"To conserve natural resources on all lands in Washington, in collaboration with conservation districts and partners."
Meeting Agenda

Thursday, March 17, 2022

Business Meeting

**Held virtually due to COVID-19**

**Time**

Please note that the times listed below are estimated and may vary. Please visit the SCC website for the most up-to-date meeting information.

**Meeting accommodations**

Persons with a disability needing an accommodation to participate in SCC public meetings should call Lori Gonzalez at 360-407-7417, or call 711 relay service. All accommodation requests should be received no later than Wednesday, March 9, 2022 to ensure preparations are appropriately made.

**Meeting Coordinates**

At 8:30 a.m. on March 17, 2022, please log into the meeting using this link. You may use your computer audio, or dial into the meeting using the information provided after logging in. SCC staff requests that you self-mute your audio line to allow for full discussion by Commissioners.

**Public Comment**

Public Comment will be allowed prior to the beginning of all action topics. Comments will be limited to three (3) minutes per comment.

**Agenda – Please note: all agenda items needing action will be listed under Tab 1.**

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<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
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<th>ITEM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:30 a.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Call to order/Welcome/Introductions</strong></td>
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<td>• Roll Call</td>
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<td>• Pledge of Allegiance</td>
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<td>• Additions/Corrections to agenda items</td>
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<td>• Welcome Director Christopher Pettit</td>
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<td>• Thank You to outgoing SCC Interim Director, Kirk Robinson</td>
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<tr>
<td>8:50 a.m.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td><strong>Consent Agenda – call for public comment</strong> <em>(Action item)</em></td>
<td>Chairman Williams</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>a. January 20, 2022 Draft Meeting Minutes</td>
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<td>8:55 a.m.</td>
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<td>1. District Operations – call for public comment <em>(Action item)</em></td>
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<td>b. Rock Lake Conservation District Mid-term Appointment</td>
<td>Comm. Cochran</td>
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<td>c. Pierce Conservation District Election</td>
<td>Bill Eller</td>
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<td>9:10 a.m.</td>
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<td>1. Policy &amp; Programs – call for public comment <em>(Action item)</em></td>
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<td>d. Agricultural Conservation Easement Sponsorship</td>
<td>Kate Delavan</td>
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<td>e. Draft Sustainable Farms and Field Guidelines</td>
<td>Alison Halpern</td>
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<td>9:30 a.m.</td>
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<td>2. Policy &amp; Programs - <em>(Information only)</em></td>
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<td>a. Voluntary Stewardship Program Update</td>
<td>Packet item only</td>
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<td>b. Conservation District Demand for Conservation Easement Programming</td>
<td>Kate Delavan</td>
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<td>c. Legislative Session Review</td>
<td>Ron Shultz</td>
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<td>10:25 a.m. – 15 MINUTE BREAK</td>
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<td>10:40 a.m.</td>
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<td>1. Budget and Finance - call for public comment <em>(Action item)</em></td>
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<td>f. 2023-2025 Budget Build Timeline and Process</td>
<td>Sarah Groth</td>
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<td>11:10 a.m.</td>
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<td>2. District Operations – <em>(Information only)</em></td>
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<td>d. District Operations Regional Manager Report</td>
<td>Shana Joy</td>
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<td>e. Center for Technical Development Update</td>
<td>Packet item only</td>
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<td>11:40 a.m.</td>
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<td>2. Partner Updates – <em>(Information only)</em></td>
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<td>f. Environmental Protection Agency Region 10 Update</td>
<td>Nick Peak</td>
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<td>g. Department of Fish and Wildlife</td>
<td>Mike Kuttel, Jr.</td>
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<td>h. Natural Resources and Conservation Service Update</td>
<td>Packet item only</td>
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<td>i. National Association of Conservation Districts Update</td>
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<td>12:00 p.m. – LUNCH</td>
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<td>1:00 p.m.</td>
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<td>Thurston Conservation District Virtual Tour Presentation w/ time for Q &amp; A</td>
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<td>2:30 p.m.</td>
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<td>2. Commission Operations – <em>(Information only)</em></td>
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<td>j. SCC General Update</td>
<td>Director Pettit</td>
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<td>2:45 p.m.</td>
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<td>Closing remarks- Adjourn</td>
<td>Chairman Williams</td>
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Regular Business Meeting ~

The Washington State Conservation Commission (Commission/SCC) met virtually on January 20, 2022. Chairman Daryl Williams called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m.

**Note:** All meeting materials can be found on our meetings webpage. You will find the meeting packet with background information, presentations and past meeting information.

**COMMISSIONERS PRESENT**

Daryl Williams, Chairman, Governor Appointee  
Larry Cochran, Vice-Chairman, elected eastern region rep.  
Sarah Spaeth, Governor Appointee  
Dean Longrie, elected west region rep.  
Harold Crose, elected central region rep.  
Perry Beale, Department of Agriculture  
Terra Rentz, Department of Natural Resources  
Jeanette Dorner, Washington Association of Conservation Districts  
Jim Kropf, Washington State University  
David Giglio, Department of Ecology

**COMMISSION STAFF PRESENT**

Kirk Robinson, Interim Executive Director  
Mike Baden, Northeast Regional Manager  
Brian Cochrane, Habitat & Monitoring Coordinator  
Jean Fike, Northwest Regional Manager  
Alicia McClendon, Administrative Assistant  
Lori Gonzalez, Executive Assistant  
Josh Giuntoli, Southwest Regional Manager  
Sarah Groth, Fiscal Manager  
Alison Halpern, Scientific Policy Advisor  
Laura Meyer, Communications Director  
Shana Joy, District Operations Manager  
Levi Keeseecker, Natural Resources Scientist  
Ron Shultz, Policy Director  
Bill Eller, Voluntary Stewardship Coordinator  
Jon Culp, Water Resources Program Manager  
Cody Makiva, IT Planning & Policy Manager

**PARTNERS REPRESENTED**

Nicholas Peak, US Environmental Protection Agency Region 10  
Tom Salzer, WA Association of Conservation Districts  
Ryan Baye, WA Association of Conservation Districts  
Roylene Comes At Night, USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service  
Michael Kuttel, Jr., WA State Department of Fish and Wildlife  
Angela Reseland, WA State Department of Fish and Wildlife  
Doug Rushton, National Association of Conservation Districts

**GUESTS ATTENDED**

Please see “Attachment A” for full list of attendees.

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Consent Agenda (Action)

**Draft December 2, 2021 Business meeting minutes and draft December 21, 2021 Special meeting minutes**
Motion by Commissioner Cochran to approve the Consent Agenda. Seconded by Commissioner Crose. Motion carries.

**Policy and Programs (Action)**

**Irrigation Efficiency Grants Program Policy (IEGP) Recommendation**

Motion by Commissioner Crose to approve the Irrigation Efficiency Grants Program policy recommendations as presented on pages 24-26 of the January 20, 2022 meeting packet. Seconded by Commissioner Longrie. Motion carries.

**Salmon Recovery Bill**

Motion by Commissioner Dorner for the Commission to acknowledge the importance of salmon and salmon recovery, and further acknowledges the need for riparian habitat protection and restoration. The Commission is neutral on HB 1838. The Commission is committed to continuing to engage in the discussion and offer ideas on how voluntary, incentive-based approaches can meet the objectives of improving riparian areas and salmon populations. Commission staff may engage with legislators, the Governor’s Office, and other agencies to offer how voluntary conservation and incentives can contribute to accelerated riparian habitat protection and restoration. Seconded by Commissioner Longrie. Motion carries. Commissioner Giglio representing the Department of Ecology abstains.

**District Operations (Action)**

**2022 Conservation Accountability and Performance Program (CAPP) guidelines**

Motion by Commissioner Cochran to approve the Conservation Accountability and Performance Program as presented on pages 11-22 of the January 20, 2022 meeting packet, for implementation in 2022. Seconded by Commissioner Spaeth. Motion carries.

**Cowlitz Conservation District Mid-term Supervisor Appointment**

Motion by Commissioner Longrie to appoint Joe Gardner to the Cowlitz Conservation District Board of Supervisors. Seconded by Commissioner Beale. Motion carries.

**Commission Operations (Action)**

**State Conservation Commission Executive Director Appointment**

Motion by Commissioner Longrie to appoint Christopher Pettit as the next Executive Director of the Washington State Conservation Commission. Chris will start March 1, 2022 with a salary set to $136,000.00 / annually, as allowed by the Office of Financial Management. Interim Director Kirk Robinson shall remain on staff until March 15, 2022 to allow for a smooth and informative transition between Directors. Seconded by Commissioner Cochran. Motion carries.

Chairman adjourned at 2:03 p.m.
Attendees

Craig Nelson
Kate Delavan
Nick Vira
Paige DeChambeau
Dana Coggon
Mike Mumford
Angela Reseland
Bill Eller
Doug Rushton
Stuart Crane
Dean Hellie
Jack Clark
Jennifer Boie
Josh Giuntoli
Karla Heinitz
Kristen Harma
Mike Tobin
Linda Lyshall
Ilene Le Vee
John Foltz
Mark Craven
Joe Crumbley
Kristin Marshall
Carrie Brausieck
TO: Conservation Commission Members
Christopher Pettit, SCC Executive Director

FROM: Alicia McClendon, Administrative Assistant
Shana Joy, Southeast Regional Manager

SUBJECT: Rock Lake Conservation District Mid-term Supervisor Appointment

Action Item X
Informational Item

Summary:
The SCC received one application for a mid-term appointment on the Rock Lake Conservation District Board of Supervisors.

The application was sent to all Commission members for their review prior to the March 17th business meeting. Commissioners and Commission staff followed the process adopted in March of 2018 to conduct a more comprehensive vetting of the applications received for Commission appointment, including conducting an interview with the candidate listed below and contacting references.

A recommendation for appointment will be given by the appropriate area elected commission member.

Conservation District Mid-Term Supervisor Application

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conservation District</th>
<th>Name of Applicant(s)</th>
<th>Area Commissioner</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rock Lake</td>
<td>1. Erik Logen</td>
<td>Larry Cochran</td>
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Requested Action:
After recommendation and discussion, members will appoint the applicant to the conservation district board, as appropriate.

Staff Contact:
Alicia McClendon, amclendon@scc.wa.gov
Shana Joy, sjoy@scc.wa.gov
March 17, 2022

TO: Conservation Commission Members
    Christopher Pettit, SCC Executive Director

FROM: Bill Eller, Conservation Commission Election Officer

SUBJECT: Investigation of Pierce Conservation District election allegations

Action Item X

Informational Item

Summary:

Staff recommends the Conservation Commission board (Commission) not certify and announce the official winner of the Pierce Conservation District (PCD) election. The issue that came to light before the PCD election related to a written candidate statement the issue rises to the level of significant noncompliance with election procedures necessary to invalidate the election.

Requested Action:

The Commission should not certify and announce the official winner of the PCD election as the issue presented did establish a finding of significant noncompliance with WAC Chapter 135-110 and the election procedures published for this election cycle.

Staff Contact:

Bill Eller, beller@scc.wa.gov

Background and Discussion:

On March 2, 2022, the Commission received a complaint from Ms. Monika Warner, a declared candidate for the PCD election, about the upcoming March 23, 2022 PCD election through its online Election Feedback Form. The complaint is as follows:

I have not had equal access for the public to review my bio and statement. Acceptance of my candidacy was delayed from 2/18/22 to 3/2/22. I am unclear when my opponent's information began being publicized on the website.
To Elections Conservations Commission,

I am a candidate for the Board of the Pierce Conservation District. While I submitted my candidate requirements and information by the deadline, my bio and statement was not posted for public review at the same time as the other candidate(s).

I believe this is in direct conflict with your guidelines:
A district may publish candidate optional information (a candidate statement). If a district chooses to publish information about candidates, it must provide equal opportunity for publication and equivalent space to each candidate.

This troubles me. Is there a provision for extending the deadline so interested supporters can request a ballot, and then delaying/ extending the voting period? If not, would I need to wait until the current process is complete to challenge the election?

I cannot be certain if this was accidental or intentional to NOT process my package and post the information. If I had not checked your website yesterday, this error in publicity and possibly being left off the ballot would have gone unnoticed for most of the election period.

I am really excited to be a part of this process and hope we can get the election on track.

Thank you,

Monika Warner

The complaint involves the district’s process to solicit and publish written candidate statements.

At a regular board meeting on December 17, 2021, Ms. Kristine Lewis, PCD Grant and Contract Coordinator, had been appointed by the PCD board as their election supervisor for the 2022 election cycle, as per PCD board resolution.

PCD set their mail-in only election for March 23, 2022. The candidate filing deadline was February 18, 2022. Two candidates filed by the candidate filing deadline:

1. Mr. John Hopkins, the incumbent. He filed the candidate required information (“PF-A” form) and the candidate optional information (a biography and candidate statement) by the deadline. His candidate optional information (biography and statement) was posted by PCD staff on the PCD web page on February 22, 2022 at 4 pm.

2. Ms. Monika Warner, a new candidate. She filed the candidate required information (“PF-A” form) and the candidate optional information (a biography and candidate statement) by email, on February 18, 2022 at 2 pm, before the filing deadline. However, her email was apparently caught in
the PCD’s email spam filter that day. Her candidate optional information was not posted by PCD staff at that time.

On March 1, 2022, after waiting for a response from the PCD on the status of her candidate application, Ms. Warner contacted the PCD. During that contact, PCD staff located her email and retrieved the PF-A form and candidate optional information. On this same day, the candidate optional information for John Hopkins was taken off the PCD web page (“unpublished”) by PCD staff so that the web page could be repopulated with both Mr. Hopkins’ and Ms. Warner’s candidate’s biographies and statements.

On March 2, 2022, PCD staff again posted Mr. John Hopkins’ candidate optional information on the PCD web page and posted Ms. Monika Warner’s candidate option information for the first time to the web page.

Ms. Warner’s candidate optional information (biography and statement) were not posted until eight days after receipt by the PCD. The effect of this lapse in posting time was to allow Mr. John Hopkins’ candidate optional information to be the sole candidate optional information posted on the PCD web page for eight days during the voting period.

On March 2, 2022, after receiving the complaint from Ms. Warner, Commission staff immediately began an investigation, as per WAC 135-110-790. During the initial investigation, and other issue came to light pertaining to the PCD soliciting voters through direct emails to request ballots using the PCD’s newsletter email list, which contains voters who do not reside within the PCD boundaries. Therefore, some voters receiving the direct email solicitation from the PCD would not be eligible to voter in PCD’s election.

Investigation
Commission staff spoke with Ms. Kristine Lewis, PCD Grant and Contract Coordinator, about the complaint on March 2, 2022. She confirmed that, as part of her duties as election supervisor, that both declared candidates submitted their candidate required information and candidate optional information by the February 18, 2022 candidate filing deadline. She also confirmed that Ms. Warner’s candidate optional information was received by the candidate filing deadline, but not discovered by the PCD until March 1, 2022, resulting in a delay of eight days between receipt and publication.

The PCD board adopted a candidate optional information policy on April 4, 2013 and that policy was in effect at the time of this incident. That policy reads as follows:
District Election Policy
Candidate Biography and Statement

The Pierce Conservation District will include a biography and statement for each declared candidate on the District’s website and Facebook page.

