

# A Conservation Professionals' Guide to Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Conservation Delivery with Historically Underserved Producers and Communities





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## Executive Summary

This guidebook seeks to be a living resource aimed at integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles into conservation efforts amidst the challenges posed by climate change. Developed by stakeholders representing historically underserved communities, including producers, conservation professionals, and supporting organizations, this guidebook serves as a crucial tool for USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) field office staff and partners. It offers actionable guidance tailored to each phase of the nine-step conservation planning process, with a particular emphasis on addressing the specific needs of historically underserved producers and communities. Rooted in insights gleaned from inclusive roundtable discussions and designed to foster trust and productive relationships, this guidebook represents a significant step toward building a more resilient and equitable conservation movement. By embracing DEI considerations and leveraging community-led solutions, this guidebook seeks to empower local communities in spearheading their own conservation initiatives, ultimately contributing to a more sustainable future for all.

## Background, Historical Context, and Considerations

### GOAL AND PURPOSE

In the face of climate change, conservation is crucial to protecting agricultural systems and communities. However, conservation cannot be achieved without prioritizing DEI across all efforts. As we seek to advance conservation, we cannot ignore the stark inequities that persist within our society. The burdens of climate change and other natural resource concerns are not borne equally. Instead, they disproportionately burden those who are already marginalized and underserved.

The most effective conservation efforts are those led by and for the people who inhabit the land. Empowering communities to lead their own conservation efforts is not only a good idea—it is essential for real and lasting change. Conservation is done best when it unites people with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and ideas to inspire leadership, collaboration, and innovation within their community.

With expanded initiatives advancing climate-smart agriculture comes an opportunity and responsibility for conservation professionals and the organizations that support them, across all sectors, to take action toward



providing equitable access to conservation. The USDA NRCS aims to ensure that all its programs and services are accessible to every customer, treating them fairly and equitably. This includes reaching out to historically underserved producers and landowners who have experienced significant barriers to equity and justice in accessing agency programs and policies. Embracing new understandings, perspectives, and skill sets will empower conservation professionals to integrate DEI considerations, even amidst increasing workloads, staffing concerns, and workplace challenges. By confronting institutional racism and inequity within conservation assistance mechanisms, we pave the way to better serve and support historically underserved producers and communities to identify goals and optimal outcomes that address the natural resource concerns in their communities.

By building productive relationships and partnerships with historically underserved producers and communities, conservation professionals can provide the conservation technical assistance needed to implement natural resource conservation practices that address a wide range of concerns such as air quality, aquatic habitat, erosion control, plant health, nutrient management, livestock production, water quality, irrigation water management, soil quality, and other resource issues that can impact both farming/ranching operations and the environment. This guidebook assists conservation professionals, both NRCS field office staff and NRCS partners, in better understanding how to partner with and offer conservation technical assistance to historically underserved producers and communities to realize that goal.

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***At the end of this guidebook lies the beginning of a better conservation movement—a more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and just conservation movement. Thank you for being a part of it.***

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## METHODOLOGY AND OTHER KEY CONSIDERATIONS

To better understand the challenges historically underserved producers face in receiving conservation technical assistance and the gaps conservation professionals struggle to bridge to address those challenges, the project team conducted a roundtable series with relevant stakeholders. The insights gained through the roundtable series informed actionable guidance detailed in this guidebook. This section describes the process we took to gather those insights.

### DEFINITION OF HISTORICALLY UNDERSERVED

For this guidebook, we use the USDA category of “historically underserved” individuals and groups, with a specific focus on racial/ethnic diversity within that category. USDA defines four groups as “historically underserved,” including farmers or ranchers who are (1) Beginning, (2) Socially Disadvantaged, (3) Veterans, and/or (4) Limited Resource. Within this definition, NRCS maintains a specific focus on racial/ethnic diversity and notes that gender alone is not a covered group for the purposes of NRCS conservation program authorities, unlike other USDA agencies.

Members of these groups have been historically underserved by, or subject to discrimination in, federal policies and programs. You can find more information on the “historically underserved” definition and the identified groups online at [www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/underserved-farmers-ranchers](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/underserved-farmers-ranchers).

## ROUNDTABLE SERIES

In collaboration with the Soil and Water Conservation Society, Meridian Institute (Meridian) planned and facilitated four roundtable discussions to gather insights from relevant stakeholders to inform the crafting of this guidebook and to review its structure and content. Meridian developed the roundtable topics, goals, and participants with equity considerations, and the facilitator drew upon previous experience in fostering inclusive spaces and facilitating racial equity discussions. Additionally, the team consulted a racial equity practitioner with expertise in agriculture and food systems to support the design of the roundtables. The resulting discussions focused on the following goals:

- **Roundtable One:** Producer and producer organizations discussed barriers within NRCS' nine-step conservation planning process and opportunities to integrate DEI considerations that support historically underserved producers accessing conservation technical assistance.
- **Roundtable Two:** Conservation professionals discussed the barriers and opportunities in the nine-step conservation planning process and opportunities to enhance DEI considerations in how conservation professionals administer conservation technical assistance to historically underserved producers.
- **Roundtable Three:** Conservation professionals discussed the outline of this guidebook and the format that would best communicate the barriers and opportunities in the nine-step conservation planning process, as well as opportunities to enhance DEI considerations in how conservation professionals administer conservation technical assistance to historically underserved producers.
- **Roundtable Four:** Producer and producer organizations discussed content revisions to this guidebook to improve the reader's understanding of DEI in the nine-step conservation planning process.

