

If you could design a cost-share program that 1) had a simple application with a straightforward approval process, 2) fit most of your forest management needs, 3) wasn't too difficult or confusing to understand, and 4) helped make our state a better place to live, what would you call it? If you guessed the Alabama Agricultural & Conservation Development Commission Program, you would be smarter than the average bear, and probably a lot of other forest landowners. The name may be a tongue twister, but it's appropriate, once you know the history behind it.

There are several assistance programs available to forest landowners for help in managing his or her timberland. Then why don't all Alabama forest landowners participate in these cost-share programs? The reasons of course vary, but the quick answer is that federal cost-share program objectives may not match the individual's objectives for his/her property. For instance, maybe you wanted to plant slash pine, but none of the programs would approve slash. Or, you may want to plant longleaf pine at a heavy stocking rate, but to qualify for financial assistance, the cost-share program requires longleaf to be planted at low density rates.

There can also be a lot of hoops to jump through on cost-share programs and the financial benefit may not be worth the hassle. A common example is trying to plan your forestry activities to coincide with cost-share sign-up and approval periods. If you want to plant trees in November and the approval won't be announced until March, you may have lost a year's production time. On top of that, you did the site preparation in the fall, but you find out too late that the program will not pay for practices accomplished before the application is approved, so you lost half of the money you were counting on.

Most of you that read this magazine are aware of federal cost-share programs for forestry, but you may not be familiar with a state-sponsored program, known as AACDCP or sometimes simply called "the State Program," which is short for the Alabama Agricultural & Conservation Development Commission Program. This assistance program helps both farmers and forest landowners with a variety of conservation practice needs. You can thank your local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) if your application gets approved under AACDCP. There are SWCDs in every state and some U.S. territories. These districts were formed in the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s when Congress passed an act that created the Soil Conservation Service, more commonly known these days as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The following paragraphs taken from the National Association of Conservation Districts' website provides some history and insight about where soil conservation had its beginnings:

“ On Capitol Hill, while testifying about the erosion problem, soil scientist Hugh Hammond Bennett threw back the curtains to reveal a sky blackened by dust. Congress unanimously passed legislation declaring soil and water conservation a national policy and priority. Because nearly three-fourths of the continental United States is privately owned, Congress real-



Lewis Crenshaw, Chairman of the Butler County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD), and Beth Chastain, Butler County Soil Conservationist, survey a property.
Photo by Paul Hudgins

What Can the AAC

The Alabama Agricultural & Conservation

By Arthur Hitt, Registered Forester

ized that only active, voluntary support from landowners would guarantee the success of conservation work on private land.

In 1937, President Roosevelt wrote the governors of all the states recommending legislation that would allow local landowners to form soil conservation districts. Brown County Soil & Water Conservation District in North Carolina was the first district established. The movement caught on across the country with district-enabling legislation passed in every state. Today, the country is blanketed with nearly 3,000 conservation districts.

In keeping with the need to conserve our soil, water, and air as well as be good stewards of all our natural resources, the Legislature of the State of Alabama established the AACDCP in 1986 and authorized it to fund a conservation program bearing



AACDCP Do for You?

Conservation Development Commission Program

by Nick Granger, Alabama Forestry Commission

its name. The legislature appropriates these funds for both the AACDCP and the Alabama Soil and Water Conservation Committee (SWCC). The SWCC serves the citizens of Alabama with many projects in helping to limit soil erosion, as well as keep our water pure and our air clean. In a nutshell, the purpose of the AACDCP state program is to provide cost-share assistance to owners of land used for agricultural or timber production by implementing soil conservation, water quality improvement, and reforestation and forest improvement practices.

Last year, the AACDC budgeted to each county approximately \$30,000 to spread between farming and forestry conservation practices. Every county in the state has a Soil and Water Conservation District Board, made up of five supervisors who are appointed by the Governor. These district supervisors rank and approve applications based on resource concerns such as soil, water, and air quality. To get the most “bang for the buck,” the conservation districts have the leeway to allocate their budget among the most needed resource concerns for the county and may also limit the amount per applicant or amount per practice.

The state SWCC has set the maximum assistance available to an individual landowner at \$5,000 per year, up from \$3,500 in past years. The state program budget may vary from one year to the next or even go unfunded in lean times because it competes with other legislative projects.

One of the advantages of the state program over other federal programs is in the application process. Don’t get the wrong idea that there is not any red tape involved with the AACDC program; it is still there, but in smaller quantities. You still have to follow the guidelines of the program and stay within the practices policies. However, since the main focus of the AACDC program is targeted at soil and water conservation, you may have more latitude in meeting your forest management objectives. The SWCD, through the oversight of the SWCC, has historically aided farmers and forest owners in implementing modern soil conservation practices to keep Alabama lands fertile and productive, making our state one of the top producers in the nation of both agricultural and wood products.

To be eligible for AACDCP assistance, you must apply for conservation practices that reduce erosion, improve agricultural water quality, or improve forest resources. Forestry site preparation practices such as prescribed burning, herbaceous weed control, and subsoiling are allowed. The AACDCP also pays for timber stand improvement practices such as cull tree deadening, release of desirable seedlings, pruning, firebreaks, crop tree release, and site preparation for natural seeding. And of course, it also pays for tree planting. Eligible lands in this program must be a minimum of 20 acres in size and used for agricultural purposes or timber production. To ensure your eligibility, check with your local SWCD district supervisors and the district administrative coordinator who generally works in the NRCS office.

The next time you run up on one of your local state legislators, consider thanking him or her for funding a program that benefits us all by encouraging good stewardship of Alabama’s natural resources. Be sure to visit the Alabama Forestry Commission website to learn more about available cost share programs such as AACDCP, the Alabama Agricultural & Conservation Development Commission Program. You’ll be glad you did. 🙏



A meeting of the Coffee County Soil and Water Conservation District Board: Nick Granger, Alabama Forestry Commission; Mike Harris, Natural Resources Conservation Service; Lee Boyd, SWCD Supervisor; Linda Norris, SWCD District Administrative Coordinator; Gilmer Grant and Kenneth Sanders, SWCD Supervisors.

Photo courtesy of James Norris