



# SWCD Operational Handbook

## Planning

December 2014

**Purpose:** This document provides guidance on the requirements and procedures for the development and update of Soil and Water Conservation District Annual and Comprehensive Plans.

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## Introduction

Planning is preparation for the future. Through planning, a Soil and Water Conservation District (district) can focus on and evaluate its efforts in achieving the mission it has established. Planning serves as a means to provide direction and guide implementation of actions in an orderly and consistent manner. It involves defining problems and establishing processes to address those problems, formulating alternatives to reach objectives, and choosing strategies that are best suited to present and future conditions. Planning can also serve as valuable documentation on the types of activities that work and provide background for possible changes direction as well as justification the district budget necessary to implement the plan.

The purpose of the comprehensive and annual plans is to plan for the management and protection of the resources of the district, see Minnesota Statutes §[103C.331](#), Subd. 11. Additionally, both plans are a statutory requirement for districts requesting funding from the state, see Minnesota Statutes §[103C.501](#), Subd. 2.

The comprehensive plan can take the form of a district-written plan, a resolution adopting a county comprehensive local water management plan, or a plan adopted through the [One Watershed, One Plan](#) program. In any of these forms, the comprehensive plan will in general include an assessment of the condition of natural resources in the area; identification and prioritization of local resource issues, problems, and opportunities; development of a set of goals, objectives, and actions; and development of an implementation program for the period of the plan. See the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) [County Comprehensive Local Water Management](#) webpage or Minnesota Statutes §[103B.301](#) for more information about the county planning process and requirements. As of 2014, the [One Watershed, One Plan](#) program is under development through five pilot watershed areas; see this page of the BWSR website in early 2016 for more information about adopting a plan through this program.

The annual plan serves to guide the implementation of the comprehensive plan on an annual basis and will generally identify actions and needs for addressing the issues and objectives identified in the comprehensive plan. Since 2014, BWSR policy has allowed for the completion of the [Biennial Budget Request](#) to meet the statutory requirement for submittal of an annual work plan in order to receive cost-share funds. However, districts are encouraged to independently develop and implement an annual workplan as a tool for the district to guide actions and measure performance.

## Adopting a County Comprehensive Local Water Management Plan

Districts within counties with approved county comprehensive local water management plans (outside the Seven County Metro Area) may adopt the county plan as the district's comprehensive plan in lieu of preparing their own plan. To meet the requirements for a district requesting funding from the state, the county plan must include the following information:

1. A map and description of the soil classifications within the district.

2. Identification and prioritization of the areas within the district where erosion, sedimentation, and related water quality problems are the most severe. May include both maps and discussion.
3. A description of the nature and extent of practices that are needed to address these problems.
4. A budget forecast for the district covering the same period the county plan encompasses.

To adopt the county plan, the district must pass a resolution that specifically adopts the county comprehensive water management plan as the district's comprehensive plan and covers the same time period that county plan encompasses. If the county plan is amended or extended, the district must pass an additional resolution adopting the amended or extended county plan. An example resolution can be found in [Appendix D](#).

A copy of the approved resolution needs to be submitted to the district's Board Conservationist.

## Developing a District Comprehensive Plan

Districts in counties without comprehensive local water management plans or those that choose not to adopt the county comprehensive plan should use the following outline in development of a district comprehensive plan. Though a district plan may vary in format or extent from this outline, the plan must include the elements listed here to meet the requirements for requesting funding from the state. A district-developed comprehensive plan may cover no longer than a ten-year period.

Regardless of the format of the plan, development of the plan should include input from and discussion with the district board, staff, and partners. Partnerships can be particularly effective in assisting in identifying local priority problems, developing options for addressing those problems, and potentially with leveraging additional technical and financial assistance for implementation of the comprehensive plan.

### Comprehensive Plan Outline

- I. Introduction
  - A. Purpose of the comprehensive plan. Include the mission statement of the district, the purpose of the comprehensive plan, and the time period the plan addresses.
  - B. Organizational history. Include a brief summary of the district's history, including reasons for formation.
  - C. Authorization and jurisdiction of the district. Include a brief summary of the district's organizational structure, boundaries, and authorities granted to the district under Minnesota Statutes Chapter 103C.
  - D. District policies. List any policies, written statements, or authorities granted to district staff that supervisors have adopted to guide district programs. These may be summarized in the introduction and presented fully in an appendix.