The team took several steps to ensure the roundtable sessions were safe and inclusive spaces for the participants. The following three parameters were developed and implemented in the roundtables to create a safe space for frank discussion:

1. The client was excluded from the discussion portion of the agenda, in recognition of the likelihood that their presence as the funder and as white people would stifle discussions.
2. The team intentionally crafted a participant list to be diverse based on race, gender, geographic location, and organizational affiliation to ensure a range of represented perspectives.
3. The facilitation team used nonattributional techniques to document and report on the discussions to promote honest feedback.





## HISTORY OF CONSERVATION TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND HISTORICALLY UNDERSERVED PRODUCERS

To create a more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and just conservation movement, it is imperative to reflect on the past and acknowledge the harm inflicted on historically underserved producers and communities. By understanding how these injustices carry over and persist today, we can pave the way for meaningful change and work toward a better conservation movement for all.

The inequities of today are deeply rooted, as privilege and wealth have perpetuated across generations. Understanding these historical injustices is crucial, as they create barriers to accessing USDA programs and contribute to present-day challenges such as wealth disparity, heirs' property issues, limited awareness and utilization of innovative technology, and smaller farm sizes among marginalized communities (Equity Commission Final Report 2024). Since the USDA's establishment, historically underserved communities and producers have experienced significant barriers to just and equitable access to programs (USDA NRCS 2024a). Other policies have also created systemic issues around access and inclusion in agriculture and conservation for historically underserved communities and individuals. Addressing these disparities goes beyond offering DEI conservation technical assistance—it requires acknowledgment of historical injustices as a foundation for implementing policies that promote equity in agriculture conservation. Examples of the historical inequities include:

- Despite being the nation's first farmers, Indigenous people often found their traditional agricultural practices and education excluded from the national agricultural extension network, with their academic institutions not recognized as land-grants until 1994 (Equity Commission Final Report 2024).
- USDA policies and eligibility requirements have long supported western models of agriculture and excluded Indigenous Knowledge and practices.
- The Morrill Act of 1862 created the land-grant college system, prioritizing agricultural education at predominantly white institutions. Historically Black colleges and universities were not supported by the USDA until the Second Morrill Act of 1890, which designated funding for them to become land-grant institutions (USDA NIFA 2024).
- Excluded from many farmer organizations, it wasn't until the late nineteenth century that Black farmers formed their own groups to engage young African American students in agriculture (Equity Commission Final Report 2024).
- Historically underserved communities have been disenfranchised by policies that have led to the failure to obtain land or loss of land, e.g., the unfulfilled promise of "40 acres and a mule" (WCEG 2020).
- Well-documented data confirm the enduring consequences of legislative measures such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Alien Land Laws, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, leading to a decline in Asian American land ownership of agricultural land spanning from the late 1800s to the middle of the twentieth century (Equity Commission Final Report 2024).
- Lack of access to legal services contributed to the prevalence of heirs property in historically underserved communities, reating a range of legal, economic, and social challenges that can undermine the stability and prosperity of historically underserved communities.
- Certain policies have created growing challenges for small and mid-sized producers, making it increasingly difficult for them to compete (USDA 2023). The federal crop insurance program is one such example.
- A history of civil rights claims and class action lawsuits exists against USDA stemming from both producers and its own workforce (Equity Commission Final Report 2024; Russell et al. 2021).

Consequently, the duration and prevalence of these and many more examples have led to a lack of representation of and mistrust among historically underserved producers and communities when it comes to working with conservation agencies and organizations. Additional resources on the historical context can be found in Appendix D.

In recent years, the US Congress, USDA, and other conservation agencies and organizations have taken actions in an attempt to rectify the history and impact of explicit and implicit policies that have hindered participation in USDA programs by historically underserved producers and communities. These efforts include the creation of offices, dedicated staff positions, commissions, reports, and goals dedicated to serving historically underserved producers. They are also offering training and changing policies and program rules to be more inclusive and offering technical and financial support to co-build projects that center historically underserved producers and communities.

Moving forward from this historical context requires a commitment to rectifying past injustices and building a more inclusive and equitable future in conservation. By acknowledging the systemic barriers that have marginalized certain communities and perpetuated inequity, we can take meaningful steps toward addressing these issues. This involves not only recognizing the importance of diverse perspectives and traditional knowledge in conservation efforts, but also actively centering historically underserved producers and communities in decision-making processes. This guidebook seeks to serve as a stepping stone for conservation professionals in offering DEI conservation delivery with historically underserved producers, focused on the future, with knowledge of the past.







## Barriers to the Nine-Step Conservation Planning Process

USDA NRCS and partners use the nine-step conservation planning process to develop a conservation plan with producers that seek to address their natural resource concerns and objectives (USDA NRCS 2024b).

The insights shared through the roundtable series conducted from October of 2022 to December of 2023 with historically underserved producers, nonprofits, and conservation professionals produced a list of barriers and action steps for DEI in conservation technical assistance administration. This section contains all of the barriers raised throughout the roundtable series.

### **LACK OF TRUST AND PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

Historically underserved producers and communities have historically lacked trust in conservation professionals, and for valid reasons (further explained in the “Background, Historical Context, and Considerations” section). The past traumatic experiences that historically underserved producers and communities have experienced with government agencies have fueled mistrust and failed relationships between conservation professionals and historically underserved producers, their communities, and the nonprofits that support them in managing natural resources effectively. Furthermore, building trust and rapport with a community or individual is a time-consuming process that conservation professionals must commit to in order to sustain the long-term ability to carry out natural resource conservation work.

