



**White River
Natural
Resources
Conservation
District**

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White River NRCD 2024-2025 Approved Policy Positions*

***Positions approved by a vote of the White River NRCD Board of Supervisors at the 2024 Annual Meeting**
Meeting Minutes: <https://www.whiterivernrcd.org/2024-12-20-board-meeting-annual-meeting>

Farm Bill Request

Request to Congress: Fund Conservation Districts Through the Farm Bill

Since the 1930s, conservation districts have been the backbone of locally-led conservation efforts, created to address critical natural resource challenges and implement federal conservation programs. Despite their nearly century-long service, the federal government has never directly invested in this vital, decentralized, national infrastructure for democratic decision making.

There exist about 3,000 conservation districts across the country. **We respectfully request that Congress allocate \$100,000 annually to each conservation district nationwide in the new Farm Bill.** This modest investment would enable districts to fulfill their federally mandated responsibilities, improve government efficiency, and enhance environmental outcomes.

Why Fund Conservation Districts Now?

1. A Long-Standing, Unfunded Infrastructure:

- Conservation districts were created in the 1930s during the Dust Bowl era to address soil erosion and water management. For nearly 90 years, they have implemented federal conservation priorities without dedicated federal funding, relying instead on inconsistent state and local resources.
- The result is a patchwork of underfunded districts struggling to fulfill their mandated roles in administering programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), ensuring compliance with Highly Erodible Land and Wetland Conservation provisions, and approving Conservation Plans.

2. Recognized in Federal Law but Never Funded:

- Though they are state-level bodies, Conservation districts are specifically referenced in the Food Security Act of 1985 for their role in conservation



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planning and compliance for Highly Erodible Lands and Wetlands, as well as in administering programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

- The Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) highlights the critical role districts play in delivering technical assistance, developing conservation plans, and facilitating compliance with federal guidelines.
- Federal guidance mandates that districts lead local working groups, which bring together community stakeholders to ensure conservation programs address locally identified resource concerns. These efforts are integral to the locally-led conservation process, ensuring programs are effective and responsive to community needs.

3. Improving Government Efficiency:

- Conservation districts streamline federal conservation efforts by serving as a single, trusted point of contact for landowners, reducing the need for redundant federal staff and administrative oversight.
- Adequately funding districts allows them to lead on-the-ground implementation, ensuring programs are tailored to local needs and delivered effectively.

4. Enhanced Environmental Outcomes:

- Districts' local expertise enables them to design conservation strategies that directly address community challenges, improving soil health, water quality, and habitat restoration.
- This tailored approach ensures federal conservation dollars achieve maximum environmental impact, avoiding the inefficiencies of one-size-fits-all solutions.

5. Cost Savings Through Decentralization:

- Funding conservation districts would reduce the federal administrative burden by empowering a decentralized, locally-led system that is already in place.
- This investment will save taxpayer dollars over time by focusing resources on actionable conservation work rather than unnecessary bureaucratic layers.

The Proposal: We urge Congress to include \$100,000 per year for each conservation district in the new Farm Bill, for a total annual line item of about \$300,000,000, an estimated 0.3% of the average annual Farm Bill expenditures. This funding will:



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- Empower districts to meet their federal mandates, including leading the locally-led conservation process and ensuring program compliance.
- Strengthen community engagement through local working groups, fostering trust and collaboration between federal agencies, landowners, and stakeholders.
- Ensure districts have the staff and resources needed to implement federal conservation priorities effectively and equitably.

Conclusion

For nearly a century, conservation districts have served as the nation's decentralized, democratic conservation infrastructure without direct federal investment. Funding these districts through the Farm Bill is a necessary step to modernize and strengthen their capacity to address today's resource challenges. This modest annual allocation of \$100,000 per district will reduce redundancies, improve government efficiency, and deliver better environmental outcomes while honoring the locally-led conservation model that has been the foundation of American conservation since the 1930s. We respectfully request that Congress prioritize this funding in the new Farm Bill to ensure the continued success of this essential infrastructure.

Vermont State Request

Update the Vermont Soil Conservation Act (Title 10, Chapter 31)

Recommendation 1: Remove mortgage restriction language 10 V.S.A. § 723(5)

Context: VT is the only state in the country with language prohibiting mortgages on real estate property for conservation districts. This restriction severely limits our options for acquiring land or office space.

Recommendation 2: Update composition of the NRCC 10 V.S.A. § 703

Context: Fix outdated Agency names, specifically:

- "Chair of the State Forests and Parks Board" should be updated to: "Commissioner of the Forest, Parks, and Recreation Department"
- "Chair of the State Fish and Wildlife Board" should be updated to: "Commissioner of the Fish and Wildlife Department"
- "Director of the State Planning Office" should be removed and potentially replaced with another statewide planning organization, such as VHCB.



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Recommendation 3: Change “Landowner” language back to “Land Occupier” or “Resident”
10 V.S.A. § 719, § 723(4), § 723(6)

Context: Current language restricts voting rights and services to “landowners”. **This is likely unconstitutional.** According to our database, only 7 states in the U.S. require landownership for voting in Conservation District elections: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Vermont. Guam and Missouri use the term landowner but also allow for alternatives.

Increase Appropriations to the Conservation Districts

We are requesting the Natural Resources Conservation Council’s base budget be increased from \$360,000 to **\$3,000,000 in the VAAFMs FY26 budget** to support ongoing operations of Vermont’s 14 Conservation Districts and our statewide council, the NRCC, which is referred to as an Agency of the State in our enabling statute. This increase in funding would allow NRCC to hire critical staff and host a website, and would allow the 14 individual Conservation Districts to be able to sustain and expand access to our state and federal legislatively mandated core services, conduct meaningful ongoing community engagement, respond to emergent needs and disasters, and leverage millions of dollars of federal funds into Vermont.