

## Soil and Water Conservation District Director Information Brief

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### Function of a Conservation District

To take available technical, financial and education resources, whatever their source, and focus or coordinate them so that they meet the needs of the local land user for conservation of soil, water, and related resources. Adapted from Dr. Peter Nowak's presentation "The Conservation District Official: Villain or Victim?"

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### History of Conservation Districts

During the 1930's, the Dust Bowl made the need to conserve natural resources, particularly soil, very clear. Agencies ranging from Land Grant Universities to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration researched and implemented conservation practices throughout the nation. Eventually, the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), now the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), was created under the Soil Conservation Act of 1935 to develop and implement soil erosion control programs. Sometimes agencies working with conservation ended up competing with each other. Local leadership was needed to coordinate their efforts and tie them into local conditions and priorities. Because of this, the U.S. Congress developed a model Conservation District law for consideration by state governments.

In 1939, the Oregon Legislature passed the Soil Conservation District Law (ORS 568.210), which established a State Soil Conservation Committee. This Committee began forming conservation districts that year. Conservation districts were to direct programs protecting local renewable natural resources. Oregon now has forty-five soil and water conservation districts.

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### Soil and Water Conservation Districts Mission

Soil and Water Conservation Districts lead local efforts to plan and implement conservation measures and watershed improvements on agricultural, forest and other urban and rural lands. The local SWCDs coordinate processes to involve citizens and stakeholders in assessments, surveys, and long-range planning on tribal and private lands. These determine priority resource concerns, allowing landowners to focus on financial and technical resources on recommended conservation systems.

Oregon conservation districts are political subdivisions of state government, much like school boards, but are not state agencies. A board of five to seven directors governs each district. Directors are local residents who serve voluntarily without pay. Local citizens elect all directors. To be eligible they must reside within the boundaries of the district and be a registered voter. Two board positions are for at-large directors who have no land ownership or management requirements. The other directors are zone directors. The additional requirements for zone directors include owning or managing 10 or more acres of land in the district. If they own the land they must be actively involved in the management.

As a district director, you have a unique niche as the grass roots representative of landowners and the general public in your community, providing leadership and direction to bring volunteer cooperation in natural resource conservation programs. Upon taking the oath of office you agreed to carry out the responsibilities of your position in accordance with the Oregon Soil and Water Conservation District Law (ORS 568.210 to 568.808).

## **Director Role & Responsibilities**

- ❖ Identify local conservation needs and develop, implement, and evaluate programs to meet them.
  - ❖ Educate and inform landowners and operators, general public, and local, state and federal legislators on conservation issues and programs.
  - ❖ Supervise other volunteers and paid staff working with the district; coordinate with cooperating agency personnel.
  - ❖ Administer the district by delegating tasks through a structure of board officers and members, committees, and others. Raise and budget district funds, and report on activities to the public.
  - ❖ Coordinate assistance and funding from federal, state, and local government; district associations; and private groups.
  - ❖ Set policy for staff to implement
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## **Time Required**

Your term of office is four years. You are expected to attend 12 regularly scheduled board meetings per year as well as committee and other special meetings, for an average of 20 days/year.

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## **Benefits**

- ❖ Satisfaction in seeing conservation practices applied.
  - ❖ Interaction with others interested in natural resource conservation.
  - ❖ Input into local, state, and federal conservation programs.
  - ❖ Training through Oregon Association of Conservation Districts and Oregon Department of Agriculture.
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## **Soil and Water Conservation District Purpose**

Oregon Soil and Water Conservation District Law (Oregon Revised Statutes (ORS) 568) describes the powers and authorities of soil and water conservation districts.

- ❖ Conduct investigations and research relating to conservation of natural resources;
  - ❖ Conduct educations and demonstration projects;
  - ❖ Carry out preventative and control measures for conserving natural resources
  - ❖ Cooperate or enter into agreements with others, including other districts
  - ❖ Acquire property, donations, gifts and contributions;
  - ❖ Make available to land occupiers equipment and materials to assist them in conserving natural resources;
  - ❖ Construct, operate and maintain a structure for conducting business;
  - ❖ Prepare and keep current a long-range conservation plan and an annual work plan;
  - ❖ Administer, manage, or act as agent for any conservation project or program within the district boundaries;
  - ❖ Purchase insurance for the protection directors, officers and employees against claims incurred in the performance of their official duties;
  - ❖ Sue and be sued; and
  - ❖ Hold public hearings, annual meetings, and perform other actions to keep citizens and agencies informed.
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## For Additional Information - Contacts

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## Soil and Water Conservation District & Director Powers

### **568.550 General powers of directors.**

The directors of a district have the following powers subject to the written approval of the State Department of Agriculture:

- (1) To secure surveys and investigations and do research relating to:
  - (a) The character of soil erosion;
  - (b) The character of floodwater and sediment damage;
  - (c) All phases of the conservation, development, utilization and disposal of water; and
  - (d) The preventive measures, control measures and improvements needed.