### **EXCLUSIONARY OUTREACH AND INVENTORY PROCESSES**

Specialized and intentional outreach to historically underserved producers is not currently part of the nine-step conservation process. Most historically underserved communities and producers are not aware of their options for addressing natural resource concerns through local or federal conservation programs, creating a lack of equity and inclusion from the start of the nine-step conservation planning process. There are various reasons for this gap, including language barriers, cultural differences, accessible forms of communication, different levels of education, and a lack of outreach efforts that meet producers where they are instead of expecting them to come to the conservation professional or field office. In addition, outreach efforts need to be continuous, not one-time presentations or providing written resources only once natural resource concerns are identified. Conservation professionals must keep historically underserved producers informed to ensure their active participation in addressing any natural resource concerns on their land.

Moreover, historically underserved producers and the nonprofits that support them have experienced inconsistent inventory methods for tracking natural resource concerns and poor communication when

changes to data documentation for planning occur. For instance, a nonprofit shared that local field offices in a region they support switched their documentation process to the Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) program, which is a voluntary incentive-based program that helps producers operate environmentally sound and economically viable operations. However, historically underserved producers in that region were not informed of this change, which limited their ability to receive the benefits of the program and the conservation technical assistance required to address natural resource concerns on their land.

### LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY BARRIERS

Historically underserved producers and the nonprofits that support them often struggle to understand the internal jargon and acronyms used by NRCS and local field offices. The lack of streamlined language and consistent definitions in NRCS communications and across NRCS programs makes it challenging for these groups



to access conservation programs and conservation technical assistance. For instance, nearly all the nonprofit representatives who attended the roundtable series raised that understanding the language used by NRCS is quite time-consuming—including NRCS standard practices, funding protocols, process for prioritization, and codes associated with the financial assistance programs. Nonprofits may face difficulties comprehending the technical jargon used in explaining the nature of a conservation program and the obligations that an historically underserved producer must fulfill to participate in it. As a result, nonprofits may have limited capabilities to assist historically underserved producers in navigating options to address their natural resource concerns through such programs beyond explaining the basics of program opportunities. Many producers learn the ropes from each other, which makes it particularly difficult for historically underserved producers who may not have those relationships or engage within those informal or formal producer coalitions, committees, or networks.

When it comes to terminology, the nine-step conservation planning process faces difficulties in integrating DEI because of the challenge of balancing different understandings of what DEI means. This challenge can manifest itself in the form of a lack of recognition of the vulnerability that historically underserved producers require to participate in the planning process. It can also be identified as varying levels of enthusiasm to understand what DEI entails and its application to the planning process and at local field offices. DEI conversations are still new and can often be

met with fear or hostility. To implement DEI, cultural and process changes are required to make it an integral part of the planning process and administration of conservation technical assistance.

### BARRIERS TO ENTRY IN CONSERVATION PLANNING AND PROGRAM APPLICATIONS

Historically underserved producers tend to lack financial resources that afford them access to and the knowledge of the local experts or systems required to implement their conservation plan or practice under NRCS contracts (e.g., external experts, contractors, and project managers). The workload alone required to create a conservation plan to include the design variables dictated by NRCS is significant, and may require additional steps that the producer is unfamiliar with, such as preparation for public comment on the plan, securing permits, and even knowing local businesses that are respected and offer a fair price for services. These elements are outside of a producer's capacity if it is their first time going through the process, and require guidance and advice from those who have experience with the process. This becomes an even more significant barrier for historically underserved producers when the majority do not hold the historical relationships necessary to implement these contracts.

Another issue is when local professionals or businesses refuse to work with historically underserved producers. This could be for an array of reasons including that the producers are not known to them, or were not recommended through their pre-existing networks. A conservation professional informed us that



external experts who could support Indigenous producers tend to express apprehension about supporting conservation projects because of the multi-agency approvals needed to work on tribal land. Further, cost-share amounts are not readily shared during the plan development period. This means that producers who are unaware that cost-share rates are listed online or are unfamiliar with how NRCS develops contract costs may not know how much they will be offered in the contract until it is time to sign it. This can cause issues down the road, if the producer has not defined the full project budget and evaluated their ability to implement the practice at the payment rate NRCS has provided.

With this in mind, historically underserved producers may require more creativity and flexibility in creating a conservation plan that addresses a natural resource concern within their capacities and financial constraints.

### **CONFUSING CONSERVATION PROGRAM APPLICATION PROCESSES**

The application process required to access conservation technical assistance is inaccessible to historically underserved producers due to the lack of streamlined application components and the multi-agency approvals needed to complete an application. Lack of streamlining makes it confusing to producers who do not know the process, and particularly for historically underserved producers. NRCS conservation technical assistance opportunities are also largely inaccessible to historically underserved producers due to lack of knowledge of how the programs operate, how to qualify, and the confidence to request the service. If producers do not have clear knowledge of the opportunities, the conservation professional may not include it in their application, which can ultimately hurt their ranking and likelihood to move forward with a contract. In-office requests are met by available staff responses, which can either provide education and guidance or message opportunities in a way that seem inaccessible to the producer. Often the producer must be a clear advocate for themselves in these meetings and already know the conservation practices offered through NRCS conservation programs. Compounding this with geographically inaccessible field offices, lack of racial/gender representation in those offices, historical distrust of government agencies in general, and limited broadband access to online application forms further exclude historically underserved producers from conservation programs and financial assistance to assist in implementing their projects.

## **Guidance for Conservation Professionals**

The following guidance aims to support conservation professionals in better administering conservation technical assistance to historically underserved producers and implementing DEI considerations throughout the NRCS nine-step conservation planning process. The nine-step conservation planning process is not only utilized by NRCS but also by local government agencies, nonprofits, and private sector partners. The process consists of three phases: Phase 1 involves collecting and analyzing natural resource concerns, Phase 2 involves deciding how to address the concerns, and Phase 3 involves applying and evaluating the chosen plan. However, before initiating the nine-step conservation planning process, it is important to understand the core DEI needs of historically underserved producers, communities, and the nonprofits that serve them. To address that, this guidebook includes a Preparatory Phase that emphasizes building trust and productive relationships with historically underserved producers and supporting organizations.

