

## Nevada's Best Kept Secret – Conservation Districts

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The first article about Conservation Districts outlined the history and philosophy of CD development and the purpose and structure of CD's at the national and state level in Nevada. The concept of conservation can be traced back to 1662 with John Evelyn's *Sylva – A Discourse of Forest Trees and the propagation of Timber*. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century European concerns over depletion of Teak trees used for ship building further advanced forestry conservation and set the foundations of Forestry and conservation in the United States. Since its inception, conservation has focused on the sustainable use of natural resources expressly for their continued use by humans. When Congress, and subsequently the states, created and empowered CD's, they believed that **conservation decisions should be made at the local level** and that CD's should have positive influence and involvement on natural resource issues. CD's could significantly multiply funding and subsequent local benefits through "on-the-ground" conservation projects and **management** that is beneficial to both the local community and natural resources. Towards those ends CD's operate under the following general policies:

- **That conservation should be led by local citizens;**
- **That the final responsibility for conservation lies with the landowner;**
- **That landowners have legitimate operating goals;**
- **That conservation districts are responsive to landowners, operators, and the community as a whole; and**
- **That the best agricultural land should be maintained for agriculture.**

This article attempts to define **Community Based Conservation** and some of its sociological underpinnings. Given this background, I will describe what I believe are fortuitous and significant events that provide opportunities for local communities and industry to affect policy and management of natural resource conservation at the local level on both private and federal lands. Involvement through your local Conservation Districts provides the authority, power and potential for local citizens to manage or co-manage local natural resources for sustainable multiple use for the benefit of the community and their natural resources, i.e. real **Community Based Conservation**.

Wikipedia defines **Community Based Conservation** "*as a conservation movement that emerged in the 1980s through escalating protests and subsequent dialogue with local communities affected by international attempts to protect the biodiversity of the earth. The object of community-based conservation is to incorporate improvement to the lives of local people*". Federal wildlife and land management agencies philosophy of management has developed very differently. These agencies were created and authorized by Congress to manage and protect natural resources through law and regulation. Generally speaking, their management begins at the national level and devolves to the local level. Particularly in Nevada, this philosophy of "top down, command and control" management has created significant controversy and conflict between the federal agencies, local citizens and communities. Resource management professionals have long recognized that social factors and communication are increasingly essential in resolving conflict and achieving meaningful conservation and application of constructive management.

Many of our environmental problems, including those related to conservation, do not lend themselves to analysis by the conventional, rational approach of defining the problem, collecting and analyzing data as the

***“People don’t have horse problems,  
Horses have people problems” Ray Hunt.  
The same can be said for natural resources***

basis for making decisions and crafting regulations. There is too much variability which creates uncertainty; goals keep shifting and objectives are often not defined and are difficult to achieve in the timeframe we desire. Issues must be constantly redefined and regulatory constraints/gridlock often obstruct the ability of users and managers to achieve timely management adaptations. All of these factors combined create a class of problems that social scientists have termed “wicked problems” (Rittel, 1973). They have “no definitive formulation, there is incomplete or contradictory knowledge, there are a large number of people and opinions involved, there can be large economic burdens, and any one problem or issue is interconnected with other problems. There is no template to follow when tackling a “wicked problem” and teams that approach wicked problems must literally make things up as they go along. There is no definitive right or wrong answer and it is very difficult to measure success because “wicked problems” bleed into other “wicked problems” (think about Sage-grouse planning and the Wild Horse and Burro controversy). Thus, a new approach to natural resource science and management is evolving through a process by which researchers, managers and stakeholders interact, often with professional facilitation, to define important questions, objectives of study, relevant evidence and incorporate local knowledge and needs to develop a course of action. To deal with these complex systems, working partnerships can be built between managers and resource users, i.e. **Community Based Conservation**.