**Biography**
The biography submitted by candidates must not exceed a total of 100 words and should include elected experience, other professional experience, education and community service.

If a candidate does not submit a biography, a statement will be issued with the text “No biography information submitted” for that candidate.

**Statement**
The statements submitted by candidates must not exceed a total of 100 words and should include candidate’s strengths and what expertise they bring to the District’s Board of Supervisors if elected.

If a candidate does not submit a statement, a statement will be issued with the text “No statement information submitted” for that candidate.

**Biography and Statement Format**
All biographies and statements must be typed. Use italics only to emphasize specific words or statements. No other formatting is allowed.

Don’t use:
• Bolding, underlining or all caps.
• Tables, list, bullets, or other formatting tools.
• Obscene, profane, libelous, racial or defamatory language.

Any bold, underlining or all caps submitted will be changed to italics. Statements and biographies exceeding word limits are shortened by deleting full sentences from the end until the limit is reached.

**Candidate Photo Guidelines**
If candidates wish to include a photo with their biography and statement (photos optional), the following guidelines must be followed:
• All photos must be digital (JPEG or TIFF format) and submitted online.
• Current photo’s only (taken within 5 years)
• Head and shoulders only portrait
Light colored, plain background
Photos with scenery, flags or other background settings will not be accepted.
Color photos preferred, black and white is acceptable.
Judicial robes, law enforcement or military type uniforms are prohibited. No photo may reveal clothing or insignia suggesting that you hold a public office.

Once the photo is submitted, it becomes property of the Pierce Conservation District. The Pierce Conservation District will not be responsible for your photo appearing in publications other than on the District’s website and/or Facebook page under candidate information.

Disclaimer
The District’s Elections Officer will review the candidate’s biography and statement for accuracy and proper content. If the Elections Officer finds there to be inaccuracies or no proper content, the candidates’ biography and/or statement will not be published.

If the Elections Officer finds submission of the candidates’ biography and statement to be accurate and will proper content, the information will be printed exactly as received.

Though PCD is not required to have such a policy under the conservation district election code (Washington Administrative Code (WAC) Chapter 135-110), the Commission strongly encourages all conservation districts to adopt such a policy. In September 2015, the Commission’s Guide was amended to provide a sample candidate information policy.¹

Analysis

The Revised Code of Washington (RCW) Title 29A generally governs elections in Washington and includes the duties of county auditors and county elections departments. Specifically, RCW 29A.04.216 sets out the duties of county auditors and also sets out the exception to those duties. One of the exceptions applies to conservation district elections. That exception is listed here:

…This section does not apply to general or special elections for any city, town, or district that is not subject to RCW 29A.04.321 and 29A.04.330, but all such elections must be held and conducted at the time, in the manner, and by the officials (with such notice, requirements for filing for office, and certifications by local officers) as provided and required by the laws governing such elections.²

¹ The policy can be found in the current version of the Guide, Appendix C, Sample Candidate Information Template, pages 18-19.
² RCW 29A.04.216
The duties of the county auditor apply to all elections except “general or special elections for any … district that is not subject to… RCW 29A.04.330.”

The general provisions of RCW 29A.04.330 do not apply to “… conservation districts, or district elections at which the ownership of property within those districts is a prerequisite to voting, all of which elections shall be held at the times prescribed in the laws specifically applicable thereto…[.]”

So, therefore, while RCW Chapter 29A governs general elections in Washington State, it does not govern conservation district elections. Conservation District elections are governed by RCW Chapter 89.08, WAC Chapter 135-110, and elections policy and procedures as determined by the Commission, the state agency charged with establishing procedures for elections.

The Commission is authorized to establish conservation district election procedures. “The Commission shall establish procedures for elections, canvass the returns and announce the official results thereof.”

The Commission has adopted election rules. District elections are to be conducted annually, and must comply with election rules and procedures.

The election procedures exist to assist conservation districts and conservation district supervisors in the election, appointment, and replacement of supervisors in the State of Washington, and to assure fair treatment of all parties involved in such proceedings, and to provide guidance for compliance with WAC Chapter 135-110.

In the event the rules, procedures, or both are not substantially followed, the Commission may make a determination of significant noncompliance. Significant noncompliance consists of failures to follow these procedures that, in the sole judgment of the Commission, may (1) affect the outcome of an election; (2) affect the appointment of a supervisor; or (3) deny voters their right of privacy in voting. If a determination of significant noncompliance is made, the Conservation Commission may choose not to certify the election.

WAC 135-110-430 allows a district to publish candidate-provided information. To assist voters in the selection of a candidate during voting, a conservation district may publish information provide by a nominated or declared write-in candidate. Further, if the district chooses to publish information about candidates, it must provide equal opportunity for publication and equivalent space to each candidate. The full text of WAC 135-110-430 is below:

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3 Ibid.
4 RCW 29A.04.330 (1) (b)
5 RCW 89.08.190
6 WAC Chapter 135-110, effective November 19, 2010, amended October 22, 2020
7 See WAC 135-110, sections .110, .790, and .795
8 WAC 135-110-430
Conservation district may publish candidate-provided information.

(1) To assist voters in the selection of a candidate during voting, a conservation district may publish information provided by nominated and declared write-in candidates.

(2) If a conservation district chooses to publish information about candidates, it must provide equal opportunity for publication and equivalent space to each nominated and declared write-in candidate.

(3) Candidate information provided by candidates and published by the conservation district may be mailed or delivered to voters before election day, but may not be provided to voters at poll sites on election day.9

The Guide builds on WAC 135-110-430 by stating that,

“[t]o assist voters in the selection of a candidate during voting, a conservation district may publish candidate optional information provided by candidates. Conservation districts should adopt a policy to set the parameters for publishing such candidate optional information.”10

In analyzing both the WAC and Guide related to this question, if a district chooses to publish information provided by the candidate, it must provide equal opportunity for publication and equivalent space to each candidate.

This was not done in this case. Ms. Warner was denied equal opportunity and equivalent space since her candidate biography and statement was not posted to the PCD web page for eight days.

The PCD failed to follow its own candidate information format and content policy. That policy requires that “[t]he Pierce Conservation District will include a biography and statement for each declared candidate on the District’s website and Facebook page.” Both candidates submitted biographies and statements, but only one was initially posted to the PCD website, resulting in unequal treatment for eight days during the election.

The failure of PCD to follow its own policy is a cause of concern with regards to conservation district elections, and this election in particular. As divisions of local government, conservation districts must create, adopt, and follow policies relevant to their operations, and elections are no different. This failure of the PCD to follow its own policies may result in a violation of the Conservation Accountability and Performance Program (CAPP) standards, but that is not the purpose or focus of this memorandum.

9 Ibid.
10 See Guide, page 6, Conservation District Duties
Conclusion
Candidate Optional Information Process Error

SCC staff, after conducting our initial investigation, concluded that the eight day period between the receipt of Ms. Warner's candidate optional information and its publication by the PCD to their web page was a significant noncompliance with conservation district election procedures and rules, such that it "may affect the outcome of an election….".

PCD should ensure that its candidate biography and statement policy is followed and consistently applied in future elections. Commission regional staff assigned to PCD should review election policy and procedure with PCD supervisors and staff to ensure compliance. If email filing of the PF-A and candidate optional information is allowed, the PCD should ensure a policy and procedure that routinely checks spam folders and accounts for other electronic measures that may cause similar issues.

In the present case, for the aforementioned reasons, we find significant noncompliance with the election rules and procedures. We find that PCD failed to follow its own policy with regards to candidate optional statement process.

PCD Solicitation of Possible Ineligible Voters

SCC staff, after conducting our initial investigation, concluded that solicitation of voters by direct emails to request ballots by the PCD using its newsletter email list may sow confusion and consternation among voters who are later deemed ineligible to vote by the PCD when the PCD evaluates their request, but otherwise does not rise to the level of significant noncompliance with conservation district election procedures and rules.

SCC staff have advised the PCD to either refrain from using the newsletter list to directly solicit by email voters to request ballots, or to “scrub” the list to ensure that only eligible voters are solicited.

The Commission actively promotes the sovereignty of local government by allowing for procedural variations, whenever possible, among conservation districts related to how they conduct elections. Illustrations of this can be found in all aspects of elections procedures (choosing an election date, picking the type of election, and advertising methods are examples). Regardless of which variation they choose, all conservation districts and the Commission place great value in the integrity of the election process.

Next Steps (if informational item):
Once the election officer completes the investigation, the election officer “shall make a written report to the executive director of the results of the investigation.” Then,

11 WAC 135-110-110
12 WAC 135-110-970 (4) (b)
(5) The executive director shall review the report of the investigation and make a
determination that:

(a) The complaint does not rise to the level of significant noncompliance with election
procedure sufficient to warrant the noncertification of the election, as per WAC 135-
110-795; or

(b) The complaint does rise to the level of significant noncompliance with election
procedure sufficient to warrant the noncertification of the election, as per WAC 135-
110-795.

(6) If the executive director determines that:

(a) The complaint does not rise to the level of significant noncompliance with election
procedure sufficient to warrant the noncertification of the election, the executive
director may recommend that the election be certified and announced by the
conservation commission.

(b) The complaint does rise to the level of significant noncompliance with election
procedure sufficient to warrant the noncertification of the election, the executive
director may recommend that the election not be certified and announced, and
request that the conservation district hold another election as per the procedure in
WAC 135-110-780.13

Once the Executive Director makes a decision, that decision is brought to the Conservation
Commission for their final determination. This can be done at a special meeting of the
Conservation Commission, or during a regularly scheduled Conservation Commission meeting.
Only after the Conservation Commission declines to certify and announce the results of the PCD
election can the PCD take further action to fill the vacancy.14

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13 WAC 135-110-970
14 WAC 135-110-780. The further action would be to seek a court order from superior court to hold another election.
March 9, 2022

Jeanette Dorner, Chair  
Pierce Conservation District  
P.O. Box 1057  
Puyallup, WA 98371

Dear Ms. Dorner:

The Washington State Conservation Commission (Commission) oversees the procedures by which conservation districts perform their elections.

On March 2, 2022, the Commission received a complaint from Ms. Monika Warner, a declared candidate for the Pierce Conservation District (PCD) election, about the upcoming March 23, 2022 PCD election. Commission staff immediately began an investigation, and found that Ms. Warner’s biography and candidate statement were not given equal treatment by the PCD, resulting in an eight-day delay between receipt of those materials by the PCD and its publication of those materials on its web site. This delay resulted in unequal treatment for Ms. Warner in comparison to the other candidate in the election.

Election procedures allow a district to publish candidate-provided information. To assist voters in the selection of a candidate during voting, a conservation district may publish information provided by a nominated or declared write-in candidate. However, if the district chooses to publish information about candidates, it must provide equal opportunity for publication and equivalent space to each candidate.

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1 WAC 135-110-790  
2 WAC 135-110-430  
3 WAC 135-110-430
The Commission is required to canvass the results of conservation district elections and announce the official results. In order to canvass the results of the election the Commission must determine the authenticity of the election.

After their investigation, Commission staff concluded that the election could not be authentic, because of the unequal treatment of one of the candidates, as required by the WAC. Further, given that the PCD mail-in only election is set to conclude on March 23, 2022, Commission staff do not believe that there is not enough time for any viable remedial action that could be taken by the PCD to rectify this error.

As a result, Commission staff recommend the election not be certified by the Commission and the PCD be directed to seek another election from the Pierce County Superior Court. Upon review of the staff recommendation and in compliance with the requirements of state law, I have concurred with the recommendation.4

The Commission typically takes action to certify or not certify conservation district elections at its May Commission meeting. This is because the May Commission meeting is generally the first regularly scheduled Commission meeting after the first quarter of the year.

However, Commission staff discussed the error and will recommend to the Commission at their next regular meeting on March 17, 2022, that they not certify the election. If the Commission takes this action, the PCD will have the opportunity to re-start the election process sooner to cure the error and ensure a quicker resolution and seating of the new Board member.

After the Commission takes action to not certify the PCD election, the PCD is then able to petition the superior court to order another election (the Commission lacks the statutory authority to schedule another election). After successfully petitioning the superior court to order another election, the process to hold the election would begin anew for the PCD.

If the Commission acts to not certify the PCD’s election at their March 17, 2022 meeting, that would allow the PCD to hold their election possibly as early as June or July, depending on how long it takes to get a Superior Court to hear the PCD’s case. The local Superior Court is the appropriate entity to invalidate the March 23, 2022 election and order another election to be held.

4 WAC 135-110-970 (5)
We recommend you and the district board seek an order from the Pierce County Superior Court to invalidate the March 23rd election and order another election. This is the same process that a few conservation districts have used in the past when they have had errors with their election (for example, Cowlitz, Moses Lake, Whitman, and Palouse).

The Commission Election Officer Bill Eller will also contact you to explain the process and your options for proceeding in Superior Court.

If the PCD is successful in getting a new election ordered and performs the new election according to Commission procedures, I will recommend to the Commission that we await the completion of that process before making any decision on PCD’s CAPP status. Commission staff have already been in contact with PCD election staff to ensure procedures are in place so that this does not happen again, and we would direct you to the Elections Guide and other materials available on our elections web page.

If you have questions or need further assistance, please contact Bill Eller, Election Officer, at (509) 385-7512 or beller@scc.wa.gov or your WSCC Regional Manager Jean Fike at jfike@scc.wa.gov by phone at (360) 764-0533.

Sincerely,

Christopher Pettit, Executive Director
Washington State Conservation Commission

cc: Commission Members and Staff
    Dana Coggon, Executive Director, Pierce Conservation District
TO: Conservation Commission Members
    Christopher Pettit, SCC Executive Director

FROM: Kate Delavan
    Farmland Preservation Coordinator

SUBJECT: Authorization to Submit Agricultural Conservation Easement Grants

Summary:
The Conservation Easement Sub-Committee refers three agricultural conservation easement projects to the Washington State Conservation Commission for authorization to pursue grant funding.

Requested Action:
The Conservation Easement Sub-Committee recommends the Commission formally authorize, by motion, the SCC Executive Director to sign required documents to submit grants for agricultural conservation easements on three properties: Central Klickitat Conservation District (CKCD) Davenport, Kittitas County Conservation District (KCCD) Swauk Prairie, and North Yakima Conservation District (NYCD) Emerick. The proposed draft motion is included at the end of this memorandum.

Staff Contact:
Kate Delavan, kdelavan@scc.wa.gov, 360-280-6486

Background and Discussion:
SCC is responsible for implementing the Office of Farmland Preservation (OFP) and those activities identified in the OFP statute (RCW 89.10). SCC has identified agricultural conservation easements as an important tool to assist in farmland protection and advancing conservation with willing landowners. RCW 64.04.130 explicitly authorizes SCC to acquire and hold an interest in land for conservation purposes.
SCC is an eligible applicant to the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP) Farmland Preservation category. (Chapter 79A.15, RCW). Eligible lands for this program must be devoted primarily to the production of livestock or agricultural commodities for commercial purposes. If SCC is a successful applicant to the WWRP Farmland program, the agency will be the primary holder of real property rights and assume the legal obligation to monitor and enforce the terms of the easement. The purpose of the easement will be to prevent the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses through a restriction of certain real property rights, including the right to subdivide and develop.