<b>Preparatory Phase</b>	<b>Phase I: Collection and Analysis</b>	<b>Phase II: Decision Support</b>	<b>Phase III: Application and Evaluation</b>
Internal Readiness Trust and Relationship Building Intentional Outreach	Identify Problems Determine Objectives Inventory Resources Analyze Resource Data	Formulate Alternatives Evaluate Alternatives Make Decisions	Implement the Plan Evaluate the Plan



Delivering equitable conservation technical assistance to historically underserved producers is both complex and specific to the historically underserved community a conservation professional may serve. As in previous sections, the following action steps were informed by the roundtable discussion with historically underserved producers, the nonprofits that support them, and conservation professionals. To be most useful to conservation professionals, we have detailed actionable steps under each phase of the nine-step conservation planning process. Additionally, under each phase, you will find a brief overview of the associated steps in the NRCS nine-step conservation planning process in a green box for reference.

This guidebook is not intended to be a comprehensive compilation of all the challenges and recommended steps to support all historically underserved producer groups that exist in the United States. Instead, this guidebook will serve as a living document that will continue to grow and evolve as discussions about DEI in conservation and conservation technical assistance progress in the field.

## A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Before diving into the guidance, conservation professionals must establish a common understanding of language and terminology with historically underserved producers. Shared language upholds respect throughout the process and helps maintain a productive relationship essential to conservation work in any region. Throughout the nine-step conservation planning process, please consider avoiding the following terms and make use of the associated inclusive replacements:

- **Avoid the term “socially disadvantaged”** when communicating with historically underserved producers as it discriminates against Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and historically underserved producers based on their identity. This term and others like it are counterintuitive to DEI efforts as it further excludes these producers and perpetuates racial and ethnic stereotypes. Additionally, the term “socially disadvantaged” has varying definitions as applied to implementing programs in any given state or USDA agency.
- **Not all ranchers identify as farmers and vice versa across the nation.** The lack of distinction in NRCS’ use of these terms can exclude ranchers from perceived farmer-only programs and vice versa. Consider combining definitions under one word, such as “producer.”
- **Relabeling tribal/culturally founded practices as new ideas for mass adoption (e.g., regenerative agriculture) is antithetical to DEI efforts.** The whitewashing of any cultural practice further alienates historically underserved producers from NRCS.
- **Use plain language techniques and translate external communications and resources** to provide clarity and greater accessibility to conservation programs for historically underserved producers.

## PREPARATORY PHASE

The **Preparatory Phase** focuses on building trust and forming productive relationships with historically underserved producers before administering the nine-step conservation planning process. This phase is foundational to breaking down barriers of mistrust and building understanding with historically underserved producers, their communities, and nonprofits that support them to effectively partner in managing natural resource concerns. The preparatory phase also covers considerations for internal readiness and intentional outreach to historically underserved producers.

- **Internal Readiness:** Refers to an individual or organization's preparedness and capacity to effectively implement initiatives and promote a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion. It encompasses willingness, commitment, and resources to drive meaningful change, address disparities, and create a more inclusive and equitable environment.
- **Trust and Relationship Building:** Building trust and productive relationships with historically underserved producers and their communities takes time and commitment. This phase must not be deprioritized for the sake of conducting the nine-step conservation planning process.
- **Intentional Outreach:** Refers to purposeful, planned, and personalized efforts to connect with historically underserved communities with the goal of fostering inclusion and ensuring equitable access.

Note that building trust and productive relationships with historically underserved producers and their communities takes time and commitment. This phase must not be deprioritized for the sake of conducting the nine-step conservation planning process. **The following are considerations and actions that conservation professionals can utilize in the Preparatory Phase:**

- Understand the difference between equity and equality in the planning process. Equality is treating everyone the same, but equity means understanding that each person has different circumstances and allocating the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome.
  - » Equality would be planting the same number of trees as wind-breaks on each farm across the county.
  - » Equity would mean planting more trees on the farms that are at the highest risk for wind erosion.
  - » Equality would be minimizing bias while reviewing job applications.
  - » Equity would mean minimizing bias as well as reaching out to encourage applications from the communities that experienced hiring discrimination.
- Commit to starting a personal journey in understanding and navigating DEI work. Offering more diverse, equitable, and inclusive conservation technical assistance among historically underserved producers is a continual process that begins with oneself—understanding conscious and unconscious biases, learning different cultures, and being open to hearing various experiences that do not reflect what may feel familiar. To get started, create a plan for embarking on a personal DEI journey and articulate your commitment to that journey with others to instill accountability. Considerations for starting a personal journey include:
  - » Acknowledge personal bias and suspend any prior notions of historically underserved producers and their experiences. Understanding that the current systems were built to exclude historically underserved communities from the benefits given to those in power can create space for

conservation professionals to hear and understand the realities of historically underserved communities from the communities themselves. To do this, conservation professionals must recognize that every individual has biases and redefine racism from an individual act to the system that continually excludes historically underserved communities from benefits and support—this will assist you in moving forward on your journey without taking feedback personally.

