

Indiana's Conservation Technical Training Program White Paper



Prepared for the Indiana Conservation Partnership by members of the
Concept Development Group, a group of the Conservation Technical
Training Development Committee

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DESCRIPTION OF NEED AND VALUE

Technical employees of the Indiana Conservation Partnership (ICP) (composed of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Services Agency, Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service, Indiana Department of Environmental Management, the Indiana State Department of Agriculture, and the Indiana State Soil Conservation Board) provide planning and design assistance to implement best management practices on urban, agricultural, and forested lands. Currently, technical employees within the ICP receive training that oftentimes varies between agencies. A formal, more standardized training, certification and development program between all partners will improve consistency in training amongst these individual technical employees regardless of employer to result in a seamless delivery system to customers of the ICP. It will also increase efficiency of the ICP as they work toward common goals.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

In summer 2009, the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA) sponsored a webinar to discuss “Training and Certification Programs for Conservation District Technical Employees”. States interested in developing or enhancing a similar program and receiving assistance were also encouraged to notify NASCA of their intent. The need for something similar in Indiana had been discussed for years between various ICP leaders and employees; consequently, Jerod Chew submitted Indiana’s name. Soon after, Indiana was one of three pilot states selected.

In September 2009, Ray Ledgerwood (Contractor, National Association of Conservation Districts) facilitated a session with the Conservation Technical Training Development Committee members. This group was comprised of 18 individuals and represented six Partnership organizations. Objectives of this work session were to envision, discuss, and identify needs and objectives and create a plan for partner technical employee training, certification and development. An overview of these discussions is summarized in this report.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The group came to consensus on the following guiding principles of the Training and Certification Program:

- The program should be comprised of multiple levels that would allow an employee to advance through “tiers” of learning, including specialized tracks for specialized positions (e.g. agricultural technician, watershed coordinator, urban conservationist, soil conservationist, engineering technician).
- Any partner employee trained through this program will be recognized as competent to do the work they are certified to do by every agency in the Partnership.

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- The program will be sustainable over time, regardless of leadership changes in Partner organizations.

NECESSARY ELEMENTS

The members of the Conservation Technical Training Development Committee have identified the following as necessary elements of a successful training program. The elements are listed in no particular order and may need to be amended as the program takes shape.

Passion for conservation

The success of any endeavor depends in large part on the passion of those involved. Although passion cannot be taught, it can be caught, and so we will expose Partnership employees to people who are passionate about conservation and who have a gift of infecting others with their passion. The history of conservation in America is a great story and its telling can imbue our work with a sense of purpose and will water the seeds of passion.

Partnership employees will be taught the history of conservation, the history and structure of the ICP, and how their work fits into the larger whole. In order to foster high morale we will make sure that Partnership employees have clear job expectations, receive recognition for certification and continuing training, and have opportunities to shadow peers within other Partnership agencies. We will also develop recruiting materials and participate in recruiting events in order to attract highly skilled, professional, and motivated staff.

A written Partnership agreement for a training program

In order to insure its continuity, the training program will be institutionalized in a formal Partnership agreement which will provide for, among other things, inter-agency recognition of such certifications as are established in the training program.

To foster cooperation and accountability, each member of the Partnership will designate a liaison to coordinate inter and intra-agency efforts to fulfill the agency's commitment to the training program.

The new program will incorporate existing ICP partners' training programs to the extent possible.

A technical training review board

A Technical Review Board comprised of at least one appointee from each member of the ICP will be established. The Board will:

- Establish certification criteria, reviewing and updating as necessary
- Develop and maintain the curriculum
- Evaluate training activities to determine if they meet certification requirements
- Identify trainers

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An evaluation of skills and an inventory of needs

The training program must be designed to meet the actual training needs of ICP members. Thus we will conduct a Partnership-wide evaluation of current staff skills and will compare existing skills against ICP technical ability requirements to determine what kind of training is needed. We will also establish a database to track employees' skills and certifications and will use the database in planning for future training needs.

