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CART: Leveraging Geospatial Data and Decision Support for More Efficient NRCS Conservation Planning

Michael P. Robotham[1], Jason Nemecek[2] and Aaron Lauster[1], (1)USDA-NRCS, Washington, DC, (2) USDA-NRCS, Madison, WI

Abstract Text:

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical and financial assistance to support the implementation of conservation activities on private lands. Authorized funding for conservation financial assistance continues to grow while agency staff levels remain steady. This increasing workload has provided a powerful incentive to explore avenues to increase efficiency while continuing to provide high quality customer service. Concurrently, the increasing availability of geospatially referenced natural resource data (e.g. soil, climate, land cover) and the expansion of computing resources and web feature services provide the opportunity to provide field staff with an unprecedented amount of information to help support and inform their discussions with landowners. The newly-developed Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) modernizes and streamlines NRCS' conservation planning and program delivery, reduces workload on field staff, and improves the customer experience by creating an efficient application process. The tool combines and analyzes geospatially-referenced data and site-specific information provided by the landowner within a decision support system (DSS) framework. CART will assist NRCS conservation planners to identify the most likely resource concerns associated with the landscape and farm operation and the suite of potentially applicable conservation practices and will provide them with a robust context within which they can identify the most appropriate mix of conservation activities that will meet landowner objectives while addressing the relevant natural resource concerns. This informed conversation will lead to wider acceptance of conservation planning recommendations and increased adoption of conservation management practices on the ground. We will present the overall CART framework in the context of wider NRCS efforts to better leverage digital capabilities now and in the future to address the resource management challenges faced by private landowners.

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Submitter's E-mail Address:	mprobotham1988@alum.northwestern.edu
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First Presenting Author

Presenting Author

Michael P. Robotham
Email: mprobotham1988@alum.northwestern.edu -- Will not be published

USDA-NRCS
1400 Independence Ave. SW

Room 4252-S
Washington DC 20250
USA

Second author

Jason Nemecek
Email: jason.nemecek@wi.usda.gov -- Will not be published

USDA-NRCS
8030 Excelsior Drive, Suite 200
Madison WI 53717
USA

Third author

Aaron Lauster
Email: Aaron.Lauster@usda.gov -- Will not be published

USDA-NRCS
1400 Independence Ave SW
Room 6017-Agriculture South Bldg
Washington DC 20250
USA

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