



The RESOURCE

Spring 2016

America's Voice for Conservation

Forestry at the Forefront

Public Lands RPG Working Hard to Deliver
on NACD's Priority Conservation Policies

\$1 Million in Technical Assistance for Urban
Agriculture Conservation Projects

Collaborative Conservation Helping to Protect
Military Mission in Minnesota

a letter from the president

Looking Ahead



Lee McDaniel

President,
National Association of
Conservation Districts

As we look ahead to the second half of the year, I would like to update the membership on some of the initiatives NACD has undertaken on your behalf. The process of developing a new strategic plan has begun and it is our goal to have a product ready for the board of directors to review and approve at our annual meeting in Denver, Colorado.

NACD is also offering two new programs that could have an immediate and direct impact on your conservation district. One is the NRCS Conservation Boot Camp program, which provides conservation district staff a primer on NRCS programs and opportunities to build partnerships with the agency. Conservation district employees can apply for the three-week, in-residence training program through NACD. Another new NACD effort is our Urban Agriculture Conservation grants program. NACD will be awarding twenty \$50,000 grants – a total of \$1 million – to agricultural conservation projects in urban and underserved communities. I'd like to issue a special thank you to NRCS Chief Jason Weller for working with NACD to move these initiatives forward.

At the request of the Washington Association of Conservation Districts, NACD has created a new RPG to address the needs of our tribal partners. I will be appointing a member from each region of the country to get this new Tribal RPG underway. The Public Lands RPG is now up and running and has already done valuable work on public lands conservation issues.

I am also pleased to announce that NACD recently welcomed a development director to the Washington, D.C., staff. Melisa Augusto will be working for both NACD and our National Conservation Foundation to raise and leverage private sector funding to grow the North American Envirothon and support our other programmatic needs. If anyone has a solid lead on a corporation or foundation that may be interested in partnering with us, please don't hesitate to contact Melisa.

NACD's Farm Bill Task Force is now fully appointed and gearing up for the next farm bill. It may seem premature to some, but just like farming, it takes time to prepare the ground and plant the seeds in Congress that will allow our ideas to grow. NACD is committed to being proactive – not reactive – in this process.

None of these initiatives would be possible without the support and commitment of our many members and staff – the ones who make it all happen. Thank you to all who volunteer their time to make our districts and national association the best that they can be.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lee D. McDaniel". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly informal style.

Lee McDaniel
NACD President

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Embarking on a Strategic Journey

This year, NACD is embarking on a journey we only have the opportunity to pursue once or twice every decade: developing our next strategic plan. This process requires our collective vision, energy, and passion for the future of our natural resources, conservation districts, and NACD.

If you are like me, it is easy to get consumed in the multitude of issues that confront us every single day in the news, on our electronic devices, or in our relationships with family, friends, neighbors and colleagues. Whether it is the politics of a presidential election year, budget matters, keeping projects on schedule, or just hoping and praying Mother Nature cooperates with our plans, these issues are important and rightfully command our attention.

But we have to stay focused on the bigger picture. We have to anticipate opportunities waiting for us just over the horizon and roadblocks waiting just around the corner. Your national association, guided by a strategic planning committee comprised of officers, board members, and staff, are working to assess some of the fundamental questions that are key to the future of our success in delivering conservation on the land: What is our mission? What is our vision? What are our collective goals and objectives?

NACD leaders completed a questionnaire earlier this spring and provided valuable feedback for the strategic planning committee to consider. In the coming weeks and months, a draft strategic plan will be developed based on the committee's efforts and will begin circulating within our membership. This plan will be presented to the NACD Board of Directors at our summer Conservation Leadership Forum and Tour in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and will also be discussed at region meetings this year. This process will culminate in a final plan, offered to the board of directors for their final approval, at our 2017 Annual Meeting in Denver, Colorado.

Despite all of the issues that command our time, strategic planning is perhaps one of the most important tasks we will complete together this year. I hope you have the opportunity to add your voice during this journey and to contribute to the future of your national association.

Jeremy Peters

Jeremy Peters
NACD CEO

ceo's
corner



Jeremy Peters
CEO, National Association
of Conservation Districts

Forestry at the Forefront



Minnesota's Sherburne SWCD is one of the many conservation districts active in urban forestry efforts.

Assisting in the fight against wildfire

The National Association of Conservation Districts covers a lot of ground for its members, including its active role in helping to serve America's forests. NACD participates in a number of forestry partnerships, conducts state and national research, and collaborates in shaping policy, all with the goal of helping to support state and local conservation district forestry efforts.

