

Sustainable Funding Alternatives for Conservation Districts in Washington State

Developed by the WACD Sustainable Funding Committee

November 21, 2025

Executive Summary

This document provides an updated overview of the Committee's work to identify viable, long-term funding sources for Washington's Conservation Districts (CDs). Since its inception, the Committee has conducted surveys, engaged in statewide workshops, and evaluated multiple funding models to address the growing need for stable, consistent funding.

Key findings include:

- Conservation Districts overwhelmingly report unmet capacity and increasing demand for services.
- Across multiple surveys (2023–2025), the Missouri Model consistently ranked as the preferred statewide funding mechanism.
- The Tax on the Sale of Real Property ranked second.
- The Committee recommends discontinuing exploration of the Agricultural Lands Act due to conflicts with agricultural land preservation priorities.
- CDs emphasized the importance of selecting partners without regulatory authority and ensuring that any new revenue source supplements, rather than replaces, existing funding.

The Committee will seek direction from the Association at the 2025 Annual Business Meeting to select a model for full exploration in 2026.

Introduction

The Sustainable Funding Committee, approved by WACD members in 2021 as a standing committee, operates under the authority of the WACD bylaws (Part X, §1). Its purpose is to identify, evaluate, and recommend sustainable funding sources to ensure consistent, long-term support for Conservation Districts (CDs) across Washington. The Committee reports progress to the WACD Board quarterly and provides an annual report to the membership.

The Committee includes the following CD managers and supervisors: Mark Craven (Snohomish CD), Bridget Gallant (Benton CD), Heather McCoy (Whidbey Island CD), Sarah Moorehead (Thurston CD), Jeff Schibel (Lincoln Co. CD), and Stu Trefry (Pierce CD), with staff support from Heather Wendt, WACD Deputy Director.

Background

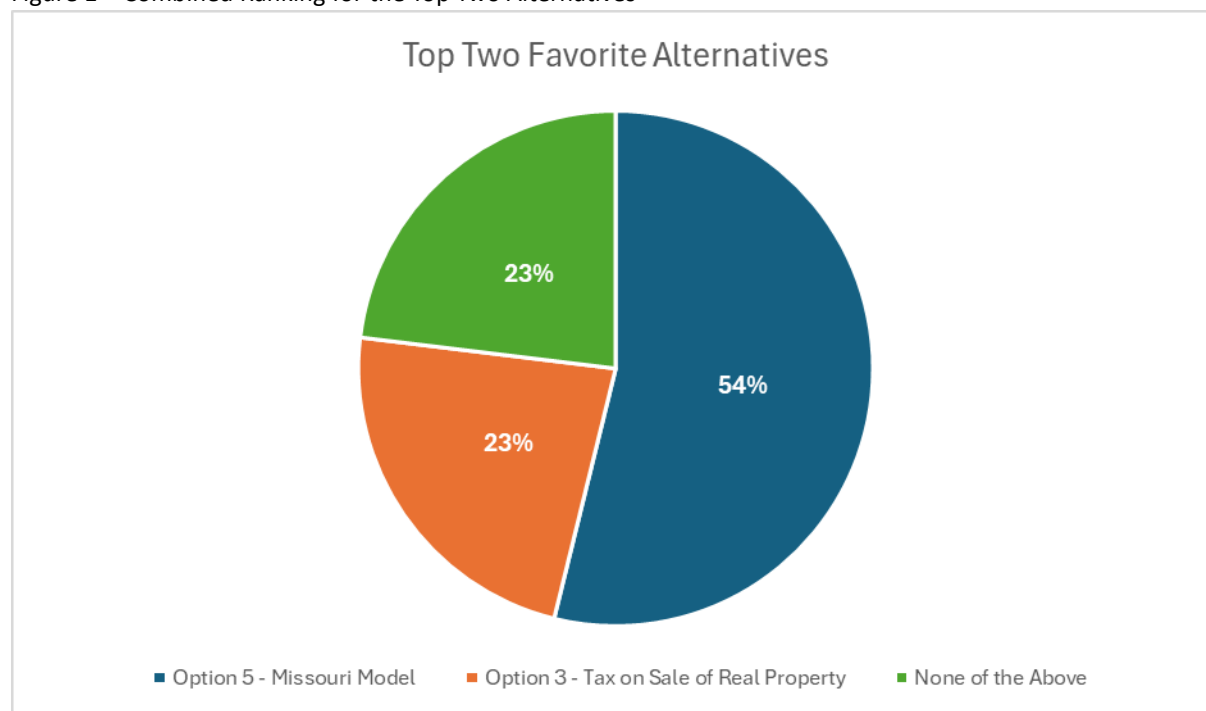
The Sustainable Funding Committee was created by Resolution 2015-09 as a temporary committee. In 2021, the temporary committee was made a permanent standing committee. In the fall of 2023, the committee surveyed conservation districts to determine their current and future funding needs. 24 CDs (53% of districts) responded to the survey. Of those responding, the existing sources of funding they

