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Holding Soil and Water: The How and Why of Soil Conservation Districts

South Dakota State University Cooperative Extension

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THE HOW & WHY OF SOIL CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

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THIS BOOK DOES NOT CIRCULATE.
1. What Is a Soil Conservation District?

A soil conservation district is a legal subdivision of the state, given the authority to prepare programs, plans, and procedures for cooperative action in conserving the soil and water resources of the area and promote proper land use.

2. What Are the Purposes of a Conservation District?

The purposes are to provide for the conservation of soil and soil resources and for the control and prevention of soil erosion; to preserve natural resources; control floods; preserve wildlife; protect the tax base and public lands; and promote the health, safety, and general welfare of the people of the state.

3. What Are the Functions of a District?

A district provides assistance to individual farmers and ranchers in planning and executing a conservation program. This assistance is based upon a soil and erosion survey and upon principles of proper land use. The types of assistance provided by the district are determined by the amount and kinds of assistance available and the individual needs and desires of cooperating farmers.

4. How Is a Soil Conservation District Organized?

A district is organized by following certain legal procedures outlined in the South Dakota Soil Conservation District Law. Petitions are submitted to the State Soil Conservation Committee who hold a hearing to determine if there is need for the district’s creation. If they determine favorably, a referendum is held in which two-thirds of the land area must be represented in the vote and two-thirds of the ballots cast must be favorable if the district is to be established. Supervisors are then selected to administer the district program.

Clearfield-Keyapaha District: Good Land Improperly Used.
5. **Who Are Members of the State Committee?**

The State Soil Conservation Committee, according to state law, consists of the Director of Extension, Director of the Experiment Station, Commissioner of School and Public Lands, and Director of the Rural Credit Department, with the State Coordinator of the Soil Conservation Service acting in an advisory capacity.

6. **What Are Their Duties and Powers?**

The State Committee hold hearings, referendums, and elections, offer assistance to district supervisors, keep the supervisors informed of the activities and experience of all other districts, obtain assistance from federal, state, and local agencies for districts, and encourage the formation of new districts. They have no authority to determine the activities of districts after they are established. All such authority is vested in the local district supervisors.

7. **Who Are the District Supervisors?**

Supervisors are local farmers and ranchers who become the governing body of the district. Two of them are appointed by the State Committee and three are elected by the land occupiers in the district. Supervisor terms are for three years, with the exception of the two first appointed whose terms are only for one year's duration. A supervisor receives no compensation but is entitled to expenses, provided funds are available.

8. **Do the Supervisors Have Any Taxing Powers?**

No. District supervisors have no authority to levy taxes, issue bonds, or incur indebtedness. Districts are not established to increase tax loads but to protect the tax base, which is the land.
9. **What General Procedures Do Supervisors Follow?**

District supervisors prepare a program which states their problems and objectives and then work out a plan of operation which lists the procedures they plan to follow in order to accomplish these objectives. They request help from private sources or local, state, or federal agencies who are able to assist them. When this assistance is obtained they sign voluntary cooperative agreements with local farmers who desire conservation plans on their farms. The program will advance only as fast as local people desire.

10. **What Assistance Is Available to Supervisors?**

The types of assistance depend on the conservation problems in the area; the amount of assistance is dependent on the availability of resources from the cooperating agencies. The districts in operation in the state have obtained skilled help to assist in technical operations and surveys and some equipment, planting materials, CCC and WPA labor.

11. **What Help May Groups Planning a District Obtain?**

The County Extension agent and the State Extension Service will be glad to explain the district organization procedures and to aid local groups in determining whether or not the district set-up offers a solution to existing problems.

12. **How Large or Small Should a District Be?**

There are no regulations governing the size of districts. Districts now organized vary from 80,000 to 500,000 acres in size. Districts should not be too large in the beginning, thereby enabling a sound educational program to precede all operation phases.
13. How May Additional Territory Be Added to a District?
The state law makes it relatively easy for additional areas to be added to existing districts. By petition and referendum new territory may be included at any time. Some districts have already more than doubled in size and others have added territory two or three times.

14. Do Districts Interfere With Land Use Planning?
No. On the contrary, the data gathered and the problems analyzed by the community and county planning committees may lead to the organization of a district as one of the action phases of the program. Districts have been organized and enlarged in counties doing intensive land use planning, and the planning committees have taken the lead in the organization.

15. How May a District Be Discontinued?
After three years, any 25 land owners may petition that the operations of the district be terminated and the existence of the district discontinued. A referendum is held and if a majority of land owners voting are in favor of discontinuance, the affairs of the district are terminated.

16. Is Everyone in the District Required to Cooperate?
No. No one is required to cooperate with the supervisors. Cooperation is accomplished only by voluntary action of the land occupiers. Land use regulations, however, may be adopted to govern the use of lands within the districts in the interest of conserving soil and preventing and controlling soil erosion.
17. How Are Land Use Regulations Enacted?
They are enacted by a two-thirds majority of votes cast, such vote to represent at least two-thirds of the land area of the district. Even after a land use regulation receives the majority approval the supervisors may withhold putting it into effect. The law also provides for a board of adjustment to safeguard the rights of the individual to the fullest possible extent.

18. Have Any Land Use Regulations Been Proposed?
No. District supervisors are conducting a voluntary program to conserve soil and moisture. Their resources have been pushed to the limit in an attempt to keep up to the number of applications received. No land use regulations have even been proposed in the first three years of district operation in South Dakota.

Copies may be obtained by writing to Ross D. Davies, Secretary, State Soil Conservation Committee, Brookings, S. D., or by requesting them from your local County Extension Agent.

20. How May an Individual in a District Obtain Help?
By making application to the supervisors he may obtain technical help for assisting in the development of a conservation plan for his farm which may include contour farming, water spreading, tree planting, dam construction, or whatever practices he and the district supervisors agree are best suited to the farm. He may also have the use of equipment, material, or labor which the supervisors have at their disposal.
21. What Are the Provisions of a Typical Agreement?

The average cooperative agreement between a farmer and the district supervisors lists what is to be done, where it will be done, when it will be accomplished, and who is to do it. These agreements may be amended at any time to include new conservation measures or to change their provisions.

22. What Is the Cost to the Individual Operator?

The cost is based on the amount of conservation work the individual intends to do and the amount of assistance the supervisors are able to give him. These figures are all computed in advance so that each cooperator knows the cost before he signs any agreement. Some farms may need little or no assistance.

23. Do Individuals Sign Governmental Agreements?

No. The supervisors, as the governing body of the district, sign an agreement with the cooperating farmer or rancher. No agreements are signed between the cooperator and any governmental agency. Cooperating agencies make their resources available to the supervisors with one general agreement.

24. How Many Districts Are There in South Dakota?

At the time this bulletin was written, there were 10 soil conservation districts in South Dakota. Additional areas are conducting preliminary steps toward the eventual organization of conservation districts. The map on the back cover shows the size and location of existing districts as well as the areas where preliminary district activities are underway.

Brule-Buffalo District: Plenty of Water for Livestock.