FORESTRY NOTES
SPECIAL REPORT

National Association of Conservation Districts

Tribal Forestry

NACD President Michael Crowder (right) signs a memorandum of understanding with the Indian Nations Conservation Alliance.

Tribal landownership can be a complicated mosaic of primarily federal statutes and regulations. Tribes may manage their resources in the ways of past generations as part of their heritage and under statutory authorization, but they can qualify for federal program dollars same as other land managers. In recent years, tribes have been authorized through programs like Good Neighbor Authority to contract directly with federal partners.

Tribal producers may be in need of conservation guidance, support and resources. However, tribal land managers are not always aware of funding opportunities through both governmental and other available networks to assist them with their land management objectives.

NACD President Michael Crowder has made outreach to tribes, tribal producers and tribal conservation districts, as well as partnering with other tribal associations, a high priority for NACD. In his home state, Crowder participated in Washington Association of Conservation Districts' Tribal Outreach Committee. This work encouraged and awarded conservation districts in Washington State that partnered with local tribes on conservation work. Later, he helped establish the NACD Tribal Outreach and Partnership Resource Policy Group (Tribal RPG) to develop relationships at the national level and was the Tribal RPG's inaugural Chair.

"It took a couple years for the Tribal RPG to gain trust from tribal partners and other tribal associations," Crowder said, "but it's become a successful partnership. We're proud of the relationships we've built, and optimistic about what's in store for the future."

For Crowder, it fits within the mission: conservation districts are charged with helping landowners find the tools to put conservation on the ground. "Many of our tribal neighbors are another landowner in need of our help putting conservation on the ground."

Committed to Supporting our Tribal Partners

In 2016, the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) envisioned two-way benefits from creating a Tribal Outreach and Partnership Resource Policy Group (Tribal RPG). Its mission is to promote and support NACD member efforts to establish partnerships with tribes that help put additional conservation on the ground. One Tribal RPG objective is to solicit, share and celebrate success stories in partnerships, including details of lessons learned. Among the priorities of the Tribal RPG are to identify effective communication methods and channels to promote outreach and connection between tribes and conservation districts, as well as describe the mutual benefits of establishing and expanding partnerships.

The Tribal RPG is committed to supporting partnerships between traditional conservation districts, tribes and tribal conservation districts. We share a common interest in making wise investments in and use of grasslands and forests so that these natural resources are both productive and sustained over time.

The stories in this special report represent a small sample of the work America's conservation districts are doing in concert with tribes and tribal conservation districts.

Larry Davis, Chair
NACD Tribal RPG

Washington partnership recognized for outstanding work

The Clallam Conservation District (CCD) and the Quileute Tribe recently received a Conservation District Tribal Partnership Award for the relationship the two groups have developed to meet the conservation needs of Clallam County in Washington over the past five years.

"It's a win-win, in that we work together as much as we can on everything," said Meghan Adamire, district conservation planner. "We see it as they know this land better than anyone, so it's excellent to have that background knowledge when it comes to larger projects."

The 2020 award, presented by the Washington Association of Conservation Districts, recognized the partnership on the Hermison Road Project. The joint venture involves restoring a 180-foot wide, nearly seven-acre riparian forest buffer along the Quillayute River on tribal land.

Quileute Tribal land will be enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), which will provide financial assistance for the project. Nearly 3,500 native trees and shrubs will be planted to provide habitat and shade in a river system that supports some of Washington's strongest remaining runs of Chinook, Coho, steelhead and other salmonids.

The partnership also allows the conservation district to have a broader reach to accomplish conservation efforts. Historically, the district has not done much work on the west end of the county, as there haven't been many landowner connections. The Quileute's relationship with the local community and knowledge of resource issues has opened the door to connecting with local landowners located in this area. The relationship has enabled the Tribe to pass along potential projects to the conservation district, which then reaches out directly to the landowners. This coordinated approach has worked well to identify concerns, make connections with willing landowners, and implement solutions to fix the resource concerns.

"It's been great for the Tribe to partner with Clallam Conservation District to make the funding go farther and the work to make a bigger impact," Quileute Tribe's water quality biologist Nicole Rasmussen said. "Working with a conservation district that is eager to get projects done on the land to help the Tribe's treaty resources has been exciting and motivating."

After meeting at a monthly North Pacific Coast Lead Entity for salmon (NPCLE) session, the two groups began a friendship and teamed up on a number of projects.

Efforts that have not resulted in funding have also strengthened the partnership, Adamire said, as they continue to provide opportunities for communication, identifying needs, and partnering to find the best solution for both groups.

"We've garnered a lot of trust," she said. "They have a keen interest in the land and making sure the natural resources are protected. It's been a really great partnership. It seems every month a new potential project comes out."