Per SCC Policy #19-02, SCC’s priorities for consideration of an agriculture conservation easement are:

1. The parcel proposed for preservation is expected to continue to be used for, and is large enough to sustain, commercial agricultural production.
2. The land is also in an area that possesses the necessary market, infrastructure, agricultural support services, and the surrounding parcel sizes and land uses to support long-term commercial agricultural production.
3. Without preservation, the land proposed for protection is likely to be converted to nonagricultural use in the foreseeable future.

OFP sent an announcement to conservation districts in Jan. 2022 seeking agricultural conservation easement sponsorship applications for the 2022 Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP) farmland category. OFP received five applications from four conservation districts by the due date.

The Conservation Easement Sub-Committee established in SCC Policy #19-02 met on Mar. 3, 2022 to review the five agricultural conservation easement sponsorship applications. The Sub-Committee discussed each project and came to consensus on the following set of recommendations:

1. The Sub-Committee requests Central CKCD combines the two Davenport applications into one project.¹

2. The Sub-Committee refers the resulting top three applications (CKCD Davenport (combined), KCCD Swauk Prairie, and NYCD Emerick) to the Conservation Commission for approval to submit grant applications to WWRP Farmland in spring 2022. The Sub-Committee finds these three projects to all be strong applications. The small point differential between the second ranked project (KCCD Swauk Prairie) and the third ranked project (NYCD Emerick) compelled the Sub-Committee to come to agreement on the need to advance all three projects.

3. The Sub-Committee recognizes submitting three projects exceeds the initial estimated capacity of OFP staff for this work. The Sub-Committee finds OFP provides critical support

¹ After consulting with the landowners, CKCD has agreed to combine the two applications into one project.
to conservation districts on farmland protection. The Sub-Committee requests the Conservation Commission add additional staff capacity to support OFP.

The Sub-Committee considered each project against established criteria to assess each project’s alignment with the grant program and with the SCC easement priorities. The criteria included agricultural values, development pressure, environmental values, and farmland viability.

Given current and future workload projections, OFP staff planned to cap the number of projects at two this year. However given the strength of the top three projects and the small differential between the second and third ranked project, the Sub-Committee is referring three projects for approval. Staff agree that all three projects are worthy of advancing and would be supportive of additional staff capacity. If there is not additional staff support for agricultural conservation easement project management, current OFP staff are prepared to assess and reprioritize their workload accordingly.

Project Overviews

If SCC successfully secures funding from WWRP Farmland, SCC, aided by the local conservation district, will work to purchase agricultural conservation easements on each property ensuring the land stays open and available for agriculture in perpetuity.

1. **CKCD Davenport**

Davenport Cattle is a multi-generational family owned cow/calf operation established in 1876 after an initial start in the Willamette Valley, Oregon in 1858. The proposed project is 5,867 acres in Klickitat County. In addition to land owned outright, the operation leases over 60,000 acres of rangeland for grazing. The owned land is the base of operations where hay is raised for sale, pasture, and winter feed. The proposed project consists of several separate parcels that support different aspects of the overall operation. Some parcels are primarily used for late fall and early spring pastures, others are farmed for hay production and others provide infrastructure for rangeland grazing on leased ground.

The project area includes areas managed for hay production as well as relatively undisturbed Oregon White Oak savanna habitat and oak-pine interface habitat. This property has 5 miles of intermittent stream on it. The stream is a headwater contributor to Rock Creek which provides critical steelhead recovery habitat and an important hydrologic function of salmon recovery in an arid watershed. There are two ponds and about a half mile of Swale Creek mid-watershed riparian area in the project area. Swale Creek is identified on watershed plans and several salmon recovery plans. Protection of the headwaters of Swale Creek from subdivision and development will contribute to maintaining hydrologic function for lower watershed reaches of Swale Creek that provide salmon habitat. The project area also includes a fenced riparian corridor with native plantings, a lake and associated wetlands, beaver ponds and wetlands on Bowman Creek. Bowman Creek is a tributary to the Little Klickitat and Klickitat Rivers. As such it is identified as a contributor to salmon recovery for
hydrologic benefits. Keeping these lands in working lands absent of residential development will contribute to recovery efforts.

The project area also includes infrastructure necessary to run the operation. Infrastructure includes a homestead, corrals, gathering pens, loading chute, and reliable livestock watering facilitates. An agricultural conservation easement would assist the family in continuing to transition their operation to the next generation and ensure the land stays in production.

2. KCCD Swauk Prairie
Swauk Prairie Farms is located in Kittitas County, between the Teanaway watershed and the Swauk watershed. The 549 acre farm sits on a section of land on the Swauk Prairie terminal moraine. The farm is bisected by Hwy 970 that stretches from Cle Elum to the intersection with Hwy 97 at Lauderdale Junction.

John Hanson, great grandfather of the current owners, bought the first quarter section in 1887. Expansion to the current farm size came in the 1940’s when the Hansons purchased adjacent quarter sections. The farm was designated a Washington State Centennial Farm in 1989.

Swauk Prairie Farms is a dryland operation that has historically produced soft white winter wheat, hay, and even potatoes when wet weather patterns occurred. Swauk Prairie Bison operated by Jim Hanson brought bison to the prairie in 1995. The grass feed bison were sold to individuals, restaurants, and grocery stores when the herd was as large as 60 animals. The herd is now less than a dozen and sales are primarily to individuals. The bison graze approximately 75 acres north of Hwy 970. Much of the remaining acreage was enrolled in Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) from 1998 to 2012. In the last few years, the nearly 400 acres south of Hwy 97 have been leased to a local cattleman for grazing.

Swauk Prairie Farm LLC is comprised of three brothers. All three members have agreed to pursue an agricultural conservation easement. The Hanson Family has a strong time honored bond to the land. They are the last of the historic farms on the Swauk Prairie as the others have fallen prey to development. As land prices increase exponentially and development pressure builds, it is the family's goal to maintain the property for future farm use while realizing a financial return.

3. NYCD Emerick
The Emerick Project will result in an agricultural conservation easement on 2,576 acres of rangeland in Yakima County. The rangeland is part of a 150 head cow/calf operation that has been in operation for three generations. The project area includes the infrastructure necessary to run a cattle operation. The conservation easement is needed to maintain a viable livestock operation that is at risk from development pressure. In addition, the project
area provides critical habitat to many terrestrial species and plant communities. Several of which are unique to this landscape and listed as endangered or threatened.

The landowner's goals are to preserve the rangeland for use as a working cow/calf operation and to transition the operation to the next generation. The conservation easement would help facilitate the current landowner's retirement and land transfer to their identified successor. Additionally, the landowners wish to see the landscape remain open as part of a cultural heritage of Yakima County.

The property has a significant relationship to the landscape and critical habitats at the thousands of acres scale. The property abuts over 2,000 acres of non-profit held land (Cowiche Canyon Conservancy) with over 64 species of butterfly, including the Coronis Fritillary that starts and ends its life cycle within the several thousand acres that includes the Emerick Property. The following state candidate species use the property and those properties connected to the Emerick's: Lewis's woodpecker, white-headed woodpecker, sage thrasher, loggerhead shrike, black-tailed rabbit, white-tailed rabbit, Townsend's big-eared bat, Western grey squirrel, striped snake and sagebrush lizard. The Emerick's property also serves as a "lynch pin" property between DNR, WDFW and FS lands for the local 2800 head Yakima Elk herd. The Emerick's property connects these publicly held lands to the winter-feeding station in the Cowiche basin. The property also connects landscapes for other priority species including mule deer, wild turkey, Dusky grouse. The habitat offered by the Emerick and publicly held lands also has the potential for supporting big horn sheep and ESA listed sage grouse.

**Recommended Action and Options:**

The Conservation Easement Sub-Committee recommends the Commission formally authorize, by motion, the SCC’s Executive Director to sign required documents to submit grants for agricultural conservation easements on three properties: CKCD Davenport, KCCD Swauk Prairie, and NYCD Emerick.

**Draft Motion Language**

The Commission has determined acquisition of agricultural conservation easements on the three properties is consistent with the mission, duties, and purposes of the SCC.

The Commission hereby authorizes the State Conservation Commission Executive Director to sign required documents to submit grants for agricultural conservation easements on three properties: CKCD Davenport, KCCD Swauk Prairie, and NYCD Emerick.
To: Washington State Conservation Commission  
From: 2022 WWRP Farmland Easement Grant Review Sub-committee  
Date: March 10, 2022  

Re: Need for increased capacity at Office of Farmland Preservation

Farmland preservation remains a high and ever increasing priority for conservation districts across Washington State. In order to access critical Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program farmland funding in partnership with the Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC), increased capacity is needed in the Office of Farmland Preservation (OFP) to provide technical expertise to conservation districts and support the complex process of establishing easements on working lands.

The American Farmland Trust considers 39% of Washington's agricultural land, or 6,011,900 acres, to be nationally significant land for long-term food production. From 2001 to 2016, nearly 100,000 acres was converted from agricultural land to residential.1 The 2017 USDA Ag Census reported 17,136 young and beginning producers in Washington State, 73% of which are the principal operator of the farm operation.2 The cost of land is the #1 barrier for young, beginning, and multi-generational farmers in starting or expanding their businesses.3 Conservation easements are a critical tool in facilitating land transfer and making farmland more affordable.

The WSCC and conservation districts are unique in the state in the sense that we are very close to the people who are interested in OFP programs and understand a broader range of needs, concerns, and threats than other agencies. Direct funding through the WSCC and conservation districts is a good idea but there has to be more capacity because conservation easements take a tremendous amount of time and effort to facilitate. The time needed and specialized expertise is prohibitive for many districts that are focusing on community outreach and implementation of conservation practices.

Districts across the state are experiencing increased landowner demand for working lands easements and are determined to strategically preserve Washington’s working lands while there is still the ability to do so. Conservation districts offer a unique opportunity to address this important natural resource need now to ensure a thriving future for generations to come.

Kate Delavan’s work at the WSCC has highlighted how effective and valuable this program can be and demonstrated the need to increase capacity under her leadership. In order to increase easement program opportunities to local landowners, more staffing capacity at WSCC is needed. This would ensure that the growing demands of processing applications administered by this office to the WWRP program, and others, could be met.

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1 American Farmland Trust: https://csp-fut.appspot.com/  
3 Building a Future with Farmers II: Results and Recommendations From the National Young Farmer Survey, National Young Farmers Coalition, November 2017
Conservations districts across the state support this request for increase capacity in OFP, and have demonstrated need for this capacity in their communities. A highlight of these needs is included below:

“For the past 14 years the NYCD has recognized the value and importance of the use of Conservation Easements. Their importance is related to keeping agricultural lands that have multiple environmental benefits in tack and undeveloped while maintaining agricultural economies and local culture. Needless to say the benefits of CE’s are many. Our on-going partnership with the WSCC-OFP is very important and will remain important for the near and long term future of our NYCD goals. At present NYCD could easily develop and promote 1-2 CE’s a year. This is a very big endeavor that requires permanent and increased staffing to be successful. NYCD fully supports all efforts to strengthen the capacity and value of the OFP.” – North Yakima Conservation District

“We are interested in learning more about the process of taking on conservation easement projects, and would lean heavily on OFP for support in that. Kate and her office are integral to CDs being successful in these efforts, and if there’s anything we can do to support increased capacity at OFP, please let us know.” – Tova Tillinghast, Underwood Conservation District

“We’ve also seen significant interest in conservation easements here in Kittitas County and are looking for ways to address it. Like others, we’re glad to have OFP. Kate has been great to work with and we were happy to meet Alex a couple of weeks ago. We would be glad to help however we can to support OFP and the Commission!” – Anna Lael, Kittitas Conservation District

“The Spokane Conservation District is also experiencing more interest and inquiry regarding conservation easements of farmland. Having the OFP is a huge benefit, and we would like to see that support continued.” – Vicki Carter, Spokane Conservation District

“Palouse CD is also starting to see increased interest in conservation easements. We also support the SCC Office of Farmland Preservation and are very happy that we have Kate Delevan and Alex James on board. Please let us know how we can help support additional resources for farmland preservation and conservation easements.” – Jennifer Boie, Palouse Conservation District

“There is a huge demand in our community for easements on working lands, but funding and capacity to implement them is very challenging. Farmland preservation is important throughout our state. Here in Western Washington, as we rapidly urbanize along I-5, we are losing our capacity to feed our large population centers virtually overnight. Farmland preservation is important to our regions food security and disaster preparedness, just as much as it is our local economy and endangered species habitat.” – Sarah Moorehead, Thurston Conservation District
In addition, farmland preservation partners at American Farmland Trust and Washington Association of Land Trusts, support this request for capacity increase and the ability of the WSCC to support conservation districts connecting landowners and operators to these important state programs that preserve working lands.

Sincerely,

Conservation Easement Sub-Committee

Sarah Moorehead, Executive Director, Thurston Conservation District
Dave Hedrick, District Manager, Ferry Conservation District
Tom Salzer, Executive Director, Washington Association of Conservation Districts
Nick Norton, Executive Director, Washington Association of Land Trusts
Addie Candib, Pacific Northwest Regional Director, American Farmland Trust
TO: Conservation Commission Members
Chris Pettit, SCC Executive Director

FROM: Alison Halpern, Scientific Policy Advisor

SUBJECT: Sustainable Farms and Fields draft programmatic guidelines

Summary:
Sustainable Farms and Fields (SFF) is a new SCC grant program that was established in 2020 to increase implementation of climate-smart practices on agricultural, rangeland, and tidelands through voluntary incentives. SCC staff has been working with partners at WSDA, WSU, NRCS to develop draft programmatic guidelines to be reviewed by districts and other stakeholders. A conceptual framework of these guidelines, along with a staff recommendation for requested action, is presented for the Commissioners' consideration and potential action.

Requested Action:
SCC staff requests that the Commission authorize Director Pettit to approve the dissemination of the first draft of the SFF guidelines to the districts and stakeholders for a 45-day review process. Feedback will be gathered and considered by SCC, WSDA, WSU, and NRCS staff during the development of next draft of the guidelines.

Staff Contact:
Alison Halpern, SCC Scientific Policy Advisor (ahalpern@scc.wa.gov, 360-280-5556)

Background and Discussion:
The Sustainable Farms and Fields grant program was created in statute during the 2020 session. It had strong bipartisan support and was lauded by a range of stakeholders. However, due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic uncertainty that followed, agencies were advised against submitting FY 21-23 budget packages for new programs and there have been no appropriations for SFF.
The general foundation of the SFF program has already been created in statute (RCW 89.08.610-.635), and SCC staff has been consulting with partners at WSDA, WSU, NRCS, and elsewhere to expand upon that foundation to develop the first draft of the programmatic guidelines and to discuss challenges associated with climate-smart practices (e.g., soil carbon quantification).

SCC contracted with Dr. Lynne Carpenter-Boggs and her team at WSU to develop the initial Measurement and Estimation Verification (MEV) system and a valuable FAQ page about GHG emissions and carbon sequestration.

SCC worked with a team from WSDA’s NRAS program on prioritization metric needs and solutions. Jadey Ryan compiled information about NRCS climate-smart practices, conducted background research on prioritization methodologies used in other programs, and developed an invaluable user-friendly dashboard (WA Climate Smart Estimator) using COMET metadata. This tool will be used when prioritizing proposed projects to compare different practices among different counties to help determine which projects will reduce the most GHG emissions or sequester the most carbon.

