

South Dakota Department of Agriculture, Division of Resource Conservation and Forestry

The mission of the Division of Resource Conservation and Forestry is to conserve, protect, improve, and develop the natural resources of South Dakota for its citizens. Currently, the Division manages the South Dakota Coordinated Plan for Natural Resources Conservation Plan, Loan, and Grant Programs on behalf of the State and the Conservation Commission. The Coordinated Plan goals are reducing soil erosion, improvement of rangelands, enhanced water, quality and other natural resource conservation efforts by providing grants to conservation districts.

The Division of Resource Conservation and Forestry was created in 1995 by Executive Order of Governor William Janklow. Prior to the Executive Order, the Division of Conservation and the Division of Forestry operated as separate departments within the Department of Agriculture but because of staffing levels and similar missions, the departments were combined. While the two divisions evolved to have similar missions, their origins were very different.

The Division of Resource Conservation and Forestry is the direct link between conservation districts and state government. The principal duties of the Division are to:

- Represent the state's conservation districts;
- Develop and implement state policy for land conservation and development (SDCL 38-7-1);
- Coordinate the programs of the various conservation districts by providing advice and consultation;
- Secure the cooperation and assistance of state and federal agencies for the conservation districts;
- Assist conservation district supervisors to carry out their responsibilities and develop their programs;
- Keep conservation districts informed of changes in the law, operational policies and procedures, and other matters of importance to the conservation districts;
- Provide funds, supplies, staff assistance, and technical assistance to conservation districts as appropriations allow; and
- Require proper accounting and financial procedures by conservation districts.

The Division of Resource Conservation and Forestry provides administrative and technical assistance to the State Conservation Commission and for the programs implemented by them. The Division reviews conservation district accounting practices to ensure that financial records are accurate and complete; provides training and technical assistance to conservation districts; keeps official records of supervisor elections and tracks each supervisor's term of office. The primary programs include: South Dakota Coordinated Plan for Natural Resources Conservation, Commission Grant Program, Revolving Loan Fund, Conservation District Programs, Public Outreach and Special Projects/Grant Development.

Recent Programs

Range Management Program: This position was created in 1997 from a cooperative effort involving the Division, conservation districts, and NRCS. The Division provided a range specialist, the conservation districts provided administrative support, and NRCS provided a vehicle and office space. The purpose of the program was to assist conservation districts in developing and implementing rangeland conservation plans and practices. This position was eliminated in 2006 due to federal program budget cuts.

Fire Suppression: The Division had approximately 38 FTE by the end of 1996 and it remained at that level until July of 2001. The fire responsibilities of the State Forester were transferred to a new Wildland Fire Coordinator. That created a split in the Division with the fire personnel being placed in the new division - Wildland Fire Suppression Division. The new division acquired 20 FTE. The Division of Resource Conservation and Forestry retained 18 FTE.

Supervisor Accreditation Program: In FY 2010 program staff completed the first set of training modules for an online Conservation District Supervisor Accreditation Program. Staff worked cooperatively with South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts and the National Association of Conservation Districts to develop the online training program to make conservation district supervisors aware of the history of the conservation movement, the roles and responsibilities of district supervisors, and legal issues important to conservation districts. The South Dakota Conservation District Supervisor Accreditation Program was recognized nationally in January 2011.

Assistance to State Conservation Commission

The 1973 Legislature established the Division of Conservation. The legislation stated that the Conservation Commission would be administered under the direction and supervision of the Division of Conservation within the Department of Environmental Protection (later to be renamed Department of Environment and Natural Resources). In 1975 the Legislature directed that the Commission functions relative to the conservation districts should be performed by the Division of Conservation and would be transferred to the Department of Agriculture.

Executive Secretary of Conservation Commission; Howard Geers (1969-1973) and Dennis Hood (1974)

Directors of the Division of Conservation: All Griffiths (1975-1979); Keith Harner (Acting 1980); Jack Fifield (1981-1988); Peter Orwick (1989-1991); Russ Stone [*last director of Division of Conservation and first director of combined division*] (1992-1994); Clark Johnson (1995-1996); Ray Sowers (1997-present).

Assistance to Conservation Districts

The Division is charged, by state statute, to require conservation districts to use proper accounting and financial reporting and to assist them in implementing those procedures. To support this effort, the "Conservation District Accounting Manual" was developed for the conservation districts' use. The Division also provides technical assistance to conservation districts in developing and monitoring grant applications, drafting or revising long-range plans and hydrologic unit plans.

The Division maintains a record of supervisors elected in each conservation district, the appointments to fill vacancies, and the expiration date of each supervisor's term of office. This information is also used to aid in the creation of the directory of "Conservation District Supervisors and Employees" which is published annually by the Division.