- » Increase knowledge about the barriers faced by historically underserved communities by listening to their experiences. While it may never be possible to understand what historically underserved communities have faced, conservation professionals can learn more about the barriers and grow in empathy toward historically underserved communities through self-education. Start by learning DEI concepts, issues, and best practices; attend webinars; and engage in training programs to build your knowledge (see the “Appendix D: Additional Resources” for more). Do not lean on historically underserved communities as the sole source of learning throughout this process, as that can be burdensome to the community. Conservation professionals can show commitment to this journey by investing time, finding resources, and pursuing the work wholeheartedly.
  - » Do not let fear of saying the wrong thing prevent you from moving forward. While you may intend for services to be diverse, equitable, and inclusive, intention alone will not move things forward. Be open to feedback, set ego and feelings aside, and focus on the goal of inclusive delivery over oneself. Becoming defensive during the work will limit your ability to make progress.
  - » Acknowledge past harms faced by historically underserved communities, even if one did not personally cause them, and create a safe space for individuals and communities to share their experiences. This can be accomplished by using active listening skills, engaging in an open and empathetic manner, and using insights gained to shape how you can more equitably and inclusively deliver conservation technical assistance.
- Acknowledge the identities and roles that the conservation professional plays with the historically underserved community and producer before engaging in the nine-step conservation planning process.
  - Conduct demographic studies of the region to understand the makeup of the historically underserved communities and producers that need support. Being informed about the identities of those being served minimizes generalizations and helps conservation professionals tailor the nine-step conservation planning process to the specific needs of the community they seek to serve.
  - Be present within the community to secure the trust and backing of historically underserved producers and their communities. An avenue to consider is attending community council meetings and other local gathering spaces to learn about the community and build relationships where they are.
  - Install a community member liaison who has gone through a conservation program to provide connection and support to historically underserved communities. These liaisons can build up a community’s knowledge of the process and programs in a vernacular or language familiar to the community. The role can also build producers’ confidence in engaging with field officers before they are brought into the community, resulting in a smoother overall process.
  - Form partnerships with nonprofits and other organizations (e.g., land-grant institutions and state/federal agencies) that support historically underserved producers. Productive partnerships with historically underserved producers and other relevant entities can accomplish more regionally and nationally than siloed efforts alone, which benefits both historically underserved producers and conservation professionals. Distinguish the role of the partner organization from the role of the conservation professionals so both parties understand their respective contributions and responsibilities.



## PHASE I: COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

With a strong foundation of trust and a productive relationship with the historically underserved producer and community established, conservation professionals can effectively commence with the nine-step conservation planning process, kicking off **Phase I: Collection and Analysis**. Phase 1 includes Steps 1-4 that touch on beginning to cultivate a relationship with relevant stakeholders, including historically underserved producers, and document inventory resource data to support producers in creating a conservation plan to address natural resource concerns. This phase allows producers to collaborate in defining and identifying problems.

- 1. Identify Problems and Opportunities:** Planning can start with a problem, an opportunity, shared concerns, or a perceived threat. Initial opportunities and problems are first identified based on readily available information provided by the customer. There may be information available through local Soil and Water Conservation Districts or through a larger-scale conservation plan.
- 2. Determine Objectives:** During this step, the stakeholders identify their objectives. A conservation professional guides the process so that it includes both the stakeholder needs and values, the resource use, and on-site and off-site ecological protection. Objectives may need to be revised and modified as new information is gathered later in the process. Objectives may not be finalized until Step 4 of the planning process.
- 3. Inventory Resources:** In this step, appropriate natural resource, economic, and social information for the planning area is collected. The information will be used to further define the problems and opportunities. It will also be used throughout the process to define alternatives and to evaluate the plan. It is important that as much information as possible can be collected so that the plan will fit both the needs of the landowner and the natural resources. Inventories can range from a farmstead or small watershed to a complete inventory of resources for a state or the entire nation, such as with the NRCS National Resources Inventory or the Soil Survey Program.
- 4. Analyze Resource Data:** This involves studying the resource data and clearly defining existing conditions for the natural resources, including limitations and potential for the desired use. This step is crucial to developing plans that will work for a landowner and their land. It also provides a clear understanding of the baseline conditions that will help assess how effective a project is after it has been put into place.

**To ensure that DEI is integrated into Phase I, conservation professionals should consider the following actions:**

- Utilize active listening skills to understand what historically underserved producers need and ask questions to learn more about concerns from their perspective. Their needs, coupled with the knowledge conservation professionals provide, can effectively address natural resource concerns in a region.
- Recognize that cultural differences will impact what crops are grown, how the resource is seen and valued, the needs of the historically underserved producer, and their objectives. For example, Indigenous producers view land, water, and other natural resource elements as relatives or family members. With this identified care for the land, Indigenous producers are already doing the work of conservation, but by means that may not translate perfectly to how conservation professionals understand the work of conservation. To ensure that there is no misinterpretation of challenges or opportunities in delivering conservation technical assistance, request cross-cultural communications training and translation support for conservation professionals and field offices. Equipped with the proper training and tools, conservation professionals can navigate the nuance around language a

historically underserved community may have regarding conservation practices, cultural traditions in managing crops, and other conservation technical assistance needs. For instance, if English is not a historically underserved producer's first language, conservation concepts could be lost in translation between their language and English.

