

## Function of a Conservation District

**To take available technical, financial and education resources, whatever their source, and focus or coordinate them so that they meet the needs of the local land user for conservation of soil, water, and related resources.** Adapted from Dr. Peter Nowak's presentation "The Conservation District Official: Villain or Victim?"

## History of Conservation Districts

During the 1930's, the Dust Bowl made the need to conserve natural resources, particularly soil, very clear. Agencies ranging from Land Grant Universities to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration researched and implemented conservation practices throughout the nation. Eventually, the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), now the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), was created under the Soil Conservation Act of 1935 to develop and implement soil erosion control programs. Sometimes agencies working with conservation ended up competing with each other. Local leadership was needed to coordinate their efforts and tie them into local conditions and priorities. Because of this, the U.S. Congress developed a model Conservation District law for consideration by state governments.

In 1939, the State Legislature passed an enabling act (RCW 89.08), which established conservation districts in Washington. Conservation districts were to direct programs protecting local renewable natural resources. Washington State now has forty-eight conservation districts in thirty-nine counties.

## Conservation Districts' Mission

Conservation districts develop and implement programs to protect and conserve Soil, Water, Prime and Unique Farmland, Rangeland, Woodland, Wildlife, Energy, and other renewable resources on non-federal lands. Districts also stabilize local economies and resolve conflicts in land use. Nationally, conservation districts usually operate under the following general policies:

- Conservation should be led by local citizens.
- The final responsibility for conservation lies with the landowner.
- Landowners have legitimate operating goals.
- Conservation districts are responsive to both landowners and operators, and the community as a whole.
- The best agricultural land should be maintained for agriculture.

Conservation districts are subdivisions of state government, much like school boards. Each district is governed by a Board of five Supervisors. Supervisors are local residents who serve voluntarily without pay. Three are elected by local citizens and two are appointed by the Washington Conservation Commission. Supervisors may come from many different occupations, but by law, three of the five supervisors must be landowners or farm operators.

As a district supervisor, you have a unique niche among agencies managing Washington's natural resources. You serve as the grass roots representative of landowners and the general public in your community, providing leadership and direction to bring volunteer cooperation in natural resource conservation programs. Upon taking the oath of office you agreed to carry out the responsibilities of your position in accordance with the Washington Conservation District Law (RCW Title 89).

## **Supervisor Role & Responsibilities**

- Identify local conservation needs and develop, implement, and evaluate programs to meet them.
  - Educate and inform landowners and operators, general public, and local, state and federal legislators on conservation issues and programs.
  - Supervise other volunteers and paid staff working with the district; coordinate with cooperating agency personnel.
  - Administer the district by delegating tasks through a structure of board officers and members, committees, and others. Raise and budget district funds, and report on activities to the public.
  - Coordinate assistance and funding from federal, state, and local government; district associations; and private groups.
  - Set policy for staff to implement
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## **Time Required**

Your term of office is for three years. You are expected to attend 12 regularly scheduled board meetings per year as well as committee and other special meetings, for an average of 20 days/year.

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## **Benefits**

- Satisfaction in seeing conservation practices applied.
  - Interaction with others interested in natural resource conservation.
  - Input into local, state, and federal conservation programs.
  - Training through Washington Conservation Commission and WADE.
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## **Conservation District Purpose**

Conservation District Law (Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 89.08 describes the powers and powers and authorities of conservation districts.

- Conduct investigations and research relating to conservation of natural resources;
  - Conduct educations and demonstration projects;
  - Carry out improvements to conserve natural resources
  - Cooperate or enter into agreements with others, including other districts
  - Acquire property, donations, gifts and contributions;
  - Make available to land occupiers equipment and materials to assist them in conserving natural resources;
  - Prepare and keep current a long-range conservation plan and an annual work plan;
  - Administer any conservation project or program within the district boundaries;
  - Sue and be sued; and
  - Hold public hearings, annual meetings, and perform other actions to keep citizens and agencies informed.
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## **For Additional Information - Contacts**

Contact Your Conservation Commission Regional Manager. Listing of Conservation Commission staff contact information at <http://scc.wa.gov/contact/>.

