



Washington Association of Conservation Districts

To: Washington State Elected Officials

From: Washington Association of Conservation Districts (WACD)

Subject: Improving Conservation District Funding and Operations in Washington State by Modifying RCW 89.08.405 (Rates and Charges)

Executive Summary

Washington State Conservation Districts are eligible to collect revenues from locally established Rates and Charges, as governed by RCW 89.08.405. The collection of these funds is approved at the county level through a resolution process. Limits on funding are established based on county populations (\$5 per parcel for populations under 485,000; \$10 per parcel for populations between 485,000 and 1.5 million; \$15 per parcel for populations over 1.5 million).

These funds provide sustained, predictable revenues to help conservation districts meet local needs, funded by local taxpayers. The bulk of funding for most conservation districts in Washington state is otherwise obtained through competitive, short-term grants that provide minimal discretionary funding for general district operations and make long-term planning and effective program implementation difficult.

The conservation districts of Washington propose the following modifications to the RCW to provide greater flexibility, with more local control, over the Rates and Charges system:

Allow the local authorizing jurisdiction to set the rate per parcel amount based on community need, not population size. Add clarifying language that counties may retain an optional fee to cover costs incurred to collect Rates and Charges in an amount not to exceed their actual costs or 1% of the amount collected whichever is lower.

Problem Statement

Many counties rely on conservation districts to provide critical services to residents where resources and expertise are otherwise limited. The current system of Rates and Charges does not allow local authorizing jurisdictions to set per-parcel rates at levels necessary to meet community needs. Additionally, the costs associated with collecting the funds vary widely, further complicating efforts to maintain consistent and reliable funding streams.

Background

Rates and Charges ensure conservation districts have the resources they need to fund natural resource projects in local communities - addressing natural resource needs in an equitable manner proven to result in long-lasting impacts. Rates and Charges are an essential source of revenue relied on by many conservation districts, ensuring conservation programs and services are more widely available across Washington State.

The system is based on a per parcel "rate" as well as a variable "charge." The system is founded on the principle that different land uses have different conservation needs, receive different benefits, and therefore should be charged different rates. For Washington counties with populations under 485,000 persons, the maximum annual per parcel rate shall not exceed five

dollars; for counties with populations between 485,000 and 1.5 million persons, the maximum annual per parcel rate shall not exceed ten dollars, and for counties with a population of over 1.5 million persons, the maximum annual per parcel rate shall not exceed fifteen dollars.

RCW 89.08.405 (6) states in part that “The county treasurer shall deduct an amount from the collected rates and charges... to cover the costs incurred by the county assessor and county treasurer in spreading and collecting the rates and charges, but not to exceed the actual costs of such work.” The current practice of fund collection for conservation districts varies significantly between counties. While one county may retain between 11% and 12% of collected funds, others retain as little as 1%, and one county collects \$0.20 per parcel. This variability has a direct impact on the resources available for conservation districts to deliver essential services.

Benefits of Rates and Charges

Rates and Charges guarantee funding over a set number of years. This long-term commitment, set by the local authorizing jurisdiction, allows conservation districts to be proactive, plan and develop long-term programs, and offer services needed over an extended period to ensure success. It allows conservation districts to hire dedicated professional staff knowing that financial certainty exists.

1. Long-Term Effectiveness – District staff can focus on implementing programs and delivering results. Rates and charges allow districts to do things that are difficult to find grant funding to do but necessary to effect long-term landscape-scale changes.
2. Leveraging Resources – Many grant programs require a matching amount from a local entity to ensure buy-in from the immediate community. Rates and charges give conservation districts the local match needed to bring project funding to their communities.
3. Meeting Local Priorities – Conservation districts exist to meet the local community’s needs regarding the conservation of natural resources. This funding stream allows districts to expand and direct their services and resources based on priorities set by their locally elected Board of Supervisors who understand the needs of their communities. Rates and Charges allow local communities to prioritize services important to them.
4. Building Capacity – Being primarily grant-funded, conservation districts have very little discretionary funding for operations, fleet, facilities, IT, legal and human resources support, and other “discretionary” items. It is not uncommon that state or federal budgets suddenly provide an influx or withdrawal of hundreds of millions of dollars dedicated to certain programs (e.g. wildfire resilience, salmon recovery) that districts are tasked with implementing. Scaling up or down and meeting these challenges is very difficult to do without sustained funding to help manage staffing levels, facilities, and all other overhead costs associated with a government organization not to mention accounting for inflation.

Proposal/Solution

WACD proposes that the Legislature amend RCW 89.08.405 by removing the per-parcel population caps and allowing local authorizing jurisdictions to set per-parcel rates at levels necessary to meet community needs. Counties may retain an optional fee to cover costs incurred in an amount not to exceed their actual costs or 1% of the Rates and Charges collected whichever is lower. Providing local control of funding levels helps make rural and urban communities more resilient, economically viable, and environmentally sound.

Overview of Funding for Conservation Districts in Washington State

The Role of Rates and Charges

This overview provides insight into how Rates and Charges fit into the broader funding landscape for Conservation Districts (CDs) in Washington State. Unlike other subdivisions of state government, Conservation Districts do not have dedicated funding sources, which makes their financial stability and ability to serve their communities heavily reliant on grants and supplemental funding.

Funding Challenges for Conservation Districts

Conservation Districts rely on grants from the Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC) and other sources to fulfill their mission of providing locally-led natural resource conservation. These grants, such as the Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) program, are crucial to the continued success of all 45 Conservation Districts across the state.

Out of the 45 districts in Washington State, only 22 currently have access to local funding as outlined in RCW 89.08.400 and RCW 89.08.405. Given this variability, Rates and Charges should be considered a supplemental funding source that enhances a district's ability to more effectively meet the needs of its community, rather than a guaranteed or primary source of revenue.

Rates and Charges in Context

While Rates and Charges can play a valuable role in supporting the work of Conservation Districts, they are not uniformly accessible or applied. Many districts face challenges in obtaining these funds due to differing levels of local government support. This lack of consistency highlights the importance of maintaining robust state-level grant programs to ensure that all districts have the resources necessary to carry out their vital work, regardless of their ability to generate local funding.

Conclusion

To ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of Conservation Districts in Washington State, it is essential to view Rates and Charges as a complementary funding mechanism that works in conjunction with state-provided grants. The ongoing support of legislative grant funding through the WSCC remains integral to the mission of all 45 districts as they strive to lead locally-driven efforts in natural resource conservation.