

Districts Thriving in Challenging Times

Listening to the news, some say our country is facing its most challenging times. But conservation districts are familiar with challenge. After all, they came into existence to address the nation's greatest natural resource crisis, the Dust Bowl. They did that successfully, farm by farm and community by community. There have been no other 'dust bowls' despite serious, lengthy droughts. Through districts' quiet leadership and locally-led approach, landowners and communities have improved land productivity, water quality, wildlife habitat and quality of life since 1937.

During their 70-plus years of existence, districts found ways to get the job done regardless of circumstances. They have done so by identifying local resource issues, developing good plans to address those resource issues, committing to the effort, diversifying funding sources, broadening partnerships, learning new methods and always looking for opportunities to help their respective communities.

The following group of stories briefly demonstrates how districts have continued to lead the way in conserving natural resources for our future, the real foundation of our country. At the same time they serve as an inspiration to us all to get the job done no matter what.



Serve the natural resource needs and concerns of the community, and represent all constituents.

In the mid-1990s, the **Prince George's Soil Conservation District (SCD)** in Maryland was threatened with elimination from the county budget. The county executive at the time was less than supportive, and seven of the nine County Council members were new and unfamiliar with the District. Prince George's SCD went back to basics to educate the County Council, taking them out in the field to show the council members conservation practices and how those practices impact in the community. These efforts helped the Council understand the District's significant role and value of its work.

During this period, the District wanted to increase its fees for urban erosion control projects, which had to be approved through the county. Thanks to their demonstrations showing how the District addresses the communities' natural resource concerns, a bill was passed that would allow the District to propose a new fee schedule with or without county government approval.

As the political cycle continued and a new administration was seated, the District made it an immediate priority to visit with the new County Executive. By showing him first-hand their on-the-ground work, the District gained another supporter and an expanded role as the expert in land issues within the county. In 2004, responsibility for the County's Agricultural Land Preservation Program was transferred to the District. No lands were enrolled at that time, but 3,000 acres have



The Prince George's Soil Conservation District assists farmers with site selection, engineering design and construction inspection on a wide variety of conservation practices including ponds and wetlands for improved water quality and wildlife benefits.

since been preserved with another 1,000 acres expected this year.

By serving the natural resource needs of the county and its citizens, the District has succeeded in growing its role within the community. For more information, contact David Bourdon at pgscd@verizon.net.



Broaden the district's partnerships, and work to maintain ongoing relationships while cultivating new ones.

Over the past several years, the **Vermilion Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD)** has developed one of the most productive conservation programs in Louisiana by reaching beyond its traditional conservation partners. The principle partners assisting the District in their conservation efforts today include Louisiana Departments of Agriculture and Forestry, Environmental Quality and Natural Resources; Louisiana State University AgCenter and University of Louisiana at Lafayette; USDA



A Vermilion SWCD employee and an Earth Team volunteer plant hardwood tree seedlings as part of an effort to establish a coastal buffer against future hurricane storm surges in coastal Louisiana.

Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency and Rural Development; the U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency; Acadiana RC&D Council; Vermilion Parish Drainage Districts; Vermilion Parish Police Jury; Texas Institute for Applied Environmental Research; Louisiana Gulf of Mexico Hypoxia Working Group; local agricultural enterprises and businesses; 4-H and FFA groups; and area landowners and homeowners.

Together with its partners, the District currently administers two 319 grant projects investing \$2.3 million to improve surface and ground water quality; a Micro Watershed Project; coastal vegetative planting projects; reforestation of areas damaged by Hurricanes Rita and Ike; hundreds of Farm Bill conservation

program contracts and applications; and a multi-level conservation education program.

By expanding its network of conservation allies, the Vermilion SWCD has gained diverse input from new, highly motivated and knowledgeable partners in planning and implementing their conservation programs and special District projects. These collaborative efforts with individuals and organizations have broadened the scope of the District's program, and firmly established both their role as the local resource management authority and the board members as local soil and water conservation leaders. For more information, contact Ernest Girouard at

egirouard@agcenter.lsu.edu.



