

Chapter 12: Developing Long and Short-Range Plans for Your SWCD

Sec. 1 Benefits of Planning

The importance of planning for a Soil and Water Conservation District cannot be overemphasized. Much depends on it, including funding, staffing, assistance from conservation partners and supporters. This is not to mention the District simply having a clear vision of its own priorities, goals and programs.

Even though a business, or long-range, plan is vital to the long-term success on any proactive SWCD, many District Supervisors and staff delay or totally avoid the completion of a formal written document. Many Districts state that needed county, state and federal funding sources change too quickly for planning, or they don't have enough time for a plan, or they have always gotten by without serious planning in the past and see no need for it now.

But the truth is that SWCDs that successfully set aside time for long- and short-term program planning function better at addressing their local needs than Districts that repeatedly allow their programs and activities to be driven by outside programs or chance. As builders often say, "measure twice and cut once, or measure once and cut twice". In other words, if your District doesn't take the time to carefully examine its needs, goals and activities, it will most likely waste limited staff, funding and other resources attempting to move itself forward.

Sec. 2 "Locally-Led" Prioritization of Resource Needs

The need for local leadership in natural resources management was one of the most important factors leading to the establishment of Indiana conservation districts. Conservation districts were created as the local focal point for coordinating and delivering technical assistance, funding, and information to private land managers and policy makers. Over the years federal, state, and local governments have channeled assistance through conservation districts to address virtually every aspect of natural resource conservation. Districts have focused on setting priorities and carrying out programs based on local needs and conditions.

Conservation districts play the lead role in the "locally-led" conservation process. (*Note: this is a separate process than the annual Local Working Group NRCS program ranking process.*) The locally-led process, which is resource driven rather than program driven, is used to guide and coordinate federal, state, and local conservation efforts.

Locally-led conservation involves a sequence of steps that involve the entire community in both planning and implementation. These steps include:

- Reaching out to the public and bringing diverse local stakeholders together
- Using a conservation needs assessment to analyze local needs and concerns
- Setting local priorities based on public input and needs assessment
- Identifying program resources available to address local needs and priorities

- Developing and implementing a district plan (i.e. business plan); and
- Reviewing and updating needs, goals, actions and accomplishments

Public Outreach

One of the most important steps in the locally-led conservation process is to solicit input from organizations and individuals familiar with local resource needs and conditions. Local stakeholders are a critical link in assessing the local resource concerns. Recent outreach efforts in Indiana have involved setting up public meetings to garner community input, establishing ongoing advisory committees, conducting surveys, and holding focus group meetings. The goal of such outreach efforts is to enable local constituents to identify natural resource issues that affect them.

Conservation Needs Assessment

The conservation needs assessment is another critical element of the locally-led conservation process. Based on public input from interested parties, an assessment provides comprehensive evaluation of the districts resource base. The overall condition of the resource base then becomes the platform for making decisions about local priorities and policies.

A comprehensive assessment will provide an analysis of broad conservation goals and specific natural resource concerns. The assessment serves as the basis for selecting the type and extent of needed conservation systems and practices and may be utilized for making recommendations for funding priorities, priority watershed areas and appropriate conservation programs.

Steps for carrying out local conservation needs assessment include:

- Identify specific concerns and existing conditions and trends for each natural resource in your district.
- Analyze conservation needs and priorities.
- Prioritize natural resource concerns.
- Identify geographic areas and potential priority areas.

Once a soil and water conservation district has completed their locally-led process, they are very well prepared to begin the construction of a business, or long-range, plan to address the most critical natural resource concerns needing assistance within their county.

Sec. 3 Business Plan (Long Range Plan)

Purpose of a Business Plan

The purpose of a business plan is to identify opportunities for the conservation and development of natural resources within the district. A plan's function is to serve as a practical guide for planning and accomplishing district work with its cooperators and associated agencies.

A carefully prepared plan states the district's mission, priority resource concerns, three-to-five-year goals (statements of intent) and annual action plan to work toward achieving the goals. A

business plan can lead to responsible use of land, water, and related resources for the district's benefit by listing what needs to be done, how to do it, and when it should be accomplished.

The plan should be completed at a facilitated meeting specially set aside to carefully examine the District's needs, programs and resources. Often multiple meetings might be needed to allow the facilitator and staff time to refine key parts of the business plan, as well as to give those participating in the plan a chance to reflect on additional items that might benefit the plan itself. If at all possible, business plan development should not be conducted at a monthly Board meeting, as items discussed at such meetings may inadvertently drive the plan more than they would if a separate time be used to complete the planning process. When correctly developed, the business plan serves as the district's long range plan and lays out specific actions for the coming year that become the annual plan of work.

