

Arkansas Conservation District Directors Training Manual

Putting Locally Led Conservation to Work

Conservation districts should play the lead role in the locally led conservation process. The process, which is resource driven rather than program driven, should be used to guide and coordinate all federal, state and local conservation efforts.

Locally led conservation involves a sequence of steps to involve the entire community in both planning and implementation. These steps include:

- reaching out to the public and bringing local stakeholders together;
- using a conservation needs assessment to analyze local needs and concerns;
- setting local priorities based on public input and needs assessment;
- identifying program resources available to address local needs and priorities;
- developing and implementing a conservation plan; and
- reviewing and evaluating needs and accomplishments

Public Outreach

One of the most important steps in the locally led conservation process is to solicit input from organizations and individuals familiar with local resource needs and conditions. Local stakeholders are a critical link in assessing the resource base, setting priorities and ultimately carrying out the local conservation program.

An effective outreach effort could involve setting up public meetings to garner community input. It might also include the establishment of an ongoing advisory committee. Other ideas to consider include conducting surveys and holding focus group meetings.

The most important goal of your outreach effort is to enable your constituents to help identify natural resource issues that affect them. By involving a broad representation of your customer base, you will have the opportunity to increase your

program's visibility, prestige and base of support within the community.

To begin your public outreach effort, you will need to identify all of the agencies, organizations, businesses and individuals in your community that have an interest in natural resource management. Even organizations and individuals that traditionally have not shared your point of view should be included.



Conservation Needs Assessment

The conservation needs assessment is another critical element of your locally led conservation process. With input from all interested parties, this assessment will provide a comprehensive evaluation of the condition of the district's natural resource base and be the platform for making decisions about local priorities or policies in all local conservation programs.

The conservation needs assessment is a comprehensive analysis of the work that needs to be done to achieve broad conservation goals and to solve specific natural resource concerns. It should be based on public input and include a detailed analysis of natural resource concerns within the district. The needs assessment should address the entire resource base, including the predominant land uses with which the district will work.

A major purpose of the conservation needs assessment is to ensure that conservation programs address the most important local resource needs. The assessment will be the basis for selecting the type and extent of needed conservation systems and practices. It will also be the basis for making recommendations on funding priorities and priority areas to be addressed by the

various conservation programs available within the district.

Here are some suggested steps to take in carrying out your conservation needs assessment:

- Identify specific concerns and existing conditions and trends for each natural resource in your district.
- Identify, agree upon and document community objectives.
- Analyze conservation needs and priorities.
- Prioritize natural resource concerns.
- Identify geographic areas and potential priority areas.

Putting the Pieces Together

The information gathered through the public outreach and conservation needs assessment process can then be used to:

- set measurable conservation goals and objectives;
- identify conservation initiatives, systems and practices needed to achieve these goals and objectives; and identify federal, state, local and non-government programs and services that are available to address specific conservation needs.

As traditional funding sources decline or shift, this process will provide opportunities to examine new sources of assistance and new players to help carry out your conservation program. Locally led conservation will help you identify ways to marshal support from a variety of sources.

The conservation needs assessment and resulting district conservation plan will form a foundation upon which all local conservation efforts should be based. This process should be the basis for carrying out federal programs such as the Farm Bill, Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act and Endangered Species Act, as well as the many state and local programs that provide assistance to private land managers.

What is Locally Led Conservation?

Essentially, "Locally Led Conservation" is community stakeholders:

1. Assessing their natural resource conservation needs
2. Setting community conservation goals
3. Developing an action plan
4. Obtaining resources to carry out the plan
5. Implementing solutions
6. Measuring their success

These actions have been grouped into four major activities for the purpose of this guidance:

- Conservation needs assessment
- Conservation action plan
- Action plan implementation
- Evaluation of results

Conservation Districts Lead

Locally led conservation is based on the principle that community stakeholders are best suited to identify and resolve local natural resource problems. Thus, community stakeholders are keys to successfully managing and protecting their natural resources. It challenges neighbors, both urban and rural, to work together and take responsibility for addressing local resource needs.

What Does Local Mean?

Local can mean a county, a portion of a county, a watershed, or a multi county region, or whatever geographic area is best suited to address the resource conservation needs identified.

