

# ***WHAT IS A DISTRICT COMMISSIONER ?***



## ***AN OVERVIEW OF THE COMMISSIONER'S ROLES***

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## WHAT IS A DISTRICT COMMISSIONER?

A District Commissioner is an appointed or elected member of the governing body of a conservation district. In taking the Oath of Office, a commissioner commits to exercising the rights and responsibilities of Commissioners as spelled out in Soil and Water Conservation Districts Law, Section 48-9-10 of the South Carolina Code of Laws.

This law charges conservation districts with the responsibility of providing first-line leadership in developing and implementing plans to meet conservation needs of the district. It also charges commissioners with the responsibility of finding the resources with which to plan and implement programs that will address the conservation needs of the district.

### **In order to be an effective member of the conservation district board a commissioner must:**

- Be familiar with the state law.
- Help identify conservation needs and assist with the planning to address these needs. Planning should be done on an annual and long-range basis.
- Work with all agencies with conservation interests and expertise to meet conservation needs.
- Cooperate with other districts and/or agencies to develop and carry out conservation plans.
- Determine funding needs and find sources of funds to meet the conservation needs.
- Keep the public informed about the conservation programs and other local, state, and federal conservation programs.
- Stay abreast of conservation issues and speak out wherever and whenever you have the opportunity to educate the public on issues that affect our natural resources.
- Find ways to evaluate the progress of your conservation programs. Evaluations should be done annually and on a long-range basis.
- Support the mission and goals of the South Carolina Association of Conservation District (SCACD) by participating in SCACD conference, workshops and events; paying annual dues; promoting programs of SCACD.
- **Finally, never relinquish your responsibilities to your staff!** Staff, whether district, SCDNR or Natural Resources and Conservation Service, exist to help you carry out the programs you help formulate. Your responsibility is to plan and to implement these programs; theirs is to assist you in this effort.

## **CONSERVATION DISTRICT AUTHORITY AND OVERVIEW**

State law created conservation districts to provide grass roots leadership for developing and implementing conservation activities. Conservation districts are subdivisions of state government. In South Carolina, there are 46 conservation districts, with the same boundaries as county boundaries.

Soil and water conservation districts are organized pursuant to Section 48-9-10 of the South Carolina Code of Laws. The Soil and Water Conservation Districts Law provides general powers and authorities of conservation districts and conservation district commissioners.

Each Conservation District has 5 commissioners authorized by the Districts Law. Two are appointed by the SCDNR Board and three are elected in the General Election. Both elected and appointed positions are for four-year terms. The elected positions appear on the ballot on a county-wide election. Commissioner appointment and election procedures are outlined in the Soil and Water Conservation District Law Sections 48-9-1210, 48-9-1220 and 48-9-1230.

In the event of an expiration of term or resignation in the appointed positions, or resignation in an elected position, the district board must recommend a candidate to fill the vacancy by completing the appropriate forms for review by the Land, Water, and Conservation Advisory Committee and final action by the SCDNR Board.

## **CONSERVATION DISTRICT PURPOSES**

Conservation districts are unique; no other agency has the responsibility that districts have. If conservation activities are to take place within a district, the district should initiate them. Other government agencies and groups may assist in these efforts, but the responsibility rests, by law, with the conservation district.

- To be responsible to the citizens of the district in matters involving resource conservation.
- To promote the wise and responsible use of natural resources.
- To develop and implement programs to protect and conserve soil, water, farmland, wood land, wildlife, energy, and riparian and wetland resources.

This handbook will provide more information about districts and the details on how you, as a commissioner, can accomplish your responsibilities.

# AN OVERVIEW OF THE COMMISSIONER'S ROLES

Commissioners must identify local conservation needs, set goals, and develop plans to achieve those goals, and ensure implementation of the plan in order to maintain effective programs.

## PLANNING

Planning is the basic tool for developing conservation district programs.

A **Long-Range Plan** is developed by the district and updated as needed. A major revision is completed every five years. This plan serves as a broad outline of your district's response to long term shifts in land use, population patterns and improvements in technology. It includes goals for all Partners: NRCS, SCDNR, District Employees and the Board of Commissioners.

An **Annual Work Plan** outlines specific objectives and activities to achieve long-range plans. The following are **guidelines** for all plans:

- The district, with its partners, must assess and define the conservation problems and needs of the district.
- All commissioners, associate commissioners, cooperating agency representatives and interested citizens should be involved.
- Commissioners should do the planning, not the paid staff. They provide you with basic information and advice.
- Keep the plan simple.
- Evaluate your success after the plan is implemented.

## INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

Conservation districts encourage volunteer cooperation of land users and the general public through information and education programs. Landowners and operators must be educated so they will understand and adopt conservation values and practices. The general public must be reached so they will understand their stake in conservation and contribute their financial, political, and volunteer support to district programs. You must also inform local, state, and federal legislators on conservation issues. Commissioners should be aware of the many ways available to communicate their message. A few examples are as follows:

- personal contact
- inviting persons to district board meetings
- newsletters
- field tours
- demonstrations
- workshops
- awards programs
- newsletters

## **LEGISLATORS**

Legislators are an important audience. Local, state, and federal laws affect district programs. Make personal contacts with all of your legislators by letter or phone calls and inform them of your conservation accomplishments and of your conservation needs. Bring your statewide and national legislative concerns to The South Carolina State Association of Conservation Districts (SCACD) and the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD). Both the State and National Association depend on support from all conservation districts in order to inform legislators of the conservation districts' needs and concerns.

