

December 12, 2018

# Summary: Survey of Washington Conservation Districts to Assess Capacity Issues

*Results suggest missed opportunities to engage Washington landowners as partners in conservation and quicken progress toward natural resource objectives*

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## Overview

A survey conducted in November-December 2018 of all 45 conservation districts in Washington indicates that limited financial and operational capacity is crippling their ability to make progress toward state natural resource priorities.

According to survey data, there are more landowners who want help with practicing conservation on their properties than conservation districts currently are able to serve.

With around 50 percent of land in Washington under private ownership, landowners are a necessary partner in conservation efforts. For over 75 years conservation districts have served as the trusted, non-regulatory partners that landowners rely on for the technical expertise and financial incentives they need to conserve natural resources on their property.

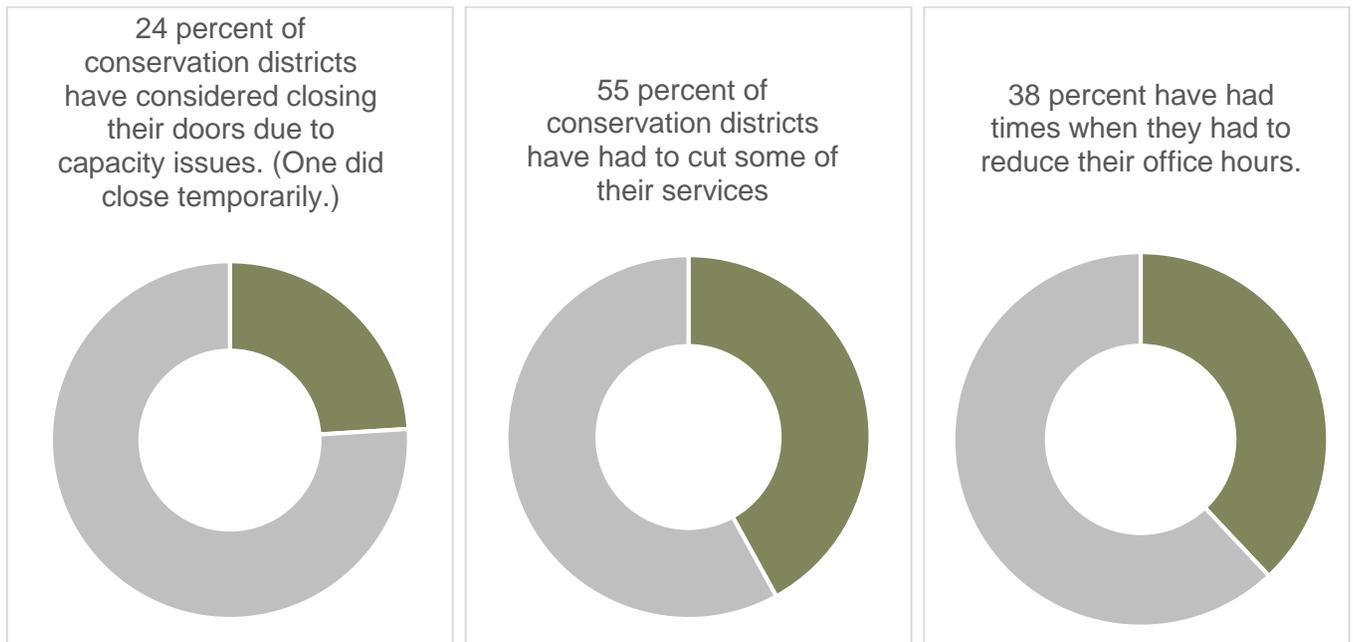
Survey findings indicate that — at their current level of funding and with a growing population — conservation districts are unable to meet the demand from landowners and partners for their services.

The Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) — the state agency that coordinates and provides financial and operational support to conservation districts — administered the survey. It was conducted as part of the SCC's statutory duties to 1) assess and report the needs and work of conservation districts to the Governor, the Legislature, and other stakeholders, and 2) to recommend appropriation of state funds by the legislature to finance the activities of conservation districts (RCW 89.08.080).