Primary Focus: Resource Concerns

It is important to keep in mind that locally led conservation must be driven by natural resource conservation needs rather than by programs. Its primary focus should be to identify natural resource concerns, along with related economic and social concerns. Once the natural resource concerns are identified, appropriate Federal, State, local, and non-governmental program tools can be used, both singly and in combination, to address these resource concerns and attempt to meet the established goals of the community stakeholders.

Who Leads the Locally Led Effort?

While there is a wide range of groups that may be in a position to lead a local conservation effort, Conservation Districts, under State or tribal law,

are charged with facilitating cooperation and agreements between agencies, landowners and others; developing comprehensive conservation plans; and bringing those plans to the attention of landowners and others in their District. Thus, Conservation Districts are experienced in assessing resource needs, determining priorities, and coordinating programs to meet those needs and priorities.

Conservation Districts are the logical group to coordinate locally led conservation due to their connections to Federal, State, tribal, and local governments, private resources, and the General public. Therefore, further discussion of the locally led effort presumes that Districts will provide primary leadership; however, leadership can come from any willing and interested group.

Public Involvement

An essential element of locally led conservation is input from a broad range of agencies, organizations, businesses, and individuals in the local area that have an interest in natural resource management and are familiar with local resource needs and conditions. These representatives

should reflect the diversity of the residents, landowners, and land operators in the local area.

NRCS will support the locally led conservation effort by:

- Providing assistance in identifying conservation needs
- Providing technical and program advice to the community stakeholders throughout the effort
- Assisting in developing and implementing strategies to include socially and economically disadvantaged groups in the locally led effort

Note: It is not the responsibility of the designated conservationist to lead the locally led effort. NRCS's task is to support the process and provide technical information upon request.

The Conservation Needs Assessment

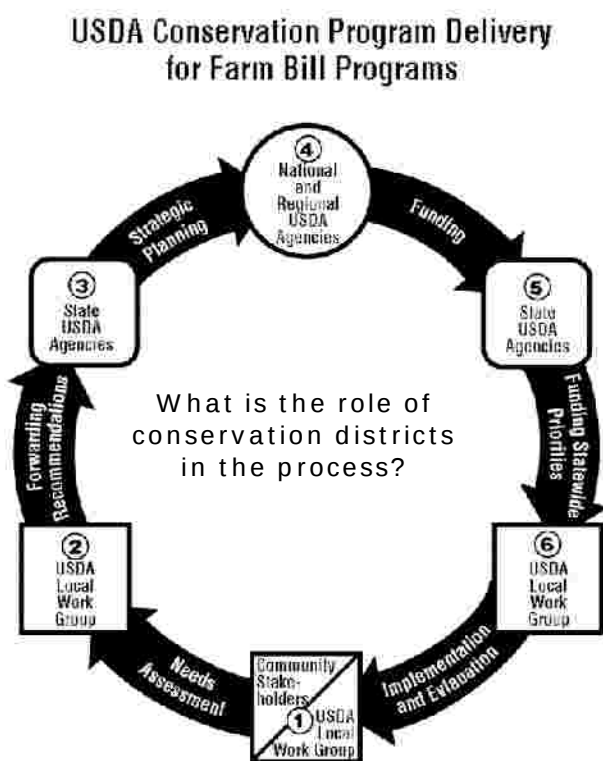
A conservation needs assessment is the first step and a critical element of locally led conservation. With input and resource data from all interested parties, this assessment should provide a comprehensive evaluation of the condition of the area's natural resource base, and will be the platform for making decisions about local priorities and policies for conservation programs delivered at the local level.

Definition The conservation needs assessment is a comprehensive analysis of the work that needs to be done to achieve broad conservation goals set by community stakeholders and to solve natural resource problems. This assessment should be based on public input and science-based information. It should include a detailed analysis of natural resource concerns within the area. To ensure versatility in all program areas, it is important that this needs assessment be resource-based, not program-based.

The conservation action plan that will result from the conservation needs assessment will identify the tools that can be used to satisfy the needs.

Purpose of the Conservation Needs Assessment.

