

News from the Watershed

What is a Soil and Water Conservation District?

The Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District is actually composed of various agencies. The Highlands County Natural Resources Department, the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) all work together to address natural resource concerns for local citizens. For example, the Board of County Commissioner's Natural Resource Department enables the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District to furnish additional landowners with technical support by providing office space, basic supplies, communications support and staff. NRCS is a federal government agency within the USDA that is dedicated to assisting landowners and operators in implementing sustainable and economical conservation practices. Soil and Water Conservation Districts bring many people together including private citizens, private and public organizations, and local, state and federal governmental agencies, to come up with ideas and support regarding natural resource issues.

Most counties in the United States have a conservation district. There are approximately 3,000 districts nationwide. As a result, citizens in these districts are being assisted with the conservation of natural resources in their area. People are benefiting by the conservation of their local lakes, rivers, land, forests, farms and wildlife. The benefits these districts provide are countless. They include assistance to land operators in best management practices regarding conservation, restoration of wetlands, prevention of erosion, protection of our precious groundwater, planting vegetation, addressing water quality issues, controlling exotic vegetation and educating the public regarding natural resources and conservation.

But how did these districts get their start? Back in the 1930's an ecological disaster of unprecedented proportions swept the nation. The Dust Bowl followed a severe drought in the Great Plains, which prompted Hugh Hammond Bennett, the father of conservation, to approach Congress about the erosion problem in the United States. Since the dust was so bad, that even the White House was affected, Congress voted unanimously to pass legislation making it a national policy to make soil and water conservation a priority.

The first Soil and Water Conservation District was established in 1937 when President Roosevelt appealed to all states to pass legislation allowing local landowners to form these districts. The Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District was created in 1942 and was originally known as the Istokpoga Soil Conservation District. Katherine Waggaman was a key player in the creation of the first district in our County. She was the first woman Conservation District supervisor in the United States. Some of the activities of the early district included the rerouting of water and drainage of land for development. Many watershed projects were completed in the 1950's and were conducted primarily to ease flooding concerns around homes and in agricultural lands.

Today, we have come a long way regarding conservation. New techniques and technology are being discovered and utilized every day. The Natural Resource Conservation Service with the assistance of the United States Department of Agriculture, plays a major role in offering local landowners financial and technical assistance through their local conservation districts. For example NRCS offers programs to local landowners to assist in the areas of efficient irrigation design, nutrient management, grazing plans, fencing, pest management, wetland restoration, improved wildlife habitat and many other areas.

So, next time you hear about a Soil and Water Conservation District, you'll know what they do and how they help the local citizens to utilize best management practices in the areas of natural resources and conservation.

To learn more about Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District, go to <http://www.highlandsswcd.org/>.