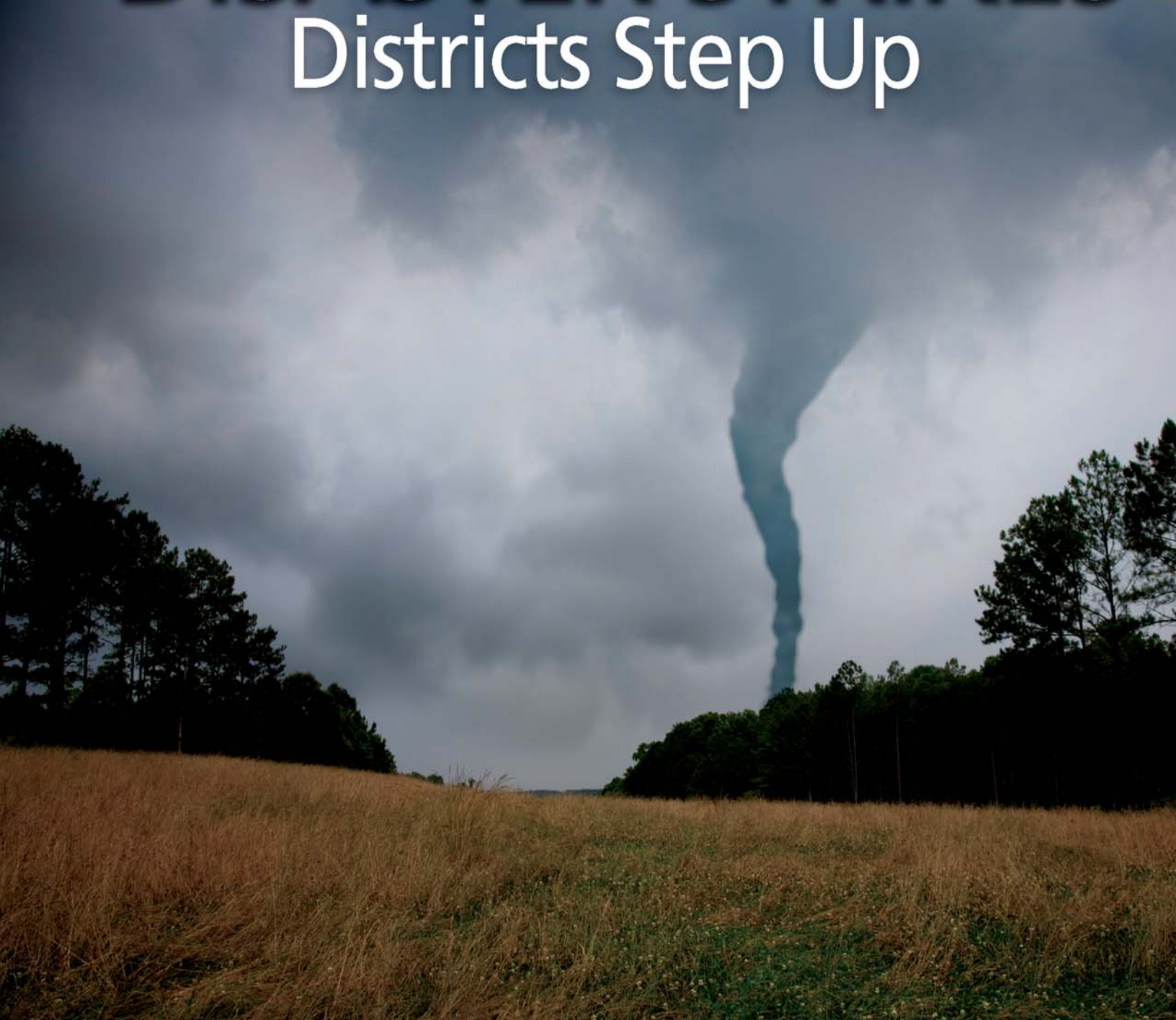




When a  
**DISASTER STRIKES**  
Districts Step Up



# DISASTER

**A DISASTER, BY DEFINITION,** is a calamitous event that occurs suddenly, resulting in dramatic damage. No one can anticipate a disaster, nor be fully prepared when a flood, tornado or toxic spill strikes. But communication, coordination and advanced planning can quickly provide needed resources to those individuals involved. Because of conservation districts' strong working relationships with landowners, communities, government partners and non-governmental entities, they have been and continue to be increasingly involved in disaster preparation and recovery.