In addition to drafting initial guidelines, SCC staff has also been informing and updating the districts about SFF in presentations/webinars through WADE and CTD, providing SFF outreach to stakeholders, and pursuing federal funding opportunities for the program.

**Recommended Action and Options (if action item):**

Staff recommend the following action:

- Authorize Director Pettit to approve the dissemination of the first draft of the SFF guidelines to the districts and stakeholders for a 45-day review process to solicit feedback that will help shape the final draft.

**Next Steps:**

- The draft guidelines will be released to the districts and other stakeholders for their feedback for a 45-day period.
- SCC staff will collect, organize, and share feedback with WSDA, WSU, and NRCS.
- Updated draft will be developed and shared with Commissioners.
- May or July meeting: Commissioners review, discuss, and approve final SFF draft programmatic guidelines.
- July: SFF program is initiated once guidelines are approved.
March 17, 2022

TO: Conservation Commission Members
    Christopher Pettit, SCC Executive Director

FROM: Sarah Groth, Fiscal Manager

SUBJECT: Biennium 2023-25 Budget Development Process

Summary:
Although the legislature is just completing their legislative session with passage of supplemental budgets, it’s time to start thinking about the WSCC Biennium 2023-25 budgets.

Agency budget proposals are typically due into the Office of Financial Management (OFM) around September 1, 2022. In previous years, Commission staff have used a budget development process where districts are engaged. This year Commission staff is proposing a process that continues conservation district involvement, as well as outreach to state agencies and other stakeholder groups. We are also hoping to present materials to the Commission earlier for key decisions that would help districts conduct more effective outreach during the summer months.

At the March WSCC meeting, Commission staff is seeking direction from the Commission on this proposed budget development process.

**Proposed WSCC Biennium 2021-2023 Budget Development Process**

**General Process and Timeline**

- **March 17, 2022**: SCC Regular Meeting. Commission reviews budget development process and timeline. Process and timeline approved with any necessary changes.

- **Post-SCC March Meeting:**
  - Save-the-Date sent to CDs for webinars to help develop budget ideas and funding recommendations. SCC work on session design.
• Message to all conservation districts, WACD and SCC staff regarding the budget development process and ensuring proposed packages have a strong tie to our newly adopted strategic plan.

• **March – April 2022:** SCC develops materials for the all-district meeting.

• **April 2022:** SCC/CD meeting to begin budget development strategy. Identify budget proposal topics. Identify work groups to continue development of decision packages.

• **April-June 2022:** Outreach to other agencies and stakeholders.

• **May 19, 2022:** Commission to discuss proposed decision packages.

  Approve:
  1) the budget package topics and
  2) to continue development of decision packages for these topics. (Any late-developing topics will be presented to the Commission at the July meeting.) Approval of topics at this meeting ensures that districts can design more effective tours in the summer months.

• **May – July 2022:** Continued work by SCC, and CDs on refining decision packages. Continued outreach to stakeholders and agencies.

• **July 21, 2022:** At the SCC regular meeting, refined information, including funding levels, is presented for each budget topic. Commissioners approve submittal of the budget and prioritize decision packages.

• **September 1, 2022:** Operating and Capital budget proposals submitted to OFM.

• **September 15, 2022:** Commission approves messaging around budget proposals.

• **December 2022:** Governor releases proposed Biennium 2023-25 operating and capital budgets.

**Requested Action:**
Review and approval of the proposed 2023-25 state budget development process and timeline for the SCC and conservation districts.

**Staff Contact:**
Sarah Groth, Fiscal Manager

**Recommended Action and Options:**
Review and approval of the proposed 2023-25 state budget development process for SCC and conservation districts.
Please Note
Budget topics will be approved at the May 19, 2022 meeting.

However, it is possible that additional topics may need to be approved at the Jul. 21, 2022 business meeting.
TO: Conservation Commission Members
    Christopher Pettit, SCC Executive Director

FROM: Bill Eller, VSP Coordinator

SUBJECT: Update on the Voluntary Stewardship Program

Background Summary:
Staff provides an update on the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP).

Requested Action:
None. Informational item only.

VSP Update:
Commission staff continues to implement the VSP on behalf of the Commission. Two FTE’s and portions of five other FTEs make up the VSP staff. Their recent efforts include:

- On-boarding a new communications consultant (1/3 of an FTE) to assist with the VSP monthly newsletter, crafting a VSP strategic communications plan, and policy advisory development.

- Created a sub-committee of SCC VSP staff to implement changes to the five year report template and database. The sub-committee is working on IT issues related to the proposed changes. During multiple listening sessions last fall, the Commission received suggested changes to the process from VSP stakeholders. Those changes include:
  - Changes to the template and database to remove redundant entries
    - Change made
  - Allowing for a summary table of accomplishments
    - Change pending
  - Allowing a technical panel member’s comments added directly into the database
    - Change made
  - Uploading documents directly to the database
    - Change pending
  - Creating cloud-based database access for the counties
    - Change pending
- Providing a section to discuss agricultural viability in the report, and
  - Change pending

- Conducted our second quarterly VSP monitoring symposium on Jan. 26, 2022, and are planning the next symposium. Symposiums are designed to provide education and outreach on monitoring to VSP implementers who must monitor the functions and values of critical areas in their counties.

- Drafted a VSP Watershed Monitoring Project Development Guide for VSP implementers to use as a resource when planning for and conducting monitoring. Comments on the guide came to a close on Feb. 28, 2022, and the guide will soon be available on the Commission’s VSP webpage.

- Held our third joint Technical Panel and Statewide Advisory Committee VSP meeting. Each of these meetings includes an opportunity for three of the 27 VSP counties to meet with the Technical Panel and Statewide Advisory Committee. This opportunity provides a place for dialogue to occur between the county and the Technical Panel and Statewide Advisory Committee before the next five year report is due. So far Chelan, Thurston, Garfield, Benton, Kittitas, Cowlitz, Grant, San Juan, and Asotin counties have taken advantage of this opportunity.

- Provided testimony, fiscal notes, and legislative analysis on a number of VSP-related bills proposed by the legislature.

- Continue to provide a VSP monthly newsletter that is read by nearly 700 subscribers.

Background:
All 27 VSP counties have approved Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) work plans (see map below).
All 27 counties are implementing their work plans. After approval of the plan, among other obligations, each county must meet a five-year reporting requirement. Each county’s five-year report is due five years after they receive initial funding in VSP. That means each county has their own unique five-year report deadline.

Thurston and Chelan counties, as VSP pilot counties, submitted their five-year review and evaluation reports in July 2019. The Commission used those reports to further drive the development of the five year report process, Monitoring Guide, template and database. The other 25 VSP counties submitted their five-year review and evaluation reports from Nov. 2020 through May 2021.

Due to when the county VSP work plans were approved, most have only had between 12-18 months of VSP implementation since approval, rather than a full five years.

The five-year reports are reviewed and evaluated by the VSP Technical Panel and Statewide Advisory Committee, and the Conservation Commission’s Executive Director must concur (or not) with the county watershed work group’s determination in the five-year report of whether the work plan’s protection and enhancement goals and benchmarks have been met. There is no definition of “review and evaluate” in the VSP statute.

The Commission created a *Five Year Report Guide* which supplements the statutory process and defines key terms (like “review and evaluate”) and adds other structures to the review and evaluation process (i.e. report content, how to submit the report, when to submit the report, how long the review will take, what will be reviewed, etc.). A five year report template and database were created in order to solicit from each county the information needed by the Director to make their decision.

The next five-year reports for Thurston and Chelan counties are due in Jul. 2024, with the rest of the counties due in either 2025 or 2026.

**Staff Contact:**
Bill Eller, VSP Coordinator, 509-385-7512, beller@scc.wa.gov
OFP Conservation Easement Survey

Survey Methodology

Purpose
▶ The purpose of the analysis is to help the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) and the Office of Farmland Preservation (OFP) assess conservation district interest in conservation easements.

Method
▶ Conservation district supervisors and staff responded to a series of questions via an electronic survey. The survey included questions on general conservation easements and on agricultural conservation easements.

Response Rate
▶ OFP sent the survey via govDelivery to all 45 conservation districts. In total, 43 conservation district staff or supervisors responded. The responses represent 33 conservation districts.

Key Findings on General Easements

Overview
▶ 22 conservation districts have conservation easements in their long-range plan and reported landowners contact the conservation district for help with conservation easements.
▶ The majority of conservation districts do not hold conservation easements currently and the majority stated either they do not want to hold easements in the future or they are not sure if they want to hold easements in the future.

Training Needed
▶ Staff and supervisor familiarity with conservation easements is varied. However, overall respondents stated a slightly higher level of familiarity with agricultural conservation easements than with general conservation easements.
▶ More than 80% of respondents indicated they are interested in a training on conservation easements. There is strong interest in all topic options (general information, agricultural easements, partnership opportunities, and resources provided by the SCC). Agricultural conservation easements received the most interest.
▶ One district proposed the idea of hosting a liaison to facilitate easements across multiple counties.
Conservation Easement Priorities

- Conservation districts prioritized conservation easements at varying levels of importance. None stated they are “not at all important.” Landowners most commonly ask about agricultural, habitat, riparian, open space, and working forests easements. Historic preservation, scenic views, and irrigation water easements were also reported.
- Partnership is a key opportunity for conservation districts. Several districts reported they partner with land trusts and county governments and stated that they value the partnership. The majority of districts report wanting to learn more about partnership opportunities.

Agricultural Conservation Easements’ Findings

Challenges to Implementing Conservation Easements

Conservation districts experience varying challenges related to protecting farmland through agricultural conservation easements. The most common challenge listed was funding followed by staff capacity and expertise.

Challenges identified by respondents include:

- Not enough funding for easement acquisition or funding programs are too complex (match requirements, process difficult to navigate) or funding timeline is too lengthy
- Lack of staff capacity and expertise
- Concern over long-term stewardship obligations (funding, liability, legal issues)
- Lack of partnership
- Lack of resources for education and outreach
- Lack of willing landowners: Easement values are perceived to be too low or easement timeline is perceived as too lengthy
- Existing programs don’t align with local needs (rangeland and shellfish properties)
- Lack of community support
- Concerns about perpetuity
- Concerns about the future viability of agriculture in the area
- Poor administration of easement funding programs
- Lack of tools to protect timberland
- Next generation farmers aren’t able to access land

Methods of partnership include:

- Information sharing, the CD provides technical assistance during or after easement acquisition (e.g. farm plan or cost-share programs);
- CD supports or coordinates outreach to landowners;
- CD refers landowners to the easement holder;
- Partnership established via an RCPP;
- District representative serves on a land trust advisory committee (1 response).
OFP Survey Resources

OFP’s Information on Easements
On the Office of Farmland Preservation (OFP) page you can find more information and resources about both general easements and agricultural easements.
▶ Get more information from the OFP website

Contact
Kate Delavan, Office of Farmland Preservation (OFP)
p: 360-280-6486 | e: kdelavan@scc.wa.gov
March 17, 2022

TO: Conservation Commission Members
    Christopher Pettit, Executive Director

FROM: Shana Joy, District Operations & Regional Manager Coordinator

SUBJECT: District Operations and Regional Manager Report

Action Item

Informational Item

Report Summary:
Regional Managers offer this report of recent activities and support provided to conservation districts.

Ongoing Service Areas to Conservation Districts
- Partnering and Relationships Assistance
- Conservation Accountability & Performance Program (CAPP) Assistance
- New Supervisor and Staff Orientations and Professional Development
- Task Order Development & Tracking
- Tracking Grant Spending and Vouchering
- Open Government Training
- Cultural Resources
- Project Development & CPDS
- Natural Resource Investments & Shellfish Programs
- Implementation Monitoring
- Long Range and Annual Planning Assistance
- Cross-pollination of Information, Templates, and Examples
- Records Retention and PRA
- CD Audits & Annual Financial Reporting
- Chehalis Basin
- Commission Meeting Planning
- District Digest Publication
- Human Resources (law/rule updates, hiring, performance evaluations, compensation, healthcare, issues)
- OPMA & Executive Sessions
- Building Better Series

Conservation District Service, Recent Topics
- COVID 19 Operations
- Grants Reporting
- Hazard Mitigation Grant
- Surplus property
• Ethics
• RCPP
• Bidding & Contracting
• Cost Share

• Elections and Mid-term Appointments
• Inter-local Agreements & Staff Sharing
• Flooding Impacts

Issues Resolution in Progress
• Personnel management: issues, turn-over, capacity gaps, transitions
• Inter-district relationships and partnering
• Grant vouchering requirements
• District governance

Partnerships & Partnering Assistance
The RM team provides ongoing assistance with partnering or participated in partner and relationship building efforts with: individual conservation districts, WADE, PSCD Caucus, Center for Technical Development, WACD, DNR, NRCS, Ecology, NASCA, WDFW, NACD, Washington Association of Land Trusts, State Auditor’s Office, RCO, Department of Veterans Affairs, WA Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network, Washington Conservation Society, and Arid Lands Initiative.

The Department of Natural Resources recently engaged in two contracts with the SCC to fund conservation district work around forest health and community wildfire resiliency in the current fiscal year. The intent is to continue discussing our partnership, mutual goals, and roles and responsibilities to inform an MOU/MOA between the two agencies as a foundation for our future cooperation this spring. Shana Joy serves as our partner liaison to DNR and forest health/community wildfire resiliency subject matter lead at the SCC.

Local Working Group (LWG) meetings are well underway and Regional Managers are working in close coordination with NRCS staff and conservation districts to administer a statewide survey, and plan and execute LWG meetings around the state to provide input and feedback into FY23 program and funding decisions to the State Technical Advisory Committee and the State Conservationist.

SCC participation and partnership with the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA) in 2022 includes Shana Joy serving as Vice President of NASCA and Laura Meyer has joined the NASCA Board of Directors representing the Pacific Region. Shana and Laura also serve on various committees and represent NASCA in interactions with NACD as well.
Western WA Flooding Response
Jean Fike and Josh Giuntoli, coordinating with other SCC staff, have worked closely with impacted conservation districts to collect information on flooding impacts and project needs. They arranged a CD training from NRCS staff on the Emergency Watershed Program (EWP) so that the program’s fit to the need could be evaluated. The SCC awarded initial natural disaster response technical assistance funding to four conservation districts to support data collection, outreach, and coordination efforts. In Whatcom and Skagit Counties, 19 dairies received emergency assistance pumping and trucking lagoon contents to prevent overflow.

Wildfire Recovery
Mike Baden, Allisa Carlson, and Courtney Woods are administering the wildfire recovery grant program by regularly reviewing applications for technical assistance and cost-share project funding needs.

Hazard Mitigation Grant Implementation
Mike Baden is leading implementation of a Hazard Mitigation Grant that the SCC is receiving from the Department of Emergency Management. All 10 of the trainings included under this grant have been completed. The final training titled “Outreach Essentials for Community Wildfire and Preparedness and Recovery” was conducted on February 3-4. Laura Meyer of the Conservation Commission and Delaini Disher from the Lincoln County Conservation District coordinated and facilitated this training with additional presenters from Conservation Districts and Partners. 33 individuals participated in this training. 260 participants participated during the course of these 10 trainings from Conservation Districts, state agencies, federal agencies, tribes, local governments, fire districts, and NGO’s. Remaining work is focused on conducting site assessments in 16 counties as a follow up to the trainings. We are planning for the work on this grant to conclude in the 2nd quarter of 2022.