## **RCW 89.08.210 - Powers and duties of supervisors**

The supervisors may employ a secretary, treasurer, technical experts, and such other officers, agents, and employees, permanent and temporary, as they may require, and determine their qualifications, duties, and compensation. It may call upon the attorney general for legal services, or may employ its own counsel and legal staff. The supervisors may delegate to their chairman, to one or more supervisors, or to one or more agents or employees such powers and duties as it deems proper. The supervisors shall furnish to the commission, upon request, copies of such internal rules, regulations, orders, contracts, forms, and other documents as they shall adopt or employ, and such other information concerning their activities as the commission may require in the performance of its duties under chapter 184, Laws of 1973 1st ex. sess. The supervisors shall provide for the execution of surety bonds for officers and all employees who shall be entrusted with funds or property.

The supervisors shall provide for the keeping of a full and accurate record of all proceedings, resolutions, regulations, and orders issued or adopted. The supervisors shall provide for an annual audit of the accounts of receipts and disbursements in accordance with procedures prescribed by regulations of the commission.

The board may invite the legislative body of any municipality or county near or within the district, to designate a representative to advise and consult with it on all questions of program and policy which may affect the property, water supply, or other interests of such municipality or county. The governing body of a district shall appoint such advisory committees as may be needed to assure the availability of appropriate channels of communication to the board of supervisors, or to persons affected by district operations, and to local, regional, state and interstate special-purpose districts and agencies responsible for community planning, zoning, or other resource development activities. The district shall keep such committees informed of its work, and such advisory committees shall submit recommendations from time to time to the board of supervisors.

## **RCW 89.08.220 - Corporate status and powers of district**

A conservation district organized under the provisions of chapter 184, Laws of 1973 1st ex. sess. shall constitute a governmental subdivision of this state, and a public body corporate and politic exercising public powers, but shall not levy taxes or issue bonds and such district, and the supervisors thereof, shall have the following powers, in addition to others granted in other sections of chapter 184, Laws of 1973 1st ex. sess.:

(1) To conduct surveys, investigations, and research relating to the conservation of renewable natural resources and the preventive and control measures and works of improvement needed, to publish the results of such surveys, investigations, or research, and to disseminate information concerning such preventive and control measures and works of improvement: PROVIDED, That in order to avoid duplication of research activities, no district shall initiate any research program except in cooperation with the government of this state or any of its agencies, or with the United States or any of its agencies;

(2) To conduct educational and demonstrational projects on any lands within the district upon obtaining the consent of the occupier of such lands and such necessary rights or interests in such lands as may be required in order to demonstrate by example the means, methods, measures, and works of improvement by which the conservation of renewable natural resources may be carried out;

(3) To carry out preventative and control measures and works of improvement for the conservation of renewable natural resources, within the district including, but not limited to, engineering operations, methods of cultivation, the growing of vegetation, changes in use of lands, and the measures listed in RCW [89.08.010](#), on any lands within the district upon obtaining the consent of the occupier of such lands and such necessary rights or interests in such lands as may be required;

(4) To cooperate or enter into agreements with, and within the limits of appropriations duly made available to it by law, to furnish financial or other aid to any agency, governmental or otherwise, or any occupier of lands within the district in the carrying on of preventive and control measures and works of improvement for the conservation of renewable natural resources within the district, subject to such conditions as the supervisors may deem necessary to advance the purposes of chapter 184, Laws of 1973 1st ex. sess. For purposes of this subsection only, land occupiers who are also district supervisors are not subject to the provisions of RCW [42.23.030](#);

(5) To obtain options upon and to acquire in any manner, except by condemnation, by purchase, exchange, lease, gift, bequest, devise, or otherwise, any property, real or personal, or rights or interests therein; to maintain, administer, and improve any properties acquired, to receive income from such properties and to expend such income in carrying out the purposes and provisions of chapter 184, Laws of 1973 1st ex. sess.; and to sell, lease, or otherwise dispose of any of its property or interests therein in furtherance of the purposes and the provisions of chapter 184, Laws of 1973 1st ex. sess.;

