

Conservation Districts— Your Community's Gateway to Natural Resource Conservation

In a world of varied government programs,

comprehensive legislation and broader focuses on national issues, everyone can agree on one thing: no single program, piece of legislation or single issue can fully address the needs of local communities across the country. This is especially true of natural resource conservation.

Because of the vast array of natural resource conditions and uses throughout the United States, it is common sense that community members are best suited to identify and resolve the natural resource concerns in their respective areas, not just those identified by federal programs, legislation or national priorities.

Conservation districts' success in the past has been largely due to the emphasis on their ability to identify needs, set priorities and carry out programs based on local conditions and needs. As conservation programs, funding and focuses continue to shift, it is more important than ever for districts to step up to the plate and fulfill their responsibility as local leaders and facilitators—their communities' gateways to local, resource-driven conservation.

Locally Led—A Way of Life

In the past, the term *locally led* has been used to describe a way of addressing natural resources needs—one that begins, is carried out and ends at the local level. Over the years, the term has been frequently used—perhaps overused at times—but its core concept remains the same and very relevant in the world of natural resource conservation.

The natural resource needs of the local community—whether a town, county, watershed or multi-county region—are at the core of the locally led process. It involves the community in the assessment of those needs, as well as the solutions and priorities. The approach emphasizes voluntary, non-regulatory, incentive-based approaches before use of regulatory measures. It is not driven by any single piece of legislation, any one fiscal year or any individual program; it is an ongoing, timeless approach that is not tied to any particular year. As such, it is able to be evaluated regularly to ensure it is effectively meeting the long-term needs of the local community.

Locally led conservation is a grassroots effort to identify and resolve natural resource conservation concerns. It is essential in promoting and developing the stewardship ethic where people help each other in local communities to enhance and conserve those resources today for future generations.

NACD Secretary-Treasurer Jack Majeres

Locally led is not a program; it is a way of doing business, a way to effectively meet communities' needs and get the right kind of conservation on the ground where it is most needed.



Courtesy of NRCS



Conservation Districts' Role

Conservation districts hold a unique position on local, state and national levels. The nearly 3,000 conservation districts across the U.S.—each governed and staffed by local people—are the ideal facilitators for the locally led process. Districts are familiar with the land uses and needs in their communities, and they can build lasting relationships with their community stakeholders.

Conservation districts have demonstrated time and again their ability to act as a focal point for the local coordination and delivery of technical assistance and funding to private land managers. Over the years, all levels of government, private corporations and nonprofit organizations have channeled assistance through conservation districts to address resource conservation needs. This process has helped districts achieve their missions—to get conservation on the ground. However, basing conservation practices solely on broad-scale programs and funding sources can ultimately dictate the work that gets done at the local level, which can result in some local needs going unmet. To be truly successful, conservation needs to be resource driven, not program driven.

Districts need to take the lead to ensure the process stays at the local level. They can do so by helping each community identify its needs and serving as a gateway between the community and outside technical, funding and educational resources, using a mix of federal, state, local and private sector programs as tools to solve local concerns. Districts then need to carry out all conservation programs at the local level.

With the leadership, hard work and ingenuity they are known for, conservation districts have the ability to step forward and ensure the process begins, is carried out and ends at the local level, ultimately ensuring all the natural resource needs of their communities are met.

Local Work Groups—Bringing Stakeholders through the District's Front Door

Local Work Groups are another example of local leadership engaged in identifying and prioritizing needs. Much of the work of Local Work Groups has been focused on priority setting for Farm Bill Conservation Programs. But when districts assemble a work group and hold deliberations on local needs, the output of the process can and should be used for all of the districts needs. A key improvement in the 2008 Farm Bill created local work groups as subcommittees of state technical committees. Local work groups are not limited in who can attend to contribute ideas and priorities.



Courtesy of NRCS



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Steps to Become Your Community's Conservation Gateway

To position your conservation district as your local community's gateway to conservation, there are several key steps you need to take:

- ✓ Public Outreach—obtain public participation
- ✓ Conservation Needs Assessment—assess the specific conservation needs of your community
- ✓ Identify and prioritize those needs
- ✓ Set goals
- ✓ Identify programs and funding sources to help meet those goals
- ✓ Develop the district's area-wide conservation plan and/or strategic or long-range plan
- ✓ Implement your district's plan(s)
- ✓ Measure performance

A few of the items above are detailed below. Additional resources to aid your locally led efforts are available on NACD's website at <http://nacdn.net.org/resources/>.

Public Outreach

Reaching out to your community is the first and most important step in the process. Without input from stakeholders, the locally driven process cannot work. Community members must help identify the natural resource issues that affect them. Their feedback will determine the resource base, help set district priorities and ultimately help your district carry out the necessary conservation programs.

