

Conservation in Kansas: An Overview

Introduction

The Dirty Thirties will forever be remembered as a time of tremendous hardship. We've seen those riveting photographs of towering brown clouds rolling across the Great Plains. We've read the accounts of farmers who were powerless to save their crops and livestock, of housewives who frantically applied wet sheets to seal their homes' windows against the invading dirt, of families who lost loved ones to dust pneumonia. It was a time of severe economic loss and profound suffering.

But out of that devastation a dedication to conservation was born. In February 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent a letter to all state governors urging them to set up soil conservation districts to work with the Soil Conservation Service, which had just been established as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

On March 25, 1937, Kansas Governor Walter Huxman signed into law the Conservation District Act, which authorized the establishment of conservation districts in all 105 of the state's counties. The following year, Labette County formed the first Kansas conservation district.

When we talk about conservation in Kansas, what exactly are we referring to? The term relates to the preservation of the state's natural resources: its soil, water, air, plants and animals. Kansas conservation, then, is a system of initiatives designed to ensure that our natural resources remain abundant for generations to come.

This publication provides an overview of the agencies and organizations whose missions are aimed at preserving the state's natural resources. In addition, it outlines some of the key programs and activities that have been at the heart of our efforts and have elevated Kansas to a model state for its strong, enduring commitment to conservation.

1. Kansas Conservation Districts

History. The Kansas Legislature passed the Conservation District Law in 1937, which authorized the creation of conservation districts in each of the state's 105 counties. The first conservation district in Kansas was established in Labette County in 1938. All other counties followed suit, and the final conservation district was formed in Shawnee County in 1954.

Funding. Kansas conservation districts are political subdivisions of state government charged with the conservation of soil, water, and other natural resources within county boundaries. Their funding comes primarily from appropriations by the county and the state, but some county conservation districts also derive funds from selling conservation goods and services.

Governance. Each county elects five local citizens to serve as supervisors of its county conservation efforts. The Board of Supervisors, which meets monthly, identifies local priorities, establishes policy, and administers non-regulatory conservation

programs. Supervisors, who do not receive a salary, are responsible for hiring and supervising employees that coordinate the daily operations and activities of the district.

Annual Meetings. Each county conservation district holds an annual meeting, either in January or February. These annual meetings are open to the public and provide an opportunity for local citizens to hear about the accomplishments of their county conservation district, learn more about conservation programs, and conduct an election for the position(s) of supervisor to fill the expired three-year term(s). All qualified electors in the county are eligible to vote in the election.

Conservation District Activities. Conservation districts are citizen-directed; that is, they address a wide range of concerns particular to the residents of their county. They address a multitude of environmental concerns, such as agricultural and urban erosion and sediment control, water quality and quantity, range and pasture management, fish and wildlife habitat, and other natural resource management issues.

Conservation districts provide information to landowners, schools, and the general public about soil and water conservation issues. Many districts have equipment available to rent that promotes conservation, such as grass drills, tree planters, and no-till seeders. Services and activities vary with each conservation district according to local needs and resources.

In addition to local programs, conservation districts administer the state cost-share programs that provide financial assistance to landowners in the implementation of conservation practices. District employees work closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and cooperate with other federal and state agencies to help protect and conserve natural resources in Kansas.

2. Kansas Watershed Districts

Definition. A "watershed" is defined as all the land area that drains to a particular water resource point, such as a lake or stream. In Kansas, there are more than 85 organized watershed districts, which encompass approximately 35 percent of the state's total land mass.

History. The Kansas Legislature passed the Watershed District Act (K.S.A. 24-1201 et seq.) in 1953 in order to address water management issues resulting from erosion, floodwater or sediment damages, and instability of natural water supplies. A key element of the measure was to develop a comprehensive general plan for a watershed that would provide flood protection for the residents and landowners.

Watershed districts are political subdivisions of state government and have limited taxing authority as well as the power of eminent domain.

Since 1977, the Kansas Legislature has appropriated funds to assist in the construction of flood detention and grade stabilization dams. These funds are appropriated to the Division of Conservation in the Kansas Department of Agriculture

(formerly the State Conservation Commission, a stand-alone agency) and allocated to watershed districts for flood control projects.

Governance. A locally elected board of directors of three to fifteen members is responsible for administration of the watershed district. At least one director represents each sub-watershed located within the district. The directors serve without compensation but may be reimbursed for expenses incurred in the performance of their official duties.

A watershed district board is required to have regular meetings no less than once each quarter during the year. An annual meeting is also held for the election of directors whose terms expire, as well as to report on the financial condition and activities of the district including proposed projects.

Watershed districts may employ personnel to assist in the performance of their statutory powers and duties. However, most watershed districts do not employ fulltime staff and do not maintain an office. One of the requirements for state assistance is a single contact person, called the "contracting officer," in the watershed. His or her primary duties are to handle the administrative procedures necessary in the construction of flood detention dams.

