

Report on the 2012 KACD Resource Planning Process

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KACD

Kansas Association of Conservation Districts

Representing Local Conservation Districts

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in early 2012, the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts (KACD) began a formal resource planning process as a way to gain a better understanding of the natural resources issues that Kansas counties currently face and the assets and challenges present in dealing with them. The project was part of a grant awarded to KACD by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The rationale for the 2012 KACD Resource Planning Process was that, in a time of shrinking budgets and increased accountability by publicly funded entities, it is more important than ever for Kansas conservation districts to create a sound plan aimed at preserving the state's natural resources. It provided a more narrow focus than a typical strategic planning process.

Specifically, it was designed to identify (1) natural resource issues and opportunities locally; (2) the preferred ways in which they can be addressed; and (3) the human, financial, equipment, and other resources available to address them. Once counties identified those initial elements, they brainstormed possible action steps and then decided which of those they would prioritize in addressing their local natural resource issues and opportunities. In this way, conservation districts could implement measures that the community supports as well as strategies for accomplishing them.

Because funding agencies often look for evidence of planning and public support as criteria for funding, the district's Five-Year Resource Plan can be used to compete for funds to implement solutions and, at the same time, demonstrate to their county commissioners and state and federal lawmakers that they continue to be relevant—that they still play a crucial role in maintaining the quality of our soil, water, air, plants, and animals.

THE PROCESS

Robin Lehman of Lehman, Inc., served as project manager for the 2012 KACD Resource Planning Process. She began by developing a workbook that outlined the details and timeline for the project. In order to simplify the process and provide focus, the workbook also provided worksheets districts could complete by supplying responses to specific questions. The

worksheets were subsequently converted to an interactive digital document that districts could complete online and submit to KACD electronically.

The workbooks were distributed at the Spring Area Meetings in March and mailed to those districts that did not attend the meeting in their area. In late March, Robin developed a module on resource planning that was added to the supervisor training modules provided by the Division of Conservation. That module was made available to districts on KACD's website at http://www.kacdnet.org/Resource_Planning_ModuleXVI.pdf.

Each participating conservation district established a resource planning committee, which was comprised of supervisors, district employees, NRCS personnel, and other advisors or individuals districts invited into the process.

Districts were asked to submit their completed worksheets to KACD by August 1st. Robin then used the worksheets to develop a preliminary draft of each county's Five-Year Resource Plan, which was subsequently reviewed by district supervisors and employees and revised if desired. Robin incorporated any revisions into the final plans, which were then formally adopted by each Board of Supervisors.

Conservation districts that participated in the project were to adopt their final plans by December 15, 2012, in order to be eligible for a one-time reduction of \$250 on their 2013 KACD membership dues.

PARTICIPATING DISTRICTS

Of the 105 Kansas conservation districts, 81 participated in the resource planning process:

Allen	Harper	Pottawatomie
Anderson	Hodgeman	Pratt
Barber	Jefferson	Rawlins
Barton	Jewell	Republic
Bourbon	Johnson	Rice
Brown	Kearny	Riley
Butler	Kingman	Rooks
Cherokee	Kiowa	Rush
Cheyenne	Labette	Russell
Clay	Lane	Saline
Cloud	Leavenworth	Scott
Crawford	Lincoln	Sedgwick
Decatur	Linn	Seward
Doniphan	Logan	Shawnee
Edwards	Marshall	Sheridan
Ellis	McPherson	Sherman
Ellsworth	Montgomery	Smith
Finney	Morris	Stafford
Ford	Morton	Stanton
Franklin	Nemaha	Stevens
Geary	Neosho	Sumner
Gove	Ness	Thomas
Graham	Osage	Wabaunsee
Grant	Osborne	Wallace
Greeley	Ottawa	Washington
Greenwood	Pawnee	Wichita
Hamilton	Phillips	Woodson

Area I: 16 of 18 counties participating

Area II: 19 of 24 counties participating

Area III: 17 of 20 counties participating

Area IV: 17 of 23 counties participating

Area V: 12 of 20 counties participating

[NOTE: The counties that comprise each area can be found at <http://www.kacdnet.org/districts.html>.]

