PERSPECTIVE

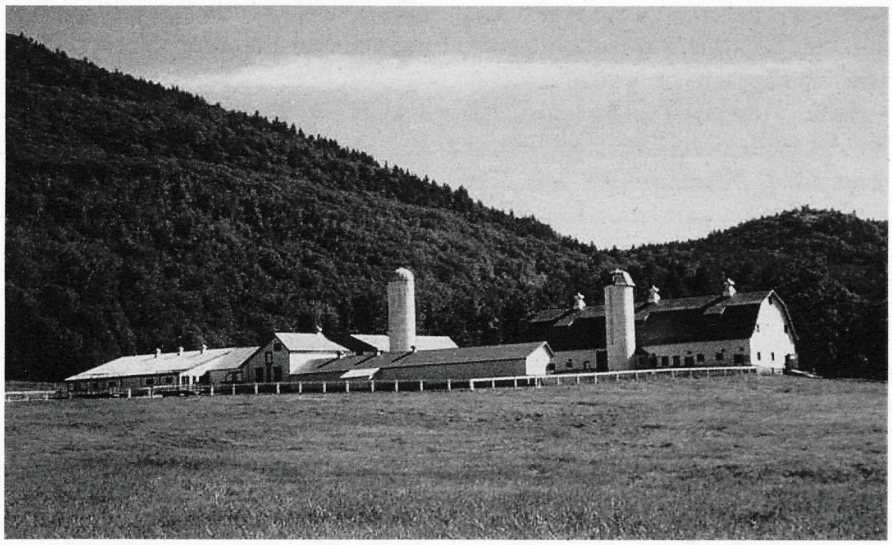
Conservation on the Land:

A Look at New York State's Soil and Water Conservaton Districts

By DAVE WICK

Abstract

Soil and Water Conservation Districts work every day at the local level to accomplish what few other agencies can: getting conservation projects on the land. Born out of the Dust Bowl Era, and pre-dating both the USEPA and the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, Districts have worked for more than sixty years assisting the nation's farmers, landowners, local governments and organizations. As technical assistance agencies, Conservation Districts act to both develop and implement projects and programs which help protect rivers, lakes, wetlands, and other natural resources. Working primarily at the county level, Conservation Districts are publicly funded yet independently governed, which gives Districts the ability to prioritize the issues and address them through sound conservation practices. By working with landowners and municipalities and addressing local natural resource and environmental issues, Conservation Districts make a difference every day in your community.



Soil and Water Conservation Districts have worked with most of the thousands of farms scattered across New York State, including this Adirondack farm.

While I was eating a particularly good homemade cookie following my presentation to the Lake George Ladies Garden Club recently, a very polite older woman came up and grabbed my hand. "That was wonderful! Why have I not heard of your organization? You seem to be involved in just about every environmental project in Warren County." The answer to that question is actually relatively simple. While Soil and Water Conservation Districts are very good at what they do, they are not so good at telling the wonderful story surrounding the conservation work that happens around us every day. This article will take an in-depth look at why Conservation Districts were formed, what they do, and how Districts are leaders in working to improve our environment at the local and regional level.

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The Early Years

To understand any organization, it helps to take a look at why it was created. To know what a Conservation District is and how it functions, we need to travel back in time to the early 1930s in a time known as the "Dust Bowl Era." Farmers in the late 1920s and early '30s were encouraged both by the government and by financial opportunities to move westward and homestead in the Texas panhandle, Oklahoma, Kansas, and other Midwestern states. Millions of acres of grasslands and other very marginal lands were plowed up and converted into wheat crops and other farmland.

From 1934 to 1936, the nation saw record drought through the Midwest. This drought coupled with a complete lack of any soil conservation practices on those millions of acres of farmland set the stage for environmental disaster. Within those years, millions of tons of topsoil blew and washed off many of these farms. In 1934 the Dust Bowl garnered national attention when dust blew from Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas as far east as New York City and Washington, D.C. In response, Congress established the federal Soil Conservation Service through the Soil Conservation Act of 1935. Notable conservationist Hugh Hammond Bennett was the first chief of this agency.