For several years the SCC has heard from conservation districts that they lack the financial and operational capacity to fully deliver their statutory role of providing programs and services to all areas of the state that will conserve renewable resources. The SCC designed and administered the survey to better assess and understand the scope of capacity issues and determine how this potentially impacts conservation districts' ability to perform their statutory role in natural resource conservation.

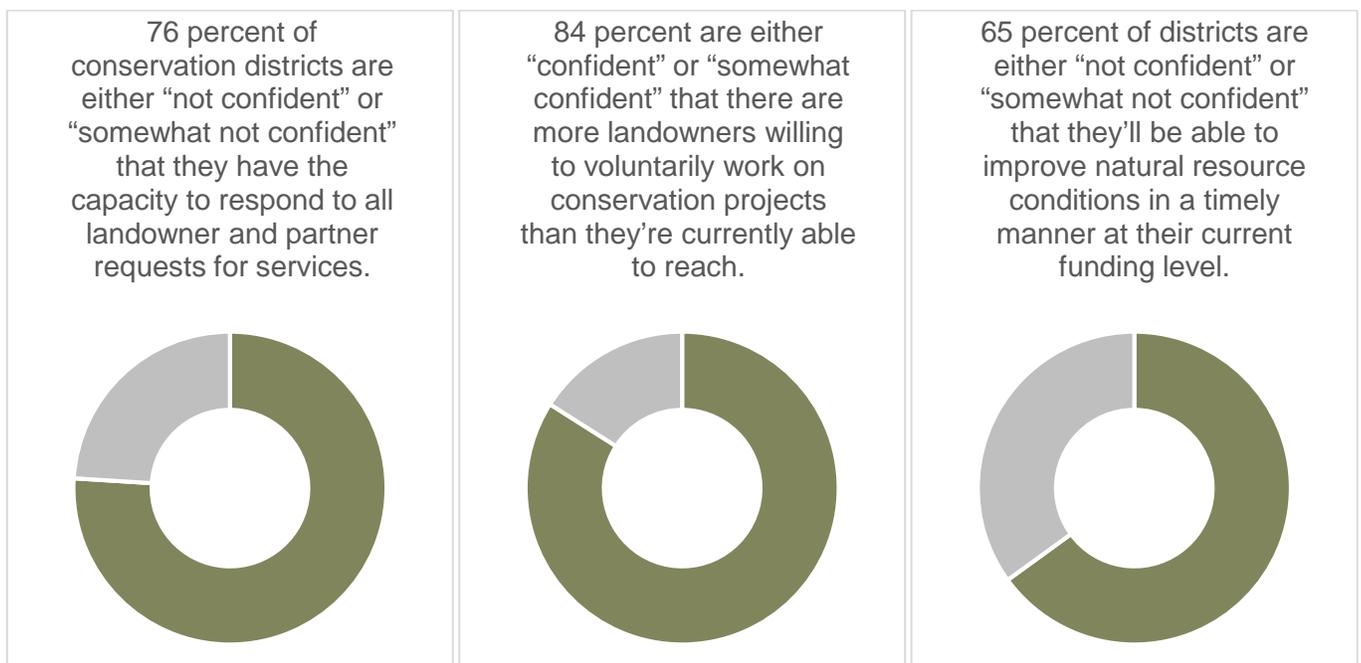
## Key survey findings

According to survey data, in the last 10 years:



Data suggest that Washington is missing opportunities to engage landowners as partners in conservation projects across the state. Capacity issues also prevent conservation districts from providing the services that other local, state, and federal partners rely on them to provide. Data further suggest that capacity issues negatively impact the pace of progress toward achieving natural resource objectives.

For example:



## SCC proposes funding package that builds capacity to conserve

The SCC submitted a \$17 million “Conservation Technical Assistance” state funding package that would address many of issues identified in the survey.

The package would allow each conservation district to work with landowners and other partners to complete an estimated 30 percent more projects per year that address critical resource issues, such as orca recovery, salmon recovery, forest health, wildfire preparedness and resilience, and farmland preservation. Conservation districts also would be able to respond to a growing waitlist of landowners who have requested assistance with practicing conservation on their properties.