Conservation districts were created in the 1920s to implement good soil conservation and to serve as local community partners to the Soil and Water Conservation Service (today's Natural Resources Conservation Service.) Through the years, conservation districts' roles have expanded to include locally-driven solutions for all natural resources concerns, including disaster preparation, such as the recovery and restoration needed after wildfires, floods, chemical or waste spills, violent storms and more.

Conservation districts have aided in numerous disaster relief efforts. Recent success stories in Indiana, New York and Montana highlight the invaluable role of districts, local producers, technical assistants and conservationists everywhere.



## Fire Recovery Efforts in Montana

An intense wildfire swept through 200,000 acres of ponderosa pine and fir stands south of Big Timber, Montana in September 2006. It was the biggest fire of the season, burning a portion of BLM lands and the Gallatin National Forest, as well as state and private lands.

The Sweetgrass Conservation District worked with the Montana Department of Natural Resource Conservation (DNRC) to identify intensely burned private land. DNRC also worked with NRCS to bring in EQIP funding to cost-share with the Governor's Environmental Contingency Grant. This funding assisted with the grass and aerial reseeding of nearly 20,000 acres of private land. Reseeding, combined with ideal weather conditions, reduced erosion by 30 percent (compared to areas that were not reseeded) and minimized weed growth.

"Coordination and communication were key to the success of this project," said Karl Christians, a conservation district specialist at the DNRC. NRCS and conservation districts were helpful with assessing the damage that occurred, Christians said.

The area is already on its way to a healthy recovery.

## 2008 Flooding in Indiana

Prolonged rainfall and flooding wreaked havoc across the Midwest during June 2008, with most of the damage concentrated in Iowa, Illinois and Indiana. Many levees overflowed or were broken, flooding cropland and residential areas. As a result, crop yields were significantly damaged, and producers were unable to replant much of their land.

The state of Indiana expected a major crop failure, with 29 counties declared a major disaster area, enabling the region to receive federal disaster aid. Farmers who could replant were forced to plant later than usual, meaning only 87 percent of corn and 43 percent of soybeans were planted in the state.

Emergency Conservation Assistance Program awarded \$1.19 million to 35 Indiana Soil and Water Conservation Districts (IASWCD) to address local needs and damaged agricultural lands. Conservation practices assisted 469 landowners, planting 13,421 acres, removing sediment and debris, repairing six water and sediment control basins and performing various other practices.





“One of the big issues Indiana faced was how to help private landowners with their dam and levee issues,” said Jennifer Boyle, executive director of the IASWCD.

Although the flooding affected many places in the Midwest, some areas reported less damage thanks in large part to conservation practices that districts helped landowners install and maintain in recent years. Conservation efforts like grassed waterways, no-till fields and contour buffer strips minimized flooding damages for some producers. For instance, no-till fields had soil losses of five tons per acre, whereas tilled fields lost 35 tons of soil per acre.

In 2010, things have returned to normal in Indiana. Sara Christensen from the Indiana State Department of Agriculture recommended that conservation districts have “shovel-ready ideas” and plans for addressing disasters. “SWCDs that already had shovel-ready ideas were more apt to receive [emergency] funding.”



## New York Manure Spill

Catastrophic events like manure spills can happen, even to a multi-award winning dairy farmer in Onondaga County, N.Y. In 2004, a spill at the Trinder Farm occurred, due to a worn-out pipe in the bottom of a 25-year-old Slurrystore manure structure. There was no way to detect that the pipe had become brittle over the years. When the pipe broke open, the manure bypassed the flap valve and spilled through the manure room and onto the road. Fortunately, weather conditions were sunny and fair, which helped first responders contain the spill.

Because of the quick and coordinated response to this disaster, the spill was contained, and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) issued no fines. Due to proactive approaches like the addition of several safety measures, the probability of another spill on the farm has been greatly reduced. As a result of this spill, Trinder Farm worked with the NYSDEC and the Onondaga County 911 Center to create the “Ag911” program, a coordinated response effort to address catastrophic events such as manure spills and other farm-related emergencies.

