

Sponsor: NASCA Policy Committee

Title: Under-performing Conservation Districts: Encouraging Effective Conservation Districts

Subject: Proposing actions to improve Conservation District performance

Supporting material and/or documentation

Conservation Districts were formed during a time when the conservation movement was young. There were no groups representing the needs of landowners or private lands conservation. They were the sole partner for their Federal partner, the Soil Conservation Service. Through time, many Conservation Districts evolved with the times and changing needs of landowners and continue to be significant conservation partners, locally, by state, regionally and nationally. However, during this time, special interest groups formed and some of them pulled support that was historically held by the Conservation Districts. Further, some Conservation Districts lost stature in the community as landowners lost touch of the services offered by the Conservation Districts. Conservation funding became more competitive and traditional funding mechanisms dissolved. Conservation Districts have a leading role, but must be willing to adapt to a changing world. NASCA must take a broad look at the climatic changes taking place (environmental, political and socio-economic) and be poised to assist state agencies in adapting to these changes and in turn assist Conservation Districts in their mission.

Key issues

- Economic – districts loss of funding support at the national, state, and local level
- Staffing- impacted by economics and the loss of institutional knowledge, lack of adequate/appropriate training
- Messaging/Branding- message delivery is as important as the message itself, loss of CD and locally-led conservation voice in many current affairs discussions
- Competition – other agencies or NGOs trying to provide or providing comparable services
- Supervisors- appointing/electing and retaining qualified (and motivated) individuals has become increasingly difficult
- Authority – CDs loss or lack of utilization of appropriate authorities – such as chairing and holding of Local Work Group meetings with NRCS

Due to changing economic forces, regulations, policies, attrition and outside competition, many Conservation Districts are finding it difficult to identify and retain qualified district supervisors, staff and funding. In some areas, the lack of focused staff and supervisor training has resulted in poor governance and allegations of misconduct. Collectively these have led to a decline in conservation district functionality in many regions of the country. Conservation Districts that lack adequate staffing, funding and leadership or those who demonstrate an inability to fulfill their statutory obligations may be considered under-performing.



Ineffective Conservation District boards

- Lack of engaged and well-trained governing board members
- Lack of adequately trained technical and administrative staff
- Lack of sufficient funding to operate, complete projects, etc.

Which led to:

- Issues with accountability of public funds
- Not fulfilling statutory or contractual obligations
- Legal issues such as lawsuits, fraud/embezzlement etc.
- Poor messaging to the public, lack of information provided to the public, disinterest in telling their District's story

In contrast, conservation districts that understand their role, comply with established regulations, policies and guidelines, actively participate in local and statewide issues and utilize multiple media outlets for messaging and marketing are viewed as effective.

Effective Conservation District boards:

- Understand the importance of locally led conservation and have actively engaged governing board members.
- Continually research conservation issues and find creative ways to seek solutions to local conservation issues.
- Have enough staff to effectively carry out Conservation District goals and objectives
- Create effective partnerships for the funding and implementation of conservation projects and programs.
- Seek training and fully understand lawful responsibilities.
- Gain public support for voluntary conservation by marketing the value and effectiveness of locally led conservation.

Action requested to be taken by NASCA

Encourage NASCA members and NACD to work cooperatively to develop a process to aid in the assessment of Conservation District performance/capacity. Conservation District audits alone may be insufficient. There are some processes in place in member states that could be gathered and potentially a template or list of best-practices for members could be put together – aiding all members to continuously improve their own processes.

- Encourage Conservation Districts to be open to expanding their mission to take advantage of non-traditional funding opportunities and programs.
- Evaluate potential opportunities to partner rather than compete with NGOs.
- Facilitate information sharing among members who may be facing difficult issues such as board member replacement or reorganization of Conservation Districts.
- State statutes for term limits and election procedures varies widely. Create a Board Transition guide with policy options for state agencies with variable legal authorities.
- Produce a video that chronicles individual districts that made changes to become more operationally effective.