The 2014-15 NACD Forestry Survey highlighted just how active America's conservation districts are in the forest. A majority of conservation districts assist private forestland management in some form, and an increasing number of conservation districts are working with civic leaders to assist urban forestry planning.

Over the past several months NACD has been busy exploring how conservation districts can become even more engaged in local and state forestry efforts.

This winter, NACD organized a series of wildfire listening sessions in Western states. The goal of this effort was to provide conservation district leaders with an opportunity to share their experiences preparing for and cleaning up after wildfires with other districts facing similar realities.

Catastrophic wildfire remains a growing problem throughout the country. Last year, ten million acres were burned, seven firefighters were killed, 4,500 homes were damaged or destroyed, and the federal government spent \$2.6 billion to control the flames. Forest Service leaders project wildfire will soon consume roughly two-thirds of the agency's annual budget if current trends hold – further limiting its ability to invest in forest management. The Forest Service and state forestry agencies need help in preparing for and rebuilding following the blaze.

NACD Western Issues Specialist Jeff Burwell helped facilitate listening sessions in Davis, California, Boise, Idaho, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, this year. The topic

Feature Story

of wildfire suppression was also part of the agenda at the Washington Association of Conservation Districts' Annual Meeting last December. A variety of partners and conservation district representatives from a total of nine states attended the meetings, and even though the states' and individuals' experiences differed, the take-home messages were the same. Among other things, meeting attendees agreed that conservation districts can:

- Lead education and outreach activities in their local community
- Serve as a clearinghouse for technical and financial assistance to impacted landowners
- Serve as fiscal agents and coordinate project funding and management
- Help expedite NEPA and engage the local community

A recognizable face in the forestry community

NACD forestry leaders have been active participants in national forestry meetings. In January, the national Joint Forestry Team (JFT) meeting was held at the 2016 NACD Annual Meeting. Representatives from JFT's four member organizations – the Forest Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the National Association of State Foresters (NASF) and NACD – gathered in Reno, Nevada, to begin constructing a new multi-year work plan. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell and NRCS Chief Jason Weller both attended, and the following morning Chief Tidwell addressed the NACD general session on how conservation districts might assist the nation's forest resource needs.

"To have so many of the country's national forestry leaders join us at the NACD Annual Meeting speaks volumes about the growing role conservation districts play in managing America's forest lands," said NACD Forestry Resource Policy Group (RPG) Chairman Steve Hedstrom. "It's always great to interact with our many forestry partners."

In April, NACD staff participated in the National Agroforestry Horizons Meeting in Washington, D.C.,

where the Forest Service and NRCS sought feedback for how to strengthen the National Agroforestry Center's (NAC) efforts and strategic partnerships. Conservation districts across the country assist landowners with all five agroforestry practices – windbreaks, alley cropping, silvopasture, forest farming and riparian forest buffers – and request more NAC publications each year than any other organization.

NACD is represented on the Forest Resource Coordinating Committee, an appointed federal advisory committee to the secretary of agriculture on private forest conservation. NACD staff and Forestry RPG members also attend a variety of other annual forestry meetings. For more information on NACD's forestry policy activities, click [here](#) to be redirected to NACD's website.

Educating the need for forest management

NACD remains committed to providing conservation education resources to landowners and students. NACD's 2016 stewardship and education theme, "We All Need Trees," set the stage for our members to celebrate this spring's Soil and Water Stewardship Week around the country. NACD hosted a special event commemorating the week on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., where stewardship and education materials, t-shirts, and tree seed planters were distributed. Children had a chance to visit with Woodsy the Owl – one of the Forest Service's beloved mascots – and Sammy Soil from NRCS during the day-long exhibit. The event highlighted many of the benefits trees provide, including clean air, clean water, and habitat for wildlife. More information about NACD's Stewardship Week and materials for this year's theme can be found [here](#) on NACD's website.

NACD generates a wealth of content through its newsletter *Forestry Notes*. The publication reaches all of NACD's member districts and thousands of partners, and also distributes information through [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). NACD is also planning to launch a YouTube channel in the near future. Conservation districts with forestry videos to share are encouraged to contact NACD

Forestry Specialist Mike Beacom at mike-beacom@nacdn.net.

Providing local conservation districts with a national voice

NACD's standing in the forestry arena has grown in recent years, in large part due to the men and women that serve NACD through its national leadership. The NACD Forestry RPG – a subcommittee of the Natural Resources Policy Committee – meets regularly to discuss policy and partnership opportunities relevant to conservation district forestry interests. The Forestry RPG consists of representatives from each of NACD's seven regions, as well as members to represent the National Conservation District Employees Association (NCDEA) and the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA).

