



Large Landscape Conservation

New Opportunities for Conservation Partners

This paper explores the potential advantages and successes of large landscape conservation initiatives nationwide and examines some of the challenges of this approach to addressing multiple conservation goals.

For traditional conservation partners, addressing land and water issues on a large scale is not new. The earliest chapters of conservation history in America show local soil and water conservation districts cooperating with local farmers and a federal partner, the Soil Erosion Service, to address 1930's Dust Bowl-era soil losses at the watershed scale. The nation's first such demonstration project, in Coon Valley, Wisconsin, used this approach and left a lasting footprint in the form of contour planting strips in use to this day on rolling hillsides near the Mississippi River.

The recognition that buy-in was needed across a watershed to achieve success was implicit in these early efforts. The same simple premise is at work in landscape conservation initiatives, albeit these efforts are often on a much larger and more complex scale than the Coon Valleys of this world.

The potential and challenges of these landscape approaches are clearly stated in the 2010 Lincoln Institute of Land Policy Report, [“Large Landscape Conservation: A Strategic Framework for Policy and Action”](#)¹:

The report says this: “The most important land and water issues facing North America – including land use patterns, water management, biodiversity protection, and climate adaptation – require new approaches. While most of these challenges need to be addressed at several scales simultaneously, ranging from the local to the global, it is increasingly imperative to address them at the scale of large landscapes. The territory of these issues often transcends the legal and geographic reach of existing jurisdictions and institutions.”

¹ Authors Matthew McKinney, Lynn Scarlett and Daniel Kemmis provide a thorough and accessible summary of large landscape conservation, including its history, the present setting and future opportunities and challenges.

The growing understanding of this need has been fed by multijurisdictional resource challenges across the country, from catastrophic wildfire in the West to hypoxia in the Gulf of Mississippi and Chesapeake Bay, from the loss of long-leaf pine habitat in the South to managing species such as the sage grouse in the West and the Lesser prairie chickens in Plains States.

Two successive presidential administrations have recognized the need to develop capacity to manage resources at an appropriate scale. President George W. Bush's White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation in 2005 recommended that the Secretary of the Interior be authorized "to support innovative landscape-level, multi-year projects that place an emphasis on collaborative approaches to conservation."

President Barack Obama's administration has made landscape conservation an underpinning of many of its natural resources initiatives across federal agencies.

As the Lincoln Institute report notes, governors associations in New England and the West have adopted regional initiatives to address resource concerns.

These efforts are sometimes called "place-based" approaches in that they leverage investments by focusing resources in *targeted places* and drawing on the compounding effect of well-coordinated action. The federal Office of Management and Budget issued an order in 2009 directing all federal agencies to develop place-based policies for the 2011 budget.

The landscape conservation approach isn't new to traditional conservation partners such as America's conservation districts. The popular PL-566 Watershed Program was passed by Congress in 1954 to address natural resource and economic damages suffered in the nation's watersheds from flooding and sedimentation. The Act has been amended several times to address a broad range of natural resource and environmental issues. The program authorizes the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to help local organizations and units of government plan and implement watershed projects in watersheds up to 250,000 acres. That is almost 400 square miles. Conservation districts have long served as local sponsors for these projects.

A more recent example of local conservation districts working on a landscape scale stems from a multi-year cooperative agreement among the National Association of Conservation Districts, USDA Forest Service and Department of the Interior in the early 2000s. The agreement engaged conservation districts in efforts to address forest health and biomass utilization, primarily in the West, where public and private lands intermingle. Districts became leaders in several states, seeking to mitigate the dangers of wildfire by encouraging and undertaking active forest management.

Likewise, conservation districts have been active participants in multijurisdictional regional efforts to address the health of the Chesapeake Bay, America's largest estuary, the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River basin.

Wide range of initiatives, some commonalities

Today, however, an unprecedented range of landscape initiatives presents itself. Two prime examples are NRCS's [Landscape Conservation Initiatives](#) addressing regional watershed, habitat and ecosystem concerns. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has identified 22 [Landscape Conservation Cooperatives](#) (LCCs) – public-private partnerships that address resource challenges across political and jurisdictional boundaries. The USDA Forest Service, meanwhile, has established a [Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program](#) that stresses an “all-lands approach” to forest restoration.

While many of these and other initiatives have distinct differences, they also have much in common. Collaboration and networking are keys to success. Most recognize the need for identifying local resource concerns as part of the larger effort.