The problem with this act was that having a strictly federal presence on private farmland was not widely accepted by the nation's farmers. The farmers needed to feel a local presence and feel that they had an active role in both implementing and promoting soil conservation practices. In an innovative

piece of legislation, the government drew up what became known as the "Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law," which was a new concept in government at the time. Organization of Conservation Districts at the local level began after a state adopted this law.

On April 23, 1940, New York State Governor Herbert Lehman signed into law the "Soil and Water Conservation Districts Law" which authorized county legislatures to establish and provide funds for the organization of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). This gave the authorization for counties to declare themselves as Conservation Districts, which would then be eligible for federal assistance from the newly formed Soil Conservation Service.

Broadening Out and Taking Hold

Over the next three decades, each county in New York State passed a resolution declaring itself to be a Conservation District. In the heavily agricultural counties, these designations were made within a few years of the state authorization. However, in the Adirondacks where agriculture plays a lesser role in land use, those designations didn't come until the late '50s and '60s. This was likely a result of the importance (or lack thereof) placed upon soil conservation issues within that particular county, although it is difficult to research the individual causes.

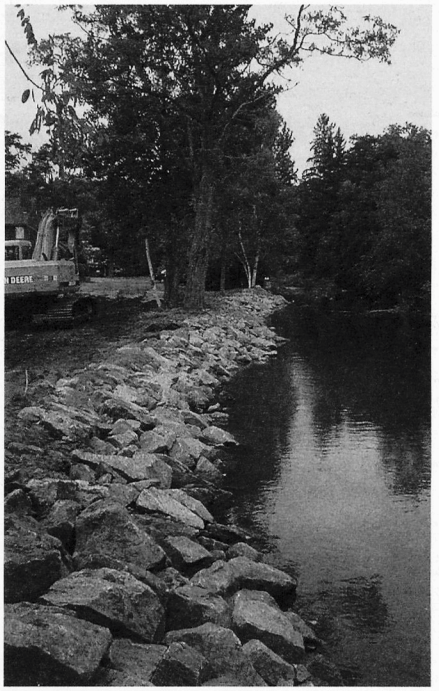
When a county declared itself by resolution to be a Soil and Water Conservation District, that county's legislature appointed Boards of Directors for those Districts. They then provided a level of funding to sustain an office and staffing as required. Once a District Board was appointed, the oversight and direction of that Conservation District office became the sole responsibility of the District Board of Directors.

As a result, Conservation Districts are independently administered units of government, separate and distinct from the county, the state, or the federal government. The most common misconception regarding Soil and Water Conservation Districts is in their governance, as most individuals believe there is either a state or federal administration of the office. In fact, it is simply a board composed of local individuals with interests in natural resources and conservation, appointed by that County's legislature. Decisions are made, funding is allocated, and work is directed solely by that Conservation District Board of Directors.

Perhaps the most comprehensive description of what a Soil and Water Conservation District involves itself with was written by the legislature and is included in the law. Section 2 of District Law is the Declaration of Policy, which notes

> *"It is hereby declared to be the policy of the legislature to provide for the conservation of the soil and water resources of this state, and for the improvement of the water quality, and for the control and prevention of soil erosion and for the prevention of floodwater and sediment damages and for furthering the conservation, development, utilization and disposal of water, and thereby to preserve natural resources, control and abate nonpoint sources of water pollution, assist in the drainage and irrigation of agricultural lands, prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs, assist in maintaining the navigability of rivers and harbors, preserve wildlife, protect the tax base, protect public lands, and protect and promote the health, safety and general welfare of the people of New York State."*

No one said it was well written, just very comprehensive. As you read through District Law, all of the above topics are listed under the "Powers of Districts" section. When you think about it, this law gives Conservation Districts the power and authority to work on just about any conservation issue that faces us today. What is also notable is the lack of a mandate that the Districts must follow. This flexibility is the underlying reason for the ability of a District to tailor its conservation program to the particular needs of that county, which is a hallmark of the District movement.



Streambank protection work on Hague Brook.