## **YOUTH EDUCATION**

A major aim of conservation education is to enrich the conservation values of people. Youth education offers one of the most fertile avenues for this enrichment. Conservation districts should develop a wide variety of methods to reach youth. Some are as follows:

- sponsoring conservation workshops
- training teachers in conservation
- providing educational materials
- involving youth leaders in board meetings
- organizing a "youth board"
- developing programs and projects that involve youth
- locating conservation projects that are meaningful to youth
- assisting in developing outdoor classrooms
- planning demonstrations and tours

A wide variety of conservation education materials and programs can be found on the Internet and through SCDNR and USDA-NRCS websites.

## **PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Your conservation district's public image affects every aspect of your work. Public relations is a continuing program to help people understand what your conservation district is, what you are doing and why it is important. Good public relations can:

- inform the public of what the conservation district is and does
- promote favorable recognition of the district
- ensure that all the people in your district are aware of the availability of district assistance
- build rapport with other groups
- increase the amount of funds that your district receives
- increase the quality and amount of assistance the district obtains from cooperating agencies
- improve the quality of people who serve as conservation district commissioners or on conservation committees

The district should set goals for the basic understanding you would like the public to have about your district. In developing and maintaining your district's public relations program, make sure all information is consistent.

- Board members and associate commissioners should represent the board in person.
- Pay attention to public relations details throughout your district program; treat people warmly over the phone and in correspondence. Follow through on commitments, pay attention to cultural differences, and give adequate recognition to agencies, associations and other groups with whom you work.
- The board should determine who speaks on its behalf. Do not rely solely the staff to carry the message.

## **WORKING WITH THE MEDIA**

Whether you are engaging in information, education, public relations, or all three, you will use a whole range of media from personal contacts to mass media. Establish friendly, mutually helpful relationships with the media representatives. If you convince them of the importance of your program, they can help convince the public. In order that your district may have effective media relations you must decide:

- why you want media coverage
- who your audiences are
- which media would be most effective in reaching different audiences

## **COMMITTEES**

Conservation districts may accomplish their work through committees. Committees study district business in specific areas, and sift out important matters for the board to consider. Committees also implement and monitor decisions made by the board and gather support from organizations and agencies represented on the committee.

There are many different types of committees. A “standing committee” is a permanent committee charged with working on a basic aspect of district work. Conservation districts typically have standing committees for planning, district operations, education, finance, research, land-use planning, water quality, recreation, water resources, and soil stewardship.

Other functions of your district may require short term or “ad hoc” committees for a specific task or time period. Examples may include watershed, nominating, annual meeting, or grant committees.

The chair and board members appoint themselves, associate commissioners, district advisors, representatives of cooperating agencies and associations, or interested citizens as committee members. Look to people with an active or personal or professional interest in the committee’s purpose. Committees also serve as an entry point and training ground for people who may eventually become a District Commissioner.

Committees have no legal or official authority and cannot vote on the district board’s business or obligate district funds. However, encourage their participation. Be sure to include opportunities at board meetings for recognition of committee progress. Regardless of whether a committee is “ad hoc” or “standing”, each should have a specific mission similar to a job description for an individual.

## **YOUR BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

*As a commissioner, you should be asking some primary questions.*

**As an individual board member, are you:**

- attending and actively participating in all board meetings?
- carrying out your committee responsibilities?
- keeping abreast of local natural resource issues?
- attending area and state conservation meetings of SCACD?

**As a District Board are you:**

- identifying local conservation district goals and achieving them?
- keeping your conservation district's mission in focus?
- working effectively with district staff and cooperating agencies?
- effectively implementing district programs?
- making sure your board's policies and activities are consistent with state law?
- following correct budget and audit procedures?
- reporting to the public on your district programs?

### **COMMISSIONER DEVELOPMENT**

After a new commissioner takes office, welcome them with a letter or phone call and issue news releases announcing their new position. Formally orient new commissioners at board meetings and through personal visits. Special training workshops are held by the SCDNR-LWC, and SCACD. It is also useful to periodically rotate board members to different positions and committee assignments to broaden their experience.

### **ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONERS**

Associate commissioners are officially appointed by the board as advisors and representatives. Associates do not vote on board decisions but augment the board's knowledge and experience and assist with conservation district programs. They also offer a way to cultivate potential new commissioners, allow former commissioners to remain active in the district, and broaden community input to the district. Every two years, districts should review their roster of associate commissioners. Be sure to orient associates just as you would commissioners, and involve them in meaningful activities and projects.

### **COMMISSIONER EMERITUS**

The dedicated men and women who have served as Conservation District Commissioners do so without compensation and give freely of their time to the management of the Palmetto State's natural resources. Many of these Individuals have demonstrated exemplary service as a Conservation District Commissioner. Upon retirement, the SC Department of Natural Resources Board, upon a recommendation from a Conservation District Board and approved by the Land Water and Conservation Advisory Committee, may confer the title of Conservation District Commissioner Emeritus upon deserving individuals.



