



# Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

The Prospective Supervisor's

## Guide to Conservation Districts

Prepared by the VACD District Capacity Building Committee

Committee chairpersons:	Amy Helemetag Jolene Hamilton
Committee members:	Bill Forbes Claire Ayer Gerry Gosliga Jon Anderson Judy Doerner Tom Bushey

November, 1994

## What are Conservation Districts?

The legal purpose of Conservation Districts (Districts) has always been to provide leadership in conservation practices and conservation education in their communities. Using supervisors' connections with their communities and their knowledge of local natural resource needs and issues, Conservation Districts work to solve environmental problems in a number of ways.

Conservation Districts implement natural resource conservation programs of other agencies and organizations. One example is the organization of workshops for the State Department of Agriculture to teach farmers about Accepted Agricultural Practices. Districts put together and support folks with issues and ideas in common. An example of that is the "Conservation Congress" sponsored by the Otter Creek District. Each year, Otter Creek works with several environmental groups, conservation agencies, and local businesses to put on a local forum designed to discuss selected controversial issues. Districts identify natural resource needs in their communities and arrange for technical and cost-share assistance to help land users deal with the problems. This help is often from federal and state agencies who have agreed to provide such assistance to Districts. It may also be in the form of grants obtained by Districts to address specific needs.

Districts are active in environmental education for youths and adults. Lamoille District, for example, owns and operates a nature center that has become the focal point of the community's environmental education efforts. Many Districts sponsor "Conservation Field Days": day long, hands on, conservation workshops for local elementary schools. Windham District sponsors teacher workshops on inquiry based science that center on the use of "Gro Labs", mini indoor green houses. Several Districts provide educational workshops for adults on topics such as pond planning and maintenance or forest management. Districts also organize community projects such as stream bank restorations, nature trails, and river monitoring.

Each District has different local needs and board characteristics that determine how it will focus its conservation energies. Each board has a long range plan, an annual plan of work, and an annual working calendar that will tell you what the priorities of your District are. As supervisors and associate supervisors join the board with their personal interests and skills, boards adjust and/or expand their focus to make the best use of new talent.

## The History of Conservation Districts

In 1935, following the dust bowl period of the Midwest, Congress ordered the establishment of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) within the Department of Agriculture (USDA). It required states receiving benefits from the program to enact legislation that provided for the prevention of soil erosion. Since successful natural resource conservation programs depend on local involvement and ownership, the USDA developed standard legislation creating Soil Conservation Districts in each state. The purpose of the legislation was to allow SCS to provide conservation programs through Districts as a way to bridge the gap between federal government priorities and local needs. The arrangement gave both state and local government a stake in the program.

## The Function of Conservation Districts

The function of Conservation Districts is to take available technical, financial, and educational resources and focus or coordinate them so that they meet the needs of the land user.

Districts encourage volunteer cooperation of landowners and the general public through information and education. They also inform local, state, and federal legislators about the implications of conservation issues that they address~

The focus of Vermont's Conservation Districts has widened over the years. What began as an interest in agriculture and soil erosion prevention now encompasses all natural resource issues, especially water quality. Districts are also involved with education of the public, groundwater, wetlands, wildlife, recreation, sustainable agriculture, and urban conservation.

## The Conservation Partnership

The Soil Conservation Service (SCS), Conservation Districts, the Natural Resource Conservation Council (NRCC or the Council), and the UVM Extension System form "The Conservation Partnership". The purpose of The Partnership is to advocate and deliver a watershed based ecosystem approach to natural resource and environmental issues. By operating as a partnership, Districts, SCS, the Council, and Extension provide better natural resource conservation services than any of one of them could

deliver alone. Nearly all of the work that Districts do at local, state, and national levels involves one or more of our conservation partners.

SCS is the only federal agency receiving funds from Congress to assist Districts, providing Districts with technical advice and expertise. SCS provides the personnel, equipment, and resource data necessary to plan and apply natural resource conservation programs. Districts and SCS often share resources such as office space and equipment, field equipment, and vehicles.

