

Steps to Implement NRCS Project Assistance for assigned forestry contracts, 2011-2014

This information pertains to woodland owners who already have a signed contract with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for specified forestry practices. (All eligibility screening, application, ranking and selection will already be done by NRCS). This process primarily applies in cases where the Maine Forest Service (MFS) has been selected by the landowner to provide Project Assistance. In these cases MFS has ultimate responsibility for:

- reviewing contracted practices with the landowner
- assuring that technical assistance tasks (i.e. Design/ project plan and Installation/ layout) are completed in accordance with NRCS practice specifications
- reimbursing landowners for approved technical assistance costs (NOT actual practice completion)
- making sure that practices are completed according to the project plan (Checkout task)

NRCS will be encouraged to provide this overview document to woodland owners who receive contracts for forestry practices.

These steps are intended to be followed in sequence. Landowners and foresters should be sure that each step is completed before moving to the next. In particular, project implementation may not begin until steps 1-5, including project design (planning) and layout (marking), have been completed and approved.

1. NRCS Informs Landowner of Technical Assistance Requirements and Options

Landowner (LO) receives a letter from NRCS State Office informing them of their choices for obtaining required technical assistance (TA) for their contracted forestry practices:

1. selecting MFS for Project Assistance. In this case, Design/project planning and Installation/project layout tasks will be delivered by a private, licensed forester chosen by LO from the MFS Stewardship Forester list; MFS will conduct the final Check-out of the completed practice(s).

OR

2. selecting a private Licensed Forester listed as an NRCS Technical Service Provider, chosen by LO from the Technical Registry, to deliver all technical assistance tasks, including Check-out of the completed practice(s)

A landowner who does NOT notify their local NRCS District Conservationist of their preference within 45 days of the mailing of the letter will be assigned to work with MFS. In some cases, NRCS staff may provide technical assistance for certain practices in the landowner's contract.

2. Landowner & MFS establish Project Assistance Agreement & identify Stewardship Forester

When the Lo selects MFS and/or the LO's contract is assigned to MFS

- a) MFS Landowner Outreach Forester (LOF) will send a cover letter and Project Assistance Agreement form to the LO, stating the practices, extents and maximum cost share reimbursement rates for these TA tasks: Design/project plan and Installation/layout. The letter also identifies the MFS District Forester (DF) involved.
- b) LO will fill in and/or correct the information required on the agreement form, including contact info, Stewardship Forester (SF) name, and optional forest management plan information. (Note: not all landowners will have a forest management plan in place; WHIP contracts do not require one.) Landowners sign the agreement form to show understanding of MFS/Stewardship Forester roles and cost-share reimbursement rates. Stewardship Forester also signs to show agreement to provide actual TA.
- c) MFS LOF sends reply letter to LO to close the loop; copies sent to SF and DF trigger start of project design phase. NRCS field office will also receive a copy, for cross-check purposes.
- d) If LO does not name a SF, or SF does not sign the agreement form, MFS will work with LO to find a SF to provide TA services. MFS LOF and DF will provide Stewardship Forester referral lists.

Note: Landowners may change their choice of technical assistance provider at any time, providing they notify the Landowner Outreach Forester in writing. In any event, landowners will not be reimbursed by MFS for tasks that have not been approved by MFS.

3. Pre-implementation Meeting/On-site review

When the Project Assistance Agreement has been signed and returned to MFS, DF initiates site review and pre-implementation meeting. Preferably held in-person, this meeting can also occur by phone or e-mail, as long as all parties (MFS, LO, SF, and possibly contractors) are involved. NRCS field office personnel should also be invited; they may attend as needed to work through contract modification issues, if any. The review is to ensure that the field conditions, contracted practice(s), practice specifications, and requirements for project design, layout and completion are correctly understood by all parties.

If MFS determines that the practices or the extents in the contract do not fit the site and/or stand conditions, or cannot be done according to practice specifications, MFS may suspend the project until the situation is resolved. The reasons for suspension will be clearly stated and documented, and communicated to NRCS for further consideration and possible contract modification, if appropriate. If after good faith effort, MFS does not feel the practice(s) can be implemented correctly and in accordance with NRCS specifications, then MFS may decline to provide any further technical assistance. MFS will document reasons and recommended corrective actions before ending involvement.

4. Stewardship Forester develops Design/project plan; DF review/approval

If all is in order, the project design will proceed. The SF will prepare a written project plan that meets all the pertinent requirements of the practice specification guides and submit it to the DF. *Any variation from published specifications will be justified and documented in the project plan.* DF will approve the project plan before project layout begins.

5. Stewardship Forester completes Installation/project layout; DF review/approval

Project layout, including any marking of trees, flagging of project area(s), etc. will then be done by the SF and reviewed and approved by MFS DF, according to Installation methods detailed in the project plan. Project extents (acres, feet, etc.) should match contracted/planned extent closely. No actual implementation of the practice(s) will begin until MFS approves both project plan and project layout.

6. Reimbursement for Design/project plan and Installation/layout

In order to receive reimbursement for cost of technical assistance provided by the SF, LO will fill out a MFS Project Assistance Claim for Payment form. A completed Claim for Payment form, signed by the LO, along with Proof of Payment or optional Landowner-Forester Affidavit, and a signed or initialed copy of SF's invoice marked PAID, will be submitted to DF for review and approval. DF will forward the paperwork to the LOF in Augusta for processing. Reimbursement will be by check from the State Treasurer, and may take 3-4 weeks from date of processing by MFS Augusta office. Standard procedure will be to claim all TA reimbursement at one time; exceptions may be made on a case by case basis.

7. Project implementation by Landowner and/or Contractor

After project plan and project layout tasks are approved, LO or contractor may begin work on the actual practice(s). MFS is available for consultation and review of work in progress. Any variations from the written project design and/or the project layout should be reported to the DF and documented.

8. Check-out/Approval of completed practice(s)—MFS use only.

DF will review completed practices on site. A TSP Progress Report is needed to document completion of TA tasks and the actual practice(s) to NRCS field office. The TSP Progress Report form can be found by going to <http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/TSPInfo.html> then scrolling down to the link for the actual form. Additional documentation should be included as needed to support the final claim for payment: sample plots, tree tallies, maps, GPS coordinates, shape or track files of area, etc. Documentation of completion of all TA tasks is also needed for MFS to claim reimbursement from NRCS under our Contribution Agreement.

NOTE: MFS will not approve completed projects where pre-implementation review, project Design/project plan, and Installation/project layout/markings have occurred without MFS review and participation. If modifications to the original project design are necessary, they may be approved by the DF if the completed project;

- substantially meets the NRCS contracted practice extents, specifications and standards, AND
- are reported to the DF as soon as possible.

One option for the final documentation (MFS use only) is to use a copy of the Design/project plan, with notation of any acceptable variations of actual vs. planned results. NRCS calls this method of approving completed practices “as-built”.

9. Reimbursement for Project Completion

After completed practice(s) are approved by MFS, LO is responsible for completing practice payment claim paperwork at local NRCS field office.

NOTE: Payment for the completed practice is the responsibility of NRCS; MFS is not involved in payments to LO for the actual practice.

Some details of this process will of necessity be worked out on a case-by-case basis, though ultimately projects must be designed and completed according to NRCS practice specifications and requirements for documentation. Once a Project Assistance agreement between the landowner and MFS is in place, the primary MFS point-of-contact for projects under way will be the MFS District Forester. For general process questions and assistance, please contact Andy Shultz, MFS Landowner Outreach Forester, 207 287-8430, or andrew.h.shultz@maine.gov.