



# Soil & Water Conservation Districts

2003-2004 Activity Highlights

## Addressing Local Priorities

For over 60 years, New York State's 58 County Soil & Water Conservation Districts have been providing assistance to landowners, organizations, businesses and local government in the management of natural resources. Established under State law as local government subdivisions, Districts have the unique ability to work on both public and private lands to implement conservation programs that address local needs, while advancing state and federal objectives for protecting natural resources.

Because of their proven ability to identify potential concerns, and implement solutions that serve to correct and prevent problems, Districts are the local go-to agency for an expanding range of issues. Districts are taking a proactive approach to meeting

growing community needs, along with an increased workload resulting from new state and federal requirements, by broadening their programs and technical services. In addition to expanding assistance in traditional focus areas such as agriculture, Districts are diversifying into emerging issues including:

- drinking water protection
- emergency action planning
- flood protection and emergency response
- forest management and urban forestry
- habitat protection and enhancement
- onsite wastewater systems
- open space and farmland protection
- stream and riparian area restoration
- stormwater management
- watershed management
- wetland protection and mitigation

*Providing  
Today...*

*Protecting  
Tomorrow*

## Expanding Services

### Stormwater Management

In response to new requirements for water quality, Districts have taken on a vital role helping municipalities, contractors and farmers comply with the State's new Stormwater Phase II regulations. In 2004, 94% of Districts were addressing stormwater issues and 80% were also providing stormwater education assistance, dedicating about one-fifth of total staff time.

Over half of Districts statewide were providing construction site plan review services to their municipalities. This service is increasing steadily as District employees expand their technical ability by achieving the international certification status of Certified Professional in Erosion & Sediment Control (CPESC). A testimony to their skills, District employees account for one-third of all certified professionals in New York State.

Regional Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) offices also depend upon the technical expertise of Districts in their efforts to implement the Phase II Stormwater Permit Program. Through an agreement between State DEC and the State Soil and Water Conservation Committee, funds have been made available to reimburse Districts for eligible activities. During the first nine months of the reimbursement program, a total of 20 counties submitted \$17,400 in reimbursement requests. Activities including 70 site visits were reported utilizing 437 technical and managerial hours.

Due to the exemplary work of Districts in the planning and construction of conservation practices that protect water quality on farms, the State granted a stormwater permit exemption for the construction of certain Best Management Practices on agricultural lands.

### Agricultural Environmental Management



While programs are broadening, serving the farming community has remained an important focus for many Districts. Their success in delivering New York's Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) program has garnered state and national recognition, which has also helped to generate new funding opportunities. Utilizing AEM, Districts support farmers in their continued voluntary stewardship efforts amidst changing environmental requirements and rising costs. Districts are leading local AEM Teams, which include USDA, Cornell Cooperative Extension and industry partners, that are assisting nearly 9,000 farms in 53 counties and 269 small watersheds.

To date, Districts have secured \$39 million in New York State cost-share funds for farmers to plan and install Best Management Practices on farms. In 2004, \$650,000 in federal funding, along with \$600,000 in State Environmental Protection Funds, were allocated for Districts to develop and implement County AEM Strategic Plans. These plans will help Districts identify where state and federal resources, including over \$20 million in USDA Farm Bill Conservation Programs, can most effectively protect the state's water resources.

Districts are also teaming up with USDA in the new Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (NYS CREP) announced in 2003. NYS CREP is providing \$62 million in incentives for farmers to install riparian forest buffers and other conservation practices that protect water quality and enhance wildlife habitat on 40,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land. Currently there are 2000 acres in active contracts involving over 100 landowners statewide.

# Advancing Objectives

More than 90% of New York's remaining water quality problems are due to nonpoint source (NPS) pollution, which refers to contaminants that wash from the land into water bodies when it rains. Polluted runoff results from land activities such as fertilizer and pesticide applications, manure spreading, timber harvesting, construction and road salt applications. Since polluted runoff comes from many sources, a comprehensive approach is necessary to reduce its impact on water quality. Districts are at the hub of a strong and unique conservation partnership working to protect the state's precious ground and surface water supplies from NPS pollution.