A key part of the Ag911 program is a technical assistance team, comprised of employees from NYSDEC-Division of Water and the Onondaga County Soil and Water Conservation District (OCSWCD). If first responders determine that technical assistance is required, trained personnel from NYSDEC and the conservation district can be called for assistance. The goal of this coordinated response is to keep items such as manure and fertilizer out of the state’s water bodies, thus preventing water quality violations, environmental disasters and enforcement actions or fines.

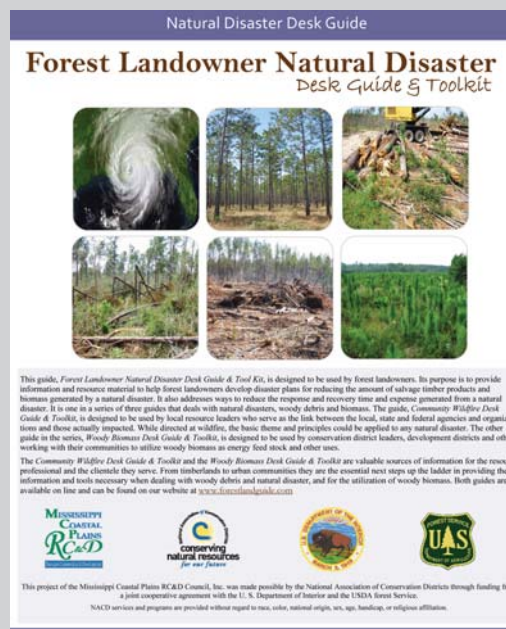
“Manure happens,” said Mark Burger, OCSWCD’s executive director. “Bad things happen to good people.” The good news is that damage to the environment can be minimized by being proactive and setting a plan in advance. Agricultural providers must identify the training needed, fix communication gaps and establish necessary protocols for a quick response. The NYSDEC is considering making Ag911 a statewide program.

## NACD offers various web resources to assist conservation districts with disaster planning:

**Woody Biomass Desk Guide & Toolkit:** provides information and tools needed for timberlands and urban communities working with woody debris after a natural disaster. Both guides are available online and can be found on NACD's website at [www.nacdnet.org/resources/guides/biomass](http://www.nacdnet.org/resources/guides/biomass).

**Community Wildfire Desk Guide & Toolkit:** was made for organizations affected by wildfires, as well as local resource leaders who serve as a link between local, state and federal agencies. While these resources focus primarily on wildfire, the basic theme and principles could be applied to any natural disaster. It is available online at [www.nacdnet.org/resources/guides/wildfire](http://www.nacdnet.org/resources/guides/wildfire).

**Forest Landowner Natural Disaster Desk Guide & Tool Kit:** designed to help forest landowners develop a disaster plan that reduces the amount of salvage timber products and biomass generated by a natural disaster. It also addresses ways to reduce the response, recovery time and expense generated from a natural disaster. It is available online at [www.nacdnet.org/resources/guides/forest\\_disaster\\_desk\\_guide.pdf](http://www.nacdnet.org/resources/guides/forest_disaster_desk_guide.pdf).



## Districts Emergency Preparedness Plan for Prevention and Response

By nature, disasters are unexpected and devastating. Good coordination and communication are crucial factors in successful recovery and restoration. In the examples discussed in this article, conservation districts were able to turn bad situations into proactive strategies for future disaster intervention. Even if a disaster has not occurred in your district, thinking about the steps needed for prevention and response means better coordination and communication when a disaster does occur.

## Districts in Action

Districts leverage partnerships and funding from federal, state, local and private sources to help carry out locally-led conservation and disaster relief efforts. Districts must continue to establish relationships with landowners, technical experts and other valuable resources that can assist them in performing effective and successful clean up and restorative work.

Currently, conservation districts are focusing efforts on supporting communities affected by the Gulf Coast oil spill and are amplifying efforts to restore the environment. No one could have predicted the April 2010 explosion of the BP oil rig. This disaster has captured the attention of not only Capitol Hill, the public and the energy industry, but also the entire nation. The results may be devastating to fragile wetlands, wildlife and coastal ecosystems for many years to come. Likewise, no one expected that powerful thunderstorms in early May would cause the Cumberland River to crest at 51.8 feet within 24 hours, leaving Nashville, Tenn. and surrounding communities in Kentucky and Mississippi submerged in disaster.

Conservation districts will undoubtedly participate in the recovery and restoration of these and other disaster-ridden areas across the nation, just as they have played key roles in disaster efforts in the past.



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