



Fall 2015

RESOURCE

America's Voice for Conservation

National Conservation Planning Partnership—Planning for the Future of Conservation Delivery



Voluntary Actions Working to Improve Sage Grouse Habitat
NACD Holds Successful Summer Meeting in Spokane

a letter from the president



Lee McDaniel

President,
National Association of
Conservation Districts

Local Partnerships

Conservation planning is a prime component in getting conservation on the ground in an orderly and efficient manner. In recent years, many districts have focused more on getting conservation dollars out the door, and planning has had to take a back seat to the programs. Recognizing this issue, NRCS Chief Jason Weller has created a National Conservation Planning Partnership (NCP). Members from the core partnership—NACD, NRCS, NASCA, NARC&DC and NCDEA—populate NCP's steering committee and a number of its action teams. Weller and members of the partnership believe a renewed focus on conservation planning will better guide the long-term goals of conservation efforts into the future.

A conservation plan provides a road map to assess natural resources challenges that producers and landowners might face. If one gets in a car to take a trip to a new destination, he or she can get there without a map or GPS, but having a plan certainly makes the trip a lot easier and more cost effective. It's just good management.

A good conservation plan should include at least four main elements. First, it should identify the resource needs of the particular property. Second, it should provide solutions to those resource needs. Next, it should prioritize those solutions. Finally, the plan needs to be implemented. As technology changes and/or the land use changes, it is also important that conservation plans be updated on a regular basis.

Creating a strategic and adaptable conservation plan can not only improve the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of conservation, it can also save you a lot of headache down the road as natural resource needs and challenges change. So let's work with our core partnership to put conservation planning back at the top of our priority list.



Lee McDaniel
NACD President



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about our cover

NACD hosted a successful Summer Board Meeting and Conservation Tour in beautiful Spokane, Washington. A highlight of the tour was a stop at the iconic Steptoe Butte State Park in the Palouse region of Washington.

Renewing the Commitment to Conservation Planning

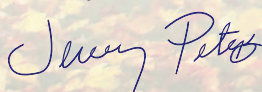
My first week on the job as NACD's CEO was spent with a group of dedicated conservationists representing each of the five national partners—NACD, NRCS, NASCA, NARC&DC and NCDEA—focused on an emerging initiative to bring renewed energy to conservation planning called the National Conservation Planning Partnership or NCPP.

Each national partner brings unique and diverse talents and skills to this effort, knowing that good conservation planning is a practical, science-based and economically-sound management tool unique to the highly diverse natural resource landscape of our nation. Even more importantly, conservation planning represents an opportunity for conservation districts and local partners to build and maintain relationships with landowners for the future—a conception I know district officials are well versed in.

With so many stakeholders increasingly interested in conservation, now is an important time to ensure sound conservation planning remains the starting point for any discussion regarding delivery of conservation assistance at the local level. That assistance could be in the form of cost-sharing through a Farm Bill conservation program to promote soil health best practices on diverse landscapes for nutrient management and water quality, or to preserve important wildlife habitat. Or perhaps the assistance is delivered through a private sector initiative such as water quality trading or participation in a sustainability program that provides financial incentives, market access or regulatory certainty. Or maybe it simply involves a landowner seeking nothing more than sound technical advice to correct a problem. Whichever the scenario, the efforts of national leaders through the NCPP will help re-establish conservation planning as the starting point for conservation delivery to landowners.

NACD's leaders are working through the NCPP and many other efforts to make sure conservation planning remains, as Hugh Hammond Bennett described, "part and parcel to the whole business of making a living from the land."

Jeremy Peters



CEO



Jeremy Peters
CEO, National Association
of Conservation Districts

National Conservation Planning Partnership— Planning for the Future of Conservation Delivery

When the National Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Associate Chief for Conservation, Leonard Jordan outlined the agency's areas of emphasis for folks at NACD's summer meeting in Spokane, Washington, enhancing partnerships and their outcomes was at the top of the list.

National conservation partners are taking him seriously. They have mounted a joint effort to enhance and update conservation planning, be it on the farm or on the landscape scale.

