



Washington Association of Conservation Districts

Five Things to Know for February 20, 2025

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Braving the mountain passes to participate in Legislative Day!

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Five Things To Know

1. Rates & Charges Bill Update

[House Bill 1488](#) and [Senate Bill 5510](#) were both voted out of their respective committees last week. These bills, supported by WACD as authorized by the membership via resolutions adopted in 2023 and 2024, would allow counties to set the per parcel amount based on community need.

While the bills were originally identical, each committee made different amendments. The House Finance Committee removed HB 1488's limits placed on the amount a county treasurer can withhold for collecting rates and charges fees. Senate Ways & Means Committee removed SB 5510's cap as well, and further modified the bill to reinstate the population cap with new amounts and adjust the rates-and-charges rate based on inflation. You can read the [full amendment here](#). Both bills now have until March 12 to be voted on by their respective legislative body.

2. Former NYCD Supervisor Passes On

Long-time North Yakima CD Supervisor Gail Thornton passed away earlier this month. He served for over twenty years on their board, sat for a while as WACD SC Area Director, and gave his time to many other community and producer groups in the Yakima area when not working on his ranch. His funeral will be on Saturday.

His full obituary is available on the [Brookside Funeral Home website](#).

3. NRCS Announces Local Working Group Meetings

Local Working Groups (LWG) are NRCS's way of listening to people interested in agriculture and natural resources so they can best serve local communities across Washington. Local Working Groups are typically composed of agricultural producers, Tribes, owners/operators of nonindustrial private forest land, professionals representing agricultural and natural resource interests, and individuals representing a variety of disciplines in the soil, water, wetland, plant, forestry, and wildlife sciences who are interested in agricultural and natural resource issues in their communities.

Local Working Group participation is also open to the public. All are welcome and encouraged to attend their local working group meeting.

- **February 25:** West Palouse Working Group
- **February 26:** Big Bend Local Working Group
- **February 26:** South Central Local Working Group
- **March 3:** Northwest Local Working Group
- **March 4:** Puget Sound Local Working Group
- **March 14:** Palouse Local Working Group
- **April 3:** Northeast Local Working Group
- **April 17:** North Central Local Working Group
- **April 17:** Southwest Local Working Group

Please [check this webpage](#) for additional details.

4. Puget Sound Stewardship and Mitigation Fund

If you are working to: improve stream health, keep our rivers cool and clean, or our beaches free of trash, the [Rose Foundation](#) wants to hear from you! They are accepting proposals for projects that improve water quality throughout the Puget Sound region.

The [Puget Sound Stewardship and Mitigation Fund](#) is enabled by court-ordered environmental mitigation payments related to Clean Water Act settlements by Puget Soundkeeper Alliance (Soundkeeper), Waste Action Project and other citizen enforcement groups. The Fund's goal is to improve the surface water quality of Puget Sound and mitigate past pollution runoff by supporting water projects related to conservation, restoration, community science, and environmental justice.

The Fund has two grant cycles per year, and the specific parts of the Sound where we may have funds for projects can vary from cycle to cycle depending on the requirements of individual settlements. [Click here to learn more about the Fund.](#)

The application deadline is March 31st.

5. Washington Water Supply Outlook Report | Feb. 2025

As a result of poor precipitation conditions this month, in addition to degrading basin-snowpack conditions, water supply forecasts (WSFs) have mostly decreased since last month. The historic mid-way point for the snow-accumulation season is here. Without significant improvements in conditions, water supply shortages may be expected for several basins, including Lake Chelan, Upper Skagit, and Upper Yakima basins. In addition, for the Upper Columbia Basin, mixed snowpack and precipitation conditions in British Columbia and poor antecedent streamflow may adversely impact water supply in that region despite SNOTEL stations showing slightly to moderately above normal snowpack and precipitation in the basin.

To read the full report, [click here](#), to access reports dating back to 2010, [click here](#). For further questions, please contact Matt Warbritton, USDA-NRCS Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting Program supervisory hydrologist, via email at matt.warbritton@usda.gov or phone at (503)307-2829.

6. Bonus Item: Nonpoint Conservation District Survey

The Department of Ecology is in the process of updating the state's [Water Quality Management Plan to Control Nonpoint Sources of Pollution \(Nonpoint Plan\)](#), which outlines Washington's approach to address water quality impacts from nonpoint sources of pollution.

Ecology is surveying key partners and restoration practitioners to better understand your priorities, the challenges and successes in your work to address nonpoint pollution, as well as opportunities for enhanced collaboration. Feedback received from these surveys will help inform our Plan's update and ongoing program efforts.

