

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS)
DISTRICT CONSERVATIONIST’S MONTHLY REPORT
3/12/2026**

PERSONNEL/OFFICE

- The Lancaster and Cass County Service Centers are under normal operations.

| Lincoln Field Office (Lancaster Co) Staff | |
|--|----------------------|
| District Conservationist | Tom Cowan |
| Resource Conservationist | VACANT as of 11/2024 |
| Soil Conservationist | VACANT as of 12/2025 |
| Soil Conservation Tech. | VACANT as of 10/2024 |
| Program Assistant | Rebecca Wusk |
| LPSNRD District Secretary | Connie Hansen |
| LPSNRD Resources Tech. | John Albert |
| LPSNRD Resources Tech. | Bridget McKinley |
| PF Farm Bill Biologist | John McClinton |
| NWTF Forester | Zack Zimmerman |

| Weeping Water Field Office (Cass Co) Staff | |
|---|----------------------|
| Resource Conservationist | Devin Heusinkvelt |
| Soil Conservationist | VACANT as of 10/2024 |
| Soil Conservation Tech. | James Conradi |
| LPSNRD District Secretary | Shelly Nielsen |
| LPSNRD Resources Tech. | Lesli Lair |
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LPSNRD LAND TREATMENT

- Continued warm weather and adequate moisture is allowing construction to continue.
- Technicians and planning staff are:
 - Processing cost-share program projects (survey, design, staking, field visits, check out, documentation, and payment processing).
 - Actively communicating with producers/landowners about cost-share program opportunities
- LPSNRD currently has the following active or completed land treatment cost-share program applications:
 - Lancaster County Field Office
 - 4 Fall 2025 Structural Applications (1 cancelled)
 - 12 Fall 2025 Cover Crop Applications
 - Cass County Field Office
 - 20 Fall 2025 Structural Applications (3 cancelled)
 - 1 Fall 2025 Cover Crop Application (cancelled)

USDA PROGRAMS

- Planning staff are assessing FY26 USDA program applications and beginning to prepare contract documents for applications selected for funding.

UPCOMING EVENTS

- 2/12/26 – Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) enrollment opened
- 3/9/26 - 4/17/26 – General CRP enrollment open

Tom Cowan – District Conservationist

Jodi Delozier, NACD Annual Conference, San Antonio, TX, February 16-19, 2026

TUESDAY

Keynote speaker – Chet Garner, *The Daytripper* podcast, takes viewers on adventures with Garner as he explores Texas’ natural wonders, food, and history.

- Emphasized the importance of storytelling. Facts are crucial but storytelling engages the community, providing an opportunity to tug at one’s emotions.
- Every person is a storyteller; they just don’t know it.
- **Key takeaway** – engage your community through storytelling while imbedding facts. The public is more likely to support your projects, programs if there is something they can relate to or an emotional pull.

Session: Smarter Grant Prospecting for Districts

This session focused on practical strategies for identifying and pursuing grant opportunities effectively.

Participants were encouraged to use AI as a support tool—not to draft entire proposals—and to ensure grant applications are specific, outcome-driven, and clearly aligned with the problem being addressed. Successful proposals clearly define objectives and ensure that funding directly supports the solution.

When developing a proposal, consider what the grant is intended to impact:

- Knowledge
- Attitudes
- Actions
- Behaviors
- Systems

Applicants should also ask: *What will be different at the end of the day if we receive this grant?*

When searching for funding opportunities, use targeted keywords such as **natural resources, sustainability, mitigation, plants, water, soil**, and look within subject categories like **agriculture, forestry, and environment**.

The session also emphasized:

- Including staff time or additional personnel in grant budgets to ensure successful implementation.
- Using [USASpending.gov](https://www.usaspending.gov) to research grants awarded to other districts and understand funding trends.
- Contacting Conservation Districts to request copies of successful applications or to seek guidance.
- Subscribing to daily updates from Grants.gov (via “Connect” and “Manage Subscriptions”) to stay informed about new funding opportunities.

Overall, the **key takeaway** - be strategic, specific, and solution-focused when pursuing grant funding.

Look at partner agencies and non-profits who may be able to support NRDs.

For example, [Foundation Directory](https://www.foundationdirectory.com) (FDO) – go to a library to search FDO, otherwise, there is a subscription fee.

[Grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov)

- Filter by type of entity

[Federal Program Inventory \(FPI\)](https://www.fpi.gov)

- Seek project grants
- Formula grants go to the state

Key Takeaway - Is this grant a good fit?

1. Does this create mission drift? Does it fit perfectly with our programs and services?
2. Do our priorities align with the funder?
3. Will it covers the expenses ?
4. Are the restrictions too great?
5. Does it require match and if so, do we have it?
6. Is the granting period going to work for us?

Session: Telling the Story Right

This session focused on improving public engagement through effective storytelling. Presenters discussed common challenges to gaining public buy-in:

- lack of awareness about available programs,

- unclear benefits,
- limited visibility of local participants,
- distrust in processes, and
- insufficient promotion of local success stories.

A **key takeaway** was the importance of translating technical work into clear, human-centered language. Strong storytelling helps build trust and connection.

Trust-building principles include:

- Being authentic
- Being consistent
- Ensuring representation

The recommended storytelling formula:

1. The Problem – Identify a real, local issue.
2. The People – Highlight who stepped up to help.
3. The Practice – Explain what was implemented.
4. The Payoff – Share the measurable or visible results.
5. The Invite – End with a call to action.

The session also provided practical outreach tips, including simple smartphone photography techniques (face a window for natural light, use simple backgrounds, zoom in, capture one clear moment, and take multiple photos to choose the best one).

For quick, effective outreach in 15 minutes:

- Capture three photos
- Record one short video clip (10–20 seconds)
- Write one caption using the storytelling formula
- Post and tag partners
- Feature youth when possible

Participants were encouraged to use a variety of media formats and to craft thoughtful captions to maximize engagement.

The overall message: tell clear, local, human-centered stories that build trust and inspire action.

Captions

- Helpful phrases to use with photos:
 - This is what conservation looks like in...
 - Today we...
 - This helps...
 - Want to learn more?
 - Quote from a producer or staff member
- When taking photos, use
 - People in action
 - Tools and hands at work
 - Wide shot of the site
 - 1 group photo
 - 1 result photo
- When recording, use
 - 10 seconds of action
 - 1 short quote
 - 1 quick walk and talk

Leadership Luncheon

- *The Hugh Hammond Bennett Award*, honoring one national producer who demonstrates commitment to conservation planning and soil health, was presented to **Jeff and Jolene Steffen of Nebraska**.
- Membership awards were distributed to states who contributed 100% of their membership dues in fiscal year 2025 –Alabama, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Guam, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maryland, **Nebraska**, Ohio, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Washington.
- **Dr. Orval Gigstad of Nebraska** was inducted into [*NACD's Hall of Distinction*](#).

President's Reception – I had the opportunity to visit with NACD Executive Board and graduates of the 2025 National Conservation Foundation's Next Generation Leadership Institute. Our discussion focused on the skills they learned as participants of the institute, their visit to D.C. as well as their capstone projects.

WEDNESDAY

Session - Fostering Sustainable Behavior – using community based social marketing

This session introduced the framework of **Community-Based Social Marketing (CBSM)** as a structured approach to encouraging lasting environmental behavior change.

1. Select Specific Behaviors

The process begins by clearly defining the desired environmental outcome and identifying the target audience (sector). Participants should develop a list of **non-divisible, end-state behaviors** specifically, actions that directly lead to environmental improvement.

Each behavior should be evaluated based on:

- **Impact** – How important is the behavior? (literature review, surveys)
- **Probability** – How likely are people to adopt it? (case studies, self-reports)
- **Adoption** – What percentage is already doing it? (observations, surveys)
- **Applicability** – Who can realistically perform the behavior? (Census/GIS data)

Alternatively, behaviors can be numerically ranked rather than formally calculating probability.

2. Uncover Barriers and Benefits

Identify what prevents or motivates people to adopt the behavior using:

- Literature reviews
- Observations
- Focus groups
- Surveys

3. Develop Strategies

Design targeted strategies using proven behavior-change tools, such as:

- Commitments
- Social norms
- Social diffusion (e.g., yard signs promoting pesticide-free lawns)
- Prompts

- Trustworthy communication
- Incentives
- Increasing convenience

4. Pilot the Strategy

Before broad implementation:

- Determine success metrics
- Use a control group
- Apply random selection and assignment
- Implement and analyze results
- Calculate return on investment (ROI)
- Refine and re-pilot if needed

5. Implement and Evaluate Broadly

After successful piloting:

- Adapt strategies for new audiences
- Adjust messaging
- Address emerging barriers

Public surveys play a key role in identifying applicability, current adoption rates, likelihood of adoption, and perceived barriers and benefits.

