The 2002 Farm Bill, signed by President Bush in May of that year, includes large increases—in terms of both funds and expectations—in conservation programs. Programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Reserve Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, and others were authorized at unprecedented levels. Along with these funding increases comes a need for knowledgeable individuals to provide technical assistance and aid private landowners in implementing conservation practices.

In the past, experts employed by the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) have provided these services. However, because NRCS does not have enough personnel to implement these expanded programs, Congress allowed NRCS to certify “third-party technical service providers” (TSP) to help fill the gap.

This new authority presents a unique opportunity for forestry professionals who are not federal employees. Under the various conservation programs supported by the Farm Bill, landowners may employ either NRCS employees or a TSP for help in developing and implementing conservation practices. If a landowner chooses to use a TSP, the agency will reimburse the landowner for some or all of the costs, provided that both landowner and TSP adhere to guidelines outlined by NRCS. Landowners may locate TSPs by contacting USDA or they may search for TSPs by expertise and location on the NRCS website.

If you are interested in becoming a technical service provider in the NRCS area designated as “forestry/agroforestry,” just follow these steps.

1. Visit the TechReg website (http://techreg.usda.gov) to see if you meet the eligibility requirements. Certified Foresters® (CF) who have taken the NRCS Conservation Planning Course, modules 1–5, are eligible for certification as a TSP. This course is available online at www.elearning.nrcs.usda.gov/consplan/start.htm; information on becoming a Certified Forester is available at www.safnet.org/certifiedforester.

2. Obtain an eGovernment ID and password from USDA. You may apply online at https://webcafsr.sc.egov.usda.gov or by contacting your local USDA service center and completing a form. To find USDA service centers in your area visit http://oip.usda.gov/scripts/ndCGI.exe/oip_public/state_list.

3. Log on to http://techreg.usda.gov to complete the online application. You will be asked to provide any certification credentials and information on education, training, and work experience. You also will be asked to demonstrate your familiarity with NRCS guidelines, criteria, standards, and specifications for the conservation programs. To prepare for this section of the application visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/forestry.html. The remaining sections allow you to select the location, categories, and services you wish to provide; landowners will use this information to choose a technical service provider.

4. Review and sign the certification agreement. When NRCS has approved the application, your name, contact information, and brief résumé will appear on the registry of technical service providers on the TechReg website.

5. Now just sit back and wait for the requests to roll in!

To learn more about this program, contact Rita J. Neznek, SAF associate director of forest policy; neznekr@safnet.org; (301) 897-8720, ext. 115.