- » Field officers must understand how producers in that community conceptualize certain activities in their language and culture to best communicate with them.
  - » Lastly, conservation professionals should consider using plain language techniques in external communications and resources to provide clarity and greater accessibility to conservation programs. The primary goal should be to lay out the process clearly and simply with historically underserved producers. Note that nonprofits have historically played the translation role for historically underserved communities, and it will benefit conservation professionals to take on more of this responsibility and foster more inclusive and equitable conservation technical assistance delivery in the long run.
  - Go beyond outreach efforts that only share information to transfer knowledge to historically underserved producers and communities. Over time, increased knowledge transfer brings power, comfortability, and equity to historically underserved producers' ability to engage in the planning process on their terms—equipped with the knowledge to engage as partners in the planning process with conservation professionals. Transferring knowledge is done by conducting on-the-ground evaluations of the land alongside the producer, collectively assessing program options, and asking producers to describe what programs they would like to participate in. Additionally, field offices could provide education and experiential learning opportunities to historically underserved producers to bolster conservation knowledge transfer.
  - Employ mobile units to meet historically underserved producers where they are. Mobile units can support conservation professionals with on-the-ground outreach to historically underserved producers where they are most comfortable and bridge the gaps of inaccessible field offices and limited broadband issues many historically underserved producers face around the country.
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## PHASE II: DECISION SUPPORT

Next, we move into **Phase II: Decision Support**, which includes Steps 5-7. Phase II involves defining alternatives to conservation plan options and selecting a plan to address a natural resource concern.

- 5. Formulate Alternatives:** The purpose here is to achieve the goals for the land by solving all identified problems, taking advantage of opportunities, and meeting the needs of the planning project. With NRCS conservation planning, NRCS field officers often can help landowners come up with alternatives based on financial assistance programs that help offset the financial expense of implementing conservation practices.
- 6. Evaluate Alternatives:** Next is to evaluate the alternatives to determine their effectiveness in addressing the customer's problems, opportunities, and objectives. Attention must be given to those ecological values protected by law or executive order.
- 7. Make Decisions:** At this point, the landowner chooses which project or plan will work best for their situation. The planner prepares the documentation. In the case of an areawide plan, public review and comment are obtained before a decision is reached.

**To ensure that DEI is integrated into Phase II, conservation professionals should consider the following actions:**

- Provide historically underserved producers with a clear explanation of program participation costs before obtaining their consent to participate in a program.
- Re-evaluate protocol reporting for nonprofits. Conservation professionals should understand how nonprofits have supported historically underserved producers and the commitment necessary to best meet historically underserved producer needs based on the nonprofit's experience. For instance, the current reporting process focuses on a quota of producers served by a nonprofit. However, one nonprofit noted that in their experience, it took 32 hours from the initial contact with one producer until they signed a contract (this excluded the hours it took to support claims, producer's log, translating documents, and being available to the producer seven days a week to answer their questions). Ensuring historically underserved producers succeed is an investment in time and resources, not transactional engagements.
- Be nimble and flexible with historically underserved producers regarding protocols to support relationship building and better outcomes through the planning process.
- Utilize a holistic approach to identify alternatives and an overall viable project plan that best works for the producer, accounting for their capacity, time, and finances. For instance, a historically underserved producer may require a well to address a natural resource concern on their land, but the cost to install and operate that well may not be financially sustainable for the producer. In cases like this, crafting bespoke alternatives and approaches to addressing natural resource concerns will be crucial in developing a project plan that the historically underserved producer can implement and sustain on their own.
- Lean on partnerships developed with nonprofits and other relevant organizations that can support historically underserved producers to incorporate DEI priorities into Steps 5-7.



## PHASE III: APPLICATION AND EVALUATION

Lastly, we move into **Phase III: Application and Evaluation**, which includes Steps 8-9. Phase III involves implementing the chosen conservation plan, applying for a conservation program to support the plan, and evaluating the conservation plan over time.

- 8. Implement the Plan:** Conservation technical assistance is provided to help with the installation of adequate and properly designed conservation practices. At this point in NRCS conservation planning, conservation engineers step in and make designs based on NRCS technical standards. Also, assistance is given in obtaining permits, land rights, surveys, final designs, and inspections for structural practices.
- 9. Evaluate the Plan:** Conservation planning is an ongoing process that continues long after the implementation of a conservation practice. By evaluating the effectiveness of a conservation plan or a practice within a plan, stakeholders can decide whether to continue with other aspects of an overall areawide plan.

To ensure that DEI is integrated into Phase III, conservation professionals should consider the following actions:

- Reinforce actions taken during the previous phase by partnering with nonprofits and other relevant organizations with implementation.
- While conservation professionals are limited in their ability to recommend specific vendors and contractors, they can suggest good practices for vendor and contractor selection, such as requesting detailed proposals, evaluating past client references, assessing their experience in similar projects, inquiring about their history of working with field offices, and asking whether any completed projects have ever been rejected.
- Foster transparency by clearly communicating what will be expected of the individual or community throughout the lifespan of the practice, management system, maintenance agreement, and easement, and articulate the consequences of noncompliance.
- Partner with the producer to actively evaluate and ensure ongoing compliance with plans.
- When evaluating the plan, view it as a feedback loop for more than just evaluating the effectiveness of the implemented project. It should also include the check-in on the status and effectiveness of the relationship built with the historically underserved producer and community.

The nine-step conservation planning process cannot continue for current and future natural resource concerns if the conservation professional is not in good standing with the community and has not maintained a productive relationship with the historically underserved producer (refer to the Preparatory Phase for details). Starting with **Internal Readiness, Trust and Relationship Building**, and **Intentional Outreach** lays the foundation for a productive and positive relationship with individuals and communities to address local natural resource concerns.

# Conclusion

As we close this guidebook, let us remember that our journey toward a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive conservation movement has only just begun. The creation of this guidebook stands as a testament to our collective commitment to harnessing the power of diversity and community-led solutions in the face of environmental challenges. As conservation professionals, we play an important role in unlocking a brighter and more sustainable future for generations to come. Let us continue to stand in true partnership with historically underserved communities, fostering trust, building bridges, and amplifying their voices. Let us be bold, let us be relentless, and let us be unwavering in our pursuit of a world where conservation knows no bounds, where justice reigns supreme, and where every voice is heard. Thank you for being part of this extraordinary journey.

