



NCDEA Connections

National Conservation District Employees Association

CONSERVATION • COLLABORATION • CAPACITY

Dear NCDEA Members and Partners,

Quarter 3 was very active and rewarding. From hands-on training in Michigan to Mid-Year meetings in Gulf Shores, AL, our team worked hard to deliver real value and build a stronger foundation for the road ahead.

Here are a few moments from the past three months I'm especially proud to share:

- **In-Person Training in Michigan:** In July, conservation professionals joined us in Grand Rapids for intensive training in conservation planning, soil health, and cultural resources. The demand was overwhelming, with 100 planners applying for 40 seats.
- **Record-Breaking Webinars:** Our monthly virtual series continues to hit new milestones.
- **Charting Our Future:** Our board met to craft a streamlined two-year strategic plan, and approved a fresh logo branding kit including a refreshed website planned for early 2027.
- **National Voice:** We continued to deepen our national partnerships and were honored once again by NRCS Chief Colton L. Buckley's invitation to participate in the quarterly Conservation Stakeholder Meeting in D.C., ensuring district employee voices stay front and center.

What's Next? We are fine-tuning the strategic plan now, with final approval set for December and implementation kicking off January 1, 2027. Looking ahead, we're focused on expanding our training offerings and strengthening state and regional connections.

None of this progress happens in a vacuum. Thank you to our Officers, Regional Directors, committee members, webinar speakers, and every district employee who poured time and energy into making this quarter a success.

I look forward to keeping the momentum going and seeing many of you at the NACD Annual Meeting in Las Vegas!

Please drop by www.ncdea.us for more information or to stay in the loop.

Sincerely,
NATIONAL CONSERVATION DISTRICT
EMPLOYEES ASSOCIATION

Tim Riley

Executive Director
timothy.riley@ncdea.org

ISSUE HIGHLIGHTS

- Conservation Planner Training
- Virtual Training Series
- Quarterly Stakeholder Meetings
- Mid-Year Meeting and Training
- Enhancing Partnerships
- Strategic Plan 2027-2028

Conservation Planners Take to the Field in Grand Rapids, Michigan

This July, 39 conservation professionals from 11 states traveled to Grand Rapids, Michigan, for four days of training, including three field days at Dunneback Girls Farm, a local fourth-generation farm. The Grand Rapids training followed February's first national conservation planning training in San Antonio, TX.

Participants included conservation district staff, NRCS staff, and partner organization staff, working through three core curricula: Conservation Planning Part 2 (CP2), Soil Health and Sustainability (SHS), and Cultural Resources. After completing online coursework and virtual pre-course meetings, participants spent a classroom day reinforcing those concepts. That day also included a producer panel focused on communication between planners and the producers they work with. The classroom day was followed by three field days spent in small groups on the farm, identifying resource concerns, working with field assessment tools, and developing and presenting conservation alternatives.

100 planners from 26 states applied for just 40 available seats. NCDEA coordinated the selection process, bringing together a cohort with a strong mix of organizations, experience levels, and regions. Participants pointed to the small-group format, the range of expertise among instructors, and the chance to work through a real planning scenario together. One said the most valuable part was "seeing the whole process start to finish and getting input from so many perspectives." Another valued learning "that it was okay not to know everything," and that bringing in a specialist or a more experienced planner is part of the job.

A sincere thank you to Dunneback Girls Farm for hosting, to the instructors and organizers who gave their time and expertise, and especially to the participants who made the trip and invested in their professional development!



Students working through the 9-steps of conservation planning.

Students and trainers from across the country gather at the Conservation Planning Training. July, 2026 - Grand Rapids, Michigan.





NCDEA Virtual Training Series Sets New Records

NCDEA's free monthly virtual training series continued to draw strong national participation this quarter, with two sessions setting new registration records. All webinars are held on the fourth Wednesday of the month at 9:00 a.m. PST / 11:00 a.m. CT.