If the District was to be related to any level of government, it would be the county level, as most of the funding for Conservation District operations in New York comes from an annual appropriation from the county government of that District. In addition to those funds, a base level of funding of $30,000 per year is also provided to each District by the State of New York to supplement its technical staffing level. The average Conservation District annual operating budget in New York State is approximately $300,000, which funds four to five staff and an office from which to work. However, some Districts have as little as $80,000 per year, and a few as much as $1 to $2 million. Each District, as a separate and distinct entity, is independently responsible for generating funding for its programs.

As Districts have grown in both technical abilities and skills in undertaking conservation projects, they have become successful at preparing project proposals and receiving grant funds to undertake environmental initiatives

within their counties. In cases where the issues cross political boundaries, Districts work together across county lines on a watershed approach to address them.

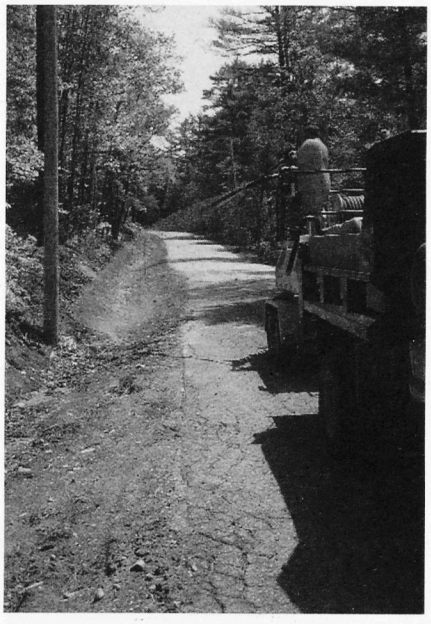
Broad Scope, Local Action

Conservation Districts have no regulatory authority, and are not regulatory agencies. The premise of Soil and Water Conservation Districts in New York State is to provide technical assistance to both landowners and local government in solving natural resource problems and issues. Although the traditional role for Districts is to assist farmers with drainage, runoff, manure storage and other issues, Districts have advanced into a much broader array of topics, most of which relate to water resource protection and improvement.

In the Adirondack Park, Conservation Districts provide services related to lake management, stormwater runoff pollution, drainage issues, logging and forestry, stream corridor management, flood control, soil erosion, sediment control, and much more. Indeed, most local municipalities tend to look at Conservation Districts as their local free environmental consulting firm in many ways, as they assist these towns in solving their natural resource issues. Each District in New York State has a highly qualified technical staff, which is overseen by a locally appointed volunteer Board of Directors. The background of the staff members is as varied as the natural resource issues of each county, but they all revolve around skills in surveying, hydrology, drafting, mapping, design, and similar topics. As such, Districts are uniquely qualified to not only identify natural resource issues facing their county, but to take on these issues, develop solutions, and oversee the implementation of those solutions.

That specific ability, to identify and actually solve natural resource problems both on private and public lands, is what makes Soil and Water Conservation Districts so unique. When one thinks of the environmental agencies which protect New York (NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, the US Army Corps of Engineers, the Adirondack Park Agency, etc), one thing becomes very clear. These entities, while regulating actions and activities, do not play an active role in solving existing problems. There is no branch of any of these state and federal agencies which actively develops and implements solutions to the problems facing Lake George, Saranac Lake, the Bouquet River, or any other resource in the Adirondacks or across the state. Indeed, these agencies play a key role in regulating activities and sometimes funding environmental projects, but local Conservation Districts are the only governmental entities in New York State which actively develop and implement environmental improvement projects on public and private lands.

Even with this broad role of developing and implementing projects to protect our natural resources, the primary function of Districts is still to assist private landowners with their conservation needs. Surprising to most people is that there is no charge for this service, which often includes surveying, design, report writing and construction oversight for the issue at hand. Whether it is a simple drainage recommendation for a lakefront homeowner, or a complex farm barnyard runoff and manure management design, the District provides technical assistance to those individuals at no cost. In an era of large government and often little direct assistance, it is pleasant to note that a service such as this is still available to the taxpayers in New York.



Hydroseeding of bare roadside ditches to prevent erosion.

