



# MONTANA CONSERVATION DISTRICT EMPLOYEE ORGANIZATION

...  
*Orientation Guide for New Employees*



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# GETTING STARTED

Welcome to your new position with one of Montana's 58 conservation districts (CDs). As a CD employee, you will help lead and conserve the natural resources of your community through on-the-ground projects, education, outreach, and more.

This orientation guide, created and published by the Montana Conservation District Employee Organization (MCDEO), is designed to give you an overview of CD history, your role and responsibilities as an employee, and some of the partners you will deal with regularly. For more detailed written information, please consult the Conservation District Employee Handbook available online and other publications listed at the end of this guide.

People are one of your greatest resources. Soon after your start date, you will receive a visit from an MCDEO representative who will provide onboarding training and introduce you to some of the other people you should know as you begin your new job.

MCDEO (also called the EO) was created in the mid-1990s to help employees tap into the experience, knowledge, enthusiasm, and support of conservation district professionals across the state. While many CDs are staffed by only one person, be assured that you are not alone. Please don't hesitate to reach out.

## EMPLOYEE ORGANIZATION (EO) *Mission and Purpose*

The EO mission is to provide a professional network of conservation district employees for mutual support and education. Its purpose is to:

- 1 Promote resource conservation in Montana and in local conservation districts.
- 2 Establish and maintain a standard of quality for conservation district employees.
- 3 Instill pride and dedication in conservation district employees.

# HISTORY OF MONTANA CONSERVATION DISTRICTS (CDS)

Today's conservation districts trace their roots to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, when a combination of drought and outdated agricultural practices led to devastating soil erosion across the Great Plains. Massive dust storms filled the skies, resulting in crop failures, abandoned farms, and the loss of countless tons of precious topsoil.

In April 1935, Hugh Hammond Bennett testified before the Senate Public Lands Committee in Washington, D.C. A major dust storm had blanketed the capital before. Bennett, one of the country's leading erosion experts, knew another was coming that day and was counting on it as the star witness for his pitch for a national soil conservation act. As his testimony wore on, Bennett kept an eye peeled outside.

In the middle of the afternoon, the sky turned dark. Senators gathered at the windows to watch the dirt roll in.

## **"THIS, GENTLEMEN, IS WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT," BENNETT SAID. "THERE GOES OKLAHOMA."**

Within days, Congress had passed the Soil Conservation Act and granted funding to establish the Soil Conservation Service as a permanent agency of the Department of Agriculture.

At first, the federal agency concentrated on demonstration projects with individual farmers to curb erosion. The government provided technical assistance, materials, and labor while the landowner allowed work to be done on the land and contributed labor. However, projects were limited in time and scope and lacked widespread local support. Farmers were leery of government agents trying to convince them to adopt changes.

M.L. Wilson, the assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, believed that the only way to address soil and water conservation issues from the Dust Bowl was through local leadership. Wilson, who had homesteaded in Montana and become the state's first extension agent, directed the creation of model legislation for each state to establish this local leadership through the organization and the development of conservation districts. The legislation created a structure for local government partnership with federal and state agencies to ensure that citizens could determine their own conservation needs.

In 1937, President Franklin Roosevelt prevailed on governors to support state legislation to create local entities to combat erosion. Arkansas passed the first state act a week later. Montana followed in 1939, largely adopting verbatim the suggested language, which remains in law today in Title 76, chapter 15 of the Montana Code Annotated. The legislature proclaimed the importance of agricultural lands, noted the detrimental effects of erosion, and declared the importance of good land and water conservation.

In 1940, Montana's first conservation districts were formed in Sheridan and Wibaux counties. Montana currently has 58 conservation districts covering almost all land in the state. As legal subdivisions of state government, Montana's 58 districts each work with the state and federal governments as well as local governments and other districts to conserve natural resources.



## **Newfangled farming**

One of the new agency's first demonstration farms was set up in Montana's Roosevelt County, where farming practices that were revolutionary for the time—such as contour farming and strip cropping—were presented to a skeptical audience. Farmers would come from miles around in buses to climb on top of an observation tower and observe these "crazy" practices.

