



NCDEA Connections

National Conservation District Employees Association

CONSERVATION • COLLABORATION • CAPACITY

Dear NCDEA Enthusiasts,

Welcome to the second edition of our NCDEA Connections quarterly newsletter. Building on the success of our inaugural issue, we strengthen the vital link between you - dedicated conservation district employees - and the NCDEA Board's national advocacy.

I'm excited by the positive response and conversations the first edition sparked. This issue highlights our work through programming, regional engagements, and partnerships.

We are especially proud of the resilience of conservation district employees nationwide, who successfully led partnership efforts through the extended federal government shutdown, ensuring continuity in vital on-the-ground work despite major federal disruptions.

Our collective strength transforms grassroots conservation into a unified national force. This quarter included deeper involvement throughout the regions, the NASCA/NWC Joint Meeting in Fort Worth, the SECDEA Annual Conference, expanded webinars, and policymaker discussions.

As your gateway to the National Conservation Partnership, we deliver timely updates, practical tools, and growth opportunities. This newsletter dives deeper while inviting your input.

Your stories of triumphs, challenges overcome, and fresh ideas enrich our community—please keep sharing.

Thank you for your dedication. Let's keep building together.

Sincerely,
NATIONAL CONSERVATION DISTRICT
EMPLOYEES ASSOCIATION

Tim Riley

Executive Director
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ISSUE HIGHLIGHTS

- NASCA & NWC Meeting
- National Partners Engagement in D.C.
- SECDEA Annual Conference
- National Conservation Planning Partnership
- NCDEA Webinar Highlight
- NCDEA at 2026 NACD - San Antonio, TX

NCDEA Board Strengthens Partnerships at the 2025 NASCA & NWC Joint Meeting

The NCDEA Board participated in the 2025 Joint Annual Meeting of the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA) and the National Watershed Coalition (NWC), held October 26–29 in Fort Worth, Texas, at the Radisson Fort Worth North at Fossil Creek. This important gathering convened conservation leaders, state agency directors, watershed sponsors, and partners to discuss advancing soil, water, and watershed stewardship nationwide.

The event highlighted Texas's innovative approaches to watershed management and flood control, with field tours showcasing local structures focused on maintenance, rehabilitation, and resilience. Sessions included parallel NASCA and NWC tracks, state idea-sharing, and joint discussions on policy and innovation.

NCDEA's Key Engagements

NCDEA President Melissa Higbee and Executive Director Tim Riley, with Vice President Sarah Tunge in attendance, delivered a joint report to the NASCA Board of Directors. They updated members on NCDEA's priorities in employee training, regional support, and advocacy for conservation district staff.

The meeting also featured a dedicated session with National Conservation Partnership (NCPP) leaders from NACD, NARCDC, NASCA, and NCDEA, aligning on unified national strategies.

Additionally, the NCPP Leadership Team met to further the National Conservation Planning Partnership's goals of reinvigorating conservation planning through strong collaborations.

Notably, the meeting's success demonstrated the remarkable resilience of our conservation partnerships. Held amid the ongoing extended federal government shutdown that disrupted federal conservation delivery nationwide, the gathering proceeded productively, underscoring the dedication of state, local, and partner entities in maintaining momentum for on-the-ground work.

These interactions reaffirm NCDEA's role in connecting district employees to broader national efforts.

Thank you to NASCA and NWC for hosting a meaningful event that built new insights and fortified relationships for the challenges and opportunities ahead.



NCDEA Leadership Engages with USDA-NRCS & National Partners in Washington, D.C.

In early December 2025, NCDEA President Melissa Higbee, Vice President Sarah Tunge, and Executive Director Tim Riley traveled to Washington, D.C., for a series of engagements focused on advancing conservation district employees' priorities.

On December 8, the team met with USDA-NRCS leadership to address critical challenges facing conservation delivery, particularly in the wake of the extended federal government shutdown. Our priorities were shaped by direct input and inquiries gathered through the NCDEA Board's communications with district



employees nationwide. Key discussions focused on strengthening the National Conservation Planning Partnership and increasing interstate consistency of Job Approval Authority for district employees. Additionally, the team advocated for the future stability of district agreements, continued support for non-funded workspace-sharing arrangements, and the universal adoption of the national Portal system to ensure consistent grant reporting and billing.