Operate from a well-thought out strategic plan. Know your district's strengths and weaknesses.

The **Grand Traverse Conservation District (GTCD)** is located in northwestern Michigan's Lower Peninsula. The area is a popular destination for many who are drawn to the forests, rivers and other natural amenities. Over time the population has grown, changing the landscape and increasing demands on the natural resources.

The District also changed, broadening its programs to meet the needs of its constituents. Responding to the county's priority needs, the District took on land management services, allowing the District to greatly increase citizens' understanding of the natural resources surrounding them.

An Eagle Scout works to build a new trail at the Brown Bridge Quiet Area, which is managed by the Grand Traverse Conservation District. Below: Kids enjoy exploring nature at the Grand Traverse Natural Education Reserve.



To grow with the changing needs of the community, Executive Director Lew Coulter

knew the District would need to plan for the future. The Board of Directors was initially reluctant to invest in strategic planning. But when the local Rotary Charities refocused their work on strengthening community capacity, the District signed up. Participating in a strategic planning process would allow the District to grow its internal operating capacity and give it the foundation to provide durable programs and services.

Coulter believes the planning process was very successful. As a result of the plan, the District launched a capital campaign to build a Nature Center. The campaign's success was celebrated at the Center's grand opening in August 2008 and visits by more than 1,400 people since. The strategic plan—which also includes marketing, long-term funding and organizational capacity—is a solid foundation for the District's ability to meet future needs. For more information, contact Lew Coulter at lewculter@gtcd.org.



The National Renewable Energy Lab's Wind Technology Center honored cutting-edge farmers and ranchers who installed small-scale wind turbines on their operations with the help of Bara County CD and its partners.



BEFORE



AFTER

Streambank erosion contributed thousands of tons of sediment to the South Fork Mitchell River each year. Stream restoration and livestock best management practices solved the erosion problem and improved water quality and fish habitat.



Fully engage board members and staff. Tap into the community for more expertise and networks. In

the southeastern corner of Colorado, Baca County was located in the heart of Dust Bowl country. Back then, members of the area came together as a community to form what is now the **Baca County Conservation District.**

The District has continued to operate as a community effort. A prime example is the District's extensive and successful efforts to bring disaster assistance during the record-breaking blizzards of 2006 and 2007.

When the District considers taking on a natural resource project of any kind, its board members and staff look at both what the District brings to the table and what is needed to accomplish the effort. Starting with the District's current network of contacts, they expand their connections until the right tools and resources are found. The key to their success has been not just finding the District's many partners, but building mutually beneficial relationships for the long-term.

The District has ongoing relationships with many agencies and organizations, including USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and Forest Service; Southeast Colorado RC&D; Colorado Departments of Agriculture and Wildlife; Baca County; Rocky Mountain Farmers Union, and others.

Most recently the District teamed up with the RC&D, Farmers Union, and International Center for Appropriate and Sustainable Technology. Together these organizations help individual farmers offset energy costs by setting up small wind turbines for agricultural applications such as irrigation wells. District Manager Misty George notes, "We've come full circle from fighting the effects of the wind in 1938 to harnessing its power in 2008." This and all their projects have been accomplished through the

work of an engaged board, staff and the broader community. For more information, contact Misty George at misty.george@co.nacdnet.net.



Diversify funding source for the Districts. The Mitchell River is born

from a dozen streams that flank the eastern side of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina. The River's North Fork was designated by the state as an Outstanding Resource Water; but the South Fork did not meet the same water quality standard. The **Surry County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD)**, along with the community, wanted to change that.

The District examined streambanks along the Mitchell River and discovered extensive erosion associated with traditional forestry and agricultural practices. "At one place, we measured 500 tons of sediment coming off 100 feet of streambank," said Richard Everhart, NRCS District Conservationist. "We realized this was a major problem."

Stream restoration is hugely expensive, costing Surry SWCD \$130 per linear foot. Though state cost-share dollars were available at the time, those funds were not enough to do all the restoration work needed.