- E. District Accomplishments. Include a list, map, or discussion of district accomplishments implemented within the time period of and/or identified in the previous comprehensive plan.
- II. Resource Inventory – the resource inventory must be developed with the following information or may reference: a county water plan authorized under Minnesota statutes §103B.311, a watershed management plan(s) required under §103B.231, a watershed management plan(s) required under §103D.401 or 103D.405, a county groundwater plan authorized under §103B.255; as long as the referenced plan is consistent with the following information.
- A. Soil survey. Identify the soils within the district and include a discussion of the soil associations. Soils mapping information may be found on the Web Soil Survey at:  
<http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/>
- B. High priority problem areas. Provide a discussion and/or map(s) of the areas within the district where erosion, sedimentation, and related water quality problems are the most severe. Include information about each of the following areas.
- i. Areas where erosion from wind or water is in excess of 2 x T tons per year and/or areas with active gully erosion.
  - ii. Areas where pollutant delivery to a water source is in amounts that may impair the quality of that water source; this may include feedlots, sinkholes, abandoned wells, and groundwater information if available. May want to include information on waters included on the 303(d) Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) list and the status of TMDL projects and implementation for these waters.
- III. Resource Assessment – the resource assessment must be developed with the following information or may reference: a county water plan authorized under Minnesota statutes §103B.311, a watershed management plan(s) required under §103B.231, a watershed management plan(s) required under §103D.401 or 103D.405, a county groundwater plan authorized under §103B.255; as long as the referenced plan is consistent with the following information.
- A. Assessment of high priority problems. Provide an analysis of the extent, condition, and trends of the high priority problem areas identified above. Information for this analysis may be found in studies, surveys, plans, and inventories completed within the district area by and with cooperating agencies and can be presented as both a discussion and with map(s).
- B. Conservation measures needed. Considering the extent, condition, and trends of the high priority problems; discuss the types of conservation practices and measures needed to address the problems.
- C. Effectiveness of past efforts. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of district programs in addressing the high priority problems areas identified in the previous comprehensive plan. Include a discussion of why past objectives may or may not have been met and why past strategies may or may not have been successful.

#### IV. Objectives, Strategies, and Actions

- A. Objectives. Identify specific, reality-oriented, and measurable commitments the district will pursue to address the problems, issues, and needs identified in the resource and district assessments. These objectives should be achievable within the time period of the comprehensive plan. *Example Objective: “Reduce sheet and rill erosion to tolerable levels by increasing the acreage of conservation tillage from 10,000 to 30,000 acres within five years.”*
- B. Strategies. For each objective, identify an approach or combination of approaches that will be utilized to accomplish the objective. *Example Strategies: “1. Increase outreach and education efforts. 2. Increase technical assistance. 3. Coordinate with communities on local regulations.”*
- C. Actions. Describe potential step(s) the district may take for each of the strategies. *Example Action: “Hold conservation tillage workshops in March and September of each year in targeted watersheds.”*

#### V. Implementation

- A. Workload Analysis.
  - i. Determine the anticipated staff years to needed carry out each of the actions identified for achieving the objectives, including technical, administrative, and clerical time.
  - ii. Indicate the amount of staff years currently available.
  - iii. Discuss any discrepancies between the need and availability of staff, and possible steps to take to address the differences.
- B. Budget Forecast. Prepare a budget for the time period of the comprehensive plan forecasting the funds that will be needed to implement the actions and achieve the objectives. Include in the forecast funds for operations, personnel, and cost share.
- C. Adjustments Needed in District Authorities and/or Programs. Discuss changes needed to current district programs or authorities in order to carry out the plan, including proposed alterations to existing state statutes or rules.

## One Watershed, One Plan

In 2012, legislation was passed that authorizes BWSR to adopt methods to allow comprehensive plans, local water management plans, or watershed management plans to serve as substitutes for one another; or to be replaced with one comprehensive watershed management plan, also known as One Watershed, One Plan. BWSR’s vision for One Watershed, One Plan is to align local water planning on major watershed boundaries with state strategies towards prioritized, targeted and measurable implementation plans – the next logical step in the evolution of water planning in Minnesota.

As of 2014, the [One Watershed, One Plan](#) program is under development through five pilot watershed areas, with a full program to be adopted in late 2015. Please check back to find out how this program will impact district comprehensive planning.

## Developing a District Annual Plan

The annual plan provides a mechanism for implementing the comprehensive plan by providing specific statements about the actions to be achieved, the programs to be implemented, and the budget allocated to each program in a given year. Since 2014, BWSR policy has allowed for the completion of the [Biennial Budget Request](#) (BBR) to meet the statutory requirement for submittal of an annual plan in order to receive cost-share funds. However, districts are encouraged to independently develop and implement an annual report and plan. A combined annual report and plan can be a valuable tool for evaluating and guiding district operations, transparency to citizens and stakeholders, increasing accountability and measurement of performance, and maintaining an historic record of district operations.

