

# New York State Soil & Water Conservation Committee





# TABLE of CONTENTS

Introduction 3

About This Plan 4

Committee Members and Advisory Members 4

Mission, Vision, and Value Statements 5

Goal: Conservation District Operations, Technical Services, and Program Delivery 6

Goal: Comprehensive Natural Resources Management 9

Goal: Cooperative Conservation 12



Photo credits: Front cover, clockwise from top right: Rockland SWCD District Manager Nicole Laible examines water samples, Wyoming SWCD riparian buffer planting, Troy Bishopp of Madison SWCD at grazing workshop with SWCC regional coordinator Ryan Cunningham, Flora photo by Chastity Miller of Franklin SWCD, Cover crops field sign, Madison SWCD works with farms to plant cover crops. TOC, counterclockwise from top right: Rockland SWCD volunteers help secure the fyke net at Minisceongo Creek for the American eel project, A six row interseeder purchased by the Genesee River Watershed Coalition, Cortland SWCD District Manager Amanda Barber talking to Marathon Central School students about composting, Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) display at outreach events.

## Introduction

New York State Soil and Water Conservation Districts are recognized as local leaders on water quality, soil health, community and natural resource resiliency, green infrastructure, and other local natural resource concerns. A leading strength of the Districts is their flexibility in with whom they can work—unlike other governmental agencies, Districts have a long history working with private landowners. The Agricultural Environmental Management framework, developed by the State Committee in collaboration with Districts and under the leadership of the Department of Agriculture and Markets, capitalizes on this authority by utilizing a tiered approach to evaluate environmental conditions on individual farms. Participation in the [Agricultural Environmental Management](#) (AEM) program is voluntary, but those that choose to become involved are eligible to receive financial assistance through the [Agricultural Nonpoint Source Abatement and Control](#) (AgNPS) and [Climate Resilient Farming](#) (CRF) grant programs to develop conservation plans and implement conservation practice systems. Districts also have authority to work with private landowners on non-agricultural projects.

As urban centers and suburban sprawl expand, Districts have broadened to have expertise in stormwater management, stream degradation and repair, invasive species management, green infrastructure, and other fields to meet local needs. The [Emergency Stream Intervention Program](#), created by Delaware County Soil and Water Conservation District, trains local highway officials and others in how to respond to stream flooding events by recognizing unstable stream beds, prioritizing which to work on, and rebuilding effectively. More frequent high intensity storms have made this program, which has been replicated by Districts across the state, even more crucial.

The State Committee supports Districts through establishing policies to guide local programs, providing technical and administrative support for local programs, and administering the AEM, AgNPS, CRF, and [Ecosystems Based Management](#) (EBM) programs. The State Committee also serves as an information and idea network among member agencies and organizations and advises other government agencies on matters relating to soil and water conservation.

As climate change and land use pressures threaten New York State’s agricultural and natural resources, the roles of Conservation Districts and the State Committee have become even more essential. The State Committee’s historical role as a facilitator of information sharing allows it to continue to work with other state agencies to share expertise, resources, and access to advance cooperative conservation statewide. It is only with this cooperative approach that we will be able to effectively face the conservation challenges of the next five years and beyond. The New York State Soil & Water Conservation Committee operates as an agency of the State located within the Department of Agriculture & Markets. While the Committee functions under its own statutory charge, the fulltime staff members are employees of the Department’s Division of Land & Water Resources.

## History

Soil and Water Conservation Districts were established throughout the United States in response to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. The New York State Soil Conservation District Law, creating the State Soil Conservation Committee and authorizing counties to create local Soil Conservation Districts, was passed in 1940—and New York’s first Conservation District, in Schoharie County, was established just a few months thereafter. The role of the Conservation Districts expanded in the 1950s and 60s, as awareness of the importance of water quality grew. After the [Clean Water Act](#) was passed in 1972, increased demand

for services from the Districts led them to increase their capacity and add technical staff, as well as to change their names to Soil and Water Conservation Districts. District successes soon led counties to fully recognize their value and designate them as the lead local water quality agency. The State Committee responded as well, by hiring regional staff to better support local Districts and ensuring that Districts have the authority and the funding to work on non-point source (NPS) water quality management. The financial security of funding through the Environmental Trust Fund (now the Environmental Protection Fund), created in 1993, has allowed the State Committee and Districts to continue their operations successfully and to develop award-winning programs such as the Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) framework and the post-flood Emergency Stream Intervention program.

