Locally Led Conservation

An Overview for Conservation Districts

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OVERVIEW

The need for local leadership in natural resources management was one of the most important factors leading to the establishment of conservation districts nearly 60 years ago. Following the creation of the federal Soil Conservation Service, conservation districts were created as a local focal point for coordinating and delivering technical assistance and funding to private land managers.

Over the years, federal, state and local governments have channeled assistance through conservation districts to address virtually every aspect of natural resource conservation. Districts have focused on setting priorities and carrying out programs based on local conditions and needs.

However, legislation such as the 1985 and 1990 Farm Bills, the 1987 Clean Water Act amendments and the 1990 Coastal Zone Act has significantly changed the way we address conservation and natural resource management needs. These and other programs, driven largely by national priorities, focused federal conservation efforts on a narrow range of natural resource concerns. State and local conservation leaders were often left on their own to balance limited program resources against growing conservation needs.

The enactment of the Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 — the 1996 Farm Bill — signaled a shift back to the original district approach of locally led conservation. Elected officials and policy makers have reaffirmed that local leadership and grassroots decision-making are the keys to successfully managing and protecting our natural resources. As a result, conservation districts now have the opportunity to return to their roots and lead their communities in determining local conservation needs and priorities.

In considering the 1996 Farm Bill as part of the locally led conservation process, Congress emphasized the need for a close working relationship among conservation districts, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and other government agencies. To facilitate this, conservation districts are being asked to bring together local stakeholders to provide input to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's local Farm Bill work groups in

order to guide program implementation and integrate the Farm Bill with other local initiatives.

As a process, however, locally led conservation goes beyond the Farm Bill or any other individual program. There are a number of program resources available through USDA, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Forest Service and other federal agencies that can be tapped for assistance in carrying out a local conservation program. There are also many resources available through state and local sources. District leadership will be critical in marshaling these resources to increase the visibility and effectiveness of local conservation efforts.

Locally led conservation creates new opportunities, but also poses significant challenges to districts to step in as conservation leaders in their communities. Districts need to take the lead in planning and carrying out *all* conservation programs at the local level.

PUTTING LOCALLY LED CONSERVATION TO WORK

Conservation districts should play the lead role in the locally led conservation process. The process, which is resource driven rather than program driven, should be used to guide and coordinate all federal, state and local conservation efforts.

Locally led conservation involves a sequence of steps to involve the entire community in both planning and implementation. These steps include:

- reaching out to the public and bringing local stakeholders together;
- using a conservation needs assessment to analyze local needs and concerns;
- setting local priorities based on public input and needs assessment;
- identifying program resources available to address local needs and priorities;
- developing and implementing a conservation plan; and
- reviewing and evaluating needs and accomplishments

Public Outreach

One of the most important steps in the locally led conservation process is to solicit input from organizations and individuals familiar with local resource needs and conditions. Local stakeholders are a critical link in assessing the resource base, setting priorities and ultimately carrying out the local conservation program.

An effective outreach effort could involve setting up public meetings to garner community input. It might also include the establishment of an ongoing advisory committee. Other ideas to consider include conducting surveys and holding focus group meetings.

The most important goal of your outreach effort is to enable your constituents to help identify natural resource issues that affect them. By involving a broad representation of your customer base, you will have the opportunity to increase your

program's visibility, prestige and base of support within the community.

To begin your public outreach effort, you will need to identify all of the agencies, organizations, businesses and individuals in your community that have an interest in natural resource management. Even organizations and individuals that traditionally have not shared your point of view should be included.

The appendix of this document includes detailed ideas and guidelines to assist in your public outreach effort.

Conservation Needs Assessment

The conservation needs assessment is another critical element of your locally led conservation process. With input from all interested parties, this assessment will provide a comprehensive evaluation of the condition of the district's natural resource base and be the platform for making decisions about local priorities or policies in all local conservation programs.

The conservation needs assessment is a comprehensive analysis of the work that needs to be done to achieve broad conservation goals and to solve specific natural resource concerns. It should be based on public input and include a detailed analysis of natural resource concerns within the district. The needs assessment should address the entire resource base, including the predominant land uses with which the district will work.

