



Conservation District Supervisor Leadership Development Program

I. Background

The success of a conservation district depends on the engagement and leadership of elected and appointed board members – supervisors. Supervisors direct the operations of conservation districts at the local level. Ours is a delivery system that is based on the principle of ***locally-led conservation***. That is, conservation districts exist to provide local leadership with respect to protecting and managing natural resources. It is essential supervisors understand theirs is a leadership position. Supervisors must recognize and employ appropriate methods to motivate and work with different kinds of people to find solutions to natural resource problems.

Many supervisors are elected or appointed to their district boards without any official training in leadership. Supervisors are dedicated and caring when it comes to natural resource conservation. However, many may need leadership development training to become successful leaders. WACD acts through the leadership of:

- people elected by the members to officer and board of director positions;
- people appointed to committees and task forces; and
- staff and contractors who implement directions from leadership.

Most WACD leaders (officers, board members, committee/task force members) are local supervisors who have stepped up to the challenge and responsibility of advanced leadership. Supervisors can also become involved in leadership positions on the Washington State Conservation Commission, by serving in one of three regional representative positions elected by the WACD membership, and by serving on Commission task forces and work groups. In addition, supervisors can serve as Area Directors and Officers of the Washington Conservation Society (WCS), a 501c3 dedicated to promoting natural resource conservation efforts in Washington State. These 'higher orbit' leadership opportunities require a different perspective and a greater commitment beyond serving as a local supervisor.

Presently, supervisors have limited access to leadership development opportunities, other than their brief WSCC orientation, a supervisor training track and issues training at annual conferences, and perhaps prior experience gained while in office or attending conservation district board meetings as an associate supervisor or interested citizen. Further, the Washington conservation partnership offers supervisors no dedicated training process that prepares a supervisor for leadership roles at the area, state association, commission, or national level (NACD, NRCS). There is no readily identifiable pool of trained and prepared supervisors from which to recruit for 'higher orbit' leadership positions. In short, we are not preparing our current leaders who are interested in taking on advanced leadership roles. Furthermore, the skills and experience necessary for these higher positions has continued to increase and become more complex each year.

To meet our leadership development needs a committee made up of individuals representing the Washington Association of Conservation Districts (WACD), Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC), Washington Conservation Society (WCS), and Washington Association of District Employees (WADE) will work together to develop and implement a multi-level Supervisor Leadership Development Program. Committee members are as follows: Dave Vogel, Ray Ledgerwood, Stu Trefry, Jerry Scheele, Larry Davis, Mike Tobin, Craig Nelson and Heather Wendt.

II. Designing a Supervisor Leadership Development Program

a. Fitting Leadership Development into the Proper Niche

A limited number of opportunities exist for supervisors to learn about basic, or even advanced, leadership skills and proficiencies.

- New supervisors receive a brief orientation from their WSCC regional managers, covering their basic responsibilities within a conservation district.
- In the annual training and professional development conference for district employees sponsored by the Washington Association of District Employees (WADE), the conference agenda includes a popular, two-day supervisor track. In this two-day session, supervisors learn about the open meetings law, public records, statutory requirements, basic authorities, personnel management, partnerships, and other aspects of their role.
- At its annual convention, WACD includes training in certain aspects of supervisor responsibilities (e.g., fiduciary management, grants, funding, elections, etc.), and offers sessions to inform supervisors about current issues.
- Some supervisors apply for and are accepted into the Washington Agriculture and Forestry Leadership (AgForestry) Program. The AgForestry program awards fellowships to 24 people each year from Washington State. Over the course of 18 months, twelve seminars are held across the state on various topics including government (state and federal), communication, teamwork, international trade, communication, agricultural issues, forestry issues, energy issues, media

relations, the criminal justice system, and public policy development. Program participants also participate in a two-week seminar in a selected foreign country and a seven-day seminar in Washington, D.C. AgForestry is a leadership development organization dedicated to advancing the abilities of natural resource professionals through enhanced understanding, education and empowerment of future leaders.

A supervisor taking advantage of some or all of these opportunities is probably in good shape to properly perform as a leader in his or her district. However, these together involve serious time and/or financial commitments, and many supervisors do not receive all the training available. Further, while most of this training only deals with the nuts and bolts of being a supervisor – programs, management, legal requirements – or with very broad policy and current issues, more effort is needed to help supervisors understand how to work together with people who have different personalities, different objectives, different styles and skillsets without the full commitment necessary to participate in the AgForestry program. Also, reaching to that higher level of area, state or national leadership requires that supervisors acquire additional and somewhat different leadership skills.