"Our goal is to provide local conservation districts and our state leaders with a point of contact so they can share local resource concerns," Hedstrom said. "This network also allows the RPG to share information about

national policy and program opportunities with our local conservation districts so they can get the word out to landowners."

NACD staff helped Western states draft a letter to several members of the House of Representatives at the end of last year to stress the growing strain wildfire has put on forest resources. The Forestry RPG welcomes input from state and local conservation district leaders when shaping resolutions each fall for the NACD Board of Directors to consider.

The Forestry RPG will meet this summer in Cherokee, North Carolina, in conjunction with the NACD Southeast Region Meeting. Topics for the forestry meeting include presentations on longleaf and shortleaf pine, landscape-scale conservation projects in the Southeast, and the impact of feral hogs on forest management.

To connect with your NACD Forestry RPG representative, click [here](#) for a list of contacts.



Members of the NACD Forestry RPG toured a small landowner forestry cooperative in Rhode Island last summer.

Public Lands RPG Working Hard to Deliver on NACD's Priority Conservation Policies

Since NACD's 2016 Annual Meeting in Reno, Nevada, the Public Lands Resource Policy Group (RPG) has been working non-stop on state, local, and federal conservation issues on public lands important to all NACD members. The RPG was established with the purpose of providing institutional knowledge to the Natural Resources Policy Committee and has been working to establish RPG-specific federal agency liaisons.

Chaired by Shaun Sims, the RPG will conduct a review of NACD's public lands policy and work to draft

public comments and letters focusing on public lands management nationwide. As part of that mission, the RPG met with Senator John Barrasso's staff, ultimately deciding to write a letter in support of the Wyoming lawmaker's invasive species control bill. The RPG also submitted comments on behalf of NACD on the Bureau of Land Management's proposed planning rule and the Fish and Wildlife Service's proposed mitigation policy revision. To view NACD's letters to lawmakers, comments on proposed rules, and congressional testimony, click [here](#).

NACD to Grant \$1 Million in Technical Assistance for Urban Agriculture Conservation Projects

NACD and NRCS have teamed up to help districts and their partners provide much needed technical assistance for agricultural conservation where the land is predominately developed or developing.

With NRCS' financial support, the NACD Urban and Community Resource Policy Group (RPG) developed a new Urban Agriculture Conservation grants initiative that puts a special emphasis on the implementation of agricultural conservation projects in underserved communities. NACD will provide a total of \$1 million in funding to support technical staff in up to 20 conservation districts to help administer this program over the next year. A formal request for proposals can be accessed [here](#).

Urban agriculture has been rapidly expanding across the nation in many forms. The USDA defines urban agriculture

as "backyard, roof-top and balcony gardening, community gardening in vacant lots and parks, roadside urban fringe agriculture and livestock grazing in open space." In order for urban agriculture to grow sustainably, conservation practices must be incorporated at all levels. This is a vital and viable role for the nation's conservation districts to fill.

An informational webinar, held on May 19, detailed the goals of the initiative and provided an opportunity for participants to ask questions and have them answered by NACD staff and the Urban and Community RPG. The webinar and a list of frequently asked questions about the program are available on NACD's website [here](#). If you have additional questions, contact NACD Northern Plains Representative and Senior Advisor Debra Bogar at deb-bogar@nacdnet.org.

NACD Fly-In Focuses on District Support for Federal Conservation Funding

Over 120 conservation leaders from across the country gathered in Washington, D.C., March 14-15 to meet with their members of Congress and discuss the importance of local, voluntary, incentive-based conservation.

On the first day of the fly-in, soil expert Sarah Mine from Datu Research, a partner of NACD, and NACD Soil Health Champions Dorn Cox of New Hampshire and Jimmy Emmons of Oklahoma briefed congressional staffers on NACD's soil health priorities. Craig Nelson, the manager of Okanogan Conservation District in Washington state, and NACD Forestry Specialist Mike Beacom also gave presentations to the staffers on wildfire management.

NACD kicked off the second day with a legislative breakfast that featured speakers Ashley McKeon, senior staff to the Senate Agriculture Committee, and Pelham Straughn, co-founder and partner of the 9b Group. NACD held a Capitol Hill reception later that evening for district members, lawmakers, and national partners. Representative Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming delivered the opening address.

Every year, NACD makes sure the member fly-in takes place during the early stages of the federal appropriations process. This way, NACD members are among the first stakeholders to meet with legislators who serve on the House and Senate appropriations subcommittees on agriculture and the environment. These are the subcommittees that are responsible for drafting and approving funding levels for voluntary and incentive-based conservation programs administered by federal agencies. This year, as in years past, NACD supports strong appropriations for conservation programming in Fiscal Year 2017.

