By now, conservation leaders all over the country recognize the term “Fuels for Schools” and what it stands for. In favorable settings, the program encourages school districts, hospitals and other public facilities to consider converting existing gas- or oil-based heating systems to woody biomass. The concept was popularized by projects throughout the northeast, but the term was actually coined by leaders from Montana’s Bitter Root RC&D. Following the fire season of 2000, which consumed more than 350,000 acres in the Bitterroot Valley, conservation leaders began to explore ways in which to reduce fuel loads while also utilizing low-value material. Residents in Darby began examining the potential benefits of installing a boiler system to service the local elementary, middle and high schools. According to Kit Sutherland, retired Bitter Root RC&D Coordinator, the project cost was roughly $1 million. Thanks to an aggressive grant-writing campaign, the RC&D secured three-quarters of that amount, with support from the U.S. Forest Service’s Region 1 office. Project work began in 2003.

Members from the Missoula, Bitterroot and Mineral Conservation Districts all serve on Bitter Root RC&D’s board and assisted in the coordination of the project. According to Sutherland, the most important step in the development of Fuels for Schools may have been the RC&D’s decision to hire project manager Tom Coston, who had previously served as a forester in Regions 1 and 5. “He’s the one who got on the ground and talked to superintendents to gauge interest. And Tom travelled to Nevada, Idaho and other states to help them get going with Fuels for Schools.”

Once the RC&D had a strong pilot model to showcase in Darby – which estimated an annual savings of $100,000 – the word spread quickly and many school districts in Montana and neighboring states followed. “Fueled by the success of the Darby pilot, project manager Coston and a number of our board members were encouraged to begin exploring ways in which to reduce fuel loadings while also utilizing low-value material. Residents in Darby began examining the potential benefits of installing a boiler system to service the local elementary, middle and high schools,” says current Bitter Root RC&D Executive Director Becki Koon.

Shortly after the Darby project was completed, former NACD forestry district supervisor Bill Horvath organized a national woody biomass conference in Missoula, with the help of NACD’s cooperative agreement with the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Interior. Bitter Root RC&D has helped to coordinate several follow-up workshops covering a variety of topics related to woody biomass systems. “Nearly every school facility that built a boiler in recent years made an initial visit to the Darby facility,” says Sutherland.

Not long ago, the Darby School District had accumulated a huge stockpile of logs that had been donated. Bitter Root RC&D had a contractor chip the material so that the school district would have enough biomass for the heating season. Sutherland says a number of individuals played a key role in advancing Fuels for Schools in Rocky Mountain states and also points to the guidance provided by conservation district leaders on the board. “They continually pushed for good utilization and management of our forest resources,” says Sutherland. “If those leaders hadn’t been working with our RC&D I’m not sure we would have been in a position to help.”

To learn more about the Bitter Root RC&D Council and the Fuels for Schools program, visit http://bitterrootrcd.org/FuelsForSchools.htm.

This fall, the Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D) Program will celebrate 50 years of helping communities develop solutions for conservation-related issues. The non-profit entities boast an action team of more than 25,000 volunteers – including local, civic, appointed and elected officials – that impact residents in all 50 states, as well as the Caribbean and the Pacific Islands. With regard to forestry, RC&D Councils in various parts of the country have helped to restore our forests following catastrophic wildfires, provide green fuel solutions for schools and businesses, and improve overall forest health through landowner education and management planning.

However, RC&Ds are now being asked to do more with less; Congress eliminated all FY2011 funding for the program. Most of the program’s dollars are driven through grants and private fundraising, but the loss of federal funding is sure to make things more challenging. Regardless, the program’s national leadership is motivated to help councils and communities address the needs on the ground. “In these tight economic times, it’s going to be an uphill battle,” says National Association of Resource & Conservation Districts (NARC&DC) Energy Director Andrew Gordon. “However, our RC&D Councils are vigilant and here to stay. They are keeping their doors open to meet the needs of the communities they serve.”

NARC&DC President James Sippey believes the loss of funding is a significant action that impacts the technical assistance provided to local communities. However, it does afford the RC&D Councils some flexibility. “We are a bit more free to approach corporations and foundations, where before we were limited by the scope of work presented in our Area and Annual plans. Further, the parameters of our previous relationship with a federal agency made branching out a bit of a touchy subject,” he says. “We can do more with economic development right now, which is an emphasis from the federal to the local level. We have no boundaries as to what we can accomplish and who we can partner with.”

For much of its history, RC&D Councils have made conservation districts key partners in many conservation efforts. “The two share common obstacles and goals, and because of this have learned to share resources and work together to tackle a number of projects. And where a conservation district staff serve as advisors to their local RC&D board.”

A brief history

The RC&D Program was established as part of the Agriculture Act of 1962, with responsibility for the administration of the program placed within NRCS. Successive Farm Bills have provided for the further development of the program, including deepening the partnership between RC&Ds and NRCS.

