



**Title:** The OnePlan Conservation Planner: A Pre-test

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**Organization:** Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts

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**Theme:** Watershed Management

**Situation:** Conservation is critical for protecting our natural resources and the environment, and for maintaining long-term productivity and sustainability necessary for the continued production of food and fiber to feed the world's growing population. Agricultural producers are constantly faced with the reality of economic survival, while simultaneously balancing the conservation needs surrounding their operation and their continuing quest to conserve our natural resources. Using the current, 'paper and person intensive' planning process, there have not been enough qualified professional agency conservationists to produce the number of conservation plans needed to meet the goals of the resource need, environmental laws and the demands of the general public. Effective resource management on private lands is best achieved through the development and implementation of conservation plans. The best way to increase the quantity and quality of conservation plans is by providing producers/landowners with convenient access to user-friendly planning tools that allow them to initiate and become engaged in the development of their own plans.

**Objectives:** The purpose of the pre-test was to identify operator knowledge, opinions and behaviors that promote: 1) adoption of conservation and important conservation practices, and 2) adoption of the OnePlan Conservation Planner. Research objectives included: identification of operators' adoption decision factors; assignment of the identified decision factors (nominal measures) to one of five characteristics (compatibility, relative advantage, trialability, observability, and complexity) of the classic diffusion of innovation paradigm; assignment of the affective and behavioral depth interview data to the decision factors; development of findings and conclusions relative to the Conservation Planner's strengths and weaknesses; and analysis of adoption success based on diffusion of innovation model research.

**Methods:** Over a period of ten working days, fourteen producers spent three to four hours at one of two NRCS field office testing sites working individually with two Conservation Planner developers and two research interviewers. Each producer utilized a software program to create a preliminary plan. Upon completion of the plan, the research interviewers conducted two depth interviews to meet the research objectives. The product being tested was the OnePlan Conservation Planner, which has been developed as a web-based planning tool specifically for agricultural producers. The Conservation Planner is the cornerstone of the OnePlan computer decision support tools used to produce a conservation plan.

**Partnerships:** The OnePlan Partnership consists of federal and state agencies, producer group associations, universities and private parties, all with an interest in conservation of natural resources as it relates to agriculture. Primary partners include NRCS, Idaho Soil Conservation Commission (SCC), EPA, Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), Idaho Department of Agriculture (ISDA) University of Idaho (U of I), and the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts (IASCD). Several other partner organizations have also participated, e.g. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Reclamation, local Conservation Districts, Idaho Dairy Association, Idaho Rural Partnership and Idaho Department of Water Resources.

**Research:** Cognitive and affective research findings have given the developers and partners of the Conservation Planner project direction for the second phase of implementation. During Fall 2003 the Conservation Planner will go live on-line for pilot testing with agricultural producers in the Fifteenmile Watershed. Pre-test test results are being shared among the NRCS planners and the local soil conservation districts in the pilot watershed that will be implementing the OnePlan Conservation Planner.

**Resources:** OnePlan resources are of three types: human resources provided by OnePlan Partners, cash funding from Partners and others contributors and equipment and special services contributed by the Partners. Human resources have been substantial and have been provided by the numerous partners. Primary cash contributors have come directly from DEQ, NRCS, IASCD, SCC, EPA and U of I, and through numerous grants. Other cash contributors include Idaho Dairy Association, Idaho Grain Producers, BLM, ISDA and Idaho Rural Partnership. Idaho Department of Water Resources and U of I have contributed major equipment and special services.

**Results:** Regarding short term research outcomes, a descriptive theory of operator conservation planning behavior emerged from the data: The individual attribute which appears to drive adoption of the Conservation Planner is the same individual attribute that drives the day-to-day farming activity - self reliance. Self-reliant conservation planning activity is motivated by moving the cognitive activity from the field where an operator is busy, or from the technical office where an operator can feel under pressure to understand the live technical discussion, to the home where an operator can access web-based technical information specific to his or her own ground (with on-screen farm visuals) while taking whatever time is necessary to select conservation options and draft a preliminary plan. When asked about the use to which they would put the Conservation Planner, operators responded not in terms of outdoor farming activities and physical work but in terms of mental exercise and personal relationships: "You can sit down and work on your own." "It gives you options. It doesn't make you think of them." "It lets you know what you can do." "It gave me the questions I need." "I like the idea I am on the same page as the techs." "I could definitely see getting together with your neighbor and working things out together." "I can do it at the house." A full latent content analysis of all interview statements found that operators saw two major values in the Conservation Planner: a tool for accessing technical information, and a highly personal, confidential and relaxed activity in which they could think through what they wanted to do with their operations without the pressure of visiting with, or talking to, a technical planner. Consequently, the individual attribute which appears to drive adoption of the Conservation Planner is the same individual attribute that drives the day-to-day farming activity: self reliance. Planning with the Conservation Planner is successful because it provides farmers with a confidential home.



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