

INTERIM REPORT

CONSERVATION DISTRICT STAFF TRAINING COORDINATION STEERING COMMITTEE

Prepared by PACD
February 21, 2007

BACKGROUND

Need for Training Coordination

In July 2006, the PACD District Employees Committee asked the PACD to facilitate the establishment of a Committee to help coordinate training opportunities targeted to conservation district staff. The District Employees Committee wanted an examination of a number of issues related to improved coordination and information for conservation district staff training such as: timing (how often and when training occurs); content of the training; whether the training is required or mandatory for the program; audience (which staff is the target for the training); difficulty level and/or experience level of the training; funding of training; possible consolidation of duplicative topics; and whether certification or other formal training mechanisms are required or needed.

This is an interim report of PACD's effort to establish a Conservation District Staff Training Coordination Steering Committee (Steering Committee).

Establishment of the Steering Committee

The first task was to identify participants on the Steering Committee. PACD staff identified training provided to conservation district staff through various state-funded programs, the department or agency and the person that has the primary responsibility for the training, and the lead coordinator for the training. Based on this information, the PACD invited representatives of the following departments and organizations to participate on the Steering Committee:

Representatives from the PACD District Employees Committee;
Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts staff;
PA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), several program areas;
State Conservation Commission (SCC);
PSU Center for Dirt and Gravel Roads;
PA Department of Agriculture;
PA Department of Education;
PA Department of Community and Economic Development;
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service; and
The Conservation Partnership's Leadership Development Committee.

The names of the participants on the Steering Committee are provided in Appendix A.

Initial Meeting

The PACD facilitated an initial meeting of the Steering Committee on December 8, 2006. The attendees were asked to provide course descriptions and curricula for their programs to share with other attendees. This information was forwarded to participants for review before the meeting. During the initial meeting, each attendee was asked to provide a brief overview of their training program(s). Participants asked questions and general notes and comments were recorded on flip charts. At the end of the day, all participants agreed that the meeting was very informative and that it was time well spent. Several people commented that they had a much better understanding of the training begin offered to conservation district staff and that this was the first time anyone had attempted to bring all the training information together. The Steering Committee agreed that it would be worthwhile to meet again to follow-up to discuss the information that was provided at the meeting.

Follow-up Meetings

Two subsequent follow-up meetings were held by the Steering Committee on January 17, 2007 and February 16, 2007. During these subsequent meetings, the Steering Committee discussed the training programs and the draft Conservation District Staff Training Matrix that was developed by PACD staff to compile information obtained on the various training programs (discussion below).

FINDINGS

There are a number of programs that conservation district staff implement and/or administer on behalf of the state of Pennsylvania that are delegated or contracted through the PA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the PA Department of Agriculture (PDA), and the State Conservation Commission (SCC). The state provides training for conservation district staff for many of these programs through its departments and agencies. Some of these programs have specific training requirements or certification requirements for staff implementing the programs that are outlined in the enabling legislation or regulations, such as the Nutrient Management Specialist Certification Program. Other programs establish their own training programs and agendas.

The Steering Committee made a number of observations regarding training for conservation district staff. The following is a summary of their findings.

Partnership Approach Works Well

The partnership approach has proven to be an effective means of coordinating and delivering training.

The Steering Committee felt that the Agricultural Conservation Technician (ACT) Training was an excellent example of the partnership coming together to provide comprehensive technical training where there was an identified need. Training that is coordinated by the conservation partnership is well organized with documented responsibilities for each partner. In addition, where there is a planning group of different partners, the training seems to meet more of the needs of the program and the staff implementing the program.

Adequate Funding is Necessary

Adequate funding is necessary for quality training.

There is a correlation between how well funded the training is and how well organized and effective the training has been. The Steering Committee observed that training for the Chapter 102 and 105 programs were lacking in a number of areas including funding. Departments and agencies that consistently budget to provide quality training for their programs have better training results and more consistent program implementation. Training programs provided with the necessary resources are better organized and more effective.

Training Needs to be a Priority

Training needs to be a priority for the department or agency responsible for the program as well as with conservation district staff.

Training will always be needed due to changing program needs and requirements and because of conservation district staff turnover. While the responsibility to provide the training necessary to implement the program remains with the delegating or contracting agency, the responsibility to send staff to attend the training lies with the conservation district. Where state program technical staff are also assigned as the sole providers of the program training, training receives a lower priority when mixed in with all the other program responsibilities.

