

FORESTRY NOTES SPECIAL REPORT



National Association of
Conservation Districts

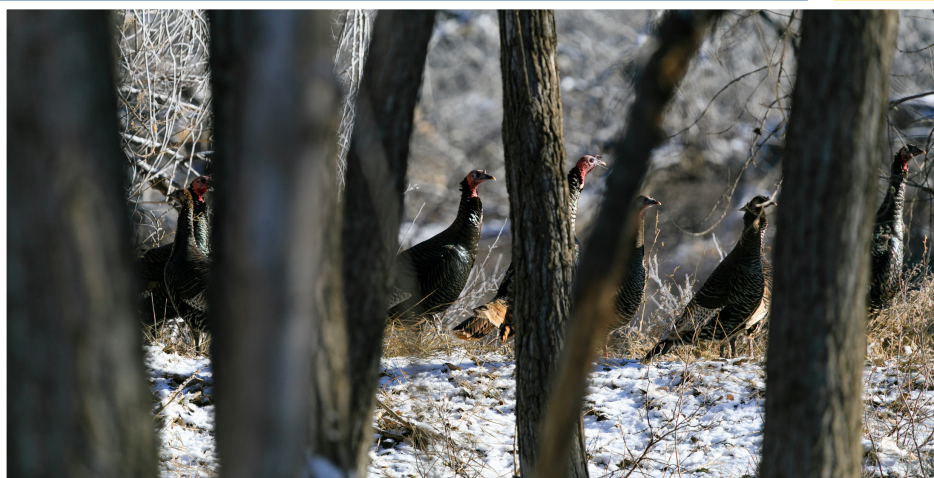
Districts help enhance wildlife habitat

Successful management of wildlife habitat often requires engagement from multi-jurisdictional landowners and a vision toward the future of our forest lands. Conservation districts have proven successful in bringing diverse stakeholders to the table and helping the public to see the value of investing in habitat efforts.

And habitat is a priority for many districts around the country. Based on data collected from NACD's 2015 comprehensive forestry survey, 51.04% of respondents selected 'wildlife enhancement' among the forest health issues and productivity concerns directly affecting their conservation district.

Conservation districts in a number of states invite wildlife partners to attend and present at annual meetings, and numerous districts organize workshops and field tours to educate the general public on wildlife habitat.

► This May, a conservation district in Maine organized a free outdoor workshop for woodland owners and area residents to learn about management options that



benefit songbirds in a variety of forest types. "Helping landowners conserve and enhance wildlife habitat will ultimately ensure that our natural systems are more extensive, healthier and thus more resilient in the face of the multiple, serious stressors our ecosystems face today. Educating the public about wildlife habitat can also create awareness and support for local and regional conservation efforts," said Aleta McKeage, Technical Director for the Waldo County Soil and Water Conservation District.

► King Conservation District in Washington has a special section on its website dedicated to fish and wildlife habitat enhancement, promoting: 'Planting native trees, shrubs and ground covers, installing water features and providing feeders and nesting boxes [as] examples of things you can do to enhance your property for wildlife.'

**"The wildlife and its
habitat cannot speak,
so we must and we will."**

— 26th U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt

► The Champaign County Soil and Water Conservation District in Illinois has a list of 10 wildlife habitat goals on its website, including 'encourage landowners and operators to manage rural roadsides for wildlife habitat.'

Districts are often an entry point for landowners to learn how their decision-making affects local wildlife, and help share information on cost-share programs that cater to habitat enhancement.

Districts play a critical role in managing wildlife habitat

Our nation's private forestlands not only help provide clean air, clean water and an escape from the city, but they also serve as a home to the wildlife so many of us appreciate. Strong forest stewardship practices help keep trees healthy, and as a result, provide a better home to this wildlife as well.

The stories in this special report are just a small sample of the work America's conser-

vation districts are doing to enhance wildlife habitat across the country. Conservation districts are contributing to landscape-scale efforts, whether leading the charge or serving in a supporting role, and districts are assisting landowners in managing their woodlands.