Prior to writing the annual plan or submitting a BBR to the state, district board, staff, and partners should review the comprehensive plan and: evaluate the district success in attaining its stated objectives, determine what actions need to be taken during the coming year to implement the stated strategies, and identify any diversions from the comprehensive plan. Once the annual actions have been specified, cost estimates and a budget should be prepared by the district staff and board outlining staffing and funding needs to implement the plan. If significant new objectives and strategies are developed through the annual planning process, the comprehensive plan may need to be amended.

Instructions for completing a BBR can be found on the [Biennial Budget Request](#) page of the BWSR website. Below is a suggested outline for guiding board discussion and/or completing an independent annual plan.

### Suggested Annual Plan Outline

- I. Introduction.
  - A. Briefly describe the purpose of the annual plan.
  - B. If applicable, briefly describe any conditions or events that may have occurred to create a need to diverge from or update the comprehensive plan.
- II. Annual Work Plan
  - A. Annual Objectives. Refer to the objectives identified in the comprehensive plan, as well as timely conditions or events, and develop specific objectives achievable within the timeframe of the annual plan. *Example Annual Objective: "Increase the acreage of conservation tillage in the Shell River watershed by 1,000 acres."*

- B. Strategies. For each annual objective, identify the direction(s) the district will take to achieve the objective. *Example Annual Strategy: "Coordinate education and outreach program with the Shell River Watershed District."*
- C. Actions. For each annual objective, describe the specific actions that will be undertaken to achieve the objective. *Example Actions: "1. Hold a conservation tillage workshop for landowners within the watershed in March. 2. Work directly with ten percent of the landowners within the watershed to encourage them to practice conservation tillage."*

### III. Resource Needs.

- A. Special Projects. Describe the anticipated practices and funding needs for implementation of special projects.
- B. New Programs. Describe the anticipated resource needs for implementation of any programs new to the district.
- C. Budget. Outline the funds needed for cost share, staffing, and operating expenses. Indicate the amount needed and the funding source (state, county, district, other).

### IV. Cost Share Program Requirements

- A. High Priority Problem Areas. Indicate how funds received from the state will be used to implement the Cost Share Program and install practices to address high priority problems identified in the comprehensive plan.
  - B. Education and outreach. Describe the district efforts to identify land occupiers in areas with high priority issues and encourage participation of these land occupiers in programs.
- V. Annual Report. Include a brief discussion of how the following annual reporting requirements are being met by the district (see BWSR reporting policy for more details). Actual report information does not need to be included in the annual plan.
- A. Annual eLINK reporting complete by the annual deadline.
  - B. Financial statements submitted to BWSR by March 15. Guidance information and specific details on financial statements is provided annually to districts.
  - C. Website. The district website must contain the following elements, either within the website or available as documents to download from the district's website. Including some of these items in the actual annual plan and report can be a good method for tracking the history of the district.
    - i. This annual plan.
    - ii. An introductory statement about the district.
    - iii. A description of services provided by the district.
    - iv. A listing of supervisors and their offices.

- v. District supervisor's meeting schedule for the upcoming year and a minimum of the previous twelve months of meeting notices and minutes.
- vi. A listing of office personnel and cooperating agencies.
- vii. The most recent audit.
- viii. The annual budget, including dues. This requirement may be met through the budget provided in the annual plan.
- ix. Narrative about the year's activities and/or information emphasizing the accomplishments of the district. Accomplishments may include land and water treatment projects, promotional activities, stewardship efforts, or other accomplishments. A district may use eLINK generated reports to document accomplishments.



## Appendix A: Terminology

Definitions for planning terms can vary significantly depending on the source of the definition and purpose of the plan. For the purposes of this document, the following definitions apply.

- Action** An action provides a specific step or steps that will be taken to achieve a given objective. An action will generally answer the questions of who will undertake the action, what will occur, and when it will happen. Action is also sometimes referred to as or used interchangeably with *steps*, *methods*, and *measurable results*.
- Goal** A goal is a commitment that can be accomplished within a fixed timeframe. At some point, the answer of ‘yes’ or ‘no’ will be given when asked if the goal has been achieved. Goal is frequently used interchangeably with *objective*.
- Initiative** Initiative can be used to describe specific projects or programs to achieve objectives. Initiative can be used interchangeably with *objective*, *strategy* and *action*, but is generally applied relatively broadly.
- Mission** A mission is a motivational, long-range statement that describes the unique sense of character and the desired future of an organization. A mission is something that is pursued throughout the work of the district, but it not measurable or achieved. Mission is also sometimes referred to as or used interchangeably with *vision* or *purpose*.
- Objective** An objective is a reality-oriented, attainable commitment that can be achieved within a fixed timeframe. When asked if a specific objective has been achieved at the end of the timeframe, the answer should be ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Objective is also sometimes used to describe a broad workload category. Objective is frequently used interchangeably with *goal*.
- Policy** A policy is a rule of conduct or course of action to be followed; sometimes used interchangeably with principle.
- Strategy** A strategy outlines the approach or combination of approaches that will be taken to achieve the objectives.

