



Arkansas Association
of Conservation Districts

Arkansas Conservation District Directors Training Manual

A Quick Overview

Arkansas Conservation Districts:

- Exist to conserve local soil, land, water, forests, wildlife and other natural resources
- Retain decision-making over local natural resources at the local level as much as possible
- Are a unit of local government, as such each conservation district is a political subdivision of the State of Arkansas
- Were created by popular vote of resident landowners as authorized by Act No. 197 of the Arkansas General Assembly of 1937.
- Boundaries roughly follow county lines.
- Each district is governed by a board of five directors who serve without pay.
- Two directors are appointed by the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission and three directors are elected by resident landowners.
- Arkansas conservation districts work together as members of the Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts (AACD)
- The Arkansas Natural Resources Commission (ANRC) supports districts administratively, overseeing district director elections, overseeing removal of directors for neglect of duty or malfeasance, managing the formation and dissolution process of individual districts. ANRC also supports districts financially..."for the purpose of aiding the development and general operation"... of districts. However, to qualify for state funds, conservation districts must comply with certain Commission rules and policies.
- Conservation districts and the Commission derive their authority from the same legislation to complement each other for their mutual purpose.

Part of a National System

- There are nearly 3000 conservation districts -- almost one in every county across the country -- all with the mission of helping local people to conserve land, water, forests, wildlife and related natural resources.
- Conservation districts have different names in different states. Whatever they are called, conservation districts work together at the national level through the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD)
- Conservation districts share a single mission: to bring together assistance from all available sources -- public (local, state and federal) and private -- to initiate locally driven efforts to conserve natural resources

A Rich History

- The Dust Bowl of the 1930s was an unparalleled ecological disaster resulting from widespread severe and sustained drought. From the mid-South to the Great Plains to the mid-Atlantic states, soil eroded and blew away, creating huge black dust storms that blotted out the sun. Thousands of "dust refugees" abandoned their farms to seek better lives elsewhere. Dust even sifted into the White House and onto President Franklin D. Roosevelt's desk.
- In 1937, President Roosevelt wrote all the state governors recommending legislation that would allow local landowners to form soil conservation districts. Congress unanimously passed legislation declaring soil and water conservation a national policy and priority.
- The Arkansas General Assembly passed the first state conservation law in the nation authorizing formation of local conservation districts and what is now the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission.

Current Challenges

- Sixty years have dramatically changed the landscape in Arkansas and nationally
- Before the Dust Bowl, more than three out of four Arkansans farmed. Today, fewer than three percent of Arkansans make their living from farming, and most supplement farm income with off-farm jobs.
- Land ownership patterns are changing rapidly. In some areas, land is being fragmented and developed. In other areas, forestry and farmland is increasingly owned by absentee landowners for investment purposes.
- In some counties, population growth is causing urban areas to encroach on prime farmland while a few counties in other parts of the state have experienced population declines since 2000 that are virtually unprecedented since the Great Depression.
- Once, Arkansas soybean producers competed with Great Plains producers and Arkansas poultry producers competed with Alabama or Delaware or North Carolina. Now American producers compete with Brazil, China and a host of other nations.
- Farmers use new technology to improve crop and livestock productivity while practicing environmental stewardship.
- While widespread use of conservation practices today prevents soil from blowing and washing away as it did during the Dust Bowl, many challenges remain and new complex challenges are emerging (e.g., nonpoint source pollution, declining groundwater levels).
- Federal programs and policies are constantly changing.
- Conservation districts that have continued to thrive through all of the changes in recent decades constantly survey the landscape, change with emerging technologies and adapt their programs and activities to the ever-changing economic and institutional environment.
- At the local, state and federal levels, more money than ever is allocated based on competitive grants that require local capacity to design effective programs, write winning grant proposals, measure results, account separately for government funds, and find local match in in-kind resources or cold cash.
- As private donors are asked to give more, they have become more demanding. Raising private funds – whether in-kind, cash contributions from individuals or businesses, event fundraising or foundation grants – requires a track record not only of activity, but more importantly measurable results.
- Competing in this new environment requires new, creative partnerships -- from joint funding proposals that combine rural and urban groups, to broadening and expanding the constituency for the conservation district's goals and programs, to outright mergers to gain the critical mass needed to make a lasting difference.
- What is needed and what works in one county will fail miserably in another county where the situation is totally different.
- Competition for scarce funds is fiercer now than ever before. Conservation districts that do not learn to compete in this new environment 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