A major purpose of the conservation needs assessment is to ensure that conservation programs address the most important local resource needs. The assessment will be the basis for selecting the type and extent of needed conservation systems and practices. It will also be the basis for making recommendations on funding priorities and priority areas to be addressed by the various conservation programs available within the district.

Here are some suggested steps to take in carrying out your conservation needs assessment:

- Identify specific concerns and existing conditions and trends for each natural resource in your district.

- Identify, agree upon and document community objectives.
- Analyze conservation needs and priorities.
- Prioritize natural resource concerns.
- Identify geographic areas and potential priority areas.

Putting the Pieces Together

The information gathered through the public outreach and conservation needs assessment process can then be used to:

- set measurable conservation goals and objectives;
- identify conservation systems and practices needed to achieve these goals and objectives; and
- identify federal, state, local and non-government programs and services that are available to address specific conservation needs.

As traditional funding sources decline or shift, this process will provide opportunities to examine new sources of assistance and new players to help carry out your conservation program. Locally led conservation will help you identify ways to marshal support from a variety of sources.

The conservation needs assessment and resulting district conservation plan will form a foundation upon which all local conservation efforts should be based. This process should be the basis for carrying out federal programs such as the Farm Bill, Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act and Endangered Species Act, as well as the many state and local programs that provide assistance to private land managers.

FARM BILL CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

As noted earlier, the locally led conservation process is an important mechanism for coordinating and carrying out *all* federal, state and local conservation programs. However, there are some specifics to keep in mind regarding implementation of the federal conservation programs authorized by the Farm Bill.

In the 1996 Farm Bill, Congress recognized the need for conservation districts to be fully involved in the development and delivery of USDA conservation programs. The intent of Congress was clarified in the Farm Bill's conference report, which states that:

> *. . . The Secretary of Agriculture should, to the fullest extent practicable, recognize the responsibilities and utilize the authorities of state and local governments, including conservation districts. . . . In particular, Congress intends for the Secretary to acknowledge and maintain the historic role of conservation districts in assessing natural resource priorities, approving site-specific conservation plans, and coordinating the delivery of federal conservation programs at the local level.*

In carrying out the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and other Farm Bill conservation programs, one of districts' most important responsibilities will be to represent local stakeholders' interests.

Conservation districts will convene the local work groups that will guide the implementation of the Farm Bill programs. The work groups will consist of district board members and key staff, NRCS staff, FSA county committee members and key staff, and other federal, state and local government agencies.

On the local Farm Bill work groups, conservation districts will provide leadership for the assessment of natural resource conditions and needs. Districts and other work group members will also:

- identify program priorities and available resources;
- develop proposals for priority areas; and

- make program policy recommendations.

In addition, districts are assigned responsibility for: conducting local outreach campaigns; providing technical support; accepting program applications; and approving conservation plans and modifications. Similarly, state associations of conservation districts and state conservation agencies will provide advice on developing policy and setting priorities at the state level through membership on the State Technical Committees.

In addition to using information from districts' locally led conservation process to help determine goals and priorities for local delivery of USDA conservation programs, the local Farm Bill work groups will monitor the overall effectiveness of USDA's conservation programs and make recommendations for improvements. Recommendations from the work groups will also be included in the state and national conservation needs assessments for USDA programs and will be used in developing future program priorities and policies.

It is important to keep in mind that the Farm Bill work groups are considered federal advisory committees, and federal law limits membership on such advisory committees to representatives of government agencies. Therefore, district representation will be the primary means through which local stakeholders' input is conveyed to the work groups.

By gathering community input through the locally led conservation process and providing it to the Farm Bill work groups, districts will be able to ensure that the work groups develop and implement conservation programs that fully reflect local needs and priorities.

Appendices

GUIDELINES FOR PUBLIC OUTREACH EFFORTS

Determine how, and to what degree, you want to engage the public in developing the conservation needs assessment. Vehicles for soliciting public input include meetings, focus groups and surveys. When choosing from among these options, consider the following questions:

- What is your time frame for gathering input?
- What financial resources are available for this effort?
- What personnel resources (district board members, staff, volunteers, outside facilitators) are available?

