

FORESTRY NOTES SPECIAL REPORT



National Association of
Conservation Districts

DISTRICTS BRING THE PIECES TOGETHER



Several years ago, Doug Rushton had an idea. Some conservation districts in his home state of Washington had a forester on staff, but others did not. What if those without could borrow the neighboring district's forester? What if Washington's conservation districts could share resources to get more work done?

Rushton, a longtime member of the NACD Forestry Resource Policy Group (RPG) and current NACD Board member, decided it was worth exploring. He conducted an inventory of conservation district personnel throughout the state. "If a conservation district had a landowner in need but did not have someone on staff equipped to help, maybe the district in the next county had that person on staff?" Rushton said.

The effort took months to complete. Responding staff logged their various experience and qualifications, then Rushton compiled the data and shared it throughout the state. In the years since, it has resulted in numerous exchanges of resources and staff sharing (see 'Washington districts take a neighborly approach' on page 3).

Conservation districts are often viewed as a source to connect landowners with the resources they need to manage their property. But conservation districts also connect common partners with one another, or act as a fiscal agent to bring parties together for the sake of serving a resource need that may otherwise go unserved.

NACD Forestry RPG Chairman Steve Hedstrom of Montana says districts are great at finding solutions that bring partners together for the sake of doing what's best for the land.

"It's something conservation districts do well—bring the pieces together," Hedstrom said. "You hear it all the time, 'No agency can do it all. We need to work together.'"

Landscape-scale initiatives—such as the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership, the National Wild Turkey Federation's Bix Six and the American Forest Foundation's place-based conservation initiative—require the support of diverse partners to address resource needs to stretch beyond jurisdictional boundaries. Conservation districts, in many instances, serve as the glue to help bond these partners.

The challenge is only expected to grow in the coming years, as budgetary restraints continue to limit agency spending and hiring. This will further drive the need to be creative in solving land management issues.

Districts help find a way to meet the need



**NACD
President
Brent Van
Dyke**

Over the past few years, I've had the privilege of visiting conservation districts from across

the country. These folks are making tangible impacts throughout the nation, and their ingenuity and ability to come up with insightful solutions to address specific problems never ceases to amaze me.

While our conservation districts have found ways to do more with less, we are experiencing a time where federal and state budgets are tight and staff is limited.

This Forestry Notes Special Report includes examples of the ways conservation districts are engaged in partnerships to solve land management issues. It's a small sample of what we see across the country—3,000 lo-

cally-led conservation districts finding a way to meet the need, whether playing a lead or supporting role.

Conservation districts are often the source landowners utilize to obtain the resources they need to manage operations. But conservation districts have the capacity to connect partners with common goals to serve initiatives that may otherwise go unserved.

I encourage conservation districts to explore ways to share ideas and resources with neighboring districts and partners. Building these partnerships will leave a lasting impact on the land we all treasure.

Wyoming partners pool resources with NWTF

In 2013, the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS), Wyoming State Forestry Department and Weston County Natural Resource District joined forces to combat the mountain pine beetle before it destroyed Black Hills Forest.

Now, the partnership is reaching further into privately-owned forest land, providing a variety of forestry management options and opening doors to new funding.

Jennifer Hinkhouse is the Campbell County Conservation District manager and also serves as the Southwest Region Representative for the NACD Forestry Resource Policy Group (RPG). She said “this process made us come together as a group, and now we’ve been able to do so much with forest health and forest management, and it all started with this one problem.”

The group was recently awarded \$1.3 million in funding through NRCS’ Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) for private landowner cost assistance for forest health in this specific area.