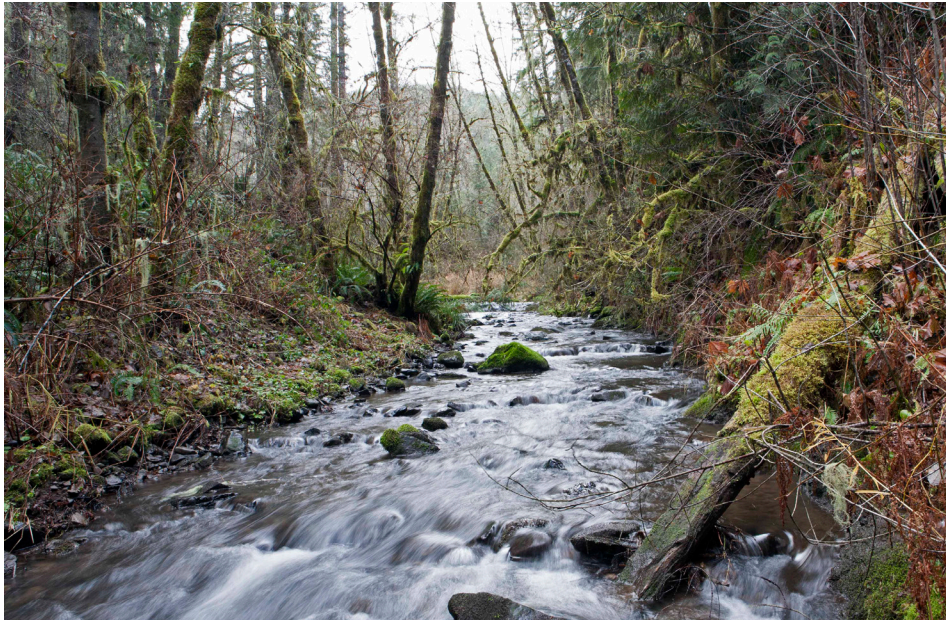
At the national level, NACD has demonstrated a commitment to grow relationships to get more work done on the ground. In 2018, NACD signed a national memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) to work together for the betterment of turkey habitat. NACD and NWTf are already working together in South Dakota, Wyoming and other states to establish

shared forestry positions. This past February, NACD entered into a similar agreement with Ducks Unlimited.

NACD and our conservation districts are serious about conserving our nation's resources to enhance wildlife habitat, and we stand ready to do even more in the coming years!



Michael Crowder
NACD First
Vice President



Clackamas SWCD using Community Forest Program to enhance habitat

With a U.S. Forest Service Community Forest Program grant, Clackamas Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) partnered with the Trust for Public Land (TPL) to acquire 319 acres of forested land to protect and improve for wildlife habitat.

About a year ago, a local property owner reached out to the SWCD about the former Weyerhaeuser Company land in the hopes of finding a way to maintain the property's forest character rather than see it developed for residential use. Since then, the Eagle Creek Community Forest was acquired by the TPL and subsequently sold to the SWCD in April.

"It's all very early and we're learning as we go," Clackamas SWCD General Manager Tom Salzer said. "It helps to have really strong partners in the Forest Service and the TPL, and neighboring landowners have been great, but we're taking a big step and it's a step into the unknown."

The year-long effort included a \$550,000 Community Forest Program grant that cut the conservation district's cost to \$750,000. The Eagle Creek Advisory Committee is working on a community forest plan that will guide land management direction for the next 50 to 100 years.

Among the district's goals are improving wildlife habitat, adding public and community recreation opportunities, and gaining revenue from occasional timber harvests that will go back into maintaining the property. Any surplus revenue will go toward supporting the district's conservation programs.

The property connects to more than 1,000 acres of public and conserved land, and neighboring property owners — Portland General Electric and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) — have expressed interest in working with the district on management of forest tracts that adjoin the property, Salzer said.

As the advisory committee tours the site and develops the community forest plan, Clackamas SWCD is preparing for wildlife habitat improvement efforts. Streams on the property host runs of salmon and steelhead. Salzer said they hope to establish no-cut zones around them.

Elk tracks are rampant throughout the property; recently, the district set up trail cameras to gather information on how many and what types of other wildlife are living on the land to assist in plan development. A bird biologist also has been engaged to conduct surveys to ensure species protection.

Clackamas SWCD is close to securing a contract with a forester to plan out any necessary treatment for understory, thinning, potential harvests and to implement efforts

to transition from Douglas fir to a more mixed species with different age classes, Salzer said.

"A lot of our non-industrial private forest landowners love their forest, and they do harvest, but they don't want a moonscape left behind; they still want to enjoy the forest and see wildlife," Salzer said. "We have a chance to mimic this on a larger scale and demonstrate different treatments that will reduce fire risk, what a thinned stand next to unthinned looks like... the list is probably infinite," he said.