considered to be sustainable funding varied greatly. 87.5% of the responding CDs' responses suggested that their long-range plans are limited by funding constraints, not the scope of work/needed within their service area.

During the winter of 2023 and spring of 2024, the Committee continued to refine the funding opportunities matrix. The [matrix](#) outlines 9 funding options identified by CDs, their benefits and drawbacks, as well as other considerations. In May 2024, WACD hosted a Spring Legislative Workshop where the Sustainable Funding Committee held a session to gather more information from CDs on their funding needs and funding option preferences. In-person attendees were queried, and the survey was sent out afterward to CDs who were not present. As a result, data was collected from 42 of the state's 45 CDs. The combined ranking had the Missouri Model as the highest-ranked option, with the Tax on the Sale of Real Property as the second-highest-ranked option. The option of none of the above received the same number of votes as the Tax on the Sale of Real Property. Figure 1 below shows a graph of the combined ranking.

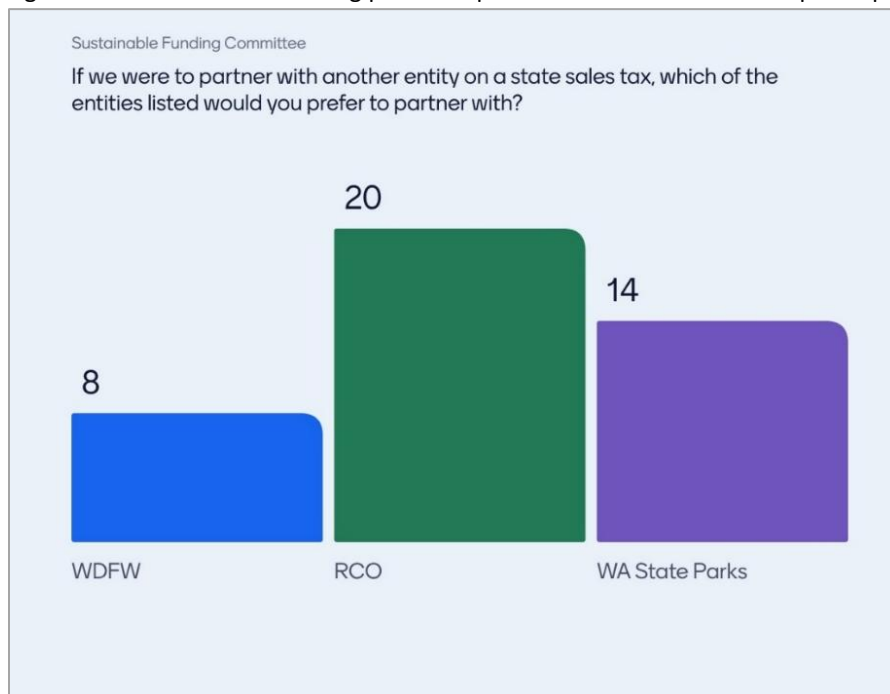
At the 2024 WACD Annual Meeting, the Sustainable Funding Committee received consensus from the Association to move forward with further investigating the two highest-ranked models: the Missouri Model (54%) and Tax on Sale of Real Property (23%).

Figure 1 – Combined Ranking for the Top Two Alternatives



At the All-District Meeting in June 2025, the Sustainable Funding Committee queried attendees on their interest in who they might want to partner with if they were to choose the Missouri Model. Based on the CDs present, the first choice was the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO; 48%), followed by Washington State Parks (33%) and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW; 19%).

Figure 2 – Menti Results showing preferred partners based on the three options provided.



