



National Association of  
Conservation Districts

# Conservation District Guide:

## Building District Capacity Through District Personnel

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### Introduction

As programs and responsibilities have grown, many conservation districts have found a need for increased staff. This includes an increase in district secretaries as well as district technicians and managers. Decreases in personnel at USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) have caused districts to hire employees just to maintain consistent levels of service to landowners and managers in their communities. Some districts have received grants for special projects or have been given responsibilities for state soil erosion control and water quality programs.

With these increased responsibilities and growing district staffs, problems can arise. Relationships between conservation district boards, their employees, and NRCS employees should be outlined in advance and individual roles made clear. A good district personnel program will accomplish more public service as well as maintain good working relations between district and NRCS employees.

The information in this white paper is based on the experiences of many conservation districts that have successfully solved these problems. Among the many takeaways from this document is this:

### **Remember, if you feel you need additional staff:**

- Develop a workload analysis.
- Write a good job description.
- Prepare a meaningful proposal for funds.
- Hire the right person for the job.
- Keep the communication channels open.
- Make sure everyone knows what their job is and how they contribute to "conserving the land and water resources of the nation."

## What a conservation district employee can do for you

Has your district board considered what a district employee(s) can do for your program? District employees can strengthen your program, provide more service to your local community and cooperators, and manage and administer your district's business. Some districts are using staff to:

### 1. *Complete administrative functions*

District employees working with the district board and NRCS can prepare meeting agendas, newsletters and annual reports, meet with news media, develop workload analysis and make recommendations to the board, and carry out the policy of the board.

### 2. *Solicit cooperators*

District employees can meet and work with landowners in the district to inform them about the district program and encourage their participation.

### 3. *Assist NRCS employees with field work*

With reduced manpower available from NRCS, districts are hiring technicians to supplement NRCS technical assistance.

### 4. *Administer cost-share programs*

Districts in several states are involved in federal, state, and local cost-share programs. District employees can administer these programs and also assist in planning and field work.

### 5. *Meet with government officials*

District employees can meet with state and county government officials and committees to present the district board's positions.

## How to determine the need for a district employee

The decision to employ staff by the conservation district should be made after the thorough consideration of all important factors. The following procedure could be used when considering hiring a district employee:

### ***Determine the workload***

Using Chapter Two of the NACD "Personnel Management Guidebook for District Officials," prepare a workload analysis showing the needs in your district and how much help is needed to do the job. A note of caution here is not to try and do all the work at once. Go easy at first. If your analysis shows that you do not have need for full-time help, a part-time employee might be the answer.

### ***Develop a position description***

From your determined workload, prepare a position description that spells out clearly what this employee will be doing, and who will supervise and give guidance. Assistance in developing a position description can be found in Chapter Five of the NACD "Personnel Management Guidebook for District Officials."

### ***How to find the money***

Once you have developed and identified your need for additional help, it is necessary to find the funds to cover the expense. Of course, you should be thinking about this from the beginning, but don't allow it to be an overriding concern until you have identified a real need. At that point, with full backup material developed, you are ready to make a request for funds. Here are some ways districts are finding the necessary help to hire employees:

- Federal, NACD, state, county, or other sources of grant funding
- Money-raising activities. Note: The NACD publication "More Dollars for Your District" is filled with fundraising ideas.
- Associate membership sales
- College work study programs
- Vocational rehabilitation
- Taxing

### ***Where to find the right person***

There are many ways of looking for and finding potential employees including: local advertising, contacting universities and employment agencies, contacting other districts, and contacting your local NRCS field office.

## Working relationship of all parties

Increased district responsibilities can result in conflicts and problems between employees of NRCS and districts. It's better to anticipate where these hitches might occur before they happen to your district. Some of the reasons problems can occur include:

- District board not taking the lead.
- Employees not knowing what is expected of them.
- Lack of a clear understanding between district and NRCS roles.
- District managing new programs under state laws.

### *How to avoid problems*

In working together, it is important to have full agreement among all the team members as to what exactly is to be achieved and what each person is to do. The district board must be in command of the situation and provide strong leadership. The local district and NRCS should decide what the district will do and what NRCS will do.

District employees should have complete and specific job descriptions that tell them what their duties are, what committees and boards they will work with, when they will represent the district board, and from whom they receive supervision. It is recommended that one board member be designated to serve as supervisor to district employees. It is not recommended that NRCS employees supervise district employees, but NRCS should be responsible for technical training and assuring that technical quality is maintained in all work.

It is best to have a signed working agreement which spells out the roles each party is to take and then review it periodically. A sample working agreement which addresses this area can be found in Chapter One of the NACD "Personnel Management Guidebook for District Officials."

Everyone on the conservation team should be aware of what others are doing. They need to understand how their jobs fit together to get the job done. Constant communication is essential.

## Responsibility for personnel administrative functions

Conservation districts across the United States and territories employ over 7,000 people who each play valuable roles in delivering conservation assistance to landowners. These men and women are also highly regarded members of the national conservation partnership.

State conservation agencies and state associations should use the following information to assist district boards in managing and coordinating their district employees. This information can also be used in preparing cooperative working agreements, operational agreements, and district personnel policy.

All personnel administrative functions (the procedures, documentation, management, and supervision of district employees) are the responsibility of conservation district boards:

- I. Administrative functions such as hiring, dismissal, job description, training, performance evaluation, leave approval, and payroll is the responsibility of the district board, employer of record, or district employee with supervisory responsibilities and should not be delegated or transferred to any other agency or organization. The district officials remain ultimately responsible and accountable for their employees.
- II. Coordination of work, workload assignments, and technical guidance should be clarified by the district officials and coordinated with and communicated to their employees and any other partner agencies and organizations personnel. If a district employee is delegated these functions, the district officials remain ultimately responsible and accountable for this coordination.
- III. Policy guidance for NRCS employees relating to districts is specified in the NRCS General Manual 180 section 401.
- IV. Coordination of work arrangements with other agencies and responsibilities should be included in cooperative working agreements and operational agreements.
- V. State conservation agencies have a statutory responsibility to work with their conservation districts on personnel administration. Districts should seek their guidance and assistance when questions arise.