

Strategic Plan  
**Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts**  
July 2017

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## PREFACE: POSITIONING STATEMENT

*The topic that received the most serious thought and discussion . . . from beginning to end, in meetings and in one-on-one interviews . . . was the topic of District consolidation.*

*The current 97 Districts will **not** be asked nor encouraged to consolidate.*

*Research and discussions conducted during the strategic planning process led to the conclusion that the current number of Districts (97) is the appropriate structure for achieving the goals of this strategic plan.*

*While it is recognized that some Districts may not currently meet standards achieved by other Districts, active participants in the soil and water conservation system prefer to help those Districts to attain a higher level of performance rather than suggest that any close or consolidate. There is a great deal of work to do, and all 97 hands are required to do it.*

*Rationale:*

- *The Districts play a unique role in the state's resource conservation system, providing a conduit between statewide and/or watershed goals and the methods to achieve those goals locally*
- *The Districts' water quality and soil health protection partners place significant value on the role that the Districts play*
- *Districts are a local unit of government, so consolidation may only be initiated and led by their locally-elected board of directors. All 97 Districts will exist unless determined otherwise by their local board.*
- *The Districts are the lynch pin in a voluntary conservation system that achieves water quality and soil health goals at a lower cost than potential regulatory programs*
- *While Districts may have lost farm and forestry operators over the years, the acres of land and surface water resources remain the same. Also, societal pressures have not diminished in urban or mixed Districts, and some Districts have gained significant challenges with new urban growth.*
- *Loss of Districts (local presence) would have a detrimental impact on their ability to seize the opportunities proposed in this plan. (The loss of local Cooperative Extension presence was often cited as a negative impact on the connection between local needs and University of Illinois-provided solutions.)*
- *As Districts actively seek additional funding to support valuable programs, they find that potential foundation and organizational donors value their local capacity, especially when it is coupled with a watershed-based approach to solutions*

*While concerns about state funds and efficiencies may, of course, be raised, the Districts are addressing those concerns and will continue to do so through implementation of the strategic plan:*

- *Most Districts do not own office space, so closing offices is not an option. Even though District directors are elected officials with significant responsibility, they do not receive compensation, and most do not even receive per diem or mileage*
- *District employee headcount has been reduced from 292 to 138 in less than a decade (a reduction of 53%)*
- *Some Districts have chosen to consolidate, and others may do so in the future, but that choice has been and will be a District-based decision*
- *An emphasis on current and future technologies for efficient program delivery and communication, in this strategic plan, will accelerate the drive to efficient operations*
- *The Districts currently depend on USDA NRCS for office space, internet/email and supplies. The strategic plan encourages the Districts to work closely with their government partners, especially Illinois Department of Agriculture and NRCS, to explore other methods of achieving natural resource protection goals without duplication of efforts, unnecessary waste, bureaucracy and outdated methods*

# Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts'

## 2017 Strategic Plan

### GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Water quality protection - watershed-based and locally-led – is the Districts' top priority.
- Districts will reinvigorate their commitment to Illinois water quality and soil health protection by assuring that every job, both voluntary and paid, and every dollar contributes to the agreed goals.
- Districts will strive to be the local, respected resource for water quality and soil health.
- Districts will work to achieve greater relevance in today's resource protection environment.
- Districts will work to meet statewide and watershed-based conservation goals.
- Districts are self-determinate. As such, they will each develop their own strategic plan and plan of work to meet the state's conservation goals, they will seek the funding needed to support their plan of work, and they will make their own decisions regarding consolidating, not consolidating, or reversing consolidation.
- Districts recognize that strong partnerships and collaboration improve their work.
- Communication is key: Shared goals, shared messages.
- Districts will strive to be proactive, not reactive.

## INTRODUCTION

It's 2017. Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts\* are celebrating the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of the state statute that created the Soil and Water Conservation system. But retirement is not an option for this octogenarian. The water and soil resources of Illinois are as vast and as important as ever, and pressures on those resources continue to challenge their protection. At the same time, the Districts' traditional primary funding partner, the State of Illinois, has cut its contribution to the conservation partnership as it grapples with much larger fiscal problems.