In order to avoid duplication of activities, the department may call upon other state and federal agencies for assistance and cooperation in their fields in accordance with memoranda of understanding to be signed by all cooperating agencies.

(2) To conduct demonstrational projects on lands within the district upon obtaining the consent of the owner and occupier of such lands.

(3) To carry out preventive and control measures on lands within the district upon obtaining the consent of the owner and occupier of such lands.

(4) To enter into written agreements with, and within the limits of appropriations duly made available to it by law, to furnish financial or other aid to any agency, governmental or otherwise, or any owner or occupier, or both of them, of lands within the district, for the purpose of carrying on soil erosion control and prevention operations within the district.

(5) To obtain options upon and to acquire by purchase, exchange, lease, gift, grant, bequest or devise any property, real or personal or rights or interests therein; to maintain, administer and improve any properties acquired; to receive income from such properties and to expend such income in carrying out the purposes and provisions of ORS 568.210 to 568.808 and 568.900 to 568.933; and to sell, lease or otherwise dispose of any of its property or interests therein in furtherance of the purposes and the provisions of ORS 568.210 to 568.808 and 568.900 to 568.933.

(6) To borrow money and to mortgage personal property of the district as security therefor; provided, landowners are given opportunity to be heard at a public hearing in the district, notice of which shall be given according to rules prescribed by the department.

(7) To make available, on such terms as it shall prescribe, to landowners or occupiers within the district, agricultural and engineering machinery and equipment, fertilizer, seeds, and seedlings and other material or equipment.

(8) To construct, operate and maintain such structures as may be necessary or convenient for performance of any of the operations authorized in ORS 568.210 to 568.808 and 568.900 to 568.933.

(9) To develop comprehensive plans and specifications for the conservation of soil resources and for the continued control and prevention of soil erosion within the district, and to publish such plans, specifications, and information and bring them to the attention of owners and occupiers of lands within the district.

(10) To take over, by purchase, lease, or otherwise, and to administer, any soil conservation, erosion control, or erosion prevention project, or combination thereof, located within its boundaries undertaken by the United States or any of its agencies, or by this state or any of its agencies.

(11) To manage, as agent of the United States or any of its agencies, or of this state or any of its agencies, any soil conservation, erosion control, or erosion prevention project, or combination thereof, within its boundaries.

(12) To act as agent for the United States or any of its agencies, in connection with the acquisition, construction, operation, or administration of any soil conservation, erosion control, or erosion prevention project, or combination thereof, within its boundaries.

(13) To accept donations, gifts and contributions in money, services, materials, or otherwise, from the United States or any of its agencies, or from this state or any of its agencies, and to use or expend such moneys, services, materials or other contributions in carrying on its operations.

(14) To sue and to be sued in the name of the district; to have a seal, which shall be judicially noticed; to have perpetual succession unless terminated as provided by law; to make and execute contracts and other instruments necessary or convenient to the exercise of its powers; to make, and from time to time amend or repeal, rules not inconsistent with ORS 568.210 to 568.808 and 568.900 to 568.933 to carry into effect its purposes and powers.

(15) As a condition to the extending of any benefits under ORS 568.210 to 568.808 and 568.900 to 568.933 to, or the performance of work upon, any lands not owned or controlled by this state or any of its agencies, the directors may require contributions in money, services, materials or otherwise to any operations conferring such benefits, and may require landowners or occupiers to enter into and perform such agreements or covenants as to the permanent use of such lands as will tend to prevent or control erosion thereon.

(16) To purchase liability or indemnity insurance, in such amounts and containing such terms and conditions as they may deem necessary, for the protection of directors, officers and employees of the district against claims against them incurred by such directors, officers and employees in the performance of their official duties. The premiums for such insurance shall be paid out of moneys available for expenditure by the district. [Amended by 1955 c.142 §16; 1957 c.603 §4; 1961 c.640 §3; 1973 c.656 §13; 1981 c.92 §29]

## Soil and Water Conservation District Partners

### Assistance from Partners

Soil and Water Conservation Districts establish priorities and direct action on local natural resource concerns by developing long range and annual plans. Districts often work together on multi-district conservation activities, such as watershed projects. In all cases, districts rely on cooperative assistance and funding from federal, state, and local governments; district associations; and private organizations and businesses. Many agencies and organizations have a strong interest in the same natural resources you are working with. It is important to involve them in your planning and implementation activities.

Assistance is set up formally through a Cooperative Agreement, or a Memorandum of Understanding. Districts can also involve groups more informally by appointing their representatives as associate directors, advisors, or committee members.

### Federal Agencies

***Farm Service Agency (FSA)*** The FSA administers cost-sharing programs to farmers implementing conservation. It also provides aerial photos for conservation work, assistance for land treatment and development, and natural disaster relief.

***Bonneville Power Administration (BPA)*** The BPA markets hydroelectric power in the Pacific Northwest. To mitigate the effects of the hydroelectric system, BPA has a large grant program for fish and wildlife projects.