## About This Plan

The 2019 – 2023 Strategic Plan begins with recognition of the Committee members and stating the Committee’s mission, vision, and values. It then moves into the goals the Committee expects to achieve/advance.

Each of the three major areas (Conservation District Operations/Technical Services/Program Delivery, Comprehensive Natural Resource Management, and Cooperative Conservation) begins with a goal, and continues with objectives to meet those goals. The goals reflect an overarching, long-term vision for how the Committee and Districts can grow in that area. The goal is refined into an achievable framework through measurable objectives for the 2019 – 2023 planning horizon.

### State Committee Voting Members

The New York State Soil & Water Conservation Committee is led by five voting members appointed by the Governor who serve five-year terms:

- **Dale Stein** - Genesee County, Committee Chair, is the Representative-at-Large for Farm Interests
- **David Brass** - Jefferson County, Committee Vice-Chair, represents the New York State Grange
- **Erica Goodman** - Saratoga County is the Representative-at-Large for Urban, Suburban, and Rural Non-farm Interests
- **Darin Hickling** - Otsego County represents the New York Farm Bureau
- **Vacant**- New York Association of Conservation Districts

Representatives of nine organizations serve as advisory members:

- [NYS Department of Agriculture & Markets](#)
- [NYS Department of Environmental Conservation](#)
- [NYS Department of Health](#)
- [NYS Department of State](#)
- [USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) (NRCS)
- [Cornell Cooperative Extension](#)
- [College of Agriculture & Life Sciences at Cornell University](#) (CALS)
- [State University of New York College of Environmental Science & Forestry](#) (SUNY ESF)
- [New York State Conservation District Employees’ Association](#)

## **Mission Statement**

The mission of the New York State Soil and Water Conservation Committee is to advance comprehensive natural resources management through the support of local Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

## **Statement of Values**

- ❖ Comprehensive and science-based natural resource management on lands both public and private
- ❖ Cooperative partnerships to achieve natural resource conservation goals
- ❖ Local leadership and grass roots decision making as key to successfully managing natural resources
- ❖ A strong voluntary local delivery system provided through Conservation Districts
- ❖ Trust that exists among landowners, local officials, conservation partners and soil and water conservation district personnel
- ❖ Natural resource conservation within the context of a working landscape
- ❖ Leadership that unites federal, state and local initiatives that promotes natural resources management on a watershed scale
- ❖ A system that allows and fosters an ongoing opportunity for Districts to adapt to a changing landscape: environmental, technical, and political
- ❖ The environmental stewardship role of NY farmers and the benefits of well managed farms to local communities

## **Vision for the Future**

- ❖ District technical capacity is enhanced to effectively address local natural resource issues
- ❖ Conservation is locally led, science based, and natural resource driven
- ❖ Conservation District legislative authority, and funding fully addresses emerging conservation issues
- ❖ Community based land use planning considers natural resource impacts
- ❖ District operations are well managed and financially secure to effectively address local natural resource issues
- ❖ Public awareness of the District mission to protect and enhance natural resources is increased within their communities

## **Strategic Goal: Conservation District Operations, Technical Services and Program Delivery**

- SWCDs continuing to build and maintain highly qualified managerial, technical, and administrative staff. Conservation Districts with Boards of Directors that are leaders in their field, engage in strategic and annual planning, to direct effective conservation services.
- SWCDs continuing to fulfill comprehensive conservation services, including timely planning, practice implementation, evaluation, permitting, and other requirements for conservation work by maintaining highly qualified managerial, technical and administrative staff with necessary experience, knowledge, and demonstrated skills.

