



Conservation Delivery System of the Future

Building Blocks for a Changing World

**Respectfully submitted by the District Operations and Member Services Committee
to the NACD Board of Directors, February 2015**

Executive Summary

This document is crafted to be a guidance and reference tool. While it captures many of the challenges, opportunities and risks facing local and state conservation partners, it is not prescriptive. Rather, it is intended to provide some of the building blocks needed to design a conservation delivery system of the future. No single formula exists for such a system. The components in this document are offered to guide conservation district leadership in the development of systems that recognize and honor local, state and region variations while providing consistent programs and services. We offer a “smorgasbord” of possibilities. Choose the options that fit your situation. We ask you to carefully review this document. It has been painstakingly crafted in an effort to fuel the engine of change. Now is the time to be bold!

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Introduction and Preface

America's conservation districts and their partners have a laudable history of successes since the soil conservation movement was created in the 1930s. But the job of conservation on private lands is ongoing and ever-changing. The ideas articulated in this white paper address what has become known as the conservation delivery system of the future, with a specific focus on the role of conservation districts in the continually evolving future.

Today's Challenges

The historic partnership's strategies to deliver conservation are rapidly and continually transitioning. The usual gradual evolution is now accelerated, which shines a spotlight on three key factors critically important to conservation districts: opportunity, challenge and risk.

Reviewing tomorrow's opportunities leads to celebrating the emergence of new strategies, partners, and tools. We applaud employing new electronic tools and processes to allow technicians more boots-on-the-ground. Experience and research demonstrate the efficacy of implementing projects focusing on larger landscapes and multiple landowners and addressing all resource concerns within defined "focus areas." Strategically targeting high priority areas may generate greater ecologic effects and economic vitality than previous "scatter-gun" approaches. The challenge is for districts to mesh new initiatives driven by state and federal programs with the commitment to serve all district residents. While adding our influence to how these new targeting and focus area initiatives are implemented in our districts (keeping the actual application of these new resources locally-led), we must continue to honor our fiduciary obligation as public officials to serve all citizens to the best of our abilities and the extent of our resources. New "players" are taking seats at the decision-making tables. It's exciting to see entities, such as public utilities, which had shown heretofore little apparent interest in private lands conservation, want to engage with our partnership.

The challenges to do more, do it faster and prove results come from all directions. Among them are the public's demand for better results from "their money"; minimizing the effects of climate change and severe weather episodes; the need for increased food production for a rapidly-expanding world population; piercing scrutiny from regulators and environmental litigants; compliance with federal and state laws and regulations; the need for farmers, ranchers, and foresters to make a living; and more partners vying for funding. Within this maze, in many locales, other groups are lobbying to replace conservation districts as the "go-to" local entity for getting work done on the ground. That's already happened in some states.

Challenges and Opportunities Expanded

This section elaborates on some of the key challenges and opportunities facing the partnership.

- The tools and science of technology and how they are employed will continue to evolve rapidly, as will the tech savvy of our direct customers and the general public. This will impact many aspects of our work and require new levels of ability and understanding among district staffs and board

members to assure our ability to interact with our partners and customers. As our federal partners move to user self-certification and program delivery, districts face important questions about how to remain viable partners in the delivery of conservation services. Additional financial expense for compatible software and equipment may be required.

- Questions about district access to new technology platforms, security of information and suitable training arise in this new paradigm. Across-the-board sharing of innovative technologies and approaches, as well as project data, will strengthen service delivery.
- Traditional funding sources will decline in some cases and, perhaps, rise in others. In this environment, we need to be nimble and able to adapt the ways we operate. When funding sources decline, we still face two realities: the rising cost of doing business and a growing demand for services. When these factors converge, the impacts on districts and their partners will be dramatic. In many cases, we will need to modernize our system from the ground up. Districts must diversify funding, especially gaining local tax bases, for long-term stability.
- Make no mistake about it: modernizing the conservation delivery system will sometimes collide head-on with long-held traditions. District consolidation may be part of the new system in some settings, raising difficult governance and funding questions.
- Regulation is likely to increase. Various groups will critically scrutinize our work in a variety of settings. Tighter regulations may make conservation planning more difficult, complex and possibly more costly. Comprehensive conservation planning could obviate the need for additional environmental regulation. But countless surveys, input from focus groups and other indicators all point to the need for conservation technical assistance at the local level. How we reconcile these factors will shape our future.
- An array of social demands will continue to impact conservation districts. We must embrace the need for diversity in our board membership, employees, customers and partners – taking into account gender, age, ethnicity, and other locally relevant social strata. These are important considerations, especially as we are being asked to reach out to historically-underserved customers in a variety of settings. Clearly, our customers and partners are becoming more diverse. If we are to continue to be leaders in addressing local natural resources needs, we need to reflect that diversity. Many conservation districts are already well on the way to achieving these goals. We need to share these success stories broadly to encourage and inform other districts and partners.
- The conservation delivery system of the future points to a strong need to increase partnering. Many districts are already well along the way and have impressive examples of partnering to achieve conservation goals. But the old paradigm of NRCS and a conservation district quietly working alone isn't going to fit the new delivery system. This report addresses this concern in several ways, including the development of more inclusive local work groups, state technical advisory committees and conservation partnerships.
- As conservation districts embrace broadened partnerships, opportunities to reach out to new customers and deliver local conservation solutions will emerge. These opportunities include forming active partnerships with organizations and businesses not generally considered within the conservation family, such as utilities, brick-and-mortar industries and high-tech electronics manufacturers that use massive amounts of water in their processing. The list is only limited by the imagination of local partners.