The Sustainable Funding Committee also queried attendees on who they would not want to partner with if they were to choose the Missouri Model. Based on the CDs present, WDFW was of the least interest to CDs (56%), with RCO (24%) and WA State Parks (20%) receiving significantly fewer votes. The consensus was that CDs did not want to align themselves with entities that had a regulatory nexus.

Figure 3 - Menti Results showing non-preferred partners based on the three options provided.

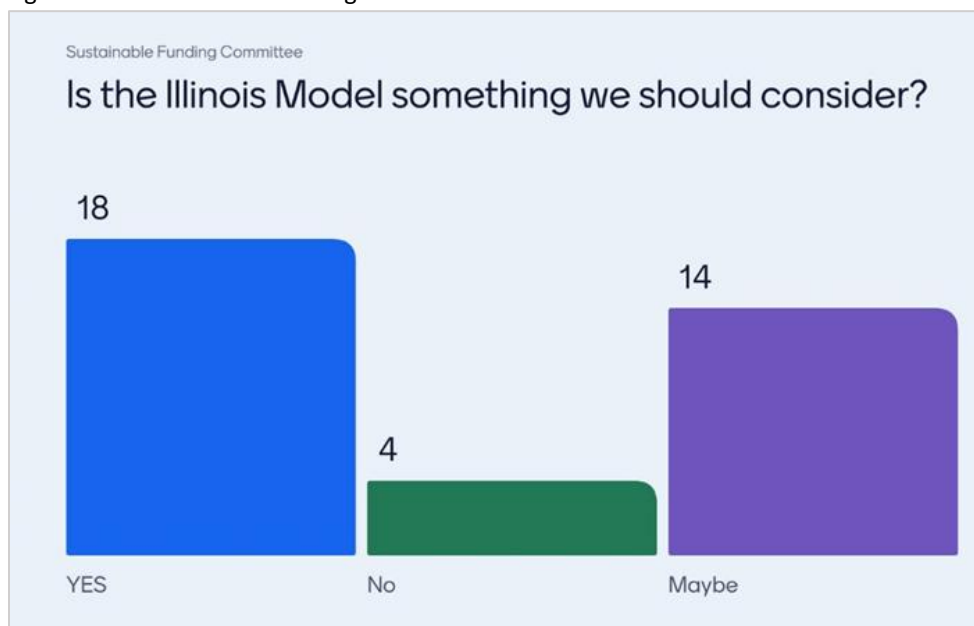


While the Sustainable Funding Committee was exploring the two preferred models, they were also made aware of an effort by the Illinois Association of Conservation Districts. Their proposed funding model, called the Agricultural Lands Act, would create a new revenue stream through the creation of a land conversion fee paid on agricultural land taken out of production.

In the Agricultural Lands Act, a \$275/acre fee, paid only once by the developer, would apply to land removed from agricultural production. The first \$10 million of revenue generated must be dispersed for Illinois Soil and Water Conservation District operation costs, supplemented by an additional \$4.5 million in operating costs from the General Revenue Fund. Any additional monies available in the fund after accounting for administrative costs may be used for other programs that support healthy soil and clean water in Illinois. Exemptions include: any land converted for personal use (i.e., home expansion, swimming pool, driveways, etc.); land converted for use within the agricultural industry (i.e., barns, grain elevators, livestock facilities, etc.); land developed for electric transmission lines; and land converted for the establishment of conservation practices.

This new model was brought before CDs at the All-District Meeting in June 2025, and Districts were asked, “Is the Illinois Model something we should consider?” 50% of participants responded yes; 39% responded maybe, and 11% responded no. See Figure 4 below.

Figure 4 - Menti Results showing interest in the Illinois Model.



Statewide Funding Needs Recap

In 2024, districts were also surveyed on their funding needs and asked, “If you could fund your current operation from a single source, how much funding would you need?” The survey broke down the amount into three categories: funding for staff, funding for conservation projects, and funding for administrative costs. The results of the survey are compiled in Table 1 below. Districts were also surveyed on the amount of funds needed on an annual basis to implement all the conservation needs outlined in their five-year plans. The results of that survey are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 1 - Summary of Funding Needs from a Single Funding Source¹

Funding for Staff ²	Funding for Conservation Projects ³	Funding for Administrative Costs ⁴	Total
\$45,045,943	\$88,026,881	\$16,744,174	\$149,816,998

Table 2 - Summary of Funding Needs for Five-Year Plan Implementation¹

Funding Needed Annually To Implement Five-Year Plans	Funding Needed for All Five Years
\$169,656,823	\$848,284,115

Evaluation of Funding Models

Ahead of the October 2025 WACD Area Meetings, the Committee analyzed the potential income each funding option would create to better inform the Association's membership.

