

Oregon Association of Conservation Districts (OACD)

Position Statements

September 29, 2022

These position statements:

- Focus on natural resources matters,
- Relate to the business of Oregon Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs),
- Serve as a reference for OACD actions in legislative and regulatory matters, and
- Reflect a large majority of the opinions of Oregon SWCDs.

These position statements have been crafted with intent to remain at the policy level. Remaining at this level is important because flexibility is necessary to respond to foreseen and unforeseen regulatory and legislative initiatives. Also, the document must be kept to a modest length to preserve its usability. There is a deliberate attempt to avoid specific and detailed best management practices (e.g. prescribed burning, no-till farming, exclusion fencing, etc.). This is done because best practices are often situational based, and it is difficult to select one size fits all approaches to conservation.

1. GENERAL APPROACH TO NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION

Balanced Approach to Natural Resources Management and Use

OACD supports a balance between conservation of natural resources and using natural resources responsibly.

Discussion: In achieving the balance, key considerations include the need for economic vitality, food and forest products, water with ample supply and suitable quality, long-term sustainability of the natural resources, and an environment that is healthy, resilient, and diverse. OACD encourages management approaches that are respectful of the balance and believes that a full range of management tools need to be available to allow sound choices in a wide variety of situations.

Voluntary Conservation

OACD supports the use of voluntary conservation as an approach to conserving natural resources.

Discussion: Voluntary conservation that relies on the efforts of citizens and businesses can be effective in achieving results while at the same time supporting good relations with government agencies tasked with protecting our

natural resources. Voluntary conservation is not always an economical choice for landowners, so incentives will often be necessary to make it happen. Mandatory conservation through laws, regulations, and enforcement actions cannot be completely avoided, but is a less preferred approach.

Locally Led Conservation

OACD supports the use of locally led conservation as an approach to conserving natural resources.

Discussion: Locally led conservation is beneficial because it helps make successful projects by incorporating knowledge of local conditions and developing community support. However, local resources for projects are often insufficient and funding as the state and federal level is often needed to support locally led conservation efforts.

Sustainable Management Practices

OACD supports the use of sustainable resource management practices.

Discussion: Sustainable management practices are those that can be continued for indefinite periods of time while allowing the natural resources such as plants, animals, soil, water, and air to remain in conditions that reflect a healthy environment.

Partnering and Coordinated Resource Planning

OACD supports partnerships and coordinated resource planning where multiple agencies and organizations can work together in a multidisciplinary approach for the benefit of the natural resources.

Discussion: Often there are multiple organizations that have overlapping interests in individual projects and programs, and they each bring different knowledge, resources, and missions. Optimum projects and programs take advantages of the strengths that each can bring.

Key Partners

OACD supports key partners in efforts that complement the work of SWCDs.

Discussion: There are a variety of public and private organizations that have similar missions with SWCDs. OACD is part of a formal partnership, the Oregon Conservation Partnership, with the Network of Oregon Watershed Councils, Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts, and the Oregon Conservation Education and Assistance Network. OACD has close working relationships with the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, the Soil and Water Conservation Commission,

and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Other key partners include but are not limited to the Department of Water Resources, Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Forestry, Department of Environmental Quality, Department of Agriculture, Oregon State University, Resource Conservation and Development Councils and the Farm Service Agency. OACD should support complimentary work, but at times these organizations take positions and actions that are inconsistent with SWCD missions and OACD should oppose directions that impair or undermine the goals and policies of OACD.

Urban and Rural Conservation

OACD supports both urban and rural conservation efforts.

Discussion: Impacts to our soil, water and other natural resources occur in both urban and rural settings, and it is important to address issues in both settings and to coordinate between two types of lands.

Conservation on Public and Private Lands

OACD supports conservation on both public and private lands.

Discussion: Impacts to our soil, water and other natural resources occur regardless of land ownership and it is important to address issues on both private and public lands and to coordinate between the two types of lands.

Conservation Education

OACD supports education and information programs that promote conservation of natural resources.

Discussion: The effectiveness of conservation efforts is dependent on effective public education that is based on current sound science and relevant practical experience. SWCDs and their partners should regularly conduct conservation tours, field days, forums and programs that expand the public understanding of conservation. Examples of important topics include pollution prevention, water, soils, climate, agriculture, forestry, ecology, and best management practices.

Conservation Planning

OACD supports conservation planning to set a foundation for a conservation practice to move forward.

