further pilot studies on them in Ohio and Louisiana. LICA is pleased with this development. And while we are pleased with this development we urge NRCS to adopt a sense of urgency and complete these trials as quickly as possible so that new tools are available to the people working in the field.

LICA supports Agren's development of these planning tools, and would encourage them and other vendors to continue working with USDA's NRCS under the CDSI to continue this new, innovative technical tool development. We see this as an activity that benefits all, the producer with quicker preliminary plans on which to make an implementation decision; NRCS, as they could help strengthen their core planning function at a time when planning technical assistance needs have increased and budgets and staff are decreasing; contractors, as construction decisions may not drag on from one year to the next; and the environment, as practices can be implemented in a more timely manner.

LICA wants to see preliminary practice plans and cost estimates available to producers much more quickly than is currently happening. Innovative new planning tools will help speed things up.