In addition, the same NCDEA leadership group engaged with national conservation partners during meetings with both NASCA, and the NACD Executive Board and staff. These collaborative conversations reinforced unified strategies across the partnership and emphasized the vital role district employees play in maintaining momentum for on-the-ground conservation.



Advocacy visits like these ensure that the perspectives and needs of frontline conservation professionals are directly represented at the national level. Thank you to everyone from our partner organizations for the productive dialogue, and to our leadership team for their dedicated representation of NCDEA members nationwide.

Reflections on the 2025 SECDEA Annual Conference

NCDEA had a strong presence at the 2025 Southeast Conservation District Employees Association (SECDEA) Annual Conference in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee (November 3-5), with Secretary Kayleigh Evans, Southeast Region Director Kelly Snoddy, Southeast Region Alternate Penny Warwick, and Executive Director Tim Riley attending.

Themed "Unmasking the Success of Southeast Conservation," this energizing event brought together dedicated conservation professionals from across the region for learning, sharing, and celebration. Under the strong leadership of SECDEA President Kelly Snoddy and the SECDEA Governing Board, the conference delivered two packed days of valuable sessions - from NACD

grant panels and hands-on trainings like Canva Creations and Conservation Jenga, to insightful topics on Farm-to-Table, Envirothon, and innovative programs like North Carolina's Book Barn. State Share Fairs highlighted impressive accomplishments from across the region, while partner updates from NACD, TACD, and others reinforced our shared commitment.

Tim Riley provided the NCDEA partner update, sharing our ongoing work to strengthen regions, deliver free training through webinars and Convene sessions, publicly launch the new NCDEA Connections newsletter for the first time, and advance the National Conservation Planning Partnership (NCPP). He also had the privilege of presenting the American Flag during the opening flag ceremony and installing the newly elected SECDEA officers in service to the SECDEA Governing Board.

Events like this remind us how vital regional collaboration is to our national voice. Thank you to SECDEA for another inspiring conference that equipped us all to continue advancing conservation across the Southeast region and beyond.

National Conservation Planning Partnership (NCPP)

At NCDEA, we understand the effort it takes to keep the spirit of conservation alive. As a proud partner of the NCPP, we have played a vital role in its accomplishments over the last decade and the exciting, renewed strategic direction that starts in 2026.

To that end, the NCPP Leadership Team convened during the NASCA and NWC Joint Meeting in Fort Worth, where a key focus was the exciting new Conservation Planning Training Pilot program, detailed at www.ncpp.info/pilot-training. This innovative hybrid initiative streamlines certification for conservation planners by combining required courses - such as



Conservation Planning Part 2 and Soil Health and Sustainability - into a coordinated experience with online pre-work and hands-on in-person training. The pilot aims to provide step-by-step support, gather partner feedback, and develop a scalable nationwide model to build greater capacity for quality planning.

The first session is scheduled for February 15–19, 2026, in San Antonio, Texas, in conjunction with the NACD Annual Meeting (with additional pilots planned in other locations).

Sign-up for the San Antonio training was a huge success, with application numbers far exceeding expectations and capacity—demonstrating strong demand for this vital professional development opportunity. Applications closed on December 5, 2025, and selected participants have been notified. For updates on future opportunities, [please sign up here](#). We're proud to be part of this forward momentum!

Despite the challenges of the ongoing federal government shutdown at the time of the meeting, the non-federal partners of NCPP (including NACD, NARCDC, NASCA, and NCDEA) reaffirmed their strong commitment to advancing NCPP efforts. This dedication highlights the resilience and shared resolve of our partnership to support planner development and ensure seamless conservation delivery.

In addition, the team advanced new resources and tools NCPP will launch to support your work - and we want to ensure you're among the first to access them.

Stay connected so you don't miss what's ahead:

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For more information, please visit [www.ncpp.info](#).

Join Us at the 2026 NACD Annual Meeting in San Antonio!

We invite all conservation district employees to connect with NCDEA at the 2026 NACD Annual Meeting in vibrant San Antonio, Texas, February 15-19.

NCDEA will maintain a dedicated Expo Booth throughout the conference - stop by anytime to chat with board members, learn about our latest training resources, complete our survey, share your stories, or discuss how we're advocating for you at the national level.