A development plan for each technical employee

Each employee will have a professional development plan that when followed will meet the employee's professional development needs and will insure that the Partnership's technical needs are met. Results from the skills survey will be used to determine overall staff training needs. This will ensure that all staff are competent on relevant core technical skills. There will also be opportunities for employees to acquire specialized skills. District Support Specialists will help Districts develop training plans for their staff and will work with District boards to insure that training plans are followed.

A curriculum and course catalog

No comprehensive training program can be considered complete without a curriculum and course catalog. The Technical Review Board ("Board") will develop a curriculum that meets the needs identified in the skills inventory, taking advantage of curricula in use by NRCS, universities, and conservation organizations throughout the country. The curriculum will cover the training spectrum from basic subject introductions, to core courses, to advanced training, and will cover the conservation spectrum from urban to agriculture. It will also cover the organizational spectrum from the technical to the administrative knowledge needed by technical employees.

The Board will publish a course catalog that will enable staff to plan for their training needs a year at a time. A published curriculum will provide the sequence of courses required for certifications. The course catalog will describe the "who-what-when-where" of all courses and will note prerequisites. A schedule of classes offered will be developed and distributed annually.

Budget and funding sources

The training program will require resources. The Board will develop a detailed proposed budget based on the training needs identified in the skills assessment and will submit it to the Partnership Leaders for funding approval. Some level of standing commitment by each Partnership agency would be beneficial for the long term success of the program.

A mentoring framework

On the job training and mentoring provide excellent opportunities for professional development and training. The Committee proposes the development of a more formalized volunteer mentoring program that could perhaps be patterned on the NRCS mentoring program. Mentoring could be both inter and intra-agency and would provide opportunities for shadowing and on the job training. Effective and informal mentoring is taking place at present between tech team members and SWCD staff, and its

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success could and should be realized throughout the Partnership. A formal mentoring process would enhance the existing informal mentoring already occurring.

Communications for training

Effective communication is vital to the success of any endeavor, and the Board will develop both a communications plan and a communications system to keep all Partnership members up to date on training opportunities, to inform members of changes in technical standards, and to facilitate training program logistics.

A pool of qualified and effective trainers

The Board will identify qualified and effective trainers from inside and outside the Partnership and will continually seek new areas and depths of expertise in order to provide the best possible trainers. Training plans for trainers to use in order to ensure consistency and up to date technology and techniques will be developed by subject matter experts.

Facilities and training venues

Appropriate training venues and field sites throughout the state will be identified to insure that adequate facilities and training site are available and are located in as centralized locations as much as possible.

A certification system

A certification system to insure that technical competency is acknowledged across agency boundaries will be developed under the direction of the Board. Certification will involve written tests, field tests (where appropriate), and performance reviews. Certification will carry continuing education requirements to insure that certified staff remains up to date on technology and practice standards. Certification for conservation planning and engineering practice application is already in place and will serve as a model for other certification programs.

Job approval authority

The NRCS has a system in place for granting job approval authority for conservation planning and practices. The Committee proposes that all members of the ICP agree to adopt the existing system so that technical and engineering staff can be used to their fullest potential. Individual agencies will clarify the liabilities and risks assumed under such a system so that ICP members can offer technical assistance to customers who are not currently being served due to the perception of unacceptable risk.

TIMELINE

A basic timeline was developed (below). Please note not all “Necessary Elements” are found in this timeline but are considered to be important. Further discussion and development of this timeline is needed.

