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# DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION TASK FORCE

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Report to the NACD Board of Directors

## *From Equality to Equity*



FEBRUARY 1, 2021

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## DEI TASK FORCE MEMBERS, ADVISORS AND STAFF

### *Members:*

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Kelly Stagen – Northeast Region, NACD Alternate Board Member - Pennsylvania

Jerry Smith – Southeast Region, NACD Alternate Board Member - Mississippi

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Sadie Lister – Southwest Region, Little Colorado River Soil and Water Conservation District, Navajo Tribe, Arizona

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### *Partner Advisors:*

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Vernon Cox, Vice-President, NASCA

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### *Staff:*

Jeremy Peters, NACD CEO

Kimberly Uldricks, NACD Director of Membership

## PREFACE

The Task Force members represent a microcosm of people from across the Partnership, and none of us – either individually or collectively – are experts in the issues and opportunities of diversity, equity and inclusion. The Task Force believes that to be effective in improving our reach into previously underrepresented communities, conversations about improving diversity, equity and inclusion need to be ongoing over time: persistent, consistent and caring. Sometimes, these conversations are hard. Often, they are uncomfortable. However, the greatest growth comes from times when we question how and what we do. Fully incorporating these ideals into the fabric of actions by the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) is a journey that has no end. We recognize that we don't yet know what we don't know, and that the value lies in taking this journey together, seeking continual improvement at every opportunity.

Perhaps the most important topic related to diversity, equity and inclusion is to simply start the conversation.

## BACKGROUND

### **NACD Board of Directors Statement on Diversity, Equity and Inclusivity**

*Adopted July 2020*

The NACD Board of Directors formally denounces racism and discrimination in any form. We are committing to gain greater awareness and understanding of issues important to diverse communities, and we support actions to advance diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in conservation.

We are taking additional steps to encourage greater diversity in our national board, calling for the formation of a Task Force to examine DEI in our internal governance; and we call on conservation districts and state associations to examine their own programs, policies and procedures related to diversity, equity and inclusion as well, in order to make conservation delivery accessible and available for all Americans.

We also call on conservation districts to actively engage all members of their local communities to understand conservation issues important to diverse populations, to encourage greater diversity in local elections and to encourage even greater transparency and open dialogue in conservation district programs. NACD recognizes that if we do not fully embrace diversity, equity and inclusion in each and every local conservation district, then we cannot possibly be a diverse organization at the national level.

At our core, we are a grassroots organization representing every community in the United States – and we understand that expanding our commitment to DEI takes this same fundamental approach – a voice that starts in the thousands of local communities that we serve and grows emphatically, energetically and compassionately into a cohesive national transformation that takes root across the country. NACD is fully committed in its efforts of diversity, equity and inclusivity to work with clients, conservation districts, partners, and others to achieve our fundamental goal of transforming how we reach and work with communities across the country.

## CHARGE

The Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) statement approved at the NACD Board of Directors July 2020 meeting called for a Task Force to be created to provide a set of recommendations back to the board on DEI issues both for NACD and our 3,000 conservation districts. The Task Force convened in September 2020 and was charged with the following:

- Review internal governance
- Examine programs, policies and procedures to encourage even greater transparency and open dialogue
  - Open meeting laws
  - Significance of local work groups
  - Local conservation district elections
  - Other topics relevant to issues of diversity, equity and inclusion
- Actively engage all members of local communities to understand conservation issues important to diverse populations

## ACTION

The Task Force developed a report and toolkit framework to help guide the conversation. Weekly video call meetings were conducted to address each identified action item. At the onset of our meetings, we developed a set of working definitions to help guide our conversations. By design, the terms are broad.

**Diversity is who we are.** It is a broad concept that encompasses all the differences among individuals. Diversity, therefore, is all inclusive, of all people and their thoughts, ideas, backgrounds and experiences.

**Equity is how we do it.** It is the guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity and advancement for all.

**Inclusion is what we do.** It is bringing individuals and groups into processes, activities and decision/policy making in a way that empowers and values them.

The DEI Task Force conducted a survey of conservation districts on diversity, equity and inclusion experience and resources. See Appendix A for the full list of questions. The survey was open October 6 - October 23, 2020 and collected 103 responses from 12 states. Responses were solicited through NACD publications, including eResource, regional newsletters and social media websites. State/Territory Association Executive Directors and contacts encouraged participation through social media, newsletters and direct emails.

