

What is a Conservation District?

Conservation districts are legal subdivisions of state government, authorized by the state legislature in South Dakota Codified Law 38-8-7 and 38-8-8, and covering the entire state. Each conservation district is governed by five supervisors who are elected at the general election on a non-partisan basis for four-year terms. Supervisors must be registered voters in the conservation district. Supervisors help guide natural resources conservation programs in the conservation district and have the opportunity, to influence state and national conservation programs. They are responsible for carrying out state laws and programs within conservation district boundaries such as the Sediment & Erosion Control Law and Natural Resources Conservation Grants Program. Conservation districts work closely with, several local, state, and federal agencies; tribes; local groups; and organizations. Key to this partnership are the South Dakota Department of Agriculture-Division of Resource Conservation and Forestry (SDDA-RC&F) and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS). SDDA-RC&F provides state technical assistance to conservation districts and helps administer state programs. USDA-NRCS works through conservation districts, providing technical conservationists and other natural resource specialists and financial assistance. Other partners include, but are not limited to, the SD Association of Conservation Districts; SD Conservation Commission; USDA Farm Services Agency and Rural Development Agency; SD Department of Environment & Natural Resources; SD Department of Game, Fish & Parks; county commissions; city councils, USDI Partners for Fish & Wildlife; water development districts; resource conservation & development districts; and local organizations.

South Dakota law grants authority to conservation districts to carry out activities that will help get conservation on the ground. Sixty-nine conservation districts cover the state, mostly one in each county. Conservation districts cannot levy taxes, nor do they have the right of eminent domain; however, a conservation district may request funds from the county(ies) to operate the conservation district. They may raise funds as profit from work performed as well as sue and be sued. Conservation districts have authority to:

- Conduct surveys, investigations and research about soil erosion, sediment damages, or flood water, and develop or implement preventative control measures.

- Conduct demonstration projects.

- Cooperate or enter into agreements with and furnish financial or other aid to government or other agencies, or to any individual within the conservation district to carry out erosion control and watershed protection.

- Obtain options and acquire property, rights or interest by purchase, exchange, gifts, lease, grant, or otherwise. May maintain, administer, and improve properties acquired. May receive income from such properties and expend income to carry out conservation activities.

- Accept donations, gifts, and contributions in money, services, materials, or otherwise from the United States or any of its agencies, and from the State or any of its agencies to carry on conservation district operations.

- Encourage local school districts to provide instruction about natural resources conservation as part of course work relating to natural resources conservation and environmental awareness.

- Develop comprehensive plans to conserve natural resources including controlling and preventing erosion or water pollution.

- Help administer cost-share for conservation practices in the conservation district.

Conservation districts offer services without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status.