Along with NACD, the national partners are NRCS, the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA), the National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils (NARC&DC) and the National Conservation Districts Employees Association (NCDEA). The five national partners have undertaken what they call the National Conservation Planning Partnership (NCPPI), engaging leaders from all five organizations.

The effort starts with the simple premise that sound conservation planning leads to better conservation delivery. With that in mind, the partners have committed substantial time and effort to strengthening conservation planning by, well, planning for it. This will include developing a multi-year action plan to incorporate all aspects of conservation delivery into a conservation planning strategy.

A Leadership Team with representatives from all groups is steering the ship. It is headed by NRCS Regional Conservationist (West) Astor Boozer and NASCA Executive Director Mike Brown.

Five Action Teams are digging into several key categories for plan development. The teams include:

- Communications and Messaging
- Performance, Outcomes and Accountability
- Partnership and Leveraging Capacity, Organization and Planning
- Technical Processes, Tools and Integration
- Training

NACD Executive Board members Kimberly LaFleur of Massachusetts and Tim Palmer of Iowa are members of the Leadership Team. Other NACD representatives populate the action teams. They include NACD Second Vice President Dick Went of Rhode Island, Jim Harreld of Mississippi, who chairs the communications and messaging team, and Kit Tillotson of Idaho. Harreld is a member of the NACD Executive Board, and Tillotson chairs NACD's Pacific Region. NACD President Lee McDaniel and Chief Executive Officer Jeremy Peters are also engaged in the effort.

"NACD joins our other national partners in strongly supporting this important work," McDaniel said. "If we achieve our goals and objectives, the planning partnership effort will lead to better conservation planning at many levels, from an individual farm to the boundaries of a conservation district and beyond. We all know that good conservation planning is essential to identifying and addressing resource needs and concerns."

With an array of challenges and new approaches to conservation delivery, the effort is timely, added Peters. "This effort is an important step toward designing an effective, resilient conservation delivery system with a structured process so we are implementing the right conservation practices at the right time and in the right place. Districts are called on to address the conservation concerns of all customers in their service areas. This

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effort and the fruits it bears will help make that happen.”

NASCA’s Mike Brown notes that the effort stems from several previous steps, including a 2012 NASCA white paper on the need for improved technical assistance and conservation planning. A goal is to embrace and incorporate new tools for conservation delivery, including the NRCS Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative (CDSI) and related service enhancements such as the Conservation Client Gateway and the Mobile Conservation Planner. “These improved tools for conservation planning will expedite the process and free up some staff time for district and federal conservation planners. Our hope is that this will allow us to place a greater emphasis on developing more comprehensive conservation plans,” Brown said.

Done right, the effort will set the stage for 21st century conservation planning and delivery at its best. The partners are devoting considerable time to the effort, with teleconferences, meetings and related work leading to development of a multi-year plan, hopefully coming this autumn.

While the effort is new and focused on 21st Century realities, it is rooted in the very birth of private lands conservation. Boozer and Brown quoted the first Soil Conservation Service Chief, Hugh Hammond Bennett, in their communications about the effort. Describing a conservation plan in his time, he said: “Under such a plan, soil conservation is not just an incidental bit of the mechanics of farming; it becomes part and parcel of the whole business of making a living from the land, and is the only way by which we may have permanently productive land for a permanent agriculture.” Some words endure.

The challenges Bennett and his contemporaries faced during the Dust Bowl years were daunting, but those faced by today’s producers and conservation professionals may be even greater in a time when there is great pressure to employ a diminished base of productive lands in the production of food, fiber and fuel for a global population that will soon reach 9 billion people. The need for the permanence Bennett spoke of is that much more important in this environment.

While the challenges continue to mount, there are also more partners who can lend their expertise and resources. These include clients and other important partners both Boozer and Brown foresee getting involved. “In addition (to the action teams), we expect to include landowner/land user/tribal involvement in this effort through focus groups and other input mechanisms. It is critical that clients help to determine what the partnership delivers to them through science-based, practical and economically sound conservation planning,” they said.