Revolving Loan Program: In 1949 the conservation district law was amended to authorize the Conservation Committee (later named the State Conservation Commission) to make loans from funds made available through the Soil Conservation District Revolving Fund. The original appropriation was \$75,000 with another \$50,000 added in 1951. Those loans were originally interest free. At that time, the Conservation Commission was part of the Department of Environmental Protection. Administrative Rules were amended in 1994 to add annual interest of

3% to the loan program. As of July 1, 2011, a total of \$1,992,045 has been loaned to conservation and watershed districts.

Soil and Water Compatibility Permits: Soil and Water Compatibility Permits (commonly referred to as Irrigation Permits) began in 1972. This program was eliminated in 1994 when the Legislature was informed that this program was not utilized by the conservation districts. The Department of Environment and Natural Resources absorbed this permitting process into their Water Rights program.

Grant Program: In 1991 the Coordinated Soil and Water Conservation Plan (Coordinated Plan) established specific goals for soil and water conservation in South Dakota. This plan was adopted by the Legislature in 1992. A grant fund was established to assist the state's conservation districts with conservation projects. This program is funded by a portion of the reimbursable, but unclaimed, gasoline taxes collected for non-highway (off-road) uses. In 1992 the Associated General Contractors of South Dakota and the South Dakota Trucking Association filed a lawsuit seeking to stop the expenditure of those funds for conservation purposes. In November 1992 the South Dakota Supreme Court ruled that the use of the un-refunded portion of the off-road gas tax for conservation grants was constitutional. A total of \$13,204,967 from the gas tax has been deposited to this fund since that time. An additional \$1,555,000 of fund-generated interest added to the fund and a total of \$1,611,204 was added in special, one-time allocations.

A portion of the grant fund has been used for other purposes. In 1993 the Legislature allocated \$350,000 from the fund to the State Fair and \$80,000 to the DeSmet Armory. Beginning in state fiscal year 2000, \$140,000 was allocated to the State General Fund. Fiscal year 1995 saw part of the Division expenses funded from the grant funds. This allocation involved only those expenses relating to the conservation staff and activities within the Division. Beginning with fiscal year 2005, that provision was eliminated and those expenses were once again funded with state general funds.

The Coordinated Plan was revised in 2007, and renamed the Coordinated Plan for Natural Resources Conservation. The goals were to include air, wildlife, and recreation as well as soil and water conservation. This plan is scheduled to be revised every five years and will be revised in 2012.

Soil Conservation Award Program: The Soil Conservation Award Program was initiated by the 2008 State Legislature to recognize exceptional farming and ranching practices that conserve soil and other natural resources in South Dakota. Producers eligible for the award will have shown resource stewardship by utilizing grassed waterways, terraces, crop rotations, sufficient crop residue to protect soil stability, no-till, grasslands managed for sustainable productivity, livestock management to limit soil and nutrient runoff, or forest lands managed according to a forest stewardship plan.

Public Outreach/Education:

Resource Conservation Speech Contest: Each year the Division along with Touchstone Energy Cooperatives of South Dakota, the South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service co-sponsor the state finals of the Resource Conservation Speech Contest. This contest is open to any student attending high school (public, private, or home-school), grades 9-12, in South Dakota. Touchstone Energy Cooperatives of South Dakota will pay scholarships to any college, university, or accredited vocational technical school in the State

of South Dakota chosen and attended full-time by the winners. The 2011 contest was the 50th anniversary.

Conservation Minister of the Year: This award was given for several years to an ordained minister who preached and practiced good natural resource stewardship. The award given was a framed and matted picture painted by South Dakota artist John Green, depicting a wildlife scene. The contest was discontinued when the nominations dropped to just one minister.

Wetlands Coordinator: The position of South Dakota Wetlands Coordinator was created during 1992 utilizing funding from the US Environmental Protection Agency. The coordinator was charged with developing a state wetlands policy and assisting with wetlands dispute resolution. Assisting the coordinator with the wetlands policy development was an interagency committee comprised of members from the Departments of Agriculture, Environment and Natural Resources, Game, Fish and Parks, and Transportation. The program was completed in fiscal year 1998.

NRCS Planner: An agreement was entered into in October 1990 among the State Conservation Commission, the South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts and the Soil Conservation Service (now named Natural Resources Conservation Service). The purpose of the agreement was to further close cooperation and working relationship among the agencies to develop joint long-range soil and water resource strategies and plans, including setting of priorities. The agreement was renewed in 1992 and was completed in 1994.

Division of Forestry

In 1869 Territorial Legislature gave a tax exemption on 40 acres for every 5 acres planted to trees and cared for by the landowners.

In 1884 the Dakota Territory Horticulture and Forestry Association was organized to promote and encourage tree planting. The formation of this group showed the early interest of the pioneers in forestry, particularly in tree planting.