NACD requested the following funding levels for USDA conservation programs in FY 2017:

- \$860.374 million for NRCS' Conservation Operations account. This account includes funding for NRCS technical assistance programs, NRCS snow and soil surveys, and other critical NRCS operations, such as agency communications.
- \$400 million for NRCS' Watershed Operations account. Conservation districts use the funding and technical assistance offered through Watershed Operations programs to manage and rehabilitate existing water infrastructure projects, and to plan and implement new ones. Despite the vital need for this funding, the Watershed Operations

account has not been funded by Congress since FY 2010.

- \$100 million for NRCS' Watershed Rehabilitation Program. WRP sponsors rehab projects for aging dams across the country.
- NACD also continues to support maintaining all mandatory conservation programs funding for FY 2017 as allocated in the 2014 farm bill. These programs include the Environmental Incentive Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and several others.
- For conservation programs housed within the Environmental Protection Agency and the Forest Service, NACD requested:
- \$237 million for State and Private Forestry programs administered by the Forest Service. These programs provide technical and financial assistance to states, private landowners, and organizations working to sustain the nation's forests and prevent damage caused by forest pests, invasive species, and wildfire.
- \$164.9 million for Section 319 Nonpoint Source grants. The EPA awards Section 319 grants to states, territories, and tribes for a variety of water quality activities. Funds are distributed by states to conservation districts and local governments to implement critical water quality programs, which employ agricultural best management practices, low impact development strategies, and stormwater management techniques. Conservation districts have demonstrated great success in utilizing these funds to achieve water quality goals to date.

As of the publishing date of this article, both the House and Senate Appropriations Committees have passed their own versions of a spending bill to fund USDA, but neither have advanced a funding bill for the Forest Service or EPA. The House and Senate's appropriations bills for USDA provide varying funding levels for NACD's priority programs. As Congress moves these bills to the floor, NACD will remain engaged to ensure that Congress' final combined product will bring the best of both bills together to provide robust funding levels for conservation.

For the most up-to-date information on the appropriations process and NACD's efforts to secure ample funding for conservation, subscribe to NACD's weekly electronic publication eResource by clicking [here](#).

New Tool to Boost Conservation Planning Being Piloted

As the National Conservation Planning Partnership works to reinvigorate the conservation planning process across the country, a new evaluation tool is being sharpened in the field.

The NRCS Resource Stewardship Evaluation (RSE) tool evaluates an operation's current management and conservation activities compared to stewardship thresholds in five natural resources categories: soil health, water quality, water quantity, air quality and wildlife habitat. The current version is only available for use on croplands, but subsequent versions will focus on other types of landscapes, including grasslands and forestlands.

The voluntary and confidential RSE is being piloted in at least one watershed in each state – most of which are National Water Quality Initiative watersheds. A national rollout of the system is targeted for next year.

RSE was piloted in 11 states last year, and experiences in those watersheds led to improvements in the tool. The web-based RSE builds on existing NRCS tools, evaluation methods, and planning criteria, such as RUSLE2, WEPS, STEP, FIRI, WIN-PST, and COMET Farm to establish "environmental" thresholds for the operation and to evaluate the impacts of using existing, alternative

conservation practices and systems.

"We are focused on learning how the tool works across the country and making improvements based on feedback from our employees, producers, and partners," NRCS Chief Jason Weller told NACD. "The tool builds on the scientifically sound and field-ready tools NRCS already uses."

NRCS has trained field employees in targeted watersheds on how to use RSE. In some states, conservation district employees have also received training. NACD is cooperating with NRCS on the development of related tools, including protocols and procedures for recognizing producer stewardship.

"We look forward to helping improve the capabilities of this new planning tool," said NACD President Lee McDaniel. "It is an exciting time as our national and state partners focus on these and other enhancements to the conservation planning process."

Stay tuned for updates on RSE on NACD's website and join us for this summer's [Conservation Leadership Forum and Tour](#) to participate in a full discussion on the tool

NACD's 70th Annual Meeting in Reno

NACD kicked off 2016 with an eventful and productive 70th Annual Meeting in Reno, Nevada. The meeting, held January 31-February 3, was centered around the theme "Historic Legacy Guiding a Brighter Future" and featured notable speakers, including NRCS Chief Jason Weller, Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell, National Geographic photojournalist Jim Richardson, and Congressman Mark Amodei of Nevada. The Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack also sent well wishes to conference attendees via video.