The title "Emeritus" conferred upon an individual is used to formally designate someone who has been honorably discharged from the performance of public duty for long and faithful service but still is interested in continuing to serve the conservation district. This title does not confer any powers or responsibilities but is in recognition of faithful service to the organization.

The Candidate shall be a former Conservation District Commissioner and shall be recommended for Commissioner Emeritus in writing by their conservation district. The letter should include the following information:

- Length of Service as a district commissioner
- Positions of leadership held with the conservation district
- Significant accomplishments
- Service to the community and state

## **OFFICERS OF THE BOARD**

District Boards of Commissioners normally elect the following officers in February and they take office immediately.

- Chair
- Vice-Chair
- Secretary
- Treasurer

Some boards combine the positions of Secretary and Treasurer. According to SCACD Policy, offices should rotate among the board members.

**THE CHAIR** calls, convenes, oversees and adjourns all meetings of the Board. The Chair assures that:

- A quorum is present to conduct business.
- Freedom of Information requirements are met (see Appendix).
- All partners who are making reports are present. At a minimum the Chair assures that the Board will receive reports from NRCS, SCDNR and the Districts' staff.
- Agenda is ready for each meeting and is adhered to during the meetings.
- Keeps the meeting discussions short and relevant to the business at hand.
- Oversees the establishment of committees.
- Makes sure the long-range plan and annual plan of work are written and enacted on time and carried out on an appropriate time schedule.
- Checks in with the office frequently to assure its efficient operation.
- Discusses issues that arise and keeps up good communication between the staff and the board
- Is familiar with NRCS and SCDNR programs, as well as any other agency programs that might affect the District.

**THE VICE-CHAIR** assists the Chair, performs the duties of the Chair in the absence of the Chair, and does whatever the Board assigns the position.

## **THE SECRETARY**

- Develops complete records of all district proceedings.
- Record dates, place and purpose (regular monthly, committee or special meetings).
- Records persons invited, who are absent, all who are present and the organizations they represent (if applicable) and the person who presides over the meeting.
- Records all motions in full and insists action be completed on each item of business.
- Informs the Chair of any business that should come before the board.

## **THE TREASURER**

- Develops complete and accurate records of all income and expenditures and any periodic financial reports.
- Pays bills approved by the Board and issues receipts for incoming funds.
- Maintains separate accounting of any funds received for specific purposes.
- Assures that bills authorized for payment are paid on time and recorded in the minutes.
- Arranges for surety bonds.

## **MEETINGS OF THE BOARD**

### **MEETINGS**

Meetings are fundamental to conducting conservation district business. Commissioners participate in the district board meetings, committee meetings of the SCACD, and other organizations and agencies. Regardless of the nature of the meetings, there are many techniques for making them run smoothly and efficiently whether you are presiding or not.

Participants, including the general public, should be notified well ahead of the meeting (preferably at least one week). This notification should include an agenda listing the reason for the meeting, location, time, estimated meeting length and important reference material. Most meeting agendas follow this basic order:

1. Call meeting to order
2. Minutes of previous meeting
3. Treasurer's report
4. Correspondence received
5. Reports from district staff, NRCS, SCDNR, and others
6. Old business
7. New business plans
8. Plans for next meeting
9. Adjournment

**It is a good idea to give the people attending a reminder phone call a day or two before the meeting.**

Pay close attention to meeting arrangements. Plan in advance for a comfortable room, parking, refreshments, etc. Arrange the room so that everyone can make eye contact. Use a round table when possible and consider placing nameplates in front of everyone.

### **Regularly Scheduled Meetings**

All conservation districts should hold monthly board meetings. Board meetings should have two basic purposes: to determine conservation district policy and to monitor its implementation.

***Board meetings also serve educational, social, and communication purposes.***

At these meetings, the board of commissioners takes official action on plans, programs, and functions of the district. The minutes are the official record of the transactions and proceedings of the board of commissioners and should contain complete and accurate information.

- Many districts utilize the guidebooks published by NACD for meetings guidelines
- NACD guidelines

**Closed or Executive Session**

Under certain conditions, the district board may go into executive session for discussion of a specific issue. Upon a formal motion made, seconded and carried, all parties may recess but not adjourn. Any motion to recess for a closed or executive session shall include a statement of the justification for closing the meeting, the subjects to be discussed during the time of executive session, and the time and place the meeting shall resume.

The motion to recess into executive session, including the required statement, shall be recorded in the minutes of the meeting and shall be maintained as part of the permanent records of the district. Discussion during the closed or executive session shall be limited to those subjects stated in the motion. No subjects shall be discussed at any closed meeting except for the following:

- personal matters of nonelected personnel
- consultation with an attorney for the district which would be deemed privileged in the attorney-client relationship
- matters relating to employer-employee negotiations whether or not in consultation with the representatives of the district
- preliminary discussions relating to the acquisition of real property

**NO BINDING ACTION** shall be taken during closed or executive recesses, and such recess shall not be used as a subterfuge to defeat the purposes of the Act.

After the completion of the closed or executive session, the chairman shall reconvene the regular or special meeting at the time and place specified in the original motion. The minutes shall reflect the time of the reconvening of the meeting, persons in attendance and official action taken in the reconvened meeting as a result of the closed or executive session.