Clear and Consistent Expectations

Where there are clear and consistent expectations of what knowledge, information and skills are required in a program, conservation district personnel are better able to identify what training is needed to acquire these skills.

Training programs with more formal curricula or certification requirements such as the Dirt and Gravel Roads ESM training and the Nutrient Management Specialist Certification Program are well organized and training requirements and participation are well documented. Certification programs offer the advantage of having very clear expectations of what training is required, a

formal evaluation of whether the skills and knowledge have been acquired, and documentation of the skills and training that have been received.

Targeting Individual Training

Individual Development Plans (IDP) can be used to target individual training needs.

Although most members of the Steering Committee were aware of the Individual Development Plans (IDP) for conservation district staff positions, they were unsure if conservation districts were utilizing the IDP to identify conservation district staff training needs. The Steering Committee felt that the IDP was an excellent tool to identify and document conservation district staff training needs and to target specific training for individuals.

Unmet Training Needs

No entity is currently summarizing and documenting unmet conservation district staff training needs

To the knowledge of the Steering Committee members, there have been no comprehensive surveys or studies completed to identify unmet conservation district staff training needs. A survey such as this would require funding or a commitment of staff resources to implement.

Transferable Skills Training

Training in transferable skills such as computer programs, accounting, writing, etc., are generally not by provided by state program-related training.

Although some transferable skills, management, and leadership training is provided annually at the Conservation District Staff Conference and the District Management Summit, the training programs offered varies from year-to-year. This is also the only training opportunity currently offered for conservation district clerical or administrative staff. Generally, training in transferable skills for conservation district staff must be obtained from other sources such as universities, colleges, other organizations, and private sector providers.

CONSERVATION DISTRICT STAFF TRAINING MATRIX

There was so much information shared about the different training programs that PACD staff thought it would be useful to provide comparable information for each training program. The Conservation District Staff Training Matrix was developed as a tool to provide basic information about each training program offered for conservation district staff. Only training related to state delegated and/or contracted programs or positions, or trainings provided by state agencies have been included in the matrix. The Steering Committee recognizes that there are many other options for staff training provided by other organizations, agencies such as USDA NRCS, universities, colleges, and the private sector that may be useful to conservation district staff. The

Steering Committee felt that the resources were not available to document or track these other training options.

Although the matrix was designed as an information training tool for conservation district managers and staff, the Steering Committee felt that the matrix should not be used in isolation. The matrix should be used in conjunction with both the Conservation Districts and Bureau of Watershed Management Training/Special Events Calendar to obtain the actual training dates, and the Individual Development Plan (IDP) which provides an individual plan for the completion of training for a staff position.

Contact information for the person responsible for the program and the lead coordinator can be found on the back of the paper copy of the matrix and as an attachment for the electronic version. The Steering Committee has agreed to assist PACD in updating the information contained in the matrix on an annual basis with a tentative release in early September of each year.

OPPORTUNITY TO PROVIDE INPUT

The Steering Committee has agreed to meet again in April to develop a list of recommendations for conservation district staff training. The Steering Committee is interested in obtaining comments and suggestions from conservation districts and others to review and discuss at its next meeting. Please provide any comments, suggestions and/or recommendations about this interim report, the matrix, or other conservation district staff training related issues to Susan Marquart at PACD (717-238-PACD or susan-marquart@pacd.org) by April 20, 2007.

Appendix A

CONSERVATION DISTRICT STAFF TRAINING COORDINATION STEERING COMMITTEE

Participants

Don McNutt., Lancaster Conservation District
Rich Kadwill, Montgomery Conservation District
Ernie Tarner, Franklin Conservation District
Lynn Sandieson, Crawford Conservation District
Karl Brown, SCC
Doug Goodlander, SCC
Mike Klimkos, SCC
Johan Berger, PDA
Dave Reed, DEP
Melanie Wertz, DEP
Barbara Beshore, DEP
Dean Auchenbach, DEP
Rick Mader, DEP
Steve Bloser, PSU
Kerry Wilson, DCED
Daniel Fitzpatrick, DCED
Tim Emenheiser, USDA NRCS
Bill Bowers, USDA NRCS
Susan Marquart, PACD Staff
Kathleen Banski, PACD Staff
Molly Burns, PACD Staff