This year's live auction was sponsored by John Deere and brought in \$81,275! The proceeds will fund NACD's



NACD General Session

conservation outreach and education efforts countrywide. Thank you to everyone who donated and made this year's auction one to remember.

During the meeting's appreciation banquet, NACD and NRCS presented the Olin Sims Conservation Leadership Award to Larry "Skip" Ahlgren and Diane Ahlgren of Winnett, Montana. NACD also presented the President's Award to Joe Lomax, NACD board member from New Jersey; the Friend of Conservation Award to The Scotts Miracle-Gro Company; and the Distinguished Service Award to Debbie Moreland, program administrator for the Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts.

Also during Tuesday's banquet, First Vice President Brent Van Dyke of New Mexico was sworn in as NACD's president-elect and Gary Moyer of Colorado was sworn in as the new Southwest Region executive board member. NACD recognized Moyer's predecessor Shaun Sims for his many years of dedication and service to NACD and Charles Holmes, NACD board member from Alabama, for his nearly 30 years of service.

NACD and National Agriculture in the Classroom signed a memorandum of understanding to promote education and outreach projects of mutual interest, and to foster collaborative relationships between conservation districts and state Agriculture in the Classroom programs. The agreement was signed by NACD President Lee McDaniel and Amber Smyer with Nevada's Agriculture in the

Classroom program.

For press releases on the 2016 conference, visit [NACD's newsroom](#) on our website.

NACD would like to thank the state of Nevada and the Nevada Association of Conservation Districts for all their hard work in hosting this year's event. We would also like to thank the following sponsors for their support: Agri Drain Corporation, Bayer CropScience; Bob Warner; Case IH; John Deere; Monsanto; National Farmers Union; Scotts Miracle-Gro; Soil Health Institute; Syngenta; Forest Service; U.S. Sugar; and Verdesian.

Here are some upcoming NACD meetings to add to your calendar:

- **NACD Conservation Leadership Forum and Tour:** July 15-19, 2016 in Minneapolis, Minnesota
- **Southeast Regional Meeting:** July 31 - August 2, 2016 in Cherokee, North Carolina
- **South Central Regional Meeting:** August 10-12, 2016 in Little Rock, Arkansas
- **Northeast Regional Meeting:** August 14-17, 2016 in Abescon, New Jersey
- **Joint Pacific and Southwest Regional Meeting:** September 14-16, 2016 in Sacramento, California



NACD Past Presidents

Collaborative Conservation Helping to Protect Military Mission in Minnesota

North of Minneapolis, Minnesota, the Morrison Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) is putting conservation on the ground and protecting the military mission of Camp Ripley by partnering with the Defense Department's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program.

Camp Ripley, which sits at the headwaters of the Mississippi River, is the primary National Guard Training Center for units from Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Ohio, and Illinois. For more than 30 years, the owners of the agricultural land and open space surrounding the installation have allowed aircraft, live fire, artillery, and IED training – along with the noise, dust, and smoke these activities generate – with only limited restrictions. But now, the rural character of those surrounding areas is attracting residential developers that stakeholders fear could change, or even prevent, Camp Ripley's ability to train its soldiers.

To mitigate potential conflicts, the Morrison SWCD is partnering with the REPI Program and other stakeholders to work with willing landowners across three counties to implement restoration

and management efforts that will protect prime working lands from development. Together these actions will safeguard the area's agricultural productivity, preserve its unique landscape, and allow Camp Ripley to continue to train National Guard members for decades to come.

For more information about the partnership at Camp Ripley, please contact the REPI Program at osd.repi@mail.mil or the Morrison SWCD at (320) 616-2479



Soil Health Champions Network Spotlight

Dorn Cox

Lee, New Hampshire

Stafford County Conservation District

Faced with the challenges of limited access to necessary tools or new varieties of seeds, New Hampshire farmer Dorn Cox decided to provide solutions where he saw obstacles to improving soil health. Cox co-founded the Farm Hack community and the FarmOS software platform, and serves as the executive director of GreenStart. These programs, as well as Cox's conservation district, seek to aid farmers by expanding their professional networks and taking what he says is "an active role in reducing the burden on farmers by linking them to others with experience."

Cox has a bachelor's degree from Cornell University and a doctorate in natural resources and earth systems science from the University of New Hampshire. With this background, he helped found the New England Farmers Union, the Great Bay Grain Cooperative, and the Oyster River Biofuel Initiative. Cox serves on the Measurement Committee for the Soil Renaissance, as a county supervisor and vice-chair of the Strafford County Conservation District, and as the vice president of the New Hampshire Association of Conservation Districts.