Here are just a few of the many areas the action teams are exploring:

- Continuing to build partnerships and use district assistance to promote and assist with conservation planning
- Partnering with colleges and universities to teach conservation planning to students
- Using the core conservation partnership to develop a phased, multi-year partnership and leveraging strategy that incorporates non-traditional partners
- Serving as a technical assessment advisor to the NRCS Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative and its related tools.
- Assessing the value of above farm-scale, “area-wide” group conservation planning to accommodate the goals, objectives and needs of individuals living in such areas
- Considering the revision of the financial assistance ranking process with a renewed focus on conservation planning
- Developing a multi-year agency training strategy to support the NPCC and creating an “Art of Conservation Planning” course
- Incorporating accountability into NRCS and partnership performance plans in a way that promotes and supports quality conservation planning



- Drafting a major NCPP conservation planning internal and external marketing and outreach campaign
- Developing a comprehensive national communications strategy that emphasizes the importance of locally led conservation planning to NCPP employees

The action teams will explore many other areas, too. It's a big job, but Brown and McDaniel foresee major improvements in conservation planning.

"We are optimistic that the partnership will place a greater emphasis conservation planning, with a focus on producing plans that comprehensively meet landowner, operator, and enterprise needs. These plans cannot simply serve as an avenue to satisfy Financial Assistance contract needs," Brown said. "They must be developed with the best technical expertise available, and ultimately reflect the conservation ethic and desired production outcomes of our nation's landowners and producers."

If that happens, McDaniel sees a bright future for private lands conservation. "Solid conservation planning will help decision-makers, including individual producers, district boards and other community leaders make crucial decisions about how to allocate, employ and maximize resources to meet identified conservation needs," he said.

NACD Issues Comments on EPA's Pollinator Proposal

This August, NACD submitted comments on the EPA's Proposal to Mitigate Acute Risk to Bees as part of the National Strategy to Promote the Health of Honey Bees and Other Pollinators released on May 19, 2015.

Under this strategy, the EPA has proposed a rule to change the labeling on pesticide products so that the spraying of pesticides that are acutely toxic to honey bees would be prohibited when crops being pollinated are in bloom and bees are under contract for pollination services on those lands. The rule also recommends that on land where there are no existing pollinator contracts, states and tribes must develop state-level pollinator protection plans (Managed Pollinator Protection Plans) and best

management practices to protect native pollinators.

NACD's comments encourage the EPA to consider the benefits of voluntary measures before implementing mandatory protocols/practices and additional restrictions on pesticide labels. NACD believes a voluntary-based approach to protecting pollinators that utilizes the relationships and reputations of locally-led conservation districts would yield the greatest level of success. A voluntary approach should also include contract provisions that address the issue, voluntary communication, and best management practices.

The full comments can be viewed on NACD's website under the Policy tab.

Planning for 2018 Farm Bill...Already?

Although it may seem like the 2014 Farm Bill was not passed too long ago, it is set to expire on September 30, 2018. Because farm bill reauthorizations are multi-year processes, NACD is already in the preliminary stages of planning for the upcoming bill.

Congress will begin preparing for writing the next farm bill soon. If this Congress has a process similar to that of the last farm bill, field hearings on different farm bill programs are likely to start well ahead of the bill's expiration, perhaps even next year. This could be especially true since the process last time took three years, much longer than typically expected for authorizing legislation.

NACD has created a Farm Bill Task Force to begin crafting a strategy for the next farm bill. Currently, a steering committee is in place to help set a timeline for the task force, appoint members, and make plans for outreach to districts on farm bill programs.

The last farm bill included many new programs and changes, including the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, consolidation conservation programs, and tying federal crop insurance premium subsidies to conservation compliance. Through the Farm Bill Task Force process, NACD hopes to help shape a farm bill that benefits districts and conservation.

Voluntary Actions Working to Improve Sage Grouse Habitat

While visiting Oregon in late August, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack announced updates to the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI). The revisions involve tailoring state approaches and reducing the threats to wildlife and invasive grasses after fires that impact the quality of livestock forage. USDA also committed an additional \$211 million in funding through 2018 to support the revisions, otherwise known as the Sage Grouse

Initiative 2.0.