July 22: Working with GIS: Tools for Conservation Districts

Speaker: Andrew Phay, Whatcom Conservation District, Washington

Andrew Phay provided an overview of GIS tools available to conservation districts, ranging from free platforms such as Google Earth and QGIS to mid-level solutions like Avenza Maps and enterprise-level applications within Esri's ArcGIS suite. Participants learned practical applications for each tool, gained insight into costs and capabilities, and explored how to select the right GIS solution based on a district's goals, resources, and technical needs.

Registrants: 300 from 38 states and territories (300 is an NCDEA webinar record)

Due to technical difficulties, the July recording failed; NCDEA is working to have the session re-created.

August 26: Building a Culture of Mentorship

Speakers: Jessica Wilson, Mark Walton, and Brandi Talton

Three district professionals led a fast-moving, one-hour conversation on strengthening mentoring culture across the nation. Because many states do not have formal mentoring programs, the session focused on simple, practical ways districts can build supportive connections through everyday actions—welcoming new employees, sharing opportunities, staying connected, and encouraging emerging leaders.

Registrants: 152 from 38 states and territories

The August recording is available on the [NCDEA YouTube channel](#).

September 23: Stop Rewriting Your Grants: Build a Master Grant Toolkit for Your Conservation District

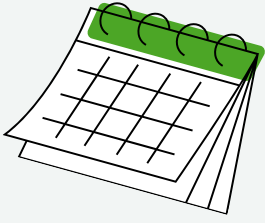
Speaker: Tanya Fell, Yuma County Conservation District, Colorado

Tanya Fell shared how to build a Master Grant Toolkit that keeps frequently used narratives, district information, project details, key statistics, partnerships, compliance information, and grant documents organized and ready to use. Participants received ready-to-use tools and worksheets to begin building their own district toolkit—helping save time, improve consistency, preserve institutional knowledge, and make the next grant application easier.

Registrants: 282 from 45 states and territories (45 is an NCDEA webinar record)

The September recording is available on the [NCDEA YouTube channel](#). The documents used during the session can be downloaded from the [2026 Sep 23 Grant Toolkit Webinar folder](#).

Thank you to all of our speakers for sharing their expertise and to everyone who registered and participated. These sessions continue to demonstrate the value of peer-to-peer learning across the conservation district community.



Looking Ahead - Mark your calendars!

2027 NACD Annual Meeting

February 6-10, 2027 Caesars Palace, Las Vegas

2027 Mid-Year Meeting and Training

August/September 2027, Location TBD

NRCS Quarterly Stakeholder Meetings

NCDEA is honored to be among the national conservation stakeholders invited by NRCS Chief Colton L. Buckley to an in-person quarterly Conservation Stakeholder Meeting at USDA-NRCS Headquarters in Washington, D.C. These meetings provide a valuable opportunity for NRCS leadership to share updates on programs, science and technology, and partnership initiatives - and for partners to share priorities and challenges directly with the agency.

We extend our sincere thanks to Chief Buckley for the continued invitation and for fostering open dialogue that strengthens the conservation partnership and supports the work of district employees across the country.

On September 22, 2026, NCDEA Executive Director Tim Riley attended the third-quarter Stakeholder Meeting. Key updates of particular relevance to conservation district employees included:

- Conservation Practice Standards & CEMA - Reviews of CPS 548 (Grazing Land Mechanical Treatment) and CPS 601 (Vegetative Barrier); revision of CEMA 216 (Soil Health Testing) adding laser diffraction for soil texture and clarifying the SLAKES method, with release for testing scheduled October 1, 2026. A new "SHAPE" soil-health testing tool is under development.
- Program Delivery & Impact 2.0 - Rankings and obligations were completed for EQIP, CSP, and AMA. The Impact 2.0 pilot is underway in nine states (plus Pacific Islands). RCPP selection announcements expected in October, followed by state negotiations. Capacity-building agreements were highlighted as highly beneficial. Recent conservation-planning trainings in San Antonio and Grand Rapids were highlighted by NRCS Planning Branch leadership.
- Integrated Field Tool (IFT) - Soft release to State Agreement Coordinators in early September; direct-to-agreement workflow expected in November; December IFT Forum planned.
- Partnerships Division - Agreement review completed for compliance with recent executive and USDA guidance.
- Soil Health Resources - NRCS refreshed its soil health web pages for clearer navigation by land use and topic. You can find the page here: [NRCS Soil Health Web Page](#).

