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About the Southern Sonoma County Resource Conservation District

MISSION

Our mission is to improve natural resource management while supporting sustainable agriculture and our urban communities. We provide technical assistance, education, and funding sources to empower landowners to be committed stewards working to improve water quality and quantity, prevent soil erosion, and improve natural habitat.

HISTORY AND AUTHORITIES

Resource Conservation Districts are one of California's earliest grassroots conservation organizations that identify local conservation problems and supports landowners in implementing solutions on a voluntary basis. The catastrophic soil losses of the dust bowl sparked national and state recognition that soil erosion was the greatest challenge to the country's ability to feed its people and be a leader in agricultural production. Non-regulatory Conservation Districts were authorized to increase leadership and provide assistance at the local level to landowners, ranchers, and farmers. California recognized their importance, and in 1938 authorized their formation. The Southern Sonoma County Resource Conservation District (District) was formed on July 1, 1986 and its boundary reflects its origin as a consolidation of the Sonoma Valley Resource Conservation District and the Petaluma Resource Conservation District, formed in 1949 and 1947.

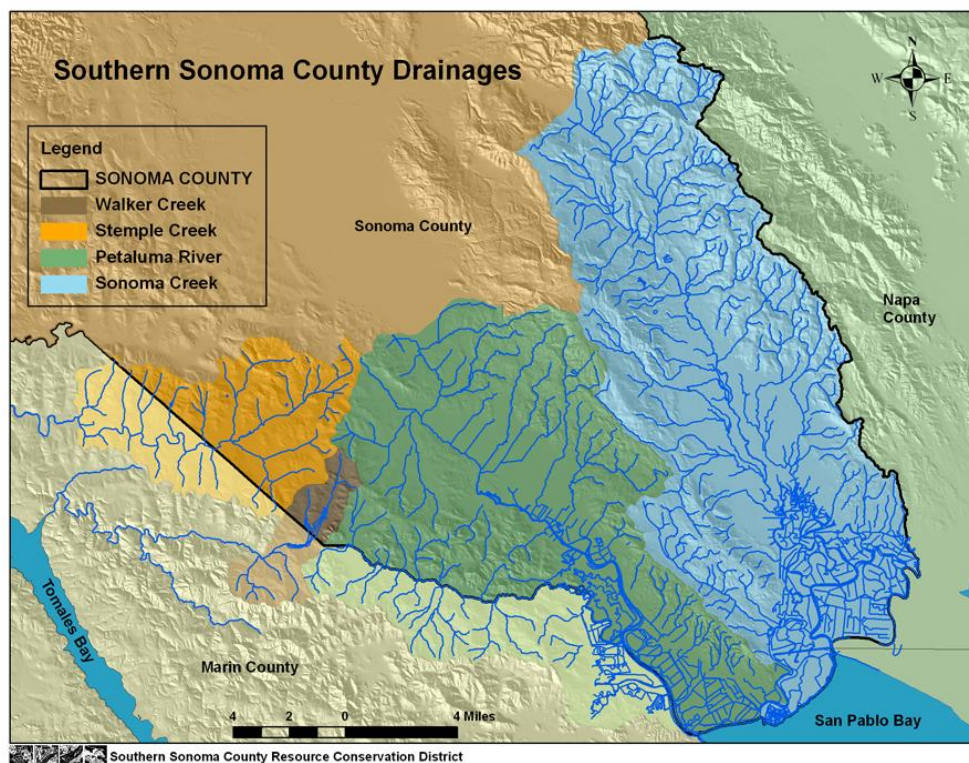
The District is a "Special District," a legal subdivision of the state, organized under Division 9 of the California Public Resources Code. Examples of other similar independent, special districts are Recreation and Park Districts or School Districts. Conservation Districts are managed by either appointed or elected volunteer directors which provide assistance to private and public landowners in cooperation with local USDA Service Centers, other public agencies, private entities, and community organizations.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DISTRICT

Southern Sonoma County Resource Conservation District covers 214,000 acres of predominately rural land in the southern Sonoma County including Sonoma Creek Watershed from Kenwood to San Francisco Bay, Petaluma River Watershed, and the upper half of Stemple Creek Watershed. Each of the three watersheds in the District has its own unique geographical features. The District also includes a small portion of the headwaters of Walker Creek Watershed. The close proximity of San Francisco Bay, tidelands, local coastal ranges, and weather patterns and soil types, offer a unique set of geographical factors supporting agriculture and the settlement of people.