Discussion: Implementation of conservation practices are dependent on good planning to make sure that actions are effective and that they achieve a good balance in the use and preservation of our natural resources. Public agencies

and private parties need to have sufficient resources to conduct planning efforts and to develop plans.

Locally Produced Food and Products

OACD supports the use of locally grown food and other products derived from renewable resources.

Discussion: Encouraging local food production and other products has many benefits including ensuring the viability of small farms, supporting local jobs and small businesses, strengthening local economies, and creating an important link between people and the land. Local food production has environmental benefits through minimizing the environmental footprint from long distance distribution systems. Support can be provided by promoting local markets, farm to school programs, voluntary certification programs, and education of consumers.

2. FUNDING

Funding for SWCDs

OACD supports all means to provide stable sources of funding for SWCDs.

Discussion: For SWCDs to function they need to have a reliable source of funding. Particularly, important is funding that can be used without restriction for basic administration and overhead. Such funding is appropriately provided at the State level. OACD supports voter-approved local taxes to provide additional funding to SWCDs. OACD supports grant opportunities for SWCDs but recognizes that grants do not provide stable funding and rarely provide sufficient allowance for administration and overhead costs.

Funding for Natural Resource Agencies

OACD supports funding for federal and state natural resource agencies at levels that provide strong programs that support natural resources conservation.

Discussion: Natural resources conservation is dependent on programs at the federal, state and local levels. OACD is particularly interested in agency funding that can be used to supplement, enhance, and complement programs that are of interest to SWCDs.

Oregon Lottery Funds

OACD supports the continued use of lottery funds to fund natural resources conservation, especially for SWCD capacity grants and support of the Oregon Conservation Partnership.

OACD opposes actions that would reduce or restrict the availability of such funding.

Discussion: This source of funding is essential for SWCDs and must be preserved.

SWCD Fees for Technical Assistance

OACD supports SWCDs to provide technical assistance / consulting services to customers at little or no cost to the extent practicable and with consideration of ability to pay

Discussion: SWCDs are successful in large part due to the fact that customers can get help and advice without significant expense. This ability to connect with customers and provide good advice on conservation practices and to secure grants and loans is essential. At the same time, it is recognized that SWCDs need to be able to cover their expenses, so fees are often necessary for certain services such as attending formal SWCD offered trainings and workshops.

Long-Term Funding and Commitment for Conservation

OACD supports long-term funding and commitments for conservation.

Discussion: Conservation efforts often take years to decades to implement, and it is important that funding and other support for projects and programs match the lifespan of the work. This long-term need is particularly true for monitoring and project maintenance. It is important to recognize that monitoring is essential to development of scientific understanding, learning and adaptation. Additionally, state agencies that support conservation need to be adequately funded to implement their mandates.

3. WATER RESOURCES

Water Conservation

OACD supports water conservation as a means to make limited water supplies serve a full range of beneficial uses to the maximum extent possible.

Discussion: Water conservation is the wise use of water with little waste. Wasted water limits the potential for all desirable and beneficial uses of the water.

Groundwater Quality

OACD supports the use of best management practices to protect the quality of groundwater so that it can be used for all beneficial purposes.

Discussion: Once groundwater is contaminated it is very difficult to clean it up. Therefore, diligent efforts need to be made to minimize the amount of pollutants that are introduced into groundwater. Best management practices can be associated with design of waste management facilities, and appropriate application of fertilizers pesticides and insecticides to the land.

Groundwater Supply

OACD supports efforts to better understand groundwater hydrogeology and make sure that the supply is used in a sustainable manner.

Discussion: In order to properly manage groundwater, we must have a thorough understanding of its location, quantity, quality, and recharge characteristics as well as the prevention of transfer between aquifers. With this understanding it is possible to determine how it can be used sustainably.

Surface Water Quality

OACD supports efforts to better understand existing surface water quality and to achieve water quality standards in accordance with the federal Clean Water Act and Oregon laws to the extent that there is a reasonable balance between the quality of the water and the need to use water resources for beneficial purposes.

Discussion: The Clean Water Act (CWA) sets forth the directive to establish water quality criteria, list impaired water bodies (303d lists), and develop total maximum daily loads (TMDLs). In implementing the CWA there is substantial opportunity for judgment, e.g. in interpretation of science and water quality data. These interpretations have significant bearing on whether the resulting TMDLs will support a balance between good water quality and the ability to economically use water resources for beneficial purposes.

Water quality monitoring to determine background concentrations of contaminants is essential to proper implementation of the CWA and state laws that govern water quality.

