



History and Future of Conservation Districts





What You Will Learn

How will training be provided?

What are the purposes of Conservation Districts?

How do Conservation Districts work?

What ecological disaster brought about the creation of Conservation Districts?

In the beginning, Conservation Districts focused programs on what type of land owner?

What type of land owners are Conservation Districts now serving?

What is the “gateway” approach to conservation?



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Before We Start

A note about this training program

Title II: Rules Governing Conservation Districts mandates approved training of conservation district directors

Section 210.8 and Section 211.16

Approved training must be completed within 36 months before ANRC can certify reappointment or re-election



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Why Training?

Changing environment/changing needs

General Assembly and Congress demanding greater accountability from all who spend public funds

Increasing competition for scarce funds

Conservation Districts evolved in response to better serve their land owners and partners



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Structure of Training

Training consists of:

Local training at District Board meetings over a three year cycle

A written training manual with six modules and 40 fact sheets

16 PowerPoint presentations, 10-15 minutes in length to be completed over a three year cycle

Workshop training to be completed at the AACD area and annual meetings



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Local Training

Develop training schedule to review 16 PowerPoint modules over a three-year cycle

Include training on agenda with related fact sheets

Review PowerPoint (typically 10-15 minutes)

Each director present signs and dates *Proof of Training Form*

Directors absent make provisions to review the PowerPoint at the district office individually and sign form



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Dust Bowl

- Unparalleled Ecological and Human Disaster
 - Widespread and severe sustained drought
 - Huge black dust storms blotted out the sun
 - Thousands of “Arkies” and “Okies” abandoned their farms to seek a better way of life
 - Thousands became “dust refugees” living in squalid camps





Conservation District Origins

Vast majority of the land in the U.S. was privately owned

Challenge facing the nation was how to mobilize farmers to adopt new practices that would keep soil on the ground

National leaders realized that implementing conservation on private land would require the active participation of private landowners

The idea of soil and water conservation districts was born

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt wrote all state governors recommending states pass legislation to form soil and water conservation districts.



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Arkansas Leads The Way

In 1937 the Arkansas General Assembly passed the FIRST state conservation law in the nation

Authorizing creation of local conservation districts

Creating what is now the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission

Arkansas becomes a national model for a new “conservation ethic”



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Conservation Districts Today

**Today there are
75 local
conservation
districts in
Arkansas and
more than 3000
across the
nation**



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In The Early Decades

In the early days and for many years, Conservation Districts focused on helping **farmers** implement conservation measures to prevent their soil Erosion.



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A Lot Has Changed In 60 Years





Farming & Land Ownership

Before the Dust Bowl, 3 out of 4 Arkansans made their living from farming.

Now fewer than 3 in 100 Arkansans farm

Most must supplement farm income with off-farm jobs

Land ownership changing

More farms large or small, fewer in the middle

Absentee institutional landowners buying land for investment

Encroaching suburban development

Fragmentation in some places/concentration in others



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Most local services - understaffed and underfunded, even in growing counties

Population Change (%) 2000 to 2006

- 9% to -5%
- 5% to 0%
- 0% to 5%
- 5% to 9%
- 9% to 20.1%



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New Generation of Landowners



In Northwest Arkansas and the counties surrounding Pulaski County, farmland is being converted to rural subdivisions, creating a generation of landowners who have little or no knowledge of land and water management.



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Changing Needs

Pressures on natural resources have continued to mount with erosion problems due to developing sensitive areas without proper conservation measures in place.



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Globalization & Technology

Globalization

Arkansas producers now compete with Brazil, China and a host of other nations.

Rapid technological improvements

Agricultural technology changed slowly from the 1860s to 1930s

Rapid technological change since aimed at increasing productivity, reducing labor demands, increasing profits

Adoption of conservation has not always kept pace

2002 Farm Bill placed more emphasis on conservation



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Federal Programs and Policies

Farm program goals evolve over time

1930s-1960s – Price Support Era

1960s – 1995 – Income Support Era

1996 – Present – Market Oriented Era

Some propose in the next era goals should be to tie farm payments to “environmental services”

Programs constantly changing

USDA consolidation of offices/staff/responsibilities

New Farm Bill every five years

Appropriations and eligibility criteria for authorized programs changes from year to year

Many programs authorized with no appropriations



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Federal Programs and Policies

Congress demands ever-growing oversight & accountability for limited funds

More paperwork

More requirements

Increasingly complex

Requires more time

More requirements inadvertently make it harder for smaller farmers to participate