**Quorum**

You must have a quorum of at least three of the five commissioners (not associate commissioners) to conduct any official business at a conservation district board meeting.

**Agenda**

The purpose of an agenda is to ensure orderly transaction of business and to give notice to the public regarding what will transpire at the meeting. Under the Freedom of Information Act, the agenda must be made available to the public at their request and posted in the office 24 hours in advance of the meeting.

The agenda must list the time, date and place of the meeting and all items to be considered at the meeting. To ensure that nothing requiring board action is overlooked, the secretary should retain a file of all incoming and outgoing correspondence and notes on any other topics the board needs to consider at the meeting. The chair of the board should work with the district staff to develop a list of all topics to be placed on the agenda. The information contained in the agenda should be reasonably detailed to inform the public of the business to be considered at the meeting and to facilitate meeting efficiency.

**Any decision or act that results in expenditure of funds, establishes or changes policy, represents an aspect, opinion or approval of an issue, or causes an obligation of any kind on the part of the district requires official action of the board of commissioners in an open meeting.**

### **Parliamentary Procedure**

Most meetings, especially formal meetings, are conducted according to parliamentary procedure, such as Roberts Rules of Order. Under these rules, a voting member suggests that the board make a decision by stating a motion (“I make a motion that we...”). A second member of the board states his or her support for the motion by seconding the motion (“I second the motion.”). If not seconded, the motion is not considered. If a motion is made and seconded, the board can then discuss the merits of the motion.

If a board member wants to change the motion, he or she can move to amend the motion (“I move that we make an amendment of the motion that...”). This amendment must be seconded and voted on. Several amendments can be added to the original motion. After discussion, the chair restates the motion and the board votes on the motion or “motion amended” and the decision is made.

A simple majority of the members present is required to pass the motion.

The above is a brief description of parliamentary procedure. Use some restraint in applying parliamentary procedure to provide the flexibility needed to address the details of issues. If the discussion becomes too controversial, such procedures may be useful and you may wish to appoint a parliamentarian.

## **DISTRICT EMPLOYEES**

Many district employees serve as the initial contact between the general public and federal, state and local programs and activities. As such, well-trained, knowledgeable employees with abilities that cover a wide range of skills are important to daily district operations.

Volunteer board members often have limited time. Conservation District employees can help you implement your programs and policy more efficiently. They can also:

- Help coordinate board activities
- Provide objective input and professional expertise
- Provide information and data as requested
- Serve as an agent of the district to contact landowners, other agencies and others regarding district business
- Provide technical assistance to landowners, provide technical and educational assistance to the public

There are a variety of paid positions that may be filled: **District Manager, District Education Coordinator, Administrative Assistant, and District Technical Personnel.**

### **Employment Procedures**

Before hiring, you should identify your needs for an employee. Analyze the tasks that need to be accomplished. Develop and/or revise the position description and establish minimum qualifications. Know what the position will cost the district and where the funds are coming from to support the position.

After deciding what the district needs and how the funds will be acquired, the district board of commissioners may authorize the hiring of an employee. Before starting active recruiting, the board needs to consider the following items:

- Details of employment
- Whether the position is full or part-time
- Probationary period
- Supervision
- Pay range
- Term of the position (permanent or temporary)
- Amount of sick and annual leave and other benefits or
- Other facts important to the position

Prepare an application form and a position announcement. Advertise the position and take applications, check references and interview the applicants. The entire board, if not on the interview team, should be briefed on applicants and interviewers' recommendations so it can make its choice.

After a candidate has accepted, notify the other applicants and establish a starting date. Make sure a new employee understands his or her responsibilities and how to carry them out .

### **Salaries and Benefits**

Just as natural resources must be stewarded with care, so should conservation district employees. Staff turnover can be very costly in time and dollars. Benefits are an excellent way to retain quality employees.

Provide employees with a fair salary, professional development opportunities and benefits. Legally required employee programs include social security, state and federal income tax and workman's compensation. The district must also adhere to equal employment opportunity and other laws that must be followed by any employer.

### **Supervision**

People are the primary resource of a conservation district. Part of your board responsibility is to supervise the paid district staff, associate commissioners, committees, and volunteers. You must also coordinate with agency personnel so everyone can carry out the conservation district mission effectively.

### **Staff Evaluations**

Conservation District employees should be evaluated yearly to clarify expectations, identify continual professional development needs, and share concerns. This is the immediate supervisor's and the chairman's responsibility. The evaluation should be in writing and discussed with the employee. You can reasonably expect the following from staff:

- Attention to details of meetings
- Complete, concise, and accurate information
- Honesty in individual and organizational relationships
- Judicious use of time
- Meeting agreed-upon deadlines with notification if deadlines cannot be met
- Prompt response to requests for information
- Prompt return of phone calls
- Excellent quality of service to the public

In return for this, staff working for your board can reasonably expect of the board:

- Fulfillment of commitments within the agreed-upon deadlines
- Proper training
- Knowledge of district organization and programs
- Candid performance appraisal and assistance in meeting performance goals
- Support in controversial situations
- Easy access to commissioners by phone or visitation
- Loyalty, confidentiality, and sensitivity
- Incentives and rewards to promote and recognize accomplishments

### **Board and Staff Relationships**

Relationships between your board and staff must be effective. It can be very difficult for a district employee to have “five bosses at once,” especially if they offer conflicting input. The Board Chairman or his designee is normally the board member who works directly with the staff and is the supervisor of the district employee. He or she should maintain a keen awareness of employee concerns and initiate evaluations, salary increases and other personnel actions. The District Manager (if your district has one) should supervise the other district employees and the Board Chairman should work through the manager.