(6) To make available, on such terms, as it shall prescribe, to land occupiers within the district, agricultural and engineering machinery and equipment, fertilizer, seeds, seedlings, and such other equipment and material as will assist them to carry on operations upon their lands for the conservation of renewable natural resources;

(7) To prepare and keep current a comprehensive long-range program recommending the conservation of all the renewable natural resources of the district. Such programs shall be directed toward the best use of renewable natural resources and in a manner that will best meet the needs of the district and the state, taking into consideration, where appropriate, such uses as farming, grazing, timber supply, forest, parks, outdoor recreation, potable water supplies for urban and rural areas, water for agriculture, minimal flow, and industrial uses, watershed stabilization, control of soil erosion, retardation of water run-off, flood prevention and control, reservoirs and other water storage, restriction of developments of flood plains, protection of open space and scenery, preservation of natural beauty, protection of fish and wildlife, preservation of wilderness areas and wild rivers, the prevention or reduction of sedimentation and other pollution in rivers and other waters, and such location of highways, schools, housing developments, industries, airports and other facilities and structures as will fit the needs of the state and be consistent with the best uses of the renewable natural resources of the state. The program shall include an inventory of all renewable natural resources in the district, a compilation of current resource needs, projections of future resource requirements, priorities for various resource activities, projected timetables, descriptions of available alternatives, and provisions for coordination with other resource programs.

The district shall also prepare an annual work plan, which shall describe the action programs, services, facilities, materials, working arrangements and estimated funds needed to carry out the parts of the long-range programs that are of the highest priorities.

The districts shall hold public hearings at appropriate times in connection with the preparation of programs and plans, shall give careful consideration to the views expressed and problems revealed in hearings, and shall keep the public informed concerning their programs, plans, and activities. Occupiers of land shall be invited to submit proposals for consideration to such hearings. The districts may supplement such hearings with meetings, referenda and other suitable means to determine the wishes of interested parties and the general public in regard to current and proposed plans and programs of a district. They shall confer with public and private agencies, individually and in groups, to give and obtain information and understanding of the impact of district operations upon agriculture, forestry, water supply and quality, flood control, particular industries, commercial concerns and other public and private interests, both rural and urban.

Each district shall submit to the commission its proposed long-range program and annual work plans for review and comment. The long-range renewable natural resource program, together with the supplemental annual work plans, developed by each district under the foregoing procedures shall have official status as the authorized program of the district, and it shall be published by the districts as its "renewable resources program". Copies shall be made available by the districts to the appropriate counties, municipalities, special purpose districts and state agencies, and shall be made available in convenient places for examination by public land occupier or private interest concerned. Summaries of the program and selected material there from shall be distributed as widely as feasible for public information;

(8) To administer any project or program concerned with the conservation of renewable natural resources located within its boundaries undertaken by any federal, state, or other public agency by entering into a contract or other appropriate administrative arrangement with any agency administering such project or program;

(9) Cooperate with other districts organized under chapter 184, Laws of 1973 1st ex. sess. in the exercise of any of its powers;

(10) To accept donations, gifts, and contributions in money, services, materials, or otherwise, from the United States or any of its agencies, from this state or any of its agencies, or from any other source, and to use or expend such moneys, services, materials, or any contributions in carrying out the purposes of chapter 184, Laws 1973 1st ex. sess.;

(11) To sue and be sued in the name of the district; to have a seal which shall be judicially noticed; have perpetual succession unless terminated as hereinafter provided; to make and execute contracts and other instruments, necessary or convenient to the exercise of its powers; to borrow money and to pledge, mortgage and assign the income of the district and its real or personal property therefore; and to make, amend rules and regulations not inconsistent with chapter 184, Laws of 1973 1st ex. sess. and to carry into effect its purposes;

