



What is a Conservation District?

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About Conservation Districts

What is a Conservation District?

Across the United States, nearly 3000 conservation districts -- almost one in every county -- are helping local people to conserve land, water, forests, wildlife and related natural resources. Known in various parts of the country as "soil and water conservation districts," "resource conservation districts," "natural resource districts," "land conservation committees" and similar names, they share a single mission: to coordinate assistance from all available sources -- public and private, local, state and federal -- in an effort to develop locally driven solutions to natural resource concerns.

More than 15,000 volunteers serve in elected or appointed positions on conservation districts' governing boards. They work directly with more than 2.3 million cooperating land managers nationwide, and their efforts touch more than 778 million acres of private land.

These are some of the things that conservation districts do.

- Implement farm conservation practices to keep soil in the fields and out of waterways.
- Conserve and restore wetlands, which purify water and provide habitat for birds, fish and numerous other animals.
- Protect groundwater resources.
- Plant trees and other land cover to hold soil in place, clean the air, provide cover for wildlife and beautify neighborhoods.
- Help developers and homeowners manage the land in an environmentally sensitive manner.
- Reach out to communities and schools to teach the value of natural resources and encourage conservation efforts.

Conservation Districts' History and Origins

In the early 1930s, along with the greatest depression this nation ever experienced, came an equally unparalleled ecological disaster known as the Dust Bowl. Following a severe and sustained drought in the Great Plains, the region's soil began to erode and blow away, creating huge black dust storms that blotted out the sun and swallowed the countryside. Thousands of "dust refugees" left the black fog to seek better lives.

But the storms stretched across the nation. They reached south to Texas and east to New York. Dust even sifted into the White House and onto the desk of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. On Capitol Hill, while testifying about the erosion problem, soil scientist Hugh Hammond Bennett threw back the curtains to reveal a sky blackened by dust. Congress unanimously passed legislation declaring soil and water conservation a national policy and priority.

Since about three-fourths of the continental United States is privately owned, Congress realized that only active, voluntary support from landowners would guarantee the success of conservation work on private land. In 1937, President Roosevelt wrote the governors of all the states recommending legislation that would allow local landowners to form soil conservation districts.

Current Challenges

Seventy years have dramatically changed the American landscape. In rural America, farmers use new technology to improve crop and livestock productivity while practicing environmental stewardship. Widespread conservation practices like planting trees and leaving crop residue on fields prevent soil from blowing and washing away. Land managers have altered their practices -- from the way they till their land to the crops they plant and how much fertilizer they use -- to protect the natural resources we all depend upon.

Although weather still acts as both friend and foe to the farmer, the Dust Bowl has taught everyone a distant but valuable history lesson. Today, conservation districts continually adapt to newly emerging challenges.

Farmers and ranchers are still challenged to properly manage manure and fertilizer so they do not contaminate water resources. Conservation efforts also focus on wetlands restoration, efficient irrigation and flood protection. Urban expansion poses a variety of problems, from threatening plant and animal habitat to compromising water quality.

Sprawling suburbia pushes forward other issues. Common construction practices often accelerate erosion, allowing sediment to wash into waterways. Homeowners often use too much fertilizer and pesticide in their yards, and that also ends up in the waterways. Loss of farmland is an issue nationwide.

Getting Involved

People are the key to conservation district success. Volunteers, whether serving on district boards or participating in a river cleanup, are important because:

- Local people offer extensive expertise and personal interest regarding the best ways to take care of their own natural resources.
- Effective management of natural resources at the local level reduces the need for outside intervention and regulation.
- Districts often have minimal budgets, and may not be able to meet their conservation goals without volunteer help.
- Volunteers in education can help youth learn to be responsible stewards of the land.

Among the things you can do are:

- Volunteer. Districts need help with everything from planting seedlings on wetland and stream restoration projects to packaging plants at annual plant sales. Contact your district to let them know you are willing to help.
- Practice good stewardship at home. You can improve your corner of the world by composting food scraps and lawn clippings in your backyard, conserving green areas in your urban neighborhood or implementing best management practices on your farm. Ask your district for assistance.

Snohomish Conservation District

Snohomish Conservation District has been in operation since 1941. The district area includes most of Snohomish County and Camano Island, which is part of Island County. We share our office, which is located in the Lake Stevens area, with the USDA Farm Services Agency and the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service. The District website is: www.snohomishcd.org.