[Fill out the survey here!](#)

Please complete the survey by **February 21, 2025**. Please reach out to Ecology's Nonpoint Program Communications Coordinator, Kate Loy (kathryn.loy@ecy.wa.gov) with questions related to the survey or our 2025 Nonpoint Plan update.

7. Bonus Item: NACD Survey of Conservation Districts

NACD writes:

We want to hear from you! Conservation districts have been at the forefront of the locally led, grassroots conservation delivery system since 1937. To ensure continued assistance to producers, communities, and conservation districts, NACD is asking for your input.

This [conservation district](#) survey was developed to help us understand the ongoing impacts of executive actions. Your responses are anonymous, unless you would like to be contacted by a NACD staff member. The survey takes 5-10 minutes to complete, depending on how many questions you choose to answer (all fields are optional).

Upcoming Events

2025

- **February 24:** [WACD Board of Directors Meeting](#)
- **March 17:** [WACD Board of Directors Meeting](#)

- **March 19 - 20:** [SCC Meeting, Grays Harbor](#)
- **March 26:** [NACD Spring Fly-In](#)

Executive Corner

NACD presented a great meeting in Salt Lake City



Some of the Washington State delegation at the awards banquet

Washington State was well represented at the National Association of Conservation Districts annual meeting in Salt Lake City, Utah.

I have to say that I was surprised. I didn't expect SLC to be a particularly great venue for this meeting, and I based that on having spent time in that city in the early 1990s. I was wrong. The city was lovely, we had plenty of non-meeting things to see and do, and the facilities were top notch. This turned out to be one of the best NACD annual meetings I've attended!

We were located in the north part of SLC, near the mountains.



View southward from the 24th floor of the Hyatt Regency in Salt Lake City



Looking west from the 13th floor of the Hyatt Regency

I look forward to the next time NACD meets in SLC!

This is a tough column to write

This is not my first draft of this column. It has proven to be difficult to write. With each iteration, it seems as if my core message gets lost, so let me state it right here, at the beginning of this piece. If you read only this and choose to stop, you'll get the essence of what I've been

reaching for:

The many changes we are seeing in our conservation system are creating stress at all levels. A useful thing you can do is to communicate how changes are affecting your conservation district's ability to deliver needed services to your farmers, ranchers, and communities. People are important in our system. You are important. Please take care of yourself. Ask for help when needed. When we remain well, we are better able to assist other people.

We are seeing dramatic changes that affect our conservation delivery system. To say this more clearly: the termination of people who help support food and fiber production, along with the freezing of funding, are affecting our entire system of conservation.

If you have strong political leanings, you may read this column and think I'm making a political statement. (I'm not.) If you support the changes that are occurring, it may sound like I'm opposed. (I'm not.) If you don't support the changes, it may sound like I'm in support. (I'm not.)

The funny thing we do as humans is unconsciously interpret what we see, read, and hear based on our own leanings. What I've written is not intended to be political in any way. Instead, my heart and mind are focused on impacts to our food system and on our people, and that is how it should be. Like conservation districts, WACD is apolitical, because food and communities cut across party lines. Your work touches everyone, no matter where they choose to stand.

Belief in the value of voluntary, incentive-based conservation is a value set that connects us. Especially in the midst of big changes, we need to remember the values and beliefs we share if we are to remain effective. We will always have differences, and hopefully, we'll always have conservation to connect us.

NACD TEMPLATE LETTER

The National Association of Conservation Districts has asked for conservation districts to contact their congressional delegation. They have a [template letter available](#) that your district can use if your board of supervisors decides they should reach out to their congressional delegation.

The letter is a good start, but I don't think it goes far enough for Washington State conservation districts. It speaks of the need to support the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. I can't argue with that. NRCS has been an incredibly close partner since our conservation district world was born. However, there is no mention of the Farm Service Agency. No mention of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). No mention of fewer rangers and wildland firefighters from the US Forest Service. I could go on, but you probably get where I'm going: conservation districts are more than just a doorway to NRCS assistance, much more. Our conservation districts touch people and communities in many more ways than just through NRCS programs.

Nevertheless, we certainly do need to support NRCS. They have been with us since the beginning and I expect they will be with us for a very long time to come. I hope so. But we need more in Washington State because we do more for and with our communities.

I've expressed my reservations directly to NACD. They, of course, have to shape their message to fit the entire network of more than 3,000 conservation districts in all 50 states and multiple territories. I get that. However, their message is just too confining for a state like Washington where hundreds of commodities are produced, where multiple species are at risk, where we enjoy such varied landscapes, where wildland-urban interface issues are relatively common, and where the basis of the state economy is ultimately driven by agriculture.