### ***Operations Objectives:***

- Advocate for increased funding of the State Aid to Districts and AEM Base Programs to facilitate District staff capacity to carry out priority natural resource programs
- Work with District Managers and Boards upon request to develop an employee compensation system commensurate with District resources, programs, commitments, and responsibilities
- Work with SUNY and other institutions of higher learning to promote SWCD careers. Work with career counselor offices and Department heads to provide information to students throughout their College education to prepare them for SWCD career paths
- Provide and facilitate training to District staff on managerial, technical and administrative topics
- Work with the [New York Association of Conservation Districts](#) (NYACD) and the [Conservation District Employees' Association](#) (CDEA) to assist District Directors to perform at a high level through training, mentoring, and leadership initiatives
- Demonstrate the benefits of comprehensive strategic planning through development and delivery of training modules and one-on-one interaction at board meetings to facilitate adaptive and effective strategic planning, and annual plans of operations
- Convene regular State Aid to Districts meetings to review current performance measures and make recommendations to modify, strengthen and determine importance to all statutory categories
- Actively assist Districts to consistently meet and exceed State Aid to Districts, Part C Performance Measures
- Continue to work with District staff and boards to review and provide feedback on operational elements and District Programs
- Hold regular Operations Subcommittee meetings to address operational related inquiries and matters
- Annually review and update the Districts' Operations manual through the Operations Subcommittee
- Provide direction to Districts in financial management and grant administration utilizing approved and appropriate accounting standards
- Develop and deliver a complete list of District Director training modules through in person interaction with Regional AEA
- Work with the NYCDEA on implementation of a management/leadership certification training program

- Recruit and maintain State Committee Staff with diverse managerial, technical, and administrative skills to assist Districts to achieve priority projects and programs
- Provide training and resources to support District staff to assist municipalities with conservation delivery and community/natural resource resiliency on a watershed scale
- Work with CDEA to offer opportunities for District mentoring and connection with other Districts that have skilled staff and successful programs
- Encourage Districts to assist in the establishment of inter-municipal agreements
- Increase Districts' ability to design and certify commonly used conservation practices while limiting exposure to liability and improving quality assurance throughout state funded programs
- Increase number of Districts with technical staff certified in applicable areas (e.g., CCA, CNMP, CPESC, JAA, CAA, NYSESCCP, and CPMSM certification, etc.)
- Expand Conservation Approval Authority (CAA) for Districts to achieve and maintain authorization to design and certify Conservation ("C") related best management practice systems for state grant purposes
- Facilitate relationship building and goal setting to assist District staff in obtaining Engineering and Ecological Science Job Approval Authority for NRCS conservation practices

## **Public Relations and Community Outreach**

### ***Objectives:***

- Release annual report of District accomplishments, as well as other outreach materials, on a timely basis
- Build public recognition of the roles and benefits of Districts in protecting local natural resources and addressing environmental concerns through articles, brochures, annual reports, etc....
- Build public recognition for the environmental stewardship role of NY farmers and the benefits of well managed farms to local communities
- Promote Districts' capacity to design, implement, evaluate, and maintain projects to municipalities and State
- Be responsive in assisting the public and other local units of government in providing conservation program information and local points of contact
- Assist publishing, promoting, and marketing District concepts and activities to the public on a state-wide scale
- Continue to work with DEC and Districts to showcase the DEC/SWCC/DAM MOU and cooperative agreements to State & Local municipalities, watershed organizations and the public

### ***Funding Objectives:***

- Continue to improve upon the current system for State Committee funding distribution and vouchering, by increasing efficiency in processing payments, contracts, and amendments
- Increase AEM Base Funding maximum amounts allowable for reimbursement in a given funding year to keep up with increasing agricultural conservation opportunities and challenges
- Provide for the expansion of practices eligible to be funded to support innovative, cost effective best management practices
- Seek increased funding of the EPF for all EPF line items where Districts are eligible applicants