These 24 counties chose not to participate in the resource planning process:

Atchison	Douglas	Meade
Chase	Elk	Miami
Chautauqua	Gray	Mitchell
Clark	Harvey	Norton
Coffey	Haskell	Reno
Comanche	Jackson	Trego
Cowley	Lyon	Wilson
Dickinson	Marion	Wyandotte

STEPS IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

The resource planning process featured five steps:

- I. **Identify concerns and opportunities.** The most valuable aspect of a long-range plan in each conservation district is its local focus. It looks at specific conservation challenges in the county as well as opportunities for new partners, new goals, and even potential new funding sources. Along with natural resource concerns and opportunities, it was important for districts to look at human and financial resources in their area that could serve either as opportunities to improve program success or constraints to achieving goals.
- II. **Determine objectives.** Objectives are the desired future objectives. They can be quantitative (expressed in numbers) or qualitative (expressed in words), intended to address the concerns and opportunities identified in Step I. For each resource concern or opportunity identified, districts were asked to respond to the following: (1) What do we want to have happen with this problem/opportunity? (2) What do we know about this problem/opportunity? (3) What do we need to know about this problem/opportunity?
- III. **Conduct a resource inventory.** Resource inventories provide important information about current conditions in the county. They detail the condition of soil, water, air, plant, and animal resources, as well as the human, financial, and equipment resources available or needed in order to successfully meet the identified objectives. Conducting a resource inventory increases the likelihood of plan implementation in the following ways: (1) Helps the district identify short-term projects to maintain momentum and build trust and confidence in the planning process. (2) Encourages holistic thinking by increasing understanding of watershed functions, land uses, and interactions. (3) Provides an opportunity to gather relevant social, cultural, and political information about communities within the district boundaries. (4) Initiates public outreach with non-committee members and potential partners.
- IV. **Formulate possible solutions (action steps).** Once objectives were identified and an inventory of resources conducted, the planning committee considered alternatives for addressing the concerns. In addition to formulating strategies to solve the problems

and opportunities identified, consideration was given to their acceptability to local citizens, existing opportunities, and ways to prevent additional problems from occurring. Districts were urged to consider solutions that could be implemented using existing financial resources. After brainstorming possible solutions, planning committee members considered the effectiveness of the solutions in addressing the concerns, taking advantage of opportunities, and meeting county conservation objectives.

- V. **Make decisions.** After the first four steps were completed, district planning committees made decisions about which solutions, or action steps, would best address concerns and opportunities, first by maximizing the use of available resources and secondly by solutions that could be implemented if additional resources became available.

The Five-Year Resource Plan for each county was framed around those five steps used in the planning process. The plans concluded with a one-paragraph summary of that county's primary areas of emphasis, such as education, information, and/or planning for contingencies in the event of reduced funding.

The locally focused plan is designed to highlight what each conservation district does well and the ways in which it can perform its role even better, which are key considerations for county commissioners as they make local funding decisions. More broadly, the 2012 KACD Resource Planning Process provided an opportunity to shine a light on Kansas conservation as a whole—and whether lawmakers who are faced with finding solutions and making decisions under current and future budget constraints would be wise to continue long-standing traditional investments in conservation programs and district operations.

THE RESULTS

Naturally, there were varying degrees of engagement by the 81 conservation districts who participated in the resource planning process. Some districts clearly understood the purpose and value of the process and fully engaged in providing content that would lead to a constructive five-year plan. The action steps they identified were numerous, broad-based, potentially effective, and sometimes even quite visionary. Other districts—in fact, the majority—did a perfectly adequate job but less detailed and deliberative.

Regardless of the level of effort expended in each case, the NRCS grant provided KACD with the impetus to seek answers about the relevance and effectiveness of conservation programs and practices. Most importantly in the face of a changing fiscal and political environment, the process can serve as a guide to where we might go from here.

Following is a sampling of responses in each section of the workbook.

Step I: Identify Concerns and Opportunities

1. NATURAL RESOURCE ISSUES

The primary natural resource issues cited by nearly every district were **water quality** (degradation due to sediment, pesticides, nutrients, and animal waste) and **water quantity** (ground and surface water used for irrigation and other uses), along with **wind and soil erosion**. Mentioned repeatedly was the **drought**, since every part of Kansas is experiencing severe to exceptional drought conditions (with the exception of northeastern Bourbon County and the extreme eastern edge of Linn County, which are experiencing moderate drought). The drought is increasing the reliance on the **Ogallala Aquifer** in certain areas, adding to its decline. **Stream bank erosion**, too, was an often-cited problem.