Therefore, this Supervisor Leadership Development Program is designed to fill a niche – to fulfill training objectives not achieved by existing training programs. It is not intended to duplicate or replace existing programs. It may be thought of as a middle-ground of leadership development – more thorough than most, but less time-consuming (and perhaps more accessible) than others.

b. Levels of Leadership Development

There are two levels in the proposed Supervisor Leadership Development Program. Level One will help ***a supervisor become a more productive and highly-functioning member of his or her local board (also known as “be the best supervisor you can be.”)*** Level One will engage supervisors in a series of educational modules that highlight basic information every supervisor should learn. Topics include: history of districts, supervisor/district roles and responsibilities, Open Public Meetings Act, Public Disclosure Action, public agency/official responsibilities, boardsmanship, Roberts Rules, partner roles, etc. Level One will be marketed to all supervisors and associate supervisors.

Level Two is oriented toward those supervisors who express a ***willingness and interest to serve conservation through area, state, or even national leadership positions.*** This level will build upon the first, and will follow-up with interested supervisors to help them understand the commitments and responsibilities associated with advanced leadership. Level Two leadership development will take the form of face to face seminars and webinars that will be offered to supervisors who complete Level One and who are nominated by their local boards, or by individuals such as WSCC regional managers to participate.

There are benefits to including conservation district managers, employees and volunteers in certain aspects of the supervisor leadership development program. These opportunities will be built into the leadership program in the future.

III. Delivering a Supervisor Leadership Development Program

a. Level One Delivery Approach

Modules will be provided on-line for supervisors to access and they will be available in audio formats and pdf slide show formats to accommodate the many ways in which people learn and process information. A self-assessment/quiz will be provided for every module so the participant can track his or her progress in completing this basic level of leadership development. Some supervisors who have already served for an extended period of time on district boards and at higher levels may choose to “test out” of completing the modules by simply taking the quizzes and receiving a passing score. Once developed, Level One training will be offered to all supervisors and associate supervisors in Washington State.

b. Level Two Delivery Approach

Level Two leadership development will consist of six seminars that will be offered over a span of twelve months. Seminars will be conducted face-to-face and through webinars. Seminars will cover topics such as: area and national resolution process, legislative process, building partnerships, communication skills, motivating people, putting leadership on-the-ground, etc. Level two will be offered to those supervisors who have completed level one and who have been nominated by their local boards or by individuals such as WSCC regional managers to participate.

c. Continuing Education

Continuing education will be a vital component of the Supervisor Leadership Development Program. As laws are updated and rules change, supervisors and associate supervisors will need to be informed of how these changes can and will impact their district. This program will provide a mechanism for the inclusion of updates to the modules offered in Level One and a mechanism for “getting the word out” to district supervisors about the updates. In addition to updating the modules, special presentations will also be offered as needed including speakers from the State Auditor’s Office, Municipal Research Service Center (MRSC), WSCC, Enduris, WACD, and others. Special presentations will be linked to the website housing the modules, providing a one-stop comprehensive resource for supervisors.

IV. Resources Required

a. Level One

Level One will be housed on the Washington State Conservation Commission's website and the WSCC will be the lead entity in the delivery of this level of supervisor leadership development in partnership with WACD, WCS, and WADE. While WSCC will have dedicated staff to this effort, additional funding for module development could come in the form of a legislative ask and potentially from partner organizations, and should include both public and private funding. In an effort to take advantage of good groundwork that other states have done, the Supervisor Leadership Development Committee recommends that we work closely with the Utah Association of Conservation Districts (UACD), and/or previous UACD staffers, whose Supervisor Leadership Development Program can serve as a model upon which we may base Level One modules.

b. Level Two

WACD will be the lead entity in the delivery of Level Two in partnership with WSCC, WCS, and WADE. Funding for the development of the seminar program would need to come predominately from outside funding sources. WACD will partner with the WCS to seek grants and endowments to fund this level. Funding will be sought from a variety of interest groups and organizations. The Supervisor Leadership Development Committee will develop fact sheets to distribute to interested groups and organizations that might want to provide funding support. Questions that will be answered in the fact sheets include:

- What are the functions of a conservation district board of supervisors that will benefit from a supervisor leadership development program?
- How will customers benefit from a district's supervisor leadership development program?
- How does the general public benefit from a district's supervisor leadership development program?
- Why should potential donor organizations contribute to support a conservation district supervisor leadership development program?

Next Steps

- Submit the White Paper to the WACD Board of Directors at their June Meeting
- Submit the White Paper to the WSCC Commissioners at their July Meeting
- Work through WACD to build conservation district supervisor buy-in to the program, and to ensure effective supervisor feedback program design.
- Outline a schedule (upon consensus approval of white paper) to initiate a fundraising and grant-writing campaign to secure resources.
- Outline a partnership-forming strategy to involve and seek participation of partners (new and old).