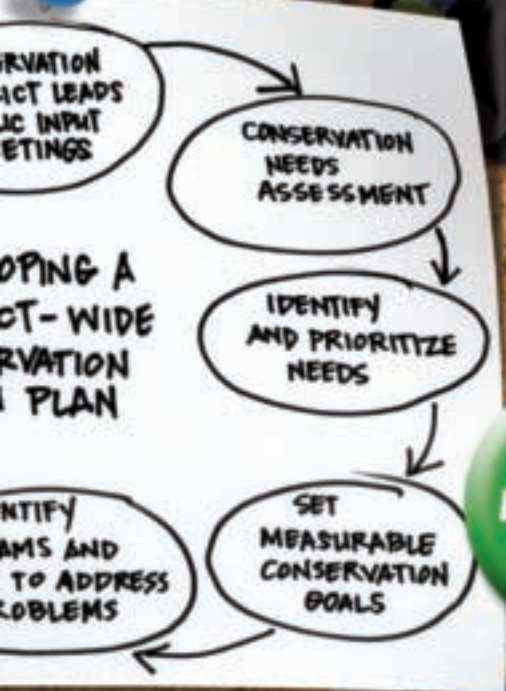
To begin your public outreach process, first identify all the individuals, businesses, organizations and agencies within your community that have a stake in natural resource management. Involving a broad representation of your customer base increases your program's credibility, visibility and base of support within the community. Be sure to include groups that have not traditionally worked with the district.

Next, reach out to those groups and gather feedback. Some of the activities your district could organize to gather stakeholder input include public meetings; ongoing advisory committees; surveys; social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs; and focus group meetings.

To ensure maximum credibility, conservation district officials should convene and facilitate all outreach activities. In addition to gaining insight into your community's needs, the outreach process will build your grassroots network and relationships with local leaders that will be helpful in implementing the programs and activities needed to address their concerns.



Courtesy of NACD





Assess, Identify and Prioritize Local Needs

Assessing, identifying and prioritizing your community's resource needs is another crucial element in determining the direction of your locally led process. A conservation needs assessment analyzes the work that must be done to achieve broad conservation goals and solve specific natural resource concerns. It should be based on public input *as well as* a detailed analysis of natural resource concerns within your district. The needs assessment should address the entire resource base, including the predominant land uses with which the district works.

To successfully assess your community's conservation needs, you will need to

- identify specific concerns and existing conditions and trends for each natural resource in your district;
- identify, agree upon and document community objectives;
- analyze conservation needs and priorities;
- prioritize natural resource concerns; and
- identify geographic areas and potential priority areas.

The needs assessment and priority setting will ensure the district's efforts address the most important local resource concerns. At the end of this process, you will have a comprehensive evaluation of the condition of your natural resource base. From that, you can build the platform for priorities and policies in all your district's conservation programs. It will help you determine the type and extent of needed conservation systems and practices and provide guidance for funding priorities and priority areas to be addressed.

Conservation district staff and district officials can further support the needs assessment process by keeping track of resource concerns year-round; recognizing problem areas around the county or watershed; and discussing them at monthly district board meetings. You should also call upon your federal and state partners for technical advice and natural resource information to present at stakeholder meetings.



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Putting it All Together

Setting Goals; Identifying Funding Sources; Developing and Implementing a Plan; and Measuring Performance

Once the information has been gathered through public outreach and the conservation needs assessment process, the next steps in the process involves the district board. The district board will need to

- set measurable conservation goals and objectives;
- identify conservation initiatives, systems and practices needed to achieve these goals and objectives; and
- identify federal, state, local and non-government programs and services that are available to address specific conservation needs.

As traditional funding sources decline or shift, this process will provide opportunities to examine new sources of assistance and new players to help carry out your conservation program. Here, again is another reason to include a large array of stakeholders in the input process. Expanding constituent and stakeholder participation increases the number of potential ideas, opportunities and financial resources available to carry out your goals. This process will help you identify ways to secure and coordinate support from a variety of sources.

The locally led process establishes a foundation upon which all of your district's conservation efforts are based. From there, your district can pull the necessary resources from the state, federal, corporate and non-profit sectors to carry out the conservation practices your community needs.

This process will ensure that the conservation work in your district is based on resource needs, not on programs and outside priorities. As a result, local elected officials, organizations, businesses and individuals as well as funders will recognize your district as the gateway to conservation assistance in your community—the role districts are meant to fill.

For additional resources about developing a district-wide conservation plan, please see the many related resources available on NACD's website at <http://nacdn.net.org/resources/>.