It is suggested that a business plan on these objectives for a three-to-five-year period is a realistic time period within which to accomplish district goals (statements of intent) due to the frequently changing effects of such items as funding sources, supporting agency restructurings, and the availability of materials, volunteers, time, and other factors needed for successful programs. Developed statements of intent, or goals, should be arranged so that those which are most critical are given priority.

The key components of a SWCD successful business plan include:

- District Definition, Function, Audience and Mission
- Critical Natural Resource Issues & Geographical Areas
- Statements of Intent (Goals)
- Priority Actions
- Staffing and Annual Budget Needs
- Key Individuals (Partners)

Serving Your Local Clientele

This portion of the plan is essential to setting the overall framing for the eventual business plan. By setting the District's self-defined function, audience and mission, the supervisors and staff are helping to focus the District's efforts in the direction which might be most appropriate for both the District's audience(s) and its strengths and resources.

In most counties in Indiana an appropriate mix of agricultural and urban interests are represented in the function, audience and mission of the Districts. The key is to identify goals and actions for each audience to focus upon for the development of its activities and programs.

Critical Natural Resource Issues & Geographical Areas

Once the overall direction of the District has been established, it is time to begin focusing on which critical natural resource issues will be addressed over the next 5 year timeframe. Although a District may identify many issues in need of being addressed, it is usually suggested that roughly the 5 most critical issues be focused upon with any business plan.

Although numerous natural resource issues may (and often are) present in any given county, District supervisors and staff should try to limit themselves to a few top concerns which will lead to more effectively developed programs. It is better to successfully solve problems in a few areas and tackle additional issues in future years, than to try to solve all problems in the county and actually succeed with none.

Identifying a District's most critical resource issues can be done in several ways, with a facilitated session such as the locally-led process (see above Section 2 "Locally-Led Prioritization of Resource Needs") being the most successful. The District should narrow down the number of concerns it will be addressing, and then prioritize the concerns to insure that, should resources become available, the most critical issues can be addressed first.

Other non-facilitated ways to identify resource issues may be through mailed or emailed questionnaires, on-line surveys, "coffee shop" polls by supervisors and staff, surveys distributed at the Annual Meeting, or simple prioritizations at a monthly SWCD meeting. The most important step is that the District has carefully chosen which issues will be addressed by the current business plan.

For some issues, the identification as to where a natural resource concern might be located may need to be discussed. Geographical areas for key watersheds (Issues: soil erosion, water quality, animal waste), municipalities (Issues: urban erosion, land use, farmland preservation) or areas of special natural resource features (Issues: forestry, wildlife, endangered species, invasive species) might need to be chosen to begin tackling the overall natural resource concern in a more manageable manner.

Statements of Intent (Goals)

After key concerns and related areas have been identified, statements of intent, or goals, for each concern need to be set by the District can be accomplished within the next three to five years. Any given natural resource concern may have several statements of intent as the issue is addressed from several different technical approaches. Each statement of intent should include 1) what issue is being addressed, 2) a date or timeframe in which to accomplish the goal, and 3) a measurable outcome for the issue. By setting specific dates and measurable levels for accomplishing the goal, the District is more likely to tackle the problem rather than avoid beginning projects that relate to the goal.

An example of a statement of intent for addressing the natural resource concern of soil erosion might appear as: By October 2027 the adoption of no-till crop systems to address soil erosion will increase by 10% from current transect survey levels.

Priority Actions

After statements of intent are completed for each natural resource concern, individual actions steps can then be identified. Annual actions steps incorporated into the plan have the ultimate goal of contributing towards the accomplishment of one or more of the identified statements of intent, and are often activities or programs that a District may already be doing for the community.

To insure that identified action steps are done by the SWCD, all action steps are usually assigned a person (“who”) and a completion date (“when”) within one year.

Action steps are assigned to a “who” to insure that someone, either a supervisor, committee, staff member, partnering agency, or entire Board, is responsible for the completion of the needed action. A “when” is assigned to insure that the person(s) in charge of the activity complete the action in the established timeframe within the year. A portion of a sample business plan addressing the natural resource concern of “soil erosion” through the “increased adoption of no-till crop systems” might appear as follows:

Resources Concerns-Soil Erosion

Statement of Intent- By October 2027 the adoption of no-till crop systems to address soil erosion will increase by 10% from current Transect survey levels. **PRIORITY ACTIONS (SAMPLE):**

<u>Issue/What/Action Step/How</u>	<u>Who</u>	<u>When</u>
Purchase no-till drill for rental to farmers interested in no-till systems.	SWCD	January 2025
Conduct farmer survey to discover reasons why farmers use no-till.	SWCD & SWCD Intern	February 2023
Fund SWCD No-Till Coordinator position with EPA 319 funds	SWCD	March 2024
Host SWCD No-Till Field Day, especially focusing on topics identified by farmer survey.	SWCD, CES, NRCS & ISDA	August 2024
Include no-till articles from Indiana CCSI coordinator in local SWCD newsletter.	SWCD District Coordinator	October 2024
Fund cost-share program for farmers to purchase no-till equipment.	SWCD	Nov. 2023
Conduct winter no-till seminar based on needs identified by farmer survey.	SWCD, CES, NRCS & ISDA	Dec. 2025

