



Arkansas Conservation Districts
Training Program



History and Future of
Conservation Districts



Power Point 1



What You Will Learn

- How will training be provided?
- What are the purposes of Conservation Districts?
- How do Conservation Districts work?
- What ecological disaster brought about the creation of Conservation Districts?
- In the beginning, Conservation Districts focused programs on what type of land owner?
- What type of land owners are Conservation Districts now serving?
- What is the “gateway” approach to conservation?





Before We Start

- A note about this training program
- Title II: Rules Governing Conservation Districts mandates approved training of conservation district directors
 - Section 210.8 and Section 211.16
- Approved training must be completed within 36 months before ANRC can certify reappointment or re-election



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Why Training?

- Changing environment/changing needs
- General Assembly and Congress demanding greater accountability from all who spend public funds
- Increasing competition for scarce funds
- Conservation Districts evolved in response to better serve their land owners and partners



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Structure of Training

- Training consists of:
 - **Local training** at District Board meetings over a three year cycle
 - A written training manual with six modules and 40 fact sheets
 - 16 PowerPoint presentations, 10-15 minutes in length to be completed over a three year cycle
 - **Workshop training** to be completed at the AACD area and annual meetings





Local Training

- Develop training schedule to review 16 PowerPoint modules over a three-year cycle
 - Include training on agenda with related fact sheetsReview PowerPoint (typically 10-15 minutes)
- Each director present signs and dates *Proof of Training Form*
- Directors absent make provisions to review the PowerPoint at the district office individually and sign form





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Dust Bowl

- Unparalleled Ecological and Human Disaster
 - Widespread and severe sustained drought
 - Huge black dust storms blotted out the sun
 - Thousands of “Arkies” and “Okies” abandoned their farms to seek a better way of life
 - Thousands became “dust refugees” living in squalid camps





Conservation District Origins

- Vast majority of the land in the U.S. was privately owned
- Challenge facing the nation was how to mobilize farmers to adopt new practices that would keep soil on the ground
- National leaders realized that implementing conservation on private land would require the active participation of private landowners
- The idea of soil and water conservation districts was born
- President Franklin Delano Roosevelt wrote all state governors recommending states pass legislation to form soil and water conservation districts.



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Arkansas Leads The Way

- In 1937 the Arkansas General Assembly passed the **FIRST** state conservation law in the nation
 - Authorizing creation of local conservation districts
 - Creating what is now the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission
- Arkansas becomes a national model for a new “conservation ethic”



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Conservation Districts Today

- Today there are 75 local conservation districts in Arkansas and more than 3000 across the nation



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In The Early Decades

In the early days and for many years, Conservation Districts focused on helping **farmers** implement conservation measures to prevent their soil Erosion.



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A Lot Has Changed In 60 Years





Farming & Land Ownership

- Before the Dust Bowl, 3 out of 4 Arkansans made their living from farming.
 - Now fewer than 3 in 100 Arkansans farm
 - Most must supplement farm income with off-farm jobs
- Land ownership changing
 - More farms large or small, fewer in the middle
 - Absentee institutional landowners buying land for investment
 - Encroaching suburban development
 - Fragmentation in some places/concentration in others





New Generation of Landowners



In Northwest Arkansas and the counties surrounding Pulaski County, farmland is being converted to rural subdivisions, creating a generation of landowners who have little or no knowledge of land and water management.



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Changing Needs

Pressures on natural resources have continued to mount with erosion problems due to developing sensitive areas without proper conservation measures in place.



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Globalization & Technology

● Globalization

- Arkansas producers now compete with Brazil, China and a host of other nations.

● Rapid technological improvements

- Agricultural technology changed slowly from the 1860s to 1930s
- Rapid technological change since aimed at increasing productivity, reducing labor demands, increasing profits
- Adoption of conservation has not always kept pace
- 2002 Farm Bill placed more emphasis on conservation





Federal Programs and Policies

● Farm program goals evolve over time

- 1930s-1960s – Price Support Era
- 1960s – 1995 – Income Support Era
- 1996 – Present – Market Oriented Era
- Some propose in the next era goals should be to tie farm payments to “environmental services”

● Programs constantly changing

- USDA consolidation of offices/staff/responsibilities
- New Farm Bill every five years
- Appropriations and eligibility criteria for authorized programs changes from year to year
- Many programs authorized with no appropriations