Meetings

You will need to decide the future relationship you want to have with the group you invite. You may decide to hold just one meeting. If so, the agenda should include only a realistic number of steps towards developing the conservation needs assessment.

If you want the group to do more than simply recommend broad conservation goals, you should probably plan for more than one meeting. You may even want to consider forming a group that meets periodically to review progress, consult on new projects or work to get funding to implement your conservation program.

Detailed guidelines, a sample meeting agenda and a sample invitation are provided on the following pages.

Focus Groups

Focus groups, or direct interview sessions with a carefully selected group that reflects the diversity of the community, can provide more detailed input than a larger public gathering. *(The document, "Information Gathering Techniques," listed on page C-1, offers guidance on conducting focus groups.)*

A facilitator trained in focus group methodology can also help assure that you get the information you are seeking from your focus group. Your state NRCS office, Extension office or land grant university may be able to help you locate a trained facilitator.

Surveys

Providing a short survey form can increase the effectiveness of your public outreach effort by ensuring that you receive input from stakeholders whether or not they participate in meetings or focus groups. Also, encourage recipients to send in written comments to address issues not covered by the survey. *(A sample survey follows on pages B-1 & B-2.)*

PREPARING FOR A PUBLIC MEETING

When? Select an appropriate time and date for the meeting. Consult local calendars and other organizations to ensure that other events will not interfere with attendance.

Where? Select a central, easily accessible location. The location should be familiar, comfortable, well-lighted and equipped with a good public address system. Consider taping the proceedings to assist in accurately recording the input.

What do we call the meeting? What you call the meeting should reflect its intent and purpose. If you plan to have the group meet periodically, it might be referred to as a conservation advisory committee or council. If you plan to convene only one or two meetings, you may want to simply call it a public meeting, community forum, or a town hall meeting.

Who should be involved? Aim to include as broad a cross section as possible of individuals and organizations with knowledge of, and interest in, the natural resource concerns of your community. Possible participants include:

- FSA county committee and staff
- other federal agencies with offices in the state or district
- district cooperators
- state conservation agency representatives
- local, state, and tribal environmental, agricultural and recreational agencies
- agricultural organizations
- environmental and conservation organizations
- civic groups
- local and state elected officials
- tribal officials
- residential community associations
- local boards of education and local schools
- local businesses that have an impact on natural resources
- garden clubs
- political organizations (Democratic and Republican clubs, League of Women Voters)
- hunting, fishing and recreation organizations
- builders associations

Invitations. Prepare a mailing list of appropriate participants. Three to four weeks ahead of the meeting, send them an invitation describing the nature and importance of the task they are asked to help with. The invitation should include a brief description of the local district, a brief description of the conservation needs assessment process and the agenda for the meeting. *(A sample invitation/announcement follows on page B-3.)*Follow-up phone calls should be made to key organizations and individuals three to five days prior to the meeting.

Additional publicity. Make sure that the meeting is well publicized in advance. Prepare a press release or media announcement based on the information included in the invitation letter. Contact local newspapers, radio and television stations two to three weeks before the meeting. Also include information about the meeting in newsletters published by your district, your county FSA office and other local organizations. Place posters in appropriate high traffic areas such as the meeting location, post offices, store windows, etc.

The agenda. When designing the meeting agenda, think about how to motivate the audience to become involved and generate significant input. For example, it may be desirable to form small groups to recommend broad conservation goals and to use a nominal group technique for voting. The bulk of the agenda should be devoted to looking at each natural resource and dominant land use, the existing conditions and priorities for your district. *(A sample agenda follows on page B-4.)*

Facilitation. Consider using a trained facilitator to run the meeting. Such an individual can be invaluable in keeping the discussion focused, resolving conflicts and maximizing audience participation. Meet with or call the facilitator before the meeting to discuss goals, procedures and expectations. Your state NRCS office, Extension office or land grant university may be able to help you locate a trained facilitator.

CONDUCTING A PUBLIC MEETING

Staffing. Appoint district board or staff members to serve as discussion leaders, timekeepers and recorders. The facilitator or discussion leader may need one or more assistants to record comments on flip chart, provide assistance to small groups and perform other tasks. Technical experts from the district, NRCS, FSA and county committee staff should also be on hand to answer questions.