Chief Buckley has invited NCDEA to the next Conservation Stakeholder Meeting in December, when related sessions, including a Regenerative Agriculture Stakeholder Meeting and IFT Forum, are expected. NCDEA will continue to monitor these developments, share actionable updates with members, and represent the perspective of conservation district employees at the national table.

Mid-Year Meeting & Employee Training

Deliver Strong Engagement in Gulf Shores

NCDEA's Mid-Year Board Meeting and Employee Training drew leaders and members to The Lodge at Gulf Shores State Park in early September for a productive mix of governance work, professional development, and relationship-building.

Board Meeting Highlights: The Board reviewed strategic planning progress, conducted a candid board assessment, and discussed ways to maintain momentum between in-person meetings. Members noted the value of the NCDEA mailing list as a strategic asset and explored ideas for restructuring committees to engage more non-board members and build future leadership.

The Board set early direction for the 2027 Mid-Year Meeting and confirmed preference for continuing the current meeting schedule at the 2027 NACD Annual Meeting in Las Vegas, to include a professional development workshop, NCDEA Reception for district employees, NCDEA presence in the NACD Expo throughout the meeting, and NCDEA Board Meetings.

New Branding and Website Approved: The Board approved adoption of a new NCDEA logo and transition to a new website. Target launch is the 2027 NACD Annual Meeting in Las Vegas.

Employee Training & Tour: Tuesday's tour combined history, aviation, and coastal conservation - visits to the National Naval Aviation Museum (including Blue Angels practice), Admiral Shellfish Company for discussion of oyster aquaculture and Gulf conservation issues, and tours of Fort Morgan Historic Grounds.

Wednesday's training used a well-received World Café format that encouraged cross-talk and practical discussion. Sessions covered district relevancy and self-assessment tools, engaging



Conservation District employees participating in peer-to-peer learning opportunities at the mid-year employee training.

The tour of Admiral Shellfish Company was a highlight of the mid-year employee training.



new agricultural audiences, updates on the NCDEA National Training Program, and a behind-the-scenes look at sustainable design and operations at The Lodge. The day closed with a National Conservation Partner Panel featuring leaders from NACD, NARCDC, NASCA, NCDEA, and NRCS. Feedback highlighted strong engagement and the importance of continued information flow so members know about available resources.



Enhancing Partnerships: BLM, EPA, and USFWS

Beyond core conservation partners, NCDEA continues to build and strengthen relationships with federal agencies. These efforts support the priority of expanding and maintaining partnerships that deliver value to district employees and the landscapes they serve.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

In August, NCDEA transmitted a package of partnership success stories to BLM's Acting Program Executive for Intergovernmental and External Affairs. The stories, gathered from district employees in Wyoming and New Mexico, illustrate the diverse and practical ways conservation districts work with BLM field offices - from cooperative rangeland monitoring and ecological site inventories to virtual fencing pilots, wildlife and fuels mitigation, and mesic area restoration.

One example from Sublette County Conservation District (Wyoming) highlights a long-standing partnership with the BLM Pinedale Field Office focused on vegetation health and sustainable management, including joint monitoring with permittees, ecological site inventories at oil and gas fields, virtual fencing pilots, and facilitation of livestock grazing adjustments in support of wildlife and fuels projects. These examples demonstrate the on-the-ground value district employees bring to federal land management and the mutual benefits of sustained local partnerships.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

In September, NCDEA met with EPA Watershed Planning leadership, including the Watershed Planning Lead & Healthy Watersheds Program Lead, and the National Coordinator for the Tribal Nonpoint Source Program. The discussion focused on how NCDEA can help EPA incorporate conservation district experience into watershed-planning resources and training.