## Regional Watershed Efforts

Through the creation of regional watershed coalitions, Districts have joined forces with partner agencies and groups including municipalities, farmers and community members, to protect water quality from NPS pollution using a multifaceted approach. Forging new partnerships across county and agency boundaries, the accomplishments of these watershed groups have been in both agricultural and non-agricultural areas, which includes the development of customized AEM worksheets, and hosting stormwater conferences. NY's watershed coalitions and groups are leading models of how partnering with farmers and communities will ensure long-term protection of our natural resources.

## Local Partnerships

County Water Quality Coordinating Committees (CWQCCs), established by the State in 1991, bring together local partners to develop and implement County Water Quality Strategies that address NPS pollution. As Districts are authorized by law to implement local NPS programs, they were the focal point for establishing the CWQCCs. Districts have assumed the leadership role in 53 of New York's 57 CWQCCs, and are key to implementing the strategies that identify and set local priorities. In 2004, \$973,000 in State Mini-Grant requests were received from 45 CWQCCs to address NPS pollution from stormwater runoff and failing onsite septic systems.

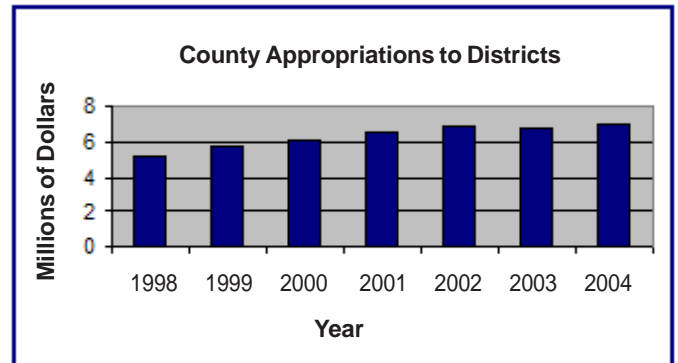
## Conservation Education

District conservation education efforts involved over 66,000 students and adults in 2004. More than 4,000 high school students participated in local and regional Envirothon events, and 225 students from 51 winning teams went on to compete in the NYS Envirothon. Initiated by Districts in 1990, the Envirothon is the state's largest environmental education program for high school students. By incorporating the Envirothon curriculum into classroom activities, Districts are responding to the public school system's need for a strong, hands-on approach to environmental education.

Districts also hosted 18,500 elementary school students at their annual Conservation Field Days. In addition, over 44,000 people participated in water festivals, school presentations, and other educational events.

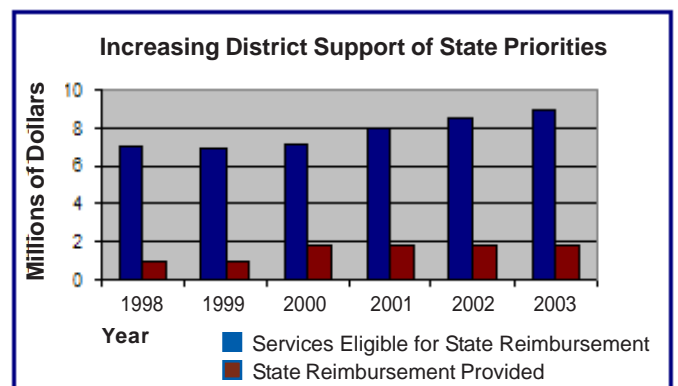
## County Appropriations

As illustrated in the graph below, Counties have recognized the effectiveness of Districts in responding to local priorities by maintaining their funding levels over the past few years, during a time when many agencies were experiencing funding cuts.



## State Reimbursements

Because Districts have a dual role carrying out both local and state priorities, they also receive State reimbursements to help advance State objectives. This workload is significantly increasing as new environmental requirements further increase the demand for District services. As illustrated below, Districts provide eligible services at five times the rate of state reimbursement amounts, which demonstrates the tremendous value of their programs and services.



## Income Producing Programs

Since county and state appropriations for Districts only cover a portion of yearly programmatic and administrative expenditures it's necessary for Districts to develop additional sources of funding, with the goal of promoting local conservation objectives. Through the sale of conservation products and services including over one-million bare root conservation seedlings and nearly 100,000 fingerlings for pond stocking annually, Districts are able to raise additional funds for programming, while providing an essential service to the community. Approximately \$13,000 of topographical maps and \$224,000 of drainage tile was sold in 2003, and \$154,000 of grass seed and hydro-seeding services were provided.



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