The Sage Grouse Initiative was originally introduced in 2010 as a coordinated effort by USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Conservation Districts, state and federal agencies, and environmental, agricultural and wildlife organizations to improve rangeland in the West. Since the program's adoption 5 years ago, USDA has



Photo: U.S. Department of Agriculture

invested \$296.5 million supporting ranchers' and ranching operations' efforts to conserve open space through conservation easements, restoration of rangeland, removal of conifers and demarcation of fences to improve sage grouse habitat. Partners nearly doubled that investment, providing an additional \$198 million during the early years of the initiative. Through SGI, 4.4 million acres of sage grouse habitat was conserved.

In an August 2015 report, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies found encouraging trends for the greater sage grouse population across the western U.S. According to the report, the population of male sage grouse increased 63% from their recent low in 2013. These findings support what conservation districts already know—locally led, voluntary conservation practices work. The increase in sage grouse numbers is particularly important right now because the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is legally required to make a determination on whether or not to list the greater sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act by September 30, 2015.

NACD continues to support programs and approaches

that work cooperatively with western land owners and land managers to undertake conservation programs that make sense on their ranching and farming operations. Those participating in these voluntary efforts should also receive assurances that the efforts they have taken to improve sage grouse habitat are sufficient should the FWS list the sage grouse as an endangered species.

SGI provides ranchers and growers that assurance through a certainty agreement negotiated between NRCS and FWS. Landowners and land managers participating in SGI and agreeing to maintain the conservation practices receive security from FWS that no additional conservation measures will be required if the sage grouse is listed. Through SGI and its second iteration (SGI 2.0), 8 million acres of sage grouse habitat is projected to be protected or restored by 2018, again proving the value of voluntary efforts that enhance species habitat and benefit livestock operations.

In May, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) issued draft land use plans for sage brush habitat in the western U.S. These plans address

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the management of federal lands and are important to sage grouse recovery because most sage grouse live on federal lands. The final public lands conservation plans were released in September along with a decision not to list the sage grouse as an endangered species. NACD is pleased that the FWS took a common sense approach, recognizing that our voluntary efforts across the West are working. The renewed commitment to the locally led approach under SGI 2.0 will yield additional benefits

to sage grouse habitat while enabling farmers and ranchers to maintain economically viable operations. Also pending in Congress are provisions in the Fiscal Year 2016 appropriations bills to restrict FWS action on the sage grouse. As we are approaching the end of the fiscal year on September 30, an omnibus appropriations bill is likely to continue funding of the federal government. Final action on appropriations bills and any provision related to FWS actions related to the sage grouse are expected this fall.

Annual Appropriations and Their Importance for Conservation

The Congressional appropriations process is vital to conservation districts and the implementation of conservation practices across the country. Although many conservation programs are established through authorizing legislation like the Farm Bill, these bills do not necessarily approve spending funds. This primarily occurs through the annual appropriations process.

In appropriations, there are two types of program spending: mandatory and discretionary. Most conservation programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program, are mandatory programs. Other programs, including Conservation Operations, Watershed Rehabilitation, and EPA 319 grants are funded each fiscal year through discretionary appropriations bills.

There are twelve subcommittees of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees representing various branches of the federal government. For instance, the Agriculture and Interior Appropriations Subcommittees oversee funding for programs vital to natural resources conservation. In an ideal scenario, each of these twelve subcommittees would create and pass one appropriations bill that funds their respective sections of the government. The bill would then be passed by the full committee, then by both houses, conferenced, and then signed by the president. This process, called regular order, is meant to happen each fiscal year.

In recent years, Congress has failed to maintain regular order for appropriations bills. Instead, a continuing resolution has been passed at the end of each fiscal year that temporarily funds government programs. These can either be short-term or last for the entire fiscal year.

This process of instituting appropriations resolutions and bills often changes mandatory levels of program funding, which causes mandatory conservation programs to be funded at lower levels than originally authorized.