1. Missouri Model

A conservation funding mechanism modeled after Missouri's constitutional dedication of a fraction of sales tax revenue to conservation purposes. Washington CDs expressed interest but emphasized the need to:

- Identify a co-participating agency, if applicable
- Determine whether implementation requires a constitutional amendment or legislative action
- Analyze potential impacts on communities and existing tax structures
- Ensure that new revenue supplements—not replaces—current state support

Figure 5 is the slide that was presented at area meetings on the Missouri Model.


¹ Represents data from 42 of 45 Conservation Districts

² Represents the amount of funding needed to support district technical staff

³ Represents the amount of funding needed to support district cost-share and other projects

⁴ Represents the amount of funding needed to support administrative staff, operations, communications, etc.

Figure 5 - Slide showing information on the Missouri Model, as applied, in WA State.



Missouri Model

- The Missouri Model provides 1/8 of 1% of taxable retail sales to CDs and Parks.
- 1/8 of 1% in WA would generate \$292.5 million per year.
- If we look at 1/10 of 0.5% it would generate \$117 million per year.
- Last year, CDs documented a need of ~ \$170 million per year to fully implement their 5-year plans.
- What does \$117 million cost Washingtonians:
 - \$36.93 per household per year
 - \$19.25 per adult per year
 - \$1.60 per adult per month

2. Agricultural Lands Act (Illinois Model)

The Act proposes a per-acre fee for agricultural land removed from production. While offering a predictable revenue stream, Washington CDs raised concerns that profiting from farmland loss contradicts conservation values and agricultural viability goals.

Figure 6 – Slide showing information on the Agricultural Lands Act, as applied, in WA State.⁵



Agricultural Lands Act, aka the Illinois Model

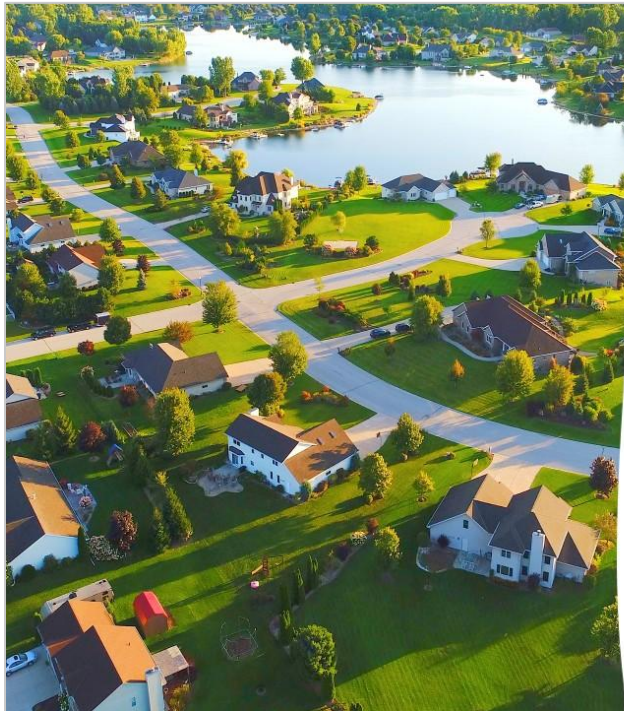
- Would create a new revenue stream through the creation of a land conversion fee paid on every acre of agricultural land taken out of production.
- Farmland Losses Range from 6,500 acres per year to 29,200 acres per year.
- @ \$275/acre fee = \$1.7 million to \$8 million per year.

⁵ It was noted that the newest [USDA data](#) estimates the current land conversion rate is closer to 165,000 acres per year, making the annual fees collected closer to \$45 million.

3. Tax on the Sale of Real Property

Ranked as the second-highest preference in the 2024 statewide survey, this model was not presented during the Area Meetings due to time constraints. A snapshot of comparative data was developed and is included in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7 – Slide showing information on the Tax on the Sale of Real Property.



