

New Directions in Conservation Districts

Joey McKinnon¹, Shannon Blankinship², and John Dowd³

Affiliation: ¹Local2Global, LLC, 5 West Forsyth Street, Suite 200, Jacksonville Florida 32202; ²St. Johns Riverkeeper, 2800 University Boulevard North, Jacksonville Florida 32211; ³Department of Geology, The University of Georgia, Athens Georgia 30602.

Reference: McDowell RJ, CA Pruitt, RA Bahn (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2015 Georgia Water Resources Conference*, April 28-29, 2015, University of Georgia, Athens.

Abstract. Since the 1930's Dust Bowl era, conservation districts have existed as politically-elected or appointed local units of government throughout the United States, charged with coordinating voluntary soil and water conservation and resource management programs with landowners and agricultural operators. More than 3,000 conservation districts exist in the United States with nearly 17,000 Soil and Water District Supervisors. Georgia, for example, where agriculture is the top industry, consists of 40 conservation districts and 370 supervisors. Although widespread in geographical range, the effectiveness of the districts under contemporary conditions has been called into question, with many localized political movements advocating the dissolution of the boards. New directions in agriculture and politics may offer renewed purpose for conservation districts. As voters have become less connected to traditional agriculture, these political races have become low information campaigns. However, increased interest in areas such as urban agriculture, green infrastructure, and environmental protection provide new avenues for districts to recalibrate to today's challenges. The role of conservation districts has widely shifted to public outreach and education in recent decades. Advances in social media provide platforms for districts to connect with the public easily when many are seeing reductions in funding. Conservation districts create an intersection of agricultural, environmental science, and politics at the local level. With the visibility of recent high profile environmental issues in national politics, and the need for scientists as communicators and public policy makers, conservation districts may provide an unique opportunity to "build the bench" with new leadership for science in politics.