

NEW YORK STATE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION COMMITTEE





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Introduction

Today, 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. It was, however, not always so. 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.

Perhaps the biggest strength of the Districts is their flexibility in with whom they are able to work—unlike other governmental agencies, Districts have a long history working with private landowners. The Agricultural Environmental Management framework, built by the State Committee in collaboration with Districts and 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 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 grant program 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 have grown, 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 and AgNPS programs. The State Committee also serves as an information and idea exchange 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 agriculture and natural resources, the roles of Conservation Districts and the State Committee 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.

About This Plan:

This document reflects the strategic plan of the State Committee for 2014 – 2018. It begins with recognition of the Committee members and stating the Committee’s mission, vision, and values. It then moves into the goals the Committee hopes to achieve. Each of the four major areas (Conservation District Operations, Technical Services and Program Delivery, Comprehensive Natural Resource Management, and Cooperative Conservation) begins with a target and a goal, and continues with objectives and metrics. The target reflects an overarching, long-term vision for how the Committee and Districts can grow in that area. The goal refines that vision into an achievable framework for 2014 – 2018. The objectives break that goal down into its components, and the metrics provide a means of measuring progress on the objectives.

State Committee Voting Members

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

- **George Proios** of Suffolk County, Committee Chair, represents Urban, Suburban, and Rural Non-farm Interests
- **Dale Stein** of Genesee County, Committee Vice-Chair, is the Representative-at-Large for Farm Interests
- **Chuck Colby** of Monroe County represents the New York Association of Conservation Districts
- **John Dickinson** of Washington County represents the New York Farm Bureau
- **David Brass** of Jefferson County, represents the New York State Grange

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
- Cornell Cooperative Extension
- College of Agriculture & Life Sciences at Cornell University
- State University of New York College of Environmental Science & Forestry
- New York State Conservation District Employees' Association

The 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.

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.

(Adopted by State Committee – September 2013)

Statement of Values

The core values that are inherent in all State Committee activities are:

- ◆ 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

It is the Vision of the State Committee that:

- ◆ 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 technical capacity is enhanced to effectively address local natural resource issues
- ◆ 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

Target: Effective, functioning Soil and Water Conservation Districts serving the public through conservation program delivery that addresses natural resource issues.

Goal: Soil and Water Conservation Districts are able to build and maintain an infrastructure of qualified technical and administrative staff. Conservation Districts have Boards of Directors that are leaders in their field, engage in strategic and annual planning, and provide effective conservation services.

Objectives:

- Provide direction to Districts in improving financial management and grant administration utilizing approved and appropriate accounting standards
- Provide District staffs with access to training on technical and administrative issues
- Work with partners to assist District Directors to perform at a high level through training, mentoring, and leadership initiatives
- Encourage Districts to have current, high quality, comprehensive strategic plans and annual plans of work
- Provide assistance to raise District capability to consistently meet goals for State Aid to Districts, Part C Performance Measures
- Continue to work with District staff and boards to review and provide feedback on operational elements
- Initiate an operations sub-committee to address operational related inquiries and matters
- Advocate for increased State Aid to Districts to provide consistent and ample resources to recruit and retain staff to carry out priority natural resource programs

Metrics:

- Develop and fully implement the Development of District Director Training Program
- Track and establish benchmarks for the number of District Director Training Opportunities offered
- Increase percentage of Districts meeting Part C Performance Measure goals over 2013 levels
- Implement NYCDEA management/leadership certification training program
- Operations manual for Districts updated regularly
- Decrease ratio of Districts to full time AEA staff
- District staff/Director turnover reduced
- Annual internal/OSC audits completed and reduction in audit findings

Strategic Goal: Technical Services and Program Delivery

Target: District technical capacity is enhanced to effectively address local natural resource issues.

Goal: Soil and Water Conservation Districts fulfill comprehensive conservation services, including timely planning, practice implementation, evaluation, permitting, and other requirements for conservation work by maintaining highly qualified technical and administrative staff with necessary experience, knowledge, and demonstrated skills.