## Appendix B: Basic Planning Steps

The following is a summary of what is involved in the basic planning steps.

1. **Development of Mission Statement.** The starting point in the planning process is defining the district's basic purpose or mission. This brief statement will provide a sense of character to the district and a sense of direction for the planning process. In addition, the mission statement provides the basis on which policies, plans, decisions, and actions are evaluated as to their contribution in achieving the central purpose for which the district exists.
2. **Resource Assessment.** This is a two part step that involves first gathering, and next analyzing data pertaining to the resource conditions in the district. Supervisors, staff, and partners should identify the resource problems present in the district and determine which problems should be addressed within the period of the plan. Each of the problems being considered for inclusion in the plan should then be assessed as to their extent, condition, and trends as well as the types of conservation measures and amount of technical assistance that may be needed to address the problem.
3. **Evaluation of Past Efforts.** A critical element for setting direction for the future is an understanding of past successes and failures. This step should be an honest, in-depth evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the district's programs over the years. If certain techniques have been successful, they should possibly be continued. If other attempts have been unsuccessful, new approaches may be needed. The evaluation should address the efforts in working with individuals, groups, organizations, and agencies in addressing resource issues and the reasons why these efforts have or have not been successful.
4. **Development of Objectives.** Once the challenges that confront a district have been fully identified, it is then necessary to establish a series of objectives to address the challenges. Objectives should define the end product for which the district is striving for and provide the framework for future actions. When discussing objectives, keep in mind that they are concrete commitments that have the following characteristics:
  - a. They are specific.
  - b. They are reality-oriented.
  - c. Their achievement can be verified.
5. **Determination of Strategies.** For any objective, a variety of approaches or strategies should be considered based upon cultural, economic, technological, and other locally prevailing factors. Once a list of alternative approaches has been developed, the approach or combination of approaches that best suits the district should be selected. This prioritization is critical to the district as it outlines the course of action the district will follow in future years and will guide the

### 7 Basic Steps in the Planning Process

1. Development of Mission Statement
2. Resource Assessment
3. Evaluation of Past Efforts
4. Development of Objectives
5. Determination of Strategies
6. Implementation
7. Evaluation & Adaptation

decisions of supervisors and actions of staff in implementing a coordinated conservation program.

6. **Implementation.** In order for a plan to be of any value, it must be used. The plan is the district's basis for policy formulation, decision-making, budget preparations, and other concerns that arise during district operations. The comprehensive plan should be utilized for development of the district's annual plan, and the annual plan is the basis for the employees' plan of work. In addition, both plans should be made available to partners so that they can coordinate their programs with those of the district.
  
7. **Evaluation and Adaptation** Planning is a continual process that revolves around the element of change. It is unrealistic to expect a plan to be relevant indefinitely, since changes which are totally unforeseen or which are beyond the control of the district continually occur. It is also important to evaluate the success of the plan in attaining its stated objectives. It may become evident that a particular approach is ineffective and another approach needs to be tried. For these reasons, it is essential that the plan be reviewed on an annual basis and revised as conditions dictate.

## Appendix C: Planning Roles

### What is a District Supervisor's Role in Planning?

When elected to a district board, supervisors assume a leadership role in the conservation of the district's soil and water resources. The primary responsibility of supervisors is to set policies and make decisions that direct the programs of the district. This responsibility is of significant importance in the planning process. Supervisors must be involved in all aspects of plan development and implementation, especially in the role of policy setting. The policy setting function is important in the following planning steps:

1. **Development of Mission Statement:** Supervisors must decide what the purpose of the district is in their community.
2. **Development of Objectives:** Supervisors must adopt the objectives they feel the district should pursue to meet the resource needs of their community and that can be reasonably achieved within the planning cycle.
3. **Determination of Strategies:** Supervisors must consider the cultural, economic, technological, and other locally prevailing factors when considering and deciding upon the approaches the district will take that will result in a more efficient and effective conservation program.
4. **Evaluation and Adaptation:** Supervisors must take an active role in the evaluation of the district programs and implementation and be prepared to make changes as necessary to adapt to challenges and needs.

