



NCDEA Connections

National Conservation District Employees Association

CONSERVATION • COLLABORATION • CAPACITY

Dear NCDEA Enthusiasts,

Welcome to the third edition of NCDEA Connections!

We are excited to bring you another issue filled with updates on how your national association continues to work hard on behalf of conservation district employees across the country. The first quarter of 2026 has been filled with meaningful engagement and strong representation at both the national and state levels.

From the energy and collaboration at the NACD Annual Meeting in San Antonio - including our well-attended education session and the successful Conservation Planning Training Pilot - to Penny Warwick's standout performance at the Tennessee TACD Convention, and productive meetings with NRCS leadership and federal agency partners in Washington, D.C., NCDEA continues to elevate the voice and professional needs of district employees.

These efforts underscore our core mission: to serve as your bridge to the National Conservation Partnership, advocate for the resources and recognition you deserve, and provide practical support that strengthens your daily work in the field.

This newsletter remains a two-way connection. We encourage you to reach out with your success stories, innovative programs, and ideas. Your input and experiences are what make this publication valuable to our entire community.

Thank you for your continued dedication to conservation and for allowing NCDEA to represent you at the national level. We are proud to serve you and look forward to an impactful year ahead.

Sincerely,
NATIONAL CONSERVATION DISTRICT
EMPLOYEES ASSOCIATION

Tim Riley

Executive Director
timothy.riley@ncdea.org

ISSUE HIGHLIGHTS

- Project Spotlight - Delaware County, PA
- Conservation Planner Training
- NCDEA at the Capitol
- 82nd Annual TACD Convention-Emerging NCDEA Leader
- NCDEA Webinar Series Returns
- NRCS Stakeholders Meetings



Delaware County Conservation District Ends 2025 Strong: 700+ Trees & Shrubs Planted at Little to No Cost

Working hand-in-hand with the Darby Creek Valley Association (DCVA) and municipal partners, DCCD completed two riparian buffer restoration projects in dense suburban areas along Stoney Creek and the tidal sections of Darby Creek - planting more than 700 trees and shrubs at little to no cost to the municipalities.

Ridley Township Project

On October 18, 2025, more than 50 volunteers gathered at Frederick L. Mann Memorial Park and planted 530 trees and shrubs along Stoney Creek in a single day. Ridley Township Public Works cleared invasive Japanese knotweed and provided stone mulch, while DCCD Watershed Specialist Chris Cook coordinated the planting plan to balance existing park uses with maximum environmental benefit.

Prospect Park Project

On November 8, 2025, more than 20 volunteers planted 180 trees and shrubs at the historic Morton Homestead along the degraded tidal zones of Darby Creek. The project was designed to emulate historic wetland habitat near the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge and help reduce ongoing flood impacts.

Both projects were made possible through the Keystone 10 Million Trees Program (supported by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation), which supplied free trees and protective tubes. DCCD provided its Conservation Planting Trailer, tools, and safety equipment, while DCVA Operations Manager Kyle Gaumann coordinated volunteers, augered planting holes, and helped implement the plans. Additional partners included Penn State Master Watershed Stewards, PA Sea Grant, Chester Ridley Crum Watersheds Association, county staff, and local municipal departments.

The plantings will deliver multiple long-term benefits: improved stream water quality (both streams are listed as impaired), flood mitigation for downstream properties, enhanced wildlife habitat, and increased shade in heavily developed suburban neighborhoods.

DCCD emphasized that these successes were possible because municipalities without an Environmental Advisory Council or Shade Tree Commission reached out for technical assistance and were willing to partner. "Partnering with others is essential," the district noted, "especially in areas with limited resources or conservation expertise."

NCDEA thanks the Delaware County Conservation District and all partners for sharing this inspiring success story and for demonstrating how conservation districts can deliver high-impact projects through collaboration and creativity.

Want to see your district's success story in the next issue?

Send your program highlights, innovative partnerships, or on-the-ground wins to timothy.riley@ncdea.org. We love spotlighting some of the great work happening in conservation districts nationwide!

Thank You for Your Engagement at the 2026 NACD Annual Meeting in San Antonio!

NCDEA extends a heartfelt thank you to all conservation district employees who connected with us during the 2026 NACD Annual Meeting in vibrant San Antonio, Texas. Your participation, conversations, and enthusiasm made the week truly memorable and reinforced the strength of our national network.

We appreciated the many members who stopped by the NCDEA Expo Booth to chat with board members, explore our latest training resources, complete our survey, share your stories, and discuss national advocacy efforts on your behalf. The energy and feedback we received were invaluable.