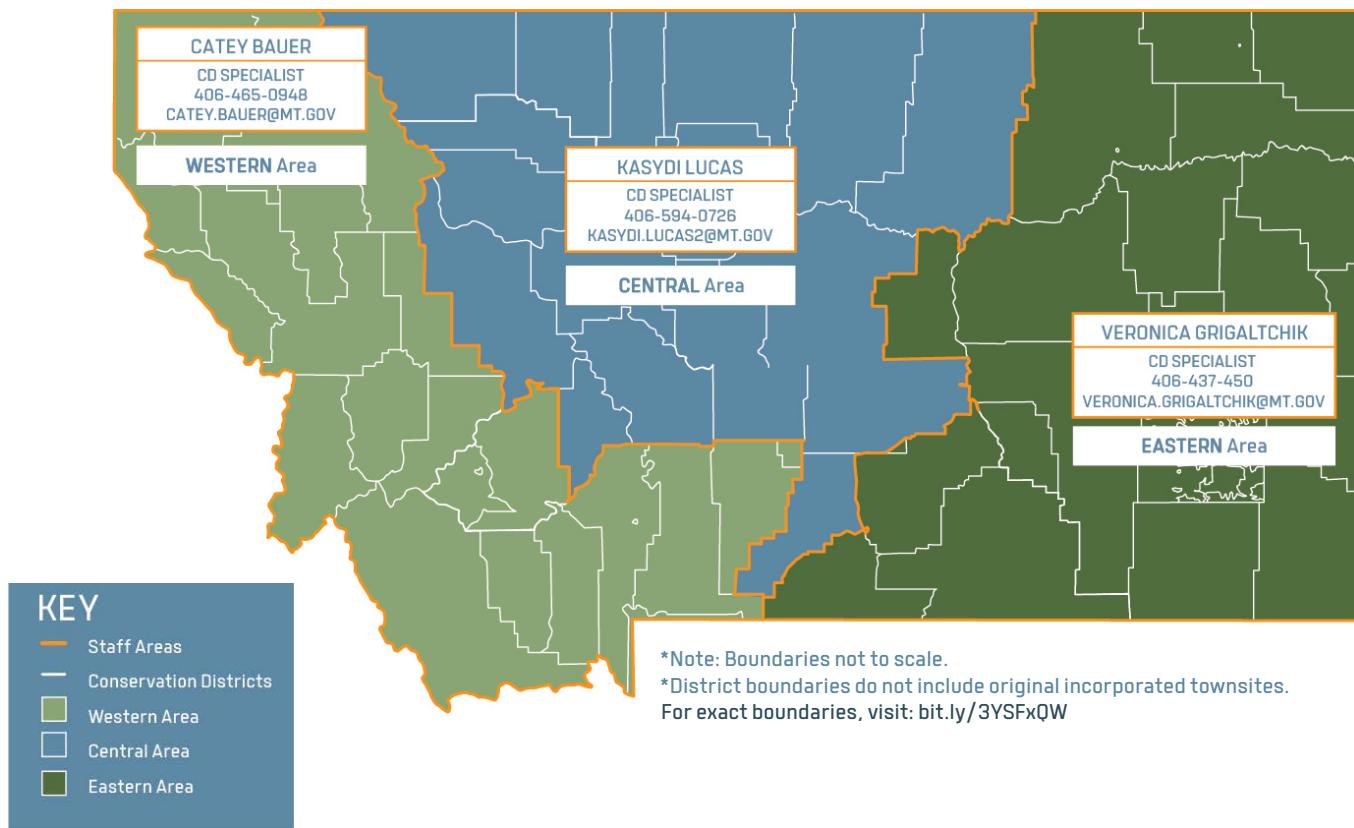
It is hereby declared to be the policy of the legislature to provide for the conservation of soil and soil resources of this state, for the control and prevention of soil erosion, for the prevention of floodwater and sediment damages, and for furthering the conservation, development, utilization, and disposal of water and thereby to preserve natural resources, control floods, prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs, preserve wildlife, protect the tax base, protect public lands, and protect and promote the health, safety, and general welfare of the people of this state.

**76-15-102, MCA**



**VISION: We envision a vibrant and relevant conservation district community leading the sustainable use of Montana's natural resources for present and future generations.**

**MISSION: Our mission is to inspire, empower, and provide financial and operational resources to conservation districts for locally led conservation.**



## CD Bureau Staff



**Bureau Chief**  
**Stephanie Criswell**  
406-444-6669, [steph.criswell@mt.gov](mailto:steph.criswell@mt.gov)

Serves all CDs in Montana and statewide programs including the Missouri and Yellowstone Conservation District Councils, the Milk River Watershed Alliance, the Montana Salinity Control Association, and the Clear Lake Aquifer Groundwater Investigation Study.