As part of the survey, conservation districts were asked to describe how this funding package would impact their ability to complete conservation projects and to describe the type of work they would focus on. Responses confirm that districts would use funding to advance progress toward critical resource issues that are shared priorities for the state and local communities. It would also allow districts to improve their customer service.

Examples of these responses include:

- “Forest health and irrigation efficiencies would be priorities. These programs would see not only an increase in our project opportunities, but perhaps most importantly, improve relationships with landowners, our level of customer service, and see increases in our partners programs and projects that can lead to large, landscape-scale restoration opportunities or effects.” (Cascadia Conservation District)
- “The majority of additional funds would go towards technical work and on the ground implementation. We would be able to offer cost share for test plots to prevent pesticide resistance through new crop rotations, and improve soil health and stability.” (Eastern Klickitat Conservation District)
- “We would likely be able to double our conservation work. We would focus on food security, adaptive beaver management, and salmon habitat enhancement.” (Jefferson County Conservation District)
- “We would have greater opportunity to work on range and forest health and fire resiliency with partners and landowners, particularly in the communities in the Wildland Urban Interface.” (Kittitas County Conservation District)
- “We could provide a substantial increase in agriculture soil conservation and riparian projects. We could begin to tackle out-of-the-box projects for our area, such as community high tunnels or alternative energy projects.” (Palouse-Rock Lake Conservation District)

- “We have an existing backlog of 14 landowners that have requested technical assistance and 21 landowners that have received technical assistance and are now waiting for funding. Additional staff would be able to meet the needs of these landowners.” (Pend Oreille Conservation District)
- “We would increase the amount of funds to introduce and implement precision agriculture methods with auto steer, variable rate application of herbicides, fertilizer, and seed, which greatly reduces the amounts needed for crop production and therefore the costs of operations. We would continue to move forward with converting farmers to direct seed. We would work with more cooperators with increasing the number of plantings and in stream structures to increase water storage (quantity), improve water quality, and improve steelhead and other fish habitat.” (Pomeroy Conservation District)
- “We would be able to cut our farm plan waiting period from 4-6 months to a more reasonable one month.” (San Juan Islands Conservation District)
- “We would be able to hire two more farm planners to provide technical assistance and do project development in high priority sub-watersheds to advance projects that protect natural resources. We would also be able to develop and coordinate a fish passage improvement program to lead the private landowner aspects of a watershed-scale fish passage improvement program. We would likely be able to work with about 45 more private property owners a year in meaningful ways and complete eight more projects a year that significantly improve water quality, fish passage, and soil health.” (Pierce Conservation District)
- “30-40% increase in implementation of projects that are ready to go! Focus would be on streambank stabilization of water bodies on the 303(d) list; livestock improvement projects; commodity buffers; and wildfire risk assessments.” (Spokane Conservation District)
- “We could see easily a 50% increase in capacity to administer and implement programs, services, and projects. Types of projects would include: more technical assistance capacity, more conservation planning and cost share project implementation, larger scale restoration and fish passage projects, and the development of an agricultural easement program.” (Thurston Conservation District)
- “Our capacity to provide technical assistance would triple, and we would anticipate a 25% increase in voluntary conservation project implementation. We would have the ability to reach out to forest landowners, urban landowners, orchards and vineyards, whereas now we cannot fulfill these needs.” (Underwood Conservation District)
- “This funding would mean less overhead and administration in delivering our programs and less grant writing and dealing with other agency overhead requirements. Firewise and forest health, nearshore habitat, farmland access, and water quality (both urban and farm) are all projects that additional funding would benefit as well as help meet demand.” (Whidbey Island Conservation District)

[Learn more about SCC funding packages that build capacity for conservation districts to engage the levels of landowner participation needed to speed up progress toward state natural resource goals.](#)

## What's at-risk if conservation districts' financial situation remains the same?

When asked how it would impact their community if their funding situation doesn't improve, conservation districts expressed a spectrum of concerns related to their ability to address natural resource priorities, provide efficient and effective customer service, and assist partners with their natural resource objectives.

