WHAT ARE CONSERVATION DISTRICTS?

Montana’s legislatively mandated local soil and water conservation authority.

Conservation districts are governmental subdivisions of the state with broad responsibility to carry out programs that conserve soil and water, protect streams and rivers, and improve wildlife habitat.

HISTORY

1939
MCA Title 76, Chapter 15 established the responsibility for the Conservation districts.

1975
Montana enacted the Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act, otherwise known as the 310 Law (MCA Title 75, Chapter 7, Parts 101-125). The 310 Law gave conservation districts the responsibility to administer permits for work in Montana’s streambeds.

CD STATISTICS

58 Conservation districts
472 Elected and Municipality-Appointed Supervisors
104,135 Supervisor hours donated annually

MONTANA’S CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

Local, Commonsense Conservation

Important conservation district work faces basic operational funding gaps

CONSERVATION DISTRICTS AT WORK

Lake County CD supervisor Susan Gardner (center) has worked with Lake CD administrator Heidi Fleury (right) and NRCS District Conservationist Ben Montgomery (left) to create an innovative pollinator habitat program in Lake County.

Many conservation districts have worked to develop citizen science water quality monitoring programs.

In 2018, the Garfield CD ran the local AIS inspection station. This is just one of the many ways districts assist other agencies.

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### HOW CONSERVATION DISTRICTS BENEFIT MONTANA

Conservation districts work on a variety of education, demonstration, research, and restoration projects that conserve Montana’s natural resources. These projects include:

- Rangeland management: monitoring, riparian management, and grazing systems
- Soil health improvements on cropland and rangelands
- Water quality projects
- Irrigation efficiency
- Pollinator habitat installations in cropland, rangeland, and urban areas
- Tree planting and shelter-belts
- River restoration
- Saline seep reclamation
- Fire and flood restoration
- River-basin wide conservation on the Milk, Missouri, and Yellowstone Rivers
- Conservation education for youth and adults, including Montana Envirothon
- Aquatic invasive species prevention and awareness and weed control
- Conducting research for on-farm application of soil health principles

Funding is a major source of concern for conservation districts. They are funded through local mill levies, but many do not receive enough money annually to employ even one full-time employee.

#### 2017 mill levy funding for conservation districts

- 7 districts received < $10,000
- 22 districts received $10,001 - $20,000
- 10 districts received $20,001 - $30,000
- 9 districts received $30,001 - $50,000
- 5 districts received $50,001 - $150,000
- 5 districts received > $150,000

The following table shows the funding needed to bring districts up to basic operational funding. DNRC provides administrative grants to help shore up local district funds, however there is still a shortfall.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Conservation District Operations Funding</th>
<th>$30,000 (39 districts)</th>
<th>$50,000 (48 districts)</th>
<th>$65,000 (48 districts)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funds Needed</td>
<td>$550,727</td>
<td>$1,445,544</td>
<td>$2,102,852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funds Available</td>
<td>($463,000)</td>
<td>($463,000)</td>
<td>($463,000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DNRC Admin Grants Base Budget</td>
<td>$363,000</td>
<td>$363,000</td>
<td>$363,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor’s proposed budget increase</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHORTFALL</td>
<td>$87,727</td>
<td>$982,544</td>
<td>$1,639,852</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### CONSERVATION DISTRICT OPERATIONAL FUNDING

#### 310 MANDATE

The average cost to process a permit is $200. This amount does not include the additional funds required for 310 emergencies, complaints and violation processing. Although Montanans recognize the importance of this task, it continues to be an **unfunded mandate**.

Conservation district supervisors donate an average of 19,175 hours per year on 310 permits.

#### 310 Program Administration Funding

| Total 310 Program Cost | $363,000 |
| Permit Processing cost to districts | $263,000 |
| Legal/Technical Support Cost | $100,000 |
| DNRC Base Budget - 310 reimbursement program | ($108,500) |
| SHORTFALL | $254,500.00 |

**DISASTER 310 PERMIT PROCESSING**

During the floods of 1996, 1998, and 2011, permits jumped an average of 564 applications annually and stayed elevated for 2 to 3 years. There are no additional funds for disaster permit processing requirements, so when permits increase conservation districts must rely on current administrative funding and donated time.