***U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)*** The USFWS is responsible for wild birds, mammals (except certain marine mammals), and inland sport fisheries. The USFWS conducts research activities, conducts environmental impact assessments, and manages wildlife refuges. In some cases, USFWS provides funding for habitat restoration projects.

***Forest Service (USFS)*** The USFS has federal responsibility for forestry. The USFS sponsors cooperative programs through state forestry agencies, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and conservation districts to control fires, stabilize gullies, improve forest growth, plant trees, and control forest pests.

***National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries*** NOAA Fisheries is responsible for providing programs to try to save the marine endangered species of the United States. Their actions affect the Columbia River and Snake River watersheds of the Northwest.

***Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)*** The NRCS has a long extensive tradition of work with soil and water conservation districts. The NRCS provides personnel, equipment, office space, and counsel to districts. It also provides free technical assistance with soils, conservation practices, and planning to land users and others.

## State Agencies

***Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA)*** The Natural Resources Division has various responsibilities in the management of natural resources programs in the state of Oregon. Among these is the responsibility to provide administrative oversight of the soil and water conservation districts.

***Soil and Water Conservation Commission (SWCC)*** The Soil and Water Conservation Commission has seven members. The purpose of the Commission is to provide assistance and direction to Oregon's 45 soil and water conservation districts and coordinates with Oregon Department of Agriculture, Farm Services Agency, Oregon State University, Oregon Association of Conservation Districts, and Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board.

***Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)*** The Department of Environmental Quality protects and enhances Oregon's environment. DEQ programs address air pollution, water pollution, solid waste, hazardous waste, noise pollution, litter and resource recovery, water resources, and shoreline and coastal zone management. DEQ is both an administrative and a regulatory agency with authority to enforce the state's environmental laws. DEQ monitors all major waterways, administers grants for wastewater treatment facilities, and issues permits for waste dischargers. DEQ also issues grants to reduce non-point water pollution.

***Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB)*** OWEB promotes and funds activities that enhance Oregon's watersheds. OWEB's programs support Oregon's efforts to restore salmon runs, improve water quality, and strengthen ecosystem health. OWEB administers a grant program that awards more than \$20 million annually to support voluntary watershed restoration.

***Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW)*** ODFW's mission is to protect and enhance Oregon's fish and wildlife and their habitat. ODFW administers the Wildlife Habitat Conservation and Management Program and the Riparian Lands Tax Incentive Program. These programs provide incentives for fish and wildlife habitat enhancement.

***Oregon State University Cooperative Extension (OSU)*** Assistance from OSU is commonly found through the OSU Cooperative Extension. Extension agents and specialists are available to counsel, educate and train conservation districts in economics, engineering, agronomy and soils, animal sciences, entomology, food science and technology, forestry and range management, home economics, horticulture, plant pathology, sociology, veterinary science, and many other areas. Most counties have an Extension office that serves as the local contact for conservation districts to request Extension assistance. OSU Cooperative Extension is also responsible for 4-H, which can be an excellent vehicle for youth conservation education programs.

## County & Local Government

Nearly all soil and water conservation districts in Oregon are along county lines, and while there is no legal relationship between the two, counties can be helpful in several ways. Counties can provide: office space; funding; co-sponsorship for watershed projects and responsibility for operation and maintenance; bridge and culvert replacement; use of county earthmoving equipment; cooperation on county parks and other county owned land; funds for soil survey. County contacts include: commissioners, council, auditor, treasurer, recorder, engineer, assessor, highway superintendent, health officer, planning commission, parks and recreation department, weed district and others. Similar assistance can be available for city & municipal governments.

## Conservation District Associations

### ***Oregon Association of Conservation Districts (OACD)***

The OACD is a non-profit, nongovernmental organization of the 45 soil and water conservation districts in Oregon State.

The OACD is made up of 8 basin associations of conservation districts and serves as a state voice for soil and water conservation districts on state policy, legislation, communication, and funding for conservation activities. The OACD also provides forums to inform, train and educate directors and recognize outstanding district individuals and programs.

### ***National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD)***

The 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. The NACD lobbies for federal conservation legislation and funding in Congress. It also provides brochures, reports, conservation films, training, and education.

### ***Oregon Conservation Employees Association Network (OCEAN)***

The Oregon Conservation Employees Association Network is a voluntary organization affiliated with the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts. All conservation district and watershed council personnel are eligible for OCEAN membership. All dues-paying members are eligible to vote on OCEAN business.

A 10-member board of directors manages Ocean. One director is elected from eight of the eight OACD basins in addition to two at-large director positions. Directors serve for two years with a maximum of two consecutive terms.

### ***National Conservation District Employees Association (NCDEA)***

The NCDEA was formed in 1992 to strengthen Conservation District programs, provide assistance, information and support to Conservation District boards and their employees. The association also promotes the professional development of Conservation district employees and will assist any agency, association, organization, municipality, group, or individual who supports Conservation Districts in the spirit of cooperation, sound conservation practices, and proper land use.