Having **adequate water for livestock** is a growing issue, exacerbated by the drought conditions that plague the state. Another issue related to livestock is the **proper management of livestock waste**. Better **rangeland management** is needed, as well as the replacement of aging terraces and waterways. Renovation is also needed for **aging windbreaks and shelterbelts**.

Many counties expressed concern over **changing land use**, particularly the breaking out of expiring CRP acres. With commodity prices at a high level, landowners are often choosing to plant those acres—even sub-optimal land—rather than continue conservation practices. Much agricultural land is being converted to residential and industrial uses. New "rural" residents may not appreciate day-to-day farm activities and impacts such as odors, smoke, dust, chemical spray, and the like.

The **increasing cost of agricultural land**, though good for the tax base, is challenging for new operators. Higher taxes and commodity prices may lead them to engage in more tillage and less conservation.

Frequently mentioned was the increasing number of **absentee and recreational landowners**. They are not as familiar with conservation issues in the area, nor are they as likely to invest in conservation programs and practices.

Many of these factors have adversely affected wildlife habitats and contributed to a **loss of species** such as the Lesser Prairie Chicken and quail. In some cases, however, wildlife such as **turkey and deer** are *too* plentiful. In a few areas of the state, **prairie dogs** are a continuing problem.

Invasive species such as Sericea Lespedeza, honey locust, cedar trees, Canada thistle, and other noxious weeds are a worsening problem in much of the state.

Oil and gas development affect conservation in some counties. Also mentioned as natural resource issues were the establishment of **wind farms** and the exploration and development of **gypsum mining**.

Intensive storm events have led to localized flooding and erosion, as well as to wind damage to property.

Declining soil health through excessive tillage and poor crop selection is leading to a change in farming methods. No-till precision farming is becoming more widely practiced, though there is still resistance to it by some farmers. Another factor that could affect farming practices is the potential change in **consumer preferences** to organic foods.

In summary, the natural resource issues identified varied in number and specificity among counties, but all districts indicated that steps must be taken if Kansans are to enjoy clean air,

have adequate, high-quality water, maintain fertile soil for crops, and preserve our wildlife habitats.

2. HUMAN RESOURCE ASSETS

It is clear that Kansas conservation districts have a number of human resource assets on which to draw in addressing their natural resource issues—**conservation-friendly county commissioners, teachers and school administrators, bankers and other community partners, the local extension office, active board members, and technical support from NRCS** and other agencies, to name a few.

Another important asset many districts cited was their contingent of **volunteers**. Many districts have a good working relationship with their **local media**. Some counties mentioned **landowners willing to host tours and share knowledge** as valuable human resource assets. An important human resource asset cited often was **experienced staff** in the conservation district office.

3. HUMAN RESOURCE CHALLENGES

The primary challenges identified were these: **lack of volunteers** because people are too busy, not enough people interested in serving on the **Board of Supervisors**, lack of support from **county commissioners, lawmakers** who lack knowledge of conservation issues and programs, and **lack of awareness** about conservation by the general public. Also mentioned was the **resistance to new ideas and practices** and **conflicting priorities** between wildlife organizations.

Another challenge is **dwindling population** in many areas of the state. In addition, there is an **aging and shrinking producer base**. **Land improvement contractors** are in short supply, and there are not enough **engineers and/or specialists** to get design work completed in a timely manner. In many counties, the **sanitarian position** has been eliminated due to state funding cuts.

A number of districts said that **hiring and retaining good employees** is a key challenge. Also mentioned frequently was the lack of **adequate technical staff** for the workload.

4. FINANCIAL OPPORTUNITIES, CONSTRAINTS, OR UNCERTAINTIES

The top financial opportunities conservation districts currently employ are **equipment rental and sales of trees, flags, weed barrier, and seeds**. Several said that the **focus on "Going Green"** helps conservation. Also cited was that the **current profitability in the agriculture sector**, which makes conservation affordable for producers and generates economic activity in the local area.

The most common constraints indicated were the number of **steps required in order to receive assistance, lack of travel funds, changing program regulations, and limited funds for operations**.

In almost all counties, the greatest uncertainties are **potential local, state, and federal budget cuts and possible office closures**. There is a high level of concern over how their districts might survive if resources become more limited or they lose the opportunity to share space and equipment.

5. FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Future opportunities identified were numerous. Among them were expanding the types of **equipment available for rent, hosting or participating in a wide array of events** highlighting conservation, **flood prevention/mitigation programs** (wetlands, retention structures, rain gardens, etc.) that could unite residential, business and ag interests to deal with a common problem, **WRAPS tours, RC&D funds**, encouragement for **area youth to consider careers in agriculture**, and many more.

6. FUTURE CHALLENGES

As with "Constraints" and "Uncertainties" in Item 4 above, the future challenges most frequently cited were **budget reductions and possible office closures**. A few of the other challenges also mentioned were upcoming elections with **loss of political or financial support, key personnel departures, creating public awareness and understanding** of purpose and mission of the conservation district, the current economics of crop production that encourages **converting CRP and grassland to crops**, new **farming methods and technologies that conflict with some conservation practices** like contour farming and terraces, **grassed waterways being replaced by underground pipe systems** that are less beneficial for water quality, producers that are

farming through intermittent streams and eliminating grassed areas along roadsides, and the potential **loss of the district technician**. Challenges identified were wide-ranging and numerous across the 81 participating districts.

Step II: Determine Objectives

For each of the natural resource issues that conservation districts identified in Step I above, consideration was given to the following:

1. What do we want to have happen with this problem or opportunity (in what condition do we want this resource ultimately to be)?
2. What do we know about this problem or opportunity (what is happening, where is it occurring, how long has it been happening, has the problem intensified, what sources of information about it are available)?
3. What do we need to know about this problem or opportunity (what questions do we have that need to be answered in order to solve it, what questions need to be answered in order to implement our solutions)?
4. With a better understanding of the scope of the problems or opportunities our county faces, what are our objectives for addressing them?

The **desired results** typically identified were a reversal of whatever the problem was; i.e., improved water quality and quantity, keeping resources in usable condition, reducing erosion, strengthening of partnerships with other agencies, etc. Here is a small sampling of responses:

- Surface water quality - reduce sediment and nutrients in surface water so that desired uses may be maintained.
- Groundwater quality - protect groundwater sources that are currently of good quality; assist with expanding public water districts to areas of need.
- Soil quality - continue to research and promote methods (no-till and cover crops) that have the potential to increase soil organic matter and improve soil quality.
- Flood mitigation - protect threatened areas using buffers and retention structures.
- Rangeland - provide funds and motivation to attack invasive plants and improve management in order to reverse the decline in rangeland condition.
- Wildlife habitat - promote wildlife-friendly practices through demonstrations and funding.

- Keep conservation name in the spotlight.
- Improve water supply to pastures, which in turn will improve grazing distribution.
- Strengthen community relationships; educate the public and political leaders about what the district can and has done for the county; build organizational capacity to achieve organizational sustainability; and clarify and promote the identity of the district.
- Establish a fully sustainable long-term funding plan, including marketing.

As they looked at **what they knew** about the problems/opportunities, a range of responses surfaced. These are some examples:

- Some groundwater quality problems occur naturally (hardness, for example); other problems (nitrates, bacteria) can result from human activities.
- Soil organic matter is a good measure of soil quality and has been declining since settlement; farming practices (no-till, possibly cover crops) can help reverse this trend.
- Storm events seem to be increasing in intensity and underscore the need for controlling erosion and minimizing the impacts of flooding.
- Poorly managed rangeland is becoming more obvious as trees and brush increase.
- Crop economics and production methods are affecting wildlife habitat - converting grassland to crops and the use of better herbicides that leave fewer weeds and bare roadsides are examples of the impacts.
- Droughts occur in cyclical patterns. When out of the drought cycle, educate and promote sound technology and information to improve resources before the drought cycle comes around again.
- Keep conservation in the public eye through newsletters, newspaper and radio ads, field days, website, and Facebook pages.
- We need to have conservation measures that are financially feasible.
- We need to have model farms where neighboring landowners can see evidence of the conservation practices.
- We need to have technical assistance available to landowners.
- We need to be able to provide cost-share assistance.
- We do have producer/public buy-in to treat the issues. Many times it is a matter of providing cost-share incentives to apply necessary practices.

