

*Report of the  
Conservation Innovations Task Force*

National Association of Conservation Districts

December 2003

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**Report of the Conservation Innovations Task Force<sup>1</sup>**  
**National Association of Conservation Districts**  
**December 2003**

**Background**

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On August 1, 2003, the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), entered into a contribution agreement with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). One of the purposes of that agreement was to establish a Conservation Innovations Task Force to investigate new and innovative approaches to addressing emerging environmental issues. The Task Force, comprised of members from NACD and partner organizations and agencies, met on November 13, 2003 in Washington, DC.

**Abstract**

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A general discussion among the CITF members revealed the remarkable variability among state and local conservation programs and needs nationwide. This brainstorming session on emerging issues of importance to the National Conservation Partnership (NCP) led to the identification of seven substantive areas that need to be addressed in future conservation programs:

- I. Partnerships
- II. National Policy and Programs
- III. Education
- IV. Energy
- V. Trading and Market-Driven Approaches
- VI. Urban Conservation
- VII. Marketing

The task force broke out into sub-groups of three and each was assigned the task of developing recommendations in one of those areas. Following are the findings and recommendations. Findings are areas in need of improvement and recommendations are suggestions for improvements.

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<sup>1</sup> This report was prepared in accordance with Section IV.B of NACD-NRCS Contribution Agreement No. Contribution Agreement No. 68-3A75-3-76, Component IV.B.

## **Recommendations**

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### **I. Partnerships**

#### **Finding**

The National Conservation Partnership needs to add an element of partnerships to reach out to all agencies and organizations, including the private sector, to bring new ideas and resources into the nation's conservation programs.

The National Conservation Partnership (NCP) is composed of:

- National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD)
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
- National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCD)
- National Conservation District Employees Association (NCDEA)
- National Association of RC&D Councils (NARC&DC)

#### **Recommendations**

- Re-examine, renew, refresh and expand elements of the partnership
- Re-examine and revise, as needed, Memoranda of Agreement among the NCP

Potential partners for an expanding partnership:

- Agricultural Research Service
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Department of the Interior
- Army Corp of Engineers
- Forest Service
- Department of Energy
- National Association of State Land Grant Universities and Colleges
- 1890 Colleges
- Corporations and Businesses
- Others

#### **Finding**

Regional Conservation Partnerships need to add an element of partnerships to reach out to all agencies and organizations, including the private sector, to bring new ideas and resources into the nation's conservation programs.

Regional Conservation Partnerships are composed of:

- NASCA Regional President or Contact
- NACD Regional Director

- NRCS Regional Conservationist
- NCDEA Regional President
- RC&D Regional President

### **Recommendations**

- Look at examples of expanded partnerships such as found in several NACD Regions.
- Expand Regional Conservation Partnership to include:
  - √ Regional EPA Administrator
  - √ Regional HUD Director
  - √ Regional Dept of Interior Director
  - √ Regional Authorities

### **Finding**

State and local conservation partnerships need to be expanded to add an element of partnerships to reach out to all agencies and organizations, including the private sector, to bring new ideas and resources into the nation's conservation programs.

Formal State and Local Conservation Partnerships are usually comprised of:

- State Conservation Agency
- Soil Conservation Districts
- Association(s) of Conservation Districts
- USDA NRCS
- Cooperative Extension Service

### **Recommendations**

- Need to re-examine, renew, refresh and expand the partnership
- Develop and sign Memorandums of Understanding using the NACD District Operations Committee guidelines

Potential partners in an expanded local conservation partnership:

- Governmental Environmental Agencies
- Non-governmental environmental organizations
- Farm Bureau and other Agricultural Organizations
- Builder, Engineer and Land Contractor Associations
- Open Space and Farmland Preservation Organizations & Agencies
- Universities and Colleges with Schools of Land Use and Environmental Law
- Watershed Associations and Groups
- Municipal Coalitions
- Schools

- Media
- Corporations and Businesses
- Farm Services Agency
- Private Technical Service Providers
- Ducks Unlimited and other wildlife, sportsmen organizations

## **II. National Policy and Programs**

### **Finding**

There is a disconnect between what happens at the national level and the field. The public doesn't hear about the benefits of investing in conservation.

### **Recommendations**

There needs to be a grassroots focus in developing policy and programs with emphasis on obtaining input from the field level:

- More field testing should take place before program final rules and policies are implemented to determine the effect they will have on the end-users.
- Ensure that practice standards are ecologically and holistically based.
- The NCP needs to do a better job of assessing the outcomes of practices and programs. The Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and other research agencies should do more to evaluate the costs and benefits of conservation programs and the NCP should do more to communicate findings to the public.

The NRCS should place more emphasis on the development of a holistic conservation plan and provide the necessary technical assistance (TA) funding for planning and implementation.

- TA should be more accessible to all farmers and ranchers, including those not participating in Farm Bill Programs.
- More emphasis should be placed on training staff on the planning process and the importance of a good conservation plan.
- District Conservationists and field staffs are technical people and should not have to be "program" specialists. Area teams should be developed who are the program specialists. These specialists would be available to help match the appropriate program information with the plans to develop program contracts. This would free up some time by eliminating the need for all field office staff to be trained on all programs and know all the rules of each.

Explore ways in which the NCP can provide input and buy-in to innovative grants, practices and processes. This should be an ongoing systematic process.

