



Helping Underserved Clients

Conservation Districts helping people and enhancing natural resources in the 21st Century.

June 2014



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Executive Summary

As the local partner in the delivery of conservation services over eight decades, America's conservation districts have become experts at assessing and addressing local priorities and needs. This report focuses on a distinctive area of district work: providing services to what are referred to as traditionally underserved clients, or cooperators.

America's population was 129 million and rising when the first conservation districts were formed in the late 1930s. Today, that number has tripled, to 317 million. We are a more diverse nation, too. Conservation districts in almost every county find themselves addressing natural resource issues their forebears could not have imagined. The complexity and scope of district work has grown immensely, but the formula for addressing local resource challenges still works, in many cases better than ever.

The traditionally underserved client base reaches across human demographics and includes a diverse group of people who have not traditionally received services from conservation districts and their partners. They may be low-income residents of urban areas or underserved minority agricultural producers. Sometimes they are immigrant or non-English-speaking populations seeking a foothold in rural or urban settings. The traditionally underserved include women operators and landowners, and urban dwellers who find succor in community gardening projects and natural areas preservation. They are children reached with distinctive outreach and education efforts that districts do so well.

As this report shows, sometimes, the work of today's conservation districts in addressing resource issues is directly tied to human health and well-being. If you are a low-income person living in an area plagued by flooding or failing septic systems, you may need the kind of expertise districts can provide. Districts increasingly find themselves called upon to help solve these and many other serious natural resource concerns.

Oftentimes, the work of districts helps enrich lives of people as local resource priorities are addressed. NACD has long embraced the empowerment of local people to solve local natural resources issues. Terms such as "locally led" and "every acre counts" are used to describe the work of districts. It is accomplished with a lengthy list of partners. Some of them are traditional, such, as the Natural Resources Conservation Service and other federal and state conservation agencies. But as the range of natural resource challenges grows, many new partners have joined in the efforts. They have helped strengthen and enrich the conservation movement, as this report shows.

This is but a snapshot of how districts are helping historically underserved clients. Many districts across the country are busy providing technical assistance, outreach and education, cost sharing and other services to an ever-broadening array of clients. NACD will share their stories in future national outreach and education activities, with a goal of sharing stories that can be replicated and reshaped according to local needs of the traditionally underserved.

CALIFORNIA

San Diego District Digs In with Gardens, Education

Community gardens, school gardens, local foods educational programs and other activities help the [Resource Conservation District of Greater San Diego](#) reach out to underserved populations.

“Conservation districts must find out what the needs of their communities are and adjust their programs to meet the needs of their people,” says District Manager Sheryl Landrum.

The RCD partners with San Diego County to manage the largest community garden in San Diego County. The Tijuana River Valley Community Garden is in the southernmost portion of San Diego. The 136 garden plots are in the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park, which covers more than five acres. Demand is high. There’s a waiting list of 125. Community gardeners come from all walks of life. “We have Latinos,



Hmong and other Asians, central Americans and other groups,” Landrum says. Many of the gardeners are apartment dwellers who relish the opportunity to get out into the fresh air and work the land. Gardeners pay \$100 a year, which includes water and fencing. Gardeners can also donate hours to volunteer causes like translating quarterly newsletters into Spanish and Hmong.

In another example of reaching out to underserved populations, the district board recently approved spending \$3,000 for a garden project at Palomar Elementary School, in a high-poverty area of the county. “It’s one of the poorest schools in the county and has a high obesity rate,” Landrum says. Special needs students will be among those who will benefit from a safe outdoors experience.

It’s an example of the district making sure county tax support it receives benefits people who live in the county, Landrum says. The district annually sets aside \$15,000 for special projects like this.

The district also focuses on training teachers about healthy food options. Formed in 1999, the San Diego Regional School Garden Resource Center assists K-12 educators interested in using the garden as a tool to teach nutrition, agriculture, nature, and other school subjects, including science, math, writing, reading, art, and music. The RCD acts as a resource clearinghouse for teachers and school districts interested in garden-based nutrition education. It sends occasional school garden email newsletters to school staff and community members working on, or interested in, school gardens.