Martin Lowenfish, acting initiatives coordinator for NRCS, stresses six key points that underlie the agency's more than a dozen initiatives²:

- Conservation beyond boundaries – the concept that landscape conservation initiatives can't be treated in isolation and extend beyond political and geographic boundaries
- A science-based approach – science advisors present the best-available data to guide initiatives
- Building partnerships – stressing the need for multiple local, state, regional and national partners
- A results-oriented approach – focusing on gathering outcomes to measure and report on achievements
- Dedicated funding – competitive grants, Farm Bill conservation programs and other mechanisms to demonstrate commitment
- Regulatory certainty – seeking to protect landowners and producers from regulatory actions as they participate in initiatives

Regarding the last point, Lowenfish cites cooperation with the Fish & Wildlife Service on certainty agreements protecting landowners who cooperate on endangered species projects. In the same vein, he cites a January 2012 memorandum of understanding between USDA and the state of Minnesota to develop a new state program for farmers designed to increase the voluntary adoption of conservation practices. In return, there is assurance from the state that cooperating farms will meet Minnesota's water quality standards and goals during the life of the agreement.

The value of landscape conservation is also supported by recent Conservation Effects Assessment Project³ reports, such as those focusing on the Upper Mississippi River basin and the Chesapeake Bay.

² A summary of NRCS initiatives is provided as an appendix to this paper

³ CEAP is a multi-agency effort to quantify the environmental effects of conservation practices and programs and develop the science base for managing the agricultural landscape for environmental quality. Project findings are used to guide USDA conservation policy and program development and help conservationists, farmers and ranchers make more informed conservation decisions.

“One of the findings is you get the most bang for the buck by treating the most vulnerable acres,” says Lowenfish. “That’s targeting. By taking a systems approach you get more conservation benefits by installing a whole system than you do by spreading dollars more broadly.”

NRCS has directed about 11 percent of its total Environmental Quality Incentives Program budget to initiatives, not counting the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative, which received dedicated funding in the 2008 Farm Bill. An array of other programs, including Conservation Innovation Grants and Cooperative Conservation Grants, along with state and local programs, support initiatives. Nongovernmental organizations and private-sector partners bring other resources to the table.

Conservation districts have long advocated locally led conservation work. While supporting the landscape conservation approach, NACD’s position is that while initiatives may focus on resource concerns that transcend jurisdictional boundaries, they should to the extent possible be locally driven, rather than top down.

How is this playing out on the ground? Two examples are instructive. The NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative seeks to stabilize populations of this rangeland bird to prevent its listing as a federal endangered species. It targets key sage grouse habitat in 11 western states. Conservation districts have played an active role in several states. In Montana, the Montana Association of Conservation Districts has a major role in the initiative, says Ray Beck, administrator of the Resource and Development Division of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

“Working with conservation districts is about the only way to get accepted here,” says Beck. “People trust districts because they’re one of them,” Beck says. Initiatives succeed in states like Montana only if they’re not top-down. “You’ve got to get local buy-in to convince folks it’s important and necessary,” he adds.

In neighboring Wyoming, conservation districts are at the table for the multi-agency Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative, but they had to work to get there. The initiative is described as “a long-term science-based effort to assess and enhance aquatic and terrestrial habitats at a landscape scale in Southwest Wyoming, while facilitating responsible development through local collaboration and partnerships.”

Districts are represented on the Executive Committee of the Initiative, but it wasn’t easy at the outset, says Mary Thoman, chair of the Sweetwater County Conservation District. “We had to beg our way in as county conservation districts,” she says. Now that districts are represented, she encourages them to prioritize conservation projects for funding under the initiative. “That’s what we told the Initiative from day one. We want these to be local projects, not top-down.”

In many cases, conservation districts are playing key roles in landscape conservation initiatives. NACD’s recent report on the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative shows heavy conservation district involvement in key Bay states such as Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia, and West Virginia. Across the country, a map of interstate river compacts in western states reveals that districts play leading roles in several of the efforts.

Traditional conservation partners also need to understand that collaborative efforts are bringing new and sometimes untraditional partners to the table. In the Chesapeake, groups like the Environmental Defense Fund are working side-by-side with districts and other partners. The private sector, too, has become more engaged. The Coca-Cola Company, Wal-Mart and other large corporations are conducting sustainability efforts, bringing the potential for unprecedented financial resources to the table.

As the Lincoln Center report notes, large landscape conservation projects are by their nature:

- Multijurisdictional – cutting across political and jurisdictional boundaries
- Multipurpose – addressing a mix of related issues, including environment, economy and communities
- Multistakeholder – including public, private and nongovernmental players

Are large landscape conservation initiatives a fad that will pass with time, or, are they, as the Lincoln Center report suggests, a major stage of American conservation history that is still being written?

