**2021 NACD State Association Executive Directors’ Conference**

**Asheville, North Carolina | September 27 – 30, 2021**

The [North Carolina Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (NCASWCD)](https://ncaswcd.org/) and the [National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD)](https://www.nacdnet.org/) hosted the State Association Executive Directors’ Conference in Asheville, North Carolina.

Participants

Seventeen Executive Directors representing eighteen states participated in the 2021 NACD State Association Executive Directors’ Conference:

* Sabra Sutton, Alabama
* Jennifer Nelson, Delaware & Maryland
* Charlene Meeks, Florida
* Grant Hammer, Illinois
* Dan Meyerhoff, Kansas
* Crystal Renfro, Kentucky
* Dan Moilanen, Michigan
* Debbie Hughes, New Mexico
* Blanche Hurlbutt, New York
* Bryan Evans, North Carolina
* Janelle Meade, Ohio
* Sarah Blaney, Oklahoma
* Angela Ehlers, South Dakota
* Matthew McClanahan, Tennessee
* Kristy Davis, Utah
* Kendall Tyree, Virginia
* Hunter Petsch, Wyoming

Agenda

**Tuesday, September 28, 2021**

**Welcome and Introductions**

Beth Mason, NACD North Central Region Representative called the meeting to order at 8:07 am. She reviewed the venue’s mask policies and invited each participant to introduce themselves. Beth invited Kendall Tyree to share draft ground rules for the meeting and Kendall led participants in a brief discussion that adopted the following rules, goals and expectations:

* Confidentiality
* Our primary goal is to learn from each other
* We will not demean, devalue, or “put down” people
* We will trust that people are doing the best they can
* Challenge the idea and not the person
* Speak your discomfort
* Step up. Step back.
* Respect others’ right to hold opinions and beliefs that differ from yours
* Build relationships. Make contacts. Share information.
* Share solutions, not just problems.

**Ecosystem Services**

Two speakers joined the meeting virtually to talk about ecosystem services: Wayne Honeycutt, Ph.D., President and CEO of the [Soil Health Institute](https://soilhealthinstitute.org/) and Tim Palmer, NACD Immediate Past President. Wayne shared a presentation that addressed how good soil health practices reduce runoff and enhance water quality and drought resilience. He shared data from studies on cover crops and infiltration rates in different states. Wayne also explained that net carbon sequestration is defined as carbon inputs that are greater than outputs.

Tim talked with Wayne about how soils’ ability to capture carbon can vary in different areas and by soil type. Wayne emphasized that most soils can be optimized for carbon capture. Tim provided an overview of carbon offsets. He shared that the amount of federal disaster relief funding spent each year establishes a strong case for investing in programs that mitigate flooding like the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (PL-566) watershed projects. Tim also talked about some preliminary opportunities for funding that NACD is exploring to engage in the current administration’s 30 x 30 goal and provide training and capacity-building (e.g., Civilian Climate Corps). Participants engaged the speakers in discussion on navigating which programs are good ones for conservation districts to support.

**The National Conservation Planning Partnership (NCPP) and Implications for Serving Clients**

Rich Duesterhaus, NACD Director of Projects and Partnerships, joined virtually and provided an update on the NCPP that launched six years ago and was renewed with a second five-year agreement at the 2020 NACD Annual Meeting to strengthen conservation planning. NCPP leadership meet monthly and there are four action teams each co-chaired by various partners. Rich emphasized that the NCPP is important for the health of the conservation delivery system. State and territory level plans are being developed, and a significant amount of conservation planning has been accomplished these past couple of years even with the workplace challenges of COVID-19. Rich also highlighted the recent publication on the conservation delivery system distributed at the 2021 NACD Summer Meeting. The publication is available [electronically](https://indd.adobe.com/view/a7cc2748-1e2c-4eec-bef8-a9557318df5d) and additional hardcopies will be available soon.

A question was asked about a possible government shutdown as the end of the federal fiscal year nears. Rich reminded participants that the [National Conservation District Employees Association (NCDEA)](https://ncdea.us/) has prepared a [guide for conservation districts on dealing with government shutdowns](https://www.nacdnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/NCDEAShutdownProcedures1.pdf).