The District's cultural history is tied to the diverse agriculture in these watersheds. The Sonoma Valley is considered a world class grape growing region and also boasts some of the finest parks, forests, grasslands, and vineyards in the San Francisco Bay Area. Upland watershed areas are drained by Sonoma Creek, which, along with its tributaries, is home to a run of endangered steelhead trout, as well as a small run of Chinook salmon and California freshwater shrimp. The Petaluma River area has long been known for its dairy and poultry industries. Once called the "Egg Basket of the World," it is home to the largest remaining in-tact tidal salt marsh on San Pablo Bay. The Petaluma watershed includes urban development, rural residential, agricultural, and open space land uses. Four tributaries to the Petaluma River support small endangered steelhead trout runs, and the watershed is home to numerous other listed species including California Red-Legged Frog, California Tiger Salamander, California Clapper Rail, and Soft Bird's Beak.

The Stemple Creek watershed begins just west of Petaluma and empties into the Pacific Ocean through the Estero de San Antonio, draining 50 square miles. The watershed is characterized by grassy, rolling hills that are used extensively for agriculture; primarily dairies and cattle grazing. The drainage is cut almost exactly in half by the Sonoma-Marin county line. From the beginning of European settlement to the mid 1900s, the watershed has been farmed with small livestock herds and large areas of land cultivated for barley, wheat, vegetables, and potatoes. Poultry and egg production was an important part of the local economy from the 1930s through World War II.



What We Do

The District provides technical and educational assistance to property owners and other stakeholders to identify their natural resource and agricultural concerns and assist them with solutions.

The District serves as a clearinghouse of information on natural resources conservation, technical guidance, permitting, and financial assistance programs for landowners interested in implementing conservation practices or habitat enhancement. Our programs are centered on education, voluntary cooperation, and the coordination of what might otherwise be only scattered services on the part of the variety of organizations and agencies performing conservation work in our district. The District uses a watershed approach in addressing natural resource issues which requires a significant collaborative approach with federal, state, and other local agencies and community groups, schools, and the public.

Program Areas

Conservation and Stewardship on Agricultural Lands

Through our Conservation and Stewardship Program, the District works with agricultural producers to develop Farm Conservation Plans and to implement Best Management Practices. District staff works with local agricultural producers to assist them in setting priorities and pursuing funds to complete Best Management Practices, comply with local, state and federal regulations, and keep their land productive in the long term.

Agricultural and Environmental Education

The District offers educational programming to both high school students and adults through opportunities and partnerships with numerous organizations, agencies, and farmers and ranchers in the county. In partnership with the Center for Land-Based Learning, we offer the FARMS Leadership and SLEWS programs, combining innovative hands-on experiences with classroom learning to help students develop leadership skills, learn how sustainable agriculture practices contribute to a healthier ecosystem, and create connections to agricultural, environmental, and food system careers. The District offers on-farm outings on Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District protected properties as well as various education and outreach events and tours.

Water Resource Management

The District assists landowners by providing technical advice and assistance on a variety of water resource management issues including: surface water and flooding, rainwater catchment and stormwater management, water conservation, recycled water, agricultural irrigation efficiencies, groundwater and water rights. Implementation of “Slow it, Spread it, Sink it!”, our guide to beneficial stormwater management, educates landowners on how to manage runoff and offers best management practices featuring small to large scale techniques with local examples. The District is active in assisting landowners with developing, funding, and

implementing on-the-ground projects to manage water resources, and maintain stream and groundwater resources.

Habitat Enhancement

Through our Habitat Enhancement program, the District works with private and public landowners to enhance the natural environment and habitat conditions for fish and wildlife. District staff works with landowners, partners, and funders to identify, fund, and implement projects including stream habitat enhancement for salmonids and other species, fish barrier removal, erosion control and sediment reduction, and riparian and wetland restoration.

Organization and Funding

As a Special District, a small portion of our funding (approximately \$59,000 annually) comes from Sonoma County property taxes assessed within our District boundaries. Over 90% of our annual funding comes from competitively sought grants obtained to assist locals with on-the-ground conservation practices. For every \$1.00 we receive we raise \$16.00, leveraging property tax investment, locally, within and for, the community.

Our activities are driven by the volunteerism of an appointed Board of Directors, all of whom are local landowners. They establish District priorities, set policies and guidelines, and oversee general operations. Staff at our office in Petaluma includes management and technical staff qualified to carry out a variety of conservation and outreach programs.

We enjoy a special partnership with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) spanning the history of the District. NRCS works closely with local Conservation Districts to provide locally led technical and funding assistance to landowners to implement best management practices on their lands.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Our Major Accomplishments (2001-2012)

- ◆ **Agricultural & Environmental Education Program:** 2012 marks the 13th year of the District's delivery of the award-winning agricultural education programs: *FARMS Leadership*, and *SLEWS* (Student & Landowner Education & Watershed Stewardship) in partnership with the Center for Land-Based Learning. In addition, the District has delivered on-farm outings program for the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District and hosted watershed forums and workshops focused on resource conservation, watershed tours, and community river clean-up events.
- ◆ **Authored Four Watershed Plans:** The District developed four watershed plans for each of the watersheds it serves: Petaluma River, San Antonio Creek, Sonoma Creek and

Stemple Creek, driven by stakeholder input. These watershed plans guide policies, specify implementation plans, activities, and support funding requests.