Responses were neutral in NACD's position in providing leadership on diversity, equity and inclusion.

The top resources requested from NACD were 70 percent Guides and Templates and 58 percent Trainings. Requests in the comments section included real world case studies, GIS data on land use changes, printed materials, and a library of resources.

Successes reported by survey participants included partnering with organizations whose priorities include DEI and strong district leadership providing the connection to diverse populations. It was also reported that ongoing trainings and discussions amongst staff and supervisors created the opportunity to reimagine programs to meet the needs of diverse populations, including translations of documents.

DEI survey respondents identified a variety of challenges. Lack of diversity is seen amongst staff and district boards but also within the community served. They also reported challenges in personalities being averse to change or training as it related to DEI, lack of engagement from minority communities, and lack of capacity and funding.

See [Appendix B](#) for complete survey results.

## REVIEW INTERNAL GOVERNANCE

A review of NACD internal governance documents was conducted. These documents included: Board of Directors job description, Executive Board job description, Region Chair/Vice Chair job description, bylaws and strategic plan.

With respect to the job descriptions, the individuals selected for these positions are determined at the state and/or regional level. As such, NACD does not have influence over who is named to each position, only that they meet the core qualification, which is to be a governing member of their local district board.

The bylaws were also reviewed as part of this process. Currently, there are no recommendations for changes.

A review of the NACD strategic plan found multiple focus areas relating to DEI. The relevant sections of the plan have been compiled into a summary document as [Appendix C](#). For reference, [Appendix D](#) contains the full strategic plan.

## EXAMINE PROGRAMS, POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

### Open Meeting Laws

Generally speaking, Open Meeting Law is a set of rules to ensure transparency in the deliberations where public policy is discussed. Each state sets its own rules and regulations that public boards must adhere to. As local units of government, conservation district officials are required to follow the guidelines set forth in their state regulations. Open Meeting Law covers topics such as: meeting notification, executive session, remote participation, public participation, minutes, etc.

There are a variety of factors to be considered when examining if strict adherence to Open Meeting Law could in fact be limiting meeting access to some members of the local community. Some of these factors include:

Factors:

1. Lack of outreach to underrepresented/underserved communities
2. Lack of access to meetings (too far away, inability to access remotely, no phone conference/listening capabilities provided by conservation district)
3. Required public notice represents a minimum bar for a conservation district to meet; it may not reach the broader, more diverse community present in a district
4. Education/training
5. Language – translation of announcements. Special accommodations – translation, interpretation, etc.

Recommendations:

1. Place announcements in locations underrepresented/underserved communities meet or congregate; visit in their language and provide information for special accommodations if needed
2. Look for ways to meet remotely by using new technology, phone lines, etc. If no access to new technology, use newspapers or local media to share information
3. State-specific training on local meeting law for clear understanding of meeting notification, executive session, remote participation, public participation, minutes, etc.
4. Develop materials such as public notice/announcements, agendas, materials presented at meeting, etc. in other languages to reach non-English-speaking producers/partners

## Significance of Local Work Groups

The locally-led conservation effort is the foundation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s conservation program delivery process. The local working group supports the locally-led conservation effort by coordinating USDA programs with other federal, state, tribal and local conservation programs to provide an integrated solution to addressing natural resource concerns. Local working groups, convened by the local conservation district, provide recommendations on local natural resource priorities and criteria for USDA conservation activities and programs. Local working group membership should be diverse and focus on agricultural interests and natural resource issues existing in the local community. Meetings should occur at least once a year and should be open to the public. For more information, contact your [local NRCS District Conservationist](#).

There are a variety of factors to be considered when conducting local work group meetings, which could in fact be limiting/affecting meeting access to some members of the local community.

Factors:

1. Lack of outreach to underrepresented/underserved communities, different disciplines and stakeholders
2. Lack of access to meetings (too far away, lack of transportation, inability to access remotely, no phone conference/listening capabilities provided by the conservation district, lack of internet access, lack of phone services, translation services, sign language)
3. Public notice/announcement: Timing of publishing; funding to cover the expense can be a challenge for some districts; translation of announcements
4. Materials – have documents translated into other languages spoken within the CD and appealing depending on the audience
5. Equipment

#### Recommendations:

1. To keep them engaged, tell stakeholders what the conservation district and NRCS will do for them and how we will use their input with the input they have provided. Plan for the next meeting of the Local Work Group, including a date, location and agenda
2. Newsletters – include them on distribution for local newsletters to keep in contact with them on what CD is doing. Communication more than one time a year.
3. Develop materials such as public notice/announcements, agendas, materials presented at meeting, etc. in other languages to reach non-English-speaking producers/partners
4. Place announcements in locations underrepresented/underserved communities meet and congregate; visit in their languages and provide information for special accommodations if needed
5. Look for ways to meet remotely by using new technology, phone lines, etc. If not access to new technology, use newspapers or local media to share information.