Cox and his wife, Sarah, have raised a diverse selection of crops and livestock over the last 30 years on their 250-acre multigenerational farm in Lee, New Hampshire. The couple and their two sons began cover cropping and using no-and low-till techniques about 10 years ago. Their no-till method consists of roller crimping standing winter annuals, such as winter rye and winter pea, before planting into corn or sunflowers. They use this technique in conjunction with cover crop rotations, a process of interseeding cover crops into standing crops, and by planting warm season forages into cool season grasses.

In the neighborly spirit, Cox harvests his farm's cover crop seeds and shares them with local farms. As a co-founder of FarmOS, he develops and shares systems for small-scale grain and oil seeds processing, biofuel production, cover cropping, and no-till and

low-till equipment to increase carbon capture and soil health in his community. By partnering with Cox, less experienced farmers have the chance to use appropriate conservation equipment, including no-till drills, aerways, wood ash spreaders, and yeomans plows. This collaborative group of farmers also provides access to cover crop seed and cover crop seeding trials through a partnership with the University of New Hampshire.

Dorn Cox's commitment to protecting and enhancing the future of soil health is what makes him a Soil Health Champion. NACD's growing roster of Soil Health Champions can be viewed [here](#). Do you know a Soil Health Champion? Contact NACD's regional staff to learn more about the program and how you can be involved.



Dorn Cox, NACD Soil Health Champion from New Hampshire.

South Dakota Districts Lead Clean-up of Big Sioux Watershed

Urban and rural areas can – and do – work together to improve water quality. Take the Seasonal Riparian Management Areas (SRAM) project, one of the first conservation initiatives spearheaded by the Big Sioux River Watershed Project in South Dakota.

The project partners – South Dakota conservation districts, private partners, and the City of Sioux Falls – have teamed up to launch a model payment-for-ecosystem-services project that they say will generate significant water quality improvements in the Big Sioux Watershed.

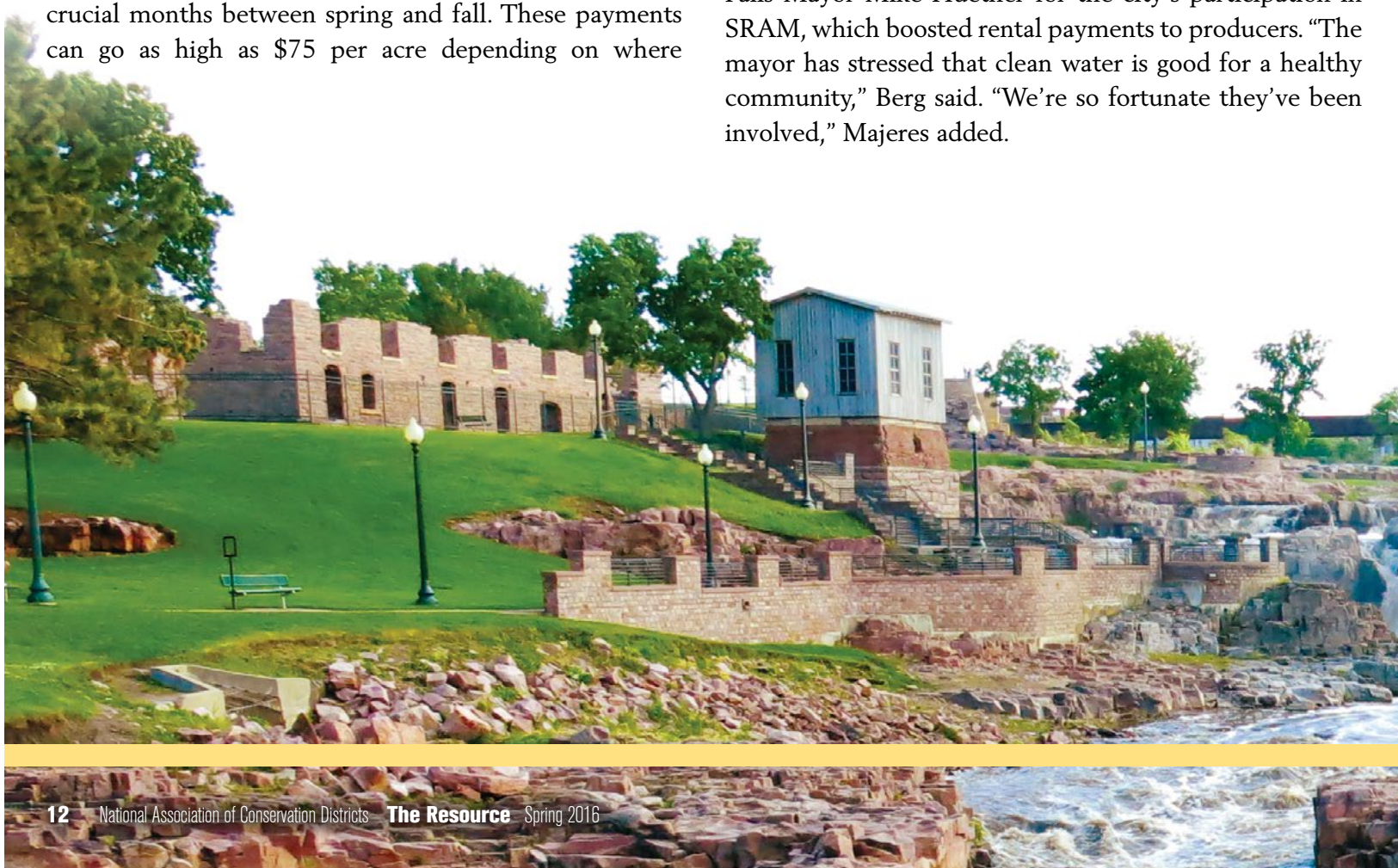
High bacteria counts and suspended solids in the Big Sioux prompted the EPA to list sections of the river and some of its tributaries as impaired waters in need of restoration. In recent years, using simple but proven conservation measures has helped to lower bacteria levels.