The District joined forces with the Piedmont Land Conservancy to form the Mitchell River Coalition. To date, 20 landowners have

put conservation easements on 32,000 feet of stream. The District has received grants from the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, North Carolina Ecosystem Enhancement Program, North Carolina Division of Water Resources and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. These grants have been matched with funds from local governments, landowners and non-profit organizations for a total of \$4.4 million since 1997.

The Surry SWCD hired three employees and contracted with engineering firms and environmental contractors to do the restoration design and perform the on-the-ground work. With the diversity of grant funds and partner contributions, the District and community are restoring the Mitchell River. For more information, contact the Surry SWCD at (336) 386-8751.



Be on the cutting edge, and learn what is being done elsewhere.

Five years ago the **Whidbey Island Conservation District (CD)** in Washington State was in difficult financial circumstances. Within a short time, by taking an active role on current resource issues, the District now finds itself a leader in conservation in their community and their state.

The Whidbey Island SWCD and partners constructed a rain garden retrofit on Island County Campus to filter and treat runoff from a small parking area that previously drained directly into Penn Cove, a 303(d) listed water body.



Whidbey Island CD is an enthusiastic advocate for Low Impact Development (LID) as a tool to meet new stormwater standards and guidelines. Low Impact Development provides innovative practices that manage stormwater close to its source by mimicking a site's predevelopment hydrology. Armed with a \$50,000 grant from the Washington Department of Ecology, the District worked with the City of Langley, who recently adopted LID into their code, and a local developer on the first LID subdivision in the city.

The District made recommendations for incorporating LID and began conducting workshops and providing technical assistance to Langley residents. Because it is an island, LID is extremely important as the communities' groundwater supply relies almost entirely on rainfall to recharge, and any stormwater runoff can affect water quality in the surrounding Puget Sound.

Working on this new initiative enabled Whidbey Island CD to address an issue that concerns the whole island. The District formed a working group called the "Low Impact Development Summit," which meets monthly to advance LID activities. The group has resulted in many opportunities for collaboration to conduct more LID education, outreach and demonstrations, helping make Whidbey Island CD the local LID clearinghouse and a leader in conservation. Through

the District's work, the 'cutting edge' has been brought into the mainstream. For more information, contact Stacy Smith at stacy@whidbeycd.org.



Be optimistic...look for new opportunities in all situations.

The **Kingsbury Conservation District** is located in a rural area of eastern South Dakota. With the county's low population, resources can be limited. Finding funding for programs and staff has always been challenging, but that has never stopped the District.

In the 1960s, the District Board found a way to construct their own building and rent office space to their federal partners. When USDA agencies were mandated to relocate, the Board quickly found new renters. They recently added a storage building for equipment with a walk-in cooler for tree seedlings they sell each year.

County funds were eliminated in the 1980s due to economic challenges from severe flooding. Still the Board embraced opportunities such as the 1985 Farm Bill Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) that enabled the District to help address resource issues. In 1994, they partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in purchasing two grass drills for CRP plantings. And in 2002, they began laying fabric for trees on

Continuous CRP land. Over the years, the District expanded services for water quality and grazing systems through state and 319 grants.

The Kingsbury District Board and staff continually seek ways to help landowners. Most recently, they signed an agreement with the South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts to verify carbon credits, a benefit they see for both their landowners and their District. This and their other successes are a result of working together, participating in area and state meetings, and constantly looking for new opportunities. For more information, contact District Manager Jody Mackey at jody.mackey@sd.nacdnet.net.



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The Kingsbury Conservation District strives to find ways to assist landowners, regardless of challenges. The trees pictured in the photo were planted for livestock protection in a grazing system for an area landowner.

Learn more about these districts by connecting with the contact person provided. Additional stories are featured in NACD's new publication, "Our Land, Our Water," available online at www.nacdnet.org/resources. Several districts will also share their respective stories at the 2009 NACD Annual Meeting, February 1-4, in New Orleans (www.nacdnet.org/events/annualmeeting). Be sure to visit with them and more of your peers about how their districts are thriving in challenging times.