



Washington Association of Conservation Districts

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December 11, 2023

Dear WACD Members and Partners:

As we swiftly approach the end of the 2023 calendar year, I want to take a few moments to review WACD's accomplishments this year and thank you for your help and support. WACD works in close coordination with our members and partners, so some of this review will also cover a few of the bigger events that touched our wider community.

January: Testimony on legislation

WACD dealt with some significant issues during the 2023 legislative session. That session convened on January 9, 2023, and almost immediately the Governor's riparian bill, HB 1215, was filed. WACD [testified on HB 1215](#) and [on another bill dealing with NPDES permittees](#). The WACD Board adopted legislative priorities in January based off 2022 resolutions.

WACD [testified as OTHER on HB 1567](#) concerning conservation district elections. WACD [testified as PRO on HB 1720](#) on the protection and restoration of riparian areas.

It is important to note that the ability of WACD to take positions that may differ from the State Conservation Commission is one of its important functions. WACD can express positions that the Commission and conservation districts cannot. WACD can lobby for certain outcomes and has invested in this work for many years. Most of WACD's advocacy work happens before bills are heard by committees. When WACD provides testimony, that act reinforces substantial work that has already occurred to influence the shape and direction of proposed legislation.

February: Legislative Week / NACD Annual Meeting

Early in February, WACD invited conservation districts to Olympia for a Legislative Week event. The feedback we heard was quite positive, both from districts and from legislators.

Washington State was well-represented at the annual meeting of the National Association of Conservation Districts held in New Orleans, Louisiana. Significantly, some of our people received [national recognition for their contributions](#). Associate Supervisor Larry Davis

(Whatcom CD) received the President's Award from outgoing NACD President Michael Crowder (Benton CD). Supervisor Wade Troutman (Foster Creek CD) was recognized by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and by NACD with the Olin Sims Conservation Leadership Award.

March: NACD Spring Fly-In / SCC terminates ED

March was a period of heightened activity. WACD sent Doug Rushton and Ryan Baye to Washington DC as part of NACD's Spring Fly-In. Our people partnered with NRCS and others to present information (primarily on the Farm Bill) to key leaders in Congress and federal agencies. WACD also asked conservation districts to send letters to state legislators in support of meaningful riparian funding. [Washington State's Spring Fly-In team](#) consisted of:

- Michael Crowder, NACD Past President, Benton CD Supervisor
- Doug Rushton, WACD National Director, Thurston CD Supervisor
- Ryan Baye, WACD Director of Member and Legislative Services
- Keith Griswold, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist
- Daryl Williams, SCC Chair, Governor Appointee with the Tulalip Tribes
- Cherie Kearney, SCC Commissioner, Governor Appointee with Columbia Land Trust
- Larry Cochran, SCC Commissioner, Palouse CD Supervisor

March is also when the [State Conservation Commission severed its relationship](#) with then-Executive Director Chris Pettit. This move surprised many in our conservation community. At that time, WACD expressed the belief that more work was needed to restore trust between conservation districts and the Commission, an opinion that drew some fire from a few folks. WACD's ability to share what we are hearing can and does lead to positive outcomes, although that pathway is sometimes not a straight line.

In the shadow of these high-profile events happening in Olympia and Washington DC, the [WACD Plant Materials Center continued setting new records](#) for plant production and sales. The harvest season for the PMC starts around December 1st and in 2023, it concluded by the end of March. Our PMC people worked extremely hard in 2023 to grow, harvest, and provide quality native plant materials for conservation projects across Washington State.

Toward the end of March, operating budgets were released for the House of Representatives and the State Senate. The State Conservation Commission released their summary of the House and Senate proposals for FY 23-25 Operating and Capital Budgets. WACD expressed [support for the proposed \\$10 million in Conservation Technical Assistance](#) funding and asked that it be ongoing funding instead of one-time funding. WACD also suggested the riparian funding dollars would best serve Washington State by being in the Capital Budget so that

projects could be planned and delivered over more than two years. Surprises in budget negotiations surfaced in April.

Meanwhile, WACD's Sustainable Funding Committee and Livestock Task Force met. WACD continued to seek participants in the Shared Resources Work Group. The WACD Board of Directors also authorized staff to move some cash into certificates of deposit so as to lock-in good returns.