## Local Conservation District Elections

This information applies to conservation districts who run their own elections for conservation district board positions. A secondary audience could be state/territory conservation agencies or tribal governments that oversee or run conservation district elections. A tertiary audience would be the public, including potential candidates and voters.

A thorough review of the local election process has many desired outcomes, including:

- Increase awareness of, and engagement with, local conservation districts
- Increase participation in conservation district board elections, including populations not currently represented on the district board or on staff



- Shift the paradigm of conservation districts from viewing board elections as a burden to viewing them as a core function as their status as a division of local government and as opportunities to expand their reach in their community
- Composition of the local district board is reflective of the community

Factors:

1. Who is in the conservation district's base, i.e., who does the conservation district usually reach out to? If it is limited, one result may be limited participation in the election.
2. Does the conservation district view their appropriate role as serving a limited clientele or serving everyone within their conservation district boundary? Those who view their role as serving a segment of the people in their district may find it hard to attract interest from outside that segment.
3. Does the enabling legislation for the conservation district limit who can serve as conservation district board members? Does this affect who the district reaches out to?
4. Is the conservation district limited in capacity (time, money, energy)? Reaching more people may require more resources, but remember that some ways of reaching out cost very little.
5. Is the conservation district able to enlist help from others, such as their state conservation agency, county auditor or local elections department? Help from trusted sources can make a difference, both in aiding your efforts and in augmenting the appearance of objectivity and fairness.
6. Does the conservation district usually hold board elections in conjunction with another event? If it is an event that draws a large cross-section from the people in the district's boundary, that can help increase participation in a district board election. Conversely, if the event is limited to a specific group, that can limit participation.
7. Does the time of year your conservation district election is held (for those who are not on the general ballot) serve to limit participation? Homework: recommendation for each style of election.

Recommendations:

1. Work to understand the natural resource issues you address and the people you serve. Sometimes conservation districts perceive that they serve natural resources but, in most cases, no natural resource conservation gets done without people agreeing to work with the conservation district. Conservation is what we do to address natural resource concerns; serving people is how we do it.
2. Work to know your own enabling statute or tribal code.
3. Work closely with your state conservation agency or tribal government. They know your enabling legislation very well and can help guide your work to increase participation in your district election.

4. Increase your outreach. Publishing information about your board election should consist of more than meeting the minimum requirement in your state. Reach out to representatives of groups who may have an interest in what your conservation district does. Think outside the box when it comes to outreach and who you serve.
5. Ask for help. If your district does not have enough staff or enough money to increase outreach activities, ask for help. Even if you think there is no possibility that your state agency or county auditor can help, ask them anyway. Create a list of things you would like to do and how much each would cost. Bring that to your state agency and/or your funding partners.
6. Holding elections in conjunction with an event that draws widely from the community you work in can be an effective way to increase participation. Be careful, though, not to focus on one special interest, because that can prevent others from being included.

## Other Topics Relevant to Issues of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

DEI for our organization must start at the local level and is a cultural change not unlike the changes we ask of our producers to make in their operations regarding soil health. Sometimes it starts with active directives, and other times, it is a leap of faith from advice given from someone they trust. As we know with soil health, if you suddenly try to change everything all at once with little to no guidance, failure can occur that makes it unpalatable to continue. However, with the proper resources and research, with help from leaders you trust, and moving toward it as a series of benchmarks, it can be achieved over time and is ever-evolving.

### *Generational Communication*

A generation is one way to group age cohorts. Groupings are typically done in 15-20-year increments, with the range typically being set around demographics, attitudes, historical events and popular culture. Generational differences, and more importantly generational communication, play an important role in diversity, equity and inclusion. Knowing *how* to communicate across multiple generations is just as important as *what* to communicate.

At any given time, you may be faced with working with three to four different generations at once. Understanding how each generation interacts with each other, as well as with other generations, helps facilitate communication and connection. Intergenerational connection focuses on the strength that each generation brings – not their differences. It is this shared wisdom that sparks creativity, collaboration and inclusiveness. The first step to connectivity begins with understanding what motivates a generation to act. The next step is identifying how that group prefers to communicate. Most importantly, learning to accept differences provides a vehicle to find common ground and let real collaboration begin.