EPA is pivoting from a full revision of its 2008 watershed-planning handbook to a living website organized around six broad planning steps, with curated plans, datasets, models, tools, literature, and practitioner case studies. NCDEA emphasized that district employees and watershed coordinators could and should help shape these resources. Topics of mutual interest included practical training, stakeholder engagement, consultant data ownership, quality assurance, and integrating plans across funding sources. Next steps include further discussion during the March 2027 NACD Fly-In.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

NCDEA is a contributing member of the planning committee for the 2027 Agriculture's Connection to the Environment Summit (AgCES), organized with USFWS and additional partners. The five-day summit is scheduled for July 19–23, 2027, at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. It will focus on the conservation benefits of regenerative agriculture and is open to approximately 50 participants ages 18–27, including recent high school graduates, university and technical school students and graduates, early-career professionals, and agricultural operators. Applications are expected to open in January 2027, with selections announced in March 2027. NCDEA's participation helps ensure the perspective and experience of conservation district employees inform this important youth- and early-career-focused event.

NCDEA Strategic Planning Task Force Charts a Focused Path for 2027-2028

The Strategic Planning Task Force met in late August to develop NCDEA's next strategic plan. The new plan will cover a two-year period from January 2027 through December 2028, emphasizing high-level priorities and measurable objectives. Current vision and mission statements were reviewed and left unchanged.

Vision: To be a catalyst for positive change; inspiring and equipping conservation district professionals to lead, innovate, and collaborate while delivering sound, effective service.

Mission: NCDEA is dedicated to fostering collaboration, innovation, and excellence among conservation district employees. We aspire to strengthen local, state, regional, and national networks by facilitating opportunities for professional growth and development.

Two primary strategic pillars were confirmed:

1. Organizational Sustainability
2. Member Value and Engagement

Five focus areas cut across these pillars:

1. Expanding and maintaining partnerships
2. Funding diversity
3. Board readiness and function
4. Professional development and services
5. State and regional engagement

Key directions include diversifying revenue, expanding the webinar program, exploring a members-only resource toolkit, establishing points of contact in every state and territory, and continuing development of a national training program (beginning with conservation planning and district employee onboarding). Longer-term ideas - such as a full national conference, planned-giving campaigns, and potential staffing expansions - were placed in a "parking lot" so the two-year plan remains realistic and focused.



Conservation Planning Training participants enjoyed three full days of hands-on training in the field. July, 2026 - Grand Rapids, Michigan.

NCDEA Quiz - How well do you know NCDEA?

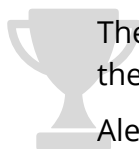
Remember that the answers will be discoverable in any of the current or past [NCDEA Connections Newsletters](#) or on the [NCDEA website](#).

1. On the NCDEA Board of Directors, what role is specifically designated for each of the 7 geographic regions to ensure representation if the primary director is unavailable?
2. The new 2027-2028 strategic plan is built around which two primary pillars?
3. What type of farm was explored during the field tour at the 2026 NCDEA Mid-Year Meeting in Gulf Shores, Alabama?
4. Who is your NCDEA Region Director and Region Alternate?

Submit your answers to timothy.riley@ncdea.org. The first to submit all 4 correctly will receive NCDEA swag and be recognized in the next NCDEA Connections Newsletter.

(Current NCDEA Board members are not eligible to win.)

Answers from last Quarter: 1) Convene Webinars; 2) Neuroscience - from Brandy Meyers's presentation in the June 2026 NCDEA Webinar; 3) Northern Plains, Regional Director Tami Moore of South Dakota; 4) Tanya Fell, Southwest Regional Director of Colorado



The winner of the April-June 2026 newsletter quiz was Alec Smith, District Administrator for the Oakland Conservation District in Clarkston, MI.

Alec started with the Oakland Conservation District in metro Detroit, Michigan in January 2022 as District Administrator, after four years on the district's board. He was the only employee for his first two years and now leads a team of three. He has a B.S. in Environmental Science from Oakland University and worked in ecological restoration and air quality field work before coming to the district. Alec also serves as Treasurer of the Conservation District Employees of Michigan (CDEM). He spends his free time pulling invasives, taking care of about 100 houseplants, and walking his dog Astro through some of the area's amazing parks and natural areas.

Honorable Mention - Heather Vestre, North Dakota also got all the answers correct.



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**CONNECT
WITH US**

NCDEA: 1679 S DuPont Hwy, Dover, DE 19901
timothy.riley@ncdea.org