Examples of these comments include (by topic):

### Addressing natural resource priorities

- “Right now we are near the opening of the Portage Bay shellfish harvest area during the spring season. All the freshwater stations are improving in the Nooksack and Drayton Harbor watersheds. This and continued improvement cannot be sustained without funding from the [State Conservation Commission].” (Whatcom Conservation District)
- “We will not be able to address all of our high priority resource concerns. This includes clean drinking water (nitrate contamination) and clean air (PM10 exceedances).” (Benton and Franklin Conservation Districts)
- “We will have less capacity to develop important projects that improve fish passage, conserve and improve soil health, and improve water quality adjacent to working lands that include improving water quality for shellfish beds.” (Pierce Conservation District)
- “We will continue to have more projects, more needs, and more interested landowners than we can serve. The impacts to natural resources will be positive, but much slower than is needed to affect watershed-scale change.” (Kittitas County Conservation District)
- “The District would not be able to implement projects on-the-ground with private landowners, and that would have a negative impact on Puget Sound recovery, as well as salmon and orca recovery, and the viability of a healthy agriculture economy.” (Snohomish Conservation District)
- “We may not be able to continue our critical programs to lead and support critical conservation partnerships focused on Palouse prairie, riparian health, salmon recovery, soil health, natural resources education, stormwater, research, and monitoring.” (Palouse Conservation District)

## Providing efficient and effective customer service

- “Without stable funding for conservation planning and conservation practice designing we are unable to respond to landowner requests for assistance in a time frame that leads to natural resource conservation... Landowners are getting frustrated at the inability to deliver timely services when they are ready, willing, and able to make changes to their land for the conservation of natural resources. They become further frustrated when they become aware of regulatory pressures that are threatened to be implemented, and they don't have the technical resources available to keep them from being penalized.” (Okanogan Conservation District)
- “We continue to work on using technology to become more and more efficient, but I think this strategy is beginning to plateau. More and more, unfortunately, we are just having to tell cooperators that we do not have the capacity to help them.” (Whidbey Island Conservation District)
- “We are at risk of closing our doors. At minimum we will dramatically decrease our services and availability to serve the community (decreased hours, elimination of some services, loss of additional staff capacities).” (Thurston Conservation District)
- “We have a wait list of over 70 interested landowner conservation projects. During recent cost-share sign-ups we regularly received requests in excess of \$1,000,000 over funding available.” (Palouse Conservation District)
- “We will continue to provide very limited, inconsistent services. The community will not have or learn to access services from our [conservation district], and therefore our efficacy will go down. In turn, landowners will have limited resources and knowledge of conservation, and voluntary stewardship will likely decrease.” (Underwood Conservation District)
- “Currently district staff is stretched too thin with too many projects and demands... Increasing demand for information is starting to create issues where it is hard to respond to people requesting information, and this could start to hurt the District's reputation.” (Stevens County Conservation District)
- “We have close communication and good standing relationships with the producers and public in our district. Without additional funding we risk losing those relationships and conservation opportunities. If there isn't more funding to get conservation on the ground, we will have to keep turning away producers and landowners interested in receiving funding for important conservation work instead of being able to implement it in a timely manner that is greatly needed for these highly erodible lands and unstable stream banks to be protected.” (Palouse-Rock Lake Conservation District)

## Assisting partners with natural resource objectives

- “Our services are continuing to decline... We are the ONLY agency or organization in our area that provides technical assistance and/or funding to agricultural landowners. We are relied on by

the County, Washington Department of Ecology, and many other organizations, but we are absolutely in jeopardy of not being able to provide meaningful services due to lack of funding.” (Clark Conservation District)

- “Our partnering agencies (WDFW, NRCS, FSA, Klickitat County, DOE, WADOT, DNR) would lose the technical support we provide to both the agencies and landowners.” (Central and Eastern Klickitat Conservation Districts)
- “We have not been able to adequately address landowner concerns relating to a Department of Ecology potential to pollute water quality referral... Our referral workload has already doubled...” (Cowlitz Conservation District)

Learn more...

- [... about conservation districts and their services.](#)
- [... about the SCC's 2019-21 state budget request.](#)
- [... about the SCC and agency duties.](#)

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