

State Conservation District Study, Final Report

PULLMAN LWV RESPONSE TO THE STATE CONSERVATION DISTRICT STUDY CONSENSUS QUESTIONS

1. Do you support the work and mission of conservation districts in Washington?

Yes, we support the CDs mandate to help landowners to be good stewards of the land by making available technical, financial, and educational resources.

Further, we support the work of CDs because their client base is changing to include small acreage farmers (e.g., organic farms) and town/city dwellers as well as serving traditional commercial agricultural operators. The Palouse CD serves the traditional farming community as well as a wider variety of clientele by such activities as conducting a water sampling program for E. coli and other parameters in unincorporated areas of the county; maintaining a Pullman-Moscow, Idaho, biking trail; establishing an Outdoor Classroom at a Pullman, Washington, elementary school; and installing free native landscaping at the Whitman County Humane Society. CDs are able to place so much “work on the ground” effectively because of cooperation with partner agencies such as the Natural Resource Conservation Service, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Department of Ecology, local environmental groups, etc. The clients witness this interaction and are educated also about the other members of this far-reaching network that is focused on conservation and sustainable use of all resources.

2. What could the Washington State Conservation Commission and Conservation Districts do to raise awareness of:

- a. Their purpose and work

CDs should publicize more by:

1. **Speaking to various community groups (e.g., local LWVs, Rotary Club, women’s organizations, etc.) about the mission, the projects, and upcoming events.**
2. **Joining the local Chamber of Commerce and participating in the monthly meeting.**
3. **Getting articles written about achievements in local newspapers.**

4. **Getting more student involvement from local schools for planting projects, etc. and using those occasions to educate about the work of the CD.; offering to give a lesson on resource conservation for a school science class.**
5. **Asking to put a link to your CD on the “partners” websites (such as the Farm Service Agency, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the local extension office, local environmental organizations, etc.) and as well as others (such as the Chamber of Commerce, local nurseries).**

Because CDs have restricted budgets with no staff or resources dedicated to public relations, efforts towards this goal are not a priority. However, a concerted effort by staff and supervisors to make contact over a short period of time (like a media blitz) using some of the suggestions above might deliver improved recognition.

- b. Their elections

Because most people do not know what a CD is or accomplishes, the current public notice for elections and call for candidates required for the CDs to post goes virtually unrecognized. Raising the public awareness of the CDs will simultaneously raise awareness of the election process, although probably never cause huge increases in voter numbers due to the general voter apathy. More interest in elections would occur if at least two candidates ran. Then additional coverage by local newspapers, radio, or public access TV in the form of interviews or forums might be beneficial for a larger voter turnout.

3. Does the current method for selecting CD Supervisors need Improvement? If so, what changes would you suggest, and why?

Yes, the selection process needs improvement.

1. **Historically, many supervisors serve multiple terms (some for 20-40+ years). Because of this phenomena and the difficulty to recruit candidates to apply for a supervisor position, many members felt that it would be wise to eliminate the problems encountered in an election completely and to have all supervisors appointed by the WA Conservation Commission. The appointment by county**

government should not be considered because of the strong possibility of interference by county politics. In addition to current supervisors encouraging applicants to come forward, outside groups and traditional partners of CDs should be asked to nominate or endorse individuals that they consider qualified; this would ensure that there would be more objectivity and fairness in the process as well as gaining candidates with new ideas and broader views.

- 2. Several members felt very strongly that elections should continue. One member, who ran against a long-time incumbent, felt that she would never have been become a supervisor if not for the local election process and her ability to campaign for herself. Another member argued that elections, however inadequate at this time, provide an avenue for discussion about our farm land and food system. As our food supply becomes more industrialized, as urbanization separates people from their food sources, as global climate changes, and as our land and water resources dwindle, we need more than ever to keep these opportunities for discussion.**

Elections could be improved by:

- a. Changing the date of CD elections to coincide with or be closer to the general election. The act of voting would “spill over” so that people would remember to vote for CD supervisors, too. This would require a change in the Revised Code of Washington.**
 - b. Increasing the terms for supervisors to five or seven years so that elections would not occur as often. This would eliminate the time and resources and money spent to collect so few votes. This would also require a change in the Revised Code of Washington.**
- 4. Should the Washington State Conservation Commission remain an independent commission? Why or Why not?**

The WSCC absolutely should remain an independent commission for the following reasons:

- 1. In other states, a merger into other Departments has led to CDs becoming less effective. When independent Conservation Commissions have been merged into a Department of Ecology, they generally lose focus on their agricultural interests. When they merge into a Department of Agriculture, they focus on more narrow environmental issues. Stakeholder coalitions and partnerships composed of**

agricultural and environmental groups that together support conservation funding and action dissolve when an independent Commission is merged into any other state agency.

- 2. There will be a diminished opportunity for agencies and citizens to work together for the good of lands and society in the state.**
- 3. The perception by landowners that Conservation Districts are unbiased, helpful, and an advocate for them will be damaged if the Commission is placed under a specific department.**
- 4. The relationship with landowners could be negatively impacted if the state agency which the CD works through has a regulatory responsibility instead of a voluntary one.**
- 5. Conservation emphasis on private lands will be at risk of being lost because conservation loses a voice, a vote, and an advocate at the Natural Resources Cabinet level if the Conservation Commission assumes a lesser stature under another department.**
- 6. Conservation implementation will become a mere sideline program lost in another agency if the singular focus on conservation that the Executive Director of the Commission brings to federal or state conservation discussions is not heard.**
- 7. Retaining the Conservation Commission as an independent entity will ensure that the positive alliances developed between landowners, their local Conservation District, the Conservation Commission, USDA, and many environmental and agricultural groups will remain strong and prosper.**