The property can be used for community workshops and a variety of demonstration sites.

Salzer said there will be challenges, among them changing the property over from hunting land and industrial forest use to public recreation, addressing dumping issues, and controlling and eliminating invasive weeds. There also is an access road on the conservation district property that is utilized by the neighboring landowners, Portland General Electric and BLM. Clackamas SWCD is working with both to keep that area cleared of brush and trees.

"It's the largest single property we've ever acquired," Salzer said. "It's kind of daunting, but at the same time it's really, really exciting to have this permanent asset that will over a long time protect fish and wildlife habitat and also provide revenue to the district."

Wyoming district helps restore streambank, improve fish habitat

Saratoga Encampment Rawlins Conservation District and the Brush Creek-Hayden U.S. Forest Service Ranger District have been working with other agencies and organizations to improve aquatic habitats by removing or modifying in-channel barriers and stabilizing riverbanks.

The project began in 2011 on the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest and included collaboration with Christina Barrineau with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Joe Parsons with the Saratoga Encampment Rawlins Conservation District and Jeff Streeter with Trout Unlimited. That first project includ-

ed an eight-mile habitat reconnection on the East Fork of the Encampment River.

"That reconnection was pretty significant," Parsons said. "There were some people who were very nervous when we started going down this path, because it didn't necessarily look like what they're used to seeing. But when you start narrowing these channels and deepening the pools, you're able to improve late summer and winter aquatic habitats."

Parsons will be recognized in June with a U.S. Forest Service 2018 Rise to the Future Award for his efforts on the project.

"Trout really need deep pools to survive, and there's a reduction of flooding associated with our work," he said. "We really feel like we've enhanced spawning, and we won't run into as many gaps in age classes of fish."

In 2015, 1,800 feet of streambank along the North Platte River was restored to a more natural stream pattern. The project design also addressed controlling bank erosion by incorporating four rock vanes, transplanting willows and shrubs and re-seeding new floodplain benches and disturbed areas.

To date, partners have been involved in 16 projects on and around the national forest, including construction of a rock ramp at a concrete diversion weir on a private ranch that reconnected 60 miles of aquatic habitat on Big Creek, an important spawning tributary to the North Platte River. The work included planting thousands of willows and shrubs.

When completed, habitat reconnection efforts will total 109 miles of the North Platte and Encampment Rivers and their tributaries. To date, a total of 86 miles of stream habitat, all on national forest lands, are accessible to

trout because of the barrier removal projects. In addition, three miles of channel in the North Platte and Encampment Rivers has been restored.

As projects continue, more private landowners express interest in engaging in the river restoration and habitat reconnection efforts.

"The landowners are very habitat-oriented, whether big game or fish species... one of their first thoughts is, 'What is it going to do to the wildlife,'" Parsons said. "That's pretty cool stuff when you have a landowner coming to you saying, 'What can we do about this?'"

The partners continue to address the North Platte/Encampment River Watershed as a landscape-scale endeavor, which benefits multiple species. Toewood structures help stabilize riverbanks and enhance trout habitat. Eliminating junipers improves understory forage, which supports more mule deer. Improved browsing for wildlife is further enhanced by riparian fencing to defer grazing of livestock until vegetation is reestablished. Efforts also have benefited amphibious species.

"We've had some really good partners with Trout Unlimited, Game and Fish and BLM," Parsons said.

"The town of Saratoga has the fishery running right through, and it's the lifeblood of this area," he said. "We get a whole lot of recreationists coming to the valley to fish, and we have a thriving tourism economy in Saratoga, so reconnecting miles of stream leads to a robust and more diverse local economy while enhancing fish populations."

"We're reducing the amount of sediment going back into the system and creating better water quality than ever before."

With help from DNR grant program, Michigan districts are improving deer habitat

Michigan conservation districts are partnering with local hunting groups, schools and private landowners to fill in forestry gaps and improve deer and other wildlife habitat through the Michigan Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) deer habitat improvement grants in the Upper Peninsula.

"In a backdoor way, we're getting people to improve the habitat as a whole," Alger Conservation District Executive Director Teri Grout said. "Everything needs food, everything needs shelter and when you've got a diversity of plants, especially native plants that have evolved to fit in, you actually improve things exponentially, sometimes in ways you didn't anticipate."