This is the second time in five years the CCD has been awarded for its work in partnering with tribes. In 2015, the district and the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe were recipients of the award.

5 ways conservation districts can engage tribal forestry partners

Establishing a relationship with your local tribe may require time and effort. Here are a few ideas to help build or grow that relationship:

1. Listen – in some cases, tribal members use their own nomenclature or have a different approach to land management. Regardless, the common thread is conservation. "First, get to know the tribal contact on a non-business level, then listen to their goals and learn about their history of land management before proposing ideas," said Larry Davis, NACD Tribal Outreach and Partnership Resource Policy Group (RPG) Chair.

2. Invite them to meetings – having a tribal representative attend a local conservation district meeting will help extend the relationship beyond the field staff level and provide insight into the district's approach to solving land resource issues.

3. Organize field days – invite tribal partners to tour a forest project site. Not only does it present the opportunity to see plans in action, but it can show how federal cost-share opportunities can be used to meet land management objectives.

4. Introduce them to partners – conservation districts are great connectors. By helping to connect tribal leaders and land users with local contacts from NRCS, state forestry, FSA, extension or even the National Wild Turkey Federation, it expands the potential for tribal engagement. "It says to the tribe that you care about them achieving their goals, regardless if the district plays a role in the project," Davis said.

5. Point to funding opportunities – land management requires financial investment. Tribal leaders often are in need of financial assistance, same as all land managers. "Tribes may be unaware of grant programs and sources. Sharing funding information is a positive step in relationship-building," Davis said.

RCPP grant helps Oregon SWCD restore oak habitat

The Polk County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) in Oregon is partnering with the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde to protect ancestral lands and implement forest management practices with a $1.7 million grant awarded through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)'s Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

The efforts aim to enhance and restore Oregon white oak habitat and associated wildlife species on private lands in Polk County, in part by creating habitat corridors and adding wildlife forage. The plan also includes acquiring three permanently conserved tribal ancestral lands through the Willamette Wildlife Mitigation Fund and teach private landowners the tribal practices for maintaining oak habitat.

"They were maintaining this kind of habitat for over 400 years before anyone else got here," said Karin Stutzman, Polk County SWCD district manager. "Their management techniques were accomplished without using chemicals or machines. That's a very valuable set of knowledge to know."

About 1,900 acres total will be impacted by the RCPP project, including 740 acres of privately-owned land. Enhancements include creating habitat corridors that provide unobstructed travel for wildlife throughout the county and connecting to other similar corridors in neighboring counties. Restoration of the privately-owned land includes acreage in the Grand Ronde Community, the county and the Airlie-Haybeck Oaks Conservation Opportunity Area.

Nearly $2 million in contributions from partners will support permanently protected conservation easements, and state grant funding will complement oak restoration work. There also will be technical assistance and outreach activities.

"There's a desire by constituents in the county that want to preserve that ecology," Stutzman said. "It's unique, it's historical, and it's greatly in decline."

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde will provide education on their traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) in managing oak habitat conditions and uses. Modern techniques modeling TEK will include the use of fire crews and brush burns.

"Tribal people are the best stewards of the land," Stutzman said. "The tribal elders and members will provide valuable information about historical oak habitat conditions and uses. Workshops will be held to train anyone who wants to know about this. It will help landowners manage savanna and oak habitat by building skills to implement another option to increase sustainability and create ecologically-based practices."

"If there are less invasive and less harmful ways to improve habitat, then everyone needs to know that," Stutzman said.

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde has a fire crew that can implement the underbrush burning on their lands and incorporate that on private lands, as warranted. There also will be thinning cuts to rid the areas of Douglas firs, cherry trees, English hawthorn and poison oak, blackberries and other weedy species.

Treatments will take place over a five-year period and will include chemical spraying and mowing, logging and creating slash piles, seeding of native species, forbs and grasses and some spot spraying.

Cleaning out the uplands and planting grasses–even some non-native–will help keep elk in their own habitat instead of roaming down to farms for commercial wheat and grass to feed on, Stutzman said. Thinning will allow the oaks room to grow with more resistant bark and will assist in maintaining the correct habitat for wildlife such as elk, fox and deer.

"It's a rare and declining habitat that provides a lot of value in our county," Stutzman said. "With this funding and this partnership, we will have integrated conservation efforts."