Special thanks go to everyone who joined our highlighted NCDEA events:

- District Employee Training – Education and Outreach session on Sunday afternoon, where attendees gained practical tools for community engagement.
- NCDEA Reception on Sunday evening, which provided a relaxed opportunity to network and unwind.
- NCDEA Board Meetings throughout the week.

We were especially grateful for the strong turnout and active participation in the "Plug & Play Conservation Education" session, featuring excellent presentations by Celia Miller and Tokina McHarry (see related article in this issue).

Thank you for taking the time to engage with NCDEA; whether at the booth, during sessions, or in casual conversations. Your input and involvement help us better serve conservation district employees across the country.

We look forward to building on this momentum and seeing many of you again at future events. Stay connected with NCDEA as we continue advocating for you and providing valuable resources and professional development opportunities.

Conservation Planners Gather in San Antonio for a National Training Milestone

This past February, conservation professionals from more than 15 states and territories made their way to San Antonio, Texas, for what turned out to be a genuinely exciting week for our field.

Held alongside the NACD Annual Meeting, the event brought together conservation district employees, NRCS staff, Technical Service Providers, and state agency staff for a coordinated training combining two core curricula: Soil Health and Sustainability (SHS) and Conservation Planning Part 2 (CP2). Participants completed online coursework ahead of time, then spent several days doing hands-on field work together at a working farm outside the city.

A training of this scale is no small feat to bring together, and NCDEA was proud to be a leader in coordinating this effort for staff around the country. This training was conceived based on direct feedback from conservation district field staff – your input shaped the course offerings and support of this effort. NCDEA continues to work to make sure district staff and partners have a seat at the table and access to professional development that directly affects their work.

By all accounts, it was a great week! Participants praised the instructors, the small-group field learning format, and especially the chance to spend a week working alongside planners from across the country. "This was one of the best trainings I attended," wrote one respondent. Another said that walking the farm with experienced planners was "a huge confidence builder."

A sincere thank you to the instructors and organizers who gave their time and expertise to make this week a success, and especially to the participants who took the time to make the journey and invest in their professional development!

"Kudos to all the organizers/instructors! Program was executed seamlessly and I feel that it was very easy to learn all that was taught. Thank you!!"
-Training Participant



NCDEA at the Capitol: Elevating the Voice of the Conservation Workforce - Washington, D.C.

This past March, the NCDEA Executive Board and Executive Director traveled to Washington, D.C., coinciding with the annual NACD Spring Fly-In. While the halls of Congress buzzed with high-level policy discussions, our mission was distinctly focused: to ensure federal partners recognize that the success of every conservation program often hinges on the technical capacity and professional stability of the district workforce.

From the EPA to the Forest Service, NCDEA leadership engaged in targeted briefings, advocating for the resources, training, and “seat at the table” that our members have earned through their on-the-ground expertise.

Bridging the Gap at the EPA

In a productive joint session, we met with the Nonpoint Source Management Branch (Section 319) and the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) teams. Our core message was straightforward: the EPA provides critical funding, but district employees deliver the “last mile” of implementation. We explored expanded opportunities for districts to access CWSRF financing for agricultural best management practices (BMPs) and more effective ways to leverage 319 grants to sustain the technical experts who design and deliver these projects.

Did you know that the [Clean Water State Revolving Fund](#) can provide low cost financing for a variety of water quality projects such as [agricultural best management practices](#), [surface water protection](#), and [land conservation](#)? Start by learning some basics about the program through [topic webinars](#) and visiting your [state's CWSRF website](#) for information. CWSRF staff can provide guidance, answer questions, and help navigate the application process. Reach out to your state program directly or email CWSRF@epa.gov if you have more questions.

Strengthening the Habitat "Buffer" with USFWS

We met with a team from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to discuss the 2027 Agriculture's Connection to the Environment Summit (AgCES). We stressed that wildlife refuges thrive best when supported by healthy surrounding landscapes. Partnering with districts gives USFWS a direct connection to private landowners managing critical habitat buffers around national lands. We are pleased to share that NCDEA is planning to participate in the “Headwaters Camp” this July to help shape the 2027 Summit.

Rangeland Health and the BLM

Our conversation with BLM leadership focused on the Rangeland Health Initiative. We advocated that, through local Cooperative Monitoring Agreements, local districts can provide the third-party, standardized data (AIM) the BLM needs to defend grazing and management decisions. We strive to expand BLM's use of districts as their technical partners for public land stewardship.

Shared Stewardship at the U.S. Forest Service

Finally, we shifted gears for a more informal session with the team at the U.S. Forest Service National Partnership Office. Invited to the Forests250 Partners and Forest Service Spring BBQ, we joined a diverse group of conservation leaders to celebrate the "all-lands" approach.