# Endnotes

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# Appendices

**Appendix A:** Glossary/Table of Terms

**Appendix B:** Acronyms

**Appendix C:** National Recommendations

**Appendix D:** Additional Resources

## APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY/TABLE OF TERMS

<b>Conservation professional</b>	An individual who specializes in managing, protecting, and restoring ecosystems and wildlife habitats. They use scientific knowledge and policy expertise to develop strategies for preserving biodiversity and promoting sustainable resource use. Conservation professionals work for various organizations, conducting research, designing conservation plans, and engaging in outreach and education efforts.
<b>Historically underserved</b>	USDA defines four groups as “historically underserved,” including farmers or ranchers who are (1) Beginning, (2) Socially Disadvantaged, (3) Veterans, and/or (4) Limited Resource.
<b>Producer</b>	An individual or entity engaged in the cultivation, management, or raising of crops, livestock, or other agricultural products for commercial purposes.

## APPENDIX B: ACRONYMS

<b>AEM</b>	Agricultural Environmental Management
<b>BIPOC</b>	Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
<b>DEI</b>	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
<b>NRCS</b>	Natural Resources Conservation Service
<b>USDA</b>	United States Department of Agriculture



## APPENDIX C: NATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

During the creation of this guidebook it was recognized that to continue to move toward equitable delivery of conservation assistance with historically underserved communities, challenges and opportunities exist that go beyond what can be accomplished by the conservation professional in the field office within the current systems that exist. Changes need to occur within policies and programs, and conservation professionals need additional support. Those challenges, opportunities, and recommendations are captured here.

### GOVERNMENT COHESION CHALLENGES

- The lack of unification across government entities, coupled with capacity constraints at the local level, deprioritizes DEI concerns on the ground. Examples include:
  - » Lack of ability to influence various levels of organizations
  - » Disagreement between federal and state entities on pathways to implementation
  - » National offices' inability to control state district activities
- The changes in administrations shift USDA mission priorities, which directly impacts historically underserved producers' access to conservation programming and conservation technical assistance.
- Internal NRCS organizational management and culture issues translate into barriers for historically underserved producers and the nonprofits that support them in the following ways:
  - » There is a need to bolster internal knowledge transfer of best practices in administering conservation technical assistance due to the recent conservation professional attrition at NRCS.
  - » The internal culture and mentality of "do more with less" is not supporting conservation professionals in meeting the mission, vision, and goals of NRCS. It also has a negative trickle-down impact on historically underserved producers.
  - » There is a need to bolster internal accountability and oversight of how local offices implement conservation technical assistance on the ground (e.g., using conservation technical assistance funds for other activities, consistent tracking, and establishing a baseline of administration gaps nationwide).
  - » Lack of clear and effective outreach tactics and communication materials that support navigating conservation programs and application processes for historically underserved producers and the nonprofits that serve them (e.g., eligibility guidelines).

### GOVERNMENT OPPORTUNITIES

- Invest internally in building up capacities to support historically underserved communities and producers. Nonprofit organizations have served historically underserved producers and communities with shrinking capacities and limited funds. Historically underserved producers view these nonprofits as project managers, translators, and trusted parties supporting their engagement with conservation programs. However, nonprofits are not direct service organizations—they hold and manage relationships with these producers. Fostering sustainable support for historically underserved producers moving forward will require NRCS to invest in building internal capacities to build relationships with historically underserved producers. NRCS also needs to fully equip field officers with a DEI lens to support historically underserved producers and their communities with conservation technical assistance (e.g., cross-cultural communications and competency; challenges faced on the land; tribal rights and land status; providing full, complete, and accessible program information; support throughout the application process; etc.)

- Reframe the reason behind conservation professionals' work to address natural resource concerns to support the community and the land as a collective resource to manage.
- NRCS should take responsibility for time considerations in managing projects informed by historically underserved producer needs and other cultural aspects to build trust and limit systemic inequities.
- Government entities at the federal, state, and local levels must have DEI integral to their respective missions and move in lockstep to implement DEI effectively. To implement DEI across federal, state, and local levels, federal-level leadership must take DEI seriously and integrate DEI as a priority from the top down (e.g., to state and local field offices).
- Articulate a complimentary DEI plan to the nine-step conservation planning process and thoroughly implement both the planning process and DEI plan to best support historically underserved producers. It should include desired outcomes and opportunities that NRCS identifies that motivate local offices and can be the foundation for an actionable DEI plan. Conservation professionals should be thorough in their assessments and recommendations and culturally aware in their engagements with historically underserved producers.
- Streamline application processes by centralizing all agencies involved into the same field office and providing internal specialists on programs/projects who support historically underserved producers navigating applications.
- Improve transparency during the farm inventory process from the top down to standardize expectations across field offices, promote accountability, and ensure evaluations are conducted equitably.
- Summarize the NRCS ranking system and eligibility requirements for individual NRCS programs in easy-to-read fact sheets, which would improve equitable access to these programs.
- NRCS must take responsibility for the institutional barriers (e.g., work culture, hiring diverse talent, talent retention, and knowledge transfer) to make space and bring attention to DEI issues.
- Re-shape the State Technical Committee to include more open-dialogue space for producers not engaged in NRCS programming to share common barriers to entry.
  - » These open-dialogue spaces can include affinity spaces for different underserved communities to connect with each other and contribute in the full committee space.

