



Communications Update

Budget / Legislative Materials



Conservation Equity and Engagement

Funding is needed to 1) conduct an equity assessment of the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) and set actionable priorities for our Conservation Equity and Engagement Plan, and 2) launch a grant program to fund conservation district efforts to better serve under-represented and under-resourced communities. This will open opportunities for all Washingtonians to inform our work, engage with our services, and access benefits of voluntary conservation.

Funding requested: \$500,000

Why this request can't wait

- ▶ The SCC has a commitment and statutory duty to provide equitable opportunities for people to engage with our services and the services of conservation districts, but barriers remain for some communities.
- ▶ Our budget doesn't support crucial steps to make our services and culture significantly more inclusive and contribute to the governor's priority of tackling inequities in our state.
- ▶ Our DEI Working Group aims to procure an equity assessment of the SCC to inform our Conservation Equity and Engagement Plan and help us prioritize actions to better serve and represent all Washingtonians, but we need funding for this expertise.
- ▶ Local communities could immediately benefit from a new grant program that would help conservation districts launch or expand DEI efforts, such as promoting food equity, supporting BIPOC farmers, or improving accessibility for persons with disabilities — but this depends on funding.

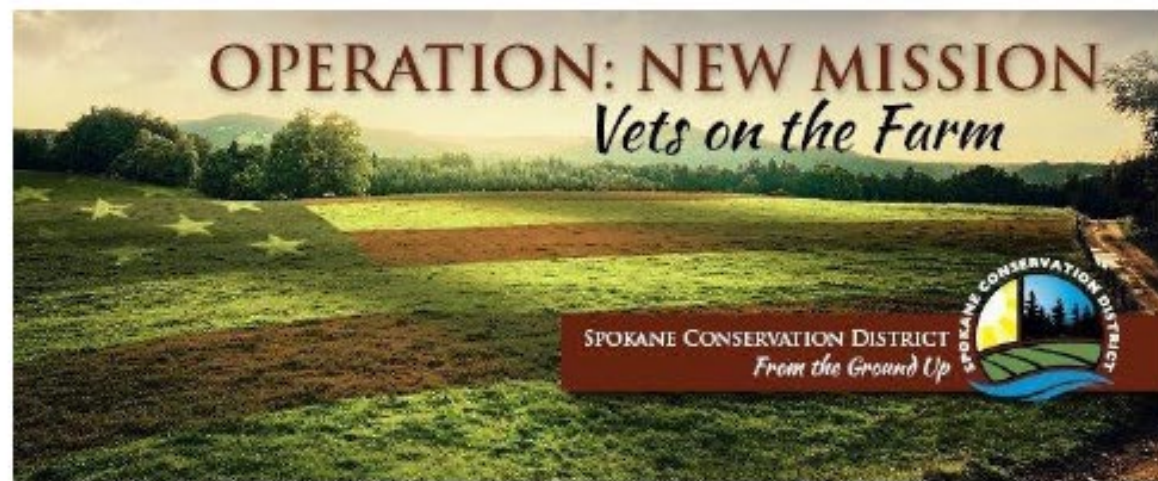
How will the SCC equity assessment influence our future work and mission?



What type of efforts could conservation districts launch or expand through the new grant program?



Efforts to deepen cultural competence. For example, Pierce Conservation District launched a Cultural Ambassadors program that enables them to work with leaders within communities they want to connect with to inform their program development.



Veteran-focused programs. For example, Spokane Conservation District runs Vets on the Farm that provides resources and opportunities to assist veterans who seek to transition back into civilian life through careers in agriculture and/or conservation.



Relationship-building with under-resourced communities and/or language translation. For example, Cascadia Conservation District developed bilingual education and outreach services as part of their Urban Agriculture Program.

Farmland Protection and Land Access

This request will keep high-quality agricultural land in production and facilitate land access to historically underrepresented farmers and ranchers. Farmland Protection and Land Access (FPLA) will enable conservation entities to purchase agricultural conservation easements on land secured through the Washington State Housing Finance Commission's new Farmland Protection and Affordability Investment Program (FarmPAI).