**Stream Permitting Coordinator**  
**Hailey Graf**  
406-437-4435, [hailey.graf@mt.gov](mailto:hailey.graf@mt.gov)

Serves all CDs in Montana



**CD Water Reservation Coordinator**  
**Mary Hendrix**  
406-431-2639, [mary.hendrix@mt.gov](mailto:mary.hendrix@mt.gov)

Serves all CDs in Montana



**CD Specialist**  
**Veronica Grigaltchik**  
406-437-4501, [veronica.grigaltchik@mt.gov](mailto:veronica.grigaltchik@mt.gov)

Serves Eastern Montana



**CD Specialist**  
**Kasydi Lucas**  
406-594-0726, [kasydi.lucas2@mt.gov](mailto:kasydi.lucas2@mt.gov)

Serves Central Montana and the Envirothon Program



**CD Specialist**  
**Catey Bauer**  
406-465-0948, [catey.bauer@mt.gov](mailto:catey.bauer@mt.gov)

Serves Western Montana

## DNRC-CDB Resource Links:

DNRC Conservation Districts Website:  
<https://bit.ly/DNRCDistrict>



CD Meeting Minute Portal:  
<https://bit.ly/CDMinutes>



CD Virtual Help Desk:  
<https://bit.ly/CDHelpDesk>



# WHAT MONTANA CDs DO

Created by the legislature, Montana's 58 CDs provide leadership for locally led conservation. CDs are political divisions of state government. Each is governed by a non-paid elected and/or appointed board of supervisors. CDs in Montana are part of a national network of over 3,000 similarly organized conservation districts in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and some U.S. territories.

Using local knowledge and expertise, CDs are leaders promoting conservation of natural resources in communities. Activities differ widely from district to district, but CDs are in the forefront of conservation education, on-the-ground conservation, and demonstration projects. CDs have authority to pass land use ordinances, if necessary, to conserve local natural resources.

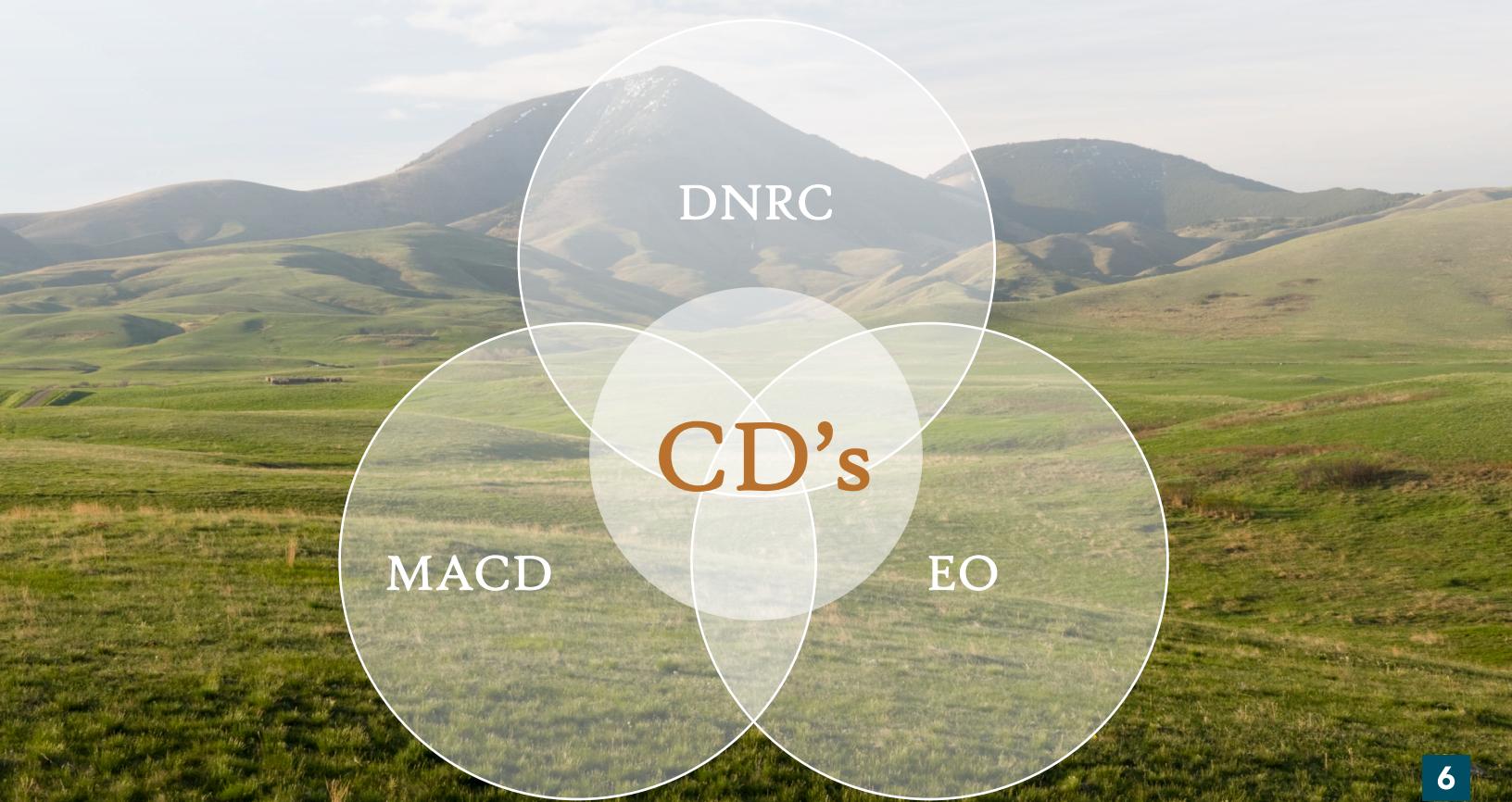
Montana is a large and diverse state, and district programs are just as varied and unique. Each CD develops and carries out programs that result in conservation and improvement of natural resources and are on the forefront of emerging natural resource concerns. CDs host local educational events where experts present ideas about the newest trends in agricultural practices, range management, urban education, and riparian and stream restoration. Some CDs sponsor pilot and on-the-ground demonstration projects to show first-hand benefits of a specific practice.

