



National Association of  
Conservation Districts

# **Unleashing the Power of the Conservation Partnership:**

A Report on the Northeast Region  
Capacity Building Pilot Project

## Building for the Future

Over a year ago, a group of leaders from the NACD Northeast Region recognized the need to engage in planning for the future needs of the conservation partnership in our region. The last time the Northeast undertook a similar endeavor was in 1996, over 20 years ago. These leaders believed that such an effort was long overdue.

With input from NACD and the generous support of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the desire to assess and plan for the region grew into the Northeast Region Capacity Building Pilot Project. After months of planning, we brought together representatives from each of the members of the Conservation Partnership. With a focus on future needs, we worked hard to ensure that we had both seasoned and emerging leaders at the table. These leaders had a thoughtful discussion about our strengths and how to build capacity for the entire partnership.

When we launched this project, we expected to host a one-time meeting that would bring the region together to develop a list of action items that would help increase the capacity of the partnership. Although we hoped that everyone would embrace the need for capacity building, we did not anticipate the enthusiasm, desire, and commitment to action that this meeting would spark. It is exciting to see the action teams that resulted from this meeting. We cannot wait to see where these leaders in our region take us.

It was always the intent that this pilot project be developed as a model for other regions to use and adapt. We were pleased that many participants thought that other regions would find this project helpful. We look forward to sharing our successes with other regions and helping them however needed.

Conservation has grown and expanded considerably since the movement started in 1935 during the Dust Bowl. Today, the conservation partnership in the Northeast is leading the way in addressing water quality concerns on a landscape scale including the Chesapeake Bay, Long Island Sound, and Lake Champlain. As the landscape changes, we find ourselves working with many new farmers and smaller farms with intensive land use. We are leaders in making sure that "Every Acre Counts," bringing conservation to both rural and urban communities in the region. Innovation in soil health, farmland preservation, source water protection, and other natural resource programs continue to expand with our guidance and assistance.

It is an exciting time for conservation in the Northeast and our conservation partnership needs to be ready. The role of the partnership is continually expanding as our region changes. Our goal is to have a strong partnership that has the capacity to meet existing and future demands.



**Denise Savageau**

Northeast Region Chair, National Association of Conservation Districts

# Unleashing the Power of the Conservation Partnership:

## A Report on the Northeast Region Capacity Building Pilot Project

In April 2018, representatives from across the conservation partnership in the Northeast met in Tarrytown, N.Y., to examine their current activities and assets. Participants shared their best practices and discussed their visions for the future. By the end of this meeting, eight action plans had been developed to strengthen the conservation partnership and drive the region toward our vision of a thriving Northeast.

This meeting grew out of a belief that while there is great work underway and exemplary leaders in the states in our region, there is still a lot that we can learn from one another. Each state has both areas where they excel and areas

where they still have room to grow. By gathering existing and emerging leaders together, this meeting strengthened our individual states as well as the connections between them. The meeting also created an opportunity for emerging leaders to engage with the partnership and deepen their role. Looking at the outcomes of the meeting that follow in this report, it is clear that the region has achieved these goals.

The meeting was facilitated by **Mary Jane Dieter** of Appreciative Pathways. Dieter led the group through an Appreciative Inquiry Summit. Appreciative Inquiry mobilizes strategic change by focusing on the core

strengths of an organization, then using those strengths to reshape the future. At these summits, participants ask questions about practices that are already working, craft a vision for the future, brainstorm ideas to reach this vision, and create action plans around these ideas.

### The Northeast Conservation Partnership includes:

- **Conservation Districts and District Supervisors**
- **Conservation District Employees**
- **Resource Conservation and Development Councils**
- **State Conservation Agencies**
- **USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service**

During the meeting, participants sought to answer four questions:

1. What are our Conservation Partnership's unique strengths and assets in ensuring the conservation of our natural resources locally, state-wide, and regionally?
2. How do we communicate the importance of the work that we do and our collective knowledge, strengths, and assets to:
  - Educate decisionmakers and potential partners to broaden our scope of conservation and resource management services in addition to our funding portfolio opportunities?
  - Engage new and diverse representation of conservation officials and district employees as members, employees, and leaders of conservation districts?
3. How can we best develop outstanding leaders at the district level to ensure excellence in the delivery of services and programs and ensure a pipeline for future leaders at the local, state, and national level?
4. How can we collaborate and communicate most effectively locally, state-wide, regionally, and nationally to meet our constituents' diverse conservation needs?



