

# **CONSERVATION DISTRICTS PROGRAM FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE**

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## **Background**

In 2006, the Chair of the Conservation Districts Commission organized three workshops that engaged provincial deputy ministers in discussing the future of the Conservation Districts (CD) Program. The “Conservation Districts Program Framework for the Future” discussion document was produced as a summary of the discussions. The Minister of Water Stewardship released the document to the public in December 2007 to initiate a consultation process to reach stakeholder consensus on the future of the CD program.

Extensive consultations were held across the province early in 2008 and a “What You Told Us” document summarizing the comments received from the consultations was made public in June, 2008. In August, a committee comprised of representatives from the Manitoba Conservation Districts Association, the Association of Manitoba Municipalities, and Manitoba Water Stewardship was established to incorporate the feedback from the consultations into a consensus-based version of the “Conservation Districts Program Framework for the Future” document. This document summarizes the consensus direction for the vision, mandate, goals and objectives for the future of the CD program.

## **Need**

- The CD program is one of the most successful land and water conservation partnerships in Western Canada.
- The success of the CD program is attributable to the provincial – municipal partnership, the governance of local CD boards and sustained annual funding.
- Both provincial and municipal partners recognize that the CD program is the preferred model for effective planning and delivery of land and water resource policies and programs in the future.
- Stresses on land and water have increased substantially since the CD program began over 36 years ago. With the growth of the CD program and the increasing complexity of environmental stressors, there is a growing need for strong, watershed-based programs

implemented through conservation districts.

- The timing is right to undertake an open review of the CD program, assess its strengths and weaknesses and suggest changes to the structure of the CD program to address the issues of today and those of the future.
- To be successful, a defined framework is necessary to provide focus, structure and common goals and objectives for the CD program. Provincial, municipal and other program partners will strive to achieve consensus on common goals and objectives and a newly defined future direction.
- The purpose of this document is to articulate a consensus-based vision on strategies and priorities for the CD program over the next 15 to 20 years

## **Vision**

- The CD program will strive to create healthy watersheds to support watershed residents, the environment and the economy, for the present and for the future.

## **Mandate**

- CDs facilitate and support integrated development and stewardship of water and land resources within watersheds, in ways that assure ecosystem health and sustainability through engagement of local citizens.

## **Purpose**

- The newly defined vision, mandate, core principles, goals and objectives all support a renewed purpose for the CD program: healthy and sustainable watersheds through focused, priority-based funding decisions providing definite improvements to watershed health.

## **Core Principles**

- The success of the CD program is dependent on a number of core principles. These principles will remain as follows and will put the program on a firm course for the future:
  - Partnerships between levels of government and engagement of the private sector and local citizens.
  - Cost-shared program with provincial and municipal government partners providing sustained annual funding.
  - Incentive-based programming and not a regulatory program.
  - Local decision-making through legislatively empowered CD boards and sub-districts.
  - Watershed-based management and planning with program delivery capability.

## **Education**

- Education is essential to the success and growth of the CD program within the overall mandate of program delivery to improve watershed health.
- Education and awareness of watershed concepts are important for CD residents and for all Manitobans.
- Educational strategies are implicit in each of the defined goal statements in this document.
- Partnership approaches to promote conservation concepts are encouraged. These could include providing information to schoolteachers, supporting existing environmental curricula, and cooperating with agricultural organizations to promote new conservation farming methods or technologies.

## Strategic Goals of the Conservation Districts Program

### *Defining Role of Conservation Districts Goal*

**Goal:** *Conservation Districts are the water management and water planning coordinators within their watersheds.*

#### **Objectives:**

- To be the lead local watershed organization, bringing a holistic and sustainable management perspective to issues affecting surface and groundwater quality and quantity.
- Water management plans will recognize that each watershed is unique and will address the issues and the needs and priorities of the watershed residents.
- To support sustainable land use through education, planning and programming to conserve, protect and restore the health of lakes, rivers, streams, wetlands and groundwater in a watershed and to ensure that downstream regions including downstream watersheds are not negatively impacted by upstream activities.
- To coordinate completion of a water management plan with consideration to surface water, groundwater and protection of drinking water sources in a watershed.
- To work with municipal, provincial and federal governments and external partners to: support, coordinate and deliver watershed based programs to protect aquatic ecosystems; improve surface and groundwater quality and habitat diversity; preserve wetlands; enhance fisheries habitat; and improve the resiliency of the landscape to better withstand potential future droughts or floods.

#### **Descriptive Attributes:**

- CDs will offer targeted incentive-based prevention, remediation, restoration, and conservation programming to address water management issues as identified and prioritized in a water management plan. These programs could include water storage, erosion control, bank stabilization, land cover/forestry, groundwater protection, riparian

protection, drinking source water protection, well sealing, grassed waterways, gully repair, livestock pasture/nutrient/watering/crossing systems, fish habitat enhancement and more.