CDs also administer the Montana Streambed and Land Preservation Act, commonly known as the 310 Program. Individuals planning to work in or near a perennial stream or river must first receive a permit from their local conservation district.

Funding for CD operations comes from an authority to levy a tax on real property within their district. Most CDs also rely heavily on grants from state and federal government for conservation operations, projects, and educational activities. The Montana Department of Natural Resources (DNRC) Conservation Districts Bureau (CDB) distributes state funding provided by the legislature to empower CDs to meet their mission through legal and operational support, financial assistance, and professional development.

The Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) is the state association that represents and provides a voice for all Montana CDs. Created in 1942, MACD is a private nonprofit association, governed by a statewide Board of Directors who simultaneously serve as district supervisors in their own districts. In Montana, MACD advocates for sound conservation policies and actions by the state legislature and works with the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) at the federal level.

The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) can provide technical assistance for CD activities, and the two entities share office space in some districts.



# WHO ARE YOU?

## CD Employee Roles and Responsibilities

As an employee of a conservation district, you work for a board of supervisors whose members are elected or appointed. The board is your boss. It's vital that you keep an open line of communication with your board. Supervisors voluntarily devote their time to the CD, and they depend on you to handle district business in a timely fashion.

Many CD offices are staffed part-time or by one full-time employee, so you are probably the first contact the community has with the district. As the face of the district, being polite, positive, and professional is key to working with the public and representing the CD.

CD employees fulfill many different roles, both in the office and out in the field. You are responsible for daily operations of the district, and will also manage district finances and records and perform other administrative and project tasks. You should have a job description and general work agreement. If you don't, ask the board to prepare one with you. There should be a clear written understanding of your duties, office hours, and notification procedures. Sample job descriptions are available and can be used to customize the description of your work.

If your office is co-located with NRCS, a work area will be provided. Roles and responsibilities between the CD and NRCS are outlined in the policies in the Memorandum of Agreement signed by both parties. Furniture and working tools such as computer, copier, etc., may be furnished by either the district or NRCS.

## Finding your niche

Every district is unique, and so is every job as a CD professional. Find what interests you in the conservation world and set goals to improve your capabilities in that area. You will learn something new every day if you're open to it.

# WHAT WILL YOU DO?

## CD Operations and Programs

### District Accounting and Administration

Every district is required to maintain and track its own financial records including deposits, expenditures, and payroll. You will develop a budget each year and review it monthly or quarterly with your board. You will also prepare monthly and annual reports, maintain files, and gather and manage employee and supervisor information.

### Project Management and Assistance

CDs implement or assist with many on-the-ground conservation efforts. Depending on the needs of your district, you may be involved in projects like stabilizing streambanks, monitoring water quality, planting trees, developing interpretive trails, creating pollinator gardens, or sowing demonstration plots.

You will also provide information for landowners completing their own conservation projects, and may help connect them to technical experts and funding sources like grants or cost-share programs.



## When in doubt

If you need help, reach out to fellow employees in your area or around the state. DNRC Conservation District Bureau (CDB) is another great resource for information on job duties.

# EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

## Public Presentations

You may be asked to deliver programs for schools, clubs, and organizations. This is a good way to inform the public about the role the district plays in natural resource conservation. If you are planning a presentation, you can find helpful photos, displays, marketing materials, and PowerPoint presentations in the resource library on the MCDEO website.

## Field Days and Demonstrations

Districts have found that in-person, hands-on activities are an effective way to promote conservation. Your district may sponsor events such as Ag Days or offer resources, seminars, and workshops. Some districts host soil health workshops or innovative ag demonstrations. It will be your job to coordinate and promote these activities.

Field days may also showcase a variety of soil and water quality practices. Partners could include the local Farm Bureau, Farmers Union, or other conservation agencies or organizations.

