

Vermont Natural Resources Conservation Districts (NRCDS)

Information regarding the role of Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Districts (NRCDS) in the state-wide and national context of natural resources management and protection.

Relationship between Vermont's NRCDS and the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Services Agency (NRCS)

One of the primary ways in which Vermont's NRCDS are distinct from relevant state agencies and nonprofit community partners who provide similar services is our **unique relationship with NRCS**. Collectively, Vermont's Conservation Districts hold written agreements with NRCS which authorize the following functions:

- **Cost-share of office space and technology** - 11 Conservation Districts share an office with NRCS staff and use of NRCS computer systems, and Conservation Districts have the ability to hold federal email addresses
- **Access to NRCS data and tools** - Conservation Districts have access to mapping and contracting tools as well as farm data that NRCS uses that are not widely available to outside groups, such as Conservation Desktop. Conservation Desktop (CD) is the core Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative (CDSI) application that integrates NRCS's technical and financial information and processes into a common user interface.
- **Facilitate Local Working Groups to inform NRCS funding priorities** - Conservation Districts are the only entity identified in the federal Farm Bill to use the NRCS's local-led framework to host Local Working Groups that influence what NRCS's funding priorities are in different parts of the state. Here are a couple of examples:
 - The White River NRCDS facilitated farmer-led Work Groups to inform the policies being developed around Payment for Ecosystem Services.
 - The Bennington NRCDS facilitated Local Working Groups around PFAS in their communities.
- **Achieving National Conservation Planner status** - Conservation Districts are invited to attend all NRCS trainings and can achieve formal "Conservation Planner" status from the federal government which enables us to write conservation plans on behalf of landowners according to NRCS standards.
- **Federal-State Cross Participation** - Conservation Districts and NRCS staff cross participate in each other's programming and administration. For example, Conservation Districts are invited to attend regular regional zone meetings held by NRCS, and NRCS staff are obligated to join Conservation District Board meetings.
- **Written Agreements to Share Work** - Conservation Districts hold unique written agreements with the NRCS to be on-the-ground partners for their state goals and work. Here is an example of language from our "Unfunded Cooperative Agreement" with NRCS:

NRCS will provide access to NRCS equipment, technology, and technical tools to the maximum extent possible to facilitate mission delivery and enable mutually beneficial program outcomes...NRCS will provide access to shared office spaces, where parties can better collaborate to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes and provide improved access and services to customers within the local community.

It is worth noting that while Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Districts are critical state partners for NRCS, the federal government does not contribute meaningfully towards operational expenses outside of shared office space and technology. The federal government's support does not include any salary or benefits for staff, travel reimbursements, necessary equipment for on-site technical assistance, etc. We provide valuable services to NRCS in exchange for office space and technology, and that the exchange is generally below a fair market rate for our services. This is especially true now, as our exchange rate does not grow with inflation.

Subdivision of State Government and Elected Leadership

Vermont's NRCDS are **subdivisions of state government** that were established by landowners through the petitioning process laid out in the [Soil Conservation Act](#) as a response to the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. Conservation Districts operate under the authority of the Vermont Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC) which is designated an "agency of the state" under 10 V.S.A. § 703. Each District has a Board of Supervisors who are all local residents elected by the public to that position.

As governmental subdivisions, NRCDs operate more like municipalities than nonprofits. **If our constituents are not happy with the services they receive from their local NRCD, they hold the power to vote acting Supervisors out of their position.** In current practice, Supervisors follow the election process to either become elected or appointed to their position, while District Managers are hired by the Board. NRCDs are responsible for holding their own elections which currently do not align with other local elections.

Non-Regulatory Status and Core NRCD Functions

Conservation District staff members are **non-regulatory government employees** who are embedded in the communities they serve. Our uniqueness lies in the neighbor-to-neighbor relationships we have with the landowners we provide services to. We are often the liaison that works directly with landowners to identify and apply to the programs and grants that best meets their needs. These programs and grants are often administered by the Agency of Agriculture & Food Markets, the Agency of Natural Resources, UVM Extension, VHCB, and others, and Conservation Districts act as local outreach. Below are just a few examples of our core work:

- **Pay for Performance Program** - Conservation Districts have a contract with VAAF to implement the new Pay for Performance program at the local level, which is a natural continuation of our role of connecting the farmers and landowners in our communities to opportunities to reduce phosphorus and stormwater runoff, enhance riparian corridors, plant native species, etc.
- **Stormwater** - Many of Vermont's Conservation Districts are stormwater project implementers. We use Stormwater Master Plans and our relationships with municipalities to help advance water quality initiatives in stormwater. Many Conservation Districts hold community forums to gather public input on town stormwater projects.
- **Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership** - the Vermont Association of Conservation Districts and all 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts are part of the Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership, which is a formal partnership with an MOU signed between ourselves, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, USDA Farm Service Agency, US Fish & Wildlife Service, UVM Extension, Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets, the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, and the Lake Champlain Basin Program. That partnership has a framework at the state level and local level to collaborate and coordinate efforts, and Conservation Districts hold that framework at the local level as regional coordinators.
- **Tactical Basin Planning** - NRCDs are one of three entities required in statute to be involved in the State's Tactical Basin Planning process (NRCDs, RPCs, and watershed groups). NRCDs not only contribute to the development of the tactical basin planning process in their local basin(s), but many take significant leadership roles in developing these plans and/or conduct most of the community outreach needed to develop the plans. 10 V.S.A. § 1253(2)(F) requires the Agency of Natural Resources to ensure that natural resources conservation districts are involved in the basin planning process, and [10 V.S.A. § 1253\(3\)](#) instructs the Secretary of ANR to "issue performance grants" to NRCDs, RPCs and watershed groups "to assist in or to produce a basin plan".
- **Wetland Protection and Water Resources Management** - [10 V.S.A. § 905b\(2\)](#) requires the DEC to "Cooperate with natural resources conservation districts" in water-related issues.

Difference of Landowner Services between Conservation Districts and Business Planning Advisors

NRCDs fill different niches in different parts of the state. Our uniqueness lies in our structural model - we exist everywhere in Vermont, regardless of community resources, providing continuity and access across all regions. Some ways in which we differ from State Agencies and other farm and forest service providers include:

- **We provide a wide range of services.** Our focus is not entirely on business and financial planning, which is often the sole focus of other service providers. When working with a farm or landowner, we are primarily focused on the sustainability of that land and the health of the local ecosystem. We sample soils, remind folks about regulatory requirements, and help with Nutrient Management Planning.
- **We provide long-term, ongoing support.** Conservation Districts will work with a farm or landowner before, during, and after other trainings, assessments or business plans provided by other service providers. Many other services focus on a specific project, end goal or point in time for any particular land.

- **We are impartial.** Conservation Districts do not have their own funding programs that we need to promote; we look at all funding available, regardless of its source, and make recommendations based on objective need and best fit. In this way, Conservation Districts act more as a case manager doing referral services rather than a representative for any particular program.
- **We have a preexisting structure that connects local → state → federal levels,** which provides unique opportunities for communication and advocacy. Also, our structure is replicated in other states, so we provide continuity, connection, communication, and parallel structure across state lines. Border Conservation Districts partner closely with Conservation Districts in New Hampshire and New York. *We have been doing this work for more than 80 years and are part of the longstanding landscape of natural resources conservation in all watersheds covering Vermont and beyond.*
- **We are based in our districts.** We don't work statewide as individuals, though we collectively cover the whole state. We are focused on the people in our District and are able to build relationships over long periods of time.
- **We are not for profit and democratically run municipalities.** If constituents aren't satisfied with our services, they hold the power to vote out Supervisors and enact change.

Below is a case study to highlight where Conservation Districts fit into the overall universe of services and technical assistance to working landscapes:

The Franklin County NRCD recently met a farmer at an event hosted by the District regarding grant opportunities for on-farm equipment. After meeting him at the event, the District Manager realized that they had been trying to get a hold of the farmer to help with the farm's Nutrient Management Plan because it was out of date (this is known using the NRCS farm data). Meeting at the event allowed the District to start working with this farm, and they were able to help enroll the farmer in the Regional Conservation Partnership Program's Nutrient Management Planning (NMP). While enrolled in this program, the Franklin County Natural Resources Conservation District completed the farm's Land Treatment Plan and helped coach the farmer through the NMP course with UVM Extension. Franklin Conservation District staff has since worked with the farmer on two grant applications - one for a grant administered by VAAF and another by VHCB - to secure funding for a piece of equipment that the farm needs. Conservation Districts help navigate and understand those grant processes at the hyper local level. The Nutrient Management Plan written with the support of District staff will help this farm achieve Organic certification.

Questions or comments can be directed to Jill Arace, Executive Director, Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

Phone: 802-496-5162 | Fax: 802-329-2057 | jill.arace@vacd.org | www.vacd.org