In 2013, aerial surveys showed the native pine beetle reached epidemic populations affecting more than 430,000 acres of the Black Hills (including portions of the forest in South Dakota) since 1996. With more than 60 percent of the Black Hills Forest privately-owned, conservation professionals knew they had to do something. Local legislators worked to secure emergency funding to address the pine beetle epidemic, while local natural resource professionals worked on a plan. A major part of the plan was a need to increase capacity. The conservation district, Wyoming State Forestry Division, NRCS and the NWTF pooled their resources to create a shared forester position, which is held by NWTF and stationed in the local NRCS field office. The position not only helped to increase the capacity to address the growing pine beetle epidemic, but it also “lent itself to better efficiency,” said Austin Sommerville (pictured), who has served in the position for two years. “Instead of offering one program that’s



set up by a single agency, I can find the program that best suits the landowners needs; that helps ensure forestry health, and it increases landowner participation.”

Last year, aerial surveys recorded just 4,700 acres affected by the beetle, and while monitoring continues, Sommerville is on to additional assistance. He is working with landowners on tree thinning, forest management plans and Tree Farm certifications.

It can be a challenge for a forester to convince landowners, particularly new ones, on the need to manage their woodlands by cutting down trees. “A lot of times it’s why they bought the land in the first place, but it’s made it easier when they can see what happens when they don’t,” Sommerville said. “More people are aware of the programs available.”

Sommerville said the Wyoming State Forestry Division has a list of landowners who have contacted the office to meet and review management practices. “We’ve been trying to encourage people to not just plan for this year, but plan 10 years down the road,” Sommerville said. “In some cases, having a management plan is a requirement for enrolling in some of the programs.”

The agencies have specific items for the forester to address. Occasionally, efforts are seasonal, like working with applications for NRCS programs in the spring and targeting conservation district needs more heavily over the summer. But there is overlap that also helps keep everyone on the same page, he said.

This overlap helps with agencies who aren’t necessarily partners. For example, during the mountain pine beetle epidemic, Wyoming and South Dakota natural resource agencies worked together to combat the epidemic from coordinating strategies to working to pool financial and technical resources to perform annual aerial surveys.

The shared position has not only helped to connect landowners with available resources, but has created stronger relationships between agencies as well. “Viewing needs and goals through different perspectives create solid partnerships and extended outreach, which allows for development of new projects and troubleshooting solutions,” Hinkhouse said.

Agencies already are working on funding for the program for additional years; some funds come out of agency budgets, while other funding is tied to grants. Though each partner funds the position through different capacities, they all work together to determine what duties the forester should complete, where and when, all with a focus on sustainable forest health.

“For the conservation districts, it’s important to see that the time and effort you put into making a partnership is going to pay off 100 times what you put into it,” Hinkhouse said. “If you create a solid partnership, it won’t just help you with whatever issue you’re facing today, it will continue to develop into new projects and help you solve new problems in the future.”



Washington districts take a neighborly approach

As service forester for the Grays Harbor and Pacific Conservation Districts in Washington, David Houk works primarily with small forest landowners on a variety of forestry programs. Through cost-sharing and a task order through NRCS, he also is available to assist adjacent and surrounding southwestern conservation districts.

"Not all districts are able to fund a forester position," Houk said. "To have someone available to meet with landowners and address their resource concerns, develop a forestry management plan, to help them apply for EQIP—to just be there, that's the biggest benefit."

Houk took the position five years ago and serves private landowners managing a range of five to 500 forested acres. He writes forest management plans and conducts on-site visits to provide technical assistance. He has assisted with county tax abatement designated land, Tree Farm certifications, firewise projects, and advises landowners on available cost-share programs.

"I'm constantly learning what other conservation districts are doing and enjoy helping meet the forestry needs for that conservation district," Houk said.

Houk said forestry program education and outreach is also important, especially for new landowners who are purchasing former

industry-owned property and more urban parcels that range between five and 10 acres.

"It provides an opportunity to get more conservation on the ground and spread the word on sustainable forestry," Houk said. "My favorite part of this position is working with a variety of different landowners across the landscape to help them achieve their forestry objectives."