- CDs will provide coordinated surface water management planning, advisory support, recommendations and programming for the watershed, which will ensure a coordinated flow regime throughout the watershed. This watershed-based approach will consider the connections between the watershed's natural topography, land use and artificial drainage systems with planned strategies for sustainable agriculture, drought proofing, flood protection, improved water quality and aquifer management. This approach will also ensure downstream residents and municipalities are not negatively impacted by the cumulative impacts of drainage, unplanned water works or poorly maintained drains. Where capabilities exist, CDs will provide recommendations and advice on drainage development, drainage applications, cumulative impacts, and drain and crossing design standards.
- A surface water management plan can be included in an integrated watershed management planning process or it can be a separate process.
- The province will support current and new partnerships, cost-share arrangements, and technical/professional assistance for CDs for managing, maintaining and improving artificial drainage and crossing infrastructures. Consistent terms of a partnership agreement will need to be developed that are acceptable for CDs with existing infrastructure and CDs interested in new infrastructure partnerships.

### **Organizational Goals**

**Goal:** *Conservation districts will be formed on watersheds throughout Manitoba, recognizing municipal participation in the conservation district program is voluntary.*

#### **Objectives:**

- CDs formed on municipal boundaries will work towards realigning to true watershed boundaries.
- CDs will include all of municipal Manitoba.

- New CDs will be formed on watershed boundaries.

**Descriptive Attributes:**

- There may be approximately 21 watershed-based CDs in municipal Manitoba.
- CD boards with municipal-based outer boundaries will coordinate their boundary realignment process and will regularly report progress to their member municipalities and provincial partner.
- A transition period will be considered where a new CD watershed boundary affects an existing CD boundary.
- Watershed boundaries must be acceptable to partner municipalities.
- Two or more watersheds could be administered by one CD board.
- Administrative efficiency, program optimization and effective budget are key factors in determining watershed size.

**Goal:** *Conservation Districts will be governed by local boards that encourage and provide opportunity for citizen consultation and meaningful participation in decision making processes.*

**Objectives:**

- The provincial government will support CD boards and staff with training and professional development to help build capacity to carry out their mandates.
- CD boards will develop policies to direct administration, governance, programming and planning.
- CD public engagement processes will include all interests within the watershed.
- A committee with representation from the Association of Manitoba Municipalities, Manitoba Conservation Districts Association and Manitoba Water Stewardship will draft a new CD appointment policy by 2011 for consideration by the Conservation Districts Commission.

**Descriptive Attributes:**

- All local governments should have the opportunity to participate in the CD program.
- Opportunities to fully participate and partner in CD planning and programming should be extended to First Nations and Manitoba Northern Affairs communities to ensure all land including Federal and provincial Crown lands are addressed within the CD mandate and to enable an inclusive and integrated approach across entire watersheds.
- The provincial government will appoint a provincial representative on each CD board.

**Operational Goals**

**Goal:** *Conservation districts will complete an integrated watershed management plan (IWMP).*

**Objectives:**

- An IWMP and a five year strategic plan will be initiated within two years of the formation of a CD.
- An IWMP should strive to be completed in less than two years.
- First generation IWMPs will involve a public discussion of watershed issues and priorities affecting land and water resource management which will help to direct a CD board in establishing goals, objectives, budgets and programs.
- Coordination between an IWMP and planning district plans is encouraged as the plans can be mutually supportive, albeit through different roles and procedures, to affect a healthy watershed.
- CD plans address local watershed issues and priorities and support provincial objectives identified in the *Conservation Districts Act*, the *Water Protection Act* and provincial land and water policies.
- Provincial and Municipal partner funding will support a CD budget and programming that is connected to an IWMP.

**Descriptive Attributes:**

- The purpose of an IWMP is the protection, conservation, restoration and stewardship of land and water resources to maintain water quality and support healthy watershed function.
- IWMPs are intended to help the CD board establish programs to address priority issues within existing resources and budgets and identify the need and means to explore new or expanded partnerships which could include provincial, federal and municipal governments, and other organizations and departments.
- Targeted land use programming that protects and improves water quality and community drinking water is a priority for IWMP.
- An IWMP will establish evaluation procedures and benchmarks to measure and demonstrate the accomplishments and effectiveness of CD programs to watershed residents and funding partners.

**Goal:** *Conservation Districts will support sustainable land use and water management through incentive programming.*

**Objectives:**

- CDs work with landowners to promote and support practices that provide public benefits to the watershed such as reduced flooding, improved fisheries and enhanced water quality.
- CDs support economic partnerships that use water, land and related resources in sustainable ways.
- CDs are proactive in securing external partnership funding.
- The focus of CDs' land and water programming should be prevention.

**Descriptive attributes:**

- CDs have no regulatory or enforcement mandate; appropriate agencies are responsible for regulation and enforcement actions.

- Incentive programming is integrative in nature, focused on prevention and sustainable management practices.
- Incentive programming is targeted to high-risk areas identified and prioritized in an IWMP.
- Land and water management incentive programming will be locally developed and prioritized through an IWMP process.
- Incentive programs that protect the environment for public benefit will consider market values of competing land uses.