- ◆ **Legacy Waste Tire Projects:** For over a decade, the District advocated for landowners in addressing state mandated waste tire removal actions from ranches where placement of waste tires in gullies, slopes, and on naturally occurring, highly erodible soils, were once a recommended practice. The District and its partners advocated for policy change to lighten the burden the state placed on private landowners in remediating issues of fire hazard and mosquito control on such legacy sites. In addition, the District managed several tire removal and restoration projects to re-stabilize hillsides and gullies, promoting continued conservation.
- ◆ **Permit Holder for the Regional General Permit for Levee Maintenance:** The District continues to hold and coordinate a unique regional general permit with the Army Corps of Engineers that allows 34 landowners, under special conditions, to conduct annual maintenance of over 30 miles of existing berms/levees in the Petaluma and Sonoma Creek watersheds. Participating permittees include both private landowners and public agencies.
- ◆ **Beneficial Stormwater Management Guidebook: *Slow It, Spread It, Sink It!*** The District published a highly acclaimed guide to rainwater harvesting and beneficial stormwater management adopted to assist landowners and managers implement projects in Sonoma County. This guide has been adopted widely nationwide and recently in Canada.
- ◆ **Creek & Watershed Signage Program:** The District developed an educational guide and program to install creek and watershed signs to promote public awareness and conservation efforts and installed over 110 signs throughout the County.
- ◆ **Habitat Enhancement Projects:** The District has implemented numerous stream and wetland enhancement projects for flood control, habitat enhancement, and water quality improvement. Projects included assisting individual landowners with design and permitting bank repairs, riparian revegetation, installation of bird boxes, wildlife-friendly fencing, and removal of fish barriers.
- ◆ **Flood control study for Lower Sonoma Creek:** The District served as local sponsor for a feasibility study to address opportunities for flood management and restoration in the lower Sonoma Creek watershed. The study features hydrologic investigation and hydraulic model development, geomorphology, and evaluation of alternative scenarios based on opportunities and constraints for achieving project goals.
- ◆ **Leadership in Principles of Sustainability:** In 2005, the District was the first in the nation to adopt California Local Government Commission's principles in sustainability, *The Ahwahnee Water Principles*, directing our water resources program in water supply, water quality, stormwater, recycled water, and groundwater.

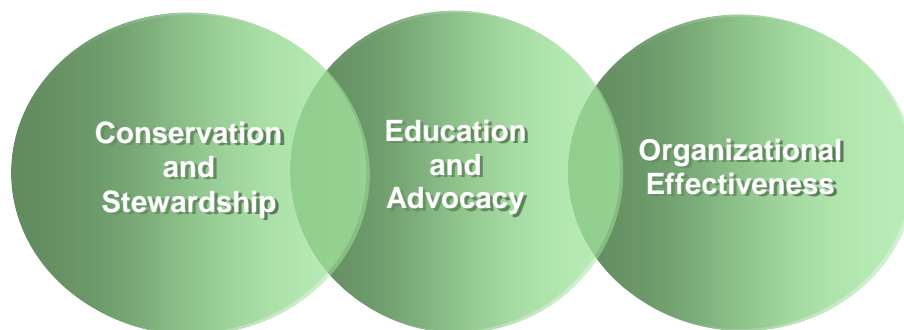
Challenges and Opportunities

Given the economic constraints facing the District and increased competition for grant funds, implementing a wide variety of innovative conservation and outreach programs will be increasingly challenging in the upcoming years. To achieve a balanced and diverse set of goals, it is critical that the District prioritize its actions in order to be responsive to the many challenges that our constituents face. Agricultural land and open space protection, stormwater management, groundwater basin planning, compliance with waste discharge requirements and other regulation, climate change adaptation, and changes in taxation and farm succession planning are just some of these challenges.

By setting key strategies and benchmarks of success, the District is well equipped to take on these challenges. These hurdles also provide greater opportunities to work more closely with our long list of diverse partners to achieve mutual goals and build capacity with our neighboring Conservation Districts. The District is uniquely poised to continue its legacy of positive and proactive conservation through advocacy, stormwater management, assistance to the agricultural community with regulatory compliance, conservation planning, and innovative conservation practices, and educational programs for students and adults.

2012-2017 Goals and Strategies

Overview of Our Five-Year Goals:



Goal 1 Conservation and Stewardship

The District will continue to work with landowners and partners to implement innovative resource stewardship and conservation for improved water quality, quantity, soil health, and natural habitat enhancement.



1A. Support good stewardship practices and provide technical assistance to ensure resource conservation.