Through SRAM, producers are paid rental rates to erect fencing or provide alternative water sources for their livestock to keep them out of riparian areas during six crucial months between spring and fall. These payments can go as high as \$75 per acre depending on where

producers' operations fall within the watershed. As a bonus, producers can harvest hay from the riparian areas and allow livestock to graze after September 30. Watershed Coordinator Barry Berg designed the SRAM program with a simple premise: "If you don't allow grazing to take place during hot summer months when cattle like to cool off in the stream, bacteria won't be going into the water," he said.

Water quality within the Big Sioux has improved in the two years since the program was instituted, Berg said. This has been especially good news for the rapidly growing city of Sioux Falls, which relies on the river for business development, recreation, and tourism. The Big Sioux River, Skunk Creek, and their tributaries are also important sources of drinking water for Sioux Falls residents.

The Moody Conservation District is the lead on the project, says Jack Majeres, board chair of the district and a long-time leader within NACD. He and Berg credit Sioux Falls Mayor Mike Huether for the city's participation in SRAM, which boosted rental payments to producers. "The mayor has stressed that clean water is good for a healthy community," Berg said. "We're so fortunate they've been involved," Majeres added.



Districts at Work

The Big Sioux Watershed Project started in 2008, helped early on by an NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant. EPA 319 funds administered by the state also boosted the effort. A \$2 million Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) award in 2014 provided resources for a five-year period, helping to expand the project area in the watershed as a whole. The Minnehaha Conservation District is lead sponsor on the RCPP.

“It is great to have this partnership, and NRCS has been with us all the way,” Berg said. In all, six conservation districts, including the East Dakota Water Development District, are involved in the current partnership addressing this segment of the Big Sioux Project. Two other South Dakota cities – Brookings and Brandon – have joined the partnership too.

When the Moody district took the lead in 2012, Majeres set up a steering committee that includes districts, cities, and other partners. The steering committee continues to meet quarterly. A joint powers agreement enables the partners to provide oversight to the work of Berg and two other watershed coordinators. Majeres has also reached across state borders, working with conservation districts in Minnesota.

Majeres has invested plenty of personal time along the way in his work to clean up the Big Sioux. “We’ve had a great concern for improving water quality in the river,” he explained.



Former South Dakota Secretary of Agriculture Lucas Lentsch (center) and state Senator Shantel Krebs tour a protected riparian area with Barry Berg in 2013.

About a dozen producers, mostly along Skunk Creek, participated in SRAM last year. In a four-mile stretch with increasing SRAM enrollment, fecal coliform counts dropped below the total maximum daily load limits set by the EPA and sediment loading dropped slightly.

“You could see the bottom of the creek as clear as day,” Majeres said. And producers noticed improvements as well.

“There was a big benefit in the health of the animals, and the rate of weight gain on the cattle,” Majeres added. “One guy with a cow-calf operation said he couldn’t believe the health of his calves. Now producers who were pushing us away are asking how to sign up.”

For more details on the market-based water quality initiatives NACD is involved in, contact NACD Communications Specialist Bill Berry at bill-berry@nacdn.org.



Partnering for Success in the West

With hard work and strong partnerships, two conservation districts took a seemingly localized issue to the national level where it became its own movement.

