Locally-led conservation - “Actions taken by conservation districts and local stakeholders to identify and prioritize natural resource concerns and to form an action strategy that will lead to the planned management and wise use of natural resources.”

Sponsor: NASCA Policy Committee

Title: Locally Led Conservation Delivery

Subject: Proposing actions to emphasize the importance of locally led conservation delivery, utilizing existing conservation district expertise and experience

Action requested to be taken by NASCA:

The NASCA Board and staff will work with partner leadership to:

1. Educate policy makers about the value of the locally led conservation delivery system;

2. Recognize the importance of conservation districts in leading the Local Working Group process and re-emphasize that the core principle of the nation's conservation districts is to provide local guidance and direction for their conservation programs and services;

3. Locally-led conservation is most effective when directed by a Board that is diversified, energized, informed, empowered, and enthused. NASCA should work directly with NACD to:
   a. Develop general standards and desirable skills, abilities, or knowledge for effective district supervisors/directors;
   b. Publicize the importance and roles of conservation districts;
   c. Develop conservation district supervisor/director self-evaluation tool/matrix;

4. Encourage and expand partnership relationships between local stakeholders, conservation districts and NASCA state-agency members to develop strategies to implement voluntary conservation at the most localized scale possible;

5. Reinforce at local, state and national levels that a vibrant, resilient and strong locally led conservation delivery system benefits the nation’s natural resources, preserves and protects public and private lands, protects the tax base and contributes to the general health and welfare of the nation’s citizens;

6. Advocate that a strong locally led conservation delivery system depends on a long-term financial and legislative commitment to efficiently and effectively address local natural resource concerns while being mindful of local producer challenges; and
7. Work with the National Conservation Partnership as well as other agencies and organizations to ensure that training opportunities are made available to all core partner members and staff regarding the principles and sound planning methodology of the locally led, voluntary, conservation district delivery system.

Supporting material and/or documentation:
When the federal government formed the Soil Conservation Service in the 1930’s, it realized that local leadership would be necessary to affect change and modify long-held beliefs. A model conservation district law that emphasized the importance of local action was drafted by President Franklin Roosevelt's administration and sent to all state and territorial governments. The proposal encouraged the formation of soil and water conservation districts, which would be charged with working with local producers to address local resource concerns and to demonstrate the effectiveness of conservation practices.

The state and territorial governments also recognized the need for local leadership and adopted laws creating local conservation districts. While the laws vary in scope, each holds to the principal that local guidance and direction is crucial for conservation district programs and services.

Since that time, the USDA has worked in partnership with state conservation agencies and conservation districts to implement Farm Bill and other conservation programs in an efficient and effective way. State conservation agencies support locally led conservation in various ways. Examples include providing funding, technical expertise, oversight for accountability of public funds and legal operations, natural resources data and information, strategic and annual planning assistance, and advocacy for locally led conservation at every opportunity. State conservation agencies also help conservation districts collaborate with other state and federal agencies. Local leadership is a vital ingredient in this conservation partnership, as the best decisions on how to address natural resource concerns occur at the local level.

This model, which has served the nation more than 80 years, is now threatened from within and by others who are taking advantage of lapses in the execution of locally led conservation.

The full understanding and support of local leadership's role in conservation is being threatened. Local Working Groups are too often not functioning as empowered groups.

Focused on doing conservation work, conservation districts have not historically spent significant time or money publicizing their relevancy and effectiveness. This lack of promotion has created a generation of people interested in conservation, but who are not aware of the opportunities afforded by their own locally led conservation districts.

As further proof of the rise of private conservation organizations, and the reduced presence of conservation districts, the President's proposed FY18 budget included the following language:
The Budget assumes a greater role by the private sector in conservation planning in coordination with NRCS, which will provide training and certification for private entities to support development of specialized conservation plans.

While NRCS will continue to provide comprehensive conservation planning, the Budget reflects increased private sector contributions to conservation planning. NRCS will take specific steps to further increase the role of the private sector in conservation planning, with a strong focus on plans requiring higher levels of technical expertise and where private sector leadership has proven successful since the 2002 Farm Bill, but has not been fully realized.

On March 1, 1936, while signing the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, President Roosevelt said the history of every nation will be judged by how it "cares for its soil."

NASCA, and our core partners, must do more to support, energize and publicize how locally led conservation works to ensure we will be judged favorably as the Nation's conservation movement approaches its 100th anniversary.