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# U. Plans and Planning

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To develop and maintain an effective program, directors must identify local conservation needs (resource concerns); set corresponding goals; develop plans with clear, measurable objectives toward those goals; ensure implementation; monitor programs or projects during their implementation; and evaluate results. Planning is the basic tool to develop conservation district programs. ORS 568.554 requires two plans: a long-range plan and an annual work plan.

## A. Planning Concepts

Planning is predicated on comparing two defined points: “what is” against “what should be”. Other ways to express this concept are:

- “Where we are” compared to “where we want to be”
- “This is bad” compared to “that would be good”
- Getting from “here” to “there”
- “What we have” versus “what we want”
- “What we don’t want” compared to “what we do want”

“What is” descriptions are also known as problem statements, descriptions of resource concerns, or something identified as being below standard. The “what is” conditions or situations are usually determined to be unacceptable, illegal, not working, or undesirable to the degree that corrective action is needed. Someone has to decide to take action to change the “what is” condition in the direction of “what should be”.

“What should be” statements define desirable conditions or situations that currently do not exist and toward which effort should be made. We also call them goals, objectives, desired outcomes and results, and prescriptions (as defined in laws, rules, requirements, adopted minimum standards, etc.).

One important factor is that “what is unacceptable” and “what should be” are often **value judgments**. Describing “what is” in great detail does not necessarily mean anyone wants to change it. Someone has to **declare** that “what is” is a problem (a condition so unacceptable that resources should be mobilized to change it) and that “what should be” will be worth the effort and expense to achieve. Problem descriptions and supportive data alone will not

automatically lead to such conclusions. Some questions to answer are: "When is the problem "bad enough"? At what point are improvements "good enough"? How much is "too much" or "going too far"?"

Therefore, a critical part of planning is **ACHIEVING CONSENSUS** on:

1. The extent and seriousness of undesirable conditions.
2. The quality and quantity of desired outcomes.
3. The general approaches, strategies, and methods to be used.
4. The types, amounts, and cost of resources necessary to obtain the desired outcomes.
5. The probability or feasibility of success.

In addition, goals and objectives, monitoring and evaluation standards and procedures, record keeping, reporting, and budgets will be easier to develop, if the beginning conditions and desired results are clearly defined. For example, one can only monitor progress if one knows where one started and the desired destination. One cannot evaluate the impact of a program without knowing what existed when it started and what it intends to achieve as final outcomes.

## **B. Needs Assessments**

Before developing plans, the district must assess and define the conservation problems and needs (resource concerns or issues) within the district. Landowners and operators, and those who work with them, are valuable sources of information. Since the conservation district is a public agency, it should consult with the community as well. This can be accomplished through public information meetings, requesting input through a watershed council, or any other method to obtain public opinion. Plan the district's approach to provide factual information to the citizens.

Obtaining public input may be time-consuming. However, the directors were elected to represent all the people in the community or district, and taking time to obtain the public's input will pay dividends in the long run.

Identify both current conservation problems and other problems likely to occur in the future. As conservation leaders, directors should evaluate how well the public understands the future consequences of actions taken today.

While it is vital to identify the problems and needs to be addressed, it is equally important to identify the condition of the resources the public desires. It is important to ask, "What do you want your watershed to look like? What do you

want to see? What do you want the water to be like, the land to look like, the conditions of wildlife, fish, wetlands, etc.?" A complete needs assessment does more than describe problems; it also paints the picture of what people want to see. If one can compare these two pictures, one can better determine needs: "What needs to be fixed? What needs to be done? How much needs to be done? Where is improvement needed?"

## C. Long-Range Business Plans

The long-range plan, referred to in this Guidebook as the **Business Plan**, is developed every 3-5 years as a broad outline of the district's response to natural resource concerns and other factors that influence the district's course of action. The Business Plan should be updated annually, usually during the same time the Annual Work Plan is being developed.

ODA and OACD have designed a format for the Business Plan so that it performs the functions and incorporates the concepts and contents associated with both long-range and strategic plans. *Long-range planning* assumes today's conditions and trends will continue into the future: programs, services, products, funding levels, etc. *Strategic planning* is a process to determine where a district intends to be in the future and how it intends to get there. It concentrates on key factors:

- Defining a vision and identifying values and guiding principles that will convince people of the value of the district and build trust and rapport between the district and the communities and consumers it serves.
- Conducting a "situational analysis": examining political, economic, social, technological trends and forces, and key stakeholders that will influence how the district does business; describing the mission; examining opportunities and threats the district faces; exploring the district's strengths and weaknesses; and identifying critical issues the district will face in the future. Critical issues are problems requiring resolution because of their potential negative or positive impact on the district, citizens, and the environment.
- Identifying and resolving issues.
- Determining the best approaches and strategies to move the district toward the desired future.

