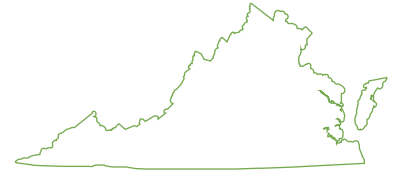


Soil and Water Conservation Districts



USDA-NRCS/BRANDON O'CONNOR

Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) were established after the devastating Dust Bowl in the 1930s to prevent soil erosion and floods, conserve soil resources, and use, conserve, and dispose of water. Today, SWCDs develop locally driven solutions to a wide variety of natural resource concerns including soil, water, wetlands, woodlands, and wildlife.

SWCDs are established by state law and governed by local leaders. District staff work with landowners and local government units to conserve and manage natural resources. They provide services from conservation planning and implementation to public education and land protection.

Virginia Program Description

In 1938, the Virginia General Assembly authorized the creation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) and recognized them as political subdivisions of state government. [The Code of Virginia /title10.1/chapter5/](#) defines their role and authorities, as well as the composition of the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board, which provides financial support, coordination, and information exchange to the districts. The districts rely on state and local funding to carry out their mission and work closely with the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), whose employees administer financial appropriations and other administrative functions and

foster cooperative working relationships with federal, state, and local agencies.

Today, 47 SWCDs serve most localities in the Commonwealth. They employ more than 150 full- and part-time staff who provide education and technical assistance to landowners and the public on topics such as soil stewardship, water quality, and agricultural conservation. They also are supported by the private, nonprofit [Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts \(VASWCD\)](#), which offers SWCDs training and resources. Its Educational Foundation promotes conservation leadership through stewardship, education, and award programs and is funded by donations.

PURPOSE

The mission of Virginia's SWCDs is to conserve state and local conservation resources by developing and implementing programs to conserve soil and water resources, control erosion, and prevent pollution.

HOW THEY WORK

Each district is directed by a board of directors who are elected in general elections and serve four-year terms. Full- and part-time staff perform a wide variety of tasks. They provide resources to farmers who want to adopt conservation practices. They promote conservation through outreach and education through field days, public meetings,

and classroom education. They develop and manage programs and provide technical expertise to help landowners and communities protect natural resources and prevent nonpoint source pollution. They help landowners with conservation planning—including agricultural provisions of local [Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act](#) ordinances and implementing [Virginia's Agricultural Stewardship Act](#). And they serve as gatekeepers to state cost-share programs by working directly with farmers to implement best management practices (BMPs) and distribute funding through programs like the [Virginia Agricultural BMP Cost-Share Program](#).

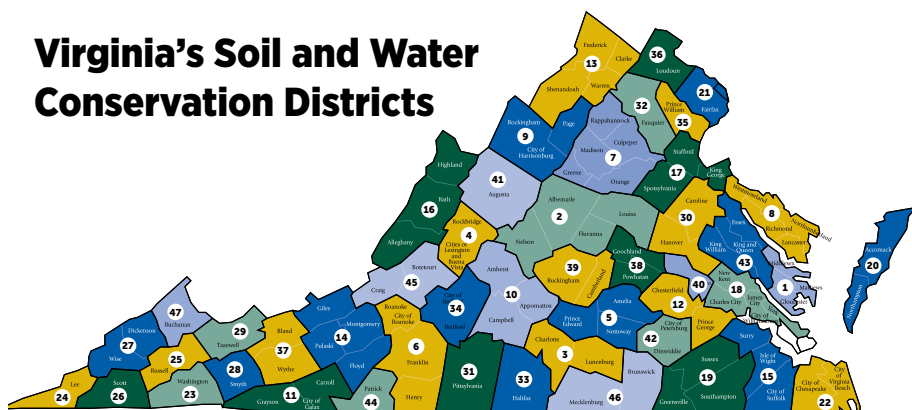
Virginia's SWCDs are supported by state funds appropriated by the General Assembly, and local funds from county, city, and town governments. Districts also may receive grants, donations, and other sources of revenue. Operating funds are administered through a grant agreement between DCR and each individual district. Agreements outline grant deliverables and DCR expectations and must be approved by the District Board. Program Funds, which are commonly referred to as cost-share money, typically are used to support water quality improvement projects.

All told, SWCDs are on the front lines of supporting conservation, water quality, and sustainable agriculture in Virginia's communities. They guide land use practices and play a pivotal role supporting environmental quality through education, technical assistance, and financial assistance.

CONSIDERATIONS

Counties can provide additional funding to SWCDs because they recognize the vital role they play in protecting natural resources and ensuring sustainable land use because these benefit communities environmentally and economically.

Virginia's Soil and Water Conservation Districts



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|---|---|-------------------------------|---|
| 1 - Tidewater | 12 - James River | 24 - Daniel Boone | 37 - Big Walker |
| 2 - Thomas Jefferson | 13 - Lord Fairfax (Winchester) | 25 - Clinch Valley | 38 - Monacan |
| 3 - Southside | 14 - Skyline | 26 - Natural Tunnel | 39 - Peter Francisco |
| 4 - Natural Bridge (Buena Vista, Lexington) | 15 - Peanut (Suffolk) | 27 - Lonesome Pine | 40 - Henricopolis |
| 5 - Piedmont | 16 - Mountain (Covington) | 28 - Evergreen | 41 - Headwaters (Staunton and Waynesboro) |
| 6 - Blue Ridge (Roanoke) | 17 - Tri-County/City (Fredericksburg) | 29 - Tazewell | 42 - Appomattox River (Petersburg) |
| 7 - Culpeper | 18 - Colonial (Williamsburg) | 30 - Hanover-Caroline | 43 - Three Rivers |
| 8 - Northern Neck | 19 - Chowan Basin | 31 - Pittsylvania | 44 - Patrick |
| 9 - Shenandoah Valley (Harrisonburg) | 20 - Eastern Shore | 32 - John Marshall | 45 - Mountain Castles |
| 10 - Robert E. Lee (Lynchburg) | 21 - Northern Virginia | 33 - Halifax | 46 - Lake Country |
| | 22 - Virginia Dare (Chesapeake, Virginia Beach) | 34 - Peaks of Otter (Bedford) | |
| | | 35 - Prince William | |

They often support activities to address a local priority issue which is beyond the scope of available funding, like [this outreach and engagement position partnership between Albemarle County and the Thomas Jefferson SWCD](#). By helping landowners take good care of soil and water resources, SWCDs help sustain agricultural viability, maintain wildlife habitat, and protect drinking water for their communities.

To Learn More

- › [Virginia Association of SWCDs](#)
- › [National Association of Conservation Districts](#)
- › [Virginia DCR: "SWCDs"](#)
- › [Membership Directory: VA SWCD](#)
- › [Virginia Agricultural Stewardship Act Guidelines](#)