COVID 19 Response
The Regional Manager team continues to provide timely resources, information, FAQs, and sometimes just moral support to conservation districts as we all navigate the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic. The team continues to monitor and review new information and guidance as it is released from the Governor’s Office, CDC, and other sources.

WDFW Shrubsteppe Habitat Budget Proviso – WA Shrubsteppe Restoration Initiative
Allisa Carlson and Shana Joy are participating on a steering committee with WDFW and DNR staff to implement a shrubsteppe habitat wildfire recovery and resiliency budget proviso that was appropriated to WDFW this biennium. A solicitation for eligible projects in the areas of deferred grazing, wildlife friendly fencing and habitat restoration was released on February 14th for the burn footprints of Whitney, Pearl Hill and Cold Springs Fires that occurred in 2020. Foster Creek, Lincoln County, and Okanogan CDs are the first districts eligible to participate. An innovative new practice, virtual fencing, is being offered as an option in this current solicitation. Allisa continues to do a great deal of heavy lifting to administer funds flowing through the SCC for deferred grazing and wildlife friendly fencing with conservation districts and project application review panels as well. More information can now be found online at: Shrubsteppe Fire Preparedness, Response and Restoration
The long-term strategy advisory group (LTSAG) meets monthly to work on recommendations around long term wildfire resiliency in the shrubsteppe landscape with professional facilitators throughout the current biennium, finalizing the long term strategy by June 2023. The Foster Creek, Lincoln County, Benton, Franklin, North Yakima, and Okanogan CDs have engaged in the LTSAG.

**Chehalis Basin**

Josh Giuntoli, SW RM, represents the Executive Director of the Commission as ex-officio member of the Chehalis Basin Board (CBB).

As referenced in the last update, in early January 2022, the Chehalis Basin experienced a major flood event. Record flows were seen. Unfortunately, two basin residents died and hundreds were displaced with over 250 homes reporting damage. The February and March board meetings included reports from tribes, counties, cities, and others impacted by the flooding. We also heard reports of how both flood and habitat projects funded through the Chehalis Basin Strategy performed. One highlight was a board update from Lewis CD regarding the engagement of farm pads that have been installed since the 2009 flood. 18 have been built throughout the basin, and the January 2022 event saw 4 in active use protecting livestock and farm equipment from flood impacts. There was no notable livestock loss reported during this flood event, compared to widespread losses during the 2007 and 2009 floods. Reports and a 2022 flood FAQ are available as PDFs on the [Chehalis Basin Board](#) website.

Through the Aquatic Species Restoration Program, Lewis CD, Thurston CD, and Grays Harbor CDs are leading local regional implementation teams to identify habitat projects brought forward by partners for ASRP funding consideration. For this work, one CD coordinates the Upper, Middle, and Lower basin implementation teams. Each team is made up of voting members from various groups working in the basin. In addition, several recently completed 2021 district projects in the basin are already showing exciting results.
CTD Planner Certifications: The CTD Planner Certification Program accepts applications on a rolling basis through an online submission process. In FY21, the CTD was able to streamline the application process by moving to Smartsheet, allowing for a cleaner submission process for applicants and a more efficient review process for the review team. With a handful of planners now successfully certified, the CTD leadership team is currently exploring ways to increase participation. The CTD is developing a strategic plan including outreach efforts such as newsletter articles, informational webinars, and direct outreach to district managers to help identify and overcome barriers to completing certification.

The CTD is taking the first steps toward development on a Forest Planner Certification this winter, for anticipated release in 2022. The Forest Planner Certification will join Farm Planner, Dairy Planner, and Riparian Planner Certifications. The CTD will again rely on a diverse mix of conservation district and partner professionals from across the state to help develop the certification requirements.

Plan Templates: The CTD has enrolled assistance with creation of a Statewide Farm Planning template and helpful links to planning resources/tools. The template provides consistency in statewide planning as well as template availability to those Districts without such resources on hand.

Planner Resources: With ongoing changes and new hybrid (virtual and in-person) work environments, the CTD continues to curate and share virtual support tools and training opportunities on our webpage and via GovDelivery. Over the past year, CTD has continually updated our planner resources on the CTD webpage, providing links to new opportunities and content for more effective remote working. The CTD Training Library helps district staff easily locate past webinars and training opportunities by topic. The Library is continually updated with new content.

Connecting Community: The CTD continues to build and host multiple Networking Forums for different planning disciplines and expertise. These Networking Forums have garnered good participation and interest from staff members. Currently the CTD hosts six Forums: Cover Crop, Farm, Dairy, Riparian, Plant Sale and Smartsheet. A Forest Planner Networking Forum was added in March. These Forums are held quarterly and provide a much-needed space for planners and technical staff to share successes and challenges, ask questions, and connect year-round. An email listserv function and a shared Google drive complement the forums and provide additional space for connection and sharing.
The “Building Better: Leadership and Management Learning Community” series hosted by the CTD in collaboration with WSCC, WADE, and WACD targets existing and developing District managers/leaders of all levels and continues to gain speed. The monthly learning and sharing network, hosted the second Wednesday of every month, held its first meeting in August 2021. A full series agenda, as well as suggested learning resources and materials from individual sessions can be found on the CTD website.

CTD continues to actively solicit ideas for new Forums and Forum feedback and ideas for discussion are always encouraged, via embedded forms on the CTD website and through direct communication with Forum hosts. All Networking Forum information is available on the CTD website and promoted regularly through the monthly newsletter and special email announcements.

NRCS Planner Designations: The CTD continues to coordinate with NRCS to help District staff through the NRCS Planner Designation process, updating CTD materials to reflect changes, communicating to District staff through webinars and email announcements, and providing individualized assistance as needed. The CTD Training Plan Template and related materials are updated as changes occur. CTD’s coordination with NRCS is also part of the new Washington Conservation Planning Partnership plan, and the CTD is on-point to help District staff meet NRCS’s goal to certify as many planners as is applicable.

Training

NRCS Collaboration: Collaboration with NRCS training partners remains a top priority of the CTD. The CTD Training Coordinator position significantly increases the CTD’s reach and impact to help District staff through training, certification, and support processes. The Training Coordinator works in close communication with NRCS on coordination of individual training events to ensure better organization and placement of CD staff in NRCS trainings. Although NRCS approved and supported a 5-year cooperative agreement to share the cost of this highly needed position, funding has not yet been allocated by NRCS. An NACD grant is currently providing short-term support for the Training Coordinator for one year while long-term funds are pursued.

National Conservation Planning Partnership (NCPP): The CTD participates in regular (bi-monthly) web-meetings of the National Conservation Planning Partnership (NCPP) to discuss national training and certification opportunity for Districts. This has been a great forum for the CTD to both give and receive feedback and ideas for advancing these opportunities nationally and in Washington State. The CTD Training Coordinator participated in a sub-committee to provide specific recommendations on how to improve access to training for all potential conservation planners. The CTD also participated with NRCS Washington and other state partners to work on the Washington State Conservation Action Plan to improve training, certification, and communications.

Training Needs Inventory (TNI): The CTD releases its annual TNI in close coordination with NRCS in early summer each year, with the goal of informing NRCS of District training needs in the coming year. The TNI is tailored to identify those NRCS training events CD staff need and engage CD staff in the CTD and NRCS certification processes. This information also helps inform and guide CTD-sponsored trainings and Task Order requests. Additionally, the CTD participates in the NRCS EDC meetings to voice support for highly requested trainings.
**NRCS Training Events**: The FY22 NRCS State Training Bulletin was released in late fall of 2021 and the CTD is actively coordinating District staff into trainings, prioritizing requests from the TNI survey.

Covid-19 continues to impact the ability to hold in-person training events, and training continues to be primarily modified to virtual formats. The CTD keeps in regular contact with NRCS and posts new information regarding training opportunities on the CTD website. Additionally, with the long-term uncertainty associated with holding in-person training, the CTD continues to advocate with NRCS to consider/create more web-based training events into the future. Over the last year and a half, the CTD successfully partnered with NRCS to hold several key in-person courses in a hybrid format (virtual classroom followed by regional, small-group field days) and strongly advocates for this model as new courses are planned.

Upcoming courses include:

- **Comprehensive Nutrient Management Planning (CNMP)** – will be held virtually, hosted by CTD, in late March 2022
- **Conservation Planning, Part 2**, which is a critical training for all planners, is identified in the FY22 NRCS State Training Bulletin and is currently in development, **scheduled for May 2022**.
- **Tribal Outreach and Partnership Training**, in development for late June or early July.

The CTD continues to strengthen their training partnership with NRCS and hopes that these web-based modular trainings will also serve as a pilot for ongoing collaboration with fully online and hybrid web-classroom training opportunities.

**Other Training Events**: The CTD is coordinating with SCC staff to provide **Contracting and Procurement Training** for district staff. A survey was recently sent out to all staff via the CTD newsletter to gather feedback on needed training topics and preferred delivery method.

The **CTD is coordinating with WADE again this year to provide technical track content and assistance in track coordination for the 2022 WADE Conference**. The CTD and WADE leadership teams are meeting regularly leading up to the conference which will be held June 13-15, 2022. If circumstances prevent the conference from being held in person as is currently hoped, the CTD will lead the switch to a virtual platform, providing hosting and moderation for the conference in partnership with WADE and WSCC.

The CTD **continues to curate and host monthly webinars** focused on timely topics. The webinars have been well-received and are advertised on the CTD website, newsletter, and through special email announcements. The CTD co-hosts additional outside virtual training opportunities through NRCS and other partners, as appropriate. The CTD is always soliciting input and ideas for trainings through its newsletter and website.

With the increase in virtual presentations including webinars, training events, and meetings, the **CTD continues to curate and provide content to support virtual presenters**. This includes a tips handout, presenter orientation events/videos, and access to presentation training events. Additional items will be added in the coming months. It is our goal to improve the quality of presentations to increase audience enjoyment and learning. The CTD sent out an announcement to all Districts informing them of the virtual resources available and offering additional support for planning, creating, and hosting virtual events.
All the recorded webinars and trainings hosted by the CTD are now housed on the CTD website in the CTD Training Library. The Library is sorted by topic and includes a brief description, the recorded session, and links to any accompanying training materials. Additional content is added to the Library frequently.

Training Scholarships: Training scholarships remain a priority for the CTD. Scholarships may be requested at any time using an online form accessed via the CTD website. Scholarships are awarded on a rolling basis to support staff through FY22. Eight $250 scholarships were awarded in the first quarter to a variety of planning and education/outreach staff from across the state. These scholarships help support district staff time and registration fees to much-needed trainings. Regular reminders of the scholarship opportunity are communicated through the website and newsletter.

A new training scholarship opportunity is also available now to districts. The Training Grant is offered to those districts or discipline groups who need support in bringing or hosting a training opportunity for district staff.

New Employee Resources: The new employee resource page on the CTD website is continuously being updated with new webinars and information, including a new employee check list for both individuals and Districts to use. The goal is to have all new employee resources in one place so they can get going with training, training plans, certification, and orientation. The new page includes a portal to the CTD database. The CTD is refocusing efforts this winter and early spring on developing a strategic plan to further refine our outreach and resources for new employees.

Communication and Outreach

Website: The CTD website (www.wactd.org) continues to serve as a source of information to CD staff and is updated regularly. The CTD has worked to keep the website updated, improving aesthetics, clarity, and navigation of the site while continually updating content and ensuring relevance of the site. New changes are also announced in the CTD newsletter.

Outreach: CTD continues to work on a cohesive marketing plan to increase recognition and impact for CD staff as well as better engage both internal and external partners. Our goal is to increase awareness of the CTD as a central provision of training and expertise and increase the collaboration with partners on events and resources. A recent communications survey helped inform improvements for CTD content and guide the marketing plan in development. Moving forward, a dedicated Partnership Engagement Plan will enable strategic communications and engagement with partners and others.

Newsletter: The CTD monthly GovDelivery newsletter continues to gain new subscribers (currently we have more than 500 subscribers). In addition to the monthly newsletter, the CTD is using the GovDelivery platform as a way to get immediate, time-sensitive news and information out to staff.

Special Projects: The CTD is working with the WSCC on developing a “Conservation Catalog” that will highlight a number of best management practices (BMP’s) across a landscape. The catalog is meant to be given to new homeowners as a way to increase BMP adoption and working with their local Conservation District. The goal is to have the catalog complete by spring 2022.
The **CTD is working with the VSP group to provide training support** and review of technical documents upon request. The goal is to provide quality assurance, technical support, and better connect VSP staff to CTD certification programs.

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### Technical Expertise and Science Program

**Expertise:** Experts are identified as needed for engagement in programs, policy and training around the state (examples include: Ecology Voluntary Clean Water Guidance for Agriculture Advisory Group, DOE Drinking Water Standard review, Dairy Nutrient Advisory Committee, WDFW riparian habitat guidance, and more). The CTD database continues to prove effective in identifying and nominating expertise as appropriate.

**Science:** The CTD supports work around the State on Discovery Farms projects to advance the application of consistent science and monitoring efforts. There has been statewide buy-in to the DF program from partners and *Cds continue to be involved in the national DF program through regular communications and annual meetings.* Through this process, statewide QAPP and SOP’s have been developed with guidelines specific to projects, but which can be used in the future as templates for any CD.

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### Quality Assurance

The CTD still holds value of development of a statewide Quality Assurance program for individuals and Districts. While the CTD can offer quality assurance assessments and planning product review upon request, we do not have a dedicated program developer for this area of work at this time.

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### CTD Coordination

**Database:** The database (run under Caspio) provides assistance in locating staff expertise for engagement in workgroups and captures metrics on expertise and certifications. **A self-service portal for employees is available on the CTD website** which allows CD staff to update their personnel profiles, track completed trainings, and more. The CTD is currently working on updates to the Database to allow for better tracking of progress towards planner certifications and to ensure that those pursuing certification are contacted for the appropriate training opportunities.

**Budget:** Underwood CD now administers the budget and reporting monthly to the CTD. Billing guidelines and procedures ensure that work expectations match billing vouchers and that budgets are quickly updated on a monthly basis. The CTD is using Smartsheet to assist with budget and task tracking.

The CTD spent considerable time in FY21 updating its Charter and creating an annual and long-range plan of work including metrics of success and short-term tasks and deliverables. The entire plan was input into Smartsheet for regular review, reflection, and revision. The sheet also tracks Gantt chart timelines, budget, staff time, and deliverables for a cohesive and interactive management across all CTD members. **The FY22 budget and plan of work are available upon request.**
Leadership: The CTD Leadership Team and partners (NRCS, WADE,WSCC) continue to meet monthly to ensure tasks are on track.

The CTD continues to prioritize recruiting new members to both its leadership and working teams. Several new task leads have recently joined the team to assist with training and event moderation, the development of the Mentoring Program, and assistance with the monthly CTD newsletter. New members represent both east- and west-side Districts, and the CTD continues to actively pursue representation from both sides of the state, and from both small and large districts.

