

their habitats, and designated ecosystems.

(13) Advocate the conservation of natural and manmade scenic resources to insure that NRCS-assisted programs or activities protect and enhance the visual quality of the landscape.

(14) Advocate and assist in actions to preserve and enhance the quality of the Nation's waters.

[44 FR 50579, Aug. 20, 1979; 44 FR 54981, Sept. 24, 1979]

§ 650.4 Definition of terms.

Definitions of the following terms or phrases appear in 40 CFR part 1508, CEQ regulations. These terms are important in the understanding and implementation of this rule. These definitions are not repeated in the interest of reducing duplication:

- Categorical exclusion.* (40 CFR 1508.4)
- Cooperating agency.* (40 CFR 1508.5)
- Cumulative impact.* (40 CFR 1508.7)
- Environmental impact statement (EIS).* (40 CFR 1508.11)
- Human environment.* (40 CFR 1508.14)
- Lead agency.* (40 CFR 1508.16)
- Major Federal action.* (40 CFR 1508.18)
- Mitigation.* (40 CFR 1508.20)
- NEPA process.* (40 CFR 1508.21)
- Scope.* (40 CFR 1508.25)
- Scoping.* (40 CFR 1501.7)
- Tiering.* (40 CFR 1508.28)

(a) *Channel realignment.* Channel realignment includes the construction of a new channel or a new alignment and may include the clearing, snagging, widening, and/or deepening of the existing channel. (Channel Modification Guidelines, 43 FR 8276).

(b) *Environmental assessment (EA).* (40 CFR 1508.9)

(1) An environmental assessment is a concise public document for which a Federal agency is responsible that—

(i) Briefly provides sufficient evidence and analysis for determining whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact.

(ii) Aids an agency's compliance with the Act when no environmental impact statement is necessary.

(iii) Facilitates preparation of an environmental impact statement when one is necessary.

(2) An environmental assessment includes brief discussions of the need for the proposal, alternatives as required by section of the environmental impacts of the proposed action and alternatives, and a list of agencies and persons consulted.

(c) *Environmental evaluation.* The environmental evaluation (EE) (formerly referred to by NRCS as an environmental assessment) is the part of planning that inventories and estimates the potential effects on the human environment of alternative solutions to resource problems. A wide range of environmental data together with social and economic information is considered in determining whether a proposed action is a major Federal action significantly affecting the human environment. The environmental evaluation for a program, regulation, or individual action is used to determine the need for an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement. It also aids in the consideration of alternatives and in the identification of available resources.

(d) *Federally-assisted actions.* These actions are planned and carried out by individuals, groups, or local units of government largely on nonfederal land with technical and/or financial assistance provided by NRCS.

(e) *Interdisciplinary planning.* NRCS uses an interdisciplinary environmental evaluation and planning approach in which specialists and groups having different technical expertise act as a team to jointly evaluate existing and future environmental quality. The interdisciplinary group considers structure and function of natural resource systems, complexity of problems, and the economic, social, and environmental effects of alternative actions. Public participation is an essential part of effective interdisciplinary planning. Even if an NRCS employee provides direct assistance to an individual land user, the basic data used is a result of interdisciplinary development of guide and planning criteria.

(f) *Nonproject actions.* Nonproject actions consist of technical and/or financial assistance provided to an individual, group, or local unit of government by NRCS primarily through a cooperative agreement with a local conservation district, such as land treatment recommended in the Conservation Operations, Great Plains Conservation, Rural Abandoned Mine, and Rural Clean Water Programs. These actions may include consultations, advice, engineering, and other technical assistance that land users usually cannot accomplish by themselves. Nonproject technical and/or financial assistance may result in the land user installing field terraces, waterways, field leveling, onfarm drainage systems, farm ponds, pasture management, conservation tillage, critical area stabilization and other conservation practices.

(g) *Notice of intent (NOI)* (40 CFR 1508.22). A notice of intent is a brief statement inviting public reaction to the decision by the responsible Federal official to prepare an EIS for a major Federal action. The notice of intent is to be published in the FEDERAL REGISTER, circulated to interested agencies, groups, individuals, and published in one or more newspapers serving the area of the proposed action.

(h) *Project actions.* A project action is a formally planned undertaking that is carried out within a specified area by sponsors for the benefit of the general public. Project sponsors are units of government having the legal authority and resources to install, operate, and/or maintain works of improvement.

(i) *Record of Decision.* (ROD) (40 CFR 1505.2). A record of decision is a concise written rationale by the RFO regarding implementation of a proposed action requiring an environmental impact statement. This was previously defined by NRCS as a Statement of Findings (SOF).

(j) *Responsible Federal official (RFO).* The NRCS Administrator is the responsible Federal official (RFO) for compliance with NEPA regarding proposed legislation, programs, legislative reports, regulations, and program EIS's. NRCS state conservationists (STC's) are the RFO's for compliance with the

provisions of NEPA in other NRCS-assisted actions.

(k) *Significantly.* (40 CFR 1508.27) "Significantly" as used in NEPA requires considerations of both context and intensity:

(1) *Context.* This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. For instance, for a site-specific action, significance usually depends on the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short- and long-term effects are relevant.

(2) *Intensity.* This refers to the severity of impact. Responsible officials must bear in mind that more than one agency may make decisions about partial aspects of a major action.

The following should be considered in evaluating intensity:

(i) Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

(ii) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

(iii) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

(iv) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

(v) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

(vi) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

(vii) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by

breaking it down into small component parts.

(viii) The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

(ix) The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 as amended.

(x) Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

(1) *Finding of no significant impact (FNSI)*. (40 CFR 1508.13) "Finding of No Significant Impact" means a document by a Federal agency briefly presenting the reasons why an action not otherwise excluded (§1508.4) will not have a significant effect on the human environment, and an environmental impact statement therefore will not be prepared. It shall include the environmental assessment or a summary of it and shall note any other environmental documents related to it (§1501.7(a)(5)). If the assessment is included, the finding need not repeat any of the discussion in the assessment but may incorporate it by reference.

[44 FR 50579, Aug. 29, 1979; 44 FR 54981, Sept. 24, 1979]

§ 650.5 Environmental evaluation in planning.

(a) *General*. Environmental evaluation (EE) integrates environmental concerns throughout the planning, in-

stallation, and operation of NRCS-assisted projects. The EE applies to all assistance provided by NRCS, but planning intensity, public involvement, and documentation of actions vary according to the scope of the action. NRCS begins consideration of environmental concerns when information gathered during the environmental evaluation is used:

(1) To identify environmental concerns that may be affected, gather baseline data, and predict effects of alternative courses of actions;

(2) To provide data to applicants for use in establishing objectives commensurate with the scope and complexity of the proposed action;

(3) To assist in the development of alternative courses of action; (40 CFR 1502.14). In NRCS-assisted project actions, nonstructural, water conservation, and other alternatives that are in keeping with the Water Resources Council's Principles and Standards are considered, if appropriate.

(4) To perform other related investigations and analyses as needed, including economic evaluation, engineering investigations, etc.

(5) To assist in the development of detailed plans for implementation and operation and maintenance.

(b) *Procedures*. NRCS's Guide for Environmental Assessment issued in March 1977 and published in the FEDERAL REGISTER on August 8, 1977, provides guidance for conducting an environmental evaluation. (42 FR 40123-40167).

(c) *Decision points*. Figure 1 illustrates the decision points for compliance with NEPA in NRCS decision-making.