## **CAPABILITY BUILDING CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONSERVATION PROFESSIONALS**

- Engage the next generation of students to foster future conservation professionals and to address attrition concerns at NRCS.
- Intentionally hire staff who share and understand the background of the historically underserved producers in their region. This will make NRCS agency outreach efforts more effective and allow for more trusted conversations in-office when discussing program opportunities.
- Bolster knowledge and training for conservation professionals that provide practical steps to integrate DEI in the conservation planning process and proper engagement with historically underserved communities. The training should occur consistently (e.g., annually, bi-annually, etc.) to ensure conservation professionals can thoroughly assess the land and enhance their DEI understanding to engage with historically underserved producers in their region. For NRCS specifically, consider both internal and external support and training for conservation professionals to include:
  - » Utilizing a third party who can objectively analyze DEI concerns within the agency and provide training to prevent the dynamic of internal/self-policing.

- » Conducting internal training to support streamlining terms and setting expectations of integrating DEI into natural resource management since USDA produces and sets the standards for definitions and language used in the field. For example, the process of NRCS reestablishing the National Employee Development Center as a source of internal training.
- Provide shared language when communicating about DEI and its application in conservation technical assistance, conservation programs, and other areas in the conservation planning process.
- Designate more time to conduct farm inventories and cultivate relationships with local organizations that have close relationships with underserved communities.
- Consider replacing “socially disadvantaged” with “historically underserved” and streamlining definitions to provide clarity and broaden equitable access to programs.

## APPENDIX D: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This list of resources is not exhaustive. We encourage further exploration and research to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and recommended steps to support historically underserved producers in your communities.

<b>Getting Started</b>	21 Day Equity Challenge	<a href="http://www.unitedwaydm.org/equity-challenge">www.unitedwaydm.org/equity-challenge</a>
	A reading list on race for allies who want to do better	<a href="http://www.wbur.org/news/2020/06/17/reading-list-on-race-for-allies">www.wbur.org/news/2020/06/17/reading-list-on-race-for-allies</a>
<b>Understanding Government Discrimination</b>	<i>The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America</i> (a book about how US policy has intentionally determined who gets to be where)	<a href="http://www.epi.org/publication/the-color-of-law-a-forgotten-history-of-how-our-government-segregated-america/">www.epi.org/publication/the-color-of-law-a-forgotten-history-of-how-our-government-segregated-america/</a>
<b>History and Current Trends Regarding BIPOC Communities in Agriculture</b>	Timeline of Black producers and the USDA: 1920s to present	<a href="http://www.ewg.org/research/timeline-black-farmers-and-usda-1920-present">www.ewg.org/research/timeline-black-farmers-and-usda-1920-present</a>
	Timeline of Latino farmer movements in the U.S.	<a href="http://www.latinoooutdoors.org/latino-farmer-movements/">www.latinoooutdoors.org/latino-farmer-movements/</a>
	Current trends in Indigenous agriculture	<a href="http://www.nativeamericanagriculturefund.org/native-ag-stats/">www.nativeamericanagriculturefund.org/native-ag-stats/</a>
	<i>An African American and Latinx History of the United States</i> by Paul Ortiz	<a href="http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/554578/an-african-american-and-latinx-history-of-the-united-states-by-paul-ortiz/">www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/554578/an-african-american-and-latinx-history-of-the-united-states-by-paul-ortiz/</a>

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	<i>Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants</i> By Robin Wall Kimmerer	<a href="http://www.milkweed.org/book/braiding-sweetgrass">www.milkweed.org/book/braiding-sweetgrass</a>
	Occupational Folklife Project, Available Online   Finding Roots: Asian American Farmers in Contemporary America	<a href="http://www.loc.gov/collections/occupational-folklife-project/?fa=partof:finding+roots:+asian+american+farmers+in+contemporary+america:+occupational+folklife+project,+2020-2021">www.loc.gov/collections/occupational-folklife-project/?fa=partof:finding+roots:+asian+american+farmers+in+contemporary+america:+occupational+folklife+project,+2020-2021</a>
	Minari and the Real Korean-American Immigrants Who Have Farmed U.S. Soil for More Than a Century   TIME	<a href="http://www.time.com/5938842/minari-korean-american-farmers/">www.time.com/5938842/minari-korean-american-farmers/</a>
<b>Template</b>	Example template for evaluating data collection	<a href="http://www.giexchange.org/equity-guide/">www.giexchange.org/equity-guide/</a>
<b>Examples of Strong Outreach</b>	Alcorn State University	<a href="http://www.alcorn.edu/discover-alcorn/socially-disadvantaged-farmers-and-ranchers-policy-research-center/outreach/">www.alcorn.edu/discover-alcorn/socially-disadvantaged-farmers-and-ranchers-policy-research-center/outreach/</a>
	University of Arizona	<a href="http://www.resilience.arizona.edu/">www.resilience.arizona.edu/</a>
	University of Arkansas	<a href="http://www.indigenousfoodandag.com/">www.indigenousfoodandag.com/</a>
	Tufts University	<a href="http://www.nesfp.nutrition.tufts.edu/new-american-resources">www.nesfp.nutrition.tufts.edu/new-american-resources</a>
	University of California	<a href="http://www.smallfarmsfresno.ucanr.edu/">www.smallfarmsfresno.ucanr.edu/</a>
<b>Potential Outreach Partners</b> <i>This list of organizations received NRCS “Equity Conservation Outreach Cooperative Agreements” grants. NRCS has already vetted and approved these organizations through a previous grantmaking process.</i>	2023 grantees	<a href="http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/resources/data-and-reports/equity-in-conservation-outreach-projects-2023">www.nrcs.usda.gov/resources/data-and-reports/equity-in-conservation-outreach-projects-2023</a>
	2022 grantees	<a href="http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/resources/data-and-reports/equity-conservation-outreach-cooperative-agreements-fiscal-year-2022">www.nrcs.usda.gov/resources/data-and-reports/equity-conservation-outreach-cooperative-agreements-fiscal-year-2022</a>