- These new partners also open up the possibility of new funding alternatives, such as ecosystem services trading. In this new age of partnering with private businesses and organizations, conservation districts should be diligent to keep the focus on our primary purpose - to represent the citizens of our districts and work to protect America's natural resources and promote their wise use.
- The ability to communicate is central to success, whether at home or with co-workers, partners or customers. The strength of conservation districts is our ability to address local conservation goals. But this strength can become a weakness as we shape a national message. We need to communicate what makes America's conservation districts so vital to the cause of private lands conservation. The job cannot get done without us.

Responding to the Risk

At risk is locally led, which could go from our base of influence (useful in the old days) to a noble but anemic historic concept, given "lip-service" but lacking credibility and potency to effect results benefiting our local constituencies.

A central risk for conservation districts is that our primary reason for being created 75-plus years ago may erode. We were created to represent our districts' citizens and landscapes, to identify problems and effect solutions through technical assistance and access to financial assistance. We are the link between state and federal resources and our landowners. We must honor our fiduciary responsibility to ensure all citizens we represent receive the technical assistance, education, and advocacy services they expect – to the best of our abilities and resources. We must uphold our commitment to "landowners in need" so they are not ignored because they do not live in a priority target area or do not rank high enough to qualify for state and federal programs. In such instances, we may have to do our conservation business the "old way."

A district's voice and power to influence conservation delivery is rooted in its close personal relationships among district officials and staffs and their neighbors: land managers, stakeholders, district residents, and related local governments.

Our importance to the success of the partnership is greater than ever. We must be involved to ensure the decisions about where and how conservation hits the ground are local. Our historic role in the partnership has not changed; in fact, it is more imperative.

The opportunities for the conservation delivery system of the future are promising. The challenges can be turned into opportunities if we manage them wisely. We have to help shape and empower new ways of doing business to benefit our constituencies.

What's at risk? Survival! We either deliberately choose to use our wisdom, experience, passion, resources and powers and authorities to effect positive growth OR we might head down a rocky road to irrelevancy and eventually become unnecessary. Nothing is sadder than being the "voice of conservation" in America if nobody is listening.

From Concepts to Actions

As the conservation movement changes, we must be prepared to influence how it evolves. It's a big job, but the emerging system can capture new opportunities and address new challenges while still respecting and preserving our core values, traditions and practices to the extent they remain viable. We must also be willing to make tough decisions to effect growth and sustainability by re-evaluating some of our most cherished assumptions – like a district and federal office in every county.

Our work on the conservation delivery system of the future is timely and important. It serves as a wake-up call, and we had better heed it lest we sleep through a period of dramatic change to see the train has left the station.

About this Report

NACD's District Operations and Member Services Committee reviewed the Field Office of the Future exercise conducted by the partnership in 2012 and wrote a white paper for the NACD Board of Directors to receive in January, 2014. During 2014, the Committee continued to incorporate additional ideas from our partners, culminating in this new submission to the NACD Board for action in February 2015.

The goal is to provide conservation district leadership with guidance to help the conservation partnership turn today's challenges into tomorrow's opportunities.

This report is offered to the NACD Board of Directors as a living document. It addresses common concerns while recognizing differences in how the conservation partnership and conservation districts operate from state to state. The elements below are beginning points for discussion.

Our past can inform our future, but clinging to what worked decades ago won't automatically and inevitably get us where we need to go.

Guiding Considerations for the Conservation Delivery System of the Future

Basic Fundamentals

A critical factor in evaluating any delivery system is determining the dominant driver. For conservation, three broad options emerge.