(12) Any two or more districts may engage in joint activities by agreement between or among them in planning, financing, constructing, operating, maintaining, and administering any program or project concerned with the conservation of renewable natural resources. The districts concerned may make available for purposes of the agreement any funds, property, personnel, equipment, or services available to them under chapter 184, Laws of 1973 1st ex. sess.;

Any district may enter into such agreements with a district or districts in adjoining states to carry out such purposes if the law in such other states permits the districts in such states to enter into such agreements. The commission shall have authority to propose, guide, and facilitate the establishment and carrying out of any such agreement;

(13) Every district shall, through public hearings, annual meetings, publications, or other means, keep the general public, agencies and occupiers of land within the district, informed of the works and activities planned and administered by the district, of the purposes these will serve, of the income and expenditures of the district, of the funds borrowed by the district and the purposes for which such funds are expended, and of the results achieved annually by the district; and

(14) The supervisors of conservation districts may designate an area, state, and national association of conservation districts as a coordinating agency in the execution of the duties imposed by this chapter, and to make gifts in the form of dues, quotas, or otherwise to such associations for costs of services rendered, and may support and attend such meetings as may be required to promote and perfect the organization and to effect its purposes.

## Assistance from Partners

Conservation districts establish priorities and direct action on local natural resource concerns by developing long range and annual plans. Districts often work together on multi-district conservation activities, such as watershed projects. In all cases, districts rely on cooperative assistance and funding from federal, state, and local governments; district associations; and private organizations and businesses. Many agencies and organizations have a strong interest in the same natural resources you are working with. It is important to involve them in your planning and implementation activities.

Assistance is set up formally through a Cooperative Agreement, or a Memorandum of Understanding. Districts can also involve groups more informally by appointing their representatives as associate supervisors, advisors, or committee members.

## Federal Agencies

**Farm Service Agency (FSA)** The FSA administers cost-sharing programs to farmers implementing conservation. It also provides aerial photos for conservation work; assistance for land treatment and development, and natural disaster relief.

**Bonneville Power Administration (BPA)** The BPA markets hydroelectric power in the Pacific Northwest.

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)** The USFWS is responsible for wild birds, mammals (except certain marine mammals), and inland sport fisheries. The USFWS conducts research activities, conducts environmental impact assessments, and manages wildlife refuges. In some cases, USFWS provides funding for habitat restoration projects.

**Forest Service (USFS)** The USFS has federal responsibility for forestry. The USFS sponsors cooperative programs through state forestry agencies, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and conservation districts to control fires, stabilize gullies, improve forest growth, plant trees, and control forest pests.

**National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries** The NOAA Fisheries is responsible for providing programs to try to save the marine endangered species of the United States. Their actions affect the Columbia River and Snake River watersheds of the Northwest.

**Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)** The NRCS has a long extensive tradition of work with conservation districts. The NRCS provides personnel, equipment, office space, and counsel to districts. It also provides free technical assistance with soils, conservation practices, and planning to land users and others.

## State Agencies

**Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC)** The Washington State Conservation Commission has ten members. The Commission and its staff provide administrative and program assistance and guidance to districts, disseminate information, and seek sources of funding to aid in district operation.

**Department of Agriculture (WSDA)** The Washington State Department of Agriculture administers state laws protecting agricultural producers from diseases, insects, predators, and weeds. The WSDA regulates fruit, seed, and other agricultural product grading. The WSDA also issues and approves licenses for nursery dealers, pesticide operators, and applicators; and issues labeling permits for products used by agricultural producers such as seed, fertilizer, pesticide, etc... The WSDA is also involved in water resources, transportation, farm labor, and other matters related to the production, distribution and sale of agricultural commodities.

**Department of Ecology (ECOLOGY)** The Department of Ecology protects and enhances Washington's environment. ECOLOGY programs address air pollution, water pollution, solid waste, hazardous waste, noise pollution, litter and resource recovery, water resources, and shoreline and coastal zone management. ECOLOGY is both an administrative and a regulatory agency with authority to enforce the state's environmental laws. ECOLOGY monitors all major waterways, administers grants for wastewater treatment facilities, and issues permits for all waste dischargers. ECOLOGY also issues grants to reduce non-point water pollution.