Re-establishing river cane in Louisiana

The Chitimacha Tribe settled in Louisiana along the creeks and on land in the bayous of what is now known as the Atchafalaya Basin around 500 C.E. Wild river cane was a traditional forest product used in basket weaving. In the 1990s, the Tribe saw river cane stands dwindling and access to the few remaining stands limited to private land with little to no access. Basket weaving is an integral part of traditional Chitimacha Tribal family life, and the critical component was scarce. In 2001, the Chitimacha Tribe began working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), St. Mary Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and local volunteers to re-establish wild river cane to the forests of south-central Louisiana. In consultation with the Chitimacha, NRCS collected plants from existing stands and propagated shoots at the NRCS Golden Meadow Plant Materials Center in Galliano, Louisiana.

Through the involvement of the NRCS Franklin Field Office, St. Mary SWCD and teams of local volunteers, new stands were planted. These partnerships helped to re-establish the river cane so that tribal artisans can begin harvesting the material on a rotating 10-year basis, allowing for regeneration. New growth will supply future Tribal basket weavers the material so important to carrying on the art and legacy of the Chitimacha Tribe.

SWCD advancing tribal agroforestry work

The Navajo Nation Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) is expanding its outreach and education efforts, in part to promote more agroforestry practices with Arizona's Navajo farmers and ranchers.

Little Colorado River SWCD is one of five tribal conservation districts on Navajo. Little Colorado River SWCD Board President Sadie Lister said many traditional Navajo practices closely resemble those practices identified as agroforestry. One of the five recognized agroforestry practices is silvopasture.

"A lot of people are not very familiar with this practice, but we are doing it," Lister said. "It's a combination of using the livestock and the forest and the forage we have."

Lister, who also is a conservationist with the Indian Nations Conservation Alliance (INCA) and serves as Vice Chair of NACD's Tribal Outreach and Partnership Resource Policy Group, began her interest in agroforestry just a few years ago when National Agroforestry Center (NAC) Lead Agroforester Richard Straight did a presentation in Farmington, New Mexico. She reached out to him afterward, and Straight later conducted a two-part webinar series on agroforestry with the Native American Producer Success (NAPS) project for Navajo (the webinar still is shared on Facebook and YouTube with NAPS project).

The SWCD's coverage area has been wrought with drought, so beginning agroforestry practices has been challenging, as barriers, policy and regulations impact Navajo land users. To maintain and implement land management practices, they are encouraged to participate in USDA programs.

With 110 chapters (local community government) in the Navajo Nation, currently 87 are within the SWCD boundaries, and 13 chapters are in the Little Colorado River SWCD. Lister said outreach and education will assist the SWCD in building capacity, and that means forward movement into projects that include more than waterline extensions, boundary fencing and rotational grazing.

Outreach and education will also help bring agroforestry home to the Navajo, as some forest farming practices already are found in the Indian farming and ranching traditions.

Juniper trees are a prime example, Lister said. Although juniper consumes a lot of water from the ground, the trees provide shade and shelter for wildlife and livestock. The tree foliage also is burned into ash by the Navajo, who then add it to blue corn flour when preparing traditional foods. Ash enhances the calcium content, with one gram of ash containing about as much calcium as a glass of milk. Dry juniper trees also provide firewood in winter.

Little Colorado River SWCD Board President Sadie Lister

Yucca plants produce banana-like fruit that are prepared into jellies and used as a sugar replacement. They also can be dried for later use and prepared in the fall. Yucca root can be used for cleansing in the beauty way ceremonies, and as a daily shampoo and extract with anti-fungal properties. The leaf fiber can be braided into strings. Goats and mule deer enjoy the fruit as a delicacy.

Pinon trees have been affected by bark beetles and drought. In the past with the abundance of rain, every few years there would be a bumper crop that was used for various foods and brought to market for income.

"We have some barriers, but we need to do work with our local districts to make sure we're meeting the goals we're charged with," Lister said. "It's a lot of education right now. We do have agroforestry in our backyard, we just don't realize what that is."

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS RELATED TO THIS SPECIAL REPORT

National Association of Conservation Districts

NACD Tribal Outreach and Partnership Resource Policy Group (RPG)
The Tribal RPG explores ways conservation districts can support tribal partners to advance shared conservation goals and celebrate successful partnerships.
https://www.nacdnet.org/about-nacd/what-we-do/tribal-outreach-partnership/

USFS Office of Tribal Relations
The Office of Tribal Relations supports meaningful and significant collaboration and consultation with Tribes across all program areas.
https://www.fs.fed.us/spf/tribalrelations/

Indian Nations Conservation Alliance (INCA)
INCA assists Tribal Conservation Districts, Tribal Nations and holistic land stewards to instill traditional knowledge, while protecting and restoring the Circle of Life to heal Mother Earth.
https://inca-tcd.org/

Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC)
IAC was founded to pursue and promote the conservation, development and use of our agricultural resources for the betterment of our people.
https://www.indianag.org/