To become recognized, a new RC&D Council must assemble an advisory board consisting of community leaders and form a 501(c)(3). Then an application is filed with the USDA Secretary of Agriculture. If accepted, the RC&D will establish a board of directors to determine the needs of the region the RC&D serves (most RC&Ds encompass a half dozen or more counties). Separate committees are then formed to focus on topics such as forestry, water resources and energy.

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The value of a strong partnership can’t always be measured in dollars and cents. Even as grants are secured and projects completed, a trusted partnership is exponentially more valuable than the sum of its accomplishments.

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Leaders from an RC&D Council help to prepare materials for a dry hydrant.

How to contact your local RC&D?

The NARC&D Council website has a complete listing of its 375 RC&D Councils nationwide, with links to each council’s membership or, to locate the RC&D nearest you, visit the NARC&D website and click on “RC&D Councils” under the “About Us” link at the top of the home page.

http://www.rcdnet.org/

An invaluable partnership
It’s smart business – and RC&Ds have enjoyed a good working relationship it has been because the RC&D was able to manage its resources. Gordon adds another point: RC&D Councils are business-minded organizations that bring that business acumen to the conservation component to the table. The combination of this and the district’s conservation know-how “allows for more work to get done on the ground,” he says.

In certain parts of the country, districts and RC&Ds have shared boundaries. Most RC&Ds encompass five to eight counties (some more than a dozen), and their leadership consists of individuals who know how to work across jurisdictional lines. An RC&D Council can help to connect multiple districts and other organizations to a regional project that may otherwise be limited or neglected.

RC&D leadership brings new tools to the table
With each RC&D comes a board of directors made up of a wide array of working professionals who have different skills and knowledge of the local community – attorneys, teachers, business people. Jamieson is a good example of this. “I’m an accountant, not a farmer,” she says.

These individuals can be excellent resources for conservation district leaders, and are positioned to help cut through political red tape.

It can lead to new partnerships
Maybe the most appealing reason to partner with an RC&D is that relationship is likely to open. Gordon rattles off a dozen state and federal partnerships that districts and RC&Ds can share wisdom and resources to maximize results.

It can stretch boundaries
Conservation districts are often limited by county lines. However, good conservation work knows no boundaries. Most RC&Ds encompass five to eight counties (some more than a dozen), and their leadership consists of individuals who know how to work across jurisdictional lines. An RC&D Council can help to connect multiple districts and other organizations to a regional project that may otherwise be limited or neglected.

RC&D Councils ... continued from front page

Federal funding of just more than $50 million annually has provided each council with the resources to maximize results.

Parker is a good example of the unique nature of the relationship between the two organizations to get work done. In February, the RC&D will offer a timber tax workshop for landowners. As with other educational programs offered through the CIG project, this workshop will be matched with funds from the Virginia Cooperative Extension’s Forest Landowner Education Program, and in-kind support from the New River SWCD and the local Society of American Foresters chapter. Another regional team - founded across state lines - its experts teaching the workshop are NC State University forestry and Extension specialists. The following month the RC&D plans to offer a workshop on estate planning.

Richert points out, both must connect with local forest landowners. “The RC&D and district have shared with districts to some degree. And Sipperly says it works both ways, pointing to how districts have helped RC&Ds establish new relationships.

In 2009, New River-Highlands RC&D received a Connecticut State Forests and Resources Council (CIG) through NRCS to provide forest management education to landowners in Virginia’s southern Appalachian counties. The project aims to identify and conserve green infrastructure in the region – a network of forests, parks, and other nature areas that provide habitat for wildlife and produce clean air and water, sequester carbon, and produces food and fiber. Work on the three-year grant will finish up this fall.

The project provided another opportunity for the RC&D to continue its 30-year working relationship with the New River Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), which services both counties, helps to provide workshops and other program opportunities to local forest landowners.

Says New River SWCD Conservation Specialist Tim Phipps, sympathy has helped the two organizations to get work done. “The districts in the area have benefited from grant resources through the RC&D, while the districts’ close relationship with farmers and landowners has provided the RC&D with an opportunity to showcase forestland and farmland conservation management.”

According to New River-Highlands RC&D Forester David Richert, more than 60 landowners have participated in the workshops so far, with a core group of 20 people having a reputation for being leaders in their communities.

Richert believes those are encouraging signs for the southern Appalachians, where the majority of forest landowners are aging passed: “What we’re trying to do is promote active management and create an incentive for landowners to take care of their land.”

If the goal was to create forest stewardship management demonstrations. “The RC&D and District have always been interested in identifying and showcasing landowners who are implementing projects that natural resource professionals have been advocating,” says Richert.

New River-Highlands RC&D is now organizing a series of demonstration projects where the majority of forest landowners are aging passed: “We’re all serving the same constituency, but in a different way. It’s just such a perfect fit.”

Conservation leaders in every corner of the country would agree. Here are five reasons why conservation districts and RC&Ds will never diminish.

Wildfire is a concern for conservation leaders in every corner of the country. In West Virginia, for example, has been doing fire prevention work for nearly a decade. Just nobody; people dozens homes in the state are damaged or lost each year due to wildfire, but, says Firewise consultant Tim Phipps, “Every 25 to 30 years we have an extreme fire season.”

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