CTD Contact Information

For more information on the CTD activities, please contact:
Jan Thomas, CTD Co-Chair / Training Coordinator | info@wactd.org

For more information, please visit: www.wactd.org
Great News
By Roylene Comes At Night
NRCS-Washington State Conservationist

SPOKANE VALLEY, Wash. (March 3, 2022) – I have some great news! First, the Odessa Groundwater Replacement Project has been funded. Then, I’m happy to announce we’re starting to return to our offices in-line with COVID safety protocols.

Regarding Odessa, a new plan is being developed that will assist with agricultural water management and watershed protection in the Odessa Aquifer area. There is a federal, state, and private partnership which includes a state level initiative and partnered program to limit depletion of the Odessa aquifer. The concern is that further aquifer depletion will cause severe economic and environmental consequences. The project is limited to replacing ground water supplies (water from the Odessa aquifer) with water from the Columbia Basin Project. As a replacement program, there would be no new irrigated land as the partners agreed to acre-for-acre ground water replacement only.

Then, we’re in the process of returning to our offices! While we’re still working within our COVID Safety protocols, we’re now able to staff almost all our offices up to 75 percent, but visitors are only allowed by appointment and staff are still allowed the flexibility of maximum telework.

Over the next few months, we’ll be returning to full staffing levels across the state. First, on April 18th, NRCS supervisors will return to the office. Then, on May 2nd, the remaining staff will return.

We have a tentative plan to allow walk-in visitors at our USDA facilities beginning at the end of May, but that date has not yet been finalized. Also, our staff can now meet outdoors. Additionally, most ‘mission critical’ activities are being approved.

Regarding training events, they are still largely being planned as virtual events, or a combination of virtual and outdoor activities. Hopefully we’ll start to see in-person training happening in 2022.

The last few years have been quite challenging for all of us here in NRCS. We’ve all learned how to deal with teleworking, and we’ve actually seen an increase in our contract numbers and the amount of conservation we’re able to put on the ground. Looking ahead, we’re very excited to return to whatever normal is going to look like once all of the final policies and procedures are in place.

For now, though, the thought of walking into my office, talking with my team, and going out to events to meet with all of you, warms my heart. While it’s been difficult, times like these have really instilled in me a deep appreciation for a life filled with human interaction. We’re social beings after all.

In hindsight, I think I took those in-person meetings, interactions, and laughter for granted. Looking forward, I will never do so again and value and cherish every opportunity I’ll share with all of you, whether that’s across a table, or walking next to you discussing conservation in the field.
Conservationist Updates

West Area

By David Rose
West Area Conservationist

Staff Actions
We currently have openings for Resource Conservationist in Olympia, Bremerton and Puyallup.

Sarah Tanuvasa, Northwest Team District Conservationist (DC), will be going to basic training and then advanced training with the Air Force. She will be gone for several months. We are very proud of her commitment to serve her country. We are currently selecting an acting DC to serve throughout Sarah’s absence.

Program Update
The current situation for EQIP has the West Area working toward funding 157 high priority applications out of a total of 296 applications for over $4 million in program funding.

Projects
We are actively working with Army Corps of Engineers to install portions of a reach scale river restoration project on our Floodplain Easement. We worked with partners to modify the restoration plan and adopted their Environmental Impact Statement so the work can happen on our easement. We now need to issue a Compatible Use Authorization to cover the monitoring and adaptive management. This project will help with regular flooding on the Skokomish River.

Central Area

By Austin Shero
Central Area Conservationist

Conservation Districts in the North Central Team held their annual meeting. This also gave NRCS an opportunity to communicate key CSP programmatic requirements to producers. Together, we had a collaborative producer meeting to help connect key points. Overall, this has been a fantastic relationship, and one we’re proud to continue to support and build.

NRCS has worked with many CD’s to develop a number of task orders for different programs. These task orders will help NRCS and CDs address critical conservation needs and meet their collective mission.

A diverse group continues to work toward developing funding strategies in the Odessa aquifer area. This is a long tenured group and have been working to address this need for quite some time. Excitement is growing as the group nears some funding opportunities to address resource concerns, solve water issues, and improve farming activities around the depleting aquifer. There has been no
shortage of challenges, but with the support of local, state, and federal partners, as well as multiple agency and elected official support, the fruits of the group’s work is blooming!

Local Working Groups have begun across the area. The Big Bend Team completed theirs in late February. The North Central Team has theirs scheduled in mid March. I hope to attend each and every Local Work Group and support the collaboration between local partners and NRCS. It is a phenomenal relationship, and one I’m happy to encourage and invest our time! We truly could not identify and address local resource concerns without the Local Working Group.

Again, I want to thank all of our partners, producers and employees for all the phenomenal work we’re accomplishing! It’s been an interesting time to be a customer facing, customer service agency. I can’t tell you how appreciative I am for our employees and partners continuing to work together to meet our customer’s needs, and to achieve the conservation mission we are charged with!

Things are starting to allow for more in person meetings, trainings, and events. I recently attended an event where I had the privilege to be in the same room as all 4 of my District Conservationists! It was a true pleasure! I can’t wait to meet all of you in person!

**East Area**

*By Aubrey Hoxie
East Area Conservationist*

**Program Updates**

Well, we are underway with completion of ranking for EQIP applications for FY2022. We had a total of 200 high priority applications for the East area, totaling around $25 million in requests for funding.

**Staffing Updates**

Exciting news for the East Area as we have a new Engineer joining us! I’m pleased to introduce R. Cory Greer who is joining us as an existing Washington employee, moving from Wenatchee.

**A little about Cory**

“I graduated with a BS in Environmental Science from Washington State University and then an MS in Agricultural Engineering, also from WSU. My Master’s focus was in Hydrology and frozen soil erosion mechanics. I started with NRCS in Ontario, Oregon in 2005 as an Ag. Engineer and completed projects for irrigation conversion, Ag. Waste and stream restoration. After 4 years in Oregon, I took a position in Fargo, North Dakota. I worked on EWP and NRCS watershed dam rehabilitation. After a couple of fun winters in North Dakota, I moved to the Emmett FO in Idaho. In Idaho, I completed projects in the SW for large pipeline projects replacing irrigation laterals, large stream restoration projects, wetlands work with Trout Unlimited and Ducks Unlimited, as well as large scale irrigation conversions. In 2015, I left the NRCS to work for the three large irrigation districts in SE Washington as the Columbia Basin Project Agronomist.

For four years, I was in charge of terrestrial and aquatic vegetation management as well as training for all the applicators in the three districts. In 2018, I accepted a position as a territory technical representative for a large Agri-Chemical company called UPL. This position with UPL allowed me to work with irrigation districts throughout the western US on aquatic vegetative management. In 2020, I came back to work with the NRCS as an engineer in the Wenatchee FO and now I am the Area East engineer here in Spokane. I spend my free time hunting, fishing, golfing, mountain biking, backpacking, playing and officiating ice hockey, and snow skiing.”
Tribal Update
By Robin Slate
Tribal Liaison

NRCS WA is working with Washington Association of Conservation Districts (WACD) staff to identify staff from Washington State Conservation Commission, WACD, and other state agencies that are interested in an abbreviated Working with Tribes training. Building on the training that was done a few years ago, the general overall response was it was very worthwhile to attend.

This year the training may be virtual as specific dates have not been chosen yet. Those interested in applying this training toward becoming a certified planner should enroll in the 32 hour full Working Effectively With American Indians training, which is not being planned for Washington this year, however several other states are planning this virtual training. Contact Robin Slate, State Tribal Liaison, for more information at robin.slate@usda.gov.

Partners & Coastal Program Biologist
By Nick Vira
Partnerships Liaison

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the NRCS have partnered to create the Partners and Coastal Program Biologist, through an interagency agreement. Through this agreement USFWS has hired Tyler Porter to fill the Partners and Coastal Program Biologist position. Mr. Porter will be housed in the NRCS Mt. Vernon Office.

The overall goal of this partnership is to leverage resources to restore and enhance wildlife habitat on private lands through voluntary, on the ground conservation projects. This agreement promotes opportunities for NRCS and USFWS to share technical expertise in delivering collaborative Partners for Fish and Wildlife/Coastal Program, and NRCS Farm Bill programs in North Puget Sound. This partnership encompasses Snohomish, Skagit, Whatcom, San Juan, Island, Jefferson, and Clallam counties.
Congress passed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act) which was signed by President Biden on Nov. 15, 2021. This legislation provides significant Federal dollars to programs administered by the USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). A total of $918 million has been allocated to three programs authorized through Public Law 566 (PL-566). The Watershed Flood Prevention Program, Watershed Rehabilitation Program, and the Emergency Watershed Protection Program are all recipients of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act funding. These funds will be added to existing funds for these programs. Requests for assistance for the Watershed & Flood Prevention Program can be made at any time throughout the year.

**Watershed & Flood Prevention Program (WFPO) - $500 million**

The Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) or “Small Watershed” Program helps local sponsors to achieve flood mitigation and prevention objectives by installing infrastructure or land treatment measures to create landscape scale resilience.

The additional $500 million will allow NRCS to address more of our Agency and sponsor’s priorities for new, backlog, and remedial WFPO projects. Priority will be given to projects in limited resource areas (LRA) and historically underserved (HU) communities where there is a severe need for watershed infrastructure to protect communities from flooding and disaster and address major watershed issues. Funding will be provided to conduct preliminary investigations, planning, and implementation necessary to address long term infrastructure needs for limited resource and historically underserved communities.

Funds will also be used to help tribal communities address their watershed scale priorities and needs. Infrastructure needs are significant within many tribal communities. This became evident during the pandemic where communities have been impacted the hardest. Many communities ran out of water or were hauling water to survive.

As we are in the midst of an historic drought, states will be provided WFPO funding to address new ag-water management needs in western states.

**Watershed Rehabilitation Program - $118 million**

The Watershed Rehabilitation (Rehab) Program helps local sponsors to upgrade aging NRCS dams to meet current dam safety criteria and performance standards while extending their service life.

The additional $118 million will allow NRCS to conduct planning, design, and construction for some of the 1,159 high hazard NRCS dams in 38 states that have reached their design life and are eligible for rehabilitation. Funding will be prioritized for those projects that have an authorized plan and where sponsors are committed to complete construction. Requests for assistance for the Watershed Rehabilitation Program can be made at any time throughout the year.

**Emergency Watershed Protection Program - $300 million**

The Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWPP) helps local sponsors to recover from natural disasters by protecting life and property.

The additional $300 million will allow NRCS to address the current backlog of EWPP funding request and new request for disasters across the country. There are communities still recovering from western wildfires, floods, tropical storms, tornadoes, and other natural disasters. The funding will be allocated to current and future disaster recovery projects and will be prioritized for exigency requests that pose an imminent threat to life and property. Requests for assistance for the EWPP can be made at any time throughout the year after a qualifying natural disaster has occurred.

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**Public Affairs**

**By Kris Mills**

NRCS-WA Outreach Coordinator

Monday was an exciting day as it marked my first day as the NRCS-WA Outreach Coordinator. I’ve been busy this week settling into this new position, learning all about NRCS programs, and thinking about all the ways and means I hope to enhance our overarching outreach strategy.

Getting my head wrapped around everything is going to take some time though, as I’m new to this world. I spent more than 20 years in the Army and recently retired to Coeur d’Alene.

Although, I am new to the NRCS, much of what I did in the military involved significant amount of time conducting outreach to communities in and around military installations, and my areas of operations. While forward deployed this outreach involved local village and communities consisting of vulnerable populations susceptible to violent extremist groups. I also worked closely with U.S. government inter-agencies, International Government Organizations, Non-Government Organizations, Independent and Private Institutions, host nation governments and officials, and indigenous populations. Throughout my career my worked
involved agricultural related projects to include: developing a Southeast Asia Agricultural Guide to support the mission of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command; working with USDA representative in Afghanistan to assist farmers with effective herd management, construction of hoop houses to extend the growing season, and conducted the first known agricultural shura in the region; managed projects in Afghanistan that protected irrigation ditches, mitigated the impacts of flooding to farmland, and delivered farm machinery to assist farmers; and authored approved grants that enabled the establishment of a poultry industry which became a primary employer in the area. During my last three years in the military, I also managed to effectively implement Cultural Property Protection into large-scale military training exercises where I also advocated for the protection of water and agricultural resources, as well.

I’ll be working through all of this with the support of my beautiful wife, Michele, and amazing children, Madilyn (10) and Liam (12), who share my love for the great outdoors. We truly love all this area has to offer with regards to the natural beauty as we enjoy camping, hiking, fishing, kayaking, and cycling. We also appreciate the diversity in the flora and fauna, geography, and landscapes as we travel and explore the region.

While I am blessed with an amazing family, I can’t reiterate enough how excited I am about joining my new conservation family! The conservation mission is more than a job for me, it is a passion. The main reason my family and I call this area home is because of the natural resources.

I am honored and privileged to be part of this team, and to be able continue to serve others. I admire and respect the work that everyone does in the name of conservation. I am here to do my part to ensure that conservation is achieved so that we all benefit now and into the future.

**State Resource Conservationist Update**

By Rachel Maggi
West Area Biologist

Following Bonda Habets retirement in December 2021, the SRC seat has been filled through a combination of Acting roles filled by Toby Rodgers, Soil Scientist and myself. We are happy to welcome Robert (Bobby) Evans to the SRC leadership team in beginning April 2022. Bobby brings a wealth of NRCS planning experience to the job along with an extensive knowledge of the interworking’s of NRCS planning and contracting software.

NRCS is considering ways to expand our assistance to Washington’s shellfish growers though Practice Standard 400 – Bivalve Aquaculture Gear and Biofouling Control. The practice was adopted into WA FOTG in December 2021. I am in the process of determining how WA could utilize existing payment scenarios from east coast states to meet the needs of WA shellfish growers.

At the national level, NRCS has improved delivery of conservation planning, implementation, and monitoring activities completed by Technical Service Providers that were formally funded under Conservation Activity Plans (CAP). Activities formerly completed under a CAP will now be contracted under as CPAs, DIAs, or CEMAs.

**What are CPAs, DIAs, and CEMAs?**

Technical service providers (TSP) or other third-party service providers (Providers) for NRCS can carry out planning, design, implementation, and monitoring tasks for NRCS conservation program purposes (previously known as Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs)). NRCS has reorganized and renamed CAPs into three new categories—Conservation Planning Activities (CPAs), Design and Implementation Activities (DIAs), and Conservation Evaluation and Monitoring Activities (CEMAs). NRCS broke these activities out to clarify which phase of the NRCS conservation planning process the TSP/Provider will be supporting.

Conservation Planning Activities (CPAs): Activities that result in a conservation plan consistent with steps 1-7 of the NRCS conservation planning process. The CPA will document client decisions regarding selected alternatives including identification of desired primary and supporting practices that the client would like to use to treat identified resource concerns.

Design and Implementation Activities (DIAs): Activities that allow for development of specific practice designs, management prescriptions, or other instructions that allow the client to implement the conservation practice or system of conservation practices. These activities are consistent with Step 8 of the NRCS conservation planning process. (Does not include assistance with conservation practice installation, review, and checkout.)

Conservation Evaluation and Monitoring Activities (CEMAs):
Activities that include evaluation, monitoring, testing, or assessment for a specific purpose, to complete practice implementation requirements, or to determine the effectiveness of conservation practices and activities. CEMAs are consistent with Step 9 of the NRCS conservation planning process but may be used at any point in the planning process.