Passing full year appropriations bills through regular order and refraining from changing mandatory program spending gives more certainty to agencies like the Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Forest Service, and the Environmental Protection Agency, and other relevant agencies. This then allows them, along with districts, to better provide services and support to landowners and the general public. Ultimately, this makes all of the federal conservation programs more effective.

The current Congress has passed a continuing resolution to keep government agencies operational into fiscal year 2016, but much work remains to make final spending decisions. NACD is working hard through this process and all of its uncertainties to ensure conservation districts are well represented and that locally-led conservation remains a funding priority.

NACD Holds Successful Summer Meeting in Spokane



NACD Officers stand atop Steptoe Butte in Washington's picturesque Palouse region.

In July, NACD wrapped up its 2015 Summer Board Meeting and Conservation Tour in beautiful Spokane, Washington. A highlight of the meeting was the Conservation Forum held on Sunday, July 12, which featured a "Washington Welcome" by Congresswoman Cathy McMorris-Rodgers [WA-5], a national issues panel with representatives from USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Society for Range Management, and the Agricultural Retailers Association, and a regional issues panel that included NRCS, soil scientists and representatives from the Washington Conservation Commission, the Washington

Association of Conservation Districts and the Palouse Conservation District.

The meeting was capped off with a tour of the picturesque Palouse region of Washington that included stops at Sievers Farm, the McCoy Grain Terminal, Red Barn Farms and Steptoe Butte State Park.

Thanks to everyone who attended the meeting! Photos from the event are now available on NACD's Flickr site <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nacd/>.

NACD in Action

NACD District Outlook Task Force

An NACD District Outlook Task Force is developing a report for the NACD Board of Directors that will provide guidance on how districts can grow with their changing workload and community needs.

The Task Force has met twice and held regular teleconferences in an effort to complete the report in time for the 2016 NACD Annual Meeting. The team conducted a SWOT analysis (an assessment of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats), evaluated common characteristics of successful districts, identified areas of focus, and began looking at each area's

challenges and possible solutions. They are now working through four teams: Communications and Awareness, Funding, Structure, Training, and Business Planning to identify the trends, challenges, and potential solutions for districts in their assigned areas.

For more information on the Task Force, contact Chair Jack Majeres at majeresj@hotmail.com or Deb Bogar at deb-bogar@nacdn.net.

Forestry RPG Holds Summer Meeting

The NACD Forestry Resource Policy Group (RPG) held its annual summer meeting in Boston, Massachusetts, where conservation district representatives from across the country learned about forest resource concerns affecting the northeast. A field tour organized by the Northern Rhode Island Conservation District showcased a small forest landowner cooperative and a state-owned farm operation the district is now managing.

Presenters included Massachusetts State Forester Peter Church, Massachusetts State Conservationist Christine Clark and Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts Executive Director Jeff LaFleur, as well as representatives from the National Association of State Foresters, American Forests, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and other state and regional forestry professionals.

Every Acre Counts

Engaging Tulsa in Urban Conservation

The Tulsa County Conservation District's stated purpose is "to conserve, protect, restore, and improve Tulsa County's natural resources for the citizens of Tulsa County (Oklahoma)." The district has done this by actively engaging citizens as demonstrated in the Crow Creek Project.

Crow Creek is on the State's 303(d) list of impaired waters due to poor fish and benthic macroinvertebrate (bugs) communities, low levels of oxygen in the water, and bacteria. The district became involved in its improvement when citizens asked for help. This was the first step in a

project the district knew would require local community involvement and an intensive education initiative.

The Crow Creek watershed, the first "open" creek south of downtown Tulsa, drains into the Arkansas River and receives flow from a heavily developed, mostly residential, area. It covers approximately 2.8 square miles and has 851 stormwater inlets, 21.3 miles of storm sewer pipe, 515 manholes, 15 industrial stormwater permittees, 21 underground storage tanks, 11 water wells, 4 oil and gas wells and 14 septic systems.

Every Acre Counts

That would be enough to make anyone question how and where to start, but not the community or the district. Teaming up with the City of Tulsa, NRCS, and others, the Tulsa County Conservation District established key work groups that have engaged residents and businesses.