Tax on the Sale of Real Property

- Real Estate Excise Tax (REET): Is the primary tax on the sale of real property itself. In FY 2024, REET generated approximately \$1.214 billion for the state general fund and other accounts.
- REET is much more complex to calculate because it has a graduated tax structure based on the selling price of the property. In addition, counties, cities, and towns may impose a local REET on top of the state rate.
- Based on preliminary estimates:
 - 1/10th of 1% would generate - \$54 million per year
 - 1/8th of 1% would generate - \$67.5 million per year
 - 1/4 of 1% would generate - \$135 million per year

Key Takeaways from October 2025 Area Meetings

In general, feedback on the Agricultural Lands Act led the Committee to recommend not pursuing this model. The consensus from Districts was that there was strong opposition to funding models tied to farmland conversion.

The Area Meeting attendees also had great feedback around the Missouri Model, including:

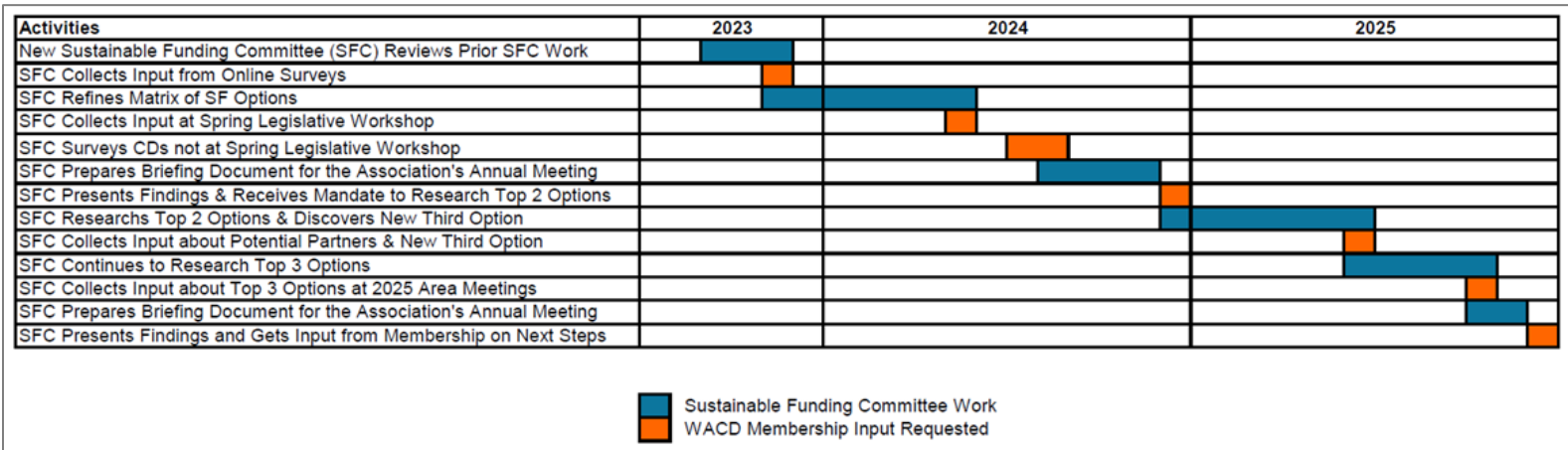
- The need to determine a co-participant, if any
- Recognition that the Missouri Model remains promising but requires further analysis
- Clear desire to avoid alignment with regulatory agencies as co-participants
- Emphasis on transparent communication with legislators regarding intent and impacts
- Need to ensure that the funding model is additive, not substitutive
- Need to develop an allocation model

Recommendations and Next Steps:

The Sustainable Funding Committee will present its findings at the WACD Annual Business Meeting on December 3, 2025, and seek direction from the membership regarding which model—if any—to pursue.

Should the Association select a model, the Committee will dedicate 2026 to fully investigate implementation pathways, including legislative strategies, partner identification, fiscal analysis, distribution allocation model, and continued conservation district engagement.

Gantt Chart of Committee Activities and CD Engagement to Date:



References:

[Sustainable Funding Committee Brief - 2024](#)

[Funding Opportunities Matrix](#)

[Missouri Model](#)

[Consolidated Alternative Ranking Data](#)