## **Information Technology; Data Management, GIS, Modeling and Reporting**

### *Objectives:*

- Implement a comprehensive data management plan (enterprise type system) that allows for greater data security, quality controls, timely upgrades, and direct data entry. The plan will also ensure compatibility with other department IT projects, NYS DEC data management and reporting, and geographic information systems (GIS)
- Continue to grow State Committee and District capacity in geospatial data management and graphics generation
- Implement web-based system for inter-agency and intra-agency reporting including map sharing capability, data forms, and database information
- Provide timely and accurate conservation data to state, federal, and local governments for decision making purposes
- Create opportunities to collaborate with municipalities and other agencies/organizations on technology needs and solutions through resource sharing and sharing of expertise
- Increase District capabilities to assist municipalities and other agencies/organizations in collecting and analyzing natural resource data for land use planning decisions
- Continue to improve citizen access to non-sensitive conservation and agency information, primarily through document management and web-based document libraries, GIS Storyboards
- Provide Districts with the tools to track, report and evaluate program accomplishments by watershed and encourage Coalitions of Conservation Districts to coordinate efforts
- Establish timelines/benchmarks to create and carry out data management plan with department ITS staff
- Implement a regular form of data communication with Conservation Districts (reports, newsletter, etc.)
- Provide coalitions of Districts with data to enhance and implement their joint projects
- Maintain a statewide web-based GIS Storyboard on conservation accomplishments across the state
- Explore data analytics models to most effectively translate program data into decision-making information
- Track and report agricultural conservation and ecological services data
- Track, monitor, model, and report on conservation systems for water quality, climate change mitigation, adaptation and other environmental benefits
- Track and report on Conservation District collaborations with partners

## **Strategic Goal: Comprehensive Natural Resources Management**

The goal of the State Committee is to achieve a high level of environmental stewardship across all land uses and types through science-based comprehensive natural resources management.

### **Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM)**

#### *Objectives:*

- Continue to promote [advance] agricultural environmental management and protection efforts through grass roots, local decision making, and cooperative partnerships
- Increase investment in Soil Health Management: healthy soils rich in organic matter can increase crop yields, increase profits, increase water holding capacity, reduce flooding impacts, improve nutrient storage and cycling, decrease runoff, and sequester greenhouse gas emissions
- Increase investment in Riparian Forest Buffers: Riparian Forest Buffers are one of the most effective practices when it comes to improving and protecting water quality and are an important component in mitigating statewide water quality issues such as [Harmful Algal Blooms](#) (HABs) and nutrient pollution. When applied and maintained appropriately, forest buffers can effectively remove pesticides and nutrients, reduce sedimentation, and positively impact the aquatic ecosystem. Moreover, planting trees on available non-forest land removes carbon from the atmosphere and stores it in the new forest in turn helping the state meet climate change mitigation goals
- Seek new and/or strengthen existing partnerships and cooperation for AEM Framework development, continue to integrate the AEM Framework into State agriculture programs
- Provide direct training opportunities to SWCD employees through one-on-one and group training events to advance District capacity to develop sound and implementable AEM plans
- Increase investment in core and emerging, cost effective Best Management Practice (BMP) Systems to enhance all-natural resources and farm viability
- Increase District capacity to identify and address critical agricultural conservation issues
- Continue to expand the planning priority areas covered by AEM, for example (Stream Corridor, Forestry, etc.) to increase the SWCDs abilities to assist a diverse agricultural community
- Actively work with Districts to seek opportunities to implement agricultural conservation measures as identified in Harmful Algal Bloom plans
- Assist Conservation Districts in strengthening and implementing their AEM Strategies through local, regional, and statewide meetings, training events and workshops
- Enable Conservation Districts to receive full AEM reimbursement by identifying overlooked AEM opportunities, and informing them of new AEM eligible activities
- Establish a noncompetitive AEM Base cost-share program to increase implementation of AEM Tier 3 plans
- Actively support Conservation Districts through direct staff mentoring and written guidance as they implement the noncompetitive AEM Base cost-share program
- Increase state, local, and federal stakeholder understanding and buy-in on the value of a local AEM Strategy
- Effectively address critical issues related to the AEM Base, AgNPS, and CRF programs through efficient policy deliberation and execution
- Identify and support partnership research efforts that address BMP System effectiveness and advances new and innovative technologies