REDUCTIONS

By now, I'm sure every conservation district is aware of the termination of NRCS probationary employees in Washington State. You may know some of the people who were let go. Folks are being very quiet about the impacts but I anticipate they will be substantial. For example, the loss of an archeologist means cultural resource work required for some projects will take longer.

On top of this, the state of the Washington State budget is looking a bit rough. The Capital Budget has some issues, but the Operating Budget is where a gigantic (translation: several billion dollars) hole exists. State agencies are going to have to tighten their belts. How much? We don't know yet.

This feels to me like a one-two punch in the gut: reductions at the federal level and shrinking of the state budget. It feels particularly painful after years of work to build up our conservation delivery system to finally achieve more federal and state support. We have had good forward momentum to secure the resources conservation districts need to better serve their communities. Like you, I am wondering what will happen next.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

What you can do is communicate the importance of your local, voluntary conservation work to your state and federal elected officials. Please do keep NACD and WACD informed so that we can help support your messaging. Try to use real stories of people who are directly affected by reductions in services and funding. A face and a name are often much more powerful than a dry list of statistics. It makes the information personal and relatable. It becomes incredibly powerful when it is a person the elected official knows.

Will this make a difference? Maybe, maybe not. What it will do is help connect you to your legislators and to your community members. It also serves to remind us why we are in this field of endeavor. We usually talk about **what** we do and sometimes about **how** we do it. We rarely talk about **why** we do it:

- to assure a stable and safe food supply;
- to make sure natural resources are available for productive use by future generations;
- to help support species in trouble; and
- to make our communities great places to live, work, and play.

The list of why's is, of course, much longer.

Please consider investing some thought on the many reasons why you are engaged in this work, why your district exists (not the what and the how, but the why), and then think about

how to incorporate your why's when communicating with your community members and partners, and with elected officials. I think you'll find that including your why will result in deeper, more meaningful interactions.

SHARE THAT YOU CARE

A truism is: people won't remember what you did as much as they will remember how you made them feel. If they know you care about them, they will tend to be much more supportive of your work. Our entire community brings a tremendous amount of heart (and dare I say it: love) to local conservation work, and this makes working with a conservation district an incredibly unique and fulfilling experience. You don't just do the work -- you also care about the people and communities you help. You become part of their life.

While I write these (hopefully) uplifting thoughts, my heart is also weighed down as I think about how many people in our conservation community are being impacted. People have lost their jobs. Families will be impacted. Staff who did not get terminated will feel guilty and not know what to do with their feelings of concern for others. (I haven't mentioned producers yet, but obviously a reduction in services and funding will also impact our producers!) If we follow our usual style, work won't get eliminated -- it will get spread around, piling the load onto people still on the job.

CONCERN FOR OUR ENTIRE COMMUNITY

I am concerned about all of our people throughout the conservation delivery system, from federal employees to local district officials and staff. I'm concerned about our producers.

Conservation district board members, district staff, NRCS people, and Conservation Commission folks all come into contact with agricultural producers. District and NRCS employees, in particular, are on the front lines of working with producers. Our front-line people may see things others don't, like changes in behavior that might tell you something isn't quite right.

We all know that farming and ranching have some of the highest suicide rates of all professions. Farmers are twice as likely to die by suicide than people in other professions. Farmers face an array of unknowns every day, and now to have support withdrawn from some programs may be the last straw, the thing that tips the balance to someone losing all hope.

Please consider learning a bit more about mental health and ag producers. [Washington's Farm Stress Counseling Voucher Program](#) is led by WSU Skagit County Extension and utilizes the WSU Psychology Clinic to deliver telehealth appointments to farmers who request stress-related counseling. Knowing this, and recognizing unusual changes in how your producers are acting, may help you save a life.

DO YOU HAVE EIGHT MINUTES?

Please look out for each other as best you can, just as I hope those around you will help you, too. Hold onto hope. Hope and love are at the center of what we all do. Pay attention to your teammates and those around you and know they want to know you are okay, too.

Consider giving eight minutes to someone else when they need it. This one-minute YouTube video explains what this means: <https://youtu.be/2IH6x5zn0GI?si=HL4Nce-wukTyp3U>

If you become aware of employment opportunities for the people who have lost their position, do share that information.

WACD remains vigilant and we care. Reach out if you need to talk. We're here for you, and with you.

We'd like to hear from you

As always, we'd like to receive your ideas and questions. Please contact us at oly@wacd.org. Emails sent to that address reach the entire Executive Office team!

Always yours for conservation,



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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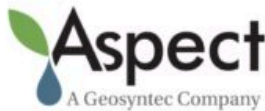
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