

Riparian Planner Certification Program

The following document outlines the requirements of the Riparian Planner Certification Program as created by the **WACD Technical Advisory Group** and acknowledged/recognized by the Washington Conservation Commission. Certification process will be administered through WADE.

Program Purpose and Objective

Purpose. The purpose of the Riparian Planner Certification Program is to both certify individuals as having the necessary skills and abilities to plan to the requirements set forth in the USDA agricultural conservation programs (e.g. CREP, EQIP)(Stubbs, 2013), as well as recognize those planners that have demonstrated an advanced level of knowledge, skills and planning as demonstrated in meeting the certification requirements set forth. In addition, this Program provides a pathway for new and advancing planners to achieve the knowledge and mentor support to qualify for certification.

The certification recognizes those planners in the riparian field that have shown necessary skills and abilities to write riparian management plans, and at higher levels of certification, exemplary knowledge and qualifications and can be called upon for a high level of work product, mentorship, and/or expertise as needed. A planner must meet all of the certification requirements set forth and maintain their certification with on-going education and active planning. A support and mentoring program will help foster and support those planners working to meet the requirements for application to the certification program.

This process does not address the elements, contents, format, or planning process of a RMP. It only reviews and verifies the qualifications of an individual to write, review, and/or implement a RMP at a desired level of expertise.

Specialization. At this time there is only a general certification classification for riparian planning. It has been proposed that resource specializations be added to acknowledge an individual's expertise in an area of riparian planning such as: geographic region, surface water, groundwater, hydrology, geomorphology, etc. This will be considered by the Advisory and Technical Review Committees and added by the Riparian Program Manager as appropriate.

Who Can Apply?

After the pilot period (TBD), the certification is open for all who want to apply (i.e., CD, outside agencies, consultants, etc.). A fee (\$TBA) will be imposed for all applicants to support the program. Since CD's currently support the program with employee time and grant funding, the fee will be waived for all applicants from Conservation Districts in Washington State. A recertification fee (\$TBA) will be imposed on those certifications that have lapsed and are being resubmitted for approval (see "Recertification and Renewal" for more details).

Certification Levels

It is recognized that the different skill levels of planners should be acknowledged in order to properly convey a level of knowledge as well as present a pathway for achieving a higher level of planner certification. For this certification, three levels of planners will be recognized: Level 1 -Beginner, Level 2 - Intermediate, and Level 3 -Expert.

Level 1 – Beginner

- **NRCS Level 3 criteria met**
- Completed and certified NRCS Conservation Planning course; Can write RMP with some assistance/review from Level 2/3 planner;
- Has understanding of required NRCS planning and assessment tools
- RMP is reviewed by a Level 2 or 3 prior to submitted for approval
- Entry level riparian planner
- Has skills and education required or underway; has a training plan that will lead them to Level 2 planner; has riparian experience
- To move up to Level 2 Intermediate, a Level 3 Expert needs to review RMPs until sufficient
- Monitoring of riparian plans should show successful implementation. Effectiveness monitoring metrics shall be consistent with other projects in the same geographic region.

Level 2 – Intermediate

- **NRCS Level 4 criteria met**
- Meets Riparian Planner Level 1 criteria
- Can write RMP on own; may request some assistance from an expert planner
- Can confidently use required NRCS planning and assessment tools
- Has all skills and education required and is making progress towards certification requirements
- Is enrolled in continuing education and has a training plan towards achieving Level 3 certification
- To move to Expert, must meet all Level 3 Certification requirements
- Level 2 planner has a percentage of plans reviewed by a Level 3 planner.
- Effectiveness monitoring metrics shall be consistent with other projects in the same geographic region. Projects not consistent with others in the region have been revised, and trending toward consistency with other projects.

Level 3 – Expert

- **NRCS Level 5 criteria met**
- Meets Riparian Planner Level 2 criteria
- Can write RMP on own; has ability, knowledge, and experience to train others
- Has skills to go anywhere and write a plan
- Has mastery of required NRCS planning and assessment tools
- Demonstrated excellence in RMP development
- Has met all certification requirements
- Is actively participating in continuing education program
- Level 3 planner has a percentage of plans reviewed by a Level 3 planner.

The level of expertise is designated based on the criteria presented above and verified by the Technical Review Committee. If a planner is Level 1 or 2, they will meet with a mentor to design an appropriate training plan on how to gain the experience to become a certified Level 3, Expert planner.

Need to outline the criteria that each level needs to have oversight on. Also outline individual training plan (create a side-by-side template to show this). As needed, the individual needs to show how the CD is supporting them to meet oversight needs. Outline how mentor will be paid either by certification (Commission) or CD ("cost of business"). Cost and time for training needs are the responsibility of the individual or CD, not the certification process.

Certification Requirements

The following categories outline the requirements necessary for application to become a Certified Level 3 Expert Dairy Planner.

1. Required Skills

An advanced level of understanding in the following areas is required for Riparian Planner certification:

- Riparian systems and functions
- Native plants appropriate for geographic area
- Hydrology and hydraulics
- Agricultural and wetland soils
- Stream stability and health
- Aquatic biology
- Pest management including invasive plants, aquatics and wildlife
- NRCS or equivalent planning process and practices
- Ability to effectively work with landowners
- Knowledge of State and local District rules, regulations, and codes
- NRCS electronic Field Office Technical Guides (eFOTG's)

2. Education + Experience

Education. Degree must be in a related field: Forestry, Biology, Horticulture, Fisheries Biology, Wildlife Biology, Aquatic and Riparian Ecology, Conservation Ecology, Ecosystem Ecology, Wildlife Damage Management, Natural Resource Management, Environmental Biology, Environmental and Ecosystem Sciences, or other as justified by applicant and/or supported with relevant coursework. (See "Experience" below for qualifications).

Level 1 – Beginner

- B.S/A. (±4 years education)
- M.S/A. (±6 years education)
- Ph.D. (±10 years education)
- In absence of degree, 2 years minimum relevant proficiency in related field and/or 2 years of Experience

Level 2 – Intermediate

- B.S/A. (±4 years education) + 1 year Experience

- M.S/A. (±6 years education) + 1 year Experience
- Ph.D. (±10 years education + 1 year Experience
- In absence of degree, 4 years minimum relevant proficiency in related field and/or 3 years of Experience

Level 3 - Expert

- B.S/A. (±4 years education) + 3 years Experience
- M.S/A. (±6 years education) + 2 years Experience
- Ph.D. (±10 years education) + 1 year Experience
- In absence of degree, 5 years minimum relevant proficiency in related field and 2 years of Experience is required

Experience. Experience must be in the riparian planning field. Experience will be evaluated by Review Committee for relevance. One year of “experience” is equivalent to a minimum of 0.5 FTE of relevant riparian planning experience.

Relevant work experience may include, but is not limited to:

- Conservation District Planner – Riparian planning and restoration
- NRCS Planner – Riparian planning and restoration
- Private industry, consulting – Riparian management, planning and restoration
- Work in riparian industry – Riparian management , planning and restoration
- Knowledge of working riparian systems – research, internship, industry, etc.
- Other closely related fields – Forestry, reclamation, agro-forestry, shrub-steppe restoration and management, refuge management
- Other – TBD by Technical Review Committee

Training. Completion of applicable training is part of the education portion of the certification process. The list below highlights those trainings that are required for all Certification Levels. Other relevant experience/training may be presented as an equal substitute to the Review Committee for review and approval. Additional courses outside of this list will be evaluated for applicability and accepted/added by the Review Committee as needed.

- Conservation Planning, Part 1 (Modules 1-5) – Web content
- Conservation Planning, Part 2 (Modules 6-9) – In-field, classroom training (or other relevant, comparable training)

NRCS Learning Modules. Completion of applicable NRCS learning modules is part of the education portion of the certification process. Highlighted modules (listed below) are required for Level 3 certification, others are recommended. Unless otherwise indicated, for Level 1 and 2 certification, highlighted modules are not required, but a learning plan needs to be outlined that shows the timeline of working towards completing all required information. Additional courses outside of this list will be evaluated for applicability and added by the Review Committee.

While repeating of courses every few years is highly recommended, there is no expiration or requirement for retaking/repeating of any courses due to time unless required in the NRCS course guidelines, or put forth as a CEU due to relevancy by the riparian certification program manager.

Applicable NRCS coursework includes the following training modules (accessed from Ag Learn) (*Note: this list is not exhaustive and may be revised as new trainings are offered and courses added to AgLearn*):

- Basic Soil Survey
- **Conservation Buffers (Required for Level 1, 2, and 3 Certification)**
- **Conservation Planning, Part 1 (Modules 1-5) (Required for Level 1, 2, and 3 Certification)**
- **Conservation Planning, Part 2 (Modules 6-9) – In field training (Required for Level 1, 2, and 3 Certification)**
- Cultural Resources Training, Part 1
- Environmental Compliance for Conservation Assistance
- **Hydrology Training Series** (or non-NRCS equivalent)
- Introduction to NRCS
- **Introduction to Field Office Technical Guide (Required for Level 1, 2 and 3 Certification)**
- **Introduction to Water Quality (Required for Level 3 Certification)**
- Pest Management
- Others as deemed relevant and appropriate to riparian planning

3. Professional Certifications

A professional certification may count as one or more years of Education, but not towards Experience. A professional certification is one that is granted and recognized by an accredited outside organization and requires renewal on a regular basis (every 1-5 years). Certifications typically require a vigorous testing process to validate ones knowledge on a subject, and continuing education credits to keep it current.

Valid professional certifications include the following (an applicant can submit an additional certification not on this list, which will be assessed by the Review Committee for relevance).

- Professional Wetland Scientist – Count as 1 year education
- Certified Forester – Count as 1 year education
- Certified Arborist – Count as 1 year education
- Other as reviewed and approved by Technical Review Committee

4. Work Product

Applicants must submit at work product example(s) that demonstrates their ability to write and implement a Riparian Management Plan (RMP) meeting NRCS planning processes, and following the RMP format outlined by the Commission. The work product will be reviewed by the Technical Review Committee for applicability, quality, and completeness. The plan needs to meet the following objectives:

- Riparian Management Plan developed using NRCS specifications and guidelines

- Must identify and address site specific conditions (shade, erosion, diversity, pest species, etc.)
- Must be approved, certified, and implemented (must show documentation)

It is expected that each level of certification has met a minimum number of planning and writing experience metrics as outlined below.

- *Level 3* - A minimum number of ± 10 plans or 600 hours of planning work related to writing, implementation, and/or adaptive management of Riparian Management Plans (RMP) must be completed (number can be negotiated pending review by the Technical Review Committee) to be a Level 3 Expert planner.
- *Level 2* - A minimum number of ± 5 plans or 300 hours of planning work related to writing, implementation, and/or adaptive management of Riparian Management Plans (RMP) must be completed (number can be negotiated pending review by the Technical Review Committee) to be a Level 2.
- *Level 1* - A minimum number of 1 plan or 60 hours of planning work related to writing, implementation, and/or adaptive management of Conservation Plan or RMP must be completed to be a Level 1. Half of the plan numbers and/or hours may be attained as general nutrient management planning, as long as relevancy/applicability to riparian planning can be shown.

All plans must be approved and certified, and hours documented as relevant RMP planning.

Level 3 Expert planners must submit three RMPs written independently and without assistance. Level 2 planners must submit two RMPs written independently, but can have mentor review/assistance. Level 1 planners must submit either one RMP or Conservation Plan that can be written with outside mentor assistance as appropriate. Level 3 planners will also have one of the submitted plans chosen for a site visit to review work, implementation, and land owner engagement.

Work Product Review. The practices and implementation guidance included in the RMP will be reviewed in addition to the basic plan content and process. It is understood that individual practices included in a RMP will be unique to a riparian operation and vary by plan. The Review Committee will assess each RMP individually and take that into account.

Applicants will be interviewed by the Technical Review Committee to demonstrate proficiency with the planning process. The interview will include a question and answer session based on the work product(s) submitted.

Level 3 Expert applicants will undergo an in-field review whereby a member of the Technical Review Committee will accompany the planner to the site of the submitted plan and go over the technical merits and implementation of the plan.

Practice Standards. The following NRCS practices should be demonstrated in the RMP (this list is not all inclusive or exhaustive). Applicability of practices will vary by location and level of planning, but highlighted practices must be demonstrated in one or more work products submitted. The required

demonstration is for the O&M guidance and inventory assessment only, engineering plans are not required by the applicant.

Does not document job approval authority.

- **Tree/Shrub Site Preparation (490)**
- **Riparian Forest Buffer (391)**
- **Tree/Shrub Establishment (612)**
- Hedgerow (422)
- Grass Filter Strip (393)
- Forest Stand Improvement (666)
- Access Control (472)
- Fence (382)
- Watering Facility (614)
- Wetland Enhancement (659)

Tools. Proficiency of use of the following assessment tools should be demonstrated in the RMP work product (this list is not all inclusive or exhaustive and may be revised by the Technical Review Committee as appropriate). Level 3 and 2 planners must demonstrate proficiency of all of the tools listed. At a minimum, Level 1 planners must demonstrate proficiencies of the highlighted items.

- **NRCS Biology Tech Note 14**
- **Web Soil Survey**
- **Environmental Evaluation Worksheet (CPA 52)**
- Stream Visual Assessment Protocol 2 (SVAP2)
- Soil Conditioning Index (SCI)
- NRCS Water Quality Tech Note 1 (Water Quality Indication - WQI)
- Site Specific Practice Effects Worksheet (SSPEW)

Programs and Specialty Areas. The following outline the programs and specialty areas that each level of planner certification should be familiar with.

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
- Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

5. References

Applicants need to supply the contact information for and/or two letters of reference. References can come from a manager, other certified planner/mentor, regulatory / agency / inspector, and/or producer/industry representative with whom the planner has worked. No more than one reference can be submitted from each source. References will act as a demonstration of the planner's ability to work with producers and community members, to complete work products efficiently. Additional calls may be made as needed to verify specific aspects of an applicant's required skills or work product.

6. Ethics

Once approved, all certified planners must sign an ethics contract. (*Content TBD*).

Continuing Education and Support

Continuing education, support, and training for planners will keep the certification process dynamic and relevant. Each current and upcoming planner will have the opportunity to participate in all continuing education programs to gain or maintain knowledge.

1. Continuing Education Units

A minimum of 40 hours of continuing education units (CEU) will be required every two years to maintain the riparian planning certification. Each planner is required to keep track of their own CEU's and provide documentation as appropriate. Credits are not retroactive; they must be completed during the two year certification timeframe. A planner is required to have:

- Suggested 20 CEU hours per year, with a required cumulative minimum of 40 hours every two years for recertification (examples of CEUs include: training of others, NRCS modules, AgLearn, webinars, workshop attendance, presentation giving, WADE attendance, etc.)
- Continuing education units categories will be defined by Technical Review Committee; individual CEU eligibility will be confirmed as part of review of individual recertification applications
- System to track CEUs by employee (*under development*)
- Integrate CEU tracking with proficiency & training data collection process (WACD)

The following are *examples* of sources to obtain continued education units. Each hour of education counts as 1 credit. Other sources will be added as relevant.

- **Conferences** – where CEU's are offered in related subjects (River Restoration NW)
- **Specialized training** - organized by the WACD Technical Advisory Group
- **Webinars** – Supported webinars will be posted on “Sharing and Support” sites. Webinars outside of this list will be reviewed by Technical Review Committee for applicability to CEUs.
 - eXtension – 1 hour webinars. Can work with eXtension to collect planner ID numbers when log into webinar.
 - NRCS – 1 hour. (*Need some way to track this.*)
 - Other applicable webinars
- **Journal articles** – Credit of 1 hour per approved article (must verify that it has been read). Approved articles will be posted on “sharing and support” sites.
- **News** – Utilize news aggregators like Good Noows. Leader can provide this service using sharing tools like LinkedIn.
- **Workshops, field days, NRCS in-person trainings** – Each hour will count towards 1 credit.
- **WADE** – Each hour of sessions attended at WADE count towards 1 credit.
- **NRCS on-line trainings** – Provide a certificate of completion for credit. Each module has a different number of credits associated with it. Units TBD.

2. Sharing and Support Mentorship Program

A sharing and support program will be developed that assists current, new and upcoming planners on accessing mentors, information, and educational opportunities. Some elements of that support program may include:

- **Direct contact** – In-field visits, calls, and other direct contact as needed to help mentor planning skills and knowledge
- **LinkedIn** - for sharing information such as articles, training announcements, research, etc.
 - One for general riparian (TBD)
 - Post information such as: News, grants, other CD links, notes, news flash, comments, extension, etc.
- **Netvibes** - Have a common home web page for information and news sharing. This could provide a central information place for planners to access CEU approved webinars, articles, and other information pertinent to CEUs.