- Assist partners to provide information to farmers on present and projected climate change driven impacts
- Build upon state framework for research, development, and implementation of agricultural climate change adaptation strategies
- Continue to coordinate AEM Framework with existing and emerging academic and applied research to advance agricultural GHG mitigation/sequestration strategies
- Continue to coordinate AEM Framework with existing and emerging academic and applied research to advance agricultural climate change adaptation strategies
- Continue to build on framework to advance the implementation of agricultural BMP Systems to reduce and mitigate greenhouse gases (GHGs)
- Seek increases in funding for the Climate Resilient Farming Program to continue efforts to reduce agricultural greenhouse gases, sequester multisector emissions sources and advance on farm and community-wide resiliency measures
- Work with State and Federal Partners to explore ways to reduce energy consumption on farms through conservation efforts

## **Ecosystem-Based Management (EBM)**

### *Objectives:*

- Foster District understanding of the value of incorporating an EBM approach
- Increase Advisory members' recognition of the State Committee and Districts' role in EBM
- Continue to implement the successful EBM project model and share information with State Committee, Department of Agriculture and Markets and conservation partners
- Increase number of on the ground EBM projects to meet emerging and existing comprehensive natural resource management needs

## **Emergency Management and Community Resiliency**

### *Objectives:*

- Facilitate District partnerships with pertinent agencies and organizations to better coordinate emergency management planning, including resiliency planning, immediate response, and long-term recovery efforts
- Facilitate District cooperation and shared services during emergency management phases, including joint planning, response, and recovery efforts
- Educate state and federal emergency management agencies on the capacities and roles of the State Committee and Districts in supporting disaster assistance response
- Increase District capacity statewide to assist municipalities in post-flood emergency stream intervention protocols
- Provide training coordination and support to Districts on protection, recovery, and restoration of natural resources proactively and following extreme weather events (e.g. Post Flood Emergency Stream Intervention, soil health, NAACC Protocol, RRAMP, emergency conservation funding)
- Support Districts ability to work with Army Corp of Engineers (ACOE) and DEC to obtain emergency permit authorization. Support cooperation/collaboration between all parties for emergency permit authorization

- Continue to advocate for and secure additional State Aid to Districts to provide direct funding assistance to raise District capacity to address community resiliency and community emergency management

## **Stormwater Management**

### *Objectives:*

- Promote Districts' capacity to assist municipalities in meeting Stormwater Phase 2 permit requirements
- Facilitate District continued involvement in the 4-hour Erosion and Sediment training for contractors 2-hour Code Enforcement Officer training and other training modules as they are developed in conjunction with renewed/updated Stormwater permit requirements.
- Continue support for NYS Erosion & Sediment Control Certification Program
- Continue to support the CDEA to continue to advance the CDEA on-line version of the NYS DEC 4-hour course
- Coordinate funding and technical support to Districts to design, implement, evaluate, and maintain Green Infrastructure projects
- Facilitate opportunities for District involvement in existing state and federal programs that support installation of stormwater projects (e.g. State Aid to Districts, Water Quality Improvement Projects, Green Innovations Grant Program, (CRF, AgNPS, and AEM Base CS for upland water management)
- Maintain SWCC staff professional certifications in Erosion Control and Stormwater Management to continue assistance to Districts with Stormwater Training, project review, tech assistance, District staff technical development