Resources provided:

[National Conservation Planning Partnership Presentation (PPT)](https://www.nacdnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NCPP-Presentation-for-EDs-9-28.pptx)

[America’s Conservation Delivery System Executive Summary (PDF)](https://indd.adobe.com/view/a7cc2748-1e2c-4eec-bef8-a9557318df5d)

**The Movement Towards Diversity, Equity and Inclusive (DEI) Outreach**

[Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts (OACD)](https://www.okconservation.org/) Executive Director Sarah Blaney provided an overview of the history of discrimination within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and recent examples. Sarah talked about how discrimination in 2021 can be overt, systemic or passive. Since producers don’t often distinguish between USDA and conservation districts, districts need to be aware of this shared collective history and well-informed of funding opportunities available for everyone.

Sarah shared OACD’s [Conservation and Agriculture Reach Everyone (CARE)](https://www.okconservation.org/care) program to increase the involvement of socially disadvantaged and veteran farmers and ranchers in conservation. The program also helps individuals with [fractionated land](https://www.doi.gov/buybackprogram/fractionation) and [heirs property](https://www.farmers.gov/working-with-us/heirs-property-eligibility) issues. CARE partners include OACD, the Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project and Texas Agriforestry Small Farmers and Rancher. The program initiated with an outreach survey and has identified champions, producers willing to share their positive experiences with NRCS. These champions also complete conservation plans and demonstration projects. CARE has reached over 2,600 producers. Additional resources shared include the: [Rural Coalition](https://www.ruralco.org/), [Federation of Southern Cooperatives](https://www.federation.coop/), [National Latino Farmers & Ranchers Trade Association](https://www.nlfrta.org/), [Land Loss Prevention Project](https://www.landloss.org/) and the [Indian Nations Conservation Alliance](https://inca-tcd.org/).

Kim LaFleur, NACD First Vice President and Chair of the NACD DEI Special Committee, joined virtually and shared the genesis of the DEI Task Force, the survey undertaken to better understand needs and the [report](https://www.nacdnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/DEI-Task-Force-Report-FINAL.pdf) developed. NACD has also compiled a [DEI Toolkit](https://www.nacdnet.org/about-nacd/dei/), a compilation of resources.

Resources provided:

[CARE Conservation and Agriculture Reach Everyone (PPT)](https://www.nacdnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CARE-Conservation-and-Agriculture-Reach-Everyone.pptx)

[Recommended Reading for CARE Partners (DOC)](https://www.nacdnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Recommended-Reading-for-CARE-Partners.docx)

[Native American Producer Experience Webinar (Zoom recording)](https://nacdnet-my.sharepoint.com/personal/beth-mason_nacdnet_org/Documents/Desktop/o%09https%3A/us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/gmRv1vlVsU4ZRv18wQWYWZby2WU9eRH7AS5vUaNsBMeCn9nON59TFmRYK4Iq86Me.tkCH_XO7-Lk5Q5WS)

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[The Black Producer Experience with Wendell Parris (Zoom recording)](https://nacdnet-my.sharepoint.com/personal/beth-mason_nacdnet_org/Documents/Desktop/o%09https%3A/us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/_jsUKFT9K2lhjIZiN6imXgapwQgPxTB2MqsJ8sz-jL-uDplO9kI9KDPXcUWHBrQ.pW1dQHVp6vBf_t-k)

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**COVID-19: Lessons Learned and the Path Forward**

Beth Mason kicked off this session with an activity. Participants wrote their biggest COVID-19 workplace challenge down on a piece of paper, then crumpled the paper into a “snowball” and had a snowball fight. Participants picked up the snowballs, read them aloud and then discussed how they’ve addressed the challenges written on the snowball and similar challenges. Challenges and solutions discussed included:

* Managing a remote workplace

This includes working remotely without or with limited federal office and systems access. Participants discussed having remote work and cybersecurity policies, changing bylaws to hold remote board meetings, providing software to all districts and holding calls with NRCS State Conservationists to spread accurate information widely.

* Keeping contact information updated

Participants discussed the challenge of sharing information through mass emailings when some districts have email addresses that can only be accessed on federal computers. Using services like Mail Chimp and Slack, as well as blogs and newsletters was also discussed.

* Holding in-person, virtual or hybrid annual meetings

Participants discussed the challenges and opportunities that come with each type of meeting. One state saw double attendance for their in-person meeting. Other states talked about portions of meetings that could by virtual, such as award ceremonies. One shared they are hosting a hybrid meeting, charging $10 less for it, and offering attendees the option to switch, at no cost, to in-person participation. Another shared that they charged a virtual registration fee to districts that wanted access to their meeting’s recordings. Participants also discussed providing full refunds to people that cancel last-minute due to COVID-19 infection, and the time required to do contact tracing.