The types of tasks performed by board members and staff should be very clear. The board sets the policy and the staff implements it. Let the staff do their respective jobs and don’t expect them to do your job, too. Keep your respective roles as clear as possible at all times.

### **Volunteers**

Most people involved in your district are volunteering their time and energy as commissioners, associates, and committee members or in other roles. For these volunteers to feel their service is worth contributing, they must see concrete achievements, and to do this they must be supervised and coordinated.

In many ways, supervising volunteers is similar to supervising paid staff. Develop position descriptions for volunteers just as you would for paid employees. This will help you focus on concrete needs for the position and assure the volunteer that you need someone to do a real job. The position description also acts as a written agreement, legally protecting the volunteer and the district. The district jointly sponsors the Earth Team Volunteer program with NRCS, which automatically provides these benefits.

Do everything you can to make volunteers feel comfortable and fulfilled in the service they are rendering to conservation. Volunteers are motivated by a variety of factors such as self-expression, philanthropy, and many others. The board should encourage these. Treat volunteers as coworkers, provide good working conditions, and promote them to greater responsibility as appropriate. Let them know how much you appreciate them, personally and professionally.

Commissioners and other conservation district volunteers serve without monetary compensation, but if they incur other expenses in the service of your district, try to reimburse them.

## **THE CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP**

**The Conservation Partnership** is an agreement entered into by the three parties (**SCDNR Land, Water and Conservation Division, S.C. Association of Conservation Districts and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service**) to facilitate the working relationship within each conservation district.

As partners, we are interdependent, having independent responsibilities, and yet we depend on each other for successful delivery of programs.

### **SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES LAND, WATER AND CONSERVATION DIVISION**

The primary mission of the SCDNR-Land, Water and Conservation Division is to ensure that the natural resources of the state are managed wisely.

As the division of state government charged with administering the Soil and Water Conservation Districts Law, the SCDNR-LWCD provides professional, technical, and financial assistance to the state's 46 conservation districts in carrying out conservation programs. The division also includes program areas in geology, hydrology, climate, habitat protection, and flood mitigation. Division staff collects and makes available to the public a wealth of information about the land and related resources for wise land resource planning decisions. The SCDNR-LWCD, assists conservation districts by:

- Providing professional and technical staff assistance
- Providing financial assistance through state-appropriated funds
- Assisting in developing annual and long-range plans for carrying out district goals and objectives
- Providing timely training for all district commissioners, associate commissioners, district staff, and other volunteers
- Developing, conducting and evaluating conservation education programs in cooperation with conservation districts
- Promoting programs of districts through the news media, exhibits, tours, conferences, visual aids, and brochures
- Securing the cooperation of State and Federal agencies in assisting districts and land users
- Informing districts of the activities of SCDNR
- Disseminating information on the activities and programs of all districts

The SCDNR has four additional divisions that contribute to the conservation of South Carolina's natural resources as well. They are the Outreach and Support Services Division, Law Enforcement Division, Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division and Marine Resources Division.

## **U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS)**

The USDA-NRCS works with landowners through conservation planning and assistance to benefit the soil, water, air, plants, and animals for productive lands and healthy ecosystems. Working at the local level, – in field offices at USDA Service Centers throughout South Carolina -- NRCS employees' understanding of local resource concerns and challenges result in conservation solutions that last. Seventy percent of the land in the United States is privately owned, making stewardship by private landowners absolutely critical to the health of our Nation's environment.

NRCS succeeds through partnerships and a cooperative working agreement with SC's Soil & Water Conservation Districts and the SC DNR-LWCD outlines how this partnership will work closely with individual farmers and ranchers, landowners, local conservation districts, government agencies, Tribes, Earth Team volunteers and many other people and groups to care for our state's natural resources.

**The District is served by a NRCS field office, usually located within the District.**

### **NRCS assistance to Districts includes:**

- Providing assistance to private landowners in developing whole-farm conservation plans
- Consulting with realtors, developers, commodity organizations, units of government, planning commission, county and city councils who need information about protecting natural resources on a watershed scale.

### **Technical services include:**

- Whole farm and total planning to use, manage and sustain our natural resources
- Designing, surveying, laying out and inspecting construction of all practices outlined in the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG)
- Inventorying and evaluating soil conditions
- Inventorying natural resource concerns and offering sustainable solutions

### **Legal responsibilities include:**

Planning and implementing conservation practices through Farm Bill cost-share programs including Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP), and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP).

In addition to providing services to the public, NRCS personnel are required to attend regularly scheduled District board meetings, special meetings called by the Board of Commissioners, and District, Area, and State Association meetings. NRCS also assists the Board in establishing priorities and developing annual and long-range plans to address conservation problems.