Funding requested: \$2,000,000

Why this request can't wait


- ▶ New farmland affordability tools, like FPLA, are necessary to increase agricultural land access and opportunity in Washington.
- ▶ Washington farmland is at risk. USDA Census of Agriculture data shows we lost 640,000 acres of farmland between 2002 and 2017.
- ▶ The bulk of Washington farmers are at or near retirement age. More than 70 percent of our retiring farmers have not identified a successor.
- ▶ Cost of land is the #1 barrier for young, beginning, and multi-generational farmers in starting or expanding their businesses.
- ▶ COVID-19 market trends are dramatically increasing the cost of farmland; some areas report increases of 20-50 percent year over year. High land prices limit farm business expansion and prevent the creation of new farm businesses.
- ▶ With FPLA, the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) – Office of Farmland Preservation will fill a gap in a multi-partner effort to conserve farmland and maintain the diversity of producers and products we need for a resilient food system.

How will partners work together to promote farmland preservation and access, and where does FPLA fit in the process?



What makes FPLA an important piece of Washington's farmland preservation strategy?


- ▶ **It's timely:** FPLA will maintain an open/rolling application process. Projects that come through FarmPAI may apply to FPLA at any time, rather than waiting for a set application period.
- ▶ **It's efficient:** The program will act swiftly to get successful easement applications under contract within a matter of months, allowing partners to preserve farmland that's at immediate risk of development.
- ▶ **It's accessible:** FPLA won't require matching funds to secure an easement. Removing this potential financial barrier makes preserving and purchasing farmland more obtainable.
- ▶ **It's flexible:** The program will accept and value easement applications for farms of all sizes, including small farms that are more typical around urban areas where there's limited open acreage.
- ▶ **It's equitable:** Once the easement is purchased and the farm is ready to sell at its agricultural value, priority will be given to buyers who represent historically underserved and/or first-time farmers and ranchers.



Pierce County lost a 70-acre farm to development because there wasn't a timely, efficient, and accessible strategy available to protect it.

Washington Farmland Trust tried to preserve the farm, but they were unable to respond opportunistically. They were constrained by public grant timelines and couldn't compete with offers from developers.

The farm was sold to a developer who constructed 16 homes on the property, forever losing prime agricultural land and wildlife habitat.



FPLA has the flexibility required to meet the needs of underserved farmers.

Existing easement programs prioritize large blocks of commercial farmland. Washington Farmland Trust has heard from underserved/beginning farmers who depend on smaller peri-urban farms, but those farms aren't competitive in existing easement programs and often are unaffordable without the financing/affordability tools the FarmPAI/FPLA process will offer.

Sustainable Farms and Fields

Funding is needed for the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) to launch the new Sustainable Farms and Fields grant program, which empowers farmers to help mitigate the detrimental impacts of climate change that affect us all. Conservation districts and other local public entities will offer expertise and financial incentives to farmers, ranchers, and shellfish growers to support the adoption of climate-smart farming practices.

Funding requested: \$2,000,000

Why this request can't wait

- ▶ Washington's agricultural producers are struggling with the impacts of climate change. There are farming practices that can help mitigate this threat by storing carbon and reducing CO²-equivalent emissions, but some farmers face barriers that prevent them from taking or expanding these actions.
- ▶ The new Sustainable Farms and Fields (SFF) grant program was created in 2020 to help farmers overcome barriers by providing expertise and financial incentives that support adoption of climate-smart farming practices.
- ▶ Despite the urgency of climate change, the grant program remains unfunded. Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic uncertainty, the SCC didn't submit a 21-23 budget request to fund SFF.
- ▶ SFF-eligible practices not only help mitigate climate change, but they also increase farmers' resiliency to current stressors such as drought, provide environmental co-benefits, and increase long-term economic viability.

What makes Sustainable Farms and Fields a climate-smart farming solution that works for Washington?



Climate Resiliency

It incentivizes climate-smart farming practices that increase carbon sequestration (e.g., cover cropping, low till/no-till) and/or reduce greenhouse gas emissions (e.g., compost storage, efficient manure application).



Agricultural Viability

Climate-smart practices provide co-benefits for farm operations, including improved soil health, resilience to hazardous weather events, and cost savings from reducing things like fuel or fertilizer use.