What do we **need to know** in order to solve the problems? These are some of the questions posed:

- Surface water quality: What are the main sources of nutrients in surface water? What are the best methods of fertilizer placement?

- Groundwater quality: Are rural water districts the most practical way to provide good water to rural residences and farms? Is a mitigation program for nitrates in groundwater feasible?
- Soil quality: How can we assess soil quality in the field? What cover crops and/or rotations are best for soil quality?
- Flood mitigation: What is the best strategy for controlling localized flooding? Are cost-share programs available that will encompass water retention structures?
- Rangeland: How can we retain prescribed burning as a management tool and minimize out-of-control fires? Is it feasible to promote the development of markets for waste trees?
- Wildlife habitat: What programs are available that emphasize non-game wildlife? Can we improve roadside habitat without increasing risks to both motorists and wildlife?
- How long will the drought last and what measures need to be taken to reduce effects?
- How much will our funding be cut and what amount of funding do we need to operate the conservation office?
- What are some of the ways we can economize our operations?

Finally, after giving thought to the background information pertaining to problems and opportunities, districts listed various **objectives for addressing them**. Here are some of the items they listed:

- Educate ourselves about new technology and practices that will reduce the effects of drought and resulting erosion and pass that knowledge on to the public.
- Keep informed about funding by continuing memberships with KACD and NACD and develop stronger relationships with county commissioners, legislators, and urban population.
- Develop strategy for conservation district office in times of reduced funding.
- Reduce soil loss to tolerable levels and improve water quality – educate and encourage the proper installation, use and maintenance of applicable soil and water conservation practices.
- Improve water supply to pastures – educate producers on alternative water supplies and promote grazing management plans.
- Encourage conservation of natural resources through news articles, educational presentations, and workshop/field days.
- Keep lobbying for federal and state funding.
- Keep our educational and informational efforts going.
- Continue to work hard with our enterprise activities and be aggressive with an open mind to create a new service or sell a new product to increase our financial income.

- Keep the partnerships we have strong: county commissioners, NRCS, FSA, FSA County Committee, K-State Extension, KDHE, schools, county engineer, watershed, Fair Board, and other county organizations.
 - Provide information to the land users through the district newsletters. Inform them about the cost-share assistance and technical assistance available to them through the district and NRCS.
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Step III: Conduct a Resource Inventory

In this section, counties provided (1) a **district description**; (2) the **economic, sociologic, environmental, and cultural features of the district**; (3) **evaluation of the natural resources** of the district; (4) **conservation measures and actions** that have been completed and those that are needed; and (5) an **inventory of available assistance**.

The resource inventory was central to the resource plan because it captured the **specific current conditions** in each county. It highlighted the condition of the county's natural resources as well as its human, financial, and equipment resources. Having this detailed information at hand, rather than simply a vague idea of these conditions, raises the likelihood that the resource plan will be implemented.

Step IV: Formulate Possible Solutions (Action Steps)

Each conservation district's planning committee brainstormed a wide range of action steps for consideration as part of its Five-Year Resource Plan. This step gave committees an opportunity to think outside the box and write down any and all possibilities, even if they were later deemed unfeasible and discarded.

Districts were instructed to first consider solutions that could be accomplished with existing resources, and then they could identify possible additional action steps in the event more funding was made available.

Step V: Make Decisions

After responding to each of the first four steps, district planning committees were well-equipped to prioritize the action steps that would be most feasible for them to undertake over the next few years.

Broadly speaking, the action steps tended to include some combination of activities aimed at **education, information, and/or planning**—such as hosting tours, increasing involvement with the local media to raise public awareness about conservation, and working with the leadership of KACD, DOC, and NRCS to develop a contingency plan in the event of reduced funding. Many districts also emphasized **collaboration** with other agencies and community partners. Most recognized that the education of youth would help to ensure a strong commitment to conservation well into the future.

Nearly all districts understand that taking action steps such as these will help them do a better job of educating and informing the public, landowners, lawmakers, and community leaders about the role of county conservation districts, thus encouraging beneficial partnerships as well as greater participation in conservation programs and practices. Locally focused efforts are still, after more than 70 years, the best way to keep the Kansas commitment to conservation strong and viable.

Report prepared by Robin Lehman and submitted to NRCS on November 13, 2012.