### **NRCS also:**

- Provides leadership in incorporation of NRCS concerns into the Partnership's annual and long-range plans
- Keeps the board informed about NRCS activities in the district, and requests that the board takes action on issues that require it
- Reviews and discusses with district officials the civil rights policies contained in the Cooperative and Mutual Working Agreements on an annual basis



## **S.C. ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS (SCACD)**

A non-governmental association of SC's Conservation Districts and their commissioners. The mission of the SCACD is to protect the natural resources of South Carolina through its 46 member Conservation Districts by providing leadership, information and tools which enable Districts to achieve their goals. SCACD offers support through conferences, workshops, awards, educational activities, and promotional assistance to maximize the effectiveness of District programs. SCACD provides Districts a voice in state and federal policy-making and legislative processes.

### **DISTRICT ACTIVITIES**

Listed here is a synopsis of most, if not all, of the items a district will be involved with each year.

#### **Annual Report**

The annual report is a published report of the district's yearly activities. The annual report can be timed to coincide with the end of the calendar year or the fiscal year. The best advise is preparing for the annual report is to collect photos and documentation throughout the course of the year. Record keeping is critical to having an accurate, comprehensive annual report to present to the public. In preparing to release this information to the public, plan your draft to be complete at the monthly board meeting prior to your scheduled publication date. This will give everyone the opportunity to make any needed changes prior to publishing.

#### **Annual Plan**

This document should be derived directly from the long-range plan. It should be 1/5th-scale model of your long-range plan with additional goals based on current needs. Specific short-term goals, which might not be included in the long-range plan, such as the completion of a grant proposal and its subsequent implementation or a pilot or trial project are examples of items that may be included in an annual plan but not the long range plan. Input from all the partners and from cooperating agencies and groups is critical to having a usable document that will product results.

#### **Audit**

Each district is required to conduct an annual financial audit. A true audit will be done by a CPA and will involve some expense on the part of the district. In addition, there will be the time involved preparing the district's financial records for the CPA. The alternative to a true audit is to have the board conduct its own financial check. The requirements for this form of audit are for two board members other than the treasurer to perform a complete review of the status of the finances of the district, including a close examination of the checking and saving account records. The DNR-LWCD should be notified upon completion of the audit. DNR-LWCD does not receive the actual results of an audit, only the notification that one has been done for the current fiscal year.

#### **Awards**

There are many award categories. Some districts have their own awards in combination with the SCACD awards. For a complete listing of the various awards, check with your District Employee. Due dates vary by contest and re typically sent with the notification forms. Rules likewise vary as to the content and the amount of supplemental documentation allowed. Districts have the option of deciding to enter a contest. The District Board will make the decision as to which awards competitions to enter. Record-keeping throughout the year will enhance your ability to put together a good awards entry.

## **Budget Request**

Both state and county governments require the submission of requests for appropriations. The timing will vary based on the planning schedule of the government unit, but will generally take place in January or February in anticipation of a July budget approval. It is extremely important that all the partners consider the district's needs for funding prior to the actual request. Be realistic with your requests, but don't be shy! It is a good idea, especially at the county level to be prepared to present your request in person. If your district provides benefits for the county, be sure to emphasize that in the proposal or request. Also, it is advantageous to "toot your own horn." Let county council know what you are doing for the citizens of the county.

## **Elections**

District responsibilities include insuring that all potential candidates know the rules and regulations regarding election to either a district commissioner or a watershed director position. It is also your responsibility to attend to petition filing requirements and deadlines and the required documentation such as ethics forms or campaign disclosure forms. You should conduct a follow-up inquiry with the local election commission to determine if the potential candidate has met the requirements for being included on the printed ballot. Following the election, a second inquiry should be done to determine the successful candidate (s). The results should be forwarded to DNR-LWCD.

## **Equipment**

Most districts own equipment for public use. It can range from the no-till type drills to mulch-laying equipment. Periodic inspection, maintenance, record keeping, and advertisement may be part of your responsibilities. Tasks will vary greatly from district to district.

## **Ethics Forms**

Responsibilities concerning ethics forms will include being familiar with the deadline for submission, and working with the district employee to insure that the copies are submitted and filed. District employees participation varies greatly from district to district. The District Employee's manual contains more information regarding the preparation of these forms. The deadline for submission is April 15th of each year. Failure to comply can result in a fine for the commissioner affected.

## **Financial Reports**

Financial reports are generally considered to be a function of the district employee. However, in your own interest, the board should be familiar with the accounting system used in the district and what reports are needed, including the due dates of each. A major part of the boards' responsibility may lie in helping to train a new district employee in the financial record keeping system.

## **Oath of Office**

Each elected official must receive the Oath of Office prior to assuming the role as an official or voting member of the District Board. A Notary Public must legally give the Oath. Documentation of who is to take the oath will generally be sent from the DNR-LWCD. Maintain the appropriate copies in the district files. A news release with an accompanying photo is also needed. (Save an extra photo for your annual report.)

## **DISTRICT PROGRAMS**

Your support and assistance with district programs is vital! The paid staff can do a great deal, but your assistance can mean the difference between an ordinary program and a very successful program.

Below is a guide to District Programs:

### **Arbor Day**

This is an annual observation that is not participated in by all districts. Use records of past events to guide your preparation for such an event or call on a staff member with experience in conducting Arbor Day observations. Typically, such an observation will involve planting one or more trees in a public place such as a school, church, or park.

