

# **5 CONSERVATION PRIORITIES**

Compiled by the Sustainable Funding Committee and reported to the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts, Tuesday, November 25, 2014 at its convention in Wichita, KS

One of the tasks of this committee, as directed by the association membership, was to list the 5 greatest conservation priorities for the next 50 years. This is difficult to do, as many things that the conservation districts do are interrelated. Conservation districts know that to address one priority affects others. We cannot help but impact in a positive way other natural resource conservation concerns when dealing with another. These “priorities” are not listed in any particular order and should not be construed as having priority over others listed. It should be noted that without adequate funding for local conservation district operations, it would be difficult, at best, for a conservation district to implement any of its responsibilities under the Kansas Conservation District Act.

## **1) Local delivery**

A strong well funded conservation district is necessary as a delivery system to assess natural resource conservation needs in each respective conservation district, and to implement programs to meet these needs. Unless a conservation district has funding for its operations, it cannot possibly function as a local delivery system for natural resource conservation programs, such as education, administration of programs and conservation practices.

Conservation districts are a true bottom up grass roots effort to address natural resource conservation. There is a conservation district in every Kansas county. Conservation district supervisors are elected by the qualified electors of a conservation district to represent them and implement the Kansas Conservation District Act in their respective districts.

An elected conservation district board needs necessary staff and resources to fund the operations of the conservation district. This includes staff to implement the district board’s policies. Staff is necessary to assist the board in administration of the district to insure accountability to the people of the district and the State of Kansas. Necessary equipment is needed to carry out these functions, as well as other staff to supply technical assistance to the district to carry out the purpose of the Kansas Conservation District Act.

This delivery system has not always been used properly by other local, state and federal agencies. It is not only necessary for each conservation district to educate others on the use of this unique natural resource conservation delivery system, it is also incumbent on the Division of Conservation, State Conservation Commission and Kansas Association of Conservation Districts to speak out wherever opportunities present themselves, to promote the proper use of local conservation districts in delivering programs at a local level.

Conservation districts are examples of a true grass roots movement, with local elected officials representing local people. Conservation districts determine the natural resource conservation needs for the local conservation district. Conservation districts try to provide education, technical assistance and resources to address these needs. To provide the services that conservation districts were formed to deliver, districts need a sustainable, reliable funding source for operations of their conservation districts.

## **2) Sediment and erosion control**

This is a conservation district's strength. This is why conservation districts were originally created. Soil loss contributes to land becoming unproductive for agriculture and degrades water quality. By using sediment and erosion control best management practices (BMPs), conservation districts can limit negative impacts to farmland, rangeland and water quality and quantity in rural and urban communities, as well as improve land and water quality and reduce damage from floods.

Conservation districts promote sediment and erosion control through education and cost share programs encouraging land users to limit soil loss. Erosion control practices contribute positively towards air quality by stabilizing soils from blowing.

## **3) Rangeland health**

Native prairie grasses, planted tame grass and cool season grass cover large areas of Kansas. These grass ecosystems have value to society by improving water quality and quantity, improving air quality, and enhance native wildlife. Proper rangeland health maintains these grasslands in a productive way to benefit local and regional economics that contribute to the

quality of life in Kansas. Any environmental policy should take into consideration scientifically proven best management practices (BMPs) for rangeland that benefit the Kansas economy, wildlife and native plants. Program funding and BMPs that support rangeland conservation encourage healthy rangeland that limits soil loss, prevents overgrazing and maintains productivity. These same BMPs also promote water quality and quantity.

#### **4) Water quality and sustainable water use in Kansas**

Water quality is a perfect example of how conservation districts, addressing sediment and erosion, can impact other concerns. Water quality and quantity are affected by the grasslands and conservation practices that filter out pollutants. Water quality and sufficient water supplies are vital for the health of people, agriculture and the economy. Conservation districts, through natural resources conservation education and programs contribute towards good water quality in Kansas by delivering locally those programs that affect water quality and quantity.

Water is important to all in Kansas. It takes water to grow food. It takes water to drive industry. It takes water to sustain populations. Conservation districts, through natural resource conservation best management practices (BMPs), can help keep water clean and be used more efficiently.

#### **5) Soil health**

The health of soil contributes towards sustainability of this natural resource. A healthy soil contains nutrients and organic material, living and dead, to promote the growth of any plant living in that soil. This assists filtration of water into the ground to reduce runoff as well as help improve water quality of runoff. Fungi and bacteria help break down organic matter in the soil to provide nutrients for plants and contribute to a soil's tilth. Healthy soils will help herbicides and fertilizers work more efficiently. Healthy soils, with adequate organic material will reduce significantly soil erosion. Programs that promote a healthy soil, in conjunction with other natural resource conservation best management practices will improve the sustainability of our soils.