Further information on CPAs, DIAs, and CEMAs can be found [here](#).

Lastly, the EcoSci team is working to reassess practice payment scenarios needed for FY23 to advance WA NRCS’s program delivery to Urban Agricultural clients and to address Climate Smart Farming needs. Stay tuned for new payment scenarios tailored to non-traditional agricultural operations as well as those that are on the leading edge to assist WA agriculture in its move toward climate resiliency.

### Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Allocation</th>
<th>Eligible Apps*</th>
<th>Contracts</th>
<th>Obligation/Awards</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSP Renewal FY22</td>
<td>$4,500,000</td>
<td>_</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>$4,378,962</td>
<td>All high screened eligible applications were funded. All remaining funds returned to NHQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSP Classic</td>
<td>$8,640,000</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
<td>CSP classic batching deadline is 3/31/2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSP Renewal FY23</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
<td>Contracting will begin in November 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EQIP Classic</td>
<td>$19,963,813</td>
<td>524</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In the process of contracting at the time of this report</td>
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<tr>
<td>EQIP CIC</td>
<td>$665,150</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
<td>Program not yet announced by NHQ</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCPP-EQIP</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
<td>Each RCPP project area has their own funding amount. This is not a yearly allocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCPP-CSP</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
<td>No applications were received</td>
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<td>FY22 RCPP Projects</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>UNK</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Application period is open. Selected projects are awarded by NHQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEP-ALE</td>
<td>$3,499,395</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
<td>Applications are in the process of being ranked and awarded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEP-WRE</td>
<td>$_</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Funds are being used for Stewardship measures on existing WRP/WRE easements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCPP-ACEP-ALE</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 application packets were incomplete and determined ineligible. 2 applications were determined ineligible (FSA records, exceeded 67% NIPF).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCPP-HFRP</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 application is currently in process. Partner has to obtain funds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*eligible applications: does not include pending, canceled, or otherwise ineligible applications
Celebrating NRCS Year End Accomplishments

By Terry Cosby
NRCS Chief

NRCS leadership and the leadership at USDA are proud of the work that has been accomplished over this last year. The American public is better because of your commitment and work to serve our customers and improve natural resources across our nation’s private lands.

Recently, Secretary Vilsack shared several announcements highlighting key work to advance equity and combat climate change. NRCS has made some remarkable accomplishments in these areas and will play a critical role in the work that lies ahead. NRCS staff will be integral to ensuring that our customers have the tools they need to mitigate climate change and build more resilient operations. We will also expand our efforts to ensure that all farmers and ranchers have access to conservation assistance. I encourage you to read the Department summaries below:

- Key Work in 2021 to Advance Equity
- Key Work in 2021 to Combat Climate Change

As I reflect on our collective accomplishments, I am both proud and inspired by your dedication and service to our mission and vision. I would also like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to our partners, particularly the employees of the conservation districts, for their support. The success of our strong conservation partnership is a shared celebration of accomplishments.

The future of the next generation is relying on the work we do today to improve and sustain our natural resources. They will not be let down.

Thank you for your passion, hard work and commitment to our farmers, ranchers, landowners, and partners.

USDA Announces Inaugural Federal Advisory Committee on Urban Agriculture

WASHINGTON, (Feb. 1, 2022) – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack selected 12 members to serve on the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) inaugural Secretary’s Advisory Committee for Urban Agriculture to provide input on policy development and to help identify barriers to urban agriculture as USDA works to promote urban farming and the economic opportunities it provides in cities across the country.

The new Secretary’s Advisory Committee is part of USDA’s efforts to support urban agriculture, creating a network for feedback. Urban agriculture plays an important role in producing fresh, healthy food in areas where grocery stores are scarce, and also provides jobs and beautifies neighborhoods. “Urban agriculture has been growing in impact and importance, and we are taking bold actions to build a support structure,” said Vilsack. “I look forward to learning how we can better serve urban agricultural producers, which will complement our efforts focusing on equity, local food systems, access to safe and nutritional food and new ways to address climate change.”

U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, Chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, was the architect of the Urban Agriculture Act of 2016. The Act laid the groundwork for historic investments to address the needs of urban farmers in the 2018 Farm Bill, including the Secretary’s
Advisory Committee.

“With every new urban farm, rooftop garden, and indoor crop, urban agriculture is helping create jobs, increase green space, and feed friends and neighbors,” said Senator Stabenow. “Michigan has long been a leader in urban agriculture. I’m so glad Jerry and others will be able to lend their expertise and wealth of experience to help grow this important sector. This is a historic opportunity to have their voices heard and shape urban agriculture for the future.”

Secretary’s Advisory Committee for Urban Agriculture

The Committee is made up of agricultural producers, and representatives from the areas of higher education or extension programs, non-profits, business and economic development, supply chains and financing.

Members include:

• Jerry Ann Hebron, Mich., Urban Producer
• Bobby Wilson, Ga., Urban Producer
• Viraj Puri, N.Y., Innovative Producer
• Kaben Smallwood, Okla., Innovative Producer
• Sally Brown, Wash., Higher Education
• John Erwin, Md., Higher Education
• Carl Wallace, Ohio, Non-Profit Representative
• John Lebeaux, Mass., Business and Economic Development Representative
• Zachari Curtis, D.C., Supply Chain Experience
• Allison Paap, Calif., Financing Entity Representative
• Tara Chadwick, Fla., Related Experience
• Angela Mason, Ill., Related Experience

USDA and the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production peer reviewed more than 300 nominees, and Vilsack made the final selections. Selections ensured geographic, racial and gender diversity and a broad range of agricultural experience. The new members will serve terms of one to three years.

The first meeting of this inaugural committee, which will be open to the public, will take place in late February. More details will be available in the Federal Register and at farmers.gov/urban and the new Federal Advisory Committee for Urban Agriculture website at www.usda.gov/partnerships/advisory-committee-urban-ag-innovative-production.

USDA and Urban Agriculture

The advisory committee and county committees are part of a broad USDA investment in urban agriculture. Other efforts include:

• Grants that target areas of food access, education, business and start-up costs for new farmers, and development of policies related to zoning and other needs of urban production.
• Cooperative agreements that develop and test strategies for planning and implementing municipal compost plans and food waste reduction plans.
• Investing $260 thousand for risk management training and crop insurance education for historically underserved and urban producers through partnerships between USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA) and the University of Maryland, University of Connecticut, and Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems.
• Providing technical and financial assistance through conservation programs offered by USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Organizing 11 Farm Service Agency (FSA) urban and suburban county committees. FSA will organize additional committees.

The Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production was established through the 2018 Farm Bill. It is led by NRCS and works in partnership with numerous USDA agencies that support urban agriculture. Its mission is to encourage and promote urban, indoor, and other emerging agricultural practices, including community composting and food waste reduction. More information is available at farmers.gov/urban and the new Federal Advisory Committee for Urban Agriculture website at www.usda.gov/partnerships/advisory-committee-urban-ag-innovative-production.

Additional resources that may be of interest to urban agriculture entities include grants from USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service and National Institute of Food and Agriculture as well as FSA loans.

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. Under the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is transforming America’s food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to safe, healthy, and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit usda.gov.
USDA Invests More Than $166.5 Million in Infrastructure to Protect American Communities

SPOKANE VALLEY, Wash. (March 3, 2022) – President Joe Biden and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is investing more than $166.5 million in 108 infrastructure projects as part of implementing the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, also known as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is working with local communities in 23 states to invest in new dam and flood prevention projects and in repairs on existing watershed infrastructure, which are all part of USDA’s broader national infrastructure investment.

Through this first round of projects, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is funding, NRCS prioritized projects in communities heavily impacted by drought and other natural disasters as well as historically underserved and limited resource communities.

“The Biden-Harris Administration is committed to building back better, and this starts with our infrastructure,” Vilsack said. “Protecting our watersheds and saving lives is paramount. These investments in our watershed programs will provide much needed support for communities to build resilience in the face of climate change. We can extend financial assistance to underserved communities that live in constant fear of flooding, help with the effects of severe weather events, and put systems in place that will ensure a climate resilient future to help communities thrive in the years to come.”

Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, signed in November by President Biden, provided $918 million for NRCS watershed programs, which includes the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) Program, Watershed Rehabilitation Program (REHAB) and Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program. Through NRCS watershed programs, NRCS works with local, eligible sponsors, including state government entities, local municipalities, conservation districts and federally recognized tribal organizations.

The WFPO project in Washington focuses on new infrastructure:

East Columbia Basin Irrigation District - Odessa Groundwater Replacement Project – WA4

A new plan is being developed that will assist with agricultural water management and watershed protection in the Odessa Aquifer area. There is a federal, state, and private partnership which includes state level initiative and partnered program to limit depletion of the Odessa aquifer. The partner’s concern is that further aquifer depletion will cause severe economic and environmental consequences. The project was limited to replacing ground water supplies (water from the Odessa aquifer) with water from the Columbia Basin Project. As a replacement program, there would be no new irrigated land as the partners agreed to acre-for-acre ground water replacement only.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act also provided EWP funds and those funds are available for communities to respond to natural disasters. NRCS will continue to assist communities as it receives disaster requests.

A full list of projects is available on NRCS’ Landscape Planning and Watershed Programs webpage.

Implementing the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law

Since the bill was signed into law, NRCS has hosted training webinars focused on educating potential sponsors and historically underserved communities about the funding opportunities provided by the new legislation.

NRCS conducted an assessment of current needs for watershed protection and flood prevention work. This assessment supported the establishment of priorities that focused funding on the most critical and highest priority projects for improving the Nation's land and water resources.

NRCS encourages local sponsors to submit requests for funding through their local NRCS Watershed Program Manager. For the Washington projects, contact Larry Johnson, state conservation engineer, at larry.a.johnson@usda.gov or (509)323-2955. On March 31, 2022, NRCS will compile any additional request received and develop a second list of projects to fund. After March 31, 2022, NRCS will continue to review and fund requests as funds are available.

More Information

Since their enactment in 1948, NRCS’ watershed programs have designed and built 11,000 dams, constructed water storage structures, flood management systems, bank stabilization, moved towns, redirected stream flows, re-established wildlife habitat and more to save lives and protect watersheds.
$1 Billion Funding Opportunity to Pilot New Revenue Streams for America's Climate-Smart Farmers, Ranchers and Forest Landowners

USDA's Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities will provide grants for pilot projects that create market opportunities for U.S. agricultural and forest products produced using climate-smart practices and include innovative, cost-effective methods for quantification, monitoring and verification of greenhouse gas and carbon sequestration benefits. USDA will support the production and marketing of climate-smart commodities through a set of pilot projects that provide voluntary incentives through partners to producers and landowners, including early adopters, to:

- Implement climate-smart production practices, activities, and systems on working lands,
- Measure/quantify, monitor and verify the carbon and greenhouse gas (GHG) benefits associated with those practices, and
- Develop markets and promote the resulting climate-smart commodities.

Proposals must provide plans to:

- Pilot implementation of climate-smart agriculture and/or forestry production practices on a large-scale, including meaningful involvement of small and/or historically underserved producers;
- Quantify, monitor, report and verify climate results; and
- Develop markets and promote climate-smart commodities generated as a result of project activities

Pilot Projects and Climate-Smart Production Practices

Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities pilot projects must focus on the on-farm, on-ranch or forest production of climate-smart commodities and associated reductions of greenhouse gas emissions and/or carbon sequestration. For the purposes of this funding opportunity, a climate-smart commodity is defined as an agricultural commodity that is produced using farming, ranching or forestry practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions or sequester carbon.

Highly competitive projects will include agricultural and forestry practices or combinations of practices, and/or practice enhancements that provide GHG benefits and/or carbon sequestration, including but not limited to:

- Cover crops
- Low-till or no-till
- Nutrient management
- Enhanced efficiency fertilizers
- Manure management
- Feed management to reduce enteric emissions
- Buffers, wetland and grassland management, and tree planting on working lands
- Agroforestry and afforestation on working lands
- Afforestation/reforestation and sustainable forest management
- Planting for high carbon sequestration rate
- Maintaining and improving forest soil quality
- Increase on-site carbon storage through forest stand management
- Alternate wetting and drying on rice fields
- Climate-smart pasture practices, such as prescribed grazing or legume interseeding
- Soil amendments, like biochar

Who Can Apply

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is accepting project applications for fiscal year 2022.

A wide range of public and private entities may apply, including:

- County, city or township governments
- Special district governments
- State governments
- Small businesses
- For profit organizations other than small businesses
- Native American tribal governments (Federally recognized)
- Native American tribal organizations (other than Federally recognized tribal governments)
- Nonprofits having a 501(c)(3) (other than institutions of higher education)
- Nonprofits that do not have a 501(c)(3) (other than institutions of higher education)
- Private institutions of higher education
- Public and State-controlled institutions of higher education
How to Apply

The opportunity is available to partners who serve producers of all sizes and all methods and all locations and all types of production. Primary applicant/recipient must be an entity, not an individual.

Applicants must submit their applications via Grants.gov by 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time on:

**April 8, 2022 – First Funding pool**

Proposals are from $5 million to $100 million are in the first funding pool and should include large-scale pilot projects that emphasize the greenhouse gas benefits of climate-smart commodity production and include direct, meaningful benefits to a representative cross-section of production agriculture, including small and/or historically underserved producers.

**May 27, 2022 – Second Funding Pool**

Proposals are from $250,000 to $4,999,999 are in the second funding pool and are limited to particularly innovative pilot projects. These projects should place an emphasis on:

- Enrollment of small and/or underserved producers, and/or
- Monitoring, reporting and verification activities developed at minority-serving institutions.

There is no specific match requirement for this funding opportunity. Applications will be evaluated, in part, on the relative contribution of non-Federal resources to the project when appropriate. This will be taken into consideration through an equity lens to ensure that the ability to secure a non-federal match is not a barrier to participation.

USDA is committed to equity in program delivery and is specifically seeking proposals from entities serving all types of producers, including small or historically underserved producers. In addition, sufficient incentives to encourage producer participation, as well as, generation of verifiable greenhouse gas reductions and carbon sequestration are critical to project success and will be considered in the evaluation criteria.

For more information and resources to support your application, visit usda.gov/climate-smart-commodities.
NACD Update for March 17, 2022
Washington State Conservation Commission Meeting

NACD 2022 Fly-in is scheduled for March 22, 2022. Some meetings are likely to occur at dates other than on March 22. Commission staff, NRCS and WACD are having coordination meetings to ascertain subject matter, timing, who says what, etc. NACD issue papers which lay out NACD priorities are [https://www.nacdnet.org/general-resources/issue-papers/](https://www.nacdnet.org/general-resources/issue-papers/) The link has previous papers, should you wish to compare. There *may* be a fifth issue paper developed on the National Watershed Coalition.

NACD 2022 Summer Conservation Forum and Tour will be held July 16-19, 2022 in San Juan, Puerto Rico. [https://www.nacdnet.org/news-and-events/summer-meeting/](https://www.nacdnet.org/news-and-events/summer-meeting/) NACD Pacific Region meeting will be held September 8 – 11, 2022 in Maui. More information to follow.