Several South Dakota partners contribute to shared forester position

A shared position held and administered by the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) in South Dakota is providing an extra set of hands to help Custer County Conservation District (CCCD) and other area conservation agencies implement forestry programs while also meeting NWTF habitat objectives.

The South Dakota Cooperative Forester position is funded with help from several partners: NRCS, South Dakota State Chapter of the NWTF, South Dakota Department of Agriculture - Resource Conservation and Forestry Division, South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Neiman Timber Co., American Forest Foundation and CCCD.

Each partner has capacity needs for the delivery of different programs, but no one group has enough funds or legislative authorization to create a full-time position. All share common conservation goals, so they partnered to create the cooperative forester position, said Collin Smith, NWTF District Biologist for Wyoming, Montana, and North and South Dakota. The position took more than a year to develop and was filled in October 2017.

"The neat thing is all these organizations and agencies have shared common goals," Smith said. "They all want to see improved forest health and active forest management increased on private lands."

CCCD contributes funding to the position, and the forester in turn assists in the district's program delivery to landowners, conducts outreach and raises awareness about local conservation issues and priorities. The position also works to secure other sources of funding for conservation delivery on private lands in Custer County.

While the position originated through efforts stemming from NWTF's nationwide Save the Habitat. Save the Hunt. initiative, the shared forester also is spearheading a unique program, the French Creek Riparian Restoration Initiative on behalf of the conservation district.

NWTF developed priority focal landscapes in each state for conservation delivery, and in South Dakota one of the focus areas is the Black Hills - Pine Ridge area, a premier destination for wild turkey hunters and the home of the Merriam's wild turkey subspecies. By improving and increasing the pace and scale of forest and riparian community management on private lands, this shared position in part is ensuring long-term viability of wild turkey habitat.

The shared forester covers six counties in the Black Hills region and also develops forest management plans, conducts outreach, and works on riparian systems on the prairie.

"The position has been effective," Smith said. "It's been very well received and accepted by the partners."

"All these organizations and agencies have shared common goals. They all want to see improved forest health and active forest management increased on private lands."

— Collin Smith, NWTF District Biologist



57% of conservation districts compile a list of local professional foresters to provide to private landowners.*



47% of conservation districts participate in joint efforts or planning with federal agencies for forestry-related projects.*



58% of conservation districts participate in their State Forest Stewardship planning committee.*



22 states have a state-level forestry memorandum of understanding (MOU), most of which include the Conservation District State Association.



56 multi-partner projects funded through the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership since 2014.

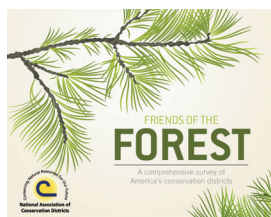
*data from NACD's 2015-16 comprehensive forestry survey.

Additional Materials Related To Shared Resources



NACD is one of four partners in the national Joint Forestry Team (JFT), which helps to foster state and local forestry collaboration. The JFT makes recommendations that result in coordinated interagency delivery of forestry and conservation assistance for working forests, farms and ranches.

www.jointforestryteam.org



In 2016, NACD released "Friends of the Forest," a 32-page booklet detailing the many ways conservation districts are engaged in forestry work. The booklet highlighted data collected from NACD's comprehensive forestry

survey of America's 3,000 conservation districts.

www.nacdnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ForestryBooklet.pdf



Through the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership (LRP), the U.S. Forest Service and NRCS are restoring landscapes, reducing wild-fire threats to communities and landowners, protecting water quality and enhancing wildlife habitat. Most projects rely on several partners to contribute in various ways. Conservation districts are involved in more than a dozen LRP projects.

www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/newsroom/features/?cid=stelprdb1244394



The National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) is helping to achieve resource and habitat objectives through its Bix Six initiative, which includes 738 million acres of identified focal landscapes. The program relies on partners to help address a set of conservation challenges, including the need to improve habitat diversity, maintain healthy hardwoods, and restore oak woodlands and savannas.

www.nwtf.org/about/big-six

