

Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District Report

Synopsis

The Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District (SCCRCD) is a little-known but important Special District. County funding is only \$40,000 per year, yet the agency channels millions of dollars in state and federal grant money to local projects. Originally a “dust-bowl era” program designed to help farmers conserve water; today the district’s focus is on habitat management. SCCRCD is not designed to perform work itself. Rather it writes grants and does studies for its clients, which range from individual homeowners to large water districts. They are referred to a list of contractors and consultants maintained by the SCCRCD. Granting agencies and clients report they are pleased with the agency’s work.

Background

The purpose of Resource Conservation Districts (RCD) is to provide local non-regulatory, educational and technical assistance to landowners and agencies.

The district’s mission is to secure the adoption of conservation practices best adapted to save the basic resources of the state from unreasonable and preventable waste and destruction. These areas include, but are not limited to, farm, range, open space, urban development, wildlife, recreation, watershed, water quality and woodland.¹

Most states have RCDs. California has 103 RCDs. Not all counties have RCDs and some have more than one.

The current concept of the RCD grew out of its origins in the dust-bowl era when small farmers needed help to survive. Now the RCD concentrates on good land/habitat management. RCDs were originally designed to share project costs with farmers. Now they also assist homeowners with their horse pastures, roads, erosion control, stream management and other projects.

RCDs in the State of California have strong powers and authority that differ significantly from other federal and state resource agencies. At the county level, RCD Directors are elected or appointed officials. At the state level, the District is empowered under the Public Resources Code. At the federal level, the power source for RCDs is the Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law, and the Farm Bills.²

¹ Section 9001, Resource Conservation District Web site.

² Section 9001, Resource Conservation District Web site.

The Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District (SCCRCD) has no jurisdiction within the city limits of Capitola, Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley or Watsonville. Its jurisdiction lies solely within the unincorporated areas of the county.

The SCCRCD performs many functions:

- It guides Natural Conservation Resources Service funding and on-site technical assistance provided to property owners, especially agricultural producers and rural landowners.
- It was a key player in development of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary Agricultural Water Quality Plan and continues to guide the implementation and revision of the plan.
- In conjunction with the Farm Bureau, it has led the effort for voluntary agricultural water quality improvement through Farm Water Quality Short Courses.
- It writes the plans needed before a grant application can be submitted.
- It writes grant applications in a voluntary, non-regulatory approach to fulfill community concerns that are not being addressed by other agencies. Examples are water quality, fisheries, habitat enhancement and restoration.
- It coordinates teams to create enhancement, assessment, and implementation plans for roads, culverts, drainage or geologic needs.
- The SCCRCD looks at the Cost Share Program mandated or authorized by the USDA Farm Benefit. The Cost Share Program allows individuals to match their money with grant funds for their projects.

The SCCRCD has developed an Integrated Watershed Restoration Program that is the model for the state. It brings together the watershed assessments of the entire county for a coordinated approach. State and federal requirements are taken into consideration.

Using the SCCRCD's Services

A homeowner can call the SCCRCD and get technical design assistance for specific problem resolution. When the SCCRCD prepares a resource conservation plan, its staff and consultants recommend solutions to the problems that they encounter. These plans, after approval by the granting authority, are not necessarily the only way projects can be done. They are solutions that can be implemented without further research. Other solutions can be implemented if the granting authority approves them.

Since the SCCRCD cannot fund repairs or investigations from its own budget, the SCCRCD may direct the homeowner toward grants or agencies that could have matching funds. All of the work for the projects undertaken by the SCCRCD is completed under

grants from other agencies (granting authorities) such as the California Department of Fish and Game, the California Water Resource Conservation Board and the Coastal Conservancy.

Scope

The Grand Jury reviewed the general operations of the Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District, focusing on four areas:

- The operating procedures of the district.
- The funding of the district.
- The purpose of the district.
- How the district publicizes itself.

Sources

Interviewed:

California State environmental agency officials.
Environmental groups.
Granting agencies.
Resource Conservation District customers.
Resource Conservation District officials.
Santa Cruz County environmental agency officials.
United States Federal environmental agency officials.

Reviewed:

RCD Web site.
Valley Press, October 28-November 4, 2003.

Findings

1. There are many applications for federal and state grant money. For example, the California Department of Fish and Game alone receives about 400 proposals for projects each year.
2. Santa Cruz County funds the RCD with approximately \$40,000 annually to cover miscellaneous expenses.
3. The district brings in grant money for projects worth millions of dollars.
4. The SCCRCD operates with a staff of two full-time and six part-time employees.
5. The district's charter establishes it as a non-regulatory agency.