Looking to develop an educational plan on range health, but needing support, the White River and Douglas Creek Conservation Districts in Colorado united in their common goal. Using their experience with earlier forest health grants and public awareness videos, the districts applied for a grant from the Colorado State Conservation Board. They sought and received matching donations from local landowners, Rio Blanco County, Wyoming Association of Conservation Districts, other local conservation districts, farm bureaus, NACD, and the Wild Horse and Burro Rangeland Management Coalition (WHBRMC) members.

The districts, in coordination with WHBRMC, worked with 9news out of Denver, Colorado, to air five separate thirty-second commercials to build public awareness on issues of

range health and feral horses. The commercials aired for two and a half weeks and prompted a considerable influx of visits to WHBRMC's [Facebook page](#) and [website](#). With so many individual requests for the video clips after they aired, the videos were also made available on the WHBRMC's [YouTube page](#).

Through the hard work of White River and Douglas Creek staff, the districts found additional opportunities to educate the public. Randy Newburg of Fresh Tracks with Randy Newburg, which airs on the Sportsman Channel, offered to include the coalition's "excess horse" banners on his hunt talk forum page. And Trent Loos of Trent Loos Tales offered to use the audio from the commercials on his program.

NACD Natural Resources Policy Specialist Chris Heck is leading NACD's efforts to reform federal wild horse policy. He can be reached at chris-heck@nacdnet.org.



Puerto Rico Pushes to Reactivate Conservation Districts, NACD Offers Support

Six years ago, Edwin Almodóvar, NRCS' Caribbean Area director, initiated the process of reactivating conservation districts in both Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Almodóvar secured support from the territories' top agriculture officials and designated Carlos Irizarry the executive secretary of the Puerto Rico State Conservation Committee.

In 1947, the committee subdivided the island into 17 conservation districts and assigned a farmer or rancher to lead each one. Some of Puerto Rico's conservation districts became inactive in the early 2000s in part because the executive secretary position had been vacant for years.

The state conservation committee is now working with amendments to the 1946 Act 211 – which originally authorized the creation of the soil and water conservation districts in Puerto Rico – by downsizing the number of districts from 17 to eight, and by changing the designation and election system of the district supervisors. These updates will streamline district operations and allow the districts greater access to funding.

NACD President Lee McDaniel traveled to Puerto Rico the week of January 18 to visit the Noreste SCD in northwestern Puerto Rico. Mariano Robledo Diaz, who is president of the district, thanked President McDaniel for his recent visit to the island.

“We learned from him how other districts operate in the U.S.,” Robledo Diaz told NACD. “He gave us valuable information and offered the help of our national association as we move forward in reactivating the conservation districts here in Puerto Rico. His visit to this part of the island gives us the energy to pursue new goals by giving us the tools needed to keep on maintaining the districts and keep them alive and running well.”

For more information on the progress Puerto Rico has made in reestablishing its conservation districts, contact NACD Southeast Representative Phylis Vandevere at phylis-vandevere@nacdnet.org.



Partnering with the Soil Health Institute

By C. Wayne Honeycutt, President and CEO of the Soil Health Institute

This is by far the most exciting time to be in agriculture that I have ever seen. The term “soil health” is not just being used at the local feed store, but has found its way into the lingo of groups focusing on water quality, air quality, climate change, wildlife habitat, rural economy, food security, sustainability, urban gardening, and others. It is recognized by the United Nations, a topic of congressional hearings, and is foundational to several federal and state agency programs. Through soil health, it is realized that agriculture can play a major role in solving these challenges.

With this high level of interest and recognition comes a correspondingly high level of opportunity and responsibility for doing it right. The Soil Health Institute was recently launched by two of the nation’s longest-serving agricultural foundations, The Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation (1945) and The Farm Foundation (1933), to safeguard and enhance the vitality and productivity of soil through science-based research and advancement. The vision for the Institute is to serve as a primary resource for soil health information and research, whose outcomes yield healthy, sustainable soils that provide the foundation for society, benefit



the environment, and contribute to the productivity and profitability of agriculture. To achieve this vision, the Institute will identify high priority research and education needs, seek and obtain funding to address those gaps, and administer an accountable, transparent, and technically proficient grants program that develops and capitalizes on synergies among projects.

We at the Institute are particularly excited to work with NACD's recently established Soil Health Champions Network and other partners to put this research and knowledge into the hands of landowners, thereby

enhancing adoption of soil health management systems. We believe this is a historic opportunity. The need is huge, but the time is now, so let's get to work!



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National Association of
Conservation Districts
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