Chris Young is the new NACD Director of Government Affairs. ([chris-young@nacdnet.org](mailto:chris-young@nacdnet.org)). [https://www.nacdnet.org/nacd-staff/](https://www.nacdnet.org/nacd-staff/)

Chris Young
Director of Government Affairs | Washington, D.C.

Miscellaneous
NACD president Crowder will announce a Farm Bill task force in the near future. The task force will determine what our NACD Farm Bill priorities are.
DATE: March 6, 2022

TO: Mike Mumford, President, WACD
    Tom Salzer, Executive Director, WACD
    Doug Rushton, National Director, WACD
    Wade Troutman, Alternate National Director, WACD

FROM: Larry Davis, WACD Acting National Director and NACD Board Member
       for 02/12-16/22 Orlando, FL annual NACD meeting

CC: Ryan Baye, Legislative and Membership Lead, WACD
    Michael Crowder, NACD President & Benton CD Supervisor
    Ariel Rivers, NACD Pacific Region Staff

SUBJECT: Report on 76th Annual Meeting of NACD in Orlando, FL

Let me begin with a thank you for the opportunity to represent WACD at the Orlando NACD annual meeting. It was a good conference with some good results. To quote President Crowder, it was “outstanding” that 46 states and three territories were represented in Orlando.

WACD RESOLUTIONS – HOW THEY FARED

Doug has already provided the update on Washington’s two resolutions. Thank you, Doug. In short:

Resolution A-3: Request for NRCS to update the reimbursable rate for riparian practices.

RESULT 1: Passed unanimously by NACD Legislative Committee, as amended. See below:

“NACD supports NRCS to evaluate payment rates for practices and adopt rates to recognize the true cost of implementing effective practices.”

RESULT 2: Passed by full NACD Board.
Resolution A-4: Reverse new FSA Emergency Conservation Program Rules on Fencing

RESULT: Failed to get out of the NACD Legislative Committee.

Comments: My understanding is that committee members had difficulty in understanding the proposed policy statement.

OVERVIEW OF MY CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

Saturday, February 12

1. RPG Coffee Plenary Session: This was a first-ever opportunity for the Chair of the NACD NRPC, Kim LaFleur (MA), NACD First Vice President, and the chairs of the six Resource Policy Groups (RPGs) to gather in one place to discuss issues. If you are not aware, each RPG is essentially a subcommittee of the NRPC. We shared what we felt was going well with our RPGs and the challenges we face. Without question, the primary challenge for each RPG is the frustration regarding RPG member participation. My understanding is that this frustration applies equally to the NACD Foundation Committees (District Operations and Member Services (DOMS), Legislative, and Communications).

Partly as a result of the RPGs/NRPC meeting, I agreed to serve on a new, short-term special committee that will focus on examining the organizational structure of NACD. The ‘deadline’ to present recommendations is at the July 16-19, 2022 Summer Board Meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

2. Tribal RPG meeting. I chair this committee. It was a sparsely attended meeting, primarily due to COVID and travel costs. Nonetheless, the Committee did adopt a 2022 workplan, the first in its six-year existence. I was particularly pleased by this outcome.

3. When the Tribal RPG ended early, I hustled over to the Coastal RPG (on which I serve as an at-large member.) My arrival was timed perfectly as the discussion was about to start on the role of the RPGs in the review of the entire NACD Policy Book. This review has been charged to the latest iteration of the Policy Book Task Force (PBTF), for which I serve as chair.
Attended the first meeting of the NACD Board of Directors. President Crowder spoke about the Biden Administration’s ‘American the Beautiful’ concept, also known as “30x30”. He stressed that the Executive Order which created the initiative is a concept program. No legislative text has been introduced. He stressed that NACD should not outright oppose the idea. Instead, to assure NACD retains a meaningful voice in the development of ideas and text to build out the concept, NACD needs to be seen as a responsible entity and offer support where it is appropriate and offer arguments against other provisions.

- NACD CEO Jeremy Peters reviewed the 2020-22 Strategic Plan. Goal A, Objective 2, speaks to increasing membership engagement. My perspective is that engagement can be defined in progressively more substantive ways: minimum to maximum. I will ponder this further for what this might mean for the Tribal RPG. I also need to inquire if there is a formal process for NACD to enter into an MOU with an NGO.

- NACD Treasurer Gary Blair shared on overview of NACD finances.

- Cynthia Mills, President & CEO of The Leaders' Haven™, talked about leadership. I will see if a copy of her PowerPoint is available. She shared a word that is new to me: Survivance. She indicated that it is a Native American word that means redefining ourselves by holding onto our principles while still embracing change. I Googled the word and came across this statement in The Decolonial Dictionary: “Although this term has a long history, I want to focus here on how it has been employed and adapted by White Earth Anishinaabe writer and literary theorist, Gerald Vizenor. “Survivance”, in this sense, names the conjunction between resistance and survival – calling attention to the fact that not only have Indigenous peoples survived the genocidal ambitions of settler colonialism, but have continued to enliven their cultures in fluid, critical and generative ways. The term thus resists the static overtones of “survival” and instead emphasizes the ways in which Indigenous peoples have created counter-poses/positions to those that are marked out for them by the settler-state through stereotypes, popular culture, and national mythology. This is a very passing attempt at expanding (not defining) the term “survivance”.”

Mills quoted from a book by Susan Scott, Fierce Conversations, “You get what you tolerate.” The context was Mills talking about CULTURE (how we engage), GOVERNANCE STYLE (how we operate), ROLES (who does what), and TRUST (the underpinning of all relationships). I am going to track down a copy of the book. A particular acronym Mills mentioned was: CEO – Coaching Extraordinary Outcomes.

4. Attended the NACD Resolutions Committee meeting. Discussion focused on policies scheduled for sunset, as well as sunset policies that were challenged so as not to be removed from the Policy Book.
Sunday, February 13

1. I dropped by the Next Generation Leadership Institute meeting to meet a member of the Class 2 cohort who is also the newest member of the Tribal RPG.

2. Attended the NRPC Committee meeting, standing in for Doug. ● Of particular note for me was that the NRPC approved all six RPG workplans.

   ● There was some discussion about America the Beautiful. I believe there was agreement that NACD’s message needs to be strong in favor of working lands and approached through voluntary-led conservation.

   ● Tom Wehr (CA), on the NACD Executive Board, spoke to a special committee he will lead that will take a look at NACD’s organizational structure (examining the RPGs and their relationship with the NRPC, the foundation committees, and use of special committees and task forces). As mentioned earlier, I will serve on this task force.

   ● The NRPC did approve the Policy Book Task Force recommendations relating to the policies for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

**NOTE:** Long ago, in a time well before COVID, I served on the Policy Book Task Force for 6-7 years. After sitting out a couple of years, I got back onto the Task Force for another year or so. This third iteration of the group is going to go through the entire policy book. As Chair, I hope we can complete roughly half the review by the time of the Summer meeting in Puerto Rico. Then, my goal is that the remainder will be done by the time of the annual meeting in New Orleans next February. It is a challenging endeavor, but I think it is doable.

Our task is **NOT** to change existing policy (we have zero authority to do so). Instead, we are checking to see if any policies are no longer applicable because the issue has been accomplished, or federal statute or regulation has been changed and the policy is not pertinent, or it is duplicative of policy elsewhere in the book. Those policies will be recommended for archiving and taken out of the policy book. Where policies can be ‘softly’ amended to improve clarity (but **NOT** affect the substance of the policy), we will make that recommendation to the Executive Board.
3. I attended the Pacific Region meeting. ● The Region discussed two resolutions from Hawaii, both dealing with feral animals. ● Discussion then shifted to developing actions for the Region’s strategic plan goals, focusing in particular on 2022 stories that would highlight the history of women’s roles in conservation.

● There was a very good PowerPoint presentation by Mitch Michaud, Vice Chair of the Kenai Soil & Water CD in Alaska. I am working on getting a copy of this presentation.

● In the annual election for officers a new Pacific Region chair was elected – Michael Aguon from Guam. Current Vice Chair, Mae Nakahata (HI) was reelected. Doug had been serving as the Region’s chair. I want to express my thanks to Doug for his commitment to this position, as well as to NACD and WACD, and certainly to his many years of service with Thurston CD.

● This year’s annual Pacific Region/SW Region joint meeting will be held in September at the Royal Lahaina Palm Resort in Lahaina on Maui. More details to come.

4. I attended the second session of the NACD Board of Directors. ● The first speaker was Dr. Thomas Easley. He spoke about DEI matters. I will see if I can get his PowerPoint. A couple of comments he made resonated with me, the first by him and the second quoting from someone else: “Equity is both a process and an outcome.”, and “Widen the trail you walk.”

Reflecting back on Dr. Easley’s remarks, I thought that we are unknowing captives of the education we did not receive growing up. In my opinion, this particularly applies to the major gaps in U.S. history addressing government treatment (federal, state, and local) of people of color. Personal reading the last 2-1/2 years has revealed to me how appallingly poor was the education I received on DEI issues, in both K-12 and higher education.

● The Board approved the financial report that was presented the preceding day.

● Tim Palmer, NACD Immediate Past President (IA), and chair of the NACD Climate Action Task Force, presented on the work to date of the Task Force. He used a phrase that is quite common, ‘farmers and ranchers’. This phrase is now more frequently being enlarged to include ‘foresters’. I wonder, is ‘farmers, ranchers, and foresters’ broad enough or intended to include those who make their living working water (oceans, lakes, rivers, and smaller water courses).

● Pelham Strong, NACD’s lobbyist on Capitol Hill spoke about the 2023 Farm Bill. The process has just got underway in Congress.
Monday, February 14

1. My day began with the **Opening General Session** of the conference. ● There was a good, ‘welcome to Florida’ speech by Jeff Moore, President of the Florida Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts. ● Tim Palmer (IA), NACD Immediate Past President, spoke next. ● Michael Crowder, NACD President, spoke to his first year as President and cited a list of accomplishments. Perhaps most importantly, he recognized Valentines Day and had a bouquet of roses delivered to his wife Gretchen’s table. “Well played, Mr. President.”

   ● Jeremy Peters, NACD CEO, talked about the Association from his perspective.

   ● Adam Putnam, leader of Ducks Unlimited gave an entertaining, informative speech. I appreciated his observation that current society is multiple generations removed from agriculture. He shared that districts need to be better performers in a commoditized world. He mentioned that the collective ‘we’ must tell our story as a matter of offense rather than defense. Finally, he mentioned the soon to be released IMAX movie, *Wings Over Water*, narrated by Michael Keaton. The movie “…tells the story of the epic journeys of three amazing bird families – the Sandhill Crane, the Yellow Warbler, and the Mallard Duck – with extraordinary footage of their fascinating behaviors.” The focus is on an “…often overlooked region of North America…the prairie pothole region, which spans over 300,000 square miles in the center of the continent and is home to millions of birds and other species.” [https://youtu.be/mFsUcMgeuic](https://youtu.be/mFsUcMgeuic)

   ● Kim LaFleur wrapped up the meeting.

2. I attended the **Leadership Luncheon**. ● Kim LaFleur led off the program and then turned it over to Toni Stanger-McLaughlin, the new Executive Director for the Native American Agriculture Fund (NAAF). NAAF is a federal agency created from a federal court case. NAAF has 20 years to grant out $266 million. After 20 years NAAF will terminate. I introduced myself after the lunch. I will be arranging a conference call to talk about this year’s grant application cycle. NACD has applied before but has yet to be successful. Toni is a member of the Colville Confederated Tribes and lives in Spokane.

   ● Gary Blair, NACD Treasurer, spoke next, followed by ● Brent Van Dyke, NACD Past President and current Chair of the National Conservation Foundation which directs the Envirothon competition.

3. In the afternoon I attended the **NRPC meeting** at which assigned resolutions were discussed and action motions were taken. Those resolutions approved went to the full Board business meeting on the 15th.
Tuesday, February 15

1. I attended the morning **General Session.** ● The program began with a four-person panel comprised of Spencer Chase, Managing Editor of AgriPulse and National Association of Farm Broadcasters (NAFB); Deirdre Irwin, St. John’s River Water and Management District (FL); Christopher Pettit, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services; and Adam Herges, Senior Sustainability Agronomist at The Mosaic Company (MN). The moderator was Mark Stewart, President & CEO, Agriculture Future of America (AFA). I thought Mr. Pettit was particularly an out-of-the-box thinker with an understated sense of humor. He commented at one point, “Let no crisis go unmanipulated.”

   - Heidi Peterson, PhD., Vice President for Agricultural Research and Conservation, the Sand County Foundation. (The foundation was named after/for the fictional county in the 1949 book by Aldo Leopold, *The Sand County Almanac.*) “Sand County Foundation’s mission is to inspire and enable a growing number of private landowners to ethically manage natural resources in their care so that future generations have clean and abundant water, healthy soil to support agriculture and forestry, plentiful habitat for wildlife and opportunities for outdoor recreation.”

   - Tracy Stone-Manning, Director of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). I learned that BLM manages 245 million acres of public lands, including 155 million acres of grazing lands. She said there are 86,000 wild horses and burros, which is three times more than the land can sustain.

   - Terry Cosby, Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), USDA. He shared some personal history and then talked about NRCS matters.

2. I attended the **Board business meeting.** ● Paul Minehart, Head, Corporate Communications-North America at Syngenta Corporation, gave a good presentation on communications. I will see if I can get a copy of this PowerPoint presentation. He said four things of which I took special note:

   a) “Your receiver (of your message) IS your audience.” Paul Minehart
   b) “Does anyone have questions for my answers?” Henry Kissinger
   c) “The more I practice the luckier I get.” Gary Player (pro golfer)
   d) Follow the Rule of 27 in communication:
      - 3 messages • 9 words each message • 27 words total

   ● The next speaker was Mr. Positive Nelson, Commissioner of Agriculture for the U.S. Virgin Islands. I liked his statement, “Planet conservation is not a choice.” ● President Crowder signed two MOUs: One with the Sand County Foundation, and one with American Farmers of the Future.
Wednesday, February 16

1. I attended the final meeting of the NACD Board. At this meeting the chairs of the respective Foundation Committees each provided an update. Of note, Kim LaFleur, NRPC chair, indicated that her committee will draft comments for NACD on the American the Beautiful Executive Order. Comments are due to the administration by March 7th.

2. The chairs of the RPGs also gave updates.

3. The NACD Region Chairs provided updates.

4. There was an update by NCF-Envirothon. I went to the mic and plugged the Washington Conservation Society’s ‘scholarship’ program to attract tribal student teams to participate in the Envirothon.

You now know effectively as much as I about my conference week in Orlando.

I will note that since Carolyn and I did not leave until the 17th, we managed to get in a nearly two-hour airboat ride on Lake Toho (Lake Tohopekaliga) in Kissimmee, FL. The 23,000-acre lake includes a marshy area on the Eastern Shore where our ride took place. The lake is known for its professional bass fishing competitions and birdwatching opportunities. It is home to a staggering number of freshwater bass, alligators, water snakes and turtles. In fact, we saw six gators. Two of them were no more than five feet, at most, from the boat. For me it was bordering on ‘too close for comfort’ because I was sitting in the front on a lower-level seat. There were literally too many kinds of birds to keep track. The experience was terrific. It is a marvelous ecosystem.