Technical Expertise and Training:

Objectives:

- Continue to build on the diverse technical proficiencies of State Committee Staff
- Utilize State Committee Advisory Members' expertise to strengthen State Committee support to Districts to diversify conservation assistance
- Provide training and resources to support District staff to assist municipalities with conservation delivery and community/natural resource resiliency on a watershed scale
- Provide funding to implement the Conservation Technical Assistance Program (CTAP) curriculum to build District competency in the fields of agricultural conservation, stormwater, stream management, and emergency services
- Provide opportunities for District mentoring and connection with other Districts that have skilled staff and successful programs
- Encourage Districts to assist in the establishment of intermunicipal agreements
- Increase Districts' ability to design and certify commonly used on-farm practices while limiting exposure to liability and improving quality assurance throughout state funded programs

Metrics:

- Develop and implement training courses for the Conservation Technical Assistance Program (CTAP) Curriculum
- Increase number of training opportunities to meet workforce needs over 2013 levels
- Increase number of Districts with technical staff certified in applicable areas (e.g., CCA, CNMP, CPESC, JAA, etc.)
- Develop a protocol for Districts to achieve and maintain authorization to design and certify Conservation ("C") related best management practice systems for state grant purposes
- All State Committee Staff develop, maintain, and implement training plans

Public Relations and Community Outreach

Objectives:

- Build public recognition of the roles and benefits of Districts in protecting local natural resources and addressing environmental concerns
- Build public recognition for the environmental stewardship role of NY farmers and the benefits of well managed farms to local communities
- Support public outreach to municipalities and highway departments to demonstrate the benefits of efficient and sustainable emergency response
- 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

Metrics:

- Release annual report of District accomplishments, as well as other outreach materials, on a timely basis

Funding

Objectives:

- Continue to improve upon the current system for State Committee funding distribution and vouchering, including connecting accountability to performance
- Continue to advocate and secure additional State Aid to Districts to provide direct funding assistance for the development and implementation of local conservation assistance programming
- Provide enhanced state resources to support District conservation efforts to assist communities to be more resilient to extreme weather events
- Seek supplementary funding to cost-share agricultural BMP Systems to mitigate GHG emissions while continuing to protect water quality
- Increase AEM Base Funding maximum amounts allowable for reimbursement in a given funding year
- Provide for the expansion of practices eligible to be funded to support innovative, cost effective best management practices

Metrics:

- Steady or increased funding for:
 - ◇ EPF Total
 - ◇ AgNPS funding, including addressing all emerging agricultural needs, including but not limited to Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) permit requirements, agronomic, field based soil health management practice systems, and on-farm food processing waste management
 - ◇ District Reimbursements (Parts A, B, and C)
 - ◇ All EPF line items where Districts are eligible applicants
- Develop and implement scale/policy for evaluating funding increases for AEM Base

Information Technology:

Objectives:

- Implement a comprehensive data management plan (enterprise type system) that allows for greater data security, quality controls, timely upgrades, and online data entry. The plan will also ensure compatibility with other department IT projects, the NYS Grants Portal, 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 leadership capabilities to assist municipalities and other agencies/organizations in collecting and analyzing natural resource data for land use planning decisions
- Develop a comprehensive information technology system to track AEM accomplishments and prioritize agricultural conservation efforts
- Continue to improve citizen access to non-sensitive conservation and agency information, primarily through document management and web-based document libraries
- Provide Districts with the tools to track, report and evaluate program accomplishments by watershed and encourage Coalitions of Conservation Districts to coordinate efforts

Metrics:

- 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
- Establish a statewide web-based map service on conservation accomplishments across the state
- Track and report agricultural conservation and ecological services data
- Track and report on Conservation District collaborations

Strategic Goal: Comprehensive Natural Resources Management

Target: Achieve environmental stewardship through science-based comprehensive natural resources management.