Mark your calendars for these highlighted NCDEA events:

Sunday, February 15

NCDEA Board Meeting: 8:00 AM – 1:00 PM
District Employee Training–Education and Outreach: 1:00 – 5:00 PM
NCDEA Reception: 5:30 – 7:00 PM

Monday, February 16

NCDEA Board Meeting: 1:00 – 4:00 PM

NCDEA Board Meeting: 2:00 – 5:00 PM

Tuesday, February 17

These gatherings are perfect for building connections, sharing ideas, and strengthening our collective voice. We look forward to seeing many familiar faces - and meeting new ones - in San Antonio! For more details on the NACD Annual Meeting, visit [www.nacdnet.org](#).

Spotlight on Innovative District Programming: Eagle Conservation District's Noxious Weed Initiative

In our ongoing commitment to sharing successful and replicable programs from across the country, we're excited to highlight a recent NCDEA professional development webinar featuring the Eagle County Conservation District (ECCD) in Colorado.

The October 2025 webinar, now available on [NCDEA's YouTube page](#), showcased ECCD's unique and highly effective noxious weed cost-share program. Presented by Program Manager Allegra Waterman-Snow and District Conservation Technician Greg Welsh, the session offered valuable insights into building a sustainable, community-focused initiative that combines financial incentives with essential technical assistance.

Key takeaways from the presentation include:

- **Program Evolution and Growth:** Reactivated in 2021 after years of limited activity, ECCD transformed a modest \$5,000 annual grant into a robust program through strategic partnerships with Eagle County, grant funding (including a \$160,000 America the Beautiful Challenge award), and voter-approved mill levy support generating over \$700,000 annually.
- **Focus on Technical Assistance:** While offering generous 75% cost-share reimbursements (up to \$2,250 per landowner), the program prioritizes education and planning. Staff conduct site visits, create customized management plans using tools like ArcGIS and Survey123, and provide species-specific guidance on biological, cultural, mechanical, and chemical controls—plus revegetation recommendations.
- **Community Impact:** In 2024–2025, the program engaged dozens of landowners and HOAs, evaluating thousands of acres. Many participants seek guidance more than funding, highlighting how knowledge builds long-term stewardship.
- **Sustainability Strategies:** Emphasis on permanent partnerships, grant leveraging, and stable local funding ensures ongoing capacity without relying solely on temporary sources.

As Allegra noted, "The technical assistance portion tends to be more important than the financial assistance," a reminder that empowering landowners with knowledge often yields the greatest lasting results.



This webinar is an excellent resource for districts looking to enhance or launch similar programs. You can find the full recording by visiting www.ncdea.us/training.

Thank you to ECCD for sharing your innovative approach - proof that with creativity, partnerships, and community focus, conservation districts can tackle persistent challenges like invasive species effectively. If your district has a program you'd like featured in a future webinar or newsletter, please reach out!

Visit www.NCDEA.us to Explore Resources

- Take the District Employee Survey: *Tell us about your district, what you need, and how we can help.*
- Professional Development Webinars: *Registration for live webinars and recordings.*
- Convene, LLC "Soft Skills" Webinar Training Service: *A free service provided for you by NCDEA.*
- Local Work Group Resources: *Presented by the National Conservation Planning Partnership.*
- Don Aron Scholarship: *Presented annually.*
- Outstanding Professional & District Board Member Awards: *Presented annually.*
- Federal Government Shutdown Checklist.
- Links to Conservation-Related Organizations.

Learn more about:

NCDEA's mission to advance the standing of district employees as professionals and serve as a vehicle for them to address regional and national concerns.

NCDEA's role in the national conservation community, including our participation in meetings with our key partners of NACD, NARCDC, NASCA, and USDA-NRCS.

NCDEA Board Quiz

How well do you know NCDEA?

1. What NCDEA Region names an invasive species as a focus of multi-stakeholder coordination efforts on multiple islands, and what is the invasive species?
2. Name the only state, and its NCDEA Region that borders all three of the following: Canada, Lake Superior, and Lake Michigan.
3. Farmers harvest me by the tons, then I am sliced, boiled, and spun into sweet crystals. What am I, and what NCDEA Region identifies me in their agricultural outputs?
4. If you attend an event with the current NCDEA Board, what two Board members would be most likely to don cowboy hats? Name the members and the regions they hail from.

If you think you know all 4 answers, please submit them to timothy.riley@ncdea.org. The first to submit all 4 correctly may receive some NCDEA swag, and be recognized in the next edition of the NCDEA Connection Newsletter.

(Current NCDEA Board members are ineligible to win, but feel free to submit your answers if you think you know!)



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