“What we’re trying to accomplish is to get the kids invested in eating healthy food. If children are invested in planting the carrot, they’re much more likely to eat the carrot,” she says. The district also offers scholarships to county high school seniors pursuing further education in the fields of resource conservation or agriculture. Five scholarships of \$1000 are awarded each year.

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GEORGIA

Reaching Out Across the State

Conservation districts, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and other partners have reached out to an array of traditionally underserved cooperators in Georgia. Here are some examples:

The Blue Ridge Mountain SWCD partnered with the Chestattee Chattahoochee RC&D, NRCS, and Georgia Organics to sponsor the Innovations in Organic Farming Field Day held at Ladybug Farm in Clayton. Eighty-eight participants learned about the inner workings of small-scale organic farming through presentations about Farm Bill programs, marketing, nutrient and pest management, and irrigation management for small-scale operations. Representatives from the NRCS were on hand to give presentations about how the Farm Bill was equipped to handle the needs of small organic farms and how those operators could apply for the programs. A representative from Georgia Organics gave a presentation on the need for small-scale organic farms and how those farms could partner to market their products. Terry Blincoe, owner of Ladybug Farm, gave a presentation about how she got started farming and how she operates her rainwater irrigation system.

[Cobb County SWCD](#) partnered with the Rolling Hills RC&D, NRCS and University of Georgia Cooperative Extension to host the Small and Beginning Farmers Workshop at the Cobb Water System Lab in Marietta. About 35 farmers heard presentations on soil quality, integrated pest management, produce safety, and Farm Bill programs. Cobb County SWCD Supervisor Alice Champaign explained how the district can assist with natural resource conservation on small farms.



The district also partnered with the City of Austell to help develop the recently completed [I.T. and Lodeamia Terrell Community Garden and Educational Center](#). The property was established by the city and provides individual 4-by-8-foot gardening plots for residents. The project also includes an outdoor classroom to host students from neighboring schools.

[Lamar County](#) and [Towaliga](#) SWCDs sponsored a small farmer workshop made possible through a grant received by the Lamar district from the Georgia Association of Conservation Districts. The workshop was held at The Garden Patch restaurant in Barnesville, with more than 60 attendees. A speaker from the Georgia Department of Agriculture discussed the [Georgia Grown Program](#) and the benefits of the marketing and economic development effort, which has a sustainability component. Participants learned how producers can join various levels of Georgia Grown certification. NRCS spoke about cost-share programs, and a local farmer from [D&A Farms](#), a community supported agriculture (CSA) business, discussed the success of his hoop houses and shared his experiences in using them. NRCS spoke on the benefits of micro irrigation and the use of micro irrigation in conjunction with hoop houses.



KANSAS

District Steps in to Assist Immigrants on Sanitary Conditions

Garden City, Kansas, has long been a draw for immigrants. That has created opportunities for some and difficulties for others.

Immigrants from across the globe come to the area to work at the nearby Tyson meat packing plant. There was a time when some lived in homes with failing septic systems that created unsanitary conditions. The [Finney County Conservation District](#) had a big role in changing that.



With support of a three-year \$21,000 grant, the district worked to educate immigrants and others in the Towns River View area about sanitary conditions. The EPA 319 grant was administered by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE).

The district also worked with the county engineering department and other partners to develop a feasibility study for a new sewage district and lagoon system, which was partially funded by USDA Rural Development.

The new sewage district has the capacity to meet rising demand from future development.

The district stepped in because it saw a need, says District Manager Connie Richmeier. “When you have green wastewater in yards, you have to cover your mouths. There are 34 languages spoken in Garden City,” she says, and many of the immigrants lived in low-income housing with failing septic systems. “Many didn’t equate sewage pooling above ground with health dangers,” she says. In addition, a water quality study showed that high clay levels in the soil prevented infiltration and sent wastewater to a nearby river bed. Ingalls, a community to the east, began experiencing high nitrate problems.

