

Executive Summary

In recent years, several issues have converged that affect the operations and effectiveness of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). These issues include tighter county budgets that often reduce county funding for SWCD staffing and operations, declining state cigarette tax revenues which fund Clean Water Indiana grants to SWCDs, and rising costs for districts to function.

The State Soil Conservation Board (SSCB), in its August 2011 meeting, discussed these trends and in an effort to be proactive in addressing them, established a task force to look into these challenges and recommend conservation delivery options. In October 2011, a draft charter tasked the group with summarizing the experiences of other Midwestern States regarding SWCD consolidation/cooperation/delivery models. The group also was to develop a set of recommendations for the SSCB to consider for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of conservation districts and the ICP in delivering conservation programs locally.

With the Bicentennial of Indiana Statehood approaching in 2016, the task force took seriously the forward-looking aspect of its assignment and came together as the “Conservation Beyond 2016 Task Force” on December 11, 2011. The group’s members are listed on page 7 of this report and include representatives of every member of the Indiana Conservation Partnership (ICP). The task force also met on January 23, February 27, March 26, April 30, May 29, and June 25, 2012. It concluded with a meeting by conference call on July 23 to finalize discussion of the report, prior to presenting it to the SSCB in August. Ray Ledgerwood, of Board Works by Ledgerwood, helped plan and facilitate the working sessions of the task force.

The task force understands that any recommendations that could affect the traditional operation of SWCDs will engender great feelings of uncertainty from SWCD supervisors and staff, and will require much analysis before changes are considered. The task force also understands that doing nothing to address the on-going trends and concerns is not in the best interest of districts and their future.

The task force worked to garner input from SWCD supervisors and employees through a statewide survey asking for specific suggestions on what the SWCD, the SSCB and the ICP could do to increase SWCD operating efficiency, as well as its impact on conserving soil, water and related natural resources. Additionally, face-to-face input was gathered at five regional training meetings in March 2012 from SWCD supervisors and employees. The results of the survey and the face-to-face input were utilized by the task force along with a large amount of background data on local, state, and federal funding levels, workload, staffing and technical capacity for program delivery, and leadership training participation. These datasets are represented in the form of maps, which are included in the Appendix of this report. The datasets presented on the state maps are further defined and discussed in the report.

Ray Ledgerwood, the facilitator for the task force, obtained a wealth of information from the experiences of other states in terms of conservation district structure, impact on service delivery, effectiveness, and efficiencies in conservation program delivery. The summaries of the information gathered from these other states start on page 14 of this report.

The task force developed a set of draft criteria for analyzing recommendations or options. The group attempted to look at options and how they accomplished the following:

1. Maximize local delivery of conservation implementation
2. Address natural resource priorities
3. Create opportunity for every district to have access to proven conservation leadership and managerial/ capacity building staff
4. Utilize/optimize staff skills and talents
5. Be flexible/adaptable to meet future needs
6. Done by choice or need without losing county identification
7. Meet land user needs
8. Will not hinder effective districts
9. Optimize cost effectiveness
10. Expand support for conservation by extending support beyond perceived customer base
11. Be realistic and financially feasible into the future
12. Create the right enabling conditions for effective conservation program implementation

The difficulty in crafting options that would fully meet all criteria and/or satisfy all parties became evident early in the process. None the less, the option of doing nothing does not fulfill the SSCB's statutory responsibility to provide advice and counsel to SWCDs or its desire to be proactive in developing options for the future of SWCDs in Indiana.

The task force proposes three potential options for consideration by the SSCB, soil and water conservation districts, and ultimately, the Indiana Conservation Partnership (ICP) membership. Each option poses both advantages and disadvantages, and some may involve legislative changes in the enabling laws to bring about any change.

The three options are presented in the report in greater detail; this summary notes what they are:

A. Collaboration and Sharing of Resources.

This option could include the sharing of staff between two or more districts to better utilize the skills of existing staff as well as broaden the expertise available to the collaborating districts. It likely would include increased use of Cooperative Agreements among districts, partner organizations and agencies. Some Clean Water Indiana (CWI) funding would likely be used as an incentive for collaboration and sharing of resources. This option could include matching state and federal funding and staffing resources based on resource concerns. Workload, workforce and budget meetings at the district level could be followed up by wider (multi-district), collaborative area meetings. This option could include the SSCB rewarding districts' performance, efficiencies, and collaboration strategies. Legislation changes could be introduced to streamline the process to allow for locally-driven consolidation and joint operating options.

B. Indiana Conservation Partnership Planning and Collaboration on a Watershed Basis

This option would organize many aspects of partnership planning on a watershed basis and could include some state and federal funding driven by watershed plans. It could include development of an ideal model for how SWCDs could voluntarily work together and include incentives to move to that model. Planning on a watershed level would provide a framework for districts to work together, provide opportunities for sharing staff among districts based on prioritized resource concerns and garner strong partnership support. Participation by districts in this model for planning and implementation of conservation programs would be voluntary and would not eliminate district boundaries and their identity with respective counties.

C. Conservation Districts and Indiana Conservation Partnership Consolidated on a Watershed or Multi-County Basis

This option would consolidate multiple SWCDs and ICP members into single natural resource districts, similar to the concept used in Nebraska, based on watersheds or geographic areas with some exemptions. This option would likely allow state and federal agency partners to place multiple staff in each natural resource district to assist with the implementation of conservation programs. It would also require legislation and would only be feasible if a funding mechanism for staffing and operations was established by the legislation.

In all likelihood, the natural resource concerns and funding issues facing Soil and Water Conservation Districts and the citizens of the state as a whole will continue to grow in complexity and cost. In addition, the public’s expectations for performance by the agencies charged with conserving our natural resources will continue to grow. To meet these demands beyond 2016, the task force thinks that change is inevitable in the conservation delivery system

The task force presents these three options in no order of priority and with no recommendation on which should be pursued. They are presented in order of the increasing amount of legislation to enact. They are presented as options to provoke discussion by the SSCB and SWCDs to help facilitate changes as needed, desired or requested. The examination of what has occurred in other states may help provide the impetus in Indiana for those in the Indiana Conservation Partnership to debate, adapt, amend, and perhaps to adopt by the year 2016.

“Continuity gives us roots; change gives us branches, letting us stretch and grow and reach new heights.”

-Pauline R. Kezer