### 1. Benefits of a Business Plan

In addition to complying with a statutory requirement, a good Business Plan provides benefits to both a conservation district and to the consumers and communities it serves. The audiences of a Business Plan are both internal and

external. Examples of the benefits are listed below, grouped under four headings.

**A. Mission and Direction**

1. The district has a road map. It knows what it wants to accomplish. Knowing where the district is heading builds confidence and enthusiasm among directors, employees, and partners.
2. Identifies problems to address, goals to achieve, and approaches to be used. The district knows not only where it wants to go, but also what it must do to get there.
3. It guides and directs local district / partner decision makers to:
  - a. Describe current natural resource concerns and geographic areas of concern;
  - b. Define the desired conditions, outcomes, and results;
  - c. Identify and evaluate alternative strategies and approaches to address resource concerns and achieve the desired conditions;
  - d. Determine long-range strategies and necessary resources;
  - e. Formulate a work plan with measurable objectives and defined responsibilities;
  - f. Assign fiscal, physical, and personnel resources to carry out the objectives;
  - g. Implement their work plan; and
  - h. Monitor progress and evaluate results.
4. Provides long-range goals, targets, and priorities for Annual Work Plans.
5. Helps the district target current resources to the highest priorities.

**B. Internal Management**

6. Provides information on which to recruit, employ, and supervise employees. Supervision is more directed and effective since specific responsibilities, job functions, and expectations can be identified in the Business Plan for each employee.
7. Specifies the content and issues, and the goals and objectives on which annual reports are based. Annual reports describe the progress achieved toward the long-range goals and annual work plan objectives.
8. Guides the development of monitoring and evaluation standards and methods.
9. Leads to specific fiscal allocation, costing, and budgeting.
10. Can eliminate superfluous and unproductive actions: those not addressing specific objectives and those not within the mission of the district and field office (not "our thing").

11. Provides a solid justification for saying "no".
12. Clearly outlines the work plan and workload on which employees report to their supervisors and district board.

**C. Resource Requirements/Needs**

13. Identifies the resources necessary to carry out the work:
  - a. Personnel (a workload analysis: number of hours or days each employee, director, associate director, director emeritus, NRCS employee, volunteer or other persons will contribute to each action);
  - b. Physical resources (equipment, space, vehicles, etc.);
  - c. Fiscal resources;
  - d. Others.
14. Provides the information on which to base decisions for assigning new resources or reducing or re-assigning current resources.
15. Provides credible information on which to develop, defend, and market funding proposals.

**D. Community and Partner Relations**

16. Contains information that can be extracted and used in many different media to inform and educate the public about the district, the problems and issues to be addressed, the goals and objectives, and the resources needed.
17. Enhances partner relations: identifies specific areas for collaboration, where help is needed, where responsibilities overlap, etc.

**2. Business Plan Contents**

The contents of the long-range Business Plan can be broken down into four areas.

**A. Resource Concerns and Outcomes**

1. Resource concerns. A resource concern is a situation or condition that does not meet defined standards (rules, laws, public and district expectations, administration decisions, etc.). The inadequacy may be in natural resources (water quality and quantity, erosion, waste management, etc.); physical properties (equipment, buildings, vehicles, etc); fiscal resources; personnel (number, skills, capabilities, etc.); public participation; knowledge; support; and many other items.
2. Goals and Outcomes. Goals and outcomes are statements of desired conditions, situations as they should be, or end results. Goals are usually long-term. They are usually not measurable to the same specificity as objectives.

3. Critical Geographic Areas. Identify and map particular places in the district where specific problems or issues need special attention.
4. The resource concerns and outcomes should be prioritized according to criteria defined by the district in consultation with the public and partners.
5. From this information, measurable objectives / strategies are written for each of the goals or outcomes.

**B. District Capacities, Needs and Strategies.**

In this section, the Business Plan (a) defines the current conditions and circumstances for each of the six factors listed below, (b) describes the desired outcomes; and (c) identifies how the district intends to achieve the long-range objectives for all of the following:

1. Services, programs, and customers
2. Personnel
3. Facilities
4. Equipment
5. Monitoring and evaluation
6. Finances
7. Other

**C. Description of the District.**

Certain information is necessary to “introduce” or describe the district. This section describes the:

1. Enabling and governing legislation – legal structure, powers, and authorities
2. History of the district
3. District vision and mission
4. Values and guiding principles
5. The district’s leadership
6. How the district operates
7. Relationships the district has with partners and the community

**D. Planning Process.**

This section describes

1. The processes used
2. Data collected and reviewed
3. Partners assisting the district in the planning
4. Public involvement, and
5. Other important factors to assess resource concerns and determine the long-range course of action.