Materials. Provide a document table at the meeting on which you can display district fact sheets and policy positions, the agenda and other information. A large map of your county or area, displayed in a prominent position in the meeting room, will be helpful when referring to specific areas during your discussions. Flip charts and easels will be helpful for capturing and displaying participants' comments. Sign-in sheets should be used to collect participants' names, organizations, mailing addresses, and phone and fax numbers. (Add these names to your district mailing list for future contact.)

Introduction. Start on time and set the tone and purpose of the meeting right away. A brief explanation of the conservation district, the conservation delivery system and the conservation needs assessment should be presented. Consider using a brief slide

presentation or video to illustrate existing natural resource conditions. (This presentation can later be used at other district events.)

Discussion/Brainstorming. The facilitator should initiate discussion and encourage input from the audience regarding the condition of natural resources in the community and how these resources are affected by dominant land uses. The audience also should be encouraged to recommend conservation goals and priorities. If there is a large audience, you may want to break up into smaller groups. Recommendations should be recorded on a flip chart. Once all input is recorded, the facilitator should work with participants to help them vote upon and/or rank the most important conservation goals and priorities.

Follow-up. Before participants leave the meeting, be sure to describe to them what the district will do with the input they have provided. Consider holding a follow-up meeting to report on progress. At very least, keep stakeholders informed with at least one follow-up mailing.

Sample Customer Survey of Natural Resource Issues

[YOUR DISTRICT NAME]
[mailing address]
[phone number]
[fax number]

1. Please rate the FIVE most important natural resource issues or areas facing our community in the next decade. Rank 1-5, with 1 being the most important and 5, the least.

___ air quality
___ animal waste
___ biological diversity
___ flooding
___ agricultural land conversion
___ agricultural sustainability
___ agricultural productivity
___ forestry
___ grazing lands
___ irrigation/water management
___ nutrient management
___ pesticide management
___ food and fiber production
___ urban land use
___ other (please specify)_____

___ riparian corridors
___ soil erosion
___ soil quality/soil health
___ water quality
___ storm water management
___ threatened/endangered species
___ urban water pollution
___ water availability
___ wetlands
___ wildlife
___ mined land reclamation
___ land disposal of organic waste
___ recreation
___ rural land use

2. Check the FOUR customer groups you think the Conservation District should make the most intense effort to reach with information, products or services.

___ agribusiness
___ businesses community
___ part-time farmers/ranchers
___ commodity groups
___ developers
___ environmental groups
___ federal and state agencies
___ full-time farmers/ranchers
___ hobby farmers
___ other (please specify)_____

___ national politicians
___ state and local politicians
___ planners
___ recreational users
___ schools
___ timber producers
___ foresters
___ urban/suburban citizens
___ minority farmers/ranchers

[over]

3. Check the FIVE most important products, programs or services the Conservation District can provide to you.

___ agricultural waste mgmt.
___ mineland reclamation
___ cost-share programs
___ conservation planning
___ develop/maintain standards
___ educational programs
___ engineering design
___ erosion & sediment control
___ flood prevention
___ forestry programs
___ information (e.g. databases)
___ outdoor recreation assistance
___ resource inventories
___ soil survey & soil information
___ recreation opportunities
___ rural development assistance
___ wildlife management
___ other _____

4. What specific areas of our community do you think are most in need of natural resource conservation assistance?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

5. Please share any additional thoughts or comments in the space below or attach a separate sheet.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Thank you for sharing your opinions with us. Please mail or fax your completed survey to the address listed on the front.

Sample Invitation to Conservation Needs Assessment Meeting

We Need Your Help to Plan the Future of
_____ County's Natural Resources!

As a community leader with an interest in our natural resources, you are invited to attend a public meeting to share your ideas for the development of the *(Your District's Name)* Conservation Needs Assessment. We hope you can join us on *(date)* at *(time)* at the *(meeting location and address)*.