## **Watershed Management**

### *Objectives:*

- Support District involvement with, and leadership in watershed management.
- Work with partners and Districts to promote District development of watershed management plans and programs to assist municipalities and county governments with local priorities.
- Continue promotion and support for watershed-based coalitions of Conservation Districts
- Increase partner agency support for implementation of completed watershed management plans
- Promote Intermunicipal Agreements for District led watershed management services
- Restore and maintain biodiversity and terrestrial/aquatic ecosystems on a watershed scale
- Promote the implementation, establishment and maintenance of conservation buffers on a watershed
- Promote the protection/construction of wetlands in the landscape for flood attenuation, maintaining surface water flow, aquifer and groundwater recharge, water quality improvement, carbon sequestration, and biological productivity
- Promote District involvement in invasive species management and control to promote watershed health
- Determine feasibility of working with Districts to develop "sub-watershed" coalitions of Districts within larger basins. This will allow the SWCC to target resources through a coordinated and comprehensive approach (e.g. Eastern Finger Lakes Cover Crop Project collaboration, Genesee River Basin Coalition)

- Increase established and supported Coalitions access to funding and technical support to improve watershed management on a basin level
- Support District involvement in source water protection planning and implementation projects

## **Strategic Goal: Cooperative Conservation**

**Cooperative partnerships are established and/or reinforced to advance common natural resources conservation goals and support of Conservation District program delivery.**

### ***Objectives:***

- Increase recognition by partner entities of Conservation Districts as the link to landowners, municipalities, watershed groups, and local communities
- Enhance partnerships with federal, state, and local agencies, and other organizations to expand financial resources for conservation implementation, including regional engineering assistance
- Support the goals and objectives of the New York State implementation of the [Safe Drinking Water Act](#) (SDWA) through interagency coordination and local initiatives led by Conservation Districts to protect public drinking water supplies
- Support the goals and objectives of the New York State Nonpoint Source Management Program through interagency coordination and local initiatives led by Conservation Districts to enhance consistency with the Clean Water Act Section 319 requirements and related Section 319 guidelines
- Support the goals and objectives of the NYS Methane Reduction Plan (May 2017) through interagency coordination, local initiatives led by Conservation Districts, and the Climate Resilient Farming grant program
- Support the goals and objectives of the [US Climate Alliance](#) to reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- Review and revise if necessary existing MOUs with Federal and State partners to identify agency roles and responsibilities to enhance program coordination
- Provide opportunities for Advisory Members to engage in a broad spectrum of natural resource issues and policies at monthly State Committee meetings and through engagement in sub-committee meetings and special project advancement
- Broaden the membership and role of the State Committee Technical Advisory Committee to provide for a forum to exchange information, and advice to Voting Members for policy and program development
- Identify opportunities for new and expanding State Committee partnerships
- Proactively identify opportunities for District involvement in existing or proposed state and federal programs
- Review 4-Way Partnership MOU to redefine roles, and responsibilities
- Hold quarterly 4-Way Partnership meetings
- Utilize partners to apprise Districts on emerging issues, technologies, and opportunities

## **GLOSSARY OF TERMS**

AEA – Associate Environmental Analyst

AEM – Agricultural Environmental Management

AgNPS - Agricultural Nonpoint Source Abatement and Control

BMP – Best Management Practice

CAA – Conservation Approval Authority

CCA – Certified Crop Advisor

CRF – Climate Resilient Farming

CNMP – Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan

CPMSM – Certified Professional in Municipal Stormwater Management

CWA – Clean Water Act

EBM – Ecosystem Based Management

EPF – Environmental Protection Fund

HABs – Harmful Algal Blooms

JAA – NRCS Job Approval Authority

NYACD – New York Association of Conservation Districts

NYCDEA – New York Conservation District Employees’ Association

NRCS- United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service

NYCPESC – New York Certified Professional in Erosion and Sediment Control Certification Program

SWCD – Soil and Water Conservation District

SDWA – Safe Drinking Water Act