## D. Annual Work Plans

An **Annual Work Plan** outlines specific objectives and activities the district will pursue in the next fiscal year to address the goals defined in the Business Plan. The Annual Work Plan should be completed just prior to or at the beginning of the state fiscal year, and should cover **July 1** of the current year to **June 30** of the following year. The Annual Work Plan must be submitted to the Natural Resources Division, Oregon Department of Agriculture for approval **no later than August 15**.

The Annual Work Plan should include work that can realistically be accomplished during one year. It should include programs which are routinely accomplished each year, such as tours, contests, and demonstrations; estimates of the number of farm plans to be developed and by whom; education and outreach programs; annual reports, annual meetings, and audits; etc. Also include actions taken as preliminary work toward goals in the Business Plan that will be completed in later years. Each item in the plan should (1) define a planned completion date and (2) identify who is responsible to implement it.

The department and the Soil and Water Conservation Commission requires each conservation district to include a Coordinated Resource Management Planning (CRMP) element in its annual work plan. The CRMP process is an excellent tool for conservation districts to use with local landowners and land users to work toward resource management goals. CRMP is a voluntary collaborative process by which resource owners, managers, and land users work together as a team, from beginning to end, to formulate and implement plans to manage all major resources and ownerships within a specific area and/or to resolve specific conflicts. For more information consult the manual, *Coordinated Resource Management Planning Notebook, CRMP in Oregon*, available from:

The Commission's requirement for every district to include an element on how it will incorporate CRMP does not mean every district must have an actual CRMP plan in progress or in place, but that the district should use the process when appropriate.

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The Annual Work Plan should list the objectives and activities to be accomplished in the next fiscal year. Include such items as:

1. Goals (goals and sub-goals from the Business Plan)
2. Objectives for one year
3. Actions, tasks, or steps needed to accomplish each objective
4. Estimated workload [hours or days by each individual (employee, director, volunteer, contractor, etc.) or discipline for each action]
5. Person(s) responsible for each action
6. Due dates or time schedule to complete each action
7. Budget information (if desired): cost elements, cash categories, etc.

Use the Annual Work Plan to figure out budget requirements that cannot be tied to objectives, such as "lease", resource funds, contingency funds, savings that fit other financial reporting such as Profit & Loss statements.

Annual Work Plans describe in detail **who** is going to do **what, by when**, and **how**. Most actions are a sequenced list of tasks recorded on a timeline, like a calendar, flow chart, time bar chart, or spreadsheet.

## **E. Recommendations for Writing Plans**

The following hints about writing plans may prove helpful.

1. Plan for planning. Appoint committees. Gather appropriate information. Write out a plan with tasks, assignments, and a schedule to complete the desired plan.
2. Involve district directors, associate directors, directors emeritus, employees, advisors, cooperating agencies, partners, and the public.
3. Make sure the district has thoroughly assessed the conditions and determined the most critical resource concerns and issues to be addressed.
4. Just describing the problems is not enough. The district must describe the desired conditions, and outcomes. As stated earlier, only by comparing two points can one determine priorities and actions needed to make changes.
5. Setting goals. After researching and defining local conservation problems, issues, and needs, the district should develop goals to address the needs. Goals have different levels. In the Business Plan, set broad, strategic, long-range goals, which focus on the next 3-5 years. In the Annual Work Plan, list more specific, measurable, operational objectives and tasks for the results needed during that fiscal year.
6. Prioritize the resource concerns, goals, and objectives.
7. Brainstorm alternate solutions to meet the goals.
8. Assess the readiness of the conservation district to implement solutions: adequate personnel, sufficient technical assistance, adequate financial assets, etc.
9. Make the plan attractive, easy to read, and understandable. Use graphics.

10. Be creative. Do not automatically accept “the way things were always done”.
11. Be realistic. Do not try to accomplish more than is attainable, or credibility may be lost. Plan for success.
12. When the Business Plan and Annual Work Plan are completed, they should be reviewed and approved at a board meeting. A conservation district representative (usually the chair) should sign both plans. Many conservation districts ask every director and a representative of each partner agency or organization having responsibilities in the plans to sign each plan as well. Indicate on each plan the date it was approved by the board.
13. Provide copies of the district plan to ODA, NRCS, watershed councils, and other partners. Also provide copies to the media, community leaders, and others, accompanied by a news release explaining the district’s major goals and activities.

## **F. Implementing Plans**

After finalizing plans, implement planned tasks by mobilizing the sources of assistance with the expertise to deal with the identified needs (these sources of expertise and assistance should have already been consulted in the planning process). Many conservation districts may choose to have one or more committees to oversee implementation. Regardless of how the district manages implementation, it should keep the district program on the planned course. Allow some flexