

CHAPTER XV: TECHNOLOGY INFORMATION FOR DISTRICTS

Section I: The Common Computing Environment

In 2000, congressional appropriations allowed for the technological modernization of USDA service center agency offices across the country. The central fund, referred to as the Common Computing Environment (CCE) provided for common computers and software, high speed internet connections, common email, and a shared local office computer network in USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offices. This Information Technology System is also known as the USDA computer network.

Conservation Districts often partner with NRCS to establish a working agreement that allows the District to conduct business from a shared office space with the agency. This practice is commonly referred to as co-location. District offices that are co-located are provided with the opportunity to access USDA workstations and the USDA computer network.

Districts with computers on the USDA network are able to benefit from a number of advantages that the network offers. The most practical advantages include: access to USDA ITS staff for computer technical support; access to USDA-developed AgLearn training courses; and access to most USDA developed or licensed software, including Microsoft Office programs as well as conservation planning and reporting software.

Districts that are not co-located with a USDA service center may have their compatible computers joined to the CCE network and use the benefits listed above using a VPN encrypted connection through a cable modem, DSL or other high speed Internet connection. Requests for use of a VPN connection may be forwarded to the NRCS state office by your NRCS District Conservationist. (Please refer to "Obtaining Access to the USDA Network" below.)

Section II: Purchasing District Computers

The USDA network can be very advantageous for Districts that are connected to it, but only if the connected computer is guaranteed to be compatible with USDA hardware. Districts that purchase computers with the intention of accessing the network are strongly recommended by the USDA to purchase machines from a vendor whose products are fully guaranteed to be compatible with USDA network specifications. A recommended product catalogue and order form may be found at <http://nacdnnet.org/resources/computers/>.

If the District chooses to purchase a computer outside of the catalog suggested above, USDA will still provide technical support to that PC, but support could be limited if the machine is incompatible with software specifications. In addition, should the District-owned computer experience any hardware failures, the machine would be subject to the manufacturer's warranty only, and not be eligible for USDA technical support. The USDA helpdesk is equipped to handle any issue for PC's purchased through the suggested catalog.

It is also important to note that since 2007, Congress has not appropriated a separate central fund to continue the financial support of the USDA network infrastructure. Although NRCS has continued to support existing computers - including those assigned to District employees - these arrangements vary by state and by individual Conservation District needs.

As is the case with any piece of equipment, the total ownership cost associated with regular computer maintenance and technical support *must* be seriously considered. The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) places the industry average for supporting an employee's computer at about \$3,200 per year (2009) when an organization hires and supports an IT Specialist in-house.

As an alternative, many private businesses and public sector organizations purchase technical support as a service rather than managing it internally. However, the cost and quality of these services vary. Therefore, Districts must weigh the risks associated with purchasing equipment that in the future could potentially become a financial burden to support.

Additional questions regarding these recommendations may be directed to your NRCS District Conservationist or to NRCS Michigan State Office IT Specialist at (517) 324-5164.

Section III: Obtaining Access to the USDA Network

District personnel who wish to connect their computer to the USDA network need to first complete a background investigation before gaining access. The cost of the security background investigation is the responsibility of the partner (the Conservation District).

In addition to completing a background investigation, individuals new to the USDA network must also complete the Information Systems Security Awareness Training and Assessment prior to being allowed access. Assessments must be submitted along with the security background investigation materials. New users must also register for a level two (2) eAuthentication account as well as an AgLearn account online.

Once the Information Systems Security Awareness training has been completed by the user and the required forms and payment is received in the state office, the new user will be issued a System Authorization Accept Request (SAAR) ticket for a computer login and an email account.

Requests to obtain access to the USDA network for Conservation District staff are to be forwarded to the Michigan USDA-NRCS State Office by the local District Conservationist. **Area Conservationists and District Conservationists are responsible for informing Conservation District Staff of this requirement.**

Questions regarding this investigation and training assessment may be directed to the NRCS Michigan's Information Systems Security Awareness Point of Contact (ISSAPOC) Jessica Modert, Human Resources Specialist at:

USDA-NRCS Michigan State Office
3001 Coolidge Road
East Lansing, MI 48823
Phone: (517) 324-5238
Email: jessica.modert@mi.usda.gov

Section IV: MACD e-mail

Conservation Districts that do not have access to the USDA network may set up e-mail accounts for Directors and staff through the Michigan Association of Conservation Districts (MACD). Requests for e-mail accounts may be submitted via phone at (517) 324-4421. An MACD staff person will issue the recipient a permanent username, and a generic password which should be changed immediately following a successful login. The e-mail service offered through MACD is a webmail service, which means that e-mail accounts can be accessed via a web browser. To access the MACD webmail login screen, visit www.macd.or/up.

Because MACD email is provided through a webmail service, available disk space is limited. To avoid exceeding the disk space quota, it is recommended that District staff use an e-mail client. An e-mail client is a frontend computer program used to manage e-mail. This is useful for storing large emails that contain attachments which consequently take up a considerable amount of disk space. While there are a large number of e-mail clients available, the USDA network provides free access to Microsoft Outlook. For instructions on e-mail client set-up and troubleshooting, visit <http://khimaira.com/email1.html>.