With the help of interpreters, the district went door to door, providing information for immigrants from countries that included Somalia, India, Pakistan, Laos and Vietnam. In cooperation with the Department of Environment and Health, the district reached out to more than 1,000 people. “We walked from door to door with interpreters, telling them about washing their hands, taking their shoes off outside and other hygiene matters,” Richmeier says. The outreach also focused on schools, which were reminded to wash buses because children were walking through wastewater puddles to get to the buses.

In addition to working on the sewage district feasibility study, the district assisted Garden City officials in securing bonding authority for the project. Once the new sewage district and lagoon system were operating, the district continued its education program for three more years.

The work took place several years ago, but it still draws attention. “We still get calls from people about how we did this so quickly and how we got it to work,” Richmeier says.

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KENTUCKY

A Matter of Life and Death

Sometimes, the work of conservation districts is a matter of life and death.

That's the case in Kenton County, Kentucky, where the local conservation district played a key role in helping people plagued by flooding. Dozens of residents along Banklick Creek are now being relocated to safe homes, thanks to the district's work. But it wasn't easy. The lesson for other districts, says [Kenton County Conservation District](#) Chair Marc Hult, is "long-term commitment. We knew something had to be done."

Several major floods, including one that took a life, have impacted residents. Many are elderly, widowed or disabled and have difficulty evacuating during flooding. Residents are often stranded for several days. Many homeowners can't afford flood insurance, says Hult.



The district has been engaged for years. It worked with other partners in the 1960s to build three multi-purpose retention structures and a flood-control dam. But flooding continued. In 2009, the district helped landowners with 50 applications to relocate under the NRCS Emergency Watershed Protection Program. But funds were short, and none of the applications was funded.

The district consulted with the Kenton County Fiscal Court, the local funding agency, and was asked to pursue a Federal Emergency Management Agency Hazard Mitigation Grant. Public input was sought, and 41 properties on approximately 45 noncontiguous acres containing 37 principal structures were included in the application.

The grant was submitted to FEMA in January 2011. More than two years later, in March 2013, the district received word that the proposal was funded. The final award from FEMA totaled \$2,027,778 dollars, with an additional \$324,444 in state emergency management agency funding and a Department of Local Government grant for \$263,612. Grant applications to help with the local share were developed by the district and submitted to the Kentucky Department of Local Government.

A meeting with applicants was held in June 2013. The Kenton County Fiscal Court is administering the grants and has started the process of purchasing properties from residents. Under the voluntary program, landowners will have the opportunity to sell their homes and land. The land will be transferred to the county and returned to a natural state to function as a floodplain. A conservation easement on the land will outline future uses.

“We felt we had an active role to play, and we stuck to it. We felt we were paying attention to the needs of our clients, folks in our watersheds. We didn’t want anyone else dying or being in harm’s way,” Hult says.

He credited District Coordinator Mary Kathryn Dickerson and NRCS staff for their dedication. “We just kept after it,” he says. More properties could be included in future grant proposals, Hult says.

More information: Marc Hult, hult@hydrologist.com.

MARYLAND

Conservation Outreach to Non-English Speaking Poultry Growers

The Maryland Association of Soil Conservation and districts in the state have reached out to more than 100 Korean and Vietnamese poultry growers in the Chesapeake Bay region with critical information about best management practices, water quality and federal and state cost-share programs.

Print materials are translated into Korean and Vietnamese with the help of two growers who are respected in their communities.



“We were really surprised to discover just how many non-English poultry growers were on Maryland’s eastern shore,” says project consultant Gerald Talbert. “CAFO (confined animal feeding operation) and nutrient management requirements can be complicated even for people who speak English.”

The Korean and Vietnamese poultry operations produce millions of chickens annually, and that adds up to a lot of poultry litter, Talbert says. In order to make the project work, there was a need to gain acceptance in the communities, he adds. That meant communicating with respected leaders.

The association has partnered with poultry experts at the University of Maryland Extension, Mid-Atlantic Farm Credit, Delmarva Poultry Industry and Korean and Vietnamese community leaders to select publications, fact sheets and other appropriate material. Maryland Extension has been a strong partner, providing content and other assistance.

Once translated, the materials are shared with Extension and NRCS state and national Civil Rights Committees for use elsewhere in the country and territories.

