

## Nevada's Best Kept Secret – Conservation Districts (History and Functions) part 1 of 2

Gary McCuin, Eureka County Extension Educator

Second VP Nevada Association of Conservation Districts

***“As a governmental agency, CD’s possess perhaps the most unique ability of any public or private entity. This is the ability to work across boundaries of both public and private land. Districts are able to, and often do, work in cooperation with other CD’s to address problems on a watershed basis. For this reason, many federal and state agencies look to CD’s to address and implement natural resource projects” (NV State Conservation Commission Strategic Plan 2010-2015).***

Conservation Districts (CD’s) grew from public concern for the condition of our natural resources in the early 1930’s; think the Dust Bowl and “The Grapes of Wrath”. In 1935, while on Capitol Hill testifying about the extraordinary erosion problem in the U.S., soil scientist Hugh Hammond Bennett threw back the curtains to reveal a sky blackened by dust originating from the Midwest. That year Congress unanimously

Conservation is the ethical **use** and protection of valuable resources, such as trees, minerals, wildlife, water and others. It focuses on maintaining the natural world in order to protect the sources of resources.

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

passed legislation declaring soil and water conservation a national policy and priority. Because nearly three-fourths of the continental United States was privately owned in the 30’s and the various agencies working towards conservation ended up competing with each other, Congress realized that only active, voluntary support from landowners would guarantee the success of conservation work on private land. **Local leadership was needed to coordinate agency efforts and tie them into local conditions and priorities.** Subsequently, in 1937, Congress developed a model Conservation District law, for consideration by state governments. Many states, including the Nevada State Legislature passed an enabling act establishing conservation districts the same year. CD’s were charged to direct programs protecting local renewable and natural resources. In *The Worst Hard Time*, by Timothy Egan, he states that “In 2004, an extensive study of how farmers treated the land before and after the great dusters of the 1930’s concluded that soil conservation districts kept the earth from blowing - this study found that what saved the land, was what Hugh Bennett had started: getting farmers to enter contracts with a soil conservation district and manage the land as a single ecological unit. Hugh Bennett’s legacy, the soil conservation districts, spread throughout America and is the only New Deal grassroots operation that survives to this day.” Presently, there are nearly 3,000 conservation districts across the U.S. almost one in every county. Nevada has 28 districts which cover all 17 counties.

Conservation Districts were founded on the philosophy that **conservation decisions should be made at the local level**. The function of a Conservation District is to take available technical, financial and educational resources, whatever their source, and focus or coordinate them so that they meet the needs of the local land users for conservation of soil, water and related resources. They often work in cooperation with counties, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, as well as other public and private entities. By developing and utilizing partnerships, CD's can have positive influence and involvement on natural resource issues and significantly multiply funding and subsequent local benefits through "on-the-ground" conservation projects and management that is beneficial to both the local community and natural resources. This is their strength and unique opportunity. CD's develop and implement programs to protect and conserve soil, water, prime and unique farm and range land, woodland, wildlife, energy, and other renewable resources on private and public lands. Districts can stabilize local economies and resolve conflicts in land use and management. Nationally, conservation districts operate under the following general policies:

- **That conservation should be led by local citizens;**
- **That the final responsibility for conservation lies with the landowner;**
- **That landowners have legitimate operating goals;**
- **That conservation districts are responsive to landowners, operators, and the community as a whole; and**
- **That the best agricultural land should be maintained for agriculture.**

The Nevada Conservation District Program in the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources provides administrative support to the State Conservation Commission (SCC), which develops policy and regulations for Nevada's 28 locally elected conservation districts. Information on the Nevada Conservation District Program may be found at <http://dcur.nv.gov/conservation-district-program/>. The mission of the Nevada or State Conservation Commission (SCC) is to provide leadership for natural resource conservation issues for the citizens of the state of Nevada, by facilitating CD goals and public and private partnerships, dispensing conservation funds, advising and overseeing CD's, and administering Nevada Revised Statutes 548.

The Nevada Association of Conservation Districts (NvACD) is a non-profit, nongovernmental organization made up of three area associations of conservation districts and serves as a state voice on state policy, legislation, communication, and funding for CD activities. NvACD also provides forums to inform, train, and educate supervisors, and recognize outstanding district individuals and programs. The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) is a non-profit, nongovernmental organization representing over three thousand districts and their state associations in the fifty states, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. NACD lobbies for federal conservation legislation and funding in



"The central thing for which conservation stands is to make this country the best place to live in, both for us and our descendants. It stands against the waste of natural resources which cannot be renewed, such as coal and iron; it stands for the perpetuation of the natural resources which can be renewed, such as food-producing soils and forests..." Gifford Pinchot

Congress. It also provides brochures, reports, conservation films, training, and education [www.nacdnet.org](http://www.nacdnet.org).

