

## WHAT IS A CONSERVATION DISTRICT?

The League of Women Voters of Washington (LWVWA) decided in 2009 to do a study of conservation districts throughout Washington State. Since then members have been gathering information on how conservation districts are composed, what they do, and what their election/selection processes are to choose district supervisors.

Conservation Districts (CDs) are political subdivisions of the State of Washington. Their authorities, powers and structure are set forth in chapter 89.08 RCW. They are governed by a volunteer board of five supervisors who are all local residents. Three are elected by the residents of the district and two are appointed by the Washington State Conservation Commission. (The next election for the Whatcom Conservation District (WCD) is March 13, 2012; please contact them at 354-2035 for more information about becoming a candidate or getting a ballot.). The Board of Supervisors is assisted by a staff of professionals with diverse skills, training and experiences necessary to accomplish the District's goals as set by the Board of Supervisors.

We have learned that in Washington there are 47 conservation districts with the mission to promote conservation within their borders. Most of these CDs approximate county boundaries. Each CD has a unique mission statement describing its work to preserve natural resources within the district. WCD's mission is "to serve present and future generations of Whatcom County through a natural resource conservation program of leadership, partnership, and technical, educational and financial assistance to foster a healthy sustainable relationship between people and the environment". Since 1946 the WCD has been dedicated to this mission and has accomplished many successes.

Conservation Districts are funded through public and private grants, contributions and partnerships. Fifteen County Conservation Districts in Washington State are authorized to collect special assessments to fund projects however Whatcom CD is not one of them. The 2011-2012 budget for the WCD is about \$1,055,800.

Many of us know about the Annual Native Plant Sale and EXPO held by the WCD (this year on March 24 at Whatcom Community College) but have you heard of the WCD efforts to help farmers improve water quality in the streams that cross their land? The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) provides landowners a combination of federal and state funds to restore critical salmon habitat. You might have noticed blue tubes with something planted in them standing in rows near streams in fields out in the County. The vegetation planted will eventually shade out canary grass and help reduce the need to dig out the creek to prevent flooding. The fish will also benefit from the cool and shaded water. 28 CREP participants have been approved for installation this spring.

Dairy Nutrient Management is another program offered by the WCD. Nutrient management is the practice of utilizing on farm nutrients (manure) in a way that maximizes forage and crop growth, protects natural resources (soil, water, and air), and increases the efficiency and productivity of a farm. Manure should not be viewed as waste product, but rather as a valuable nutrient asset that when used responsibly, can increase the tilth and productivity of soil, maximize crop and forage growth, and reduce the import of chemical fertilizer onto the farm. Part of properly managing nutrients is knowing how to apply them in such a way that minimizes the risk of resource pollution, while also maximizing availability to plants. The Application Risk Management System (ARM) was developed by WCD to help dairy farmers through the process of properly assessing, managing, and reducing the risks associated with applying manure to their fields. The system is meant to be used in conjunction with a Nutrient Management Plan, which lays out the risks associated with farm fields and how to individually manage them.

These are only two of the many WCD programs and activities we are learning about. More information on programs and activities as well as CD elections and voter registration can be found at [www.whatcomcd.org](http://www.whatcomcd.org).

The LVWWA study has resulted in a 24 page document which is available at <http://www.lvwva.org/studies.html>. We want to share what we have learned so on February 18, 2012 the LWV of Bellingham/Whatcom will host a meeting at the Lynden Public Library at 10 am. George Boggs, Executive Director of the Whatcom Conservation

District, a staff person and a county resident who has participated in one of the programs will tell us more about the WCD. The public is welcome.

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League of Women Voters of Bellingham-Whatcom County

[www.lwvbellingham-whatcom.org](http://www.lwvbellingham-whatcom.org)