* Grant extensions

Participants talked about requesting grant extensions and what to ask for. One now routinely asks for a twelve-month extension.

* Long-term planning

Participants discussed the general challenges of long-term planning. One state has amassed an extensive library of virtual trainings.

* Onboarding new employees

Discussion was held on not being able to meet new employees in-person and provide them with training. Acknowledging individuals who leave was also identified as a challenge.

**Programs and Projects Roundtable**

Executive Directors shared programs and projects from their states.

* Alabama

A $4.2 million feral swine pilot program is looking at the impacts and environmental damage caused by feral swine. One challenge encountered is private businesses that offer feral swine eradication that are now competing with free eradication services provided with federal funding.

* Delaware

Virtual training for district officials based on NACD’s [District Officials State Training Recognition Program](https://www.nacdnet.org/general-resources/district-officials-training-program-recognition/) and including an ArcGIS StoryMaps component has been launched. The training is delivered in weekly 15-minute modules sent out by email.

* Florida

With funding from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the [Association of Florida Conservation Districts](https://afcd.us/) is updating websites to bring districts into compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other requirements.

* Illinois

The [Saving Tomorrow’s Agriculture Resources (STAR)](https://starfreetool.com/home) program, which started in Illinois to assist farm operators and landowners in evaluating their nutrient and soil loss management practices has spread to other states, including: Colorado, Indiana, Iowa and Michigan. The [Crop Year 2020 STAR Annual Report](https://starfreetool.com/about#c5aad50e-b6c6-4054-a7a7-e2fec59c7057) has been released.

The [Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts](http://www.aiswcd.org/) has developed many advocacy outreach materials and is happy to share them with others to use as templates.

* Kansas

Kansas received funding through [NRCS’ Conservation Collaboration Grants or Agreements (CCGA)](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/ks/people/partners/?cid=nrcseprd1438417) program to train employees. They are leveraging retired employees to provide the training and mentoring for new employees.

* Kentucky

Through an agreement with NRCS, the [Kentucky Association of Conservation Districts](https://kyconservation.com/) has $2.1 million in funding to hire 50 technicians for conservation technical assistance. One goal of the program is to eventually hire these technicians at NRCS. To-date, 28 technicians have been hired. Challenges include providing training and retaining hires.

* Maryland

The [Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts](https://mascd.net/) is in the process of onboarding 100 new employees.

* Michigan

The [Michigan Association of Conservation Districts](https://www.macd.org/) serves on the Governor’s [Council on Climate Solutions](https://www.michigan.gov/egle/0%2C9429%2C7-135-3306_88771_102482---%2C00.html) and is engaged in a One Tree Planted reforestation project.

* New Mexico

New Mexico’s $50 million bond includes $10 million for soil and water. The state is working with funding from NRCS’ [Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/rcpp/) and the Department of Defense’s (DoD) [Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative (REPI)](https://www.repi.mil/). The state is looking to improve Local Work Groups.

* New York

Districts are working with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation to get certified to review and approve erosion and sediment control plans. This will generate income for the districts.

* North Carolina

NCASWCD has started sponsoring partner events and projects to spread goodwill and bolster the recognition of soil and water conservation districts. For example, funding was donated to the construction of a building on the North Carolina State Fairgrounds.

* Ohio

The [Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative (OACI)](https://ohioaci.org/) brings together nonprofits to offer certification to farmers that implement best management practices on their farms that help protect Ohio’s waterways.

* Oklahoma

The [Yard by Yard Community Resiliency Project](https://www.okconservation.org/yardbyyard) provides urban and suburban homeowners with a checklist of conservation practices to implement in their yards. Certified homeowners earn a yard sign to help spread the word to neighbors. The project can be managed and implemented virtually through videos and the [YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYvOL6UWxmAFArV-lgDsz9Q).

* South Dakota

A two-day retreat was recently held with partners with no topic off the table, like challenges with 40% of South Dakota’s land not operated by landowners.

* Utah

A position was recently hired to provide a training program for conservation planning, and another is focused on interagency training. Also working with grants for good soil health practices.

* Virginia

The [Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts](https://vaswcd.org/) (VASWCD) administers the [Virginia Conservation Assistance Program (VCAP)](https://vaswcd.org/vcap) that is an urban and suburban complement to the state’s $75 million agricultural cost-share programs. VASWCD partners with the [Soil Health Coalition](https://www.virginiasoilhealth.org/), hosts a [Youth Conservation Leadership Institute](https://vaswcd.org/ycli) and offers an environmental literacy seal for high schoolers.