To sort out their many challenges and opportunities, the Districts dedicated themselves to developing a strategic plan to guide their work. With support from agriculture and conservation partners, and with input from hundreds of internal and external stakeholders, the Districts' leadership identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and obstacles. They then prioritized the goals they would pursue to protect Illinois' water quality and soil health.

To acquire the best possible quantitative feedback from the Districts, they partnered with Prairie Rivers to conduct a survey that provided valuable data. The Association also sponsored seven Forums around the state for District directors, staff and local partners to discuss challenges, highlight successes and provide ideas to the strategic plan.

An Advisory Council, made up of partner representatives and District representation, shared advice and insights during their meetings. Other experts familiar with the Illinois resource conservation system or with systems in other states were also interviewed for their insights and ideas.

As a result, this strategic plan is, essentially, a distillation of that input and a re-commitment to the values that the Districts have held since their creation:

- Statewide, watershed-based, locally-driven **soil conservation and water quality protection**
- **Best possible service** to their ultimate clients – the citizens and the resources of Illinois
- **Mutually-beneficial partnerships** at both the resource and delivery levels
- **Consistent quality of program delivery** throughout Illinois
- **Relevance** through use of cutting-edge **technologies** and **communication** methods

*\*Note: for the purposes of this plan, the term "Districts" includes the state's current 97 SWCDs, their Association and their employees.*

## MISSION

### “Clean Water, Healthy Soil”

Clean Water, Healthy Soil: Providing leadership and coordinated assistance for the people of Illinois who have natural resource concerns as we strive to protect and conserve valuable resources.

## GOALS

1. *Fully utilize and capitalize on unique asset: local knowledge, presence and influence*
2. *Enhance relevance and reputation for achieving Illinois’ conservation goals*
3. *Increase funding for conservation programs and effective implementation*
4. *Improve partnerships for efficient program delivery, funding opportunities and best results*
5. *Provide valuable services for partners and stakeholders to help achieve conservation goals*

## GOALS with Rationale and ACTIONS

### CAPITALIZE on UNIQUE ASSET

Throughout the development of this strategic plan, the Districts’ local knowledge and networking ability was portrayed as a unique strength by their partners and stakeholders. This role is also a point of pride for the Districts and worthy of preserving. However, with this regard comes responsibility: Districts must be ever-vigilant to preserve and protect their reputation as they strive to preserve and protect the state’s resources.

Districts that are not doing so already will be encouraged to develop strategic and work plans that indicate how they want to achieve watershed and statewide water quality and soil health goals. The plans will support and justify funding requests and guide District operations.

An often-repeated theme at Forums and Advisory Council meetings was the need for training (both directors and employees). Many felt it important to ‘re-ignite’ the interest in and dedication to District work, encouraging directors to recognize the responsibility they have assumed in protecting Illinois’ most valuable resources. But it is also important for others to recognize directors and reward staff for their dedication and valuable work.

1. Fully utilize and capitalize on unique asset: local knowledge, presence and influence
  - A. Strengthen Districts by ensuring best use of limited funds and staff (more details, page 11)
  - B. Challenge Districts to rise to state and watershed challenges through District-specific plans and funding requests
  - C. Strengthen the relationship between Districts and their Association to make work more effective (more details, page 11)
  - D. Reignite interest and engagement of District directors (more details, page 11)

- E. Provide continuing education and/or training for District employees
- F. Provide Districts with access they need to technologies that will provide valued services and relevant messages to their targeted delivery partners, audiences and stakeholders

## ENHANCE RELEVANCE

After decades of focus on soil conservation, the Districts are refocusing on and prioritizing water quality protection and implementation of the state’s Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy. Because state-provided funding levels have dropped in recent years, it has been difficult for the Districts to maintain expertise and adopt cutting-edge technologies. Conservation experts encourage them to do so, noting that other organizations and businesses are moving into the conservation ‘space’, especially for nutrient management and soil health. So technology adoption and conservation science are keys to long term survival of the Districts and their work.