### **Outcome-Based Goals**

**Goal:** *Drinking water protection is a priority consideration in conservation district planning and programming.*

#### **Objectives:**

- Protect drinking water sources through land use management and coordination with other planning tools.
- Strive to prevent direct and indirect water pollution.
- Identify priority management zones.

#### **Descriptive attributes:**

- Provincial funding priorities are linked to mitigating risk areas identified in an integrated watershed management plan.

**Goal:** *Conservation districts programming will support initiatives that improve and protect Manitoba's water.*

#### **Objectives:**

- CDs assess current and future risks to the overall health of the water through IWMPs.
- CDs will offer targeted incentive-based programming to address land use impacts affecting the health of the water.

**Descriptive Attributes:**

- Water quality protection is fundamental in all CD programming.
- CD programming promotes land use that supports clean, healthy water with vibrant plant and animal populations.
- CD programming will be identified and prioritized in a locally developed IWMP.
- Manitoba's water resources include surface water and groundwater.

**Goal:** *Conservation district programming will demonstrate definite improvement to watershed health.*

**Objectives:**

- The Conservation Districts Commission, in conjunction with the Manitoba Conservation Districts Association, will define appropriate reporting procedures for documenting suitable watershed health improvements in 2009-10.
- CDs monitor and evaluate programming to demonstrate that program funding brings appreciable change to watershed health and water quality.
- The annual budget process includes assessing programming and identifying goals and strategies for demonstrating outcomes.
- CDs provide watershed residents with an annual report card on watershed issues, indicators of watershed health and progress toward goals.
- Provincial funding is based on the benefits received from programming (outcomes) as opposed to the number of projects completed (outputs).

**Descriptive attributes:**

- The provincial government seeks to maximize benefit by providing funding when and where it is needed most in each CD.
- Watershed project proposals that project definite improvements in watershed health are more likely to be given funding priority.

- The provincial government supports watershed programming targeted to high risk areas that are identified and prioritized in an IWMP.
- The provincial government will assist in providing technical professional data, indicators, evaluation strategies and processes to help CDs with monitoring and evaluation.
- Program delivery is the focus of the CD program. Measuring improvement and reporting on outcomes must be practical, considerate of limited CD staffing, and balanced within the program delivery focus.

## **Funding Direction**

### **Introduction:**

Public funding is often provided to support public policy objectives such as ecosystem health, stewardship and conservation. There are many competing demands for public funds and funding is an ongoing challenge for the CD program. This is the reality of the CD program, which must be considered in developing future funding policy direction.

### **Principles:**

- CD program funding is founded on a provincial - municipal partnership utilizing public funding.
- The cost share formula is 75% provincial – 25% municipal for programs that meet the legislative mandate of the CD program. Funding for the CD program is dependent on the priorities, decisions and amounts approved through the provincial and municipal budget processes.
- CD boards are legislatively empowered local watershed boards that are responsible and accountable to their watershed residents and funding partners for their policy, spending decisions and progress.

**Objectives:**

- A committee with representation from the Manitoba Conservation Districts Association, the Association of Manitoba Municipalities and Manitoba Water Stewardship will draft a new funding allocation formula for the Conservation Districts Commission by fall 2010 considering:
  - Investigation of the potential to provide funding mechanisms to reward innovation, efficiency, and outcome based achievement.
  - A review of base administration, fund concept and criteria.
  - Investigation of the potential for carryover of provincial funding for planned and budgeted projects from one fiscal year to the next and provide a response by 2010.
  - Investigation of how best to incorporate large urban centers into the program.
- Establish the 2007-08 provincial grants to CDs as base funding so CD boards can plan and deliver programs with assurance (subject to municipal cost sharing as per 75-25 formula).
- Move from a demand-driven funding process to a funding methodology that is fair, equitable and transparent.
- Adjust the *Conservation Districts Act* to accommodate a new funding allocation formula.
- Encourage and support new funding sources, including the federal government, corporations and non-profit organizations recognizing the CD program's future cannot rely exclusively on public funding.
- Separate drain/crossing infrastructure funding from land/water conservation programming funding.
- Ensure IWMPs are implemented by modifying the existing annual budget process to connect the plan, identified priorities and targeted programs to the budget. A new budget format will be developed for use in the 2010-11 year.
- Support targeted programming as identified in a plan over non-targeted watershed-wide universal application based programs.

## **Next Steps**

- The committee will present the consensus-based “Conservation District Framework for the Future” document to the Minister of Water Stewardship and the Conservation Districts Commission prior to fiscal year end, 2008-09.
- The Conservation Districts Commission will review the document and provide their recommendations to the Minister.
- The Minister will provide direction on any further initiatives.
- The target is to implement the new strategic framework directives in the 2010-11 fiscal year and to initiate a review of the *Conservation Districts Act* to identify necessary amendments.

## **Summary**

- The intent of this framework is to focus the work of the provincial government, member municipal governments, local CD boards and program partners to create common goals and objectives on the future direction of the CD program.
- This document is a starting point intended to collaboratively provide focus and structure to ensure the growth and success of the CD program.