Economic Vitality

SFF is suitable for small and medium-sized farms and may help them be more competitive in the carbon market. It also offers assistance that may help support first-time, low-income, and minority farmers.

Examples of SFF-eligible farming practices:



Purchasing seed for and planting cover crops



Practicing low/no-tillage and direct seeding



Storing compost and manure in covered facilities



Adopting precision agriculture (e.g., tractor GPS navigation)



Planting native trees and shrubs

Proposal for Conservation District Election Reform

The Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) and Washington Association of Conservation Districts (WACD) propose a package of reforms to the conservation district (CD) election process. After a thorough and collaborative exploration of potential election improvements, this proposal represents the best option to meet the needs of CDs and the communities and natural resources they serve.



Background: CD elections and what makes them different

- ▶ By statute, CDs conduct elections to fill volunteer positions on their boards outside the general elections process.
- ▶ Part of the reason for this is related to cost. Unlike most special purpose districts, CDs don't have taxing authority. This limits their funding for everything from carrying out their statutory duties to covering election costs.
- ▶ Another unique feature of CDs is they are subject to state oversight, which is provided by the SCC.
- ▶ As part of their oversight role, the SCC sets the CD election process, monitors election administration, and verifies/certifies election results.
- ▶ As with any process, changes may be needed over time. The SCC reviews procedures after each election cycle to assess opportunities for improvement.

Why change the CD election process?



INCREASE VOTER TURNOUT

Participation in CD elections typically is low. We want more people to have a say in CD leadership.



IMPROVE ACCOUNTABILITY

Many are unaware of CDs' locally led structure. This limits community feedback to elected supervisors.



EMPOWER LOCAL FLEXIBILITY

The one-size-fits-all approach to elections isn't meeting the needs of all CDs and their communities.

Three-part proposal for CD election reforms

Goal: Increase participation in and access to CD elections without causing unintended impacts to communities and CDs' statutory role.

PROPOSAL 1/3: TERMS AND ELECTION SCHEDULE

- ▶ Extend the CD supervisor term to four years.
- ▶ For the three elected supervisor positions, hold elections every other year during even years.
- ▶ For the two appointed supervisor positions, make appointments every other year during odd years.

Why?

- ▶ **Cost savings.** Changing the term from three to four years and holding elections every other year (rather than the current every year schedule) reduces election administration costs.
- ▶ **Capacity for outreach.** With elections held less often, CDs will have more capacity to double-down on local outreach during election years to engage more participation.
- ▶ **Normalizing terms of service.** Supervisor terms will be consistent with many other local and state elected officials.

PROPOSAL 2/3: SCC ELECTION PROCESS

- ▶ CDs host elections during one "Conservation Month" designated by the SCC. SCC will run statewide campaign to promote CDs/ election opportunities leading up to and during this month.
- ▶ CDs increase local elections outreach.

Why?

- ▶ **Statewide promotion.** With elections held within one month, rather than the current three-month period, the SCC will run an efficient "Conservation Month" marketing campaign to promote CD elections.
- ▶ **Inclusive outreach.** SCC will take steps to reach diverse and underserved communities as part of the elections marketing strategy.
- ▶ **Engagement with conservation.** Elections marketing will include messaging about CD services and encourage people to take part in conservation.

PROPOSAL 3/3: GENERAL ELECTION OPTION

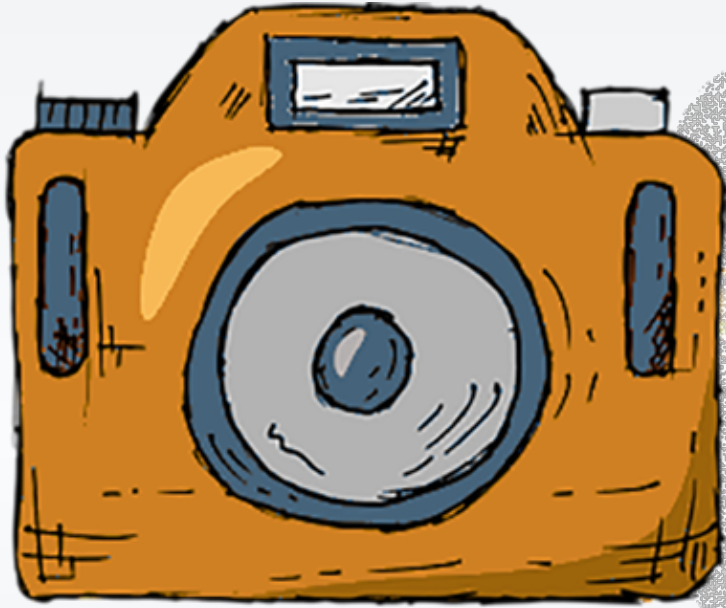
- ▶ By a majority vote of a CD board, any CD may choose to go on the general election rather than follow the SCC election process.