* Wyoming

The [Wyoming Association of Conservation Districts](https://conservewy.com/) is developing a marketing plan to engage younger people in conservation.

**Parking Lot Items**

The last hour of the day was used to address “Parking Lot” items. Participants discussed:

* DEI
* Board elections and training board members
* State association budgets, funding, and dues
* Advocacy
* Partnerships

**Wednesday, September 29, 2021**

**Urban Conservation Assistance Programs**

Bryan Evans, NCASWCD Executive Director, shared information about North Carolina’s [Community Conservation Assistance Program (CCAP)](http://www.ncagr.gov/SWC/costshareprograms/CCAP/index.html). The program was established in 2006 and provides a 75% cost-share for conservation practices on non-agricultural lands. Marsh sills, cisterns, rain gardens and riparian buffers are among the most popular practices installed.

Kendall Tyree, VASWCD Executive Director, talked about [VCAP](https://vaswcd.org/vcap), which was modeled in part after CCAP and provides financial, technical and educational assistance to property owners. CCAP is implemented through local, participating conservation districts and began as a pilot program involving four districts. It has now grown to all 47 of Virginia’s conservation districts. Demand for the program is high. It is a 75% cost share program with funding from multiple sources. Homeowners work with their local conservation district to submit an application. The program works with homeowners associations and places like churches, since projects implemented in high traffic areas where signs can be placed help promote the program. The program also tracks nitrogen, phosphorous and sediment reductions and is expanding outreach to underserved and minority communities.

Kendall and Candice Abinanti, NACD Southeast Region Representative, also shared details about the recently launched [Georgia Conservation Assistance Program (GCAP)](https://www.gacd.us/gcap) which currently operates in two urban districts to install green infrastructure projects to improve water quality. The program partners with NRCS, the University of Georgia, conservation districts and Trees Atlanta.

Learn more about these programs by watching the July 15, 2021 [NACD Urban and Community Conservation Webinar](https://www.nacdnet.org/general-resources/webinars/) on [“Conservation Assistance Programs Incentivize Stormwater Management.”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3RxX5J0fEA&list=PL1zOUTEjoqu_717vtF_Zx2T-2glOjdcxQ&index=6)

**North Carolina Capacity-Building Discussion**

Vernon Cox, Director of the Division of Soil and Water Conservation with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, provided an overview of agriculture in North Carolina. He also reviewed Job Approval Authority (JAA) in the state and a 2020 law that authorizes the Soil & Water Conservation Commission to develop and implement a program for granting JAA for state conservation programs.

Bryan Evans talked about the development of a training calendar that is organized by practice codes, and also tracks training completion certificates. There is a high demand for, and limited seats available for training provided by NRCS and gaining access to AgLearn can be difficult. The training calendar helps to publicize state and local training opportunities available throughout the state and make them easier for individuals who need training to access it.

Bryan also shared efforts to develop mutual aid agreements to allow for peer-to-peer training and mentorship. These agreements connect to JAA, disaster response, mentoring and peer-to-peer staff development.

David Williams, Deputy Director of the Division of Soil and Water Conservation with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, talked about implementation of NRCS’ Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program in North Carolina. The program had to be re-introduced to districts following recent disasters since many districts were unfamiliar with it. District employees are now enlisted to conduct post-disaster assessments. They were trained to do these assessments over six virtual sessions. Now, the state has over 80 trained district employees that can be deployed throughout the state. NRCS reimburses districts for completed reports and then approves/disapproves them. If approved, trained employees complete Damage Survey Reports (DSRs) to develop a scope of work and estimate costs for projects that is also reimbursed by NRCS.

North Carolina plans to put forth a resolution to NACD to ask that EWP funding be part of federal disaster relief (discretionary) funding.

Vernon shared photos from a recent flash flood event in western North Carolina. They are advocating for a program that will remove stream blockages and help repair streambeds, especially for areas where no infrastructure damage is involved. There is a need to remove debris from these streams so storms don’t exacerbate flooding.

**Tours and Cookout**

Participants visited the Buncombe Soil & Water Conservation District to view a rain garden project implemented with CCAP funding and took a bus tour of the [Biltmore Estate’s conservation practices and farm operations](https://www.biltmore.com/our-story/our-mission/environmental-stewardship/) that include the production of corn, soybeans, beef cattle and heritage breed hogs. Afterwards, participants gathered at a picnic shelter in Lake Julian Park for a cookout.

**Adjourn**

The meeting adjourned with an evening return to the hotel.