Federal Programs and Policies

- **Congress demands ever-growing oversight & accountability for limited funds**
 - More paperwork
 - More requirements
 - Increasingly complex
 - Requires more time
- **More requirements inadvertently make it harder for smaller farmers to participate**
- **Limited funds mean more applications denied than approved**



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Where/How Landowners Get Information

- Increasing demand for information from individuals with specialized knowledge
- Where and how farmers & landowners get information is changing. More demand for:
 - Private sector consultants
 - Vendors
 - Large landowners hiring specialized staff
 - Internet
- Word of mouth still most effective





Funding Harder To Secure

- Increased competition for available funds
- Funders demanding more
 - Creative partnerships
 - Local match
 - Measurable results
 - Accountability (e.g., record-keeping, monitoring, tracking, reporting)
- No “free” money; all money has “strings”





Conservation Districts Adapting

- Conservation Districts that are adapting to changing conditions will thrive
- Conservation Districts that do not adapt will fall further and further behind



There are three kinds of groups: Those that make things happen; those that wait for things to happen; and those that wonder what happened.

Anonymous



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How We Work Today

- Conservation Districts work with people to:
 - Conserve soil, water, wildlife and land resources
 - Increase productivity and
 - sustainability
- Conservation Districts link people with local, state and federal partners to achieve their purposes



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How We Work

- Bring together people in local agencies, organizations and community organizations to:
 - Identify conservation needs
 - Plan collaboratively
 - Educate and assist
 - Utilize all public and private resources available
 - Initiate locally-driven efforts to conserve natural resources





Existing Partnerships

- Arkansas Conservation Partnership
 - Arkansas Natural Resources Commission
 - USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
 - Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts
 - Arkansas Association of Conservation District Employees
 - University of Arkansas, Division of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service
 - University of Arkansas – Pine Bluff
 - Arkansas Forestry Commission
 - Resource Conservation & Development Councils



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Where The Future Lies

- Conservation Districts must drive locally-led planning and priority setting
- Conservation District boards mobilize private landowners to demand seamless service delivery
- Conservation Districts reach out to a new generation of landowners without historic ties to the land
- Conservation Districts provide “gateway” to specialized conservation services from all kinds of agencies and organizations



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How: Telling The Conservation Story

- Instead of talking programs, dollars ,acres and acronyms .
- Conservation Districts passionately tell the conservation story
 - Where we have come from?
 - Where are we now?
 - Where are we going?
 - Why is conservation important?



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How: Give “Old Fashioned” Testimonials

- Tell your own story
 - What was your land like?
 - What have you done to conserve or restore water, soil, habitat, wildlife, forest? Why?
 - What difference has it made to you?
 - Why should others follow your example?
 - Why are you passionate about conservation?





“Most efforts begin with a core group of supporters. The critical task is to broaden that core base by finding and using themes that engage the intellect and emotions of those who are not ready supporters and build trust from there. Seeing is believing.”

—Advocacy Institute



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How: Start with the person in your office

- Instead of trying to reach the masses, focus on the person in your office who wants help
- Get results
- Results generate word-of-mouth & trust
- Tell the story of your results
- Accumulated results provide a track record
- A track record generates funding





How: Strengthen Partnerships

- Strengthen existing partnerships aimed at reducing overhead costs while expanding/improving services:
 - More seamless service delivery
 - Coordinated priorities
 - Joint funding proposals
 - Shared administrative services among conservation districts
 - Shared staff among conservation districts
- Develop new partnerships (e.g., municipalities, water districts, environmental groups, private sector vendors and consultants, etc)
- Accept that funding requires a track record
- A track record follows results – stories of success (see testimonials)





Summary

- Conservation Districts have a proud history in leading the efforts to provide assistance in erosion control and rehabilitating farmlands and forests.
- Our challenge is to ensure today's citizens appreciate what Conservation Districts can provide.



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Discussion Questions

- What ecological disaster brought about the creation of Conservation Districts?
- What ecological disasters might lie ahead? What can conservation districts do to avert them?
- How are the needs of traditional farmers and the new generation of landowners different? The same?
- How effective are your district's partnerships?
- What does it mean to be a "gateway" to specialized conservation services?
- How effectively is your district telling the conservation story?





Additional Resources

- **Fact Sheet 1:** Quick Overview
- **Fact Sheet 2:** Putting locally lead conservation to work
- **Fact Sheet 3:** Story Telling as a Conservation Strategy
- **Fact Sheet 4:** Arkansas History of Agriculture



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Credits

Photos courtesy of the USDA Natural
Resources Conservation Service



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