*The Project's Northeast Region*

The meeting began with one-on-one interviews between participants. Through these interviews, participants sought to identify the “positive core” of the conservation partnership. This “positive core” is the combined best practices, capabilities, and assets of the partnership. Within state groups, participants also conducted an asset assessment for their state and presented this to others.

Building on this shared understanding of the best things in the region, participants crafted visions for what the conservation partnership might look like in 2020. Using these visions as a guide, participants brainstormed ideas to reach these visions and crafted action plans around eight of these ideas.

Looking forward, teams will work on implementing each of these action plans. Each team identified a coordinator to help continue the work.

These action plans will maintain momentum and strengthen our region.

In addition to an opportunity to build capacity and grow the Northeast Conservation Partnership, this meeting was also intended as a leadership development exercise. Participants included both existing and emerging

leaders from across the region. Existing leaders shared their insights and experience with the conservation partnership. Emerging leaders were given a platform to grow their engagement and an opportunity to contribute to the partnership at the region level.

## Positive Core

To begin the meeting, participants broke into pairs for one-on-one interviews. Through these interviews and subsequent discussion, participants identified the “positive core” of the Northeast Conservation Partnership. These attributes are listed below.

### Individual Strengths as Conservationists

- Outreach to non-traditional entities
- Persistence, perseverance
- Flexibility
- Volunteers
- Communicator/orator
- Dedication and commitment
- Partnership/partnering
- Finding funding
- Passion
- Observing past successes
- Innovation
- Looking to the future
- Creativity

### Our Unique Collective Strengths

- Commitment
- Grassroots/Locally-led ethos
- We are “good people”
- Knowledgeable
- Our long history
- Thinking outside the box
- Open communicators
- Knowing strengths and limits of partners
- Multiple funding sources
- Willingness to compromise
- Client loyalty
- Connecting client to delivery system

## **Key Success Factors in our Education and Engagement**

- Getting partners to share and present a common message – we “don’t stand alone”
- Shared concerns and motivations to build synergy
- Keeping board meetings focused and interesting
- Adjust your messaging approach to fit the audience
- Being aware of unintended consequences
- No preconceived notions – “Let the information take us to the result”
- Images have power
- Focusing on a relatable issue
- Demonstrating how the participant can benefit in a real way
- Personal one-on-one communication
- Making it about personal relationships
- Return and reflect on core values, mission, and foundation planning relationship
- Make message clear for all involved
- Engage everybody
- Expansion of non-traditional roles
- Partner buy-in
- Message delivery accessible to all with current platforms
- Target non-traditional funding sources

## **Root Causes of Highly Successful Leadership**

- Vision
- Trust
- Listening
- Openness
- Communication transparency
- Ability to build consensus
- Keep people on task
- Lead by example
- Team gets ownership
- Ability to make “imperfect” decisions
- Ability to engage with others and recognize the contributions of others by saying thank you

## **Components of Effective Leadership Training and Delivery**

- Identification of future leaders
- Mentoring
- Identifying individual strengths
- Grooming future leaders
- Targeting individual strengths and needs
- Staying mindful of diverse styles of leadership
- Getting participants out of their comfort zone

## Key Contributors to Effective Partnership Communication and Collaboration

- Start small, build trust
- Face-to-face communication
- Isolated communication and connecting non-traditional partners, such as a canoe trip
- Building connection over a meal
- Having a business plan in place
- Perseverance/tenacity
- Mutual goals to address natural resource concerns
- Look across states to get new ideas and thoughts
- Showcase conservation and tribal customs
- Judge relationships outside traditional boundaries
- Mutual respect
- Shared core values
- Buy-in
- Equal work distribution across partnership
- Accountability to each other
- Focus on clients
- Meaningful meetings and purposeful communication
- Developing a plan with realistic scope
- Leveraging partnership strengths and using them
- Expanding best management practices to capture innovation

## State Assessment Results

Sitting together, participants from each state identified the best practices and assets within their state. These were recorded for participants from all states to examine. Then, participants identified those assets and practices that they wanted to learn more about. The list below identifies those assets and practices of most interest to the other states.