- Develop a third party conservation planning certification program to meet the needs of landowners in navigating new regulations for vineyards and rangeland in Sonoma Creek to comply with recent Ag. Waivers.
- Continue implementing the “Slow It, Spread It, Sink It!” Program for beneficial stormwater management by working with partners to identify and promote retention and other water conservation practices as part of integrated regional watershed management plans.
- Establish and continue partnerships with owners of public lands (e.g. Sonoma Land Trust, SCAPOSD, Regional Parks, etc.) to assist in conservation planning and recommendations for best management practices and overall land management
- Pursue streamlining of CEQA compliance and permit approvals for broader geographic areas and longer time periods. Stream maintenance and enhancement projects will be completed with reduced project costs, expedited project timelines, and implementation of multiple projects simultaneously.

1B. Provide leadership and coordination to ensure resource management in each of the District’s three main watersheds: Sonoma Creek, Petaluma River, and Stemple Creek.

- Continue to engage with landowners and partners in updates to watershed plans, stormwater management, and water quality improvement in all of the District’s watersheds.
- Provide leadership and participate in development of innovative conservation practices as part of the County’s energy independence, Climate Protection Campaign and Sonoma Biochar Initiative.
- Support and align the County’s Health Action program initiatives with the District’s agricultural and environmental education program activities.

1C. Implement high priority habitat improvement projects on private and public land and measure success.

- As part of the District’s Conservation Planning program and implementation of watershed management plans, begin the implementation of a Rural Road Improvement Program where District staff will conduct sediment source assessments on rural and agricultural roads throughout the District.

- Expand and improve the District’s Habitat Enhancement Program by building upon prior projects to create larger, contiguous and more beneficial habitat improvement projects.
- Consider the development of a water quality monitoring program to assist agricultural landowners in waste discharge requirements monitoring and assess the success of riparian enhancement and sediment reduction projects.

Goal 2 Education and Advocacy

The District will work to enhance the public’s understanding of resource conservation practices and expand awareness of the needs of the District’s constituents and its programs.



- 2A. Strengthen the District’s education and outreach activities to landowners, the public, and other audiences throughout the District.**
- Expand the number of watershed forums and natural resource and agricultural workshops to increase and expand program implementation and knowledge of the District as a resource.
 - Enhance current outreach and education programs in schools and higher institutions such as SSU and SRJC to reach the greater public about resource conservation issues.
 - Expand dissemination of educational materials and opportunities to the Spanish speaking community including the *Slow It, Spread It, Sink It!* guidebook and natural resource management, erosion control, and sustainable agricultural workshops.
 - Continue to partner with other Districts and partners to expand education and outreach efforts to the greater public throughout Sonoma County.
 - Continue to work with local partners to acquire a demonstration ranch and/or conservation center.
- 2B. Proactively identify key issues and represent the interests of District’s constituency.**
- Enhance the District’s ongoing engagement with constituents to maintain an up-to-date understanding of their issues and priorities.
 - Educate regulators regarding the impacts of regulations on landowners, agriculture and conservation practices. Continue to be engaged in and providing effective feedback about processes that undermine the sustainability of agriculture in the District.
 - Continue the coordination of the District’s Regional General Permit for levee maintenance with agencies and landowners in lower Sonoma Creek Watershed.
 - Continue and expand broad collaboration with partners throughout the County.
 - Provide information regarding local needs to local, state, and federal resource and funding agencies as they develop their annual priorities.

2C. Improve marketing and the District's capacity to provide public information about its programs.

- Develop clear and effective messaging for publicity and various communication tools.
- Develop marketing tools and outreach materials for public relations, correspondence, and fundraising.

Goal 3 **Organizational Excellence**

The District will enhance its ability to effectively fulfill its mission by being efficient, effective, and well-funded.

3A. Ensure excellence in governance and operations.

- Maintain a knowledgeable, effective Board of Directors that is focused on the organization's mission and vision.
- Complete an annual review of the District's five year strategic plan to record milestones and accomplishments.
- Create a electronic database to track the history of the District's past and current projects, programs, and participants.
- Assess the potential to reduce cost and increase administrative capacity through an administrative partnership and staff sharing or consolidation with another District.

3B. Develop a diverse base of funding support.

- Expand the District's Fee for Service Program.
- Pursue general service agreements with the City of Petaluma and other jurisdictions.
- Pursue foundation grants and other sources (public or private) to support innovative conservation projects and education and outreach activities.
- Work on a regional basis with other neighboring Districts to create programs that are competitive for grant funding.

3C. Build District capacity to support its core mission principals.

- Determine adequate technical staff needed to fulfill strategic plans goals.
- Assess the potential to reduce cost and increase technical capacity through staff sharing or consolidation with another District.

The District's Strategic Plan was developed with consultation services provided by:



The Results Group