Funding for monitoring, development of scientifically sound TMDLs, and actions to achieve TMDLs is essential.

Surface Water Supply and Storage

OACD supports programs for water development that ensure adequate water supply at the time the water is needed and are protective of other natural resources and water rights of record.

Discussion: Water can be a critical limiting factor in human activities and environmental health. New water supplies should be developed to the extent practical so long as they do not have serious negative consequences on other natural resources. Surface water development can be achieved in a variety of ways such as new storage, water recycling / reclamation, water use efficiency, and actions to retain water in watersheds for longer periods of time for slow release during dry periods.

Water Rights

OACD supports actions to implement and enforce the laws in a manner that encourages water conservation and assures that our limited water supplies are made available to all beneficial uses in an equitable manner.

Discussion: The existing system of water rights including the principle of “first in time first in right” needs to be respected. At the same time, and with acknowledgement of our limited water supplies, efforts are needed to ensure that water is not wasted and is put to beneficial use. Systems need to be encouraged that allow transfer of water rights and reservation of water rights for future uses. Ongoing study of surface water and groundwater supplies and their relationship to existing water rights is needed to provide an improved foundation for understanding how much water is available now and in the future. Enforcement of water rights laws is critical to make sure that legal uses are protected. The Oregon Water Resources Department needs to administer water rights through proactive, effective and transparent communication; enforce water rights laws in a consistent manner; and proactively review and update water rights laws, regulations, policies, and programs.

Water Planning

OACD supports comprehensive long range planning efforts to ensure that water resources are well managed given changing supplies, demands, and environmental conditions.

Discussion: Oregon needs a strong vision of its water future and road maps for successfully moving forward. Planning is needed both at the state and regional / watershed level, and must be done with active involvement of stakeholders, policy makers, and subject matter experts.

Water Measurement and Efficiency

OACD supports accountability for efficient water use.

Discussion: Accountability means knowing how much is used and being responsible for proper use. Efficiency refers to minimizing wasted water and wasted energy.

Agricultural Water Quality Management Plans

OACD supports the role of Districts working with ODA to implement the Agricultural Water Quality Management Program and Agricultural Water Quality Management Area Plans and the continued financial support to Districts to implement the plans at the local level.

Discussion: The program and plans are effective approaches to preventing water pollution.

4. AGRICULTURE

Agriculture in Oregon

OACD supports efforts to promote successful agriculture in Oregon.

Discussion: Agriculture is a critical industry in Oregon that needs to continue in a manner that is economically viable and productive. It is important to have a diversity of crops, scales of operations, growing practices and right to farm protections.

Agricultural Heritage

OACD supports efforts to preserve and grow Oregon's agricultural heritage.

Discussion: The culture surrounding agriculture is critical to its long-term success. It is important to recognize the past practices and accomplishments and take action to make sure that agricultural is viable in the future. This includes preservation of farmland, development of farming communities and work forces, and making sure that people can afford to choose the lifestyle without destruction of natural systems such as erosion and groundwater depletion.

5. FORESTRY

Forestry in Oregon

OACD supports effort to promote successful and sustainable forestry in Oregon.

Discussion: Forestry is a critical industry in Oregon that needs to continue in a manner that is economically viable, productive and innovative. It is important to have a diversity of forest products, scales of operations, and management practices that support to sustainable forestry. Practices need to be compatible and coordinated across public and private lands.

6. WILDFIRE

Fuels Reduction

OACD supports sustainable efforts to reduce fuel loads that can lead to catastrophic wildfires in natural resource environments.

Discussion: It is understood that fire is a natural phenomenon and is an important part of ecosystem health, but excessive fuel loads can lead to high intensity fire that can lead to serious damage to soils and water quality and loss of valuable timber. The trend towards more high intensity fires is increasing, and this trend should be reversed by appropriate management actions on both public and private land.

Fire Fighting

OACD supports increased funding and resources to fight fires and flexibility for the various agencies that fight fires to cooperate and share resources.

Discussion: With the trend of more and larger fires, it is necessary to provide more resources to control fires, including the ability to coordinate suppression effectively among levels of local, state and federal government resources.

7. SOIL CONSERVATION AND HEALTH

OACD supports efforts to conserve soils and to build the health of soils.

Discussion: Soil is a fundamental building block of our ecosystems. It forms in geologic time scales and is not easily replaced. Loss of soil is a substantial problem caused by wind and water erosion and poor management practices. Healthy soils exhibit physical, chemical and biological characteristics that allow people to achieve reasonable goals in an economical and sustainable manner. Improved soil health is linked to greater carbon sequestration, reduced surface runoff and erosion, and increased water holding capacity. Soil health is critical to agriculture, forestry, the natural environment, and people.

8. SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION

Promotion of Science

OACD supports vigorous research on current and emerging natural resource issues and needs.

Discussion: Support for science and research programs is essential to advancing our understanding of natural resources and how to conserve and enhance them.

Science Based Decision Making

OACD supports the use of scientific evidence in making public policy decisions, taking into account that decisions often involve some level of uncertainty and acceptance of reasonable risks.

Discussion: It is recognized that science will continue to yield new information that will affect our understanding of natural resources. It is important to rely on the best current science, but action to conserve and use our natural resources cannot always wait for complete certainty in the science. Precaution is important, but it should not be applied excessively.

Environmental Monitoring

OACD supports environmental monitoring to collect important information that can inform decisions on natural resources.

Discussion: The need for environmental monitoring has not received sufficient support in the past leading to frustration in not knowing whether actions are necessary to conserve and protect natural resources and whether past projects and programs have been effective. Monitoring efforts with well-designed protocols and funding to support projects and programs. Efforts to build and manage comprehensive repositories for environmental data need to be supported so that data from various sources can be made accessible.

9. CLIMATE AND ENERGY

Climate Change

OACD supports efforts to reduce greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere and adapt to climate change. In doing so, actions on natural and working lands throughout the landscape to achieve these ends should be promoted.

Discussion: While solutions to climate change will require a multifaced approach, OACD is most focused on those actions that take place on natural and working lands. Such actions include those that reduce emissions and sequester carbon

and increase the ability of natural resources to be resilient and adapt to changing climactic conditions. Important contributions can be made through management of natural lands in both urban and rural settings. Consideration must be given to implementing practices that complement key uses of the lands such as farming, forestry, and wildlife habitat.

Renewable Energy

OACD supports development of renewable and alternative energy sources.

Discussion: Sustainable, low impact energy sources are needed to secure our future.

Renewable Energy Facilities Siting

OACD supports actions that result in locating renewable energy facilities, such as solar facilities, at sites that do not substantially interfere with the function of important natural and working lands.

Discussion: There are usually multiple options for siting renewable energy facilities, and the least expensive options are often on natural and working lands. OACD holds that natural and working lands are often valuable beyond their market value and need to be protected against loss. Siting should be restricted on lands with productive soils and important natural resources considering regional characteristics of the land. Decisions on siting of renewable energy facilities on natural and working lands should be made consistently throughout the state. Additionally, OACD supports regional self-sufficiency and distributed energy generation systems in agricultural operations.

9. LAND USE

Right to Farm

OACD supports right-to-farm laws.

Discussion: The ability to farm efficiently must be preserved and right-to-farm laws prevent interference from urban and other concerns. It is important to educate landowners regarding agriculture and forestry practices through workshops, publications, and community meetings.

Preservation of High Value Farmland and Forestland

OACD supports preservation of high value farmland and forestland for the purpose of growing and harvesting.

Discussion: High value farmland and forestland with high quality soils and good growing conditions continues to be lost due to urban encroachment and non-farm uses. Efforts should be made to minimize the loss of such lands. This includes preventing siting of large power generation facilities or other non-compliant structures or uses as defined under state zoning laws on high value farmland and forestland.

Working Lands and Conservation Easements

OACD supports efforts to implement resource conservation practices on working lands that conserve natural resources in harmony with the need to use the land.

Discussion: Working lands (agriculture and forestry) can provide important opportunities for conserving natural resources. The opportunities include use of good farming and forestry practices that conserve and protect soils and water. Additionally, the use of conservation easements where there is high value in protecting the ecosystem and little loss of the ability to work the land can be beneficial. SWCDs, private land trusts, and others can properly hold easements and own conservation properties because they can have the technical knowledge and financial assurances to ensure proper administration of the easements or acquired land.

Wildlife Corridors

OACD supports actions that maintain and enhance important corridors for the movement of at-risk plants and animals.

Discussion: Plants and animals need to be able to migrate to new locations for survival especially as the climate changes. The ability to migrate can be hampered by habitat fragmentation in various forms including incompatible land uses and barriers in the form of transportation infrastructure. It is important to identify at-risk species, their habitat needs, and their migration barriers and take actions to preserve and enhance key corridors.