Snapshot: Warren County SWCD

An examination of one county located largely within the Adirondack Park will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the roles and responsibilities of Districts and how they effectively function as both driver and catalyst for conservation initiatives. Warren County Soil and Water Conservation District is host to such notable natural resources as Lake George, Gore Mountain, the Hudson and Schroon Rivers, and seemingly endless miles of trout streams. It also comprises rural, suburban, and urban population centers, which are often the root cause of environmental and conservation issues in Warren County.

With an office complement of four technical staff and one administrative, the Warren County SWCD is about average in size for most Districts in New York. The District tailors its project and program workload towards the needs of the county, which largely focus on stormwater runoff pollution into lakes and streams, streambank and lakeshore erosion, drainage issues, and fish and wetlands habitat.

A snapshot look at the District's workload during the week of the writing of this article reveals multiple on-site landowner assistance visits related to ponds, logging job reviews, stormwater runoff, water wells, and drainage problems. On the conservation project workload front for the week, construction oversight is progressing on a delta removal project on Lake George, the hydroseeding of bare road ditches has taken place in a local town, two in-stream sediment reservoir cleanouts have been scheduled for excavation and permitted, construction oversight on a large

stream retaining wall was conducted, and oversight of a large erosion control project on a snowmobile trail was begun. The staff at the District is cross-trained in topics ranging from erosion control techniques to wetlands management to stormwater runoff designs. Each staff member has a particular specialty, but with the workload as broad and large as it is, each member must be competent in all fields noted.

Working Together

In many cases, a Conservation District acts as a catalyst and primary partner on conservation initiatives. Most significant projects and programs involve heavy equipment, construction manpower, permitting workload, and financial management. With such projects, partnering with local municipalities and other organizations is very useful and often necessary. Many conservation initiatives are grant-funded by both the state and federal government, but they come with a requirement that half of the cost of the project be borne by local entities. In managing such projects as require construction, Districts will partner with the local highway department or public works department to undertake earthwork if required. If additional funds or manpower are needed, local lake associations and other involved civic groups will assist. Working together ensures that the work will get completed, and that all interested parties are at the table and can share their views regarding the project's direction and outcomes.

Local Conservation, Statewide Success

The old adage "all politics are local," can also be said for conservation. The very premise of Soil and Water Conservation Districts is to offer technical assistance to both landowners and municipalities to protect and improve the state of our natural resources. Although the regulatory roles of the DEC and the APA are without doubt keys in preserving what we already have, we need to do more.

People in the Adirondacks tend to be fairly well versed in their local environmental issues, whether it is sedimentation of their lakes and streams, uncontrolled runoff from large farms, failing septic systems seeping into waterbodies, or similar issues. Particularly over the past ten years or so, the conduit for action at the local level has become Conservation Districts. With their abilities to analyze an issue and implement solutions, their knowledge of the larger agencies' roles and abilities, and the contacts with local town supervisors and legislators, Districts have largely become a nexus of activity related to natural resources protection and improvement initiatives.

There is a fairly good chance that you have never heard of a Soil and Water Conservation District. However, if you were to tour your local countryside with one of the staff from that office, you would be surprised at the impact that the local District has had on the land. I encourage anyone interested in their community's environment to contact their local office and talk about what is happening within their county. You will find that the District staff and board members are more than happy to meet with you and talk about work going on in your community. If you have a concern related to an issue on your land, you can be assured that District staff will be willing to walk your property with you and discuss how to address your concerns or implement your goals. There is never a charge for this service, as it is what Districts were created for.

Perhaps Soil and Water Conservation Districts will always be obscure small organizations to many folks throughout the Adirondacks and New York State. As I've mentioned, Districts aren't particularly skilled in promoting themselves or developing marketing campaigns. That's all right, however. People who need assistance related to conservation issues always seem to find their way to the Soil and Water District office, through referrals from supervisors and other agencies. Once there, a relationship is developed with the District which often lasts for many years to come. If conservation issues are resolved, people with problems get taken care of, and the environment is a little bit better in the end, then the District's mandate and purpose is fulfilled.

For contact information for your local Soil and Water Conservation District, visit the New York Association of Conservation Districts at www.nyacd.org on the world wide web.

Installing a stormwater runoff infiltration chamber system to protect Lake George from polluted runoff.