



# Conservation District Elections Proviso Report

Webinar to review and discuss conservation  
district elections proviso report

March 6, 2014

10:00 am – 11:00 am

# Welcome

- Ron Shultz – Moderator and Presenter

- Comments or Questions –  
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- Webinar ID – 368312025

<http://www.gotomeeting.com/online/webinar>

# Background

- 2013 -15 WSCC Operating Budget included the following proviso:

*The conservation commission must evaluate the current system for the election of conservation district board supervisors and recommend improvements to ensure the highest degree of public involvement in these elections. The commission must engage with stakeholder groups and conservation districts to gather a set of options for improvement to district elections, which must include an option aligning district elections with state and local general elections. The commission must submit a report detailing the options to the office of financial management and appropriate committees of the legislature by December 10, 2013.*

- The stakeholder workgroup includes the following stakeholders:
  - Dave Vogel and Alan Stromberger, WACD
  - Lori Augino, State Elections Officer, Washington Secretary of State's Office
  - Susan Eidenschink, League of Women Voters
  - Craig Nelson, WADE
  - Larry Davis, Whatcom Conservation District and State Conservation Commission
  - Bill Eller and Megan Finkenbinder, Conservation Commission Staff

# Report Highlights

- Pages 2 – 6 provide an in depth look at the history of conservation districts (why were districts formed, founding principles, etc.). Also included is the history of the State Conservation Commission, duties and responsibilities of a district supervisor, funding and taxing authority and rates and charges authority.
- Pages 7 – 11 provide an overview of the current conservation district elections process. We also include concerns raised about conservation district elections in the May, 2011 report by the League of Women Voters titled “Washington State Conservation Districts: A Report by the League of Women Voters of Washington.”
- Pages 13 – 16 list the criteria developed by the election proviso work group that was used to evaluate the options listed on pages 16 – 17.
- The options reviewed on pages 16 – 17 included nine elemental options as well as three hybrid options.

## CRITERIA TO EVALUATE OPTIONS FOR POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE CONSERVATION DISTRICT ELECTIONS

The criteria developed by the Work Group include the following, in no priority order:

### 1. Participation

The issue of voter participation and voter turnout has been a common topic when discussing conservation district elections. As noted, the number of voters in conservation district elections can vary from extremely low to relatively high if there is a contested race. The Work Group considers voter participation to be important, but in particular they believe the critical factor is whether the election process provides better opportunities for voters to participate. All we can really do in any election is create the opportunity for someone to vote if they desire; we cannot make them vote, or guarantee a specified level of voter participation. One Work Group member brought up the recent 2013 election as an example. The election is a statewide mail-in ballot and every registered voter received a ballot in the mail. But voter turnout was, according to one new source, the lowest in a decade at 44%.<sup>1</sup>

**Criteria:** Degree to which the option increases opportunities for voter participation in the election.

### 2. Increasing awareness of conservation district

Engagement with landowners is the core of conservation district work. A conservation district election is an excellent opportunity for members of the conservation district community to be made aware the work of the conservation district and engage in the operation of the conservation district. Some election options may increase this visibility, while others may work against the opportunity to communicate with the broader community.

**Criteria:** Degree to which the option increases opportunities to communicate broadly the work of the conservation district and engage the local community.

### 3. Cost of election

Running an election can be a very expensive proposition. Whether the cost is borne by the conservation district or by the county auditor, there are expenses to cover when an election is held. Costs of elections compete with funding available to put conservation on the ground, and to assist local landowners in stewardship. There are a number of options by which to address the cost issue (i.e., who pays what costs).

**Criteria:** Degree to which the option remains affordable for the conservation district, and allows maximum application of district funding to be applied toward conservation work on the ground.

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<sup>1</sup> "State's 2013 voter turnout lowest in a decade", Seattle Times, November 15, 2013

## CRITERIA TO EVALUATE OPTIONS FOR POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE CONSERVATION DISTRICT ELECTIONS

### 4. Promote or encourage volunteer participation for conservation district boards

Conservation districts depend upon the full engagement of dedicated and knowledgeable volunteers to serve on conservation district boards. Board members serve without compensation and must dedicate many long hours to conservation district work. Many conservation district board members are landowners or land managers who have farm operations and businesses to run. Elections can be expensive for the candidates or can require a level of financial disclosure that some may find burdensome and a barrier to seeking a volunteer and public service office. The method of the election can also be a barrier to potential candidates if information about when the election will occur or the process to file as a candidate is difficult to find out.

Criteria: Degree to which the option encourages participation as a candidate.