Conservation districts are subdivisions of state government. Each district is governed by a board of six or more supervisors. Supervisors are locally elected residents who serve without pay. They serve as grass roots representatives of landowners and the general public in your community, providing leadership and direction to bring volunteers and agencies together for natural resource conservation programs. Supervisors carry out the responsibilities of their position in accordance with the Nevada Conservation District Law NRS 548 and NAC 548. In many Counties the Conservation District may be the only entity capable of developing and formalizing a natural resource plan (Conservation Plan) or policies that are District or county wide and they have the ability to work across boundaries of both public and private land. Districts can work in cooperation with other CD's to address problems on a watershed basis. For this reason, many federal and state agencies look to CD's to address and implement natural resource projects (NV State Conservation Commission Strategic Plan 2010-2015).

Conservation district supervisors develop a wide variety of programs depending on local needs. Examples of successful conservation district programs include:

- Develop Natural Resource Conservation Plans and Policies;
- Serve as a cooperating agency for Federal actions requiring NEPA; NRS 548.113 (GRSG LUPA's and table 2.0);
- Receive and administer grants;
- Coordinate and develop projects, i.e. wildlife habitat and/or grazing management;
- Provide technical assistance, materials, and equipment to control soil erosion ;
- Sponsoring youth conservation camps (Nevada Youth Range Camp);
- Implement Best Management Practices (Irrigation efficiencies, Grazing practices, etc.);
- Assist wildlife habitat, including actions supporting Sage-grouse; and
- Lead or sponsor local working groups for Coordinated Resource Management Projects or "Locally Led Conservation" projects.

Under these and other authorities in NRS 548 Nevada CDs are doing thousands of acres of weed control and inventory/monitoring each year, clearing and snagging and bank stabilization on the Carson River, sponsoring rancher-led groups such as SANE, implementing urban gardens, improving storm water treatment to keep sediment-laden highway runoff out of Lake Tahoe, clearing thousands of acres of PJ encroachment to improve water availability and rangeland condition, providing education and outreach, assisting the Diamond Valley Groundwater Management Planning Group, supporting soil and snow surveys, making equipment available to local producers, providing annual tree sales of locally adapted plants, maintaining buildings important for local uses, seizing the moment to remove sediment from the Walker River, and reviewing Washoe County planning projects, among numerous other projects.

To develop and maintain effective programs, CD's identify local conservation needs; set corresponding goals; develop a plan/s to achieve those goals; ensure implementation of the plan/s, and evaluate district program effectiveness. Planning is the basic tool for developing effective CD programs. The Annual Plan outlines specific objectives and activities to achieve long range goals. If a CD is ambitious and aggressive with their plans and goals, the workload and funding requirements often outstrip the Supervisors capacity to achieve those goals. The good news is that CD's can accept grant funding and form partnerships that can greatly expand their immediate capacity, resources and social

support. CD's can appoint volunteer committees to address various needs and functions. Membership on these committees need not consist entirely of CD supervisors. A group such as Stewardship Alliance of Northeast Nevada (SANE), a group of eight ranches in northeastern Elko County whose focus is on-the-ground habitat projects and long term collaborative solutions to sagebrush habitat related conflicts, could serve as an ad hoc committee to the local CD or group of CD's providing input on Sage-grouse projects and collaborative solutions. In return the CD/s can obtain grants and other funding to implement the projects and collaborative mechanisms identified by SANE. Multiple parties can benefit by working together without losing or sacrificing individual or group identity and values. This is especially true when the groups utilize facilitation and consensus building processes such as those employed by the National Riparian Service Team.

CD's can integrate desired projects into NRCS funding pools and planning mechanisms, serve as an official cooperating agency with BLM, USFS and USFWS on NEPA processes and become the entity to embody and magnify local interests in Sage-grouse planning, land use management (Grazing, mining, energy, etc.), and project implementation across all of Nevada. Through partnerships and coordination local initiatives gain the critical mass and funding necessary to be efficient and functional across a broad area. CD's are statutorily recognized as the local conservation entity in state and federal statute; we simply have not utilized this authority to its fullest potential in Nevada to date.

The "Restore New Mexico" initiative is a perfect example of the potential CD's have for local communities to address resource issues across private, state and federal lands at a state wide scale. Their goal was to pool their resources to restore hundreds of thousands of acres of land each year within priority watersheds, regardless of land ownership, leading to the restoration of landscapes to their full ecological potential. Through this initiative Restore New Mexico have developed and funded over 170 Coordinated Resource Management Plans and completed 62 watershed /landscape scale treatments through 13 CD's and treated 2 million acres since 2005. All of this was achieved by local citizens working with BLM and other agencies to utilize their Conservation District and State CD Association to engage in partnerships to gain the support and funding necessary to accomplish landscape restoration while maintaining and enhancing local ranching and natural resource values critical to them.

Hopefully, this article has provided the background about CD functions and authorities to inspire people to contact their local CD to investigate their activities and volunteer to serve on a committee, help implement a project, or even serve as a Supervisor. I have often heard the desire of Nevadan's to be heard and participate in conservation and management of our natural resources at the local level. This is your opportunity to accomplish just that and utilize the CD system to its fullest potential. In the next article I will provide more details about CD's statutory authorities and the intent of Congress and State legislature to lead and implement conservation efforts at the local level through implementation of **community based and locally led conservation**.