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Timeline	Benchmark	Notes and Actions
Jan 2010	Partnership leaders express support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify agency representatives who will take the concept to the next level ▪ Send introduction letter to all districts and partners ▪ Introduce concept at IASWCD annual conference
Apr 2010	Training Board Identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Each ICP member identify and appoint board members ▪ The training Board will write a set of proposed Roles and Responsibilities of the Board (or guiding principles) and submit them for ICP approval
Apr 2010	Written Partnership Agreement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Will identify roles and responsibilities of each partner ▪ Will define purpose and principles of the training program ▪ General agreement on funding contributions
May 2010	Program cost analysis, program development budget, and potential funding sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Each partner commits funds and staff time toward the budget ▪ Outside funding sources are identified and a plan is in place to seek those funds by partner agencies that have the authority to seek outside funding.
May 2010	Research existing training programs in other states	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Enlist NASCA assistance for soliciting training programs and materials from other states ▪ Each agency will contact counter parts in other states to acquire relevant training materials.
July 2010	Develop skills inventory and needs assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Based on the specific level of technical skills required by position description and grade level of the employee.
Oct 2010	Complete skills inventory and needs assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inventory and needs assessment will be used to develop annual training offerings. Curriculum will be developed based on the required skills to perform the duties of specific functions. Training schedules will be based on the ability of the partnership to provide funds to support the training program.
Oct 2010	Develop/adopt tracking system for training	
December 2010	Develop core competency framework (by discipline)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Based on position descriptions and grade levels or equivalent requirements of the differing agencies.
Jan 2011	Develop curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Will use existing courses and materials where available

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April 2011	Develop training plans for technical employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ District Support Specialists will work with district boards and staff. ▪ Each agency will perform this for their employees on an annual basis.
April 2011	Develop program budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Each agency will determine its level of long-term support for the budget ▪ Outside funding sources will be solicited by agencies with the authority to do so.
April 2011	Identify trainers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify and include in budget if necessary ▪ Trainers will be identified from within the ICP as much as possible. ▪ Trainers will be sought from outside the ICP if necessary
July 2011	Begin offering core training modules I & II	

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Making the commitment to undertake this task is a huge time and effort commitment that should provide great benefits over the next few years. There will be many challenges to overcome during this “journey” from where we are now to a highly trained workforce with the skills, knowledge and abilities to provide topnotch assistance to our customers.

The following is a list of currently foreseen challenges and potential solutions. Challenges are presented in the numbered list below and potential solutions are offered as bullet points beneath each challenge. It is essential that each Partnership agency be aware of the commitment being made.

1. Create a Technical Review Board
 - Each member accepted by ICP leadership
 - Each Partner appoint a member or members to the “Board”
 - Each member be allowed the time for the Board to function
 - As the Board will not have the skills to develop everything, the Board will provide the leadership to get the job done
2. Maintain current database to track employee’s skill level & certification progress
 - Maintain one database for all ICP staff
 - Develop uniform process to make entries on timely basis such as use of a form to be completed by trainer and submitted for entry into database
 - Entries completed monthly into database
3. Determine a responsible lead to insure progress and maintenance of the program
 - Determine lead agency or individual
 - Rotate annually or bi-annually through each ICP accepting this role
4. Keeping modules up to date with current technology & information
 - Review and update curriculum on regular basis

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- Solicit current information on regular basis from those who supply inputs into the training modules
- Annual development of a training schedule
- 5. Sharing of changes in technology & information after staff completes certification
 - Provide for continuing education units
 - Send updates to modules to those who have already completed the module
- 6. Financial commitment by ICP leadership
 - Complete annually
 - Technical review board prepare overall budget for ICP leadership to review
- 7. Identify quality trainers
 - Individuals be certified in the subject matter being taught
 - Individuals to possess teaching skills to present the subject matter
 - Individuals be given time to provide training and follow-up

This will only work if each Leader of the ICP is willing to commit staff time and financial backing to make it happen. It will take at least a couple of years to have a “final” package; however, a more coordinated effort can begin immediately to identify who needs what training and getting those needs met. We can also begin developing standardized training outlines/plans immediately as training is provided.

OTHER CONCERNS RAISED BY THE COMMITTEE

These additional concerns were raised by the committee:

1. Determining liability of failed engineering practices
 - ICP managers produce guidelines to be followed before practices are installed
 - Original source of cost-share may need to assume liability of failed practice when practice is installed meeting NRCS specifications.
2. Equal compensation for similar Certification Levels regardless of employer
 - Include this information in Job Descriptions at time of hiring for new positions
 - Investigate ways to supplement salary of SWCD employees achieving higher levels of certification

NEXT STEPS

1. Revision/Adoption of concept by ICP Leadership
2. Written agreement between Partners to pursue program and outline each Partner’s roles
3. Appointment of a Technical Review Board to develop the program