- Stream Restoration Work Group (instream and banks) - public, private, retired technical experts with residential advisors
- Landscaping Work Group (adjacent to creek) —neighbors, neighborhood associations, public officials

- Business Support Group (entire watershed) - business Associations, individual businesses, St. John Hospital, Philbrook Art Museum, Brookside
- Community Education/Outreach Work Group (entire watershed) - public, private and grassroots supporters

The project is well underway with outreach efforts, assessments, demonstration projects, land restoration and more. As a result, “It’s always a beautiful day at Crow Creek!”

Urban and Community Conservation in Iowa

The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) is hard at work to maintain all aspects of the state’s environmental health. Beyond the traditional rural and agricultural conservation efforts, they are exploring avenues in urban conservation, specifically storm water retention. Valuable water management practices in the cityscape include ecosystem reconstruction that allows landscapes to better absorb rain and shed little to no runoff. Through groundbreaking partnerships with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA), IDALS is working to provide technical assistance while the former groups provide financial assistance.

As of mid-summer, there are projects pending in more than forty communities in Iowa with approximately \$50 million worth of restoration funding through the DNR and approximately \$6.5 million through IEDA funding. Projects include streetscape retrofits with permeable pavers and tree planter boxes, bioretention projects, installation of permeable pavers in parking lots and alleys, and stream corridor stabilization projects.

Two specific programs the four-person IDALS urban conservation team are the Dubuque Green Alley Program and the IEDA Green Streets Criteria. Available through the DNR’s State Revolving Fund, the Dubuque Green Alley Program is a \$9 million project to fund alley retrofits in Dubuque. The IEDA Green Streets Criteria is a program

to meet the minimum requirements to be eligible for Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds, or other funding that may be available. Whenever IEDA funds a CDBG application they must develop and install a storm water management system that at a minimum infiltrates the water quality volume (WQv)—or the runoff from a 1.25 inch rain. In Iowa, this accounts for 90% of annual precipitation.

It is in part thanks to the efforts put forth by the IDALS urban conservation team that such a high number of projects have been achieved and have been so successful.



Soil Health Champions Spotlight



Champions Darwin and Sandy Roberts

Hello, my name is Darwin Roberts. I am proud to be one of the first members of NACD's Soil Health Champions network!

My wife, Sandy, and I work with our four grown children (three daughters and one son) in a farming partnership of 800 acres of corn/soybean and pork production. We are extremely dedicated to the use of good soil health practices on our operation; we know that these practices are critical to sustaining healthy land and a healthy business into the future.

I am a third-term elected Martin SWCD Supervisor. I have been a Farm Bureau member for over 40 years, have served over 30 years on the County Board of Directors for the Minnesota Corn & Soybean organizations, on the County Water Plan

Board since helping with its creation in the 1980's, and on a Policy Board of a (10) county watershed (GBERBA) Greater Blue Earth River Basin Alliance.



I am also involved in research projects with the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture in the areas of water quality, nutrient management and biomass production. In July 2014, I was certified through the Minnesota Agriculture Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP) for my farm management practices. MAWQCP is a voluntary opportunity for farmers and agriculture landowners to take the lead in implementing conservation practices that protect our water, and in turn obtain regulatory certainty for a period of 10 years.

For information about me and the other Soil Health Champions, visit: <http://www.nacdnet.org/policy/healthy-soil/soil-health-champions-network>.



Conservation Client Gateway

Conservation district leaders Linda Brownson of New Hampshire and Ray McCormick of Indiana hosted events on their farms in June that helped NRCS roll out its online Conservation Client Gateway.

Brownson is president of the New Hampshire Association of Conservation Districts, NACD board member and vice chair of the Grafton County Conservation District. McCormick is an NACD board member and chair of the Knox County, Indiana, Soil and Water Conservation District board. The hosts and NRCS officials used the events to draw attention to the advantages of 24/7 access to information and assistance.