In a new project, translators have been working on the Maryland Department of Agriculture’s new 50-page Poultry Operation Record Keeping Guide.

The current mailing list is more than 120. Talbert says the outreach has led to more inquiries at soil and water conservation districts from growers seeking information on technical assistance and cost sharing. The state’s Department of the Environment also reports improved inspections at some facilities.

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MICHIGAN

An Organic Approach

The [Wexford Conservation District](#) in Cadillac faced a dilemma a few years ago when it lost most of its state and local funding and grant support. Executive Director Theresa Williams came on board knowing the district needed new programs to generate support.

With a background in organic gardening and the recognition that growing food on a backyard scale had grown in popularity, she set out to develop an organic gardening program for local residents. The district offers a variety of resources, including workshops in a dozen topic areas, information on planting dates



and hardiness zones and web links to more information. The district was also filling a need. State Extension had dropped local gardening programming. “We’re not a heavy agriculture area,” Williams says, “but we do have a lot of landowners who are interested in growing their own food.”

The district also needed programming to reach more nontraditional clients. “We need to be providing services to not only agriculture and forestry if want to make a difference in our

community,” she says. The gardening program reaches both backyard growers and small commercial producers. “If people take our gardening workshop, they’ll learn about how food is grown and will be more educated citizens when making decisions about natural resources and agriculture.” About half the workshop participants are women, she notes.

“The percentages of people we serve in ag and forestry aren’t that high, so we’re reaching a new group with information on conservation and wise land use.”

The district also strengthened its forestry program, assisted by a grant to fund forestry technical assistance to private landowners. The revitalized programming and new clients didn’t go unnoticed. Last year, the county board reinstated some funding.

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‘If people take our gardening workshop, they’ll learn about how food is grown and will be more educated citizens when making decisions about natural resources and agriculture.’

NEW MEXICO

Taos District Helps Maintain Centuries-Old Irrigation Organizations

The Taos Soil and Water Conservation District is using today's tools to strengthen centuries-old communal irrigation canal systems called acequias (ace-ee-quias).

Acequia organizations predate the Declaration of Independence, notes District Manager Peter Vigil. They are recognized as political subdivisions of the state, so they qualify for cost-share funds through the district. Many of the residents who rely on irrigation to grow food for subsistence are low-income Hispanics and Native Americans, Vigil says.

Water is a precious commodity in the high desert. "It is crucial to everyday survival. The acequias have a cultural component that goes back to the concept of the commons – the water belongs to the neighborhood," Vigil says. "The delivery system is almost like a utility owned by all the members. They pitch in to do maintenance, labor and administration of the system."

But some of the work is costly, and that's where the district comes in. "Our program enables and empowers these individuals to have new and improved infrastructure," he says.

Native Americans were first to develop the irrigation systems, and when the Spanish colonized the region in the 15th and 16th centuries, they enhanced the systems and brought the communal concept from Spain.



The Taos District has been assisting the local acequia associations and "parciantes" – water rights holders – with irrigation improvement projects since 1990. Today, the district works with more than 60 associations in a 50-mile radius. It combines the skills of experienced staff and consultants, and uses state-of-the-art technology. Projects are prioritized, designed and implemented by the district. County property taxes – the district has taxing authority – state and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers funds support the work.

"We do all our own engineering and work on ditch lines, pipelines, diversion gates, dams, water control structures and other projects," Vigil says. Natural Resources Conservation Service and state personnel also cooperate. Private contractors with expertise in areas like forest thinning and stream restoration are also used.

Cost-sharing on projects can be as high as 85 percent in areas where poverty levels are high. Other areas receive from 70 to 75 percent. "Many of these are very poor organizations," Vigil says, adding that some of the water rights holders are aging. "So we have an educational component that's trying to get

youth involved. We try to do as much outreach as possible.” There has also been an influx of new residents, he says. “They see that the concept has merit and would like to be part of the acequia, as well,” he says. Because the waters are adjudicated, property purchases include water rights, and new owners become members of the acequias.

