



Conservation Districts

Picture your family running through a stream as it makes its way through tall oak trees under the sounds of black-capped chickadees. Now, imagine that feeling and attempt to savor it for future generations. It is the creation of conservation districts, which statutorily ensured the effort to preserve and sustain the aforementioned feeling. Located in all but one county, Philadelphia, the conservation districts provide a variety of programs that unite farmers, municipal officials, homeowners, teachers, students, and others, driven by thought of rebuilding and conserving Pennsylvania's natural resources.

Conservation districts are tasked with addressing a number of environmental issues, which include, but are not limited to: soil erosion, flood control, maintenance of dams and reservoirs, storm water management, air quality protection, wildlife preservation, and advocating for the health, safety, and welfare of its citizens.

The 1945 law creating conservation districts, Act 217, followed a concerted effort to address the conservation of soil, water and related natural resources. In addition to creating the districts, it charged them with conserving natural resources and developing programs and projects consistent with responsible environmental stewardship. Act 217 also created the State Conservation Commission to provide oversight for the county conservation districts and administer a variety of programs, including:

- [Nutrient and Odor Management Programs](#), Act 38 of 2005 provides for phosphorus and nitrogen management practices and year-round setbacks for manure applications as well as implementation of approved odor management plan;
- [Resource Enhancement and Protection \(REAP\) Program](#), which offers tax credits for farmers implementing best management practices to enhance farm production while protecting natural resources;
- [Dirt and Gravel Road Maintenance Program](#); and
- [Conservation District Fund Allocation Program](#), which includes administrative assistance cost share, technical assistance cost share, and agricultural conservation easement program support.

The [State Conservation Commission](#) is a departmental administrative panel under concurrent authority of the PA departments of Agriculture and Environmental Protection. The 14-member commission holds a broad mandate to ensure the wise use of Pennsylvania's natural resources, and it maintains a diverse membership, including:

- The secretary of the [Department of Agriculture](#);
- The secretary of the [Department of Environmental Protection](#);
- Dean of the [Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences](#);
- Four farmers, appointed in consultation with the [PA Association of Conservation Districts](#) and the [PA State Council of Farm Organizations](#);
- Two members of the public who are not farmers;
- The state conservationist of the [Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture](#);
- Associate director of the [cooperative extension service](#) of Penn State University;
- President of the [PA Association of Conservation Districts](#);
- The secretary of the [Department of Conservation and Natural Resources](#); and

- The secretary of the [Department of Community and Economic Development](#).

Pennsylvania’s 66 conservation districts represent each county, except Philadelphia, and they provide assistance on a wide array of issues, including agricultural land preservation, environmental education, forest management, wildlife management, abandoned mines, and Chesapeake Bay program. The districts are locally managed by citizens from varying backgrounds.

Conservation districts receive funding from the Conservation District Fund and from the Public Utility Commission, which is responsible for collecting and distributing the unconventional gas well impact fee. Conservation District Fund receipts can come from state or federal appropriations, earnings on interest, and other funds made available by the State Conservation Commission.

Act 13 of 2012, which established the impact fee, directed \$2.5 million for disbursement to county conservation districts in fiscal year 2012-13, \$5 million in fiscal year 2013-14, and \$7.5 million plus CPI adjustment in fiscal year 2014-15 and each year thereafter. In accordance with state law, half of these receipts are divided equally among conservation districts, while the remaining balance is distributed to the State Conservation Commission. Funds allocated to the State Conservation Commission are deposited into the Conservation District Fund to provide further conservation district support.

Additionally, the Conservation District Fund receives General Fund transfers from the Department of Agriculture and DEP. The Conservation District Fund receives an average of \$3.4 million annually from General Fund transfers, with the bulk coming from DEP’s budget. The chart below tracks conservation district funding, as well as the state agency from which they were budgeted.

Conservation District Funding							
(Amounts in Thousands)							
	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
PUC: Act 13 Impact Fee Distribution	\$2,500	\$5,000	\$7,500	\$7,545	\$7,545	\$7,643	\$7,750
DEP: Transfer to Fund	\$2,856	\$2,506	\$2,506	\$2,506	\$2,506	\$2,506	\$2,506
AGR: Transfer to Fund	\$1,019	\$869	\$869	\$869	\$869	\$869	\$869
Total Conservation Funding	\$6,375	\$8,375	\$10,875	\$10,920	\$10,920	\$11,018	\$11,125

Grants to conservation districts support services, projects and activities that benefit the agricultural community, promote training and development of professional staff to carry out the mission of the conservation districts, and implement programs developed by DEP, which have been delegated to these districts due to their unique position at the local level.

Conservation districts have been working closely with state environmental agencies to meet Pennsylvania’s obligations under the Chesapeake Bay program. Pennsylvania holds 35 percent of the Chesapeake Bay watershed, and roughly 33,000 farms are situated along the Susquehanna River, the largest tributary to the bay.

As Gov. Tom Wolf’s administration implements its Chesapeake Bay “reboot” strategy of investing more time and resources to address pollution and runoff that hurt the bay, conservation districts are working to help the commonwealth win compliance from the agricultural community.

The conservation district concept is one tool the commonwealth uses to subsidize conservation practices and responsible environmental stewardship. By employing teams of technical experts in conservation and agricultural sciences, the districts are able to enact real reforms across Pennsylvania. The local management arrangement, by which a committee of citizens from varying professional backgrounds make decisions to protect their local community, provides the necessary first-hand experience prior to initiating conservation projects.

House Appropriations Committee (D)		
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