See [Appendix E](#), “Generations in the Workforce – The Value of Including Different Problem Solving Strengths” for more in-depth information.

### *Outreach*

When trying to reach all members of a community, meet them where they are. This is in the physical sense, as well as the social/emotional. Learning how and where people gather in your community is

greatly beneficial to outreach activities. Understanding cultural differences and having any needed accommodations in place goes a long way to showing people that their thoughts, values and experiences matter.

## ACTIVELY ENGAGE ALL MEMBERS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Understanding conservation issues important to diverse communities involves moving past open meeting laws and into actively engaging people and communities that normally are not reached by a posting in the paper and/or a sign on the office door. This takes a little work and planning. For starters, research the demographics of your county. Ask questions of your board and community about the people of your county who are not getting involved in your meetings that should. For example: All the big farmers go to (insert ag supplier here), and your board always posts on their bulletin boards. Instead, you may try additionally seeking out the small garden centers and horticultural suppliers to broaden your reach.

Underrepresented/underserved people are people who face additional barriers to access services. As a Task Force, we struggled with not only defining each population, but also in deciding which would be the appropriate term to use for the purpose of this report. One might look at underserved in terms of potential customers of a district who have been unable to access services, while underrepresented could be a segment of the population that is not reflected on the local board. People who are underserved are often underrepresented, and this may contribute to a lack of inclusion and service. It is our desire to include all voices. Ultimately, we agreed that this terminology may be more regionalized in nature and may be best left defined at the local level at this time.

## PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships are critical to the work of conservation districts. Collaboration with others magnifies the reach of any one individual or organization. Much like seeking out partnerships to get conservation practices in place, developing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with outside organizations can be mutually beneficial to both parties.

The DEI Toolkit, located in Appendix E, contains a list of organizations that may serve as potential partners for matters related to DEI. Through the recommendation of the Task Force, NACD is engaging the following organizations for new or modification of existing MOU's with an emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion.

Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS) - <https://www.manrrs.org/>

Farmer Veteran Coalition - <https://farmvetco.org/>

Indian Nations Conservation Alliance (INCA) - <https://inca-tcd.org/>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of our research and deliberation, the Task Force makes the following recommendations:

1. Recognizing that the work around DEI issues is best part of an ongoing conversation with follow-up action, we recommend that the NACD President appoint a special committee to continue the work started by the DEI Task Force
2. Establish an advisory committee with new voices and perspectives drawn from outside the Conservation Partnership to support the DEI special committee
3. Hire a DEI consultant to conduct an organizational audit and make training recommendations
4. DEI training for all members of the NACD Board of Directors
5. DEI training for all members of NACD staff
6. Update/add to Toolkit on an annual basis
7. All future Memoranda of Understanding include language to support and advance DEI initiatives
8. Continue to seek avenues to advance DEI initiatives by raising capital or partnerships
9. In addition to the resources listed in the toolkit, the Task Force identified other topics where more in-depth training could be beneficial depending on the local needs; for example, generational communication and local work groups.

## RESOURCES

### NACD Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Toolkit

Task Force members compiled and reviewed online resources related to DEI. These materials have been categorized into training materials suitable for local-, state- and national-level events. Topics include partnerships, communications, awareness, implementation strategies, data and training. By no means is this list exhaustive, nor is every resource relevant for every district or state/territory. The Task Force intends for the toolkit to be a living document, with periodic updates as more resources are discovered and/or developed. The toolkit is located in [Appendix F](#).

### Training Opportunities

Within our own conservation family exists opportunities to access DEI training. NRCS and NASCA have established training programs that local district officials and employees can participate in. Local districts and state/territory associations are encouraged to reach out to your respective state contacts if you would like more information. Additionally, the NACD District Operations/Membership Services Committee is working on new online training modules that will soon be available through the NACD website.

## APPENDIX

[Appendix A: DEI Survey Questions](#)

[Appendix B: DEI Survey Results](#)

[Appendix C: Strategic Plan - ABBREVIATED WITH IMPLEMENTATION STEPS](#)

[Appendix D: Full Strategic Plan](#)

[Appendix E: Generations in the Workforce – The Value of Including Different Problem Solving Strengths](#)

[Appendix F: DEI Toolkit](#)