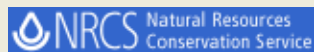


Creating Conservation Plans for Farmland

Context, steps, and insights that will help other communities replicate a successful program
in Warwick Township, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania



Warwick Township
Lancaster County, Pennsylvania





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The Chesapeake Bay Funders Network (CBFN) is a funding collaborative of private nonprofit foundations helping communities to initiate and sustain the necessary changes to promote and protect the health of the Chesapeake Bay. CBFN allows grantmakers to network, exchange information, and pool resources to advance shared interests in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

The CBFN Agricultural Initiative—Strong Communities, Healthy Waters—strengthens the economic sustainability of farms while promoting conservation practices that improve the health of the Bay. Grantmakers in the Agricultural Initiative have pioneered an innovative approach to identify and support strategic projects in key farming communities. Each project includes strong evaluation and communication components, providing a transferable model that can be applied to other locations.

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Conservation Plans for Farmland

“It All Begins With A Plan”

Farmers throughout the Chesapeake Bay region are making important contributions to the health of local rivers, and ultimately the Bay itself, through practices that reduce erosion and nutrient loss from farmland. This work requires investments of time and money, gleaned from full days and tight budgets. And, quite often, it requires change.

Resource professionals know it's a lot to ask, even from farmers who are dedicated to the effort. They also know that the benefits of individual conservation practices—such as the use of cover crops, stream bank fences, or no-till farming—pale in comparison to a fully considered and implemented conservation plan. A conservation plan is a tool for putting all of the natural resources on a tract of land into context and making decisions about how to manage and conserve them. A conservation plan includes maps, soil information, background on relevant conservation practices, and a schedule of actions and decisions to be made by the farmer. This holistic approach moves the farmer toward his or her own stated goals, instead of pursuing individual management practices that may eventually seem disconnected.

Promoting and supporting any single conservation practice is an enormous challenge. Nevertheless, one township in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, raised the bar: they tackled the challenge of farmland conservation plans with great success. The project partners, led by the Warwick Township municipality and Lancaster County Conservation District, launched a three-year effort that produced new or updated conservation plans for 100 percent of the active farmland in the township. This included a total of 94 conservation plans covering 103 farm tracts and 91 farm operators. Twenty-seven of the conservation plans existed before this project began and were revised or updated as needed.

The Warwick Township partnership could be replicated in many settings where public agencies need to elicit broader conservation support from the local farm community. In Warwick Township, the need is driven by an array of connected concerns, from protecting wellhead zones and improving local waterways to reducing the local impacts of stormwater runoff and helping to restore the Chesapeake Bay.

The strategy that worked for Warwick Township—and some portions that didn't—are captured in the following pages.



Creating Conservation Plans in Warwick Township



Challenge & Incentive

The pursuit of farmland conservation plans in Warwick Township, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, evolved from a broad watershed protection plan, a neglected regulation, and farm-friendly incentives.

The township's Comprehensive Watershed Protection Plan outlined the need for all of its citizens to become more active stewards. As this effort progressed, the township passed a stormwater ordinance that redirected attention to a 1970 state law requiring farmland conservation plans.

The township ordinance reinforced the law by requiring an approved conservation plan for all farms requesting exemptions for building permits. The carrot at the end of the stick was simple: *a program was available to help farmers develop the conservation plans free of charge.*

Warwick Township assembled this incentive program by partnering with the Lancaster County Conservation District, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and a private consulting company called TeamAg. It was funded by a three-year grant from the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network, which covered staff time and contractor support, outreach materials, travel, meetings, and support for best management practices on farms.

The Starting Gate

When the project period began, conservation plans existed for roughly 25 percent of the township's farmland acreage. Files that reflected these plans were often incomplete or out-of-date. Some farmers weren't aware of the need for a conserva-

tion plan. Others thought they already had one—they had signed nutrient management plans or other agency paperwork that seemed to serve a similar purpose. Some thought the process would be a hassle.

The Conservation District rolled out the project with the local media and a mailing to farmers that described the requirements of the ordinance and the project, along with a Conservation Plan workbook published by the NRCS.

The response was poor.

This surprised the project team, which hoped to find a match for their own enthusiasm. They regrouped and revised their strategy.

Opening Doors

The project team organized a second mailing, directly from Warwick Township. Then the township zoning officer, who was well known in the agricultural community, began making direct, personal contact with each of the township's 91 farmers.

His initial contacts were made as follow-ups to the introductory letters. In the end, *nothing matched the success of his face-to-face visits.* He answered questions about conservation plans and the offer of free assistance, and encouraged farmers to contact TeamAg or the Conservation District. Many of them did.