The purpose of the conservation needs assessment is to ensure that conservation efforts address the most important local resource needs. The assessment will be the basis for selecting the type and extent of needed



conservation systems and practices. It will also be the basis for making recommendations on funding priorities and priority areas to be addressed by the various conservation programs available.

The conservation needs assessment is the foundation for carrying out Federal programs such as the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). From a resource concern identification standpoint, this conservation needs assessment may also be used to assist localities in implementing the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, as well as many State, tribal and local programs that provide assistance to private land owners and managers.

The NRCS designated conservationist will support, where requested, the development of the conservation needs assessment by:

- Providing assistance in assembling natural resource inventories and data
- Assisting in analyzing the data and other information
- Providing information on socio-economic factors involved in determining the conservation needs

Leadership Identification. Using the conservation needs assessment, the Conservation District involves community stakeholders to develop and agree on a conservation action plan. This plan will:

- Identify natural resource conservation priorities
- set measurable conservation goals and objectives
- Identify conservation technology needed to achieve these goals and objectives
- Identify responsibility for action and create a time schedule for completion of elements
- Identify Federal, State, tribal, local and non-government programs and services needed to address specific conservation needs
- Identify a need to develop new programs or processes to address those problems not covered by existing programs

The NRCS designated conservationist will support the development of the conservation action plan by:

- Providing overall planning assistance
- Identifying non-USDA programs that may be of assistance
- Explaining appropriate USDA conservation programs and services

Implementing the Action Plan

Implementation of the conservation action plan means that the community stakeholders, with the leadership of the Conservation District, obtain the needed programs and services to address the problems identified by their conservation needs assessment.

In this step, they coordinate existing assistance, available through private organizations, Federal, State, tribal, and local agencies, including USDA; ensure that appropriate program application processes are followed; develop detailed proposals for new programs; and seek financial, educational, and technical assistance as necessary.

The NRCS designated conservationist will support the implementation of the conservation action plan by:

- Explaining, interpreting, and clarifying USDA rules, regulations and procedures
- Providing input on other potential sources of assistance from Federal, State, tribal, and local government or private sources

Evaluating Results

Locally led conservation does not end when the conservation action plan has been implemented. The effectiveness of plan implementation should be evaluated to ensure that the community stakeholders' planned goals and objectives are achieved. An evaluation should be made to determine where the actual results differ from those anticipated. This difference may result in retracing one or more of the steps in the locally led conservation effort.

The NRCS designated conservationist will support the Conservation District and the community stakeholders in evaluating the results of their locally led conservation efforts by:

- Assisting in the evaluation process
- Providing updated natural resources information and assessments
- Keeping them aware of changes in the USDA programs and the program delivery process
- Assisting in interpreting the impact of conservation action plan implementation on the condition of the natural resources

Excerpted from "Locally Led Conservation: An Overview for Conservation Districts" produced by the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) in cooperative with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the National Association of State Conservation Agencies.

Summary Table

	Phase	Activity
1	Public Involvement and the Conservation Needs Assessment	The Conservation District leads the effort to gather public input from a broad range of agencies, organizations, businesses, and individuals in the local area who have an interest in natural resource conditions and needs. It is the task of these community stakeholders to evaluate natural resource conditions in a conservation needs assessment and establish broad conservation goals to meet those needs.
2	Conservation Action Plan	The Conservation District involves community stakeholders developing and agreeing on a conservation action plan that documents decisions and time schedules, identifies priorities, sets goals, and identifies government and non-government programs to meet those needs. Community stakeholders, under Conservation District leadership, will identify which government and non-government programs are needed to address specific natural resource concerns. Note: USDA conservation programs are just some of the many programs that can be used to satisfy the community's goals and needs.
3	Implementation of the Action Plan	Community stakeholders, under Conservation District leadership, will obtain government and non government program resources and will assist in implementing the programs that can satisfy the community's goals and needs, as identified in the action plan.
4	Evaluation of the Action Plan	The effectiveness of plan implementation should be evaluated to ensure that the community stakeholders' planned goals and objectives are achieved. An evaluation should be made to determine where the actual results differ from those anticipated. The difference may result in retracing one or more of the steps in the locally led conservation effort.