Many of the Districts’ agriculture and conservation partners are looking to the Districts for local implementation of the state’s Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy. This responsibility provides a focused, achievable goal, much like campaigns the Districts successfully implemented in the past (i.e. T by 2000). It will also help them identify emerging needs, as weather patterns and societal changes put increasing pressures on Illinois’ water and soil resources.

- 2. Enhance relevance and reputation for achieving Illinois’ conservation goals
  - A. Sharpen focus on and prioritize water quality protection
  - B. Build statewide expertise in conservation science, technologies and program delivery (more details, page 12)
  - C. Provide local implementation of the Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy to meet state’s reduction goals; lead efforts where needed
  - D. Ensure Districts have the tools and resources they need to deploy programs that achieve state’s goals for soil and water conservation and watershed protection
  - E. Identify emerging needs and create programs and practices to meet those needs

## INCREASE FUNDING

Throughout the strategic planning process, a consistent concern was the more immediate need to increase funding for the Districts. Most involved throughout the planning process are resigned to the fact that state funding will not increase in the foreseeable future. Some partners advised the need to target limited resources to water and soil protection activities, while Districts are concerned about the loss of staff qualified to do the work.

To bolster funding, the Districts plan to invigorate their Foundation, actively seek grants/donations from diverse sources, and use the Foundation to guide and facilitate dispersal of the funds. They will also seek

opportunities to acquire funds for program implementation (such as NLRS) and provision of services (several opportunities were suggested during the strategic planning process).

However, it is important to also maintain a focus on the still-largest portion of most District budgets and prove return on investment for state and federal dollars, such as the current Partners for Conservation state funds and USDA support.

3. Increase funding for conservation programs and effective implementation
  - A. Invigorate and use the Districts' Foundation (more details, page 12)
  - B. Prove and illustrate the return on investment that District programs provide Illinois general revenue investment, to gain greater support and increased funding
  - C. Work with partners to identify options for funding NLRS implementation
  - D. Aggressively pursue other funding options to diversify funding sources (services for fees, etc. see page 12)

## STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS

The soil and water resources of Illinois are so valuable, and so vast, that no one entity can protect them alone. In fact, because the Districts do not control land and water resources, they usually achieve their goals indirectly, with delivery partners for whom the Districts provide guidance and incentives. The Districts also work with their resource partners, providing local expertise and insights in exchange for financial support, guidance and advocacy.

District partners can be broadly organized into three categories:

- Key partners, like the Illinois Department of Agriculture and USDA's NRCS
- Resource partners, like the University of Illinois, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, Illinois Department of Natural Resources and various conservation organizations
- Delivery partners like farmers, foresters, landowners, municipal water supply managers, land improvement contractors, local and county governments, and the many organizations who represent them

Good working relationships with their partners also help the Districts leverage their assets through partners' efforts to achieve watershed and statewide goals. Advisory Council and other experts made it clear that most partners value the Districts' 'boots on the ground' program delivery ability. Some partners also advised that the Districts could add further value by becoming more mutually-supportive.

The Districts' partners are concerned about cuts to state funding and the affect it has had on programs, especially cost share. Some conservation partners are adept at acquiring funds from other sources for resource protection projects and encourage the Districts' to develop similar skills in order to attract support for SWCD goals.

4. Improve partnerships for efficient program delivery, funding opportunities and best results
  - A. Work with system partners to achieve mutually-supportive partnerships:
    - clarify roles
    - eliminate duplication

- improve conservation program cooperation
- B. Lead an annual Conservation Implementation Roundtable to network, monitor programs, build effective working relationships, propose both long-term and short-term water quality goals
- C. Form coalitions to develop watershed-based and other multi-District projects and to write grant proposals

## PROVIDE VALUABLE SERVICES

Win-win ideas are always appreciated when developing a strategic plan. Several ideas surfaced during this planning process that could possibly contribute to conservation goals *and* derive funding for the Districts. The primary challenge for these services and projects is that they be prioritized for their conservation value. But product developers will also need to assure that the value of the product or service outweighs its cost of development and management.

Careful attention to partner needs should assure that value. Further, farmers, foresters, land improvement contractors and others who work in more than one District will appreciate consistency across District programs, to make their work more efficient.