- Utilize innovative grants in EQIP and develop a process to solicit input and requests from land users and the field.
- Encourage ARS and other research agencies do more on-farm research to study the effects of new practices that are initiated by landowners or others. The NCP should make

a firm commitment to link ARS and other research agencies to research and development as it applies to farmer and ranchers innovative practices.

- Encouragement for more ideas for new practices can come from all levels; national, state, field and district employees, farmers, ranchers and others.
- There is a tremendous need to tap into or develop new technologies to implement practices that are less expensive for limited resource farmers.

### **III. Education**

#### **Finding**

The NCP, through the NACD Capacity Center, the NRCS Social Sciences Institute and other organizational resources, has a wealth of educational materials and offers myriad services to help conservation districts and their partners conduct public outreach, education and marketing to promote the values and benefits of natural resources conservation. These resources are underutilized.

#### **Recommendations**

- Review, update and revise existing tools and aggressively promote their use by members of the partnership at all levels.
- Develop partnerships with private industry to develop tag lines for use in branding and labeling commercial products with conservation messages.

### **IV. Energy**

#### **Finding**

Energy has not been a high priority for the NCP but there are many potential opportunities for the practices and systems employed for natural resources conservation to have a tremendous impact on the nation's energy needs, production and consumption. The nation needs to create an incentive for agricultural producers to invest in energy efficiency. Considerable research has been done that could be used to show producers how to increase energy efficiencies in the operations.

#### **Recommendations**

- Initiate demonstration projects to show producers how to improve energy efficiency, including audits of “energy budgets.”
- Promote the use of conservation tillage and integrated pest and nutrient management to reduce energy use.
- Encourage the production of biomass to promote carbon sequestration and increase soil tilth and organic matter.
- Promote the use of new technologies using solar energy for harvesting and drying crops—the largest single use of energy in an operation.
- Educate the public on the use of bio-based products to help reduce the dependence on imported oil.
- Promote the production of bio-energy by producer cooperatives.
- Explore the use of alternative crops, such as switchgrass, for the production of bio-energy.

- Strengthen partnerships with the US Department of Energy and the US Environmental Protection Agency to facilitate partnerships with agricultural producers to increase the use of energy technologies such as:
  - √ methanol capture
  - √ solar power
  - √ wind power
  - √ other

## **V. Trading and Market-Driven Approaches**

### **Finding**

Trading programs can be developed on local or watershed-based levels in which regulated sources of pollution are permitted to achieve mandated higher levels of pollution control by buying credits from other entities. The result could be programs in which significant environmental objectives are achieved in a shorter time frame and at lower costs than traditional approaches to reduction.

### **Recommendations**

The conservation community should provide leadership and encouragement to create trading and market-driven approaches to addressing conservation issues wherever feasible as it provides another source of incentives for landowners to voluntarily install the same BMPs that the conservation community has been endorsing for decades. States should support the development of pilot trading programs to address environmental issues including:

- water pollution—both point sources and nonpoint sources
- air pollution, including greenhouse gas emissions; and
- wildlife habitat, including threatened and endangered species protection.

Specific examples of frameworks for developing trading programs are found in the attached concept papers:

- Carbon Sequestration, Carbon Trading, and Agriculture
- Conservation Banks for Endangered Species
- Water Quality Trading—Nonpoint Credit Bank Model

## **VI. Urban Conservation**

### **Finding**

More than 80 percent—nearly 226 million people—of the US population lives in metropolitan areas. The 276 metropolitan areas in the US grew by nearly 27 million people, accounting for nearly 85 percent of the population increase, between 1990 and 2000. This important component of the American population comprises by far the largest block of taxpayers and voters and, as would be expected, the largest political power base in the country. Cities are also the sites of some of the most serious conservation problems in the nation. Partnerships in urban conservation, especially along the urban/rural interface, present opportunities to address issues such as sprawl impacts, habitat protection, invasive species concerns in rehabilitation efforts, etc.

## **Recommendations**

- Enhance dialogue and collaborative efforts on wildland/urban interface issues/activities with federal and state urban-oriented agencies such as the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, US Environmental Protection Agency and organizations such as the Urban League, US Conference of Mayors, Municipal League, National Urban Conservation Roundtable and others.
- Educate the public on and promote the concepts of Smart Growth and Green Infrastructure to address urban sprawl, and compact growth.
- Investigate the use of taxes and fees to support urban initiatives such as stormwater management, urban erosion and sediment control, tree planting, anti-litter campaigns and other community conservation issues.
- Promote partnerships with urban-based industries and businesses to support public awareness of urban conservation issues.

## **VII. Marketing**

### **Finding**

There is a need to bring consumers into the conservation community and do a better job of marketing conservation. Support for conservation depends largely on how the NCP is perceived by the public. Most of the conservation programs the NCP deals with use taxpayer dollars to provide public benefits. There is a responsibility to be accountable for the use of public funds and build community understanding of the value of investing in conservation.

### **Recommendations**

- Develop education tools to market to the public “How you are part of the problem and part of the solution.”
- Develop a strategy and support materials to better articulate the conservation cause and communicate the benefits of conservation to the American public.
- More aggressively market conservation success stories and publicize the good conservation work being done.
- Develop conservation education programs that will establish the role of the National Conservation Partnership as “the” delivery system for private lands conservation. Model could be based on Australia’s Landcare program.
- Develop a marketing plan, including surveys of public understanding of conservation issues, to assist in the setting priorities for the use of limited program budgets and staff.



### **Members of the Conservation Innovations Task Force**

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