Supervisors should see that all resource concerns of the district and its stakeholders are brought forth, discussed, and decided upon with regard to the extent of involvement and types of programs the district will pursue in addressing them. Once these decisions have been made, supervisors should ensure that the actions outlined in the plan are taken, monitor the progress being made in reaching their stated objectives, and make appropriate adjustments as necessary.

### What is a District Employee's Role in Planning?

Planning includes the assembly and analysis of data and the presentation of this data in useable form. District employees can play a valuable role in the preparation and presentation of this data throughout the planning process. This role is particularly important in the following planning steps:

1. **Resource Appraisal:** Employees should assist in identifying the major resource problems prevalent in the district and offer alternatives to supervisors in selecting the problems that the district should address. Employees can then gather the data necessary to complete the resource appraisal and request the assistance of other technical agencies as needed.
2. **Evaluation of Past Efforts:** District employees can gather information on past accomplishments and identify strengths and weaknesses of the program.
3. **Development of Objectives:** Employees should be asked to suggest a range of alternative objectives as well as pros and cons of each for supervisors to discuss and consider.
4. **Determination of Strategies:** District employees should develop various alternatives for supervisors to review in carrying out each objective, analyze their implications, and prepare drafts of the plan for supervisors to review.

5. Implementation: District employees will play a major role in the implementation of the plan. The plan should be used to guide the day-to-day activities of the district, and employees should insure that program implementation is consistent with the plan's objective(s).
6. Evaluation and Adaptation. District employees will generally be the first to understand if district programs and policies are successfully meeting the objectives established by the board.

### **What is the Board of Water and Soil Resources' Role in Planning?**

The Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) will assist in the preparation of comprehensive and annual plans by providing guidelines on plan content and by keeping districts informed of legislative actions that may require revisions to planning and reporting. The guidelines outline provisions that must be addressed in order for districts to receive state and federal funding. Upon request, advice and consultation is available through the Board Conservationist (see the BWSR website site at [www.bwsr.state.mn.us](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us) for the Board Conservationist contact information). BWSR will review the comprehensive and annual plans to insure that all requirements for receiving state and federal funds are met.

### **What are the Partners' Roles in Planning?**

Partners can be an integral piece in comprehensive and annual planning as well as in implementation. Partners may have new and innovative ideas, technical and financial resources, and will be an important source of support technical and resource information. Partners should be brought to the table early in the planning process to assist with developing objectives and strategies, as well as to assist with determining actions and implementation steps.

Potential partners may include, but should not necessarily be limited to the following:

- Federal Partners such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service
- State Partners such as the Department of Natural Resources, Pollution Control Agency, Department of Agriculture, and others.
- County and local partners including elected officials as well as staff, members of appointed commissions or committees, etc.
- Not-for-profit partners including sporting and wildlife organizations, friends organizations, lake associations, etc.

## Appendix D: Example Resolution

**RESOLUTION # \_\_\_\_\_**  
**ADOPTING THE**  
**\_\_\_\_\_ COUNTY**  
**COMPREHENSIVE LOCAL WATER MANAGEMENT PLAN**  
**AS THE**  
**COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF THE SWCD**

Supervisor \_\_\_\_\_ offered the following resolution, No. \_\_\_\_\_, and moved its adoption.

**WHEREAS**, the \_\_\_\_\_ Soil and Water Conservation District has been an active participant in the development and all updates of the \_\_\_\_\_ County Comprehensive Local Water Management Plan (County Plan); and

**WHEREAS**, the County Plan has been approved by the Board of Water and Soil Resources and has been determined to be in compliance with all laws and rules governing water in the State of Minnesota; and

**WHEREAS**, the County Plan includes a map and description of the soil classifications within the district; and

**WHEREAS**, the County Plan identifies the areas within the district where erosion, sedimentation, and related water quality problems are the most severe; and

**WHEREAS**, the County Plan identifies high priority erosion, sedimentation, and water quality problems in accordance with BWSR rules and guidelines.

**NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:**

**THAT THE** \_\_\_\_\_ Soil and Water Conservation District adopts the \_\_\_\_\_ County Comprehensive Local Water Management Plan as its Comprehensive Plan for the time period of \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_.

Supervisor \_\_\_\_\_ seconded the adoption of the resolution, and it was declared adopted upon the following vote:

Ayes: \_\_\_\_\_ Nays: \_\_\_\_\_

Adopted: \_\_\_\_\_