Conservation District staff also provided a simple description of conservation plans and the planning process at farmer meetings, demonstrating the benefits with tabletop models. Farmers who approached

the speakers afterwards appreciated the clear summary and wanted to learn more. The zoning officer and Conservation District administrator followed up with those who continued to express doubts.

By the start of the second year, many farmers were working with either public or private agricultural technicians to develop conservation plans unique to their land. Project partners sustained the momentum with press releases about this good work.

During the third year, the farm community was recognized for its outstanding participation at the annual Conservation District banquet. The partner organizations began working with farmers to prioritize and implement the conservation practices identified in their plans.



A demonstration of no-till farming practices, which reduce erosion from fields, takes place during an agricultural meeting in Warwick Township.

Success Stories in Warwick Township

- *Warwick Township covered 100 percent of its active farmland—103 farm tracts and approximately 4,490 acres—with conservation plans. A small area of fields and meadows with little to no agricultural activity was excused from the plans because there was low probability of erosion and little threat to water quality.*
- *By tracking and analyzing the emerging conservation plans, the partners now have a comprehensive database of prioritized best management practices needed in the township.*
- *The Warwick project instigated discussion, ideas, and a new project on a much larger scale. The new project aims to design conservation plans for all farmers within the Conewago River watershed, a combined effort between multiple funders, townships, and counties.*
- *The project resulted in a new, local nonprofit organization with 501(c)3 tax status that will make it easier to seek and accept private grant funds for similar projects.*
- *Media coverage helped publicize the farmers' work, as well as the overall effort to improve local water quality.*

Important Project Steps

1 Identify all organizational partners before the project is fleshed out and involve everyone in the planning process. Create a written work plan with milestones and designated tasks. Meet regularly throughout the project.

Interaction and consistent communication among the Warwick Township project team was critical. During the first year, the team met monthly. During the second and third year, the team met quarterly or as needed. The team reviewed the work plan to monitor progress and develop outreach strategies. The meetings also allowed grant managers to collect data and individual contacts on a regular basis.

2 Create a master list of farms and review Conservation District files to identify farms with existing conservation plans. Zoning maps and tax lists can help create the master list. Use the finding to assess your outreach needs and messages.

3 Send an introductory letter to farmers that describes the incentives and/or regulations that require farmland conservation plans. This sets the stage for making personal contact.

4 Identify the most credible messenger(s) to make personal follow-up visits with farmers. Build relationships. Strengthen the understanding of conservation plans and the planning process.

5 Continue to inform farmers of the conservation planning process at farm meetings and/or through other community gatherings.

6 Connect interested farmers with public resources or private contractors for

developing the plans. Allowing farmers to work with private contractors is critical for meeting the needs and comfort levels of those who either have established relationships with contractors or prefer not to work with government agencies.

7 Share news about the project with the media, the general public, legislators and fellow stakeholders. Also conduct appropriate recognition for participating farmers. Be aware that some farmers aren't comfortable with personal recognition for their conservation actions and be sensitive to their preferences.

8 File and organize completed conservation plans with the Conservation District for easy reference during the implementation phase.

9 Based on the conservation plans, identify and prioritize the conservation practices that will be needed. Begin planning and/or seeking appropriate support for the implementation phase.

10 Evaluate the process and outcomes of the project. The Warwick Township project was evaluated not only by outreach and coverage goals, but through anecdotal and standardized feedback from farmers.

A survey showed that 88 percent of the farmers who participated in the project are now very likely or somewhat likely to recommend conservation planning to their peers. Approximately 66 percent of those who participated were largely motivated by the requirements of the building permit. Approximately 22 percent participated because they manage preserved farmland, for which conservation plans are required.

Partnership Roles

It is important to have the full team assembled for early input on the entire project and to collaborate on a work plan. In Warwick Township, the roles of the partner organizations were as follows:

- **Warwick Township:** Introduced the project, contacted partners, identified agricultural zones, and conducted mailings. The township also provided a large amount of critical staff time that allowed the zoning officer to make personal contact with farmers and the town manager to serve as a project advisor.
- **Lancaster County Conservation District:** Served as team leader, sought and managed grants, reviewed status of conservation plans at the outset of the project, tracked the status of plans under development by various service providers, wrote and reviewed plans. The Conservation District also provided media outreach, conducted mailings, and organized meetings and recognition for farmers. Staff involvement included the agricultural conservation technician, district administrator, assistant to the administrator, education coordinator, watershed specialist, agriculture program manager, and the Plain Sect outreach coordinator.
- **USDA/NRCS:** Wrote and approved conservation plans and reimbursed some farmers for installed best management practices.
- **TeamAg and AET:** Provided private consulting services for the development of conservation plans.