State	Best Practice Others Would Like to Learn More About
Connecticut	Teams for Agricultural Streams Farm energy Community gardens and rain gardens Equipment sharing Capital improvement project Local grown Watershed collaborations Farm tourism

Delaware	<p>Monthly partnership lunches</p> <p>Large animal mortality program</p> <p>Best management practice verification</p> <p>Position dedicated to the solicitation and management of grants</p> <p>Weed wipers</p> <p>Active program to engage with state officials</p>
Massachusetts	<p>Online district supervisor training</p> <p>Cooperative grant process for district funds</p>
Maryland	<p>\$22 million available for conservation from the state</p> <p>Co-location prioritized for partner offices</p> <p>Fee for service work</p> <p>State cover crop program</p> <p>Equipment rental programs for producers</p>
Maine	<p>Forest pest outreach</p> <p>Blueberry irrigation program</p> <p>Beginning farmers' network</p> <p>State emphasis on farm-to-table and locally grown</p> <p>High rate contract completion by NRCS</p> <p>Efficiency in customer service by NRCS</p> <p>Dairy nutrient management program</p>
New Hampshire	<p>Roller crimpers demonstration</p> <p>Riparian management program</p> <p>Working with urban agriculture as a distinct client group</p> <p>Equipment sharing</p>
New Jersey	<p>Statewide data collection for storm water hydrology</p> <p>State cost-share program for agriculture</p> <p>Training for builders and engineers</p> <p>Fee for service work</p> <p>Urban conservation</p> <p>Forest land stewardship</p> <p>Animal waste management</p> <p>Soil Erosion and Sediment Control Act</p> <p>Working with urban agriculture as a distinct client group</p>
New York	<p>Link to Cornell Cooperative Extension</p> <p>Multiple county field teams</p> <p>State Environmental Protection Fund</p> <p>Districts "working for a common goal"</p> <p>Hydroseed</p> <p>Agricultural Environmental Management Program</p>

<p>Pennsylvania</p>	<p>Farmland preservation  Leadership development program  Online district supervisor training  Equipment sharing/expanding services  Leadership training of district managers and supervisors  Monthly core partnership meetings  Dirt, gravel, and low volume roads program  Water programs at districts  Legislative support/funding  Working with urban agriculture as a distinct client group</p>
<p>Rhode Island</p>	<p>Partnership with Providence Water  Work with young and urban farmers  Outreach to K-12 students  Forest management  Aquaculture/oyster restoration  “They need us, we need them” ethic  Aquatic organism passage work</p>
<p>Vermont</p>	<p>Natural Resource Assessment/Inventory  Role of non-profits in their partnership structure  Works with the VT Housing and Conservation Board and  Department of Transportation on funding and implementation  River basin water quality management  Strategic hiring  Natural Resource Assessments  Comprehensive grants for state funding</p>
<p>West Virginia</p>	<p>Focused conservation  Creative capacity  Statewide video network  Small watersheds  Stewardship monitoring</p>

## Design Group Ideas and Action Plans

Participants worked in small groups to craft shared visions for the future of the Northeast Conservation Partnership. Based on these visions, they brainstormed ideas that would help the region reach these visions. Eight of these ideas were chosen to be more fully developed. The groups then crafted action plans to achieve these ideas. Those action plans are listed below.

### Recruitment of Board Supervisors: Effective boards with strategic representation

Goal: Provide assistance to districts, effective leadership, and great service to customers. Led by NACD. Championed by states.

Action	Target Completion Date
Create internal survey	Short-term
Develop external survey	Short-term
Gather and analyze data – develop tools to quantify	Medium-to-Long-term
Recruit new board members	Medium-to-Long-term

Coordinator: Greg Stone, W.V.

### Multi-Level Communications and Collaboration

Goal: Organizational and asset inventory to assess conservation program delivery needs and commonly held areas of strengths. Improve networking by identifying and pursuing opportunities.

Action	Target Completion Date
Design asset inventory method	Within 3 weeks
Acquire agreement on design	3 months
Deliver the inventory and collate results	3 months
Disseminate results	6 months
Assess ability of all partners to work collaboratively	8 months
Provide opportunities to strengthen programs that need or want help	12-18 months

Coordinator: Dave Mortensen, N.Y.

## National Conservation Partnership Day/Week

Goal: Connect with all elected officials at all levels as appropriate and coordinate efforts to host one day/week across the region to celebrate partnership successes and showcase accomplishments.

Action	Target Completion Date
Identify what is already being done	30 days
Research best way to bring visibility of week vs. day	30 days
Pick day vs. week	60 days
Draft language to bring clarity to the effort (proclamation)	30 days
Statewide coordination for planning activities	90 days
Gather accomplishment data	90 days prior to event
Develop and distribute fact sheet and social media templates	90 days prior to event
Invite attendees – “Celebrate”	30 days prior to event

Co-coordinators: Debbie Absher, Del., and Bruce Young, Md.

## Northeast Regional Conservation Partnership Website

Goal: A clearinghouse of partner information that facilitates sharing of best practices such as grant templates, success stories, job swap/announcements, events, and contact lists.

