



10-Minute Supervisor Trainings

Kentucky Soil and Water Conservation Commission

DECEMBER 2012

Conservation Districts: How We Began

In the 1930's, our country was experiencing the greatest economic depression along with a severe drought in the Midwest. The severe drought coupled with widespread tillage of the soil caused one of the most ecological disasters known to man, The Dust Bowl. From this disaster, Congress passed legislation declaring soil and water conservation a national priority. In 1937, President Roosevelt wrote the governors of all the states recommending legislation that would allow local landowners to form soil conservation districts.

In Kentucky, the General Assembly passed legislation enabling the creating of conservation districts in 1940. South Logan Conservation District was the first to be assembled and was issued a Certificate of Organization on November 19, 1940. The Henderson County Conservation District was the last to be established in 1954 therefore covering the state with conservation districts.

Conservation Districts were charged with the goal of developing and implementing programs that protect the natural resource base of the district. In 1946, to provide more state input into the conservation program, the General Assembly created the Division of Conservation. In the beginning, the division's goal was to provide primary administrative assistance to the districts. Since that time, the programs have expanded to include financial assistance, education and information, budgeting, financial reporting, equipment loans, participating in the soil survey and other areas.

In the beginning, Conservation districts were formed to allow local citizens many opportunities to help guide and develop conservation programs in each county by working at the "grass roots" level. This is seen as the most important vantage point for identifying problems, finding solutions and implementing programs. Many programs that began at the grass roots level still exist to this day. Many were picked up and expanded to the state level.



Kentucky has been a leader in the nation when it comes to conservation efforts.

- In 1948, the Kentucky General Assembly established the Equipment Revolving Loan Program to provide loans to Kentucky's Conservation Districts for heavy and specialized equipment. Since its existence, more than 2300 loans have been made for over \$64 million. In 2007, the General Assembly approved language to include infrastructure, allowing conservation districts to borrow money to purchase or construct office space.
- Kentucky General Assembly passed Kentucky's Watershed Act of 1956. Kentucky then became a national leader in watershed project development with three watershed projects recognized nationally by the National Watershed Congress.
- In the 1960s saw progress made in conservation planning and implementation. During this time, a new conservation technique was being born in Christian County in western Kentucky. At that time, it was called minimum tillage and no-till.
- The 1980 General Assembly passed legislation to provide a millage tax to conservation districts to raise funds for conservation programs. It was one of the first pieces of legislation in the United States to provide districts with a means to fund conservation activities.
- In 1982, the General Assembly passed the Agricultural District Program which provided Kentucky's farmers an opportunity to place their land in an agricultural district and protect it from the conversion of farmland to other uses.
- In 1994, Kentucky's General Assembly passed sweeping conservation district legislation with the passage of a State Funded Cost Share Program and the Agriculture Water Quality Act which will shape conservation district programs well into the next century.

This is just a brief glimpse in to the history of conservation in Kentucky. In the next several months, trainings will focus on where conservation districts are at in their programs in the present and how conservation will be implemented in the future.

DISCUSSION

1. What were some of the early programs your conservation district implemented locally?
2. What can we learn by looking back in the past that may help us in the future?
3. How could your district become more locally driven in the future?