Warwick Township Supervisor Logan Myers describes the benefits of the conservation planning program.

Foundations of Success

Context Strong township leadership, supporting the project from the top down, willing to stand behind ordinances and incentives that require conservation plans. Having a regulatory requirement provides incentive; it would be challenging without this context. Jurisdictions with comprehensive watershed programs may also have an advantage, because they will have an existing framework for stressing the importance of conservation plans.

- Staffing**
- A lead outreach person with an established relationship with farmers and landowners. Farmers are more open to calls, letters, or visits from people they know or whose names they recognize. In Warwick Township, this role was filled by the zoning officer.
 - An adequate suite of public and private agricultural conservation technicians to write conservation plans. Some farmers are more likely to participate if they can work with a private sector consultant.
 - A coordinator who tracks the status of each conservation plan and the location of participating farms. The Lancaster County Conservation District filled this role for Warwick Township.

- Partnerships & Process**
- A close partnership between the township and the Conservation District
 - A designated grants manager
 - Involvement of all partners at the earliest planning stage
 - Regular, in-person team meetings for the duration of the project
 - A written work plan that the team creates, revisits, and revises as necessary
 - A memorandum of understanding between project partners to outline staff commitments and responsibilities

Funding Grant funding will ease the replication of this project, especially by making private grant money available to serve farmers, like those in the Plain Sect, who may decline government assistance. The project is replicable without grant funding, but may move at a slower pace. Private consultants costs would likely become the responsibility of the farmer.

Conservation District technicians demonstrate the purpose and process behind an agricultural conservation plan.



Planning Notes

Funding and Budget

Funding for the Warwick Township conservation planning project came through a three-year \$225,000 grant from the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network. The grant-funded expenditures broke down as follows:


	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Personnel			
Includes education, outreach, planning, documentation, and administration. <i>Note: In the second year, funds were reallocated from personnel to allow \$23,000 for BMP work.</i>	\$59,000	\$55,000	\$33,000
Conservation Planning (contracted)	\$12,500	\$10,000	\$10,000
Equipment/Materials/Supplies	\$6,200	\$3,500	\$5,500
Includes soil/manure test kits, printing/mailings, office supplies, meeting expenses.			
Travel	\$3,000	\$1,000	\$500
BMP Implementation Cost Share	\$0	\$13,700	\$12,000
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	\$80,700	\$83,200	\$61,000



An angler enjoys Lititz Run.

Lessons, Insights, and Timesavers

- 1** Allow a full year for start-up time, and focus on personal communication. The best response resulted from a two-step process. The zoning officer released a letter to farmers explaining the project and then followed up with farm visits. The most valuable change to the original work plan was to allow the township zoning officer additional time for meaningful, personal outreach. Face-to-face visits are best.
- 2** Be prepared to address the challenge of identifying all of the farms in your jurisdiction and the status of existing conservation plans. Warwick Township created a master list of farms by comparing zoning maps and tax lists, and making on-the-ground checks. The Conservation District had records of more than two dozen existing conservation plans, but time was needed to find out if the plans addressed the farms' current crops and management practices.
- 3** Respect farmers' work cycles. As the project began, communication efforts were planned to meet the grant timeline rather than the farmers' needs and the seasons of farming. Within the first year, technicians made modifications to meet with farmers during times when they are most approachable for planning—that is, during times that do not conflict with planting and harvesting.
- 4** Don't neglect the importance of basic messages. It's easy to underestimate the amount of basic outreach that might be needed. Explain the definition and purpose of a conservation plan in every possible venue. Explain the planning process. Be prepared to help farmers understand more about the installation of best management practices; even at the end of this project, much outreach remained to be done on the practices themselves.
- 5** One agricultural conservation technician within the Conservation District should dedicate significant time to monitoring and documenting the conservation plans that are under development with various service providers.
- 6** Technicians working with farmers on conservation plans, including private contractors, should submit an internal cost proposal to help project budget needs accurately.
- 7** Maintain focus on conservation plans. As the Warwick Township conservation plans were completed, the team amended the project budget to support the installation of some best management practices identified in the plans. This change, at the end of the third year, added a different focus and challenged the group. The installation of best management practices requires even more communication with farmers than the creation of conservation plans; be wary of biting off more than you can chew.
- 8** If a similar project were designed to include an implementation phase, some funds should be included for best management practices that could be implemented quickly without much design and/or permitting. However, it is difficult to estimate the full scope of funding needs until the plans have been developed. This might best be handled through a separate, follow-up grant period.



Questions?

For more information about conservation in Warwick Township, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, please contact:

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