### **Clinics**

A clinic is just a mini-workshop. A clinic generally is geared to one topic such as pond management, beaver control, wildlife habitat establishment, installing water bars, or irrigation. Clinics are targeted to a specific audience. Usually the district will receive a request from an individual or group for information or the district will see a need to share information on a timely subject or program.

### **Conservation Districts Youth Workshop**

This annual event for high school students is held at Lander University and focuses on natural resource conservation. Commissioners can assist in getting delegates to attend by taking advertising fliers to the schools, writing articles promoting the workshop for the local paper, speaking to youth groups or individuals regarding the workshop, and selecting the final applicants from your district. Invite your delegates to a board meeting after they have attended the workshop. This will give you an idea of how the workshop is being conducted and what the young people are learning.

### **Earth Day**

Earth Day is celebrated in many districts. Participating in this global environmental observation may provide an opportunity for the district to spread its conservation message. Tasks could be as simple as photographing the event for the news release and the annual report to completely organizing the event, manning an exhibit, or giving a presentation to a group.

### **Envirothon**

This is a team competition for high school students in which they are tested in the areas of soil, water, forestry, wildlife and a current topic such as recycling or groundwater. Any high school in the state will be eligible to register through their conservation district for the statewide competition. You may be involved with recruiting or training the team.

### **Essay Contest**

This annual writing competition topics include soil, water, forestry and wildlife. Tasks may range from distributing essay fliers, to visiting schools, putting together a judging panel, and handing out the awards. This program will vary from district to district.

### **Farm-City**

This observation is an excellent opportunity for the district to join with the agricultural and business communities to promote conservation and to celebrate the partnership of the two. Tasks might include preparing for a meeting, including organizing speakers, planning meal functions, arranging transportation and tour sites. Whether you are part of the planning or not, your presence at the functions is evidence of the district's support of both business and agriculture.

### **Photography and Poster Contest**

Sponsored for various grades, these contests are conducted annually. Rule fliers are distributed each year with the current topic and due dates for submission of entries. NACD and the NACD Auxiliary annually partner to host the National Poster Contest and the Photo Contest. Rules for the NACD contest can be found at <http://www.nacdnet.org/education/contests/>.

### **Recognition Programs**

These vary from district to district. Recognition of accomplishments, whether it is youth, board members or some segment of the public or one of your area land users, is a win-win situation. It shows the person or persons that you recognize and appreciate their work. It may also motivate others to become active in conservation. News releases should be prepared on all recognition meetings.

### **SCACD Committees**

Each commissioner is asked to serve on one of the South Carolina Association of Conservation Districts' standing committees. Commissioners should attend the meetings and provide the committee with your insight and knowledge.

### **Soil and Water Stewardship Week**

This annual program sponsored through NACD incorporates both religious and educational aspects of natural resources management. A district may be involved in distributing the materials to churches and/or schools as well as holding dinners and tours to promote the event.

### **SCACD Conferences**

These conferences are held throughout the year in partnership with SCACD, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the SCDNR-LWCD. All commissioners should attend. This is the only opportunity that you have to meet with your fellow commissioners from around the state. It is an excellent time for exchanging ideas, renewing old friendships and also finding out what is happening on the state and national conservation scene. The annual conference is also the business meeting for the SCACD.

### **SC Conservation Districts Foundation**

The Foundation is publicly supported, tax exempt organization, which seeks to promote and support education, understanding, and actions related to all phases of the conservation and protection of South Carolina's natural resources.

### **Teacher Workshop**

Sponsored by the district, these programs are held on a county and multi-county basis. Commissioners should be involved in various aspects of this district program including the planning, coordination and implementation. These courses are open to all teachers in the specific conservation district (s) that is/ are sponsoring the workshop. Depending on how the program is set up, a teacher may receive recertification and/or graduate credit.

**Watershed Conservation Districts**—A watershed conservation district is Special Purpose District created by state law covering a specific watershed (drainage area). An elected board of watershed district directors oversees maintenance and repairs to the dams and drainage canals and monitors structures from being located in the flood pool. Many flood control structures are also used for municipal and industrial water supply, fire protection and recreation. In South Carolina, there are 35 watershed conservation districts in 25 counties.

# LAWS AND AGREEMENTS

## **LAWS and why they are important:**

**Conservation District Law**—so Commissioners can understand the powers and authorities granted to them and act accordingly.

**Watershed Law**—so Commissioners can oversee the Watershed Districts and their Boards of Directors and understand how these powers and authorities fit with the Districts.

**Freedom of Information Act**—so Boards do not meet illegally or render their decisions void because they did not properly notify the public; so the Commissioners understand what materials in the local office are subject to the Act and which are not.

**Ethics Law**—so Commissioners understand what they can and cannot do as part of an elected Board as an individual elected official; so Commissioners do not ask the staff to do anything illegal; so Commissioners are not fined for not filing their Ethics Forms annually.

**Civil Rights Titles of the Voting Rights Act of 1964**—so the Board can assume that all its operations are conducted according to law and policy. It is the policy of Districts that they will comply with the state equal employment opportunity and civil rights policies. Therefore, Commissioners as individuals and elected officials must comply with these policies.