Why?

- ▶ **Flexibility to weigh impacts of election costs.** Districts will evaluate whether they can afford general election costs or if the expense could result in communities losing access to the conservation services they're statutorily required to provide.
- ▶ **Voter participation.** Districts that can afford general election expenses will see more ballots cast in their CD supervisor elections.



Communications, Partnership, and Outreach (CPO) Committee



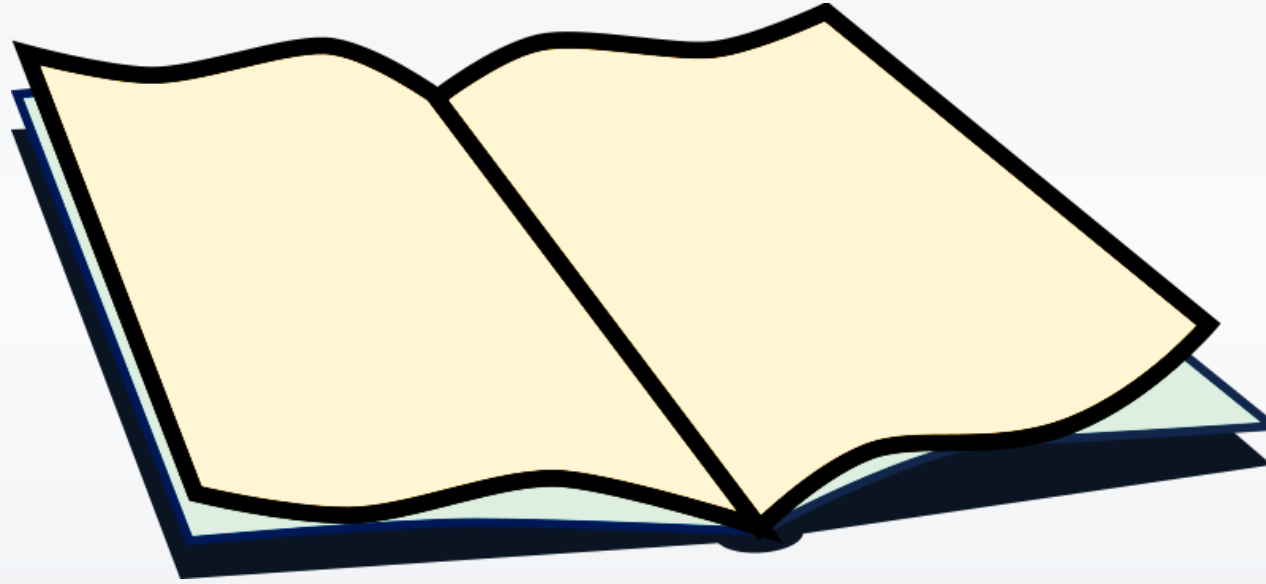
8th Annual

Conservation
District

Photo Contest

Sponsored by the Communications, Partnership, and Outreach (CPO) Committee

Conservation Catalog



in partnership with the Center for
Technical Development



Networking

- Chance to “meet”
- Show-and-tell
- Partner updates (e.g., WNPS)



Other updates...



Sixth video featuring CD work in
partnership with

washington
grow  wn



6,168 subscribers | 12.5K views/mo



70K followers | 3K-10K views/video

Over half of online viewers age 25-44

New “Outreach and Engagement Manager” joining team Jan.3!



Priorities include:

- VSP communication/engagement strategy
- Sustainable Farms and Fields communication/engagement strategy
- Inclusive outreach strategies
- Agency social media presence



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CONSERVATION DISTRICTS
OF WASHINGTON STATE

your window to healthy lands