



National Association of
Conservation Districts

Conservation Districts & the Good Neighbor Authority:

Empowering Local Communities for Sustainable
Forest Management

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The Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service aims to enhance forest management, increase efficiency, and strengthen partnerships with local communities and community partners. Conservation districts are key stakeholders at the local level, and GNA offers the opportunity to collaborate with the Forest Service, contribute to sustainable land management, and promote ecological, social, and economic well-being within the community.

Good Neighbor Authority

The Good Neighbor Authority allows the Forest Service to enter into agreements with State, County, and Tribal agencies to perform forest, rangeland, and watershed restoration services on and adjacent to National Forest System lands. The authority allows the Forest Service to enter into up to 10-year agreements with partner agencies with a mandate to conduct forest and watershed restoration activities. These partner agencies then perform these activities on behalf of the Forest Service. The GNA is an important partnership tool available to the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to increase the pace and scale of forest, rangeland, and watershed restoration across jurisdictional boundaries.

Landscape-scale conservation and shared stewardship offers pathways to address environmental challenges while supporting biodiversity and promoting sustainable practices.

Shared Stewardship & Landscape Scale Restoration

Landscape-scale conservation recognizes the importance of enhancing ecological connectivity across geographies. Landscape-scale approaches to conservation prioritize protecting and restoring habitat corridors, maintaining wildlife routes and migration areas, and addressing entire ecosystems. This approach enables the identification of key areas for protection and supports cross-jurisdictional conservation approaches.

Shared stewardship brings together multiple stakeholders to address environmental challenges. These challenges, such as habitat fragmentation, invasive species, and climate change impacts, are felt by more than just one community. By working collaboratively, stakeholders can pool their knowledge, resources, and expertise to develop comprehensive strategies that address the complexities. Shared stewardship promotes a sense of shared responsibility, allowing for more effective and coordinated management actions

across landscapes.

Landscape-scale conservation and shared stewardship benefit ecosystems and provide social and economic advantages. These approaches foster a sense of ownership and shared responsibility by engaging diverse stakeholders, including local communities, indigenous groups, landowners, and government agencies. They facilitate the integration of local knowledge and perspectives into decision-making processes, leading to more inclusive and equitable outcomes. Additionally, landscape-scale conservation and shared stewardship contribute to creating green jobs, promoting nature-based tourism, and supporting sustainable livelihoods, thereby enhancing local economies.

Conservation Districts as Key Partners

1. Community Engagement: Conservation districts are deeply connected to their local communities. The Conservation District are typically leaders in the community that help sell the conservation work being done in their communities. They organize workshops, create and distribute resources, and provide educational programs educational programs to raise awareness, gather input, and develop collaborative solutions that address local needs and concerns.

2. Technical Assistance: Conservation districts provide technical assistance to

landowners, offering guidance on sustainable forest management practices, erosion control, reforestation, invasive species control, and wildlife habitat improvement. They serve as a valuable resource for individuals seeking advice and support in managing their range and forested lands.

3. Conservation Programming: Conservation districts develop and implement conservation programming tailored to the specific needs of their communities. These offerings might include strategies for range and forest health, wildfire mitigation, invasive species control, and watershed protection, among others.

4. Funding Support: Conservation districts educate landowners on available programs and funding to complete conservation work on their property. They assist in navigating the application process, increasing access to resources that can support local conservation efforts.

Conservation Districts and GNA

Districts have held various roles under GNA but often are among a grouping of partners, not the prime or direct partner working with the Forest Service to complete these projects. This changed in 2023 in Louisiana when the Louisiana Association of Conservation Districts received approval to initiate a GNA contract directly between a district and the Forest Service.

Louisiana:

In 2023, the Louisiana Association of Conservation Districts began pursuing a direct GNA agreement between a district and the Kisatchie National Forest (NF). The Dugdemona Soil and Water Conservation District will partner with the Forest Service to support watershed and ecosystem restoration work in the Kisatchie NF. Proposed work will include projects to improve and/or restore the Kisatchie NF native ecosystems, implement watershed restoration projects, remove nuisance animals, support habitat surveys, and provide expertise and/or technical assistance for watershed restoration project implementation.

NACD will continue to report on this growing project as work begins.

Alaska:

Eric Geisler, the program lead for forestry in BLM's Alaska State office, admits that until recently, he had given little thought to enlisting soil and water conservation districts as cooperators. "I'd worked with the Salcha-Delta Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) following the Eagle Trail Fire, but that was in 2010," said Geisler.

In 2015, BLM's Alaska State office entered into a pair of Good Neighbor Authority agreements with various objectives, including mine reclamation, streambank restoration, and fire rehabilitation.

Recruiting partners became a top priority. One soil and water conservation district (SWCD) board supervisor sold Geisler on the idea that conservation districts could help do the job. Geisler sent a note to the state's SWCDs asking them to complete a skills inventory. He was pleased with what he heard.

"(GNA) allows us to target where we want the work to go based on the strength of the partners," Geisler said.

Other SWCDs have assisted BLM's Alaska State office with [GNA project work](#).

North Carolina:

The Madison County Soil and Water Conservation District works with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and the Forest Service to manage invasive species through Good Neighbor Authority.

[Madison County SWCD](#) is working with the Appalachian Ranger District ranger and other partners to develop projects strongly focusing on invasive species eradication on the federally managed lands of the Appalachian Ranger District of the Pisgah National Forest.

Conclusion:

Conservation districts are a key partner to local and state conservation organizations and agencies. They provide access to private landowners and a local infrastructure many partners cannot provide. They offer versatility and flexibility and can provide financial and administrative assistance to keep efforts organized. With their local knowledge, community engagement, and collaborative approaches, conservation districts are prime partners in achieving effective and sustainable natural resource management. The Good Neighbor Authority presents valuable opportunities for conservation districts to actively contribute to sustainable forest management and cross-jurisdictional conservation efforts. Embracing these opportunities will strengthen the collaboration between conservation districts and forest management agencies, leading to more effective and sustainable land management practices.

To strengthen the role of conservation districts as partners under GNA, these strategies could be considered:

- 1. Collaboration and Communication:** Foster regular communication and coordination between conservation districts, the Forest Service, BLM, state forestry agencies, and tribal governments to ensure a unified and cohesive approach towards range and forest management goals.
- 2. Maintain Resilient Landscapes:** Collaborate on landscape scale conservation efforts and continue to engage conservation districts as key local partners. Expand and advance partnerships to accelerate implementation of cross jurisdictional conservation efforts.

3. Capacity and Training: Invest in capacity-building programs that provide conservation districts with the necessary knowledge and tools to actively participate in the GNA program and implement effective land management practices.

4. Share Successes: Highlighting successes and local efforts are key to replicating these partnerships in other parts of the country. Share successful activities with state and regional partners to highlight effectiveness and continue to drive partnerships in other places. Sharing the success locally can help have buy in from local communities for conservation work being completed on federal lands.

Conservation districts are deeply connected to their local communities and can provide technical assistance, develop and implement conservation programming, and help educate landowners on available funding sources. They fill a natural role as partners under the Good Neighbor Authority.

Please contact NACD's Forestry staff leads for more information about this publication.



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