More information: Peter Vigil, tswcd@newmex.com

NORTH DAKOTA

Focus on Women AG Operators

Women are making up an increasing share of farm operators and owners in the U.S., and conservation districts in North Dakota are reaching out to this growing group with programs and tours.

About 20 districts in the state are involved, says Rhonda Vetsch, district secretary at the Emmons County Conservation District in Linton. The Natural Resources Conservation Service partners with districts in the efforts. One activity is a Women in Agriculture Night. Districts invite women to a program that blends education and entertainment. Motivational speakers are sometimes featured, as are agency representatives who provide information about conservation programs. Up to 250 women attend the Emmons District’s programs. Local Farm Service Agency offices help provide names of women farm operators for invitations.



Women in Ag programs educate and entertain.

USDA says the number of farms run by women in the past three decades has tripled. There’s a need to reach them with the conservation message, says Vetsch. “Our Women in Agriculture Program encompasses all female producers and wives, whether they’re renting the land or operating it themselves.”

Some end up back at the district office, seeking more information and signing up for programs.

“One of the biggest benefits for many of the women is just being among peers. The fellowship is important,” Vetsch says.

“Family circumstances have changed, and women are playing a greater role in farming,” Vetsch says.

“We use these activities to promote districts. Programs also focus on other ways women can impact the environment, including xeriscaping, planting native fruits and trees and using rain barrels. Others zero in on financial matters, such as estate planning, tax preparation and identity theft. Districts look for women presenters who have been impacted personally by agriculture.

Machinery dealerships, insurance organizations, livestock markets and farming organizations pitch in to sponsor the events. *More information: Rhonda.Vetsch@ND.nacdnet.net*

OHIO

From Food Desert to Local Foods Hub

Districts in Ohio are cooperating on reaching out to underserved populations, whether it's providing educational materials to Spanish speaking clients or helping assure that urban residents have fresh, locally grown food.

Districts in rural areas are focusing on Spanish-speaking farm workers, while urban districts such as the [Cuyahoga Soil and Water Conservation District](#) in the Cleveland area are reaching out to Puerto Rican and African American populations.

Funding through a Lowe's Home Improvement Tool Box grant helped districts in seven northeastern counties promote the Fertilizer Institute's Four R's program in an effort to address water quality concerns in Lake Erie. "Green Isn't Always Good" themed bookmarks, posters and fliers were published in English and Spanish. "With large Spanish-speaking populations in northeast Ohio, we felt providing the 4R information in Spanish would help expand the message to a different target audience," says Janine Rybka, Cuyahoga district administrator.



An NACD urban webinar helped spur a high-tunnel project in the Cleveland area. The webinar made note of the fact that urban areas don't qualify for Environmental Quality Incentives Program funding for high tunnels. State Conservationist Terry Cosby reached out to U.S. Rep. Marcia Fudge, which led to NRCS implementing the Cleveland High Tunnel Initiative. Many of the neighborhoods in Fudge's district are impoverished and food deserts, with few sources of healthy food available.

In a city with more than 3,000 vacant lots, city planners had been focusing on urban agriculture. The high tunnel project fit perfectly with efforts to expand community gardens and urban market gardens.

"It was a quantum jump for NRCS to provide funding for high tunnels in an urban area, and we really wanted it to be in Cleveland," Rybka says. NRCS has provided funding for two years, with about 50 high tunnels already built. The district hosts workshops and other activities to spread the word about the project.

Rybka's advice for other districts: "Collaborate, and don't be afraid to get out there. Think about what we have to offer to people, what we promote, what we've believed in as conservation districts back from the Dust Bowl. We understood then there's a value to these resources, especially soil and water, sun and air."

More formation: Janine Rybka, JRybka@cuyahogawcd.org.

PENNSYLVANIA

Plain Sect Outreach Efforts

The [Lancaster County Conservation District](#) in Pennsylvania goes the extra mile to reach out to new and underserved audiences.

Lancaster created an education and outreach department to promote natural resource stewardship and make all citizens aware of the interrelationships between human activities and the natural environment. Then, in an effort to reach out to a large Plain Sect community in the county, the district hired a Plain Sect outreach coordinator to develop relationships and spread the conservation message. Funding from Lancaster County and NRCS supported the hiring.