1. Resource concerns and desired outcomes must be identified and documented. Given limited resources, priorities must be set. The priority of resource concerns can change over time, as evidenced by the greater emphasis on soil health.
2. Program and service designs must be able to positively address resource concerns and achieve desired outcomes.

Only after these two factors are fully developed can one really envision the delivery system needed to put conservation on the ground. What modifications in current processes might be needed? What realignments are indicated? Districts have a central responsibility to lead the planning that selects important resource concerns, describes what outcomes are desired, and chooses the best approaches to achieve these outcomes that protect the resources.

3. Infrastructure, including physical plants, staffing distribution and tools, will evolve from the first two considerations. Infrastructure comprises an array of considerations, including personnel (their number, type, and location), physical offices (number, location, and residents), technologies and tools, communication media, and transportation options.

The most efficient and effective conservation delivery system for the future requires that the designing and modernizing processes follow that sequence. The primary driver must be resource concerns and desired outcomes. The critical choice is between building the delivery system to fit the product or forcing the product to conform to an inflexible delivery system.

Services and programs, including conservation implementation on farms and ranches, in forested and urban settings, will be resource-driven, based on watershed- or landscape-scale resource assessments, and clearly specify measurable outcomes and planned workloads. NRCS, our federal partner in the delivery of conservation services to private landscapes and landowners, embraces this concept in the newly-created Regional Conservation Partnership Program. As emphasis on this method of partnering grows, conservation districts and their partners need to be nimble and flexible in how they deliver conservation services in a new paradigm. Local needs will continue to be assessed and prioritized through the Local Work Group process and will aggregate up to statewide resource assessments. Districts must be prepared and willing to ensure the Local Work Groups deal with the issues brought forth by the districts. In order to do so the districts should lead or at a minimum be directly involved in setting the agenda and orchestrating the meetings. Strategic thinking will consider advancements in technology, recognize the need for positive returns on investments, and be sensitive to available technical and financial resources.

Long-range plans for the conservation district and its boundaries will identify resource needs, priorities and actions while reflecting partner input and leveraging opportunities. An example of addressing multiple resource needs is the Soil Health Movement. Soil health management systems address many of the most pressing agricultural challenges of the day—from water quality to resilience to extreme weather events. Plans will identify district financial resources and needs. Plans will be flexible and will define strategies to handle the potential of smaller and larger agency budgets and future staffing challenges at national, state and local levels. District plans will coordinate with local NRCS plans in identifying resource concerns, action priorities, strategies and investments each partner can make.

The core conservation partners will identify opportunities for strategic investment and district support and will cooperate to provide assistance to districts.

As appropriate, NACD will provide guidance and assistance to districts proactively and cooperate with state partners on action plans to address short- and long-term district challenges and opportunities, within the framework of state conservation district laws.

Existing NACD resources and services to assist districts will be inventoried and aggregated for sharing. Gaps in resources and services will be identified and addressed through development of new modules and other actions.

District Office Configurations and Service Areas

A range of office configurations and service areas will emerge as the core conservation partners prioritize resource needs and the ability to address them. Office configurations and service areas will address the needs of a given state and the applicable conservation district laws. State partners will address future configurations based on evaluations of geography, workload complexity, funding, political climate, natural resources needs and other considerations. Input from conservation district leadership will provide direction to design a system that accounts for variation but achieves maximum cooperation and consistent delivery of conservation services.

Multi-agency field offices will be developed or maintained in some states, based on needs and opportunities identified in state Field Office of the Future reports, internal and external discussions, listening groups, focus groups and other information-gathering techniques. An array of configurations will emerge to address local needs, state conservation district laws and other considerations. Technology capabilities and financial resources may make consolidating federal and local district offices either necessary or advisable.

Shared information technology and technological fluency will provide cost savings and enhanced customer-service capabilities in multi-agency settings. Clarity will be required in office- and information-sharing agreements with a goal of enhanced services and partner cooperation. All parties must understand roles, responsibilities and expectations. Gaps in service delivery will be addressed and overcome. One-stop shopping for customers will be enhanced through use of common information technology platforms suitable for a variety of office configurations. Training for partner staffs will be consistent, allowing for seamless delivery of services in virtually any office setting.

Merged functions and shared services among conservation districts and partners will increase to address resource needs and provide basic conservation technical assistance in the field. Conservation districts will collaborate and cooperate across traditional district and state boundaries to achieve resource-driven conservation goals. However, it may not be necessary, nor in many cases desirable, to alter traditional conservation district governance structures and boundaries

Conservation specialists in areas such as biology, engineering, hydrology and other areas of expertise will be available from NRCS or other partners on a shared basis. Districts that employ conservation specialists will participate in customer-service delivery in a similar shared manner.