Limited funds mean more applications denied than approved



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Where/How Landowners Get Information

Increasing demand for information from individuals with specialized knowledge

Where and how farmers & landowners get information is changing. More demand for:

- Private sector consultants

- Vendors

- Large landowners hiring specialized staff

- Internet

Word of mouth still most effective



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Funding Harder To Secure

Increased competition for available funds

Funders demanding more

- Creative partnerships

- Local match

- Measurable results

- Accountability (e.g., record-keeping, monitoring, tracking, reporting)

No “free” money; all money has “strings”



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Conservation Districts Adapting

Conservation Districts that are adapting to changing conditions will thrive

Conservation Districts that do not adapt will fall further and further behind



There are three kinds of groups: Those that make things happen; those that wait for things to happen; and those that wonder what happened.

Anonymous



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How We Work Today

Conservation Districts work with people to:

Conserve soil, water, wildlife and land resources

Increase productivity and
sustainability

Conservation Districts link people with local, state and federal partners to achieve their purposes



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How We Work

Bring together people in local agencies, organizations and community organizations to:

- Identify conservation needs

- Plan collaboratively

- Educate and assist

- Utilize all public and private resources available

- Initiate locally-driven efforts to conserve natural resources



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Existing Partnerships

Arkansas Conservation Partnership

Arkansas Natural Resources Commission

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Arkansas Association of Conservation District Employees

University of Arkansas, Division of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service

University of Arkansas – Pine Bluff

Arkansas Forestry Commission

Resource Conservation & Development Councils



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Where The Future Lies

Conservation Districts must drive locally-led planning and priority setting

Conservation District boards mobilize private landowners to demand seamless service delivery

Conservation Districts reach out to a new generation of landowners without historic ties to the land

Conservation Districts provide “gateway” to specialized conservation services from all kinds of agencies and organizations



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How: Telling The Conservation Story

Instead of talking programs, dollars ,acres and acronyms .

Conservation Districts passionately tell the conservation story

Where we have come from?

Where are we now?

Where are we going?

Why is conservation important?



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How: Give “Old Fashioned” Testimonials

Tell your own story

What was your land like?

What have you done to conserve or restore water, soil, habitat, wildlife, forest? Why?

What difference has it made to you?

Why should others follow your example?

Why are you passionate about conservation?



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“Most efforts begin with a core group of supporters. The critical task is to broaden that core base by finding and using themes that engage the intellect and emotions of those who are not ready supporters and build trust from there. Seeing is believing.”

—Advocacy Institute



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How: Start with the person in your office

Instead of trying to reach the masses,
focus on the person in your office who
wants help

Get results

Results generate word-of-mouth & trust

Tell the story of your results

Accumulated results provide a track record

A track record generates funding



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How: Strengthen Partnerships

Strengthen existing partnerships aimed at reducing overhead costs while expanding/improving services:

- More seamless service delivery

- Coordinated priorities

- Joint funding proposals

- Shared administrative services among conservation districts

- Shared staff among conservation districts

Develop new partnerships (e.g., municipalities, water districts, environmental groups, private sector vendors and consultants, etc)

Accept that funding requires a track record

A track record follows results – stories of success (see testimonials)



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Summary

Conservation Districts have a proud history in leading the efforts to provide assistance in erosion control and rehabilitating farmlands and forests.

Our challenge is to ensure today's citizens appreciate what Conservation Districts can provide.



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Discussion Questions

What ecological disaster brought about the creation of Conservation Districts?

What ecological disasters might lie ahead? What can conservation districts do to avert them?

How are the needs of traditional farmers and the new generation of landowners different? The same?

How effective are your district's partnerships?

What does it mean to be a "gateway" to specialized conservation services?

How effectively is your district telling the conservation story?



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Additional Resources

Fact Sheet 1: Quick Overview

Fact Sheet 2: Putting locally lead conservation to work

Fact Sheet 3: Story Telling as a Conservation Strategy

Fact Sheet 4: Arkansas History of Agriculture



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Credits

Photos courtesy of the USDA Natural
Resources Conservation Service



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Our Mission

Our Mission

To bring together local agencies, organizations and community leaders to work together to initiate locally-driven efforts to conserve natural resources

Not Mission Impossible



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Quick Overview

Act No. 197 of 1937, as amended

First in nation

Locally-driven priority-setting

**76 Conservation Districts in Arkansas of
3000 in nation**

Unit of local government

Broad powers

Local link to state and federal partners



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