### 5. Maintaining the working and trust relationship with landowners and other community stakeholders

As described in this report a fundamental value and strength of conservation districts is their relationship with the landowners and land managers across the state. The successful implementation of incentive-based programs necessarily requires the cooperation and engagement of the landowner. The farmer must have a level of trust with the conservation district staff who will be working with them on their land. Any option considered for the election process must maintain this fundamental feature of conservation districts.

Criteria: Degree to which the option maintains or enhances the trust relationship with the landowners.

### 6. Help build and support accountability

Generally, elections provide accountability to those who elect the officials by providing a vehicle for change if the electorate is dissatisfied. Of course, the opposite is true as well. If the electorate is satisfied with the elected body, they can retain the officials. The point is there is a level of direct accountability to the electorate. This is especially true if the entity has authority to impose taxes, fees, or levy an assessment. Since conservation districts implement projects and activities that also meet the priority needs of local and state governments there is also a degree of accountability to those other units and levels of government as to how the work is being done. Some of this accountability can be achieved in the form of grant contracts. But there may also be other forms of accountability such as representation of the agency at the district. Election alternatives considered should place a high value on this combination of different levels of conservation district accountability.

## CRITERIA TO EVALUATE OPTIONS FOR POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE CONSERVATION DISTRICT ELECTIONS

### Criteria:

- 6a. Degree to which the option provides accountability for local residents.
- 6b. Degree to which the option provides accountability to other units and levels of government.

### 7. Not diminishing locally-led purpose of district

As described in this report, a foundational principle of conservation districts is locally led conservation working closely with the farmers on the land. Although conservation districts can provide valuable assistance to, and be tool for, accomplishing state and federal resource priorities, the real focus and drive of their work is to lead solutions locally.

Criteria: Degree to which the option maintains or enhances locally led conservation.

## OPTIONS FOR POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE CONSERVATION DISTRICT ELECTIONS

The work group applied the criteria outlined above to the following election options:

1. No change to the current system.
2. Keep the current system but hold all district elections on the same day or over several days.
3. Keep the current system but divide each conservation district into three areas with one supervisor elected for each area.
4. Keep the current system but eliminate the landowner / operator requirement.
5. Keep the current system but have all five board members elected.
6. Keep the current system but have the election run by the county auditor.
7. Place district election for three board members on the general election ballot.
8. Place district election on the general election ballot for all five board members.
9. County commissioners / council appoint three or all five of the district board members.

In addition to the options evaluated, reviewers suggested several hybrid approaches should be considered. These include:

**Combine general election options with greater authority to impose assessment or raise funds by other means.** This option would make conservation districts consistent with port districts and school districts, each having authority to levy a property tax. It would also be consistent with addressing concerns raised regarding accountability to the electorate for funds raised and spent. The downside would be the creation of yet another special purpose district with revenue generating authority, and the cost issues would still have to be addressed.

**Selection of election option could be the choice of a conservation district.** A conservation district board could choose whether to maintain the current or modified election system, or could choose to go on the general election ballot with additional authority noted above.

**Vary election approach based on the population of a conservation district.** For smaller conservation districts the option of appearing on the general election ballot may not be feasible for a number of reasons. Another approach may be to set various population thresholds where, once each threshold is reached, the election process becomes more dependent on the general election ballot.

# What we need from you

As stated in the memo sent out to conservation district managers and chairs on February 24, 2014 we are very interested in hearing from each conservation district on the following:

- Comments and suggestions regarding the context of the elections proviso report. These can be submitted via email to Megan Finkenbinder and [mfinkenbinder@scc.wa.gov](mailto:mfinkenbinder@scc.wa.gov)
- Review the list of options identified in the report, keeping in mind the criteria and answer the following questions:
  - Are these options adequate
  - Did we miss any options, if so, please provide your suggested options in your response
- What are you as a conservation district willing to do or change with respect to elections?
  - *Responding to this question with “no changes necessary” is an appropriate response. We are really looking to get a feel for how conservation districts view the election process.*

All of your comments are due by COB on May 19, 2014. This timeline provides 60 business days to review and comment.

# Timeline

- As stated before, comments are due by COB on May 19, 2014. Please submit them to Megan Finkenbinder at [mfinkenbinder@scc.wa.gov](mailto:mfinkenbinder@scc.wa.gov)
- Upon receipt of comments from districts, they will be presented to the Elections Proviso workgroup for review and consideration. The workgroup will then make their recommendations of the proposed final report for the Commission's consideration. If the report as recommended is adopted at the Commission meeting, formal notification will be sent to conservation districts and other affected parties.

# Questions

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