Staffing and Annual Budget Needs

Based on the specific statements of intent and priority actions developed in the plan, the District will need to identify staff and budget needs in addition to those that currently exist. Although adequate SWCD technical, educational or administrative staff may exist to deliver proposed District programs, most Districts with limited staff and/or intentions for more aggressive future programs may want to explore additional staff to meet their predicted needs. Demonstrating these needs through the business plan, where long-range (three-five-year) statements of intent highlight how your SWCD will deal with identified concerns, will help increase chances for funding for your District's program.

Key Individuals

Once the business plan is developed, the District should also identify to whom it should be distributed and in what manner. As a minimum, local, state and federal agencies and public officials should be made aware of the Districts goals and proposed programs so that they might better understand what is being addressed and how they might assist the district. Note that some district prefer to produce a special publication (excerpt) or attractive page on their website from the business plan for public distribution that contains only the district's mission statement, priority resources concerns and the district's statements of intent for addressing each of them. The popular version often includes some good conservation pictures and includes some information on recent accomplishments, etc. of the district. When this is done the full-blown business plan still is keep in tack as well to serve as the district's internal plan document.

For those agencies or groups that are key to completing specific parts of the business plan, the SWCD should invite these groups or individuals to a monthly SWCD meeting to discuss common goals and interests share by them and the District, as well as to better explain the District's need for their assistance. This may include groups such as county commissioners and councilmen, city mayors, town council, county health department, solid waste management district, county surveyor, county highway department, MS4s, Farm Bureau, Quail Unlimited, invasive species groups and others, as well as traditional partner agencies such as Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, Indiana State Department of Agriculture, Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service and Indiana Association of SWCDs.

For other agencies or individuals who might assist the District but that might not be as crucial for proposed programs, or to simply inform others of current programs, simply distributing a copy of the business plan for their review might be adequate.

The key is to present the goals and programs of the District in a thorough, professional manner to insure long-term interest in you ability to address common priorities with these groups, should their assistance be needed in the future.

Types of Business and Long-Range Plans

In general, there are several types of plans a District may follow. The type discussed in the above section of this chapter was developed by the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) for use by local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and is the system used by

District Support Specialists that assist districts in developing business plans. Other business plan examples used in Indiana Districts may be variations of this design with goals and actions derived from active SWCD committees. Other plans may use a template used by supporting agencies such as Purdue Cooperative Extension Service, private consultants, and other equally acceptable sources.

The important thing to remember is: 1) that the plan should reflect the SWCD’s natural resource concerns, goals and annual actions to work toward addressing them and 2) that those goals, actions, programs and activities will only be accomplished if the SWCD makes the items in its business plan a top priority on a yearly and monthly basis.

Sec. 4 Developing an Annual Plan from Your Business Plan

Once the SWCD business plan is completed, the District’s annual plan of work should be come directly from this document. The business plan’s annual action steps should be the content for the district’s annual plan of work, and should help the District decide which programs are truly needed for the upcoming year’s events and programs.

The annual plan which comes from the annual action steps outlined in the business plan outlines the steps to be taken in the current year to accomplish the goals of the district’s business plan. Each year the annual action steps in the business plan need to be updated to the next year and become that year’s plan of work. Some routine items that must be done each year such as preparing the annual budget can be added to the annual plan of work but avoid putting too many routine items in the plan of work. These can instead be placed on the monthly meeting agenda. Rather, include key programs, projects or activities for the next calendar year that will help get your District closer to its business plan goals. In general, the annual plan of work emphasizes what to do, how to do it, who should do it, and when it should be done.

Remember, this is the plan of the district—not of another agency. Therefore, responsibility for its completion rests with the supervisors with the help of district staff. The plans of cooperating agencies should complement district work during the coming year. The district annual plan of work, once developed, enables partners to formulate their own annual plans and properly plan for assistance to the district. It helps the cooperating partners set priorities for their work within the district and provides an administrative guide to the district and to their assisting agencies.

