



The Center for Absentee Landowners: *Innovating outreach to those who do not operate their agricultural land*

The M&M Divide RC&D received USDA NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant funding in October 2005 to increase implementation of conservation practices on private lands owned by absentee landowners. These funds will further develop, demonstrate, and evaluate innovative approaches designed specifically to target absentee landowners. Throughout the three-year project, the RC&D will work to establish the *Center for Absentee Landowners*. This nation-wide organization will provide specialized tools and services and act as an advocate for over 40 percent of our nation's landowners—those who do not operate the agricultural land they own. Throughout the project funding period, the *Center for Absentee Landowners* will focus its efforts in Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin, and New York. Ultimately, the Center for Absentee Landowners will provide services and resources nationwide.

Sociological research and demographic data confirm that the American farming community is less and less a homogenous group of full-time family farmers and more and more a heterogeneous group composed of large, corporate farmers, part-time farmers, farm managers and absentee landowners. This fact was acknowledged as early as 1986 by NRCS in the report *Sociological Aspects of the Adoption of Conservation Practices*. The report further contended that special implementation strategies may be needed to achieve higher levels of adoption among these non-traditional groups (Clearfield, F., B. Osgood).

The USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) has more recently acknowledged land tenure as an important factor in farmers' decisions to adopt conservation practices. Of the 3.4 million owners of private agricultural land in the United States, 42 percent do not operate any of the land they own and lease out all or part of the land. ERS analysis found that cash-renters are less likely than owner-operators to use conservation tillage. Additionally, the ERS analysis found that 85 percent of absentee landowners are not actively engaged in decision making on the farm and a majority of the landowners have never been a farm operator. These factors suggest that future gains in the adoption of conservation practices will require efforts targeted specifically to increasing conservation adoption on rented lands (Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey, 1997 Census of Agriculture).

The proposed project will employ a combination of expert panel review, pilot demonstration, and sociological research to develop, evaluate, and implement innovative approaches for working with absentee landowners. The overall goal of the project is to increase implementation of conservation practices on private lands owned by absentee landowners through completion of the objectives listed below.

Objective 1: Demonstrate and evaluate the use of innovative approaches to contacting, education and communication with absentee landowners on conservation issues in eight pilot watersheds or counties.

The Center will seek out a number of county or watershed partners to demonstrate and evaluate the use of innovative methods for working with absentee landowners. Essentially, the local organization will be able to contract with the Center to carry out a local effort targeted toward absentee landowners. Several specialized methods for working with absentee landowners have already been developed, and these methods will be further incubated through a collaborative expert panel review process conducted in December 2005. Examples of these templates include different processes for matching absentee landowners with conservation friendly tenants; landowner and operator panel discussions; team-based whole-farm planning; and the use of conference calls and personal telephone calls to seek out motivated absentee landowners.

The Center's intent with each of these methodologies goes beyond providing outreach and education to absentee landowners on conservation issues. Ultimately, the Center intends to build trusted relationships with motivated absentee landowners and to facilitate their work with the local USDA Service Center to achieve practice implementation.

Objective 2: Develop and promote an online clearinghouse of tools and resources that will empower absentee landowners to improve and preserve wildlife habitat.

In addition to the active outreach to absentee landowners described in Objective 1, the Center will also provide more passive outreach on a national basis. The Center for Absentee Landowners website will provide a host of specialized tools and resources to support and incubate the non-traditional landowner's interest in conservation. Examples include an on-line discussion board where landowners can share common questions and concerns; farm bill program fact sheets designed to answer questions specific to the absentee landowner; and sample "conservation friendly" lease agreements. These resources will be developed to compliment and augment outreach materials currently developed by NRCS.

Additionally, the Center will maintain Conservation Connect, a toll-free hotline that landowners can call with questions on specific conservation practices or programs.

Objective 3: Develop a framework for providing market-based Resource Management System or whole farm planning services.

As relationships are formed with absentee landowners, it is essential that a mechanism be available to provide Resource Management System (RMS) or whole farm planning services to motivated landowners. If local USDA Service Centers are unable to service requests for technical assistance from these landowners, the outreach and education efforts will never lead to actual practice implementation. Unfortunately, there are currently very few privately employed individuals qualified to provide this type of comprehensive service. Those that do exist would be nearly impossible to locate for someone who does not live in the local area. The Center will explore development of a market-based framework to provide these services to landowners. Possible alternatives such as a team-based approach and web-based listing services will be incubated through the collaborative expert panel review process conducted in December 2005.



Objective 4: Develop best practice recommendations for absentee landowner outreach and promote their understanding and use to other conservation-oriented organizations.

The Center will develop best practice recommendations to guide future activities and to assist other conservation-minded organizations effectively work with absentee landowners as lessons are learned and experts are consulted throughout the project's duration. These strategies will be formulated, tested, and revised only through thorough project evaluation and consensus recommendations from the expert panel members.

As best practice recommendations are formalized, they will be developed into an easy to implement toolkit format. The toolkits will be targeted toward groups interested in improving their outreach to absentee landowners such as soil and water conservation districts or locally led watershed groups. The materials in the toolkit will help local groups improve outreach on their own and also market the services of the Center. Examples of items contained in the toolkit may be targeted news releases; template flowcharts; fact sheets and frequently asked questions; strategies and recommended terminology; and other tools that will assist organizations in better meeting the needs of absentee landowners.

For more information, contact John Klein, M&M Divide RC&D coordinator, at 712-792-4415 or John.Klein@ia.usda.gov. The M&M Divide RC&D, Inc. is a registered 501(c) (3) non-profit organization, providing the local leadership and framework required for developing and carrying out conservation and development activities for the purpose of improving natural and human resources in West Central Iowa.



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