

# Conservation Districts

MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN OUR COMMUNITIES

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**A**s volunteers, we give our time, our talent, and our treasure. But what do we get in return? I've found that what we give, we get back exponentially. Through volunteering with Pennsylvania's conservation districts, I've turned my passion into pride. Whether it's educational programs, improving rural roads, cleaning up streams for better fishing, or helping farmers avoid fines for polluting, conservation districts make a difference in our communities by ensuring there is enough clean water for future generations. I'm proud to be leading this effort in Pennsylvania. I was working full-time for the Ricoh Company when I was asked to be an associate member of the Beaver County Conservation District (BCCD) in 1996. A year later, I was a full director member of the board, and in 2004 I became chairman of the board.

A board of directors governs conservation districts. These volunteers study county natural resource issues and make decisions that enhance and protect the local community. Each board includes one county commissioner along with public and farmer members. Being a director of a county conservation district while working full-time wasn't easy, but if you are passionate about something, you make time for it.

My involvement with the conservation district and environmental education began when I found out that wetlands at the Pittsburgh airport were being mitigated. The BCCD handled the process. My wife encouraged me to get more involved with the conservation district because she saw how passionate I was about the project.

I was at the district from the time of wetland construction and realized it would make a great educational classroom. In the end, the BCCD built an environmental center classroom and added offices that housed the district after we split from the county in 2004 to become independent. From the beginning, the district leadership decided that students using the classroom would do so for free. Our 80-acre property and facilities include an indoor classroom and also a picnic pavilion, restrooms, hiking trails, wetlands, meadow, woodlands, and access to Raccoon Creek. We hold fundraisers throughout the year to ensure that the only cost to schools to visit the center is the cost of bus transportation.



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## DISTRICTS EVOLVING

Conservation districts work to better the community as a whole. They help citizens identify available natural resources and establish plans for their wise use. Many conservation districts have delegated agreements with partners to further conservation efforts in Pennsylvania. Since each county faces different challenges, the local conservation district office can address those specific needs. Examples include helping horse owners in southeast Pennsylvania write a manure management plan which is required by law. In central Pennsylvania, stream erosion and flooding may be the biggest issue facing a county. In northern parts of the state, conservation districts stand ready to help the timber industry do their work with the least amount of impact on the forest ecosystem. In south-central Pennsylvania, the biggest concern may be the erosion of farm fields and staff have the knowledge and access to equipment to help farmers keep more of their valuable topsoil in place. In western Pennsylvania, district staff may find that poorly maintained dirt roads pollute streams, and they have the funding and knowledge to help their county solve this problem.

As a conservation district director, I see first-hand how conservation

districts bring conservation practices to landowners quicker than ever before. Each county in Pennsylvania has a conservation district except Philadelphia. That's 66 offices around the state tackling pollution issues in their backyard. The fact that conservation districts are locally led is their key to success. Who knows the problems facing our communities better than those that live and work there? Conservation districts were initially established to promote the value of conserving soil and water to farmers. Today's districts have evolved; their areas of interest and expertise involve almost every area of natural resource conservation imaginable.

## ENVIROTHON

Education is woven throughout what we do at conservation districts. An annual program we do for students is the Envirothon. The Envirothon is a competition where five-member teams participate in a series of tests that focus on five topic areas - soils and land use, aquatic ecology, forestry, wildlife and environmental issues. The district hosts the county level competition. The winner of the county level competition is then sent to represent their county at the Pennsylvania State Envirothon. These kids are sharp! Kudos to the kids because it is not an easy test. The winners get scholarships, so the stakes are high.

## DIRT, GRAVEL, AND LOW VOLUME ROAD PROGRAM

The Dirt, Gravel, and Low Volume Road Program began in 1997 from a dirt and gravel road initiative by Trout Unlimited in conjunction with Penn State's Center for Dirt and Gravel Roads, the State Conservation Commission and local conservation districts. The goal of the program is to reduce pollution to nearby streams while improving the rural road network. One of the qualification requirements of the program is to direct funding to "worksites" where road runoff is affecting water quality of the nearby stream. As a result of Act 89 (PA Gas Tax), additional funding has been allocated to the program, which will now include Low Volume Roads (<500 vehicles per day). Technical assistance is available and provided by the Center for Dirt and Gravel Road studies and the conservation district.

## STREAM CLEANUPS

On September 7, 2019, the BCCD hosted a stream cleanup on a tributary to Big Sewickley Creek. It is a vital creek that people use for fishing, swimming, bird watching and many other outdoor activities. The tributary runs along Cooney Hollow Road, which is a problem area for people dumping their trash. Twenty-two volunteers attended. Together they cleaned up an estimated 30 tires, 20 televisions and other miscellaneous items which were discarded in the stream and surrounding areas. Everyone at the stream cleanup had fun spending time outdoors doing their part to clean the stream. Many conservation districts host similar, successful events.

## AGRICULTURE

Soil is an ecosystem with many living organisms. Soil health is managing the soil to improve ecosystem function. All crops have their roots in the soil ecosystem. It is necessary to improve soil health to improve crop yields. No-till planting is key to improving soil health and planting cover crops provide energy and other benefits to the soil.

Conservation districts help farmers ensure they comply with environ-

mental laws. They work with construction companies to make sure they are using best management practices to reduce pollution and avoid costly fines.

The BCCD purchased a no-till drill that is available for rent to interested farmers in Beaver County. The purpose of the drill rental program is to encourage and assist farmers in implementing no-till crop production systems, including cover crops, as well as promote better pasture management. Reducing tillage can improve soil health and improve farm economics. Renting this drill provides farmers with a low-cost opportunity to try no-till planting and determine if it can be an asset to farm management.

Renting the no-till drill from the conservation district provides a cost-effective tool to try planting a cover crop. Additionally, all farms that are tilling greater than 5,000 sq. ft. must have a conservation plan. All farming operations that apply manure need to develop and implement a manure management plan. Conservation districts support farmers in developing these plans.

## STATE ASSOCIATION

In July 2019, I was elected President of the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts (PACD). Our state association represents all the districts on the state and national levels. I lead the board of directors, which helps set the grassroots policy that guides the association.

Our strength comes from partnerships with agencies and organizations such as the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. Together, we can put more boots on the ground to implement locally led conservation activities.

I am honored to be part of PACD's executive board. It's a high honor to be chosen to lead the state's conservation districts. The state association goes above and beyond to make sure the conservation district directors are trained in leadership, and staff is trained in technical subjects.

Conservation districts stand ready to offer technical assistance and educational guidance to landowners and managers, local governments, teachers, students and people from every walk of life. They can provide

information and help on matters such as reducing soil erosion, protecting water quality, acid mine drainage or preventing hazardous situations such as floods.

Like the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, conservation districts work to improve the well-being and quality of life for every Pennsylvania resident. Let's work together toward our common goal.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

County commissioners can support their conservation district by making sure the district has the best leadership in its directors as possible. Commissioners can support districts by including them in the county budget financially, or through in-kind services. Also, talk to legislators to make sure they aren't forgotten in the state budget. Commissioners can support farmers and their agricultural products in their county. Without farms, we will starve, period. For more information on conservation districts, visit [www.pacd.org](http://www.pacd.org). 🍷

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