The Division of Forestry within the US Department of Agriculture was created in 1886. Since the department had no jurisdiction over any forest land, the Division acted as advisors to private individuals and other governmental agencies.

One year after South Dakota became a state, the Legislature provided for a bounty of \$2.00 per acre per year for planting trees for a 10-year period. A total of 6 acres was allowed. Forest fires in the Black Hills in 1893 accentuated the need for public management and protection of forest lands. Along with statehood, South Dakota was in the forestry business. The school sections in the Black Hills area, granted to the state by Congress upon statehood, contained stands of commercial size ponderosa pine. On February 22, 1907, President Grover Cleveland created the Black Hills Forest Reserve. In 1905 the Reserve was transferred from the Department of Interior to the Department of Agriculture to be one of the first forested areas to be administered by the US Forest Service.

Difficulty was experienced by both the state and federal governments in trying to administer scattered lands. In 1906 the Commissioner of School and Public Lands urged the consolidation of ownership through land exchanges. An agreement was drawn up in 1910 between the Commissioner of School and Public Lands and the US Forest Service to exchange lands in the Black Hills in order to form the Custer State Forest. The next year, the Commissioner was

authorized to hire a forester to be known as the Forest Supervisor. This position was the predecessor to the present State Forester.

In 1913 Custer State Forest was made a game preserve under the joint supervision of the Commissioner of School and Public Lands and the State Game Warden. In 1919 it was designated Custer State Park and a new park board was established. The State Game Lodge was completed and opened August 8, 1921. It burned to the ground October 19, 1921. It was rebuilt and reopened June 15, 1922.

In 1927 President Coolidge established his summer White House at the State Game Lodge. It was here that he made his famous statement "I do not choose to run for president in 1928."

In 1933 the Secretary of Agriculture was authorized to cooperate with the Forest Service under Section 4 of the Clark-McNary Act. Two years later the Prairie States Shelterbelt Program under the US Forest Service was started with headquarters in Huron. This gave impetus to tree planting throughout the state.

In 1935 the Great Plains Agricultural Council met to find some way to combat the dust storms that raged through a 200 mile wide belt from Canada through Texas. The greatest problem, the council said, was that of erosion, which could be stopped by permanent vegetative cover. An immediate controversy arose over whether a massive shelterbelt program of tree planting could cut down the force of the winds and the erosion of the soils of the plains.

In spite of opposition, the Prairie States Forestry Project started in 1936 and continued until 1942 when a combination of adequate rainfall, World War II, and a changing economy ended the project. By that time, 200 million trees and shrubs had been planted on 30,000 farms in the 200-mile wide belt. This equaled 18,600 miles of windbreaks throughout the plains states.

The goal of the Prairie States Forestry Project was never realized in spite of the magnitude of its accomplishment. Its goal was to plant two parallel, 10-row shelterbelts in each section to protect against the north and south winds. Between the parallel belts were to be three to five-row intermediate belts, and cross belts of the same width were to be planted at right angles to the basic and intermediate belts. The only two places in South Dakota where this was achieved were near Hecla and Forestburg.

By the end of World War II, however, even the most steadfast critics agreed that trees could be grown on the Great Plains, and that they helped greatly to conserve soil and water.

In 1940 Ed Gray was appointed the Forest Supervisor. He was the first to do any insect control. With Civilian Conservation Corps crews, he cut, peeled, and burned about 2,000 trees which were infested with the mountain pine beetle.

The Division of Forestry was established in 1945 as part of the Department of Game, Fish and Parks. The Game, Fish and Parks Commission was set up as a bipartisan commission of eight people appointed by the Governor. The Division of Forestry was administered by a State Forester who was required to be a degreed forester. The Division was made responsible for all forestry activities of all state departments including fire protection, tree distribution, timber management, parks development, and law enforcement. The tree fund and tree distribution responsibilities of the Secretary of Agriculture were transferred to the State Forester.

In 1947 the Black Hills spruce was named as the state tree and Arbor Day was established as the last Friday in April in South Dakota.

In 1949 the Black Hills Forest Fire Protection District was created. Permits were required in order to set any open fire. The "Keep South Dakota Green" program was launched in 1950 under the joint sponsorship of the Department of Game, Fish and Parks and the Junior Chamber of Commerce. As an independent association, "Keep South Dakota Green" was a valuable local ally to Smokey Bear in keeping people aware of the dangers of fire.

Through land exchanges with the Federal Government in 1951, the acreage of Custer State Park was increased to 69,004. This coincided with the legislature making its first appropriation for the support of forestry and parks.

The Forestry & Parks warehouse was established in Pierre in 1952 to distribute tree planting stock through a federally funded tree distribution program (CM-4), to store supplies, and to provide office space for the District Forester. South Dakota also became a member of the American Tree Farm System.

