Voluntary Conservation: Benefit and Cost Considerations for Stewardship Programs

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1. What is Voluntary Conservation?

2. Understanding the Baseline

3. Value of Conservation
What is voluntary conservation?

- Conservation is the “preservation, protection, or restoration of the natural environment, natural ecosystems, vegetation, and wildlife”

- Voluntary conservation is conservation undertaken by individuals or other parties that is not mandatory or regulated.

- While voluntary conservation could apply to any person or group interested in preservation, protection, or restoration, this presentation focuses on agriculture – primarily landowners and/or growers.

Photo by Jeff Vanuga, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, Kansas
What is Voluntary Conservation?

- Conservation actions have been and are continuing to be installed that directly benefit species and provide numerous other environmental benefits, such as controlling soil erosion.

- The most appropriate conservation actions are dependent on the site-specific threat and the purpose and need related to a given species.

- Conservation actions may be ineffective if they are designed without an understanding of landscape.
• Why is a baseline important?
• How is a baseline defined?
• Are there minimum criteria for conservation actions?
Establishing and Understanding the Baseline
Buffered agriculture as a percentage of total agriculture in each 12-digit HUC.
The CRP is a program administered by the Farm Service Agency; farmers in the program receive annual payments and establishment cost share to remove environmentally sensitive land from crop production and instead plant perennial species that provide environmental benefits.

Source: https://www.epa.gov/enviroatlas
LandScope America

• Conservation Registry, an online database that tracks and maps conservation, restoration and wildlife projects.
• Using LandScope, you can map and track a wide range of conservation actions, including:
  • Habitat restoration and management actions
  • Enhanced conservation status actions
  • Monitoring, research and education actions
Understanding the **baseline** is key to being able to identify and target conservation to areas where the **benefits will be the greatest**.

Knowing what conservation actions are already on the ground and the benefits provided by those actions, may allow for a stewardship program to be developed that focuses conservation funds to address specific objectives, such as habitat development, in areas that will directly benefit the species.
What are the Costs and Benefits of Conservation?

- Estimating the costs and benefits of conservation actions is not easy.
- In many cases, investment in conservation is an investment in long-term benefits.
- There are different conservation actions that can be used to address a specific resource concern based on site-specific considerations and the objectives of the decision maker.
- Costs and benefits differ by conservation action and by location of the action.
- Some conservation actions provide the greatest benefits when established as part of a system of practices.
- Conservation, like everything else in agriculture, is not one-size-fits-all. It is specific to a grower and their operation.
Costs and Benefits are Action and Site Specific

- The choice of conservation action is dependent on the resource concern being addressed and the location of the resource concern.

- For example, for wildlife habitat management, growers may choose to manage or re-establish:
  - Early successional habitat
  - Native grassland habitat
  - Wetland and shallow water habitat
  - Stream and riparian corridor habitat
  - Forested habitats

- The most appropriate and successful action may differ from location to location and from grower to grower.
Benefits

- Water Quality
- Soil Quality
- Economic Opportunity
- Biodiversity and Habitat
- Outdoor Recreation
- Aesthetics and Visual Quality
- Protection and Safety
- Other Benefits

Costs

- Materials
- Equipment
- Labor
- Management
- Crop Production Changes
- Forgone Income
- Other costs
Maximizing Benefits and Minimizing Costs
Concluding Thoughts

- The goal should be to target stewardship programs to facilitate conservation adoption areas where there is a potential for measurable benefits.

- Conservation actions must fit into the current production system of the grower for the actions to be successful. Conservation is not one-size-fits-all.

- There needs to be a clearer understanding of the conservation baseline.

- While some costs are straightforward (materials, labor), others (foregone income) are not as clear. The same thing is true for benefits. Consideration must be given to all costs and benefits, even if it is just as part of a qualitative discussion.
Thank you!

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