



Bitter Root RC&D: Big on Fuels for Schools

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.



A conveyor belt delivers fuel for the Darby facility. The school district was visited by many Rocky Mountain school administrators.

Members from the Missoula, Bitterroot and Mineral Conservation Districts all serve on Bitter Root RC&D's board and assisted in the planning.

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 suit. "In fact, the success of the Darby pilot helped further the development of student-led tours and a Fuels for Schools Middle School Curriculum, thus facilitating education of youth throughout the region on biomass utilization and energy efficiency," says current Bitter Root RC&D Executive Director Becki Koon.

Shortly after the Darby project was completed, former NACD forestry 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 wood boiler systems. "Nearly every school or 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 several heating seasons.

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>.

NARC&DC makes woody biomass a priority

The RC&D Program has been an advocate of woody biomass projects for many years. According to NARC&DC Energy Committee Chairman Gary Freeman, in addition to the workshops that have been held in Montana, NARC&DC also developed a series of biomass fact sheets to distribute to RC&Ds and partners. Conservation districts assisted in the project. To view the fact sheets please visit www.rcdnet.org and click on Focus Area/Biomass Utilization.

A few years ago, NARC&DC worked with BBI International out of Colorado to create a biomass feasibility tool. Says Freeman, "People can plug in several factors, such as material type and travel distance, to determine if a project is feasible."

Freeman is also assisting Central Sacramento Valley RC&D in converting biomass to oil, which is blended with diesel to run in diesel trucks or other diesel motors. The RC&D will convert slash in the forest using a mobile site, then utilize the leftover biochar. The process is close to meeting California fuel standards. Says Freeman, "We have a tentative contract to provide the Forest Service with all the oil we can generate."



FORESTRY NOTES: SPECIAL REPORT RC&D Councils

A partner with common obstacles and goals

Continuing to meet community needs

RC&D Program boasts impressive history, promising future

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 forestlands following catastrophic wildfire, 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 continue their work on the ground. "In these tight economic times, it's going to be an uphill battle," says National Association of RC&D Councils (NARC&DC) Executive 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 Sipperly 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 more flexibility. "We are now 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. The two share common obstacles and goals, and because of this have learned to share resources and work together to tackle projects of every size. In many areas, 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.

An invaluable partnership

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



Gene Schmidt
NACD President

For years, conservation districts across the country have worked with RC&D Councils to tackle countless projects, several of which are highlighted in this insert.

Thanks to shared resources and common goals, these partnerships have helped satisfy the needs of local communities.

Due to stresses on federal funding, our partners now face a difficult road ahead. Through my conversations with NARC&DC leadership, I'm confident RC&Ds will endure, despite the reductions in federal support, and will find ways to grow even stronger.

NACD is as committed to working with RC&Ds today as it has ever been. In forestry alone, I see opportunities for collaborative work on forest management, woody biomass and reducing the threat of wildfire.

With challenging federal budgets, I would encourage conservation districts to look at the total resource needs of their communities and to utilize all opportunities and working relationships with their conservation entities. I assure you, no matter what your district plans to work on in 2012 and beyond, there is an RC&D nearby that can be a valuable partner.

Gene Schmidt
NACD President



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

See 'RC&D Councils' on next page



How to contact your local RC&D?

The NARC&DC website has a complete listing of its 375 RC&D Councils nationwide, with links to each council's website. To locate the RC&D nearest you, visit the NARC&DC website and click on "RC&D Councils" under the "About Us" link at the top of the home page.

<http://www.rcdnet.org/>

5 reasons to reach out to your local RC&D

Conservation districts and RC&Ds have been working together for decades. Involvement and project type vary, but the common ingredient for success is in how well the two organizations mesh. As NARC&DC First Vice President Jeanette Jamieson puts it: "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 should partner with their local RC&D:

1 It's smart business
RC&Ds are 501(c)3 not-for-profit organizations which offer more flexibility in the managing of grant dollars than any governmental agency or for-profit partner can provide. Often, when conservation districts and RC&Ds have enjoyed a good working relationship it has been because the RC&D was able to manage the funding.

Gordon adds another point: RC&D Councils are business-minded organizations that bring an economic community development 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 understand what is needed but are not equipped or authorized to assist. Again, this is where flexibility can help. Says Jamieson, "In my state (Georgia), districts are very much involved in assisting landowners with

agriculture. However, they cannot build farmer's markets; the RC&Ds can."

2 Districts and RC&Ds share common obstacles and goals
Structurally, the two may be different, but leaders agree the mission is the same. Both RC&Ds and conservation districts are motivated to improve the quality of life in their respective communities through strong conservation. The two also face many of the same obstacles. As NARC&DC President James Sipperly points out, both must connect with a younger audience in the coming years to preserve their futures. "We need to reach out to our universities, community colleges and high schools and solicit support," he suggests. Technology is another area where RC&Ds and conservation districts are trying to make strides. Just recently, NACD has made social media and online communication a priority; Sipperly says the NARC&DC is working to expand its technology base and develop social media tools.

Sipperly believes that by identifying common goals and obstacles, conservation districts and RC&Ds can share wisdom and resources to maximize results.

3 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 partners on large-scale projects that may otherwise be limited or neglected.

4 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 understand the needs and strengths 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.

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

According to Jamieson, conservation districts in Georgia have become partners with the University System, the Environmental Protection Division and the Department of Natural Resources through their relationship with RC&Ds in the state.

RC&D Councils ... continued from front page

Federal funding of just more than \$50 million annually has provided each council with one full-time staff member (an NRCS employee) as well as office space, equipment and a limited travel budget for that federal staff member.