The Agricultural Act of 1956 (Soil Bank) brought out the need for great quantities of trees to be planted in the conservation reserve. Congress appropriated money to be made available through the US Forest Service to the state foresters for increased tree and shrub production. In November 1956, the Game, Fish and Parks Commission, after reviewing proposals from South Dakota commercial nurseries, signed an agreement with the Forest Service for the establishment of a conifer nursery in the state. The federal government provided 100% of the funds for establishment, administration, production costs, facilities, machinery, seed collection, and distribution of Soil Bank trees. The District Forester concept was enacted the next year, with foresters located at Watertown, Pickstown, Mobridge, Lemmon, Sioux Falls, Woonsocket, and Pierre.

In April of 1957, the department purchased a quarter section in Codington County, northwest of Watertown on the east bank of the Big Sioux River. The nursery site was selected after soil and water analysis studies were made in 44 counties. Another feature affecting the site selection was the fact that, historically, the Watertown area was hit by hail less often than any other area of the state.

In 1959 the Deadwood fire burned over 6,000 acres. The separation of the Parks and Forestry Divisions was proposed in 1965. The following year the Tree Bounty Law of was repealed.

A Black Hills spruce from the Black Hills of South Dakota was designated as the White House Christmas tree in 1970. All CM-4 tree distribution operations were transferred from Pierre to the Big Sioux Conifer Nursery with the hardwood stock distribution program being discontinued in 1971.

The Dutch elm disease infection study and survey program was vigorously pursued by the Division in eastern South Dakota in 1972.

The Argyle Fire, covering about 4,500 acres of mixed ownership timber and grassland occurred in Custer County in 1974. An intensive mountain pine beetle control program was first tried by using helicopters for removal of infested trees in the northern Black Hills area. The pine beetle epidemic peaked in 1975, and collapsed in 1979. Total losses were 4.1 million trees.

A preventative thinning project in the Lead/Deadwood area was implemented in 1980 with the purpose of thinning steep slopes and noncommercial areas to prevent future outbreaks of mountain pine beetle. Big Sioux Conifer Nursery expanded operations and began to plant

hardwoods on a production basis. Because of the expansion, the word "Conifer" was dropped from the name at the nursery became Big Sioux Nursery.

Big Sioux Nursery completed the construction of a cold storage facility in 1981. This facility would be able to package and store 5 million seedlings.

In 1984 the Division of Forestry was moved from the Department of Game, Fish and Parks to the Department of Agriculture by a Governor Proclamation and confirmation by the State Legislature.

Big Sioux Nursery

In 1952 a tree distribution facility was constructed in Pierre. The following year, hardwood stock was distributed from this location. In 1955 the South Dakota Forestry Division, Department of Game, Fish and Parks, distributed 2,297,900 trees out of this location. (In later years this location would be used as the Hughes and Stanley Conservation Districts' tree cooler.) The next year monies became available through the US Forest Service in the US Agriculture Act of 1956 (Soil Bank Act), and the Clark McNary Act, to be used by state foresters to increase tree and shrub protection. The South Dakota State Forester's Office conducted a state-wide study to find the most desirable conifer nursery location.

On May 9, 1957, for \$15,648, Raymond T. Matz and Mrs. Grace H. Matz granted to the State of South Dakota, for the use and benefit of the Department of Game, Fish and Parks, 156.48 acres. That land is the present location of Big Sioux Nursery, Inc. The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Commission decided that Watertown would be the best location for the Big Sioux Tree Nursery. The nursery was dedicated July 27, 1958.

Until 1959 the Big Sioux Conifer Nursery had been 100% federally financed. From that point on, it was to be partially funded by the state through tree sales.

In 1960 Big Sioux Nursery had the first 500,000 trees ready for distribution. In the mid-1960's, the cooler location in Pierre was abandoned as the central distribution site.

In 1977 state-contracted nurseries were no longer able to meet the hardwood needs of the conservation districts so a feasibility study was done. The next year Big Sioux Nursery began growing hardwoods. The name was changed to Big Sioux Nursery to reflect that they produced more than just conifers. From 1978 to 1982 Big Sioux Nursery utilized four to twelve people, year-round, through federal funds which established the Young Adult Conservation Corps.

Legislation in 1979 provided for cold storage at Big Sioux Nursery. This storage was completed in 1980, allowing for fall lifting, winter storage, and spring distribution of hardwoods. At that time, Big Sioux Nursery was the first conservation grade nursery in the upper Great Plains region to have a cold storage facility. Two years later Big Sioux Nursery established a program to pursue the genetic improvement of each species grown there.

In 1993 Big Sioux Nursery began delivering trees with a refrigerated trailer.

During Governor Janklow's administration, the nursery was transferred to the conservation districts in 1996 after the Conservation Commission approved a series of 3 grants to retire the debt for the nursery.