



Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts

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Conservation districts are cost-effective and scientifically defensible for the implementation of broad based natural resource programs. Conservation districts are housed, with a few exceptions, with USDA-NRCS, so they have access to the information, technical assistance and resources available from the federal government and the Farm Bill. The Arkansas Natural Resources Commission provides additional support through administrative functions, training, and programs to enhance and/or improve water resources. However, for this network of agencies to be efficient and effective for the landowners they serve they need additional resources and funding. Currently district receive minimal funding which results in a lack of capacity, inability to keep qualified staff and reduced service to the landowners. If given adequate funding the conservation districts are uniquely positioned to provide landowners the resources they need locally to address their natural resource priorities.

Water Quantity Recommendations – While there has been much debate about the validity of the data of the water well registration we have to accept it is the best data that we have to date. However, it would appear that the following activities could be implemented by conservation districts which could render greater certainty and assurance among those who use the data collected. Those activities include:

- Increased training of district employees once a year (October/November)
- Training should be mandatory for any district with more than 20 water wells
- Consistency in the formulas used to calculate the reporting and/or develop a program which calculate the usage once the employee feeds the data in
- Clearer understanding of when and why the producer/farmer is pumping the water (wildlife versus crops) and if it is being reported appropriately
- Districts work with farmers to increase an awareness of the importance of reporting all pumping episodes throughout the year regardless of purpose
- Districts should be provided the resources needed to hire qualified staff to work with farmers to encourage and implement groundwater conversion projects, conservation practices and irrigation efficiency; PHAUCET, PipePlanner, flow meter, etc.
- Metering of water wells should be voluntary. However, incentive programs should be made available to the districts to encourage voluntary metering of water wells such as cost share on the installation of flow meters, supplies and tax credits, etc.
- AACD would not support any action which impacts property rights regarding land use or water rights. Every effort should be made to secure stakeholder input, fully investigate all water conservation options and support a variety of incentive based voluntary efforts.

Building Capacity, Outreach & Education Recommendations - Conservation districts are uniquely positioned in every county and given the legislative authority to represent the landowners on soil and water matters. However, their funding is insufficient to allow them to hire staff with the educational and technical capabilities necessary to address many of the emerging natural resources concerns.

- ANRC work with AACD to offer training sessions annually on 319 grant writing, program development, watershed assessment and resource assessment
- Water Plan should include funding to build capacity within the conservation districts rather than allow them to become displaced by other organizations which have their own “mission” and not that of the landowner. Lack of funding has eroded their capacity to deliver services to landowners.
- Water Plan should continue to build on the incentive programs such as agricultural enhancement loan program and tax credits to encourage landowners to implement conservation practices
- ANRC should work with AACD to establish formal training for employees on programs which involve landowner funds; ag loan program and tax credits
- Water Plan should include conservation districts in all stakeholder groups which involve soil and water matters
- Arkansas Conservation Partnership be utilized to address those issues which overlap agency boundaries and programs such as nutrient management, conservation programs, technical service providers, etc.
- Landowner education could be implemented efficiently and effectively by conservation districts through field days, demonstration days, workshops, newsletters, etc. They are only limited by their current resources.

Natural Resources Recommendations - As challenges mount for landowners and communities related to environmental concerns, the conservation districts are the first line of defense. Through voluntary, incentive based programs, outreach and education, as well as having a position of trust with their landowners’ conservation districts have provided assistance to landowners since 1937. Their mission is to improve soil health, enhance water quality and water usage and provide technical assistance to landowners for such issues as water quality impairment, threatened & endangered species, critical habitat designation, invasive species, wildlife habitat, air quality, energy-related activities, etc.

- The Water Plan should include AACD and conservation districts in the development of a drought contingency plan for water resource management with regards to livestock, row crop, and any aspect of the agriculture industry
- The Water Plan should seek additional funding for the agricultural enhancement loan program and support for additional tax credits for water conservation projects
- The Water Plan should seek state and federal funds to be used with EPA 319 funding to address water quality and nutrient management concerns. Leveraging state funds with

federal funds would greatly increase our ability to remove stream segments from the EPA 303 (d) List for Impaired Streams

- Conservation districts and landowners have a rich history of working together toward more sustainable water management by providing consistent conservation measures for our farms and communities, restoring important wildlife habitat and species, and helping the state's environment become more resilient. As such conservation districts need to be provided the infrastructure, funding and support necessary to continue to meet this need in future years.
- The Water Plan should expand existing programs to provide technical assistance, shared data and information, and incentives to urban and agricultural local water agencies, as well as conservation districts.
- The Water Plan recommend to the Legislature to expand funding for urban and agricultural water use efficiency research, development and implementation through existing programs.
- The Water Plan will promote regional and local projects that improve the efficiency of how water is pumped and used. These actions will save water, energy, and money.
- Providing funding for locally-driven, multi-benefit projects is critical.
- Conservation districts receive training to work with landowners to raise awareness regarding the importance of a conservation planning and best management practices for wildlife and other species' habitat. This effort will increase collaboration and transparency and ensure that management decisions are supported by the best available science.
- The Water Plan will seek to provide funding to conservation districts/sponsors of watershed dams, which have been designated high hazard due to the need for rehabilitation. These dams were put into place to prevent flooding and have reached their life span of 50 years thus posing a hazard to structures downstream.
- The Water Plan will seek to provide additional funding and programs to promote the appropriate management of nutrients. With the addition of 600+ poultry houses to be installed in NE Arkansas efforts will be needed to educate farmers on how to use poultry litter properly. Conservation districts will need qualified staff to work with farmers on issues such as proper storage of poultry litter, application rates and times, need for soil samplings, etc.
- The Water Plan to include recommendations for addressing efforts to implement an Unpaved Road Initiative with local leaders to include grant funds and a conservation water resources education component. Lack of education for local road and bridge departments and county officials is a primary factor in sediment loading and water quality impairment in rural areas.

Respectfully submitted by AACD Executive Board