April: Albert Roberts / budgets adopted by Legislature

And then April arrived. The [Okanogan CD lost a long-time supervisor](#), Albert Roberts, in a farm accident. This loss was felt across our entire community.

WACD members made a last pitch with legislators in support of Conservation Technical Assistance. At the end of April, WACD reported on more than \$55 million in new programmatic funding for the State Conservation Commission, bringing the Commission to a record \$97 million in operating funds for the FY 23-25 biennium. Unfortunately, something happened at the 11th hour in the budgeting process, resulting in a reduction in Conservation Technical Assistance from the proposed level of \$10 million to only \$1 million.

The Conservation Commission was allocated \$63.5 million in the Capital Budget, an increase of almost \$40 million compared to the previous biennium. Most of that increase came from \$25 million for riparian restoration grants, satisfying a WACD priority that riparian grants be funded through the Capital Budget.

A study of conservation district elections was funded. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy was tasked with delivering a preliminary report by December 1, 2023. As we now know, this report has been delayed a year.

WACD monitored many bills and activities during the 2023 legislative session and generated an [end-of-session report](#) for members that summarized actions of significance to conservation districts.

At the end of April, WACD watched and waited during the 20 days provided to the Governor to sign, completely veto, or partially veto bills. Our catchphrase then was a quote from Yogi Berra: "It ain't over 'til it's over!" In May, Governor Inslee signed a budget of historic proportions.

May: Final budget signed / WACD Board prepares for new FY

The WACD Board of Directors reviewed a [new annual work plan and a new budget for FY 23-24](#) that were later adopted at their June meeting.

June: WADE training / Walla Walla HS Envirothon team

In June, WACD was represented at the Washington Association of District Employees' annual training conference. Notably, NRCS Chief Terry Cosby also joined folks at the WADE conference. WACD staff began planning for the 2023 WACD Annual Conference and Business Meeting. WACD was well-represented at a celebration of life for Albert Roberts, held in the Okanogan Grange building. The [Walla Walla High School Envirothon team](#) took the statewide trophy in their very first year of competition.

July: Ron Shultz / NACD Summer Conservation Forum

In July, our community suffered another loss with the unexpected passing of long-time [conservationist Ron Shultz](#). Ron's work for the State Conservation Commission touched all conservation districts. He was well-known and well-regarded for his commitment to local conservation and his support of the voluntary conservation ethos.

WACD was well-represented at the NACD Summer Conservation Forum and Tour, held in Bismarck, North Dakota.

August: Heather Wendt / SCC releases position description

The vastly increased funding for conservation work coming from Washington State to the State Conservation Commission and conservation districts requires expanding the Commission's capacity. Similarly, NRCS capacity must also increase as their funding levels rise. In August, WACD chose to expand our Executive Office staff by [hiring Heather Wendt](#) to serve as Director of Development and Engagement. Heather served the Benton and Franklin conservation districts for 22 ½ years, and before that, she worked for 4 years in Maryland for NRCS and the Kent Soil and Water Conservation District.

Also in August, the State Conservation Commission released their position description for a new Executive Director. WACD updated the resolution template in anticipation of conservation districts working on resolutions in September. WACD began publishing a new grant opportunities newsletter and updated the District Directory.

September: CREP contracts / Prep for Area Association meetings

September arrived and within came news of problems with some Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program contracts. We saw articles on this published in the Lynden Tribune and the Capital Press, and it was mentioned in two episodes of The Farming Show podcast. WACD published the Area Association annual meeting dates and provided additional information to our members on the State Conservation Commission's recruitment efforts for the Executive Director position.

During this time, WACD staff were hard at work on [October area association meetings](#) and on planning the WACD Annual Conference and Business Meeting. The WACD Board of Directors approved a letter of engagement with an attorney to serve as WACD's General Counsel, and as part of that arrangement, also set aside \$10,000 to fund a "first hour is free" legal consultation process for WACD members in good standing. Some of the services WACD provides to members include:

- Advocacy and representation
- Assistance in reaching legislators
- Providing email service for conservation district supervisors and employees
- "First hour is free" legal consultations, with subsequent hours billed at a discounted rate

The State Conservation Commission bid adieu to Kirk Robinson and thanked him for stepping in to serve as Interim Executive Director of the Commission. Sarah Groth was appointed to serve as the new Interim Executive Director.