NRCS' Conservation Client Gateway, accessed through the NRCS web site at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/cgate/>, provides producers a secure connection to:

- Request technical assistance
- Apply for financial assistance
- Review, sign and submit applications, contracts and other documents, and
- Track payments



Conservation district leader Linda Brownson (third from left in front) hosted a Conservation Client Gateway rollout on her New Hampshire farm. Others in the photo include Barbara Pursley, NRCS National Client Gateway Expert in Ft. Collins, CO. (front, left), NRCS Assistant Chief Kirk Hanlin (second from left in front), Gary Peters, Chair, Grafton County Conservation District (directly behind Brownson), and State Conservationist Rick Ellsmore (upper right).



Individuals logging on for the first time will be guided as they sign up on the site. While the current version is focused on individual producers, an enhanced version, scheduled for release next year, will accommodate business entities. Plans also call for enhanced interfaces with conservation districts that assist in serving these same producers. Cell phone access to the system is also planned.

All of which strikes NACD President Lee McDaniel as positive. "NACD applauds the Conservation Client Gateway as another tool for producers and conservation professionals seeking to address their local conservation priorities," McDaniel said. "We look forward to future enhancements that will broaden the Conservation Client Gateway's availability and strengthen the ability of conservation districts to help meet the needs of the Conservation Client Gateway users."

NRCS Chief Jason Weller concurred. "We are continuing to find ways to enhance Conservation Client Gateway and will make the service available soon to business entities. We are also working to improve information exchange with conservation districts that serve many of the same clients," he said.

The 200-acre Sacred Paw Farm operated by Brownson and her husband, Fred, welcomed an array of guests as NRCS began its outreach efforts for the new service. The Brownsons participated in an NRCS pilot program to shape and test the Conservation Client Gateway, and they were early users.

Districts at Work

Brownson told those at the kickoff event, including NRCS Assistant Chief Kirk Hanlin and State Conservationist Richard Ellsmore, she enjoys seeing the maps of her property and soils online and being able to access other information about her farm electronically. She said she has multiple contracts and having them available that way appeals to her.

McCormick, who incorporates multiple conservation practices on his 2,000-acre crops and livestock operation, hosted NRCS Chief Jason Weller, State Conservationist Jane Hardisty and other visitors on his farm.

“In the past, just tracking financial information and payments was difficult to do. Now, that payment history and other information is recorded for me to visit securely. It is very helpful,” he said.

NRCS is hearing the same from other producers who have accessed the system. “Customers I’ve spoken to like the convenience and flexibility Conservation Client Gateway offers them,” Weller said. “For instance, they like the option of signing applications and contracts from their own offices, rather than driving to a service center.”

Producers who choose to conduct their business at a service center or district office can continue to do so. The Conservation Client Gateway provides an online option. As use increases, it is expected to offer another benefit: enabling NRCS and conservation district professionals to serve producers better by concentrating on conservation planning and getting conservation on the ground.

NRCS is concentrating on state-level staff training this year. That means lots of hands-on practice with the Conservation Client Gateway.

The agency is using feedback from early users to improve how the system performs. One early and ongoing concern is system security. Officials emphasize that security features are similar to electronic security steps used by the banking industry.



Conservation District leader Ray McCormick (center) hosted NRCS Chief Jason Weller (left), State Conservationist Jane Hardisty and others at a Conservation Client Gateway rollout at his Indiana farm.

An NRCS YouTube video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5mT_5nBk5Q features Brownson and other producers sharing their Client Gateway experiences. Among those featured is NACD Executive Board member Tim Palmer of Iowa.



Partnering for Success

Strengthening State Conservation Partnerships

When the National Conservation Partnership Leaders signed an historic Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) last February, it set in motion a nationwide conversation on the steps needed to strengthen individual state and territorial conservation partnerships and the conservation delivery system they represent. The leaders in the Southeast Region decided to set an example for states by discussing the future of conservation on a regional basis and signed a Memorandum of Agreement at the regional level at the recent NACD Southeast regional meeting.