In our discussions, we emphasized that forest health doesn't stop at the boundary line, and that district employees work across fence lines to create resilient landscapes in the Wildland-Urban Interface. We are currently coordinating a follow-up, in-depth session with the National Partnership Office team to further discuss how the 7,000 conservation professionals can serve as a "force multiplier" for the U.S. Forest Service mission.

The Bottom Line

From soil stability challenges in the West to nutrient management in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, one theme emerged clearly: Capacity. We made it clear to every federal agency that a highly trained, well-supported, and professionally recognized district workforce can play a big part in helping them meet their 2026 goals.

As we move into the second quarter of the year, the NCDEA will strive to turn these high-level meetings into tangible opportunities for you—the boots on the ground—to continue to lead the way in American conservation.

NCDEA Strengthens Ties at Tennessee's 82nd Conservation Districts Convention - Franklin, TN

At the invitation of TCDEA President Janice Weiss, NCDEA participated in the 82nd Annual Convention of the Tennessee Association of Conservation Districts (TACD). The event drew over 200 attendees and offered an excellent platform to support state and regional leadership.

NCDEA Southeast Alternate Director Penny Warwick took a leading role in her inaugural appearance as regional representative. She delivered a highly engaging concurrent session on Employee Retention Strategies that resonated strongly with Tennessee's district supervisors and employees. Penny also co-presented the Luncheon Keynote for the TCDEA and TACD Auxiliary, sharing regional updates and emphasizing the critical contributions of district employees.

NCDEA Executive Director Tim Riley accompanied Penny to provide mentorship and support. He delivered a Board Report during the TACD Officers and Directors Luncheon, highlighting current NCDEA initiatives and national collaboration. Together, they stressed the importance of a strong Board-Staff partnership, with Supervisors maintaining direct oversight of staff to keep local priorities front and center, and encouraging employee participation in associations at all levels.

The convention provided opportunities to celebrate excellence, including recognition of three past NCDEA Outstanding Professional Award winners from Tennessee and special acknowledgment of Mr. Ray Weaver, the 2026 NCDEA District Board Member Award recipient. Informal conversations with NACD President-Elect Mark Masters and USDA-NRCS State Conservationist Sheldon Hightower further strengthened national and state partnerships.

Penny Warwick's confident performance and practical insights made a lasting impression, confirming she is a valuable asset to the Southeast Region and NCDEA. The strong engagement from attendees reaffirmed Tennessee's role as a leader in conservation and the value of NCDEA's continued presence.

NCDEA Launches 2026 Monthly Webinar Series

The NCDEA 2026 Monthly Webinar Series continues our commitment to delivering practical, high-quality professional development for conservation district employees nationwide.

The March 2026 session, titled “First Impressions Matter: Building an Onboarding Process That Retains Talent,” got the year off to a strong start with 156 registrants. The webinar offered actionable strategies for creating effective onboarding programs that help districts attract and retain top talent—a topic that remains a top priority for our members.

Visit www.ncdea.us/training for the recording and resources from the March session. [Register](#) for future webinars throughout 2026. Stay tuned—more valuable training opportunities are headed your way!

NCDEA Contributes to NRCS Conservation Practice Standards Updates - Washington, DC

NCDEA participated in the NRCS Stakeholder meeting focused on Conservation Practice Standards Updates. The session featured a detailed presentation of the 2026 Science and Technology Updates by Noller Herbert, Deputy Chief for Science and Technology.

NRCS representatives reviewed 48 conservation practice standards and actively invited stakeholder input. Agency leaders stressed that feedback from partners like NCDEA is essential to ensuring the standards remain relevant, flexible, and responsive to the real resource concerns affecting producers and conservation district staff in the field.

Highlights from the Science and Technology Updates included ongoing work in soil health, technical training programs, new efficiencies and tools, and continuous improvement of conservation practices for FY2026.

NCDEA appreciates the opportunity to provide the field-level perspective of conservation district employees and remains committed to collaborating with NRCS to refine these standards so they deliver the most practical and effective technical assistance possible.

“Plug & Play Conservation Education” Session Delivers Practical Resources at NACD Annual Meeting - San Antonio, TX

NCDEA members and conservation district staff enjoyed a lively and informative education session titled “Plug & Play Conservation Education: Proven Programs & Resources” during the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) 2026 Annual Meeting.

The panel showcased ready-to-use programs and tools that districts can implement quickly and effectively in their local communities.

Celia Miller (Mississippi) opened with her engaging “Farm to Table” presentation. She began with a simple cereal box and proceeded to pull out food packaging after food packaging, dramatically illustrating the many farm ingredients required to produce everyday foods. Using audience participation, she then highlighted the surprising number of farmers needed to create a typical cheeseburger meal.