Adaptive management, or as social scientists term “Adaptive co-management” is often crucial to the success of these partnerships and ultimately a workable solution, which recognizes, as a starting point, that information will never be perfect. The use of imperfect information for management necessitates a close cooperation and risk-sharing between the management agency and local people. Such a process requires cooperation, transparency, and accountability so that a learning environment can be created and practice can build on experience over time. Adaptive co-management captures two key elements to making community-based conservation work: sharing of management power and responsibility—as opposed to token consultation and passive participation—and creating a context that encourages learning and stewardship and builds mutual trust (Berkes, 2004). This approach, bringing the community actively into the management process, is fundamentally different from the top down command-and-control style that has historically defined federal wildlife and land management. Incentives to **Community Based Conservation** and management are multidimensional. Equity –fairness in the distribution of benefits-and empowerment are often more important than monetary incentives (Chambers, 1983). Workable **Community Based Conservation** helps inform and implement decision making processes that are legitimate, accountable, and inclusive and that take into account multiple stakeholders and interests. Knowledge is power, and the use of local and traditional ecological knowledge is a mechanism for co-management and empowerment. Local indigenous knowledge is utilized in the cooperative process of creating conservation projects and management strategies. Two key processes: (1) sharing of management power and responsibility through multiple institutional partnerships that involve government agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO’s), and communities and (2) feedback learning and building of mutual trust among the partners are necessary for sustained successful **Community Based Conservation**.

Given the background just provided, we can review the statutory authorities of CD’s, legislative factors and events that I feel has poised and empowered CD’s to have real positive impact and power

through **Community Based Conservation**. In Nevada and many other western states, where the federal government administers and manages significant portions of the land within the state, CD's serve a vital role connecting private and public interests. NRS Chapter 548 grants CD's specific duties and powers to develop and carry out the District policies or Conservation Plans for the conservation and management of renewable natural resources across both private and federal land. NRS 548.113, recently passed by the State Legislature, officially recognizes that CD's ***"may be recognized as having special expertise regarding local conditions, conservation of renewable resources and the coordination of local programs which make conservation districts uniquely suitable to serve as cooperating agencies for the purpose of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 et seq., and any other federal laws regarding land management, and to provide local government coordination for the purposes of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, 43 U.S.C. §§ 1701 et seq., and any other federal laws regarding land management"***. As a "cooperating agency," CD's get a seat at the table with the proposing agency and other cooperating agencies to provide comments, offer suggestions and assist in the development of the management action being drafted. This provides the opportunity to ensure that local natural resource plans and policy of the CD and county is considered at the very beginning of the NEPA process, not merely as a member of the public commenting on the proposed action after the action is drafted. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLMPA) provides explicit directives for the BLM to coordinate federal land use planning with county governments (including CD's), and to ensure that federal land use plans are consistent with local plans to the maximum extent possible. Federal agencies are required to coordinate with state and local agencies 43 CFR 46.155 (DOI).

**The terms cooperate, coordinate and consult denote a desire by Congress that federal, state and local governments work together for the general welfare of all citizens with special emphasis on localized needs.**

In 2008 the Farm Bill provided an allowance to expend EQIP funds on federal lands where resource issues and impacts extend across ownership and management boundaries creating new opportunity. It is essential to recognize, understand, and utilize, to the fullest extent possible, the authorities granted by state and federal statute to CD's in the planning, development, and implementation of resource management plans and policies at the local level. A general lack of recognition of these duties and powers of CD's by federal land and wildlife management agencies, and more significantly, by CD's themselves may be one of the reasons that CD's, in general, across Nevada are not functioning at their full potential. When dealing with federal agencies locally developed natural resource conservation plans are crucial to local guidance, acceptance, and management of natural resources on federally administered lands.

On July 16, 2013 the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) and the United States Bureau of Land Management (BLM) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) providing for a cooperative working relationship between the NACD and the BLM. The MOU provides for similar arrangements between State BLM offices and State Conservation District Associations such as the Nevada Association of Conservation Districts (NvACD) The intent is to "form a framework for cooperation that supports common goals and interests in managing, developing, and protecting federal and private land and water resources in an environmentally and economically sound manner, consistent with applicable statutory and regulatory requirements". This MOU recognizes and supports the role of Conservation Districts taking the leading role in administering locally led conservation practices and provides for national and local sharing of technical, fiscal and administrative support to local conservation districts. This relationship will help to develop and implement specific plans of action for

cooperative conservation activities on private land that can benefit neighboring public land resources and vice versa.

The Nevada Collaboration Conservation Network (NCCN) was kicked off with a two and one-half day training (November 29 through December 2, 2016) where more than 80 participants from across Nevada came together to learn collaborative processes and develop relationships among the people who will implement the sage-grouse plan amendments and the people who will be affected by them. The State of Nevada, the Bureau of Land Management, and the US Forest Service sponsored the workshop in partnership with the BLM National Collaborative Action and Resolution Office. During this training, trainees identified that there was a lack of cross-agency, cross-partner conservation and communication in sagebrush management to promote this collaborative network. Participants identified an overall desire for this network to achieve Sagebrush ecosystem enhancement in addition to implementation of the sage-grouse plan amendments. As obstacles participants specifically identified a lack of:

- 1) Trained available facilitators,
- 2) A strategy to pool funding, and
- 3) A designated position that will help elevate sagebrush local conservation efforts

The NCCN workshop recognized and identified that Nevada is a unique and diverse state where implementation of federal land use plan amendments is best understood and accomplished by incorporating local science and knowledge provided by those closest to the land. In order for federal land management agencies like the BLM and U.S. Forest Service to successfully implement the actions described in the sage-grouse plan amendments for Nevada, collaboration between state, federal, and local partners operating in an adaptive management environment is essential. **Community Based Conservation**, which is initiated and developed at the local level and is beneficial to both the community and natural resources is imperative in order to regain local trust, input and acceptance for implementation of any meaningful land management actions going forward. To help promote this bottom up approach to sagebrush ecosystem collaboration, the State of Nevada's Sagebrush Ecosystem Council approved the concept of developing the NCCN in late 2016. For more information go to the Sagebrush Ecosystem Website at [sagebrusheco.nv.gov/](http://sagebrusheco.nv.gov/) and click on Collaborative Network under ABOUT at the bottom of the page. Sage grouse with all the controversy, fear and consternation surrounding this species has initiated a conversation in Nevada creating a unique opportunity where local communities, state and federal partners and numerous NGO's are all supportive of cooperative joint efforts to streamline conservation delivery in Nevada and have the opportunity to craft their own local version.

**"It is about creating a space and a place for the community to come together."**

**Laura Van Riper, Facilitator**

Conservation Districts across the nation continue to identify, prioritize, plan and implement community based local conservation programs on vast acreages; across ownership boundaries; utilizing private and federal partnerships and leveraging private and federal funds on projects and resource management that is beneficial to the local community and society at large. Conservation Districts in Nevada are accomplishing great things within their Districts. However, due to a general lack of funding and recognition in Nevada of the potential CD's have to identify, implement and manage natural resources within local communities keeps Nevada CD's from realizing and accomplishing what has been accomplished in other states. History bears out that there is a pervasive independent spirit of the citizens of the "Battle Born" state to demand local governance particularly in regards to management of

land and natural resources. Utilizing the full potential and authority of the Conservation Districts Program and Conservation Districts offers a very real and legal means to accomplish that desire.

There is more opportunity for involvement and real beneficial impact at the local level than ever before. But in order to realize the benefits, local people must become involved at the local level with their Conservation Districts and the NCCN to make the opportunity become the reality. Contact your local CD and become involved, attend meetings, ask questions, offer solutions and help identify and plan projects, volunteer to help accomplish what you want to see happen in your area. Then Nevada's best kept Secret may become her best Success Story.

## Works Cited

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