## **FORMAL AGREEMENTS:**

**Mutual Agreement with USDA and State of SC**—covers the Partners' relationship, cooperation, administrative commitment, and alliance for nondiscrimination.

**Cooperative Working Agreement with NRCS and SCDNR-LWCD**—supplements the Working Agreement, says how the partnership of NRCS, SCDNR and the District will work together on partnering, personnel, program delivery to customers, technical standards, facilities, equipment, data sharing, funding, liability and civil rights.

**Local Agreement**— agreement with no-till drill vendors or maintenance people, small farmer groups, or local governments for work during emergencies.

**Partnership Agreements**—agreement between SC Association of Conservation Districts, SCDNR-LWCD, and NRCS to work together cooperatively to provide services to all customers.

## **PLANNING TOOLS:**

**Long-range Partnership Plan**—is a list of the districts' long-range goals and how they are to be achieved. This plan is updated every five years and used to produce the annual plan at the beginning of the work year. Input from the public and all partners is included.

**Annual Partnership Plan**— is a list of annual goals and how they are to be achieved. This plan is updated annually and comes from the long-range Partnership Plan.

**Local Work Group**— under the Farm Bill, a group of people in a county identified and convened by the District to design federal conservation programs.

## ABBREVIATIONS

**For more education and information about the services and programs offered by NRCS in SC, visit their website at [www.sc.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.sc.nrcs.usda.gov).**

**APO**— Annual Partnership Plan—annual plan of operations for the District, SCDNR, and NRCS within a District.

**BMP**—Best Management Practice—conservation practice which is chosen as most practical for an individual site.

**COG**—Council of Governments, a multi-county planning office which provides resources to the local counties cities and towns in their regions. The Councils are also partners with numerous federal and state agencies, obtaining and administering grants for a variety of community-based programs and economic development initiatives. There are 10 COGs in South Carolina.

**Conservation Plan**—official NRCS and District records of land users' decisions over time to perform conservation practices. Required for conservation compliance.

**Conservation Planning**—(holistic, ecosystem, whole-farm, etc.) - working with land users to plan the best use of land and to decide on systems of conservation practices to use.

**CSP**—Conservation Stewardship Program is a voluntary conservation program that encourages producers to address resource concerns in a comprehensive manner by: undertaking additional conservation activities; and improving, maintaining, and managing existing conservation activities.

**CRP**—Conservation Reserve Program—enacted by the Farm Bill; retires cropland to trees, grass, perennial wildlife foods or a combination of the three.

**DC**-District Conservationist—NRCS position that oversees the NRCS work in a District

**EQIP**- The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers through contracts up to a maximum term of ten years in length. These contracts provide financial assistance to help plan and implement conservation practices that address natural resource concerns and for opportunities to improve soil, water, plant, animal, air and related resources on agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland.

**EWP**—The purpose of the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program is to undertake emergency measures, including the purchase of flood plain easements, for runoff retardation and soil erosion prevention to safeguard lives and property from floods, drought, and the products of erosion on any watershed whenever fire, flood or any other natural occurrence is causing or has caused a sudden impairment of the watershed.

**FOTG** - Field Office Technical Guide. Written by NRCS, it is also the District's standards and specifications for each conservation practice.

**FRPP** - The Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP) provides matching funds to help purchase development rights to keep productive farm and ranchland in agricultural uses. Working through existing programs, USDA partners with State, tribal, or local governments and non-governmental organizations to acquire conservation easements or other interests in land from land-owners. USDA provides up to 50 percent of the fair market easement value of the conservation easement.

**FSA** -USDA Farm Service Agency

**GIS** -Geographic Information System - computer mapping system used to identify important resources.

**GPS** - Global Positioning System - uses satellites for exact ground locations.

**HFRP**—Healthy Forests Reserve Program -The purpose of HFRP is to assist landowners, on a voluntary basis, in restoring, enhancing and protecting forestland resources on private lands through easements, 30-year contracts and 10-year cost-share agreements.

**LTA** - Long-term agreement - Conservation agreement covering several years of installing conservation practices with cost-share funds.

**MOA** - Memorandum of Agreement - previous agreement with Partners

**MOU** - Memorandum of Understanding - previous agreement with Partners

**NACD** - National Association of Conservation Districts

**NRCS** -Natural Resources Conservation Service

**SCACD**-South Carolina Association of Conservation Districts

**SCDEA**- S.C. Conservation District Employees Association

**SCDHEC** - SC Department of Health and Environmental Control

**SCDNR- LWCD** - S. C. Department of Natural Resources, Land, Water and Conservation Division

**Standards and Specifications** - Requirements of individual conservation practices (see FOTG)

**SWCD**- Soil and Water Conservation District

**USACE**—U.S. Army Corps of Engineers—the division of the Army that administers laws relating to navigable waterways and wetlands

**USDA**— U.S. Department of Agriculture

**WHIP**—Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program—enacted by 1996 Farm Bill. Provides cost-sharing for wildlife practices.

**WRP**—Wetland Reserve Program—pays landowners to restore wetlands and puts them under long-term contracts

## **SOUTH CAROLINA CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP**



**DNR**



**USDA NRCS**