5. Provide valuable services for partners and stakeholders to help them achieve conservation goals
  - A. Prioritize development of products and services that achieve water protection and soil health goals
  - B. Work with partners to fully understand what they need and what would add value to their work (possible examples on page 12)
  - C. Provide consistent policies and program delivery for those partners who work in multiple Districts

## NOTE:

This Strategic Plan, to be voted on by the Districts' at their 2017 Summer Conference, contains the "WHY" (Mission), the "WHAT" (Goals) and an *outline* of the "HOW" (Actions to support the Goals), on pages 7 through 10. Once the Strategic Plan has been adopted, a detailed Implementation Plan will further define the "HOW" and add the "WHO" (responsible parties) and "WHEN" (projected timeline for each action).

However, the Strategic Plan Task Force decided that some of the "HOWs" outlined above should be provided, with more detail, for District directors' and employees' review before Summer Conference. Those Actions and their associated activities are outlined here, also in outline form (no "WHO" or "WHEN"), to aid discussion at the Summer Conference.

### Actions for Goals that have received further discussion during the Strategic Planning process:

Goal 1, Action A: Strengthen Districts by ensuring best use of limited funds and staff (pg. 7)

- Create a cohesive, consistent statewide delivery system by clearly defining prioritized goals and sharing best management practices
- Establish minimum District criteria and move toward District certification, tying public funding to certification
- Source adequate funding for essential programs (i.e. cost share, etc.)
- Eliminate unnecessary obstacles, such as burdensome reporting or no-longer-relevant activities
- Consolidate application for and distribution of state funds through the Land Use Councils, to reduce Illinois Department of Agriculture administrative burden and to encourage purpose-driven funding requests from Districts

Goal 1, Action C: Strengthen the relationship between Districts and Association to make work more effective (pg. 7)

- Continue to clarify roles/responsibilities
- Communicate frequently, using web-based technology for timeliness and to provide substantive information
- Encourage vigorous resolution process, so that Districts guide and decide policies
- Reinvent Association for policy implementation and executive function
- Transition AISWCD Board to smaller AISWCD Board of active, educated, engaged members who can perform executive functions
- Hold monthly board meetings to retain level of engagement adequate to serve Districts
- Transition current AISWCD larger board to an Advisory Board
- Strengthen president and/or executive director role for clarity with partners
- Charge Association with diversifying and expanding the funding base (see Increase Funding, Goal 3)

Goal 1, Action D: Reignite interest and engagement of District directors (pg. 7)

- Develop District Director support and recognition program(s)
- Provide orientation and training for District directors
- Provide a certification program for District directors to enhance professional image and abilities at the District level
- Explore the value of term limits and, if appropriate, encourage adoption
- Encourage use of internet and smartphone communication technology

Goal 2, Action A: Build statewide expertise in conservation science, technologies and program delivery (pg. 8)

- Provide continuing education for current District and Association employees so that they are the best qualified in system; when hiring, prioritize expertise
- Invest in technologies that help make the Districts and the Association the “go to” source for best in class conservation practices and programs (satellite imagery, etc.)
- Monitor trends and research across the upper Midwest and communicate ideas and solutions both locally and through watershed-based education/demonstrations
- With partners, sponsor research projects that provide the science that allows Districts to advise about local land use challenges

Goal 3, Action A: Invigorate and use the Districts' Foundation (pg. 9)

- Provide governance and staff in order to solicit and receive individual, corporate and foundation donations and/or grants
- Include external experts to advise fundraising and management
- Launch a campaign that celebrates the work of the Districts and their partners, drawing attention to the importance of soil and water conservation

Goal 3, Action D: Possible products that could create revenue streams (pg. 10)

- Develop a certification program and/or example leases for farmers wanting to benefit from their commitment to conservation practices on rented land
- Develop smartphone apps that land improvement contractors and farmers can use for government program records, conservation practices, compliance, etc.
- Develop expertise, or partner with existing experts, for soil health programs
- Research and coordinate value-added marketing opportunities for ‘sustainably-raised’ crops

Appendices, including survey and Advisory Council, to be added