Key takeaway: Sustainable behavior change requires a structured, research-based approach that identifies specific actions, removes barriers, tests strategies, and continuously evaluates results. *May be something our NRD uses with specific and very targeted programs.

Session - Hellbent on Expanding Conservation to a New Audience and Generation

Jefferson County SWCD (Ohio) used the Hellbender salamander as a symbol to engage the community and preserve its habitat while improving the neighboring ecosystem.

- Recognized a *perspective gap* – did the community understand the importance of the hellbender?

- Made a *connection* between the hellbender and the community – tough, resilient, and had faced many storms but preserved.
- Developed stories that connect different people and generations
- Engaged community through *visual imagery*
- Embraced *local history*

Key takeaways - Be flexible and prepared to pivot or scale back when challenges arise. Our district could consider using the Salt Creek tiger beetle as a unifying symbol to advance conservation efforts throughout the district.

Session - Stewardship Blueprint

The Guam SWCD moved their Local Working Group to Stewardship Week which made more sense and resulted in increased motivation and success.

Guam Educators Conservation Summit (5 days)

- Target the correct audience (science teachers)
- Be sure to follow up with teachers after the conference
- Set an enrollment limit
- Must submit an application to participate
- Make it a cohort so that teachers can share strategies and ideas with each other
- Provide hands-activities
- Align activities and objective to meet state science standards
- Cohorts must develop a projects to take back to their classrooms
- Invite partners to help with presentations and resources

Guam SWCD invited 19 schools

- 9 public
- 3 private
- 2 others
- Total – 14 teachers

Conference

- Day 1 – presentations
- Day 2 – field trip
- Day 3 – presentations
- Day 4 – project work

Idea for LPSNRD – a two day workshop (half-days)

Awards Banquet

- *NACD's Friend of Conservation Award* was bestowed upon **Andy Bishop with the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture from Grand Island, Nebraska**, for his outstanding contributions to conserving the nation's natural resources.

THURSDAY

Keynote Speaker – Aaron Alejandro, Executive Director of the Texas FFA Foundation, who spoke about connecting with youth, leadership, and leaving a legacy. He emphasized the importance of creating new pathways for youth and empowered the audience to seize opportunities.

Quotes

- When values are clear, your choices are easy.
- Let's be stronger
 - Unirritable
 - Unembarrassable
 - Unoffendable

Notable trends:

- There is an aging or "greying" within the conservation districts. How can we encourage more young people to support and view conservation districts as career options?
- Use storytelling as a conduit to increased community interest and engagement.

Emerging Topics –

- Water concerns (data centers)
- Provide opportunities for youth.

On Mar 18, 2026, at 11:58 AM, John Yoakum <joakum.nrd@outlook.com> wrote:

At the NACD conference we meet with people from across the nation and shared our Experiences.

In our regional meeting we kept the same leadership team each state shared what they were doing.

Conservation districts are the best kept secret: We seem to be leading the nation in our efforts and educational outreach we are doing most of the just suggestions that were made.

The role of tribal conservation districts: We had little choice so I took this class they talked mostly about Alaska and the challenges they face.

Community connections and you: Taught by the environmental defense fund, they talked about their efforts to bring dairy farms and tribal nations together to keep the water of Minnesota clean.

Telling the right story: This is the this was the age-old adage of building common ground using history and the ecosystem in your district to tell your story . An example could be building hype around the train wreck by the Jamaican trail, sponsoring a Halloween fun run around dead's men's run or hyping the tiger beetle.

Districts office assessment: Asked what we are mandated to do and what we are doing. Also to suggest to look at the board make up, does your board represent the district? Are you diversified in age, sex and race.

Building trust for conservation: Talked about how to bring people into the conservation movement. Like hosting events that bring all ages into the conservation awareness events Like our efforts in the schools, our pub trivia and many other outdoor events that we sponsor.

Hellbent on conservation: This was a good class, Jody will probably have a better report on this but they used the Hellbender salamander and developed a conservation area where people come visit and enjoy nature.

How Seattle conservation district built a new office: The district partnered with veterans groups local farmers and artists to build a new office that included a farmers market and event space

We learned how the Nebraska NRD system is the envy of the nation. Most are formed by county lines, dependent on county boards or state government.