3. The Kansas Conservation Partnership

The Kansas Conservation Partnership represents a federal, state, and local collaboration that has existed in Kansas for more than 70 years. The three entities that make up the partnership are (1) the Natural Resources Conservation Service, (2) the Division of Conservation (formerly the State Conservation Commission), and (3) the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). NRCS is an agency of the United States Department of Agriculture. Its mission of "Helping People Help the Land" has six primary goals: (1) high quality, productive soils; (2) clean and abundant water; (3) healthy plant and animal communities; (4) clean air; (5) an adequate energy supply; and (6) working farms and ranchlands.

Since the Dust Bowl days in the thirties, NRCS has worked with conservation districts and others to assist landowners, as well as federal, state, tribal, and local governments and community groups.

Locally-based NRCS staff members work directly with farmers, ranchers, and others to provide technical and financial conservation assistance, such as the development of conservation plans and advice on the design, layout, construction, management, operation, maintenance, and evaluation of the recommended voluntary conservation practices.

NRCS activities include farmland protection, upstream flood prevention, emergency watershed protection, urban conservation, and local community projects designed to improve social, economic, and environmental conditions.

NRCS conducts soil surveys, conservation needs assessments, and the National Resources Inventory to provide a basis for resource conservation planning activities and to provide an accurate assessment of the condition of the nation's private lands. As the leading source of technology

as it applies to natural resource conservation on private lands, NRCS develops technical guides and other web-based tools to help enhance natural resource conservation efforts.

For more information, please visit www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov or contact Kansas NRCS at (785) 823-4500.

Division of Conservation (DOC). The Division of Conservation in the Kansas Department of Agriculture was formerly the State Conservation Commission, a stand-alone agency of state government. In 2011, Governor Sam Brownback issued an executive order to reorganize the SCC and two other agencies and place them within the Kansas Department of Agriculture.

The term "State Conservation Commission" is now used only to refer to the elected and appointed members of the board previously serving the State Conservation Commission before it became the Division of Conservation. The members on this board will continue to hold their positions and their powers, and their duties and functions have not changed.

The DOC administers pro-

grams to improve water quality, reduce soil erosion, conserve water, reduce flood potential, provide local water supply, and assure that aggregate mining sites are reclaimed. This effort is achieved in cooperation with 105 local conservation districts and the more than 85 organized watershed/drainage districts, as well as with state, federal and nonprofit entities. The DOC is assigned responsibilities for administering provisions of the Conservation District Law, the Watershed District Act, the Surface-Mining Land Conservation and Reclamation Act, and other statutes authorizing various programs.

For more information, please visit www.ksda.gov/doc or contact DOC at (785) 296-3600.

Kansas Association of Conservation Districts (KACD). The Kansas Association of Conservation Districts is a voluntary, nongovernmental, nonprofit, 501(c)(4) organization that was established in 1944, two years before the National Association of Conservation Districts was formed. Its members are the conservation districts located in the state's 105 counties. The KACD Board of Directors is composed

of five elected members, each of whom represents one of five geographical areas of the state.

KACD's mission is "to promote the establishment of and give support to programs designed to advance the conservation and orderly development of Kansas land, water, and related resources." To do so effectively and systematically, in 2008 the organization undertook a broad-based strategic planning process that identified four primary goals: (1) be an effective advocate for the protection of Kansas soil, water, air, plants, and animals; (2) strengthen key partnerships among entities committed to wise and efficient conservation practices; (3) facilitate conservation education and information; and (4) ensure strong, efficient association leadership. The KACD Five-Year Strategic Plan, 2009-2013, outlines objectives and action steps associated with each goal.

The primary activity of KACD is its annual convention, held each year in November. The event features breakout sessions and keynote speakers aimed at providing conservation district supervisors, **see OVERVIEW page 4**

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Compliance

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In addition to reviewing soil loss limits, NRCS staff also reviews whether or not the protection of wetland areas is being observed by producers. In recent years, there has been a marked increase in the amount of trees being cleared along riparian areas or issues of stream channels being either filled or straightened. Many of these actions can carry consequences to USDA benefit eligibility, but could involve other issues or violations to regulations to Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. Producers who are thinking of removing trees or manipulating possible wetland areas, need to consult with their local FSA or NRCS office to ensure their proposed actions do not affect wetlands or cause violations which may carry heavy fines and costs for mitigating affected wetland areas.

Since the Food Security Act of 1985 was signed

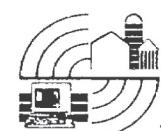
into law, many changes in farming practices and farm programs have taken place, but one remaining fact still endures, compliance with the Act is still the law. Producers can protect their program eligibility and benefits by practicing good conservation methods and understanding the laws that were designed to protect our natural resources. Contacting and working with your local FSA and NRCS office can help you protect your land and your USDA benefits.

For more information visit the Kansas NRCS Web site (www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov) or your local U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Service Center. To find a service center near you, check your telephone book under "United States Government" or on the Internet at offices.usda.gov. Follow us on Twitter @NRCS_Kansas. USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

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