The funding level has remained the same since 2003, and in recent years, Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama both proposed a zero budget for the program. "Each year we've been able to work with Congress to restore our funding," says Gordon. "However, in this last fiscal round, Congress approved a budget that was equivalent to jumping out of a plane without a parachute and the RC&Ds were one of the parachutes left behind."

An unbeatable track record

Regardless of the economic climate, one thing few can dispute is the economic return

the RC&D Program has shown throughout its existence. In FY2010, RC&D Councils helped 2.2 million people nationwide who were socially or economically disadvantaged, and over the past five years RC&Ds have helped to create more than 35,000 jobs while helping to retain at least 15,000. This past year, RC&Ds celebrated the completion of their 100,000th project.

The number everyone points to, however, is the total amount leveraged from federal dollars – an estimated \$6.93 for every \$1 in FY2010 funding. Says NARC&DC First Vice President Jeanette Jamieson, "I challenge any group to equal those results with the funding we had to work with."

Continuing to fight for conservation

This summer, not long after assuming his role as executive director, Gordon began to collect information from the 375 RC&Ds

located around the country. The data was encouraging: roughly 80 percent of those councils will be able to continue into the foreseeable future without any level of funding; the remaining councils are exploring options that would allow work to continue, such as merging with a nearby council.

Certain programs could be sacrificed, but RC&Ds will continue to grow so long as they possess the lifeblood of their program – volunteers driven to make a difference in their local community. And, suggests Gordon, while funding may come and go due to the economy, the demand for what RC&Ds provide will never diminish. "The RC&D Program is about leaders who get together and look at the issues and problems for their local area and identify who in that community has a want to fix those needs. It's local people determining local needs."



WILDFIRE

Building Firewise Communities in Missouri

Wildfire is a concern for conservation leaders in all parts of the country, not just the west. Southwest Missouri RC&D, for example, has been doing fire prevention work for more than a decade. Only a couple dozen homes in the state are damaged or lost each year due to wildfire, but, says Firewise consultant Duane Parker, "Every 25 to 30 years we have an extreme fire season."

Parker is a good example of the unique hires RC&Ds are able to make. After having spent more than three decades with the Missouri Department of Conservation Forestry Division, the regional supervisor was ready to retire when Southwest Missouri RC&D approached him about managing its Firewise Communities grant program. It was a good opportunity for Parker – a chance to continue his forestry and fire work in the state, but on a part-time basis.

In 2006, Parker began to familiarize himself with the Firewise Communities Program and helped Southwest Missouri

RC&D write a fire mitigation grant. Southern Missouri's wildfire risk was intensifying just as Parker's work was beginning. Ice storms and tornadoes devastated the area early into the grant, creating considerable fuel buildup in the region. "The wildland urban interface is a concern nationally and we're certainly not an exception here," says Parker. "We have big reservoir lake projects that folks want to live near, where it's steep, rugged forest terrain. There is potential for significant property loss."

The council bought movie theater advertising, stuffed 300,000 brochures in local papers, and did a series of television and radio public service announcements to help educate landowners about fuel loading. On billboards along the busiest interstates the RC&D asked: "Are you protected from wildfire in Missouri?"

Parker also began educating local conservation and civic leaders about Firewise. Several Missouri soil and water conserva-

tion districts invited him to speak at their well-attended annual dinners, where Parker was able to connect with legislators, city and county officials and fire chiefs. Those encounters helped Parker to assemble planning teams to begin drafting Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP) – an important step in becoming a Firewise Community.

"It's hard to travel to every county," says Parker, "so attending those annual meetings proved successful. A lot of the key players were at those dinners."

Last year, Redings Mill and nine other villages in that fire protection district became Missouri's first Firewise Communities.

"Without the SWCDs, our efforts wouldn't have been nearly as successful," he says.

To learn more about Southwest Missouri RC&D's fire prevention work, email Parker at dp65803@gmail.com. To learn more about Firewise Communities, visit <http://www.firewise.org/Communities.aspx>.



STEWARDSHIP

Better forest management thanks to CIG

In 2009, New River-Highlands RC&D received a \$111,000 conservation innovation grant (CIG) through NRCS to provide forest management education to landowners in Virginia's Grayson and Carroll counties. The project aims to identify and conserve green infrastructure in the region – a network of forestland that provides clean air and water, sequesters 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); the district, which services both counties, helps to publicize workshops and other program opportunities to local forest landowners.

Says New River SWCD Conservation Specialist Tim Phipps, synergy has helped the two organizations to get work done. "The districts in the area have benefitted 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 programs."

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 approximately 30 who attend regularly.

Richert believes those are encouraging numbers for the southern Appalachians, where the majority of forestland is managed passively. "What we're trying to do is promote active management and create an extra benefit for the wildlife or protect water quality."

Richert calls it a "double-barrel approach." New River-Highlands RC&D has offered landowners an educational program tailored to their needs – classroom programs on ecology, controlled burning, timber taxes, integrated pest management, and field-based training on tree identification, forest measurements, timber harvesting, and roads. "The other barrel is we're putting projects on the ground: invasive species management, monitoring deer herbivory, timber stand improvement, and low-impact logging."

It closely resembles a 2007 project where 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 proj-

ects on landowner properties and in the Matthews State Forest to showcase the benefits of forest-related practices. "If someone wants to know about a timber bridge, for example, we can take them to one and talk about the project and cost," says Richert.

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 a team effort. CIG project funds 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. This particular team reaches across state lines; the experts teaching the workshop are NC State professors and Extension specialists. The following month the RC&D plans to offer a workshop on estate planning.

For Phipps, the CIG project is as another example for how well the district and RC&D work together. "Many needed conservation projects would have gone unfunded without the development of our partnership," he says.

To learn more about the stewardship work being done by the New River-Highlands RC&D and New River SWCD, email Richert at David.Richert@dof.virginia.gov.