Several factors would suggest that the latter is the case. Among them:

- Budgetary pressures at the local, state and national level are straining resources. Thomas Christensen, regional conservationist for the NRCS Central Region, puts it this way: “Austere times call for you to be more efficient and effective, particularly with outcomes.”
- Science is showing the value of large landscape efforts. CEAP reports are making it clear that voluntary conservation combined with targeting resource concerns is an effective way to deliver conservation.
- Addressing problems such as hypoxia zones in the Gulf of Mexico and Chesapeake Bay requires large landscape conservation approaches.
- Much of the rapid population growth in the western U.S. has occurred in the wildland-urban interface, where public and private lands are intertwined. Resource concerns such as wildfire and invasive species don’t distinguish between the public and private lands, and dealing with these concerns requires multijurisdictional cooperation.

That said, collaboration requires an understanding that large landscape initiatives must be driven by local resource concerns. Lessons from four decades of efforts to address the health of the Chesapeake Bay teach that. One of the keys to successes documented in the Chesapeake CEAP is achieving buy-in from states in the basin that don’t border the Bay. Conservation districts in Pennsylvania, for instance, have played an important role in the effort. “It’s hard to sell the Chesapeake Bay to local farmers here in Pennsylvania. Some have never seen it,” says Susan Marquart, NRCS acting Chesapeake Initiative coordinator. “We find it still works best to work with them on a local basis and present it as local improvements in their local watersheds.”

With a few variations, that quote could sum up the importance of local buy-in on initiatives across the country. It also plays into the strengths of the traditional conservation partners.

This paper closes with some time-worn advice for partners seeking to play roles in large landscape conservation initiatives.

So You Want to Be Involved?

Large landscape conservation initiatives present new opportunities and challenges for traditional conservation partners. But the rules for engagement haven't really changed much. Some keys to effective partnering include the following:

- ✓ Be at the table...
A variety of coordinating bodies guide initiatives. Find out where the action is, find out where your organization fits and show up. In some cases, this may mean being at the table in a number of settings, from the state conservationist's technical advisory committee to multijurisdictional steering committees or citizen advisory groups.
- ✓ Go to the source...
Be it the federal land manager in your area, the state agency overseeing portions of a project or your state NRCS office, find out where the action is, reach out and get to know the key actors. Social media tools are fine additions to communications toolboxes, but face-to-face personal relationships lead to engagement opportunities.
- ✓ Identify and communicate local resource concerns...
Conservation district local working groups that function effectively are excellent examples of locally led conservation. Seek input from local stakeholders, develop your priorities and communicate them to other partners.
- ✓ Stay abreast of funding opportunities...
Innovative new tools such as Conservation Innovation Grants are available to address resource concerns. Federal-state matching programs, foundation grants, private-sector funding and other tools supplement and enhance traditional cost-share programs. Develop tools and techniques that help partners share information about these opportunities. Your state associations and conservation agencies and national associations should be encouraged to provide that information, too.
- ✓ Outreach and educate...
These traditional roles are among the most important duties for America's conservation districts. The job is never-ending, but more important than ever given the wide range of potential stakeholders in large landscape initiatives. As Ray Beck of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation says, "Financial incentives are sometimes important, but I don't think as important as proper education and awareness."
- ✓ Be in it for the long haul...
The stability of your organization and strength of your network are important to achieving positive outcomes.
- ✓ Be strategic...
In tight times, you can't be everything to everyone.

NRCS LANDSCAPE INITIATIVES:

NRCS landscape initiatives include those listed below. Click on them to learn more. Several other initiatives were recently approved, including the West Maui Coral Reef Initiative, the Ogallala Aquifer Initiative and the Red River Initiative. The agency plans to provide more information on its [NRCS Initiatives web site](#) shortly.

Watershed initiatives:

- [Bay Delta](#)
- [Chesapeake Bay](#)
- [Gulf of Mexico](#)
- [Great Lakes Restoration](#)
- [Illinois River and Eucha-Spavinaw Lake](#)

Habitat initiatives:

- [Lesser Prairie Chicken](#)
- [Migratory Bird Habitat](#)
- [Sage Grouse](#)

Ecosystem initiatives:

- [Longleaf Pine](#)
- [Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watershed](#)
- [New England / New York Forestry](#)

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE INITIATIVES:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has identified 22 landscape conservation cooperatives. [Click here to learn more.](#)

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