Robert E. Lee Soil and Water Conservation District

Strategic Plan

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The Commonwealth of Virginia supports the Robert E. Lee Soil and Water Conservation District through financial and administrative assistance provided by the Department of Conservation and Recreation.

THE ROBERT E. LEE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

History

The idea of soil and water conservation districts in the United States originated during the first term of Franklin D. Roosevelt. The stimulus was the massive ecological, economic and human tragedy of the Dust Bowl of the nineteen thirties. Many persons now living can remember the terrible scenes of those days when millions of tons of suffocating dust filled the air of great regions of the Southwest, ruining farms and driving people from their homes in despair. Congress responded to that crisis by passing Public Law 46, the Soil Conservation Act. In response to the broader implications of the Dust Bowl disaster, the Virginia General Assembly enacted the Soil Conservation District Act in 1938.

The Robert E. Lee Soil and Water Conservation District was organized on July 24, 1940, under the provisions of the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Districts Law of 1938. The District was originally made up of the counties of Amherst, Appomattox, Campbell, Buckingham and Cumberland. It was reorganized in 1972, when the City of Lynchburg joined the District and Buckingham and Cumberland Counties withdrew to form a separate Soil and Water Conservation District known as the Peter Francisco District. Amherst, Appomattox, Campbell Counties and the City of Lynchburg now make up the Robert E. Lee District.

The District covers an area of about 1385 square miles. Programs and initiatives are directed by a volunteer Board of Directors. Two Directors are elected to four-year terms from each of the three counties and the City of Lynchburg in the regular general elections (started November, 2007). Two additional Directors are appointed; one serves as a Director at-large and the other represents Virginia Cooperative Extension (started January, 2005). Associate Directors are also appointed by the Board for their expertise, as they apply to the District's mission. Occupations of the current members of the Board include beef cattle and general agriculture, education, civil service, land development and environmental consulting.

Threats to the environment in the Robert E. Lee District seem very different from the problems in the American Southwest of the 1930's and are not as dramatically visible, but they are increasingly serious and challenging. The District is a part of the rapidly developing corridor that runs along U.S. Route 29 from Washington D. C. to the North Carolina border and beyond. Large scale changes are taking place in the form of population growth and industrial and economic development. Enormous sections of land are being covered over by residential developments, industrial buildings, malls, parking lots and multilane highways. Significant acreage has been and is being diverted from farming. The shocks to the watersheds in the form of non-point-source pollution, sediment deposits, riparian erosion and increased volume and velocity of floodwater run-off have created ever more visible signs that the area has significant soil and water challenges. These are the trade-offs for the benefits of economic development. It is the responsibility of Conservation Districts to "stay ahead of the curve", anticipate problems and compensate for the side effects of demographic and economic change.

Put in very simple and general terms the long-range responsibilities of the Districts are to insure the retention of topsoil, prevent precipitation of eroded earth into our waterways; prevent the run-off of pollutants, safeguard water quality, assist in maintenance of rural and urban forests. This is to be accomplished with limited paid staff and organized volunteers. Education and technical assistance are important parts of the work, from environmental instruction for young children to technical assistance for farmers and builders as well as cost-sharing programs to encourage best management practices (BMP).

Who We Are

The District Staff consists of an Office Administrator, Ag BMP Conservation Specialist, Ag BMP TMDL Technician, Watershed Coordinator, and Education Specialist. The Office Administrator, Ag BMP Conservation Specialist and Ag BMP TMDL Technician operate out of a small suite of offices in Appomattox. These offices are shared with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service. The Watershed Coordinator and Education Specialist operate out of an office at Sweet Briar College Chapel (3rd floor).

Responsibilities of the staff include:

Administration of the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practice Cost Share Program,
Erosion and Sediment Control Plan Review & Inspection,
Coordination of Watershed Surveys for Monitoring and Protection,
Environmental Education and Outreach,
Grant Oversight for Special Watershed Initiatives,
and Coordination of District Operations.

District meetings are held at The Spring House Restaurant on Rt. 460 (9789 Richmond Hwy.), Lynchburg, Virginia, on the fourth Thursday of every month (no meeting in December) and are always open to the public. The meeting facility is accessible to persons with disabilities.

Members of the District Board are Michael J. Russell, Chairman (Amherst Co.), Barry Lobb, Vice-chair (Amherst Co.), Julius Sigler, Jr., Treasurer (Lynchburg), Bruce Jones, Asst. Treasurer (Virginia Cooperative Extension), John Harrison, Asst. Treasurer (Appomattox Co.), Dennis Torrence (Appomattox Co.), James Puckett, Jr. (Campbell Co.), Carolyn Hutcherson (Campbell Co.), Shannon Brennan (Lynchburg), , and Erin Hawkins (at large). District staff includes Julie Stratton (Office Administrator), James W. Jarvis (Ag BMP Conservation Specialist), David Sandman (Ag BMP TMDL Technician), Anne Marie Clarke (Watershed Coordinator), and (Education Specialist position vacant).

Projected activities of the District are annually outlined and updated in the Annual Plan of Work. At the end of each fiscal year the District staff produces an Annual Report. These documents are available to the public upon request. The current Plan Of Work specifies a wide variety of separate tasks, including youth training projects; development of public awareness of conservation through education and awards programs for rural and urban constituents; advancement of conservation practices through technical assistance, cost-share programs and direct action by the Board and the District staff, by our USDA FSA and NRCS colleagues; and finally by cooperation and correspondence with other relevant groups and agencies.