**Office of Financial Management (OFM)** The OFM provides budget planning and fiscal administration for state agencies. The OFM also monitors agency spending, maintains the statewide accounting system, and forecasts state population.

**Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW)** In 1994, the departments of Fisheries and Wildlife were combined to more effectively protect and enhance the fish and wildlife of our state. The WDFW enforces the state anadromous fish and shellfish harvest and management laws. It also participates in long-range planning involving streams, maintains a fish habitat enhancement program, issues hydraulic project applications permits, provides technical assistance in design of in-stream structures affecting anadromous fish, assures conservation and preservation of salmon resources in the state through intensive fish culture facilities, and cooperates in fish rearing projects with sport groups, tribal organizations, educational facilities, and civic groups. The WDF&W also continues the Game Commission and its staff. It enforces state fish and game laws, classifies, monitors, and enhances wildlife species, numbers, and habitat; improves hunting and fishing access; and advises individuals and groups on ways to minimize man-made impacts to wildlife.

**Department of Natural Resources (DNR)** The DNR manages and protects state-owned lands. DNR foresters also assist private landowners with the Agriculture Conservation Program (ACP) and the Forestry Incentive Program (FIP) and provide other limited free technical forestry assistance. The DNR administers the Forest Practices Act, a Washington state law regulating practices such as timber harvest.

**Washington State University Cooperative Extension (WSU)** Assistance from WSU is commonly found through the WSU Cooperative Extension. Extension agents ("county agents") and specialists are available to counsel, educate and train conservation districts in economics, engineering, agronomy and soils, animal sciences, entomology, food science and technology, forestry and range management, home economics, horticulture, plant pathology, sociology, veterinary science, and many other areas. Most counties have an Extension office which serves as the local contact for conservation districts to request Extension assistance. WSU Cooperative Extension is also responsible for 4-H, which can be an excellent vehicle for youth conservation education programs.

## **County & Local Government**

Nearly all conservation districts in Washington are along county lines, and while there is no legal relationship between the two, counties can be helpful in several ways. Counties can provide: office space; funding; co-sponsorship for watershed projects and responsibility for operation and maintenance; bridge and culvert replacement; use of county earthmoving equipment; cooperation on county parks and other county owned land; funds for soil survey. County contacts include: commissioners, council, auditor, treasurer, recorder, engineer, assessor, highway superintendent, health officer, planning commission, parks and recreation department, weed district and others. Similar assistance can be available for city & municipal governments.

## **Conservation District Associations**

### ***Washington Association of Conservation Districts (WACD)***

The WACD is a non-profit, nongovernmental organization of the 48 conservation districts in Washington State. The WACD is made up of six area associations of conservation districts and serves as a state voice for conservation districts on state policy, legislation, communication, and funding for conservation activities. The WACD also provides forums to inform, train and educate supervisors and recognize outstanding district individuals and programs. The WACD has standing committees on research, district operations, education, finance, forestry, land-use planning, legislation, public and private rangelands, pollution, recreation, water resources, resolutions, soil stewardship.

### ***National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD)***

The NACD is a non-profit, nongovernmental organization representing over three thousand districts and their state associations in the fifty states, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. The NACD lobbies for federal conservation legislation and funding in Congress. It also provides brochures, reports, conservation films, training, and education.

### ***Washington Association of District Employees (WADE)***

The WADE was formed in 1986 to develop conservation district employees' abilities through continuing education, recognition and a network of professional support. Consult the Commission Directory for more information about WADE area directors and officers.

### ***National Conservation District Employees Association (NCDEA)***

The NCDEA was formed in 1992 to strengthen Conservation District programs, provide assistance, information and support to Conservation District boards and their employees. The association also promotes the professional development of Conservation district employees and will assist any agency, association, organization, municipality, group, or individual who supports Conservation Districts in the spirit of cooperation, sound conservation practices, and proper land use.