As appropriate, districts will pursue technical service provider status to assist partners to deliver conservation services, including technical assistance, conservation planning and program delivery.

Planning

Statewide strategic planning will be based on local priorities and broad partner input with the goal to support a common long-range strategic plan. Complexity of resource issues will define the scale of planning efforts, for example, watersheds and landscapes that cross county, district or state lines.

The Local Work Group process will be a district priority and will guide local planning efforts. Their roles will be both advisory to the state and focused on developing local long-range plans and resource assessments and prioritization. The groups will have broad representation of agriculture, forestry, conservation interests, natural resource agencies, environmental groups, and urban community and business leaders. They will strive for a common perception of resource needs, their priorities, program and service strategies, and individual partner investment opportunities.

State conservation agencies, NACD and other members of the core conservation partnership will assist district efforts to enhance the Local Work Group process through information sharing, templates, tools and other support.

Multi-agency funding strategies will support efforts to address resource priorities. Traditional federal, state and local funding will be augmented by private-sector and other partner resources as appropriate and necessary, creating investment pools.

Reporting systems that recognize partner contributions and capture ecologic benefits of conservation work through science-based models and monitoring will be used to identify outcomes.

Information sharing will be transparent and consistent, while meeting confidentiality requirements, to satisfy conservation partners' needs.

State Technical Advisory Committees

Districts may continue to encourage State Technical Advisory Committees to empower and instill a common vision addressing private land conservation and where applicable, an all-lands consideration. To accomplish this task, the committee will engage broad conservation, agriculture, forestry and urban representation, and be a model for the configuration of Local Work Groups. Opinion leaders and decision makers will be engaged and informed about the committee's work.

The Committee will incorporate broad program emphases and develop collaborative conservation strategies to leverage and maximize partner investments, resources and knowledge.

The Committee will rely on consistent input from Local Work Groups that provide recommendations for program direction. The Committee serves as a conduit through which broad federal programs not designed to fit all needs can be added to state resources and tailored for local implementation.

The Committee will be positioned to address local and state natural resource concerns and will be empowered with the flexibility and authority to undertake private land conservation strategies best suited to local and state priorities.

Where appropriate, the Committee will incorporate input from a state tribal advisory committee.

NACD will conduct periodic reviews of State Technical Advisory Committee functions and provide recommendations for enhanced Committee success.

Service Delivery

All partners in the conservation delivery system will promote a common vision and goal – to preserve, enhance, and use our natural resources in ways that allow natural resource industries to be sustainable and contribute to healthy environments, vibrant economies and livable communities.

The conservation delivery system will identify opportunities to balance and leverage workloads among districts, NRCS and other partners. Consideration will be given to the boundaries of areas of natural resource concern, such as watersheds, without being forced to be constrained within legal jurisdictions.

To enhance customer service, core partners will develop protocols, training modules and information-technology fluency so basic conservation planning processes are supported and understood by all partners. Synergies from the shared platforms will reduce administrative burdens and lead to increased field time to assist customers. Increased field time with customers will necessitate that the customers themselves take a more active role to assess resource concerns and develop alternative solutions. Core partners will be diligent in maintaining technical fluency.

Districts are encouraged to investigate how they can be involved in NRCS's Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative to enhance customer service with more "boots on the ground." Tele-working, satellite offices, mobile tools and other strategies will be employed to maximize field time.

As appropriate, districts will explore opportunities to gain access to and deploy NRCS mobile tools.

Joint technical training for conservation partners will be required to accomplish streamlining goals and empower local decision-making. The partners must be on the same page.

Enhanced web-based tools will allow customers direct access to program information. These tools include the Client Gateway currently being tested and to be deployed soon, resource assessment data and planning tools, all designed to provide opportunities for self-certification by customers. Web-based access will be available on home computers and other devices and in kiosks located in offices.

Customer self-certification tools will be required to include links to NRCS and conservation district resources and provide opportunities for scheduling assistance.

Partnership Coordination and Communications

Conservation partners at all levels will hold regular face-to-face meetings with teleconferencing capability to encourage transparent and candid communication as a collaborative team. The agenda of such meetings will provide opportunities for discussion, interaction, and possible decision-making. Methods may vary from state to state.