Mill Creek watershed is lined with many Plain Sect properties near or adjoining the stream. With encouragement from the district, Plain Sect and other residents are restoring vertical banks and improving vegetation along the waterway as part of a multi-phase project. Federal, state, county, and non-profit partners will have reshaped and restored nearly 10,000 feet of stream bank at the conclusion of the project.

As District Manager Don McNutt notes, members of the Plain Sect community need to develop a high level of trust to work with others not of that community. “The district has worked hard to establish those trusting relationships with this population and is now able to assist them with their agricultural efforts in the county,” he says. Lancaster’s Plain Sect farmers tend to steer clear of government and keep their Old Order ways. But government environmental regulations aimed at the farming industry affect all farmers, McNutt says.

With support from the County Board of Commissioners, the district provides education and training for producers and promotes farming best management practices (BMPs) that maintain the quality of Lancaster County prime farmland and control agriculture runoff in efforts to encourage good stewardship without regulation.

While work with the community is an ongoing process, many Plain Sect producers are adopting BMPs such as no-till and cover crops.

Lancaster isn’t alone among Pennsylvania districts reaching out to Plain Sect residents. [The Mifflin County Conservation District](#) is a recent recipient of a \$102,237 NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant to improve targeted outreach to underserved farming communities in the Juniata River Basin, including the Plain Sect community.

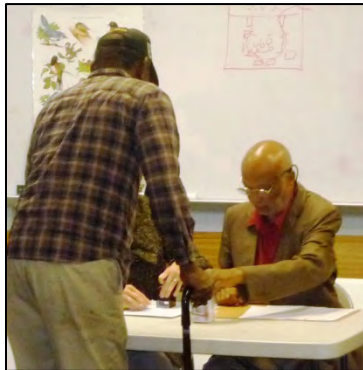
More information: Don McNutt, Lancaster District Administrator, donmcnutt@lancasterconservation.org.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Protecting resources, helping people

In a win-win for conservation and human services, the [Charleston Soil and Water Conservation District](#) in South Carolina has helped dozens of low-income residents repair or replace septic systems, and that has contributed to the reopening of 883 acres of productive shellfish harvesting beds in the Sewee to Santee Watershed.

Funds from a U.S. EPA 319 Grant administered by the state Department of Health and Environmental Control helped the district accomplish the work over a three-plus-year period. Thanks to success in that watershed, the state awarded a new competitive 319 grant in January 2013 for work in the Toogoodoo Creek Watershed.



The \$426,000 in federal and non-federal contractual funds for septic systems in the Sewee to Santee Watershed helped repair and replace 66 poorly functioning or failing septic systems for homeowners in the towns of Awendaw and McClellanville, says Debbie Eckard district office manager and education coordinator. Homeowners were also required to attend a workshop that provided information on proper septic system maintenance.

Shellfish beds in the watershed were closed in part because of high levels of fecal coliform bacteria from failing septic systems, livestock waste, pet waste and marine sanitary waste discharged from boats.

In addition to addressing septic system failures, the district also focused on implementation of best management practices for animal farms, pet waste and marine sanitary waste. Extensive water quality education and outreach included signs, posters, workshops, presentations at public events and other activities.

Themed “Our Connected Coast,” the effort reached recreational audiences, schools, community centers and other places where the public gathers.

The state reopened shellfish beds in 2011, in part due to the septic system program and education activities. More than 20 failing septic systems in the immediate vicinity of the beds were replaced, achieving measurable reductions in bacteria counts.

“We were proud as a district that our grant funds were able to not only reach our goal of water quality restoration in the watershed, but to also help those in need through education, outreach and replacement of their failing septic systems,” Eckard says. “When you help those in need you help the whole community and generations to come. Residents were very appreciative for the opportunity.”

A wide range of local, state and federal partners cooperated on the project. “One of the difficulties for small conservation districts is to get local matches for grants,” says Lisa Hajjar, district grant project manager. “It’s necessary to have many partners and sponsors.”

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