The Conservation Needs Assessment will evaluate the current conditions of _____ County's natural resources and dominant land uses, identify natural resource concerns and goals, and prioritize areas where our conservation efforts are most needed. This assessment will become the foundation on which our future plans and projects will be based. We want to hear your recommendations on where the natural resource problems are and how we can work together to solve them.

The *(Your District's Name)* was created by state law in 19*(##)* with the mission to protect and manage the natural resources of *(Your County)*. *(Your District's Name)* serves as a local coordinator of technical and financial assistance for natural resource problems from all levels of government to private landowners and land users.

The District is governed by a board of *(directors/ supervisors/ commissioners)* who are local residents, *(elected/ appointed)* to *(#)* year terms, and take an oath of office to carry out the district's mission. The district's *(directors/ supervisors/ commissioners)* are unpaid officials who dedicate their time to serve the community and its natural resources.

Whether you can attend or not, we encourage you to fill out the enclosed survey form and mail it back to us so we can benefit from your opinions. You may also wish to send additional written comments if the form doesn't adequately address the natural resource issues of concern to you.

We hope to see you at the meeting and look forward to your participation. You are one of our customers and we intend, through this process, to serve you better. Please join us and help us plan for the protection and proper management of our natural resources into the next century.

Sample Agenda for Public Meeting

Public Meeting to Set Conservation Priorities

[YOUR DISTRICT NAME]
[meeting place]
[date]
[time]

Agenda

1. Introduction and Purpose (15 minutes) — *District Chair*
2. Establishment of Ground Rules (5 minutes) — *Facilitator*
3. Review Resource Data (30 minutes) — *District/NRCS Staff*
4. Identify Resource Concerns (1 hour) — *Facilitator*
5. Discuss and Prioritize Resource Concerns (1 hour) — *Facilitator*
6. Outline Goals and Actions Needed to Address Resource Concerns (1 hour) — *Facilitator*
   - What needs to be done?
   - What resources are available?
   - What additional resources are needed?
   - Who should have primary responsibility?
7. Reports and Discussion on Goals and Actions (45 minutes) — *Facilitator*
8. Summary (15 minutes) — *District Chair*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO ASSIST IN THE LOCALLY LED CONSERVATION EFFORT

Publications

The Conservation Partnership developed a series of pertinent booklets as part of the "Marketing for Conservation Success" campaign. Titles include: *Alliance Building, Information Gathering Techniques, Conflict Management, Leadership Identification and Group Dynamics, Guide to Facilitating Strategic Planning Workshops, Media Relations* and *Reaching Out to Minority Farmers.* To order, contact the NACD Service Center at (800) 825-5547; fax: (713) 332-5259.

The Conservation Technology Information Center developed a series of guidebooks as part of the "Know Your Watershed" campaign. The information is applicable to all locally led conservation efforts. Titles include: *Putting Together a Watershed Management Plan, Building Local Partnerships, Managing Conflict* and *Leading and Communicating.* To order, contact CTIC at (317) 494-9555; fax (317) 494-5969.

National Planning Procedures Handbook. Contact your local NRCS office.

Earth Team: Lending a Hand. A complete guide to recruiting, directing and supervising Earth Team volunteers. As you begin discussing ways to set natural resource priorities in your communities, perhaps Earth Team volunteers can help. For a copy of this guide, call 1-800-THE-SOIL, extension 29.

Training

Conservation Partnership Operations Work Group. This team of NACD, NASCA and NRCS representatives works directly with states to assist districts with leadership training, program planning, meeting design and other needs. For information, contact NACD's Ray Ledgerwood at (509) 334-1823; fax: (509) 334-3453.

Building Common Ground. This series of workshops, developed by the National 4-H Council, provides information on group forming, communicating, negotiating and planning for change. Contact: Sherry Pecharka at (301) 961-2904; fax: (301) 961-2894; e-mail: *pecharka@fourhcouncil.edu.*

The Leader in You. This training series, developed by the NRCS Social Science Institute, is designed for NRCS, district and state conservation agency staff. It is intended for managers and team leaders who must achieve results through others. Contact: NRCS's Barbara Wallace at (616) 456-2247.

Facilitation

Contact your state NRCS office to get a list of trained NRCS facilitators in your state. Your state Extension office or land grant university may also be able to provide information.

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