Goal: Strengthen Conservation District capabilities to address critical environmental protection needs by effectively assisting landowners, municipalities, and county residents with conservation practice system implementation.

Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM)

Objectives:

- Achieve reduction in water pollution originating from working lands through grass roots, local decision making and cooperative partnerships
- Promote farmer 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
- Strengthen partnership communications and cooperation for AEM Framework development, incorporate the AEM Framework into State agriculture programs
- Promote core and emerging, cost effective Best Management Practice (BMP) Systems to enhance all natural resources and farm viability
- Outline a Statewide Agricultural Conservation Plan that considers the current status and projections of agriculture, and addresses the state's future goals and objectives for agricultural conservation in the state
- Strengthen District capacity to identify and address critical agricultural conservation issues
- Assist Conservation Districts in strengthening and implementing their AEM Strategies
- Enable Conservation Districts to receive full AEM reimbursement by identifying overlooked AEM opportunities, and informing them of new AEM eligible activities
- Increase state, local, and federal stakeholder understanding and buy-in on the value of a local AEM Strategy
- Prioritize farm BMP Systems based on conservation planning that integrates environmental risk, watershed needs, farm business objectives and cost effectiveness
- Streamline AEM Base and AgNPS programs to reduce administrative requirements and enhance project implementation effectiveness
- 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
- Coordinate AEM Framework with existing academic and applied research to advance agricultural GHG mitigation strategies
- Establish a framework to advance the implementation of agricultural BMP Systems to reduce and mitigate greenhouse gases (GHGs)
- Determine feasibility of amending AgNPS Statute to add consideration for agricultural GHG mitigation along with water quality conservation practice systems
- Work with State and Federal Partners to explore ways to reduce energy consumption on farms through conservation efforts
- Effectively address critical issues related to the AEM Base and AgNPS Program through efficient policy deliberation and execution

Metrics:

- Delisting of waterbodies currently on the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) 303D listing where agriculture is a source of impairment
- Lessening severity of known impacted waterbodies on DEC Waterbody Inventory/Priority Waterbodies List (PWL) where agriculture is a source of pollution
- Reconvene partnership and Advisory Member AEM “Steering” Committee meetings to coordinate agricultural conservation objectives
- Increase number of AgNPS projects leveraged with other federal and local funding sources
- Work within the context of the NYS Grants Gateway and other contract requirements to reduce voucher payment processing time and reduce Districts’ administrative encumbrance
- Districts have current, high quality AEM Strategic Plans to guide AEM Base Annual Action Plans and AgNPS Proposals
- AEM Tier 2 Worksheets developed to assess agricultural contribution to greenhouse gas emissions and mitigation
- AgNPS Program funding is expanded to include consideration of greenhouse gas reduction/mitigation opportunities
 - ◇ Funding is made available for cover/flare retrofits of existing anaerobic agricultural waste storage systems
 - ◇ Funding is made available for covers and flares for new agricultural waste storage systems
- Outreach efforts targeted at NYS Farmers are increased to raise awareness of current and projected climate change impacts and adaptation scenarios
- Adaptation strategies that do not exacerbate emissions are supported through AEM Framework
- State Committee and Districts are involved when NYSERDA, Ag&Mkts., DEC, NRCS, and other partners invest funds to assist farmers in climate change mitigation and adaptation

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

Metrics:

- Continue to implement the Sandy Creeks EBM model and share information with EBM Council
- Increase number of EBM presentations and status reports at State Committee meetings throughout the year
- State Committee provides tools to Districts to enhance their capacity to gather, analyze, and evaluate local natural resource information
- The EBM Council regularly meets and the State Committee is in attendance
- Increase number of on the ground EBM projects

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 roles in providing conservation emergency management services to local municipalities
- 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 following extreme weather events (e.g. Post Flood Emergency Stream Intervention, soil health, emergency conservation funding)
- Continue to advocate and secure additional State Aid to Districts to provide direct funding assistance to raise District capacity to address community resiliency and emergency management