Action	Target Completion Date
Consensus from core Northeast partners	6/1/18
Agreement development	7/15/18
Facilitated workgroup and Northeast Region meeting	6/1/18
Develop tight proposal for RC&D to contract	9/30/18
Website up and running	9/30/18
Share with NACD at annual meeting	2020 NACD Annual Meeting

Coordinator: Chad Cherefko, Vt.

## Training

Goal: Improving customer service through better training

Action	Target Completion Date
Regional feedback via survey	Mid-June
Prioritize list based on feedback (gap analysis)	1 month
NASCA conversation – partnership?	Mid-May
Research available existing training	< 3 months
Identify non-NRCS training cadre members	< 3 months
Determine budget	< 3 months
Determine frequency of budget	< 3 months
Explore opportunities with NRCS/NEDC (National Employee Development Center)	< 3 months
Appropriate training at 2019 Northeast Region Meeting	August 2019
Look for opportunities to connect with NRCS TSP training	1-2 years
Obtain funding	1-2 years
Post to new regional website	1-2 years
Measure progress – develop milestones	TBD
Monthly communication	Monthly

Coordinator: Brian Farkas, W.V.

## Empowering the Passion of Conservation Leaders

Goal: Providing support

Action	Target Completion Date
Develop an organizational structure chart for each organization	July 2018
Develop job descriptions for leadership positions that identify roles and expectations	December 2018
Develop core partnership regional email distribution lists	May 2018
Develop and maintain an up-to-date Conservation Partnership (CP) regional contact list	July 2018
Develop template outgoing report to help transition new leaders	July 2018
Establish orientation procedures for CP new leaders	May 2018
Promote quarterly regional face-to-face meetings of CP leaders	Schedule for July 2018

Co-coordinators: Denise Savageau, Conn., and Kasey Taylor, Del.

## High Functioning Board

Action	Target Completion Date
Review existing enabling legislation	Soon
Review existing board books	3 months
Develop generic template	1 year
Compile comprehensive training goals and materials	1 year
Develop dashboard indicators to measure	1 year

Coordinator: Tom Gordon, Maine

## Branding the Northeast Conservation Partnership

Goal: An initiative to lead to the Northeast Conservation Partnership being recognized as the face of conservation to protect and improve the environment for today and future generations.

Action	Target Completion Date
Branding initiative buy-in: Communicate to the Northeast leaders the need and benefits of a branding initiative	5/31/18
Develop NACD Regional Branding Subcommittee to advance the branding initiative as a pilot for the nation	6/30/18
Prepare and brief branding subcommittee on prototype work (branding concept, authorization, leadership, support)	NACD Northeast Region Meeting 7/16/18
1 <sup>st</sup> Branding Committee (task force) meeting - clear statement of who we are and what we do	7/16/18
Develop the branding plan	
Drafting the prototype brand – review and test the brand	
Measure progress/success	
Utilize web platform resources to distribute and recognition and acceptance of prototype: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Core partners nationally</li> <li>- All state partners</li> <li>- District employees and boards</li> <li>- Cooperators, customers</li> </ul>	
Report Results	

Coordinator: Tim Riley, Del.

## Lessons for Other Regions

From the outset, this project was intended to be a pilot for other regions, should those regions wish. In general, participants thought that this project would be a useful model for other regions. While other regions, they believe, are likely to find similar issues and outcomes, it is important that those regions go through the process of discovering these outcomes. Participants also thought that the region level is a useful scale for this capacity building work.

A few participants were interested to see how the outcomes of this summit carry forward before recommending the pilot for further adoption. They were eager to put the action plans in motion to further test the process.

As other regions consider a capacity building process, they would be best served by bringing together a broad cross-section of participants from across the partnership. Meeting face-to-face and building in time for participants to network is particularly important to success. Participants wished that they had more time to learn about the programs, activities, and best practices of other states. Other regions should be advised to create plenty of time for this sharing.

## Looking to the Future

Now that the eight action plans have been drafted, it's time to get to work. Each team has been asked to:

- Examine the membership of the action team and determine if any additional people are needed and if anyone would rather step off the team;
- Assess the resources and tools that our region already has in place that could be useful for this effort;
- Review and revise the action plan to ensure that it is specific and detailed; and
- Determine what, if any, information the team would like to gather from our region at our upcoming meeting in Lancaster, Pa.

NACD's Northeast Region Meeting in July 2018 and Annual Meeting in February 2019 will provide an opportunity for participants to meet in person, check in on progress, and gather any information needed from the region as a whole.