6. Proposals must be available for assessment, enhancement and implementation of a project before a grant application can be submitted.
7. Grants are awarded for various purposes: for studies, designs, plans and reports as well as for implementation. Grant funds can be used for the stated purpose only.
8. Each granting authority has stringent auditing requirements for both labor charges and report contents. Labor hours are audited on each submittal.
9. Permits currently can take up to two years to process. A single stream project may require as many as five separate permits from different agencies before it can proceed. They include the Regional Water Quality Control Board, the California Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, the Army Corps of Engineers, the National Marine Fisheries Services and several county agencies.
10. Landowners and the SCCRCD see the permit process as a daunting problem.
11. The SCCRCD has many years' experience in dealing with these agencies and understands the permit process.
12. The SCCRCD received a \$4.5 million grant from the California Coastal Conservancy to take on a new role of coordinating projects through their design and permit phases. The Coastal Conservancy gave the following reasons for selecting the SCCRCD:
 - It is a non-regulatory agency and thus not threatening to property owners nor conflicting with other regulatory agencies. The non-regulatory requirement eliminated many other potential choices.
 - The SCCRCD's jurisdiction is the unincorporated area of the county.
 - The SCCRCD already successfully completed several watershed projects and is "considered to be a great grant manager."³
13. SCCRCD recommends contractors and consultants from an approved list of specialists. Final selection is with the user.
14. The California Department of Fish and Game has worked with SCCRCD for more than 20 years.
15. The Natural Resources Conservation Service has worked with SCCRCD for 63 years.

³ California Coastal Conservancy.

16. The SCCRCD publicizes its resources through brochures, handouts, press releases, newspaper articles, radio, word of mouth, e-mail list servers, direct mailing or personal recommendations. The SCCRCD uses its own newsletters or it may be included in other newsletters as a technical resource.
17. The SCCRCD receives numerous contacts from road associations, landowners and land managers who have learned about it from the various ways the agency publicizes itself. The Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau Newsletter's monthly article, written by the SCCRCD or the Natural Resources Conservation Service, often refers growers and landowners to the SCCRCD.
18. Landowners are often referred to the SCCRCD by agencies or community groups or other landowners as a source of technical assistance and information. The SCCRCD recently created a Web site and has an intern making it more user-friendly. The district has noticed that other groups have links to its Web site as well.
19. Critics say the money spent on reports would be better spent on projects.⁴
20. The district cannot use grant money specified for reports to implement projects.
21. Critics say that the SCCRCD makes decisions without public input.
22. Public input is not required by most granting authorities dealing with the district.
23. Critics allege that some landowners have illegally diverted water or otherwise violated water and environmental resource law. These critics say that the SCCRCD should release the names of these landowners.
24. The district's non-regulatory status does not allow it to become involved in enforcing the law.

Conclusions

1. A key to the SCCRCD's success is to use its non-regulatory status to build trust and to provide help as needed. Policing its clients would both violate its charter and impede its work.
2. Money spent on proposals, studies and plans is not wasted because agencies that grant funds for projects require such reports to be written before they consider applications.

⁴ Valley Press, 28 October – 4 November 2003.

3. The public has grown accustomed to commenting on projects. Such comments now seem inevitable and desirable. However, the RCD cannot be faulted for adhering to grant standards that do not require such input.
4. Public awareness is one key to the agency's success.
5. With a small amount of local tax dollars, the SCCRCD performs a valuable service in bringing millions of dollars worth of state and federal funds to the county for local projects.
6. Helping homeowners negotiate the permit process is an important addition to the SCCRCD's mission.
7. Critics of the SCCRCD appear to lack a basic understanding of the agency's rules of operation.

Recommendations

1. The Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District should be praised for the fine work it is doing.
2. The Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District should work to expand public awareness of its services.
3. The Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District should allow as much public input as possible. Even if grantors do not require it, this helps enhance the project itself, builds good community relations and publicizes the work of the SCCRCD.
4. The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors should continue to fund this valuable agency.
5. Funding should be found to continue the SCCRCD's role as a permit coordinator.

Responses Required

Entity	Findings	Recommendations	Respond Within
Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors	2	1, 4, 5	90 days (September 30, 2004)
Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District	1 - 20	2, 3, 5	60 days (August 30, 2004)

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