WACD adopted a theme for the 2023 Annual Conference: "Conservation: Getting To Yes."

October: Area Association meetings / grant submitted by WACD

[WACD Annual Conference and Business Meeting](#) registration opened in October. WACD Officers and WACD staff traveled back-and-forth across Washington State to attend all six area association annual meetings.

Also in October, WACD contracted with Streamline (<https://www.getstreamline.com/>) to rebuild WACD's public-facing main website. Streamline provides a platform that will help WACD provide a website that is more accessible to visitors with visual and auditory challenges.

WACD submitted a \$4 million project proposal to NACD to assist Washington State dairies in achieving methane reduction.

November: Five RCPP grants / WACD Annual Conference

In November, WACD staff were putting the final touches on the WACD Annual Conference and Business Meeting. Final speaker selections were made. The search for sponsors continued.

[NRCS awarded five RCPP grants in Washington State](#), totaling \$73 million. Three of these awards were for the Odessa Groundwater Replacement Program. Also funded was a project on the upper Yakima River (water supply and fish habitat) and a methane reduction project for Washington State dairies.

WACD set January 25, 2024 as the next Legislative Day in Olympia. WACD's policy committees met to review all resolutions adopted at area association meetings.

To save some operating cost and increase accessibility, WACD changed phone vendors in November. WACD Executive Office staff are available through a single number (564-669-7540) and a message left at that number goes to Heather, Ryan, and Tom. This helps assure that your message is not lost in the shuffle. We also added a toll-free number to assist those who may have to pay long distance charges to reach us: 1-866-275-9223 (1-866-ASK-WACD).

After Thanksgiving, in its 81st year of existence, WACD put on the 2023 WACD Annual Conference and Business Meeting. We culled some numbers from the event, including:

- 39 CDs participated online or in person
- 66 virtual attendees
- 136 in-person attendees
- 14 different partner entities attended, including some sponsors
- Over 26 speakers
- 27 sponsors
- 28 resolutions

December: Resolutions / SCC hires ED

One outcome of the resolution process was a call for the WACD President to appoint a task force to address some concerns about the availability of native plant materials for conservation district projects. The increased funding over the past two years has dramatically increased demand for certain species of native plants. WACD's Plant Materials Center is producing record numbers of plants but has been unable to meet the needs of all conservation districts. Some districts are distinctly unhappy about this situation. The WACD President will appoint a task force to help us figure out how we can provide the plants conservation districts need for their projects.

The State Conservation Commission completed the hiring process for the Executive Director position, welcoming James Thompson as their new executive.

Closing

Calendar year 2023 is just about in the books. As you can read in the high-level summary above, it's been quite a ride. I know I missed some other significant events but I've already stretched your grace by making this missive more than six pages long!

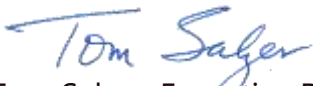
Throughout the year, WACD worked hard to deliver the services and representation needed to help conservation districts succeed. WACD's advocacy work, the establishment of a much-desired legal services fund, and the effort to find a solution to a lack of native plant materials all serve the entire conservation district community.

Over the past two years, I have seen WACD become more responsive, more transparent, and more service oriented. These are positive changes. WACD is working hard to deliver more value to members. WACD's Board of Directors and staff are committed to continuing to find ways to better support Washington's 45 conservation districts.

On behalf of the WACD Board of Directors and WACD staff, I thank you for your support of WACD. The real story is told by the incredible work you are doing in your conservation district. Each conservation district confronts a unique set of challenges and opportunities, but there are also many concerns and needs that are common to most, sometimes all, districts. I was very pleased to see our community of conservation districts and partners come together on shared concerns several times in 2023. The community expressed a range of views and demonstrated strength in unity throughout the year.

From us to you, please have a healthy and happy holiday season. We'll connect again just around the corner in 2024!

Best always,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tom Salzer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Tom Salzer, Executive Director