Partnerships must be broader. Core partnerships might also include Farm Service Agency, RC&D Councils, state associations, state conservation agencies, state funding agencies, state conservation district employee associations, and other groups considered central to the conservation delivery system. New partners should include organizations such as non-governmental organizations, public utilities, philanthropic foundations, and commercial and industrial businesses.

Harnessing private markets brings new possibilities to incentivize conservation actions, such as water quality trading, which already exist in some locales, and also for trading for nutrients, wetlands, prairies, carbon and other ecological services. We can abolish the use of artificial divisions, such as urban vs. rural, private vs. public, and agriculture and forestry vs. everything else. Information sharing will be expected at all levels and in all multi-agency communications. This information sharing and the ability to partner with a diverse array of agencies and organizations require that NRCS documentation evolves to allow more flexibility. For example, NRCS may need to accept another agency's inventory form for certain resource concerns.

The state partnership will regularly meet with other local, state and region partners, including governors' offices, state agencies, lawmakers, NACD region leaders and other decision-makers.

Conservation districts work with an array of partners to achieve common goals. Resource needs determine partner roles and operations. This diversity of partnerships is embraced and encouraged.

The conservation partnership will make it a priority in each state to conduct regular outreach to the general public and nontraditional partners to tell our story, highlighting the returns on conservation investments.

Outreach strategies are encouraged and will reflect local methods. Successes will be shared with NACD and key partners to disseminate to districts and partners nationwide.

Skill Levels and Capacity

A successful conservation delivery system requires highly skilled employers, employees and volunteers. Extensive and ongoing training is needed to achieve and maintain high skill levels. Cross-training opportunities for NRCS and conservation district employees, board members and volunteers will be regularly provided and seen as an investment by funders.

Skill development will encompass the whole spectrum of functions, from planning through implementation to evaluating progress and reporting results. Training will include sound business practices for district operations, particularly business management. Conservation technicians will receive training for conservation planning certification, job approvals and project management. Emphasis will be given to working with landowners, partnering, and building trust and credibility.

Conservation district official training will raise competencies of board members, increase understanding of board operations, improve understanding of respective employer/employee relationships and fiduciary responsibilities, enhance leadership opportunities and raise district advocacy capacity.

To bolster local capacity, technical specialists such as engineers, hydrologists and GIS technicians should be available through partners, at least regionally.

Technology skills training will include but not be limited to navigating the web, accessing important conservation/partners' websites, computer literacy, employing social media, conferencing and using webinars.

NACD and other key partners will cooperate to develop training modules and provide training opportunities through web-based and direct-contact strategies. Training will focus on increasing district capacity to improve local conservation services delivery.

Agreements

Conservation districts and their partners will strategically use agreements to leverage abilities to address resource and customer needs. Agreements will maximize collaboration by being consistent in overall intent yet flexible enough to recognize local needs and differences.

Statewide master agreement templates will be employed, leading to various agreements, including mutual, cooperative working, contribution and technical service provider.

Evaluations of the availability and ability of partners to participate in agreements will lead to developing training modules to raise competencies.

NACD and other partners will educate districts about changes to the types and structure of agreements in federal programs.

Progress and Achievement Reporting

The accountability of the conservation delivery system will rely on rigorous, science-based performance standards and benchmarks that address resource issues and the effectiveness of conservation measures. Data-gathering, record-keeping, and reporting processes and tools will minimize the time requirements of field staff. Conservation planning has been at the core of private-lands conservation service delivery for years, but the benefits of implementing conservation plans have not been well documented. New approaches to documenting these benefits are being developed, and conservation districts and their partners can be at the forefront by integrating these approaches into the delivery system.

As appropriate, memoranda of agreements (MOAs) will be developed to establish outcomes for partners and cooperating agencies on conservation activities. MOAs will enhance the development of resource assessment baselines, promote monitoring protocols, and simplify record-keeping and reporting mechanisms.

Decision-Making Authorities, Scope and Accountability

Whenever feasible, the conservation delivery system will empower decision-making authority, responsibility and accountability at the local level. The definition of “local” will vary from state to state, and may include district, county and multi-county boundaries, or some combination thereof.

Similar authority, responsibility and accountability measures will be employed at various other levels, including the watershed or landscape, basin or area, state and national.

In Conclusion

No single formula exists for a future conservation delivery system. These components are offered to guide the development of systems that recognize and honor local, state and region variations while providing consistent programs and services.

Linking federal, state and local conservation partners to achieve shared goals is our mandate. The recipes may vary from state to state, but many of the ingredients are captured in this document. The challenge now is to use our collective wisdom to achieve a flexible yet strong conservation delivery system.