In many states across the country leaders of state/territory conservation partnerships have embarked on discussions at meetings and conference calls to chart the future of their delivery system. The national partnership furnished

a sample state MOA and a lengthy discussion paper of issues affecting the future of conservation delivery in the country. In September, these leaders asked their respective state counterparts to provide an update on the status of discussions and actions in states and territories across the nation. These updates will provide ideas and success stories from states that can be shared so that every district and state/territory association can take advantage of opportunities to help them strengthen their delivery of conservation in the future. A full report on the progress of this effort will be presented at the NACD annual meeting in Reno. For further information on this subject feel free to contact Phylis-Vandever@nacdnet.org or your respective NACD Field Representative.



Southeast region leaders (pictured from left to right): James Tillman, NRCS Regional Conservationist for the south region; Rhonda Bryars, SE Conservation District Employees Association President; Robert Harbison, RC&D; Mark Gilbert, SE National Association of State Conservation Agencies; Jim Harreld, NACD Executive Board member – SE Region; and Kevin Jeffries, SE Region Chair, sign Memorandum of Agreement at the Southeast Region Meeting.

District Development

NACD U&C Webinars in FY2016

NACD's Urban and Community monthly webinars will continue throughout 2016! With the sole sponsorship of The Scotts Miracle-Gro Company, the NACD Urban and Community Resource Policy Group (RPG) has offered free monthly U&C webinars since September 2012. Held at 12:00 PM ET on the third Thursday of each month, these popular webinars have reached over 1,000 members and partners, many of them through more than one webinar. They have covered a variety of urban and community conservation topics and have allowed districts and other entities to share their projects and programs, information and resources. You can view a full list of the past

webinars at <http://www.nacdnet.org/policy/urban/webinars>. The site also provides links to PDFs of all presentations and recordings of the FY2014 and FY2015 webinars.

The draft slate of FY2016 webinars follows the pattern of showcasing districts' activities and highlighting partners' resources. The schedule will be finalized and posted on the above website in early October. Contact Debra Bogar at deb-bogar@nacdn.net for additional information.

Helping pollinators thrive on farmland and a variety of landscapes

Syngenta developed Operation Pollinator more than 12 years ago to help restore pollinators in agricultural, golf and other landscapes. The program creates essential habitats using practical conservation practices that directly address pollination needs at a local level. Based on scientific research and participants' experience, Operation Pollinator has proven to successfully establish and manage nectar- and pollen-rich habitats in key landscapes, with dramatic recovery in the number of pollinating insects.

This science-based, sustainable program provides solutions through collaboration with key stakeholders for region-specific seed mixtures. With Operation Pollinator, farmers, golf course superintendents and land managers strengthen the environment through a sustainable approach to biodiversity on various landscapes.

Preserving healthy bee populations is critical to crop production. And an abundance of pollinating insects is a highly visible indicator of healthy ecosystems. Managing habitats for bees and other pollinators significantly increases biodiversity and brings about real environmental benefits.

Not only does Operation Pollinator provide an answer for restoring vital populations of pollinating insects, small mammals and farmland birds also benefit from these habitats. And with careful site planning and management, Operation Pollinator can also play an important role in reducing soil erosion and helping protect valuable water resources.

Syngenta is committed to sustainable agriculture while helping growers increase productivity. We engage in many global initiatives aimed at maximizing production



Operation Pollinator site at Scott Flowers farm in Mattson, Mississippi. Photo courtesy of Delta F.A.R.M.

and restoration of our natural resources. We strive to be an agriculture leader through presence, collaboration and commitment to research and development. Now, we are taking our commitment one step further by helping ensure pollinators have the habitat they need to thrive.

We are proud to spearhead this innovative initiative, but we do not operate alone. It's through strategic collaborations and marketplace presence that we are able to address this growing agricultural need. Syngenta collaborates with an extensive network of farmers, land managers, NGOs and government agencies. These trusted relationships allow us to find practical solutions that can benefit pollinators and farmers. We work with ecology and entomology experts at the University of California-Davis, Michigan State University and the University of Florida, as well as organizations like Delta F.A.R.M. and Trees Forever and others.





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**Start making your plans to join NACD in Reno, Nevada
January 30-February 3 for the 2016 NACD Annual Meeting!**