The detailed Strategic Plan for 2006-2011 which follows is designed to meet the needs for advance planning, coordination, action and public information during the coming five years.

Strategic Planning Process

In the fall of 2005, each of the District's standing committees was asked to complete a written analysis of its function. The submitted analyses contained overviews of the committee's purpose, took stock of past accomplishments, and projected new areas and activities for consideration.

In the late spring of 2006, members of the district board and staff solicited input from various stakeholders—from the agricultural community, from the urban/suburban communities, from the educational community and from community leadership. These interviews revealed some interesting perceptions of the district and its responsibilities. In addition, relevant information from a state-wide analysis of cost-share programs was studied and incorporated into the proposed strategic goals.

The planning committee then developed a set of strategic goals for the entire board and staff to consider at its June meeting.

Analysis of Stakeholder Interviews

Interviews with stakeholders revealed that the general public knows only that we **do something related to water and soil**, but outside of the agricultural community, very few people have any real idea of what a soil and conservation district does or should do. The agriculture community knows about us, but many farmers have little detailed knowledge about programs designed to help them be better stewards of land and water resources. The extent to which community leadership knows about us is directly related to the amount of interaction they have had with us. Since we have memoranda of understanding with Lynchburg and Amherst, those leaders are best informed about what we do. Homeowners probably know the least about us. They assume that we are somehow associated with **the environment**, but know little more that that.

Members of the agricultural community identify water quality as the major environmental concern, but feel that the public unfairly blames them for causing water quality problems without understanding the real situation. They agree that livestock production is one important contributor to non-point-source pollution, but also point out that improper disposal of human waste, and in urban settings, pets, poor erosion and sediment control practices on the part of builders, developers and homeowners. Improper use of fertilizers and chemicals in the urban setting are also major contributors. All groups interviewed expressed growing concerns over the loss of agricultural lands and open spaces to development, with the concurrent increase in stormwater runoff and the subsequent sediment load on local streams and rivers. Farmers believe that conservation is important, and that they both can and do act to improve water quality and reduce soil erosion. However, many do not fully understand how BMPs really affect water quality. They are generally sympathetic to practices that directly affect stream quality, such as fencing, cover crops, and no-till programs, but many view the process of gaining approval for BMP funding as cumbersome and uncertain.

Concerned members of the general public may be committed to recycling or to litter reduction, but believe that they have little, if any, environmental responsibility beyond that. They do not perceive that their collective gardening practices may be as detrimental to water quality as any farming practice, nor do they understand their possible relationship to stormwater runoff.

The Strategic Plan

Strategic Goal 1. Work To Improve Water Quality within the RELSWCD

Objective 1. Target Agricultural Production Activities

We continue to support agricultural BMPs through cost-share and tax-credits. This objective is well met.

Objective 2. Continue to work to improve storm-water management in urban settings

We have offered many rain barrel workshops. The Amherst Watershed Coordinator will help with Amherst County erosion and storm-water complaints on an as needed basis.

Objective 3. Begin to determine the effectiveness of the agricultural, forestry and urban BMPs that the district and the participants in its programs install and implement.

In the fall of 2010, an intern working with the District Watershed Coordinator is collecting water samples from the Graham Creek Watershed area, including areas that have implemented Ag. Bmps and areas that have not. This should supply us with information regarding the effectiveness of SL-6 practices.

Objective 4. Highlight the State Riparian Buffer Program

We are meeting this goal through the many SL-6 practices we have supported and through the Watershed Coordinator's tireless efforts to create buffers in Amherst County.

Objective 5. Support the Timberlake Watershed Improvement District

We do have excellent communication between the District and the WID, but we have not provided workshops, etc. targeted to the WID. We also serve as fiscal agent for proffers between developers and the WID.

Objective 6. Continue the mandated program of dam maintenance.

We are clearly meeting this goal, thanks largely to the work of the Ag BMP Conservation Specialist.

Strategic Goal 2. Continue to reenergize and expand environmental education and outreach based on the preceding analysis of the contributions of our stakeholders.

Objective 1. Continue to develop and build programs for elementary and secondary schools and higher education.

We are clearly meeting all aspects of this goal.

Objective 2. Strengthen education and promotional programs for the agricultural community.

We are clearly meeting all aspects of this goal.

Objective 3. Strengthen and expand education programming for urban communities.

We have made some efforts in this area, but we have much more to accomplish in offering classes in water-friendly landscaping, etc. Our website has been improved and the information available to the public has been increased.

Strategic Goal 3. Raise the visibility and recognition level of the District within all stakeholder groups.

Objective 1. Continue and expand recent efforts to publicize district activities.

We have made inroads with this objective, primarily through the outstanding efforts of our District Staff. The District Watershed Coordinator and Educational Specialist have updated District display panels and continue to display them at various area festivals.

Objective 2. Increase day-to-day visibility of the District

We have created some attractive signs to advertise the District and those who work with us, thanks to our TMDL Ag BMP technician who developed the signs. An additional district logo was created by an Appomattox High School student and has been used to further publicize the District and its efforts.

Objective 3. Where feasible, the District will take public positions on issues and make those positions known.

We are partially meeting this goal. We have discussed a variety of issues, usually at the request of other districts or the state association of districts. We have not had the occasion to take a formal stand on any particular issue since the plan was adopted.