## Youth Activities

Youth activities may include speech, poster, essay, and photo contests designed to interest students in conservation at an early age. You may help by delivering contest materials to schools, obtaining judges, and sorting entries. You will ensure that proper recognition is given to contest winners and will also enter your district's winning entries in the state contest.

Your CD may sponsor a student to attend conservation summer camps hosted by partners. It may also participate in Envirothon. This is a competitive outdoor learning event for high school students that tests their knowledge of environmental resources. Many CDs sponsor teams for regional and state competitions and/or provide scholarship opportunities.

Your district may also choose to participate in other educational activities like outdoor classrooms, water festivals, Arbor Day celebrations, Ag Days, other natural-resource-day events, and many more. Ideas and help are always available through partners and fellow CDs.

## Stewardship Week Activities

One week in May is set aside to call attention to the importance of natural resource conservation. Stewardship Week is observed nationally, with various activities conducted by CDs across the country. Materials and suggestions are available through the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) to assist in preparing for this week's activities and spreading the word throughout your district.

## Outreach Events

Many districts exhibit at their county fair and other events. These are important outreach opportunities and a source of pride for the district. Tips are available from your partners and fellow districts on how to create a high-quality booth that is neat, attractive, and effective at telling your district's story.

## News you can use

Read past newsletters from your district and others not just to learn how to develop and edit your own newsletter, but also to learn more about what your job entails, and what kind of projects and activities are happening in Montana conservation districts.

**Newsletters can be a valuable source for both ideas and contacts.**



## District Newsletters

A district newsletter is encouraged as a great way to tell the local conservation story and keep the public informed about conservation activities and opportunities in your community. You don't have to do all the writing, but you will prepare the layout and maintain the mailing list. If you are just starting a newsletter the first issue will be the most difficult, but you will quickly learn how much material it should include and how long it takes produce.

### NEWSLETTER BASICS



Ask for newsletter articles from your supervisors and partners such as the NRCS, county agent, and others.



Begin the newsletter with your most important story and end with the least important stories.



Include at least one photo in each issue that illustrates one of your feature stories.



If your newsletter is printed professionally, costs may be defrayed by selling advertisements to contractors or business owners. Many CDs have elected to create electronic newsletters with an email subscription list.