Tokina McHarry (North Dakota) shared her successful low-budget educational programming. She spotlighted a fun, hands-on bee activity in which participants build a simple buzzing bee craft using just an index card, rubber band, pencil erasers, and string. When spun, the craft produces a realistic buzzing sound that delights participants of all ages.

Celia then stepped in to detail the contents of NACD's District Education Starter Pack, built around the 2026 Stewardship Theme: "Soil. Where It All Begins." The pack includes a curated set of printed outreach and education materials designed to support soil and stewardship lessons.

In her final presentation, "Who Planted Me," Celia illustrated how nature, including wind, rain, and many animals, plays a major role in planting trees, using the example of acorns from a single oak tree. In a humorous highlight, NCDEA Southwest Region Alternate Director Mike Henn played the role of the oak tree. With arms outstretched like tree limbs for more than 30 minutes, Mike was a great sport despite Celia's relentless direction, much to the audience's amusement.

The session emphasized practical "plug-and-play" resources, adaptable curricula and low-cost activities that deliver high impact while saving districts time and money. Attendees left equipped with fresh ideas to strengthen their local education and outreach efforts.

NCDEA extends sincere thanks to Celia Miller and Tokina McHarry for stepping up and delivering such engaging, practical content.

NCDEA Engages with NRCS Leadership at 2026 Conservation Stakeholders Meeting - Washington, D.C.

NCDEA representatives participated in the NRCS Conservation Stakeholders Meeting in Washington, DC, where agency leaders emphasized that strong partnerships with conservation district employees and organizations like NCDEA are essential to delivering effective programs that meet the needs of producers, landowners, and communities.

NRCS Chief Aubrey Bettencourt, Associate Chief Colton Buckley, and Acting Partnerships Division Director Rebekah Lauster led the presentations. They outlined the agency's strategic direction for 2026 and beyond.

NRCS 2026 Priorities

Chief Bettencourt presented five clear priorities for the agency:

- 1 Preserve and Protect Agricultural Land** - Expand conservation easements, promote regenerative practices, and keep productive farmland in agricultural use.
- 2 Modernize NRCS Infrastructure and Technology** - Achieve broadband in every county office, implement a unified "One Farmer, One File" cloud-based system, and shift to real-time digital conservation planning.
- 3 Re-establish Field Engagement and Technical Assistance** - Move staff time back into the field, deploy more certified conservation planners, and meet producers where they are.

- 4 **Strengthen Partnerships by Streamlining Processes and Accountability** - Accept third-party certified plans, improve responsiveness, and align partner strengths to accelerate conservation outcomes.
- 5 **Shift to Outcome-Based Conservation and Farmer Empowerment** - Measure success by real improvements in soil health, water quality, and natural vitality rather than acres or dollars, while recognizing farmers as the heroes of conservation.

NRCS introduced the Sustainable Futures Initiative, which will leverage private contributions from corporations, foundations, nonprofits, and individuals to supplement federal funding and expand conservation delivery nationwide. Contributions can support programs such as EQIP, CSP, ACEP, and others, with matching opportunities available.

NCDEA appreciates the direct engagement with NRCS leadership and the clear invitation to provide our perspective as the voice of conservation district employees. We remain committed to collaborating closely with NRCS to support field staff, strengthen local conservation efforts, and deliver meaningful results for the producers we serve.

We will continue to keep members informed as these priorities and initiatives advance.

NCDEA Quiz - How well do you know NCDEA?

Although we received many answers for the Oct-Dec 2025 Quiz, no one answered all 4 questions correctly. Remember that the answers will be discoverable in any of the current or past [NCDEA Connections Newsletters](#) or on the [NCDEA website](#).

1. During NCDEA's 2025 Annual Mid-Year Meeting & Training what was the name of the successful Spokane Conservation District program that supports veterans transitioning into conservation and agricultural roles while addressing regional food scarcity?
2. Which Colorado conservation district was spotlighted for its innovative noxious weed cost-share program that combines financial incentives with strong technical assistance?
3. At the 82nd Annual TACD Convention in Franklin, TN, which NCDEA Representative delivered a session on Employee Retention Strategies? What Region are they from?
4. Who currently serves on the NCDEA Board from Indiana, and what is their Board position?

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

Answers from last quarter: Pacific Region-Axis Deer; Michigan-North Central; Sugar Beets-Northern Plains Region; Sarah Tunge, ND-Northern Plains Region and Mike Henn, WY-Southwest Region



National
Conservation
District
Employees
Association



**CONNECT
WITH US**

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