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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICTS
By Harold H. Gilman, Extension Soil Conservationist

1. Q. What is a soil and water conservation district?
A. It is a legal subdivision of state government organized by petition and referendum vote of the local landowners as authorized by the Soil and Water Conservation District Act.

2. Q. What are the purposes of a soil and water conservation district?
A. (1) To manage and conserve the land and its resources in a systematic, effective and economic manner.
   (2) To enable individual farm and ranch operators working cooperatively to execute conservation measures in the district.
   (3) To provide a means whereby individual farm and ranch operators may obtain from local, state and federal agencies the assistance necessary for establishing proper soil and water conservation measures.

3. Q. Who runs or governs the district?
A. Five locally elected supervisors who are farm operators or landowners in the district.

4. Q. Why is it desirable to have local farmers run the district?
A. Supervisors who are also residents of the district provide local control of the soil and water conservation program being applied to their own and their neighbors' farms.

5. Q. What are some of the responsibilities of local soil and water conservation district supervisors?
A. (1) To outline, promote and maintain a technically sound soil and water conservation program in the district.
   (2) To determine priorities of work within the district.
   (3) To approve each conservation farm and ranch plan as developed by the soil conservationist assigned to that district; also, to approve each Great Plains conservation plan that is developed under that program.
   (4) To carry on an active educational and informational program.
   (5) To coordinate the facilities and services of all soil and water conservation agencies working within the district.
   (6) To work out an annual plan of work and activities calendar, and to make an annual report to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
6. Q. Can land in the district be taxed for this work?
A. The district cannot levy any taxes, make assessments or issue bonds against any land within the district. However, the district is authorized to receive contributions in money, materials and services from individuals, groups, and county, state and federal governments.

7. Q. How does the soil and water conservation district finance its operations?
A. Since the district cannot levy taxes, make assessments or issue bonds against any land within the district, it has to operate on technical and other assistance provided by the county, state or federal government or through grants or donations and proceeds from equipment rental, building rental and sale of trees, seed and other special items.

8. Q. Are all landowners or operators in the district required to cooperate?
A. No landowner or operator is required by law to cooperate with the district. Cooperation is accomplished by voluntary action of the landowners and/or operators.

9. Q. How can a group of interested farmers or landowners obtain information concerning the organization, operation and benefits of a soil and water conservation district?
A. Information is available from county agricultural agents, the local Work Unit Conservationist, the Area Conservationist of the Soil Conservation Service, the supervisors of any soil and water conservation district, the State Soil Conservation Committee, or the Extension Soil Conservationist of the Agricultural College.

10. Q. How can an individual farmer in the district get the assistance he desires?
A. On application to the district supervisors, he can obtain technical assistance, information and surveys to assist in establishing and developing the combination of practices considered best for soil and moisture conservation and wise land use on his individual farm or ranch. The practices may consist of grassed waterways, contour farming, terracing, strip cropping, pasture furrowing and grooving, retirement to grass, improved crop rotations, water spreading, irrigation, drainage, gully control and proper construction of farm ponds.

11. Q. Besides technical services, what assistance have farmers received from soil and water conservation districts now in operation in Nebraska?
A. Many soil and water conservation districts in Nebraska have special equipment such as tractors, graders, bulldozers, terracers, grass drills, sub-tillers, treaders, packers, mechanical tree planters and pasture grooving machines for rent at a reasonable cost. Few farmers own all of the specialized equipment they might want to use. Also, tree and shrub planting stock, native grass seed and steel pipe for dams have been purchased by districts for sale to cooperating farmers.

12. Q. How much does a soil and water conservation program cost the individual farmer on his farm?
A. There are no charges for surveys or other technical services that the district renders in helping the farmer plan and establish his conservation program. The farmer pays a rental fee for any equipment he uses.
13. Q. Are there any advantages to be derived from having a farm or ranch in a district even though the owner may not be particularly interested in soil conservation at present or may not have any particular conservation problems?

A. In any community project, there are intangible advantages that affect any and all in the community. There is at least one very real benefit felt by everyone in a soil and water conservation district:

The free technical assistance provided to farmers who do have conservation problems enables them to maintain and, in most cases, increase the value of their farms. This naturally helps protect the tax base for both the present and the future.

14. Q. If future legislation should change the present law, will districts organized under the present law be affected thereby?

A. The Attorney General of Nebraska states in regard to this: "Retroactive laws may not be enacted where the effect is to disturb vested rights or impair the obligation of a contract." In other words, a new law cannot be made nor the present law changed in such a way that it will interfere with either the privileges or obligations specified in the present law.

15. Q. Do the activities of soil and water conservation districts conflict with the Agricultural Conservation Program?

A. No. The two programs supplement each other. The Agricultural Conservation Program authorizes cost-sharing payments on approved soil and water conservation practices. The soil and water conservation districts furnish planning and technical assistance and can provide special equipment and materials for the establishment of conservation practices on individual farms and ranches.

16. Q. How successful has the soil and water conservation district movement been in Nebraska?

A. The first Nebraska district was organized in Washington County in 1938. All the farm and ranch land area in Nebraska was within the 87 soil and water conservation districts by December 1950.

17. Q. What is the Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Committee?

A. The Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Committee is the official agency which directs the over-all program of soil and water conservation, watershed protection and flood prevention within the state.

18. Q. Who is on the Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Committee?

A. The committee consists of eleven members: The Dean or Director of the Conservation and Survey Division of the University of Nebraska; the Dean of the College of Agriculture, University of Nebraska; the Associate Director of the State Agricultural Extension Service; a representative of the Department of Water Resources; two members appointed by the Governor, one of whom represents the chambers of commerce and one the irrigation interests of the state; one soil and water conservation district supervisor or former supervisor to represent the state at large; and one soil and water conservation district supervisor from each of the four Congressional districts of the state. The State Committee can request the Governor of Nebraska and the Secretary
of the U.S. Department of Agriculture each to appoint an advisory member.

19. Q. What are the duties of the Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Committee?
   A. (1) To coordinate the programs of all agencies in the state interested in soil and water conservation.
   (2) To secure the cooperation and assistance of the United States and any of its agencies and of the agencies of the state in the work of the districts.
   (3) To keep supervisors of the districts informed of the activities and experiences of all other districts, to facilitate an interchange of advice and experience among them and to suggest cooperative action where advisable.
   (4) To coordinate the programs of the soil conservation districts so far as this can be done by advice and consultation.
   (5) To disseminate throughout the state information concerning the activities and programs of soil and water conservation districts.
   (6) To encourage the formation of soil and water conservation districts, receive watershed applications requesting technical assistance in watershed planning, make watershed application approvals and recommend watershed planning priorities to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
   (7) To conduct elections for supervisors of soil and water conservation districts.
   (8) To assist wherever possible in the promotion of soil and water conservation in the state.
   (9) To represent the State of Nebraska in the field of watershed protection and flood prevention.

20. Q. Do the Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Committee or District Supervisors receive a salary?
   A. The Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Committee receive no salary for their services. However, they are entitled to receive a per diem allowance. Soil and water conservation district supervisors receive no salary for their services but are allowed travel expenses in carrying out their duties.

21. Q. How does the Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Committee get its funds to carry on this program?
   A. Each biennium the Legislature authorizes an appropriation to the Committee whereby the Committee can carry out its functions and provide direct assistance to soil and water conservation districts.