## RENTAL EQUIPMENT AND SALES

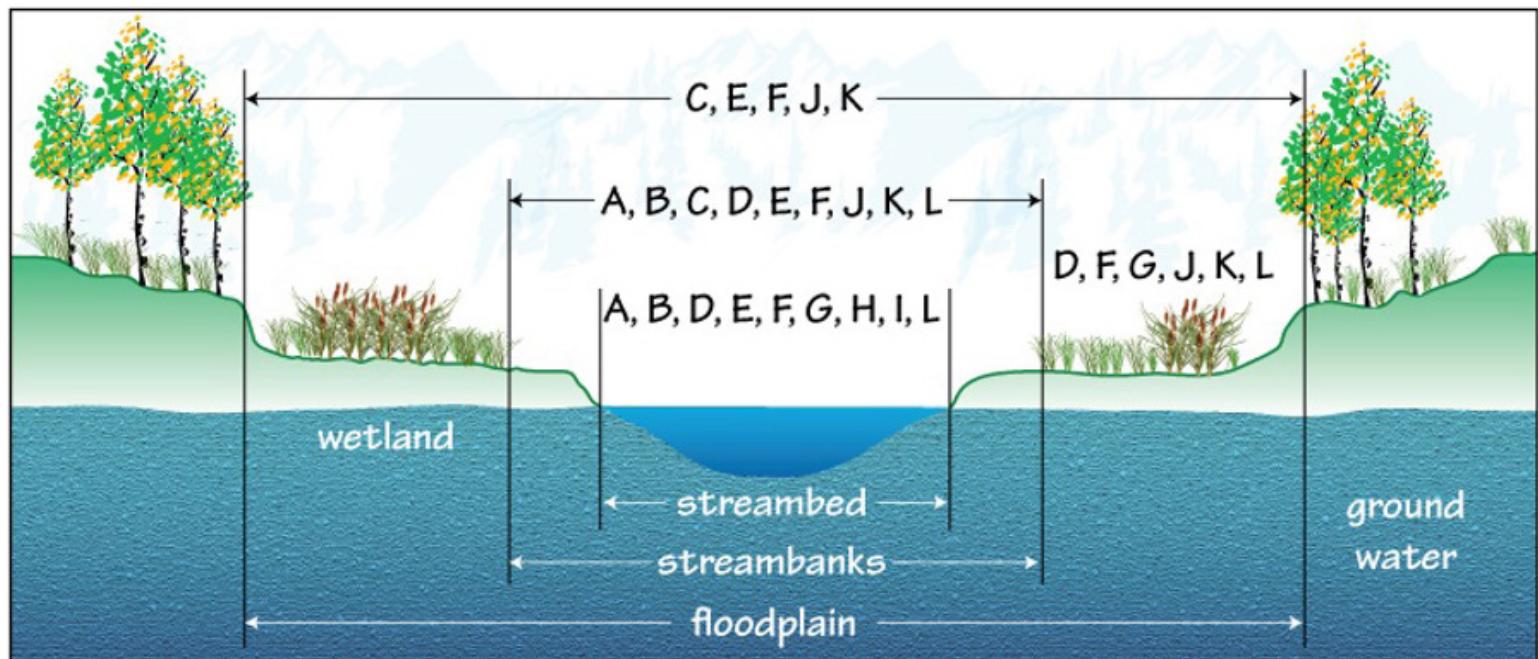
### Equipment Rentals

Many districts offer rental equipment for landowners such as tree planters, no-till drills, or weed sprayers. If you don't already have a rental program and would like to, contact a district that has already developed a program.

### Sales Program

Most districts sell landowner maps or map books. Your district may also sell bird ramps, soil probes, trees, and more. Make sure you have a rate card for each item. If your district sells trees, know which nursery you are working with and be familiar with available inventory and ordering procedures. Tree orders are taken late fall through winter and delivered the following spring. Each nursery will have a slightly different process for ordering and invoicing.





*NOTE: The above graphic is only meant as a guide, please consult the permit descriptions to determine which permits are needed.*

## 310 PERMITTING

Conservation districts are required by law to administer the Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act (SB310), also known as the "310 Law." The purpose of the 310 law is to keep rivers and streams in as natural or existing condition as possible, to minimize sedimentation, and to recognize beneficial uses. Any individual or corporation proposing construction in a perennial stream must apply for a 310 permit through the local conservation district. CDB staff provides training and technical and legal support to CDs to administer the 310 Law.



## RESERVATION OF WATERS

Employees in some CDs are involved in allocating water reservations under the Montana Water Use Act. In 1978, the Board of Natural Resources and Conservation granted water reservations to 14 conservation districts in the Yellowstone River basin. Ten CDs were granted reservations in the upper Missouri River basin in 1992, and 11 CDs were given reservations in the lower and Little Missouri River basins in 1994. Some CDs have reservations in more than one basin. Each of these CDs administers its reservation for use by individuals within the district. DNRC staff work with the CDs to process applications for reserved water right use to ensure compliance with state regulations.

### Streamside service

As part of the permitting process, CD supervisors and/or staff visit the site with a landowner and the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks team member. These mutually beneficial site visits allow for discussion about landowner needs and limitations and help landowners better understand the goals of the permitting process. Because of the give-and-take nature of these site visits, they can also help foster a positive relationship between landowners and CDs.

# PARTNERS

CDs work with their local county governments as well as a number of organizations, associations, and state and federal agencies. Below are some of the partners you'll work with.

## *CD Organizations and Associations*

### **Montana Conservation District Employee Organization (MCDEO)**

The MCDEO is an association of the employees within Montana conservation districts created to provide employees with education and training within their occupations, and to maintain a better understanding and working relationship among district employees, conservation districts, and cooperating agencies.

[employees.macdnet.org](http://employees.macdnet.org)

### **Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD)**

MACD is a private, non-profit association created to support Montana's conservation districts. It serves as a collective voice for policy and legislation and a forum for training and recognition. MACD maintains three committees—executive, finance, and governance—to work on district and natural resource issues around the state.

[macdnet.org](http://macdnet.org)

### **Montana Salinity Control Association (MSCA)**

The Montana Salinity Control Association (MSCA) was established to reclaim and prevent saline seeps and other agriculture-related water quality problems, on an individual farm and/or watershed basis. MSCA originated in 1979 in nine counties but expanded across the eastern portion of Montana via the conservation districts.

[montanasalinity.com](http://montanasalinity.com)

### **Missouri River and Yellowstone River Conservation Districts Councils**

River councils are a coalition of conservation districts charged with representing natural resource and environmental interests on the corresponding river and its associated uplands and tributaries.

[missouririvercouncil.info](http://missouririvercouncil.info)

[yellowstonerivercouncil.org](http://yellowstonerivercouncil.org)

### **Central Eastern Montana Invasive Species Team (CEMIST)**

CEMIST is a coalition of volunteer partners from CDs and other organizations that operate east of the Continental Divide in Montana and whose mission is working together to strengthen and support invasive species prevention.

[cemist.macdnet.org](http://cemist.macdnet.org)



## **Straight to your inbox**

Subscribe to the CDB's Conservation Matters and MACD's District Dispatch newsletters for news on training, professional development, funding opportunities, and other information relevant to districts.