"Having a balanced forest like that is healthy for the entire ecosystem and all sorts of wildlife," she said.

In its 11th year of the program, Michigan DNR awarded \$100,000 to 11 projects in April, including those in six conservation districts.

"The conservation districts are really good at reaching out to the landowner and getting work done on the ground," DNR Wildlife Division Field Operations Manager Bill Scullon said.

"The deer become a catalyst," Scullon said. "The dollars come from hunters, so that's why we focus on deer, but we recognize that you're going to benefit other species in this management."

Alger Conservation District, based in Munising, was awarded \$6,800 to work with private landowners in four areas that need habitat improvement. The conservation district will train landowners and volunteers to plant the four sites with white pine, red oak, hazelnut and crabapple seedlings and saplings, and another site will be planted with a clover mix.

The plantings will establish summer, fall and winter forage as well as shelter and improve habitat on about 20 acres of publicly accessible land.





"We've lost a lot of beech to beech bark disease over the past 10 years, and it's always been a primary source for deer and other wildlife," Grout said.

The areas receiving the plantings are adjacent to publicly accessible lands, so the public benefits as well, she said.

Marquette County Conservation District is also in its fifth year of the program, and this year will be utilizing its \$9,500 award on a new project that includes seeding open areas and logging trails to improve habitat.

"We decided to seed in wildlife openings and trail openings," Marquette County Conservation District Forester Matt Watkeys said. "We're really focusing on wildlife seeding areas and fruit and nut producing shrubs."

For this project, the district also is working with the Ruffed

Grouse Society, because the commercial forest property is open to the public for hunting, fishing and trapping. The group is donating nursery stock of fruit and nut producing shrubs and volunteer time for planting.

Other partners in the project will be the Bays De Noc Gobblers, U.P. Whitetails-Marquette County and the Michigan United Conservation Clubs. The conservation district is providing a match of \$2,375, or 25 percent, for a total project value of \$11,875.

"These grants provide us the funds to reach out to the landowners and provide the service for them to get these species planted

and produce a good habitat," Watkeys said. "Every year, I have a working list of landowners who are interested. We wouldn't be able to spread the wealth without these grants."

Scullon says that outreach and education is key for Michigan DNR's participation and fund distribution.

"The biggest part of this really is understated," he said. "It's the education. People understand why this is important and it sparks an interest, and they come back to the (conservation district) or DNR and look at getting forest management plans to become eligible for the farm bill programs. It's a catalyst for us."

Other recipients include the Iron-Baraga Conservation District, which received \$15,000 to plant a total of 525 oaks, 3,850 white pines, 1,550 wildlife shrubs and 255 apples, and provide 780 tree protectors to participating landowners; the Chippewa-Luce-Mackinac Conservation District received \$10,000 to develop a project focused on hard and soft mast plantings with 12 or more eligible landowners owning 40 or more acres; the Gogebic Conservation District will use \$2,585 toward its project to maintain forest openings and walking trails within the Devils Creek-Chaney Lake deer wintering complex — the Mosinee Grouse Enhanced Management Site — in Gogebic County, and \$3,639 to plant abandoned or blocked forest trails and openings on county forest lands within the Little Girls Point deer wintering complex to a clover-trefoil mix; and the Schoolcraft Conservation District received \$10,566 for work on Weyerhaeuser Commercial Forest Act lands at seven project sites to establish small wildlife food plots totaling about 8.09 acres.

It is the fifth year the conservation district has been involved in the grant program. The projects require a 25 percent match from the district for each grant, so the total value of the project is \$11,400. Alger Conservation District has matched \$30,258 over its five years in the program.

The conservation district plans to plant between 2,500 and 3,000 trees, in part to bolster thermal cover as well as replenish beech trees that have been decimated by the beech bark disease, caused by a one-two punch from a sap-feeding insect and a fungus that then moves in afterward, eventually killing the tree.

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS RELATED TO THIS SPECIAL REPORT



National Wild Turkey Federation initiative,
Save the Habitat. Save the Hunt.:
[http://www.nwtf.org/about/
save-the-habitat-hunt](http://www.nwtf.org/about/save-the-habitat-hunt)



Ducks Unlimited website:
<https://www.ducks.org/>



Community Forest Program website:
[www.fs.fed.us/managing-land/private-land/
community-forest/projects-and-partners](http://www.fs.fed.us/managing-land/private-land/community-forest/projects-and-partners)