Critical Habitats

OACD supports highly functioning ecosystems in critical habitats.

Discussion: Riparian zones can support a wide diversity of plants and animals. They also have a very important role by buffering activities that can contribute to water pollution such as erosion of sediment and movement of nutrients. The shade provided by trees in riparian zones is very important in keeping water temperatures cool.

Wetlands can provide critical habitats and serve important ecological functions. Wetlands continue to be lost to human development and need to be given high

priority for protection and restoration. Fill and removal projects associated with urban land development and agricultural practices contribute to the loss of wetlands and need to be designed to minimize impacts and provide mitigation.

Coastal marshes and estuaries are of critical importance because they provide habitat for many plants and wildlife. They are of critical significance to west coast commercial fisheries. These areas are also a source of “blue carbon,” providing the ability to sequester carbon.

Uplands can also have critical habit that needs to be protected. Sage grouse habitat is a good example.

It is important to inventory and define critical habitats to support good stewardship and policy.

Habitat Trading

OACD supports processes and programs for habitat credit trading to mitigate environmental impacts.

Discussion: To support a balanced approach to natural resource management and use, flexibility is needed in how to mitigate environmental impacts. Habitat credit trading and use of mitigation banks can be good ways to achieve the balance.

10. WEED AND PEST MANAGEMENT

Noxious Invasive Species

OACD supports efforts to maintain and update weed lists and weed information, detect weeds in the environment, educate citizens, plan responses, and eradicate noxious invasive species.

Discussion: Efforts can be done through a variety of organizations including SWCDs. The Oregon Department of Agriculture and the Oregon Invasive Species Council (OISC) have existing plans and programs that should be supported. Formation of local weed control districts is encouraged. Efforts can benefit from volunteer public participation, but State and local funding is needed for partnering with state, federal, and local agencies for programs to have success.

Integrated Pest Management

OACD supports the use of integrated pest management to control or eradicate the various forms of pests including rodents, birds, insects, fungus, nematodes, bacteria and noxious invasive weeds.

Discussion: Integrated pest management (IPM) relies on a combination of techniques such as biological control, habitat manipulation, modification of cultural practices, and use of resistant varieties. Pesticides are used only after monitoring indicates they are needed, and treatments are made with the goal of removing only the target organisms. Pest control materials are used in a manner that minimizes risks to human health and the environment.

11. MISCELLANEOUS POSITION STATEMENTS

SWCD Board Governance

OACD holds that SWCDs are best served by board members that bring relevant knowledge, experience and expertise to their job as board members.

Discussion: Currently, SWCD board members must meet certain eligibility requirements defined in state statute including land ownership, natural resources management, and residence location. There are likely to be efforts to modify or eliminate eligibility criteria in the future. OACD holds that there are a variety of options for eligibility criteria, but the criteria should result in boards that are filled with people with knowledge of the geographic areas they serve and natural resources issues. OACD recognizes that the criteria must be sufficiently open to provide opportunity and flexibility to accommodate diversity, equity, and inclusion to serve SWCDs.

Endangered Species Act (ESA) Assistance

OACD supports financial and technical assistance to help landowners and land managers comply with legal requirements as a result of ESA actions.

Discussion: ESA compliance can be expensive and disproportionately affect some landowners and managers over others, yet the benefit of compliance is widespread. Assistance should be used to minimize economic disruption to communities, businesses, and individuals affected by threatened/endangered species listings, designation of critical habitat and through safe harbor agreements and implementation of recovery plans.

Safe Harbor

OACD supports safe harbor agreements that provide protection to landowners who engage in voluntary conservation programs.

Discussion: Participation in voluntary conservation involving threatened and endangered species can put the landowner at risk of assuming additional unintended responsibilities under environmental laws. To encourage

participation, safe harbor agreements that limit landowner liability when they are acting in good faith should be made available.

Strengthen Participation in Conservation & Working Lands Programming

OACD holds that SWCDs and their constituents are best served by broad and diverse participation in conservation and working lands programming, and supports efforts that encourage diversity, equity, and inclusion in such programming throughout the state.

Discussion: OACD recognizes that gaining the perspectives of, and working with, diverse communities increases the strength, resiliency, and future viability of the state's conservation and working lands programming. OACD supports conservation and working lands legislation that aligns with its position statements, and that also results in the inclusion of, but not limited to, community members of all ages, genders, and historically under-served and under-represented groups including people of color and tribal members.