Metrics:

- District Aid is increased to build District capacity to plan for and respond to natural disasters
- Number of Emergency Stream Intervention training events held locally or regionally increase over 2013 levels
- Increased number of Highway Superintendents and other flood responders trained in Emergency Stream Intervention Statewide each year
- Districts are incorporated in the county emergency operations centers for natural disasters
- Tools are developed for District use to help plan for and assess damages from natural disasters
- State Committee networks and communications are enhanced to provide Districts with useful and timely information
- Establishment of a statewide MOU for Districts to consolidate and share services for emergency management and response
- State Committee and Districts are involved when NYSERDA, Ag&Mkts., DEC, NRCS, and other partners invest funds to assist communities in climate change mitigation and adaptation

Stormwater Management

Objectives:

- Promote Districts' capacity to assist municipalities in meeting Stormwater Phase 2 requirements
- Facilitate District continued involvement in the 4-hour Erosion and Sediment training for contractor
- 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)

Metrics:

- Regularly convene Municipal Subcommittee to coordinate District efforts and needs related to Phase 2 Stormwater implementation
- Regularly meet with DEC, Environmental Facilities Corporation (EFC) and partners to facilitate District participation
- District Aid is increased to build District capacity to plan, implement, and maintain Green Infrastructure projects
- Increased number of Green Infrastructure projects led by Districts, and increased number of Districts involved in Green Infrastructure projects, each year

Watershed Management**Objectives:**

- Work with partners and Districts to promote District involvement with, and leadership in, developing 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 and maintenance of conservation buffers on a watershed scale consistent with the NYS Open Space Plan
- 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
- Well established and supported Coalitions have access to funding and technical support to improve watershed management on a basin level

Metrics:

- Increased number of Watershed Management Plans prepared with District involvement
- DOS Waterfront Revitalization Program legislation is amended to include Districts as an eligible applicant for Watershed Management Planning; funding for development and implementation of the plans stays constant or is increased
- District Law is amended codifying District's authority to address invasive species management
- District Aid is increased to build District capacity to address biodiversity and invasive species management
- Increased number of riparian buffer miles created
- Increased acres of wetlands protected, restored, or constructed

Strategic Goal: Cooperative Conservation

Target: Cooperative partnerships are established and/or upheld to achieve mutual natural resources conservation goals and support Conservation District program delivery.

Goal: The State Committee will create and strengthen relationships with state, local, and federal agencies, and non-governmental organizations, to involve Conservation Districts in achieving statewide conservation goals.

Objectives:

- Increase recognition by partner entities of Conservation Districts as the local link to landowners, municipalities, and the general local public
- Improve coordination with partners including a discussion of roles and State Committee strategic priorities in relation to the missions of other partner organizations
- Enhance partnerships with federal, state, and local agencies, and other organizations to expand available resources for natural resource conservation
- 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
- Establish and maintain State and Federal partnerships to advance conservation initiatives
- Establish AEM MOU with Federal and State partners to identify agency roles and responsibilities and 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
- Encourage communication between Advisory Members and the agencies that they represent
- 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
- Utilize partners to apprise Districts on emerging issues, technologies, and opportunities
- Engage economic development councils to make conservation a part of economic development
- Districts are recognized as a lead local environmental agency; municipalities seek their assistance with local projects

Metrics:

- State Committee Advisory Members' attendance, involvement and interaction at monthly meetings is increased
- Existing partnerships are strengthened by renewed MOUs and new partnerships are established and codified by new MOUs
- Increased number of residents, landowners, and municipalities requesting to partner/work with the District
- Number of projects and collaborative work completed with partner organizations and agencies as informed
- Successful District programs and activities highlighted at State Committee meetings
- Increased communication between State Committee representatives and their respective Principal Advisory Members
- Develop outreach and education tools specifically for state public officials in both the Executive and Legislative branches of Government