When completed, the portion of a sample 2023 Annual Plan dedicated to increasing the adoption of no-till systems to control soil erosion might look as follows:

2023 ANNUAL PLAN (SAMPLE ACTION STEPS):

Issue	Action Step	Who	When
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Soil Erosion

No-Till Adoption

Purchase no-till drill for rental to farmers interested in no-till systems.	SWCD	January 16
Conduct farmer survey to discover reasons why farmers use no-till.	SWCD & SWCD Intern	February 7
Fund SWCD No-Till Coordinator position with EPA 319 funds	SWCD	March 6
Host SWCD No-Till Field Day, especially focusing on topics farmer survey.	SWCD, CES, NRCS & ISDA	August 19 identified by
Include no-till articles from CCSI coordinator in local SWCD newsletter.	SWCD	October 1
Fund no-till cost-share program for farmers	SWCD	November 1
Conduct winter no-till seminar based on needs identified by farmer survey.	SWCD, CES NRCS & ISDA	December 6

Note: action steps for an annual plan should come directly from the business plan

Sec. 5 Utilizing Annual Plans to Develop Monthly Meeting Agendas

Once the District's resource needs, goals, programs and actions have been established and long- and short-term plans developed, these programs and actions need to be regularly brought forward and completed or reviewed at monthly SWCD meetings. Without a serious attempt to review identified actions on a monthly basis, the entire business plan and annual plan of work might be forgotten for a time where it is never addressed by those needing to work on it, and it may eventually be abandoned completely.

Annual plans are useful in identifying key actions during a given year that contribute to the accomplishment of the District's long-term goals and priorities. To be most easily reviewed on a regular basis, appropriate actions and events need to be brought before the entire District Board on a monthly basis. The entire business plan should also be reviewed at least annually to be sure the goals are still feasible and to update the annual action steps toward achieving them which become the key content for the next year's plan of work.

When using the annual plan for developing a monthly agenda, begin by reviewing the annual plan and selecting all actions listed under the month of the meeting, as well as the items listed for the following 2-3 months. The items planned for completion during that months meeting should have been completed by the assigned supervisor(s), committee, or staff and discussions should revolve around activity.

Activities listed for the upcoming 2-3 months are more to remind responsible individuals about the need to actively address these items, as well as to get SWCD comments on the activities as

they begin. In most cases the majority of the meeting should focus on these planned activities as they represent the true planned activities of the SWCD.

Another option for the SWCD chairman and staff is to simply include a small portion of the annual plan into each meeting’s agenda. This not only saves time from having to review the entire plan each month, but helps the Board and staff better see that these actions are part of their monthly responsibilities as well. Frequently Districts will feature a designated grid or other area to highlight those action steps that are part of their business plan or from the annual plan of work if a separate annual plan document has been prepared by pulling the annual action steps from the business plan into a separate annual plan of work document. If incorporated correctly, the actions, responsibilities, and dates indicated will not only give direction to the monthly Board meeting, but to the priorities of the respective SWCD committees and staff as well. Keep in mind that a separate annual plan of work is not necessary if a district prefers to take the annual action items directly from its business plan and insert them in by date into the monthly board meeting agendas. A Board meeting agenda driven by the SWCD’s business plan’s annual action steps might appear as follows:

**Hoosier County Soil & Water Conservation District
 USDA Service Center Office, Boilerville, IN
 Monday, January 9, 2023; 7:00 PM EST**

- Open Meeting
- Introductions
- Minutes of Previous Meeting
- Financial Report

BUSINESS PLAN PRIORITY ACTIONS:

<u>What</u>	<u>How</u>	<u>Who</u>	<u>When</u>
<u>January</u>			
Forestry	Seek forestry award recipient	Forestry Com.	Jan. 5
Soil	Purchase no-till drill for rental to farmers interested in no-till systems.	SWCD	Jan. 6
Water	Promote Clean Water Indiana to State legislators	SWCD	Jan. 16
<u>February</u>			
Water	Complete quarterly newsletter	SWCD Staff	Feb. 1
Soil	Conduct farmer survey to discover reasons why farmers use no-till. SWCD	SWCD & Intern	Feb. 7
Land Use	Meet with County Planning Commission	SWCD	Feb. 20

March

Soil	Fund SWCD No-Till Coordinator position with EPA 319 funds	SWCD	Mar. 6
Wildlife	Encourage habitat programs through newspaper articles	Wildlife Com	Mar. 10
Water	Complete SWCD Leveraging Sheet and visit County officials about budget needs	SWCD and Staff	Mar. 30

Monthly Business:

SWCD Programs and Projects

Grant Programs:

Forest Stewardship

Watershed Plan – Trail Blazer Creek T

Livestock Management

Clean Water Indiana

Field Event – March 17

BC Steering Committee – March 28

Release cost share applications- April 1

Urban/Rule 5 – Sycamore Subdivision

Board Supervisor Reports

IASWCD Regional Training - Comments

Invasive Species Committee Meeting- Update

District Employee Reports

Cooperating Agency Reports

NRCS

ISDA

IDNR – Fish & Wildlife

Purdue Extension

Approval of claims

Public Comments – Limited to 5 minutes each

The Hoosier County Soil and Water Conservation District promotes the vital benefits of protecting and preserving our natural resources – especially soil and water – to all citizens of Hoosier County.