The Council (NRCC) provides Districts with administrative, legislative, and educational assistance as well as partial funding. It is responsible for the development, formulation, and review of policies concerning conservation matters in Vermont. The Council maintains Districts' primary relationship with state agencies and the Vermont legislature, acting as a liaison between all agencies involved in any aspect of the conservation of natural resources. Through its staff, the Council provides advice and counsel to Districts. It is the primary source of assistance in personnel matters, helping Districts with policy, training, and recruitment.

The University of Vermont Extension System is an important source of leadership development programs for District supervisors and personnel. Extension develops and implements educational programs for landowners, consultants, and the public in the broad area of sustainable agriculture. It also serves Districts as a source of information on other conservation topics and works with Districts to solve conservation problems.

### Important Alliances

Districts form conservation and education oriented alliances with many groups outside of the Conservation Partnership. These range in duration and focus from single issue, temporary alliances to long standing partnerships with multiple objectives. Partners can be anyone who shares an interest or goal with Conservation Districts such as schools, businesses, or private interest groups. They may be a local land trust, town government, or the solid waste district. Districts are equipped to be *catalysts* in bringing together facets of the community that will benefit from a united undertaking to address natural resource problems.

## The Supervisor's Job

Supervisors are elected by local land owners to serve on their District's five person board. Many Districts have associate supervisors who work with boards in areas of special interest to them, but do not have a vote on official District policy.

Each supervisor and associate supervisor brings different knowledge and experience to the board. Some supervisors enjoy planning and organizing while others are happiest implementing "hands on" types of projects. Since the Conservation District is placed in a leadership position by law, it must be able to develop supervisors' leadership skills to accomplish its objectives. A few supervisors will serve as up-front persons by presiding at public functions sponsored by the District or by representing the District at events that are related to conservation. Others will communicate important information to their local media. Most supervisors are not born with these skills, but training and assistance is available within the Conservation Partnership and through the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD).

It takes all kinds to make a well rounded team. There are, however, a few things that all supervisors need to be. All supervisors need to be willing and able to devote adequate time to the job. Time commitment can be flexible and may vary with the supervisor's job, District programs, and personal capabilities, but all supervisors must pull their share of the work. Each District has an annual work plan that should give potential supervisors a good idea of monthly projects and time commitments.

All supervisors should be able to work effectively in a team, considering the mission and good of the group above personal biases. They should prepare for, attend, and actively participate in all board meetings. They should also plan to attend meetings of area and state associations of Conservation Districts whenever possible.

District supervisors need to develop an understanding of resource management, a vision of the future, and an ability to use the organization of the District. At first glance, this seems like a tall order for new supervisors, but they are not alone. Not only do we have the Conservation Partnership, we also have state (VACD) and national (NACD) organizations of Conservation Districts to assist us.

The Vermont Association of Conservation Districts is the voluntary association of all fourteen of Vermont's Districts. Serving as the voice of Conservation Districts in Montpelier, it develops positions on state wide issues and recommends state policy to the legislature. It organizes the lobbying efforts that are critical to conservation law and practice and to the funding of Conservation Districts in Vermont. It also serves as a forum for ideas and communication for Districts by organizing newsletters, state wide meetings, and area workshops for supervisors.

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) performs the same functions (and more) at the national level. It represents state associations and maintains a liaison with various conservation organizations and agencies and with members of Congress. It is also a national voice for Districts, tracking and analyzing legislation, lobbying, testifying in Congress as necessary, and sponsoring special publicity efforts for Districts. Both VACD and NACD work toward the achievement of maximum efficiency in the operations of Districts.

### Finally

Society needs knowledgeable people who can work out solutions, find common ground, and prevent needless turf battles in natural resource conservation. Those knowledgeable people are Conservation District supervisors. To ensure collaboration and integration, Districts must actively seek out diversity in their communities as they create new partnerships and networks aimed at solving natural resource problems.

Supervisors are the people who should see all sides of conservation issues. It is up to Districts to reach out to other groups and let them know that Districts share many of their concerns and that we are in a position to do something about it. Our partners are ready, willing, and able to assist us. Great things can happen if we use what we already have and add thought and energy to it