## **Get involved**

Many of these organizations are looking for participants from CD staff. Check out a few that are relevant to your district and consider getting involved, for both the good of the natural resources in the CD and your own professional development.

# State Agencies

## Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation (DNRC)

DNRC oversees numerous programs pertaining to Montana's water, energy, and land resources. As part of the department's Conservation and Resource Development Division (CARDD), the Conservation District Bureau (CDB) assists conservation districts in meeting their legal requirements to carry out conservation programs locally, and to administer the Montana Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act (310 Law). The CDB offers many grant programs for conservation districts and helps sponsor statewide educational events. The CDB also assists CDs as they develop reserved water for the Yellowstone River Basin, part of the Upper Missouri River Basin, and the Lower Missouri Basin.

CARDD's Resource Development Bureau (RDB) provides technical and financial assistance to local governments, state agencies, nonprofits, and private citizens for projects that benefit, protect, restore, conserve, or sustainably develop Montana's natural resources. RDB also provides assistance to conservation districts for the administration of water reservations.

The grant and loan programs administered by the bureau total over \$340 million in bond authority and over \$10 million in grants each biennium. The RDB program includes the following: Renewable Resource Grants and Loans, Reclamation and Development, and Irrigation Development.

[dnrc.mt.gov/divisions/cardd/conservation-districts](http://dnrc.mt.gov/divisions/cardd/conservation-districts)

## Montana Invasive Species Council (MISC)

CARDD hosts MISC. The mission of MISC is to protect Montana's economy, ecological resources, and public health and safety by assessing and bolstering Montana's invasive species management efforts through a coordinated approach to keep invasive species out of Montana and to eliminate, reduce, or mitigate the impacts of established invasive species.

[misc.mt.gov](http://misc.mt.gov)

## Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)

DEQ is Montana's lead agency in charge of implementing state and federal resource protection laws. The agency has both regulatory and non-regulatory functions and administers the provisions of the Federal Clean Water Act.

[deq.mt.gov](http://deq.mt.gov)

## Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP)

FWP oversees the state fisheries and wildlife programs and manages Montana state parks. As a member of the 310 inspection team, FWP provides technical assistance to CDs in regulating nongovernmental projects affecting streams under the Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act. It also regulates governmental stream projects under the Stream Preservation Act.

[fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov)

## Montana State University Extension (MSU Extension)

The MSU Extension, through its county extension offices, works closely with conservation districts on addressing conservation issues and providing producer/youth education.

[msuextension.org](http://msuextension.org)

## Montana Weed Districts

Each county in Montana has a local weed district coordinator who provides noxious weed management and technical assistance. The Montana Weed Control Association helps to strengthen and support noxious weed efforts in the state.

[mtweed.org](http://mtweed.org)

## Federal Agencies

### Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)

NRCS, which carries out a national program of conserving and developing land and water resources, helps landowners and operators make physical adjustments in land use to conserve and protect soil, water, air, plant, and animal resources. Some CDs work with their local NRCS staff to develop a joint annual work plan through a local work group, which brings landowners and partner agencies together to prioritize resource concerns and match them with conservation practices.

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/state-offices/montana>

### Army Corps of Engineers (Corps or ACOE)

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plans and constructs reservoirs and local measures to control floods and improve navigation. It is active in flood control, hydroelectric power, municipal and industrial water supplies, and recreation, as well as planning for water resource development.

[www.usace.army.mil](http://www.usace.army.mil)

### Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

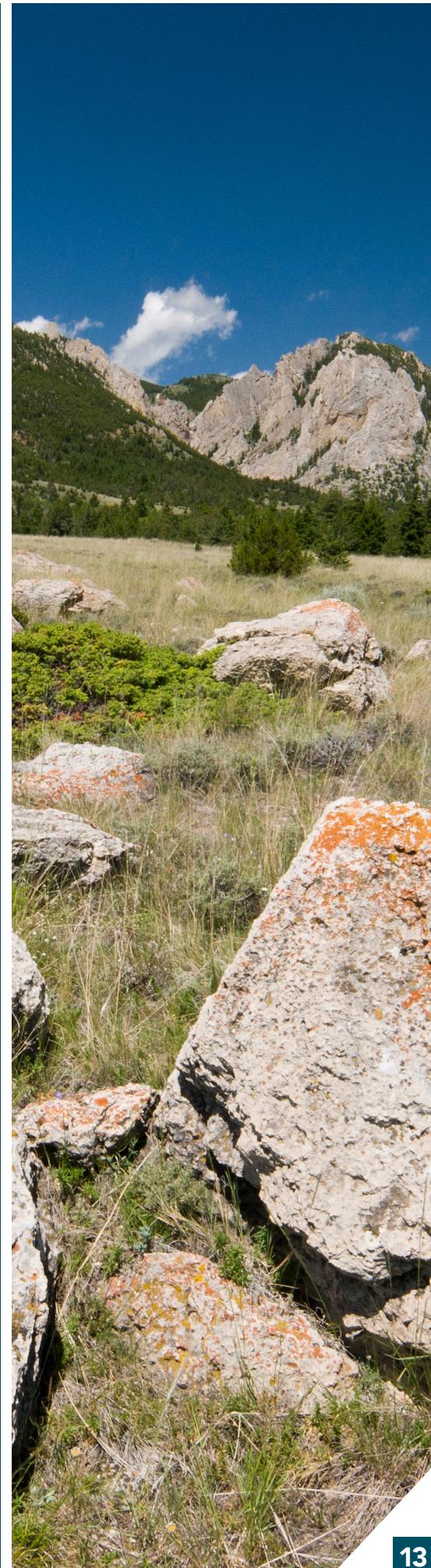
Land managed by the BLM is generally non-forested public land used for grazing and recreation. The agency's Minerals Management Service manages all minerals within the public estate regardless of who owns or manages the surface.

[blm.gov/offce/montanadakotas-state-office](http://blm.gov/offce/montanadakotas-state-office)

### Forest Service (USFS)

The Forest Service, which manages forested public lands for multiple uses, sponsors cooperative programs through state forestry agencies, the NRCS, and CDs to control fires, stabilize gullies, improve forest growth, plant trees, and control forest pests. Montana is in USFS Region 1.

[fs.usda.gov/r1](http://fs.usda.gov/r1)



## LEARNING MORE

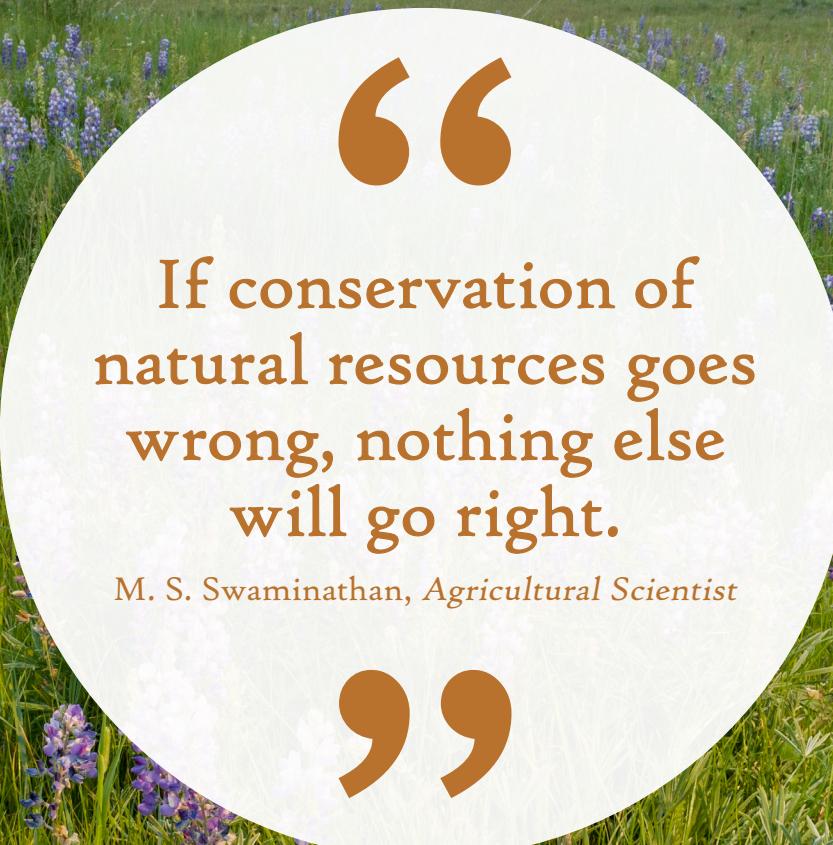
As you begin your new position, experienced employees offer a few recommendations:

- Connect with your area EO representative.
- Study the CD law book.
- Become familiar with the Conservation District Supervisor Manual and the Conservation District Employee Handbook.
- Know your way around the DNRC, MACD, and MCDEO websites.
- Learn your district's Annual Work Plan (if available).

And don't hesitate to reach out to your colleagues or the employee organization when you need help, advice, or even just another perspective.

No one begins this job knowing everything they need to know. But working for a Montana conservation district will give you an opportunity to learn and grow while you make tangible contributions to the conservation of natural resources and help others do the same.

Just as it was more than 80 years ago, when the farmers of the Great Plains were trying to dig their way out of an ecological disaster, the work of conservation districts is vital. Your work is important, too, and what you do will make a difference in your community.



If conservation of natural resources goes wrong, nothing else will go right.

M. S. Swaminathan, Agricultural Scientist