3. Education and Training Events

Specialized riparian-focused trainings can be organized to get planners the training they need to be better planners. The following are potential examples.

- Annual in-field planning training and plan review (open to both certified and upcoming planners)
- Special Webinars - NRCS ETC, eXtension, etc.
- NRCS and CD trainings specific to use of inventory and planning tools
- Special topics and training organized by CD riparian planning group (i.e., cultural resources, beaver management, effectiveness monitoring, etc.)
- Linking training needs into WADE
 - Work with WADE Riparian Track coordinator each year to tailor one day of the training to meet riparian planner needs
 - Do a statewide group meeting at WADE - Chance for cohort groups to meet, mingle, and share

4. Training Plans

Level 1 and 2 planners will work with a mentor to create a training plan and pathway for achieving the next level of planner certification (Level 2 and 3, respectively). Training plans will be revisited annually and modified as necessary.

Approval, Recertification and Renewal

1. Approval

A Riparian Planner Certification application will be submitted by the applicant, reviewed and recommend for approval or denial by the Technical Review Committee, approved by the WACD Technical Advisory Group, and recognized by the WA Conservation Commission. Applications will be reviewed for approval once per year (may be adjusted upwards pending number of applications received).

2. Renewal

The Riparian Planning Certification must be renewed every two years. Submission for renewal is the responsibility of the individual employee. Recertification materials/process includes:

- Fill out a renewal form
- Submit record of the required 40+ CEUs
- Submit current status of any applicable professional certifications
- Submit a work plan product every two years with recertification

The certification and re-certification process will run on state fiscal year (July 1 to June 30) schedule (place reminder on Commission calendar and on annual technical employee's survey).

Proposed: The Technical Review Committee will conduct a random review of a RMP from certified planners. The plan will be selected at random from all of the plans written and approved by the certified planner within the previous year. This process will verify the quality of planning being conducted by the certified planner.

3. Recertification

If certification lapses for more than one year, the employee will need to reapply with 20 current (within the last 12 months) CEUs, resubmit application materials, have an in-field review, and pay a recertification fee (\$TBA).

4. Certification Withdrawal

Pending review by the Technical Review Committee, a certification can be suspended or withdrawn at any time if the planner's behavior violates the ethics agreement, is unprofessional, or otherwise inconsistent with the criteria laid out in the certification criteria. If a complaint is issued about a planner, the Technical Review Committee will convene immediately to objectively review it and take appropriate action. A majority agreement (2/3 vote) within the Technical Review Committee must be met in order to suspend or withdraw a certification. If suspension is requested, a timeframe and plan of corrective action will be offered to the planner to remediate the complaint or violation of certification criteria.

The specific guidelines, rules, and action pathways for certification suspension and withdrawal are under development and review.

Certification Technical Review Committee

Technical Review Committee

A Technical Review Committee, compiled by the WACD Technical Advisory Group with support from the Conservation Commission, will provide review and assessment of certification criteria. The Committee will be composed of approximately six members with high levels of planning and/or riparian proficiency and broad, statewide representation. This Committee would be tasked to:

- Review and recommend approval or denial of certification applications
- Conduct renewal and recertification reviews and approvals

- Make decisions on applicability of application materials as submitted
- Conduct work product reviews, interviews, and field visits (proposed) as needed
- Verify professional certification qualifications
- Regularly review and revise applicable continuing education credits, learning modules, NRCS practices, etc.

Criteria will be developed by which decisions and certification acceptance/denial will be determined.

Technical Review Committee Members: WSU (1-2), CD riparian planners (2), riparian producer (1 east, 1 west), NRCS (1-2), Commission staff (1 manager)

Advisory Committee

An Advisory Committee will provide input into the certification process. The committee is composed of a diverse group of stakeholders from industry, agency, regulatory, CD, University, Commission, and other areas. At the onset of the project, the Advisory Committee members will be asked to review and provide feedback on the riparian certification criteria, qualifications, and process. These members may be randomly called upon to provide comments and feedback on the program as it develops.

Program Contact

For questions, comments, or inquiries about the Riparian Planner Certification Program, please contact the Program Manager:

Brian Cochrane
Habitat and Monitoring Coordinator
Conservation Commission
PO Box 47721
Olympia, WA 98504

O: (360) 407-7103

E: bcochrane@scc.wa.gov