

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO MICHIGAN'S CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

Section I: Conservation Districts and How They Operate

A Conservation District is a governmental subdivision of this state, and a public body corporate and politic, organized by the people within the District boundaries under provisions of the *Soil Conservation District Law*, Act 297 of Public Acts of 1937, as amended. As such, it is a locally controlled resource management agency, created by concerned landowners and administered by publicly elected boards of directors. The Michigan Department of Agriculture has been charged with oversight of the conservation districts. In 1994, the *Conservation District Law* was made part of The Compiled Environmental Code. It has since been amended and is now PA 463 of 1998, as amended. To view the Act in its entirety, refer to *Appendix A*.

The locally elected five-member board of directors makes all decisions regarding the District's programs and activities. The directors hire qualified staff to conduct and carry out the programs and activities that have been approved. These programs provide technical assistance, information, and education to assist people in the District with properly managing their natural resources. Currently, Michigan has 79 Conservation Districts, which are generally organized along county boundaries.

Section II: The Purpose of Conservation Districts

Conservation Districts are local providers of natural resource management services that help citizens conserve their land and protect the environment for a cleaner, healthier, economically stronger Michigan. The major goals of a Conservation District and its programs are to:

- Reduce wind and water erosion, and control sedimentation in waters.
- Encourage conversion of all mismanaged land to a productive use.
- Encourage use of effective methods of surface and groundwater management.
- Facilitate land use and land use changes based on land capabilities and user goals.
- Enhance and protect the basic ability of land to produce food and fiber.
- Promote the maintenance of aesthetic values of land and its related resources.
- Assist landowners in controlling non-point sources of pollution to surface water, groundwater, and air.

Section III: How Conservation Districts are Funded

District funding sources include state appropriations, federally funded grant programs, county and other local governmental appropriations, and locally initiated and conducted fundraising activities. Conservation District directors are responsible for developing funding sources for the operation of the Conservation District and for the implementation of programs that focus on solving resource issues. For more detailed information regarding funding sources for Districts, please reference the section in this manual entitled Conservation District Funding. For details concerning Conservation District Funding, refer to *Chapter XIII* of this Manual.

Section IV: How Conservation District Programs are Conducted

To effectively carry out its programs, a Conservation District must:

- Establish a mission with a long-range plan and natural resource assessment for the District along with a calendar of actions and annual goals leading to the accomplishment of the plan's overall goals;
- Develop an annual plan of work (i.e. business plan) based on the District's Natural Resource Assessment and long-range plan.
- Use Directors, District staff, technical personnel, cooperating agencies, and partner organizations in planning and implementing various phases of the District program.

Section V: How Natural Resource-Users Receive Assistance from Their District

District assistance to a natural resource user may be in the form of a recommended solution to a specific problem or may involve development of a complete conservation plan for a given land area. To receive assistance:

- A natural resource-user requests assistance from the District.
- District reviews the request, and assigns assistance based on its program plan and staff available in accordance with state and federal Civil Rights Laws.
- Technical personnel review problems on-site with the user.
- Recommendations are developed with alternatives.
- Natural Resource-user, in cooperation with technicians, selects preferred recommendations and/or alternatives.
- Natural Resource-user implements recommendations with technician's assistance where needed.
- District maintains contact with natural resource-user to offer further assistance if and when needed.
- Implementation of recommendations is voluntary on the part of the resource-user who bears most or all of installation costs.

Through grants from state and federal programs, Districts may be able to offer additional assistance to natural resource-users in the form of cost-share for various conservation and environmental risk reducing activities. Some of the grants offered by the State of Michigan include the Michigan Water Stewardship Program, Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program Technical Assistance, and 319 Watershed Programs, which is tied to federal EPA funding. For more information regarding these programs refer to Chapter XIII, Sections III and IV.

Section VI: Conservation Districts in Other States

More than 3,000 Conservation Districts operate throughout the United States. These entities of government are responsible for conducting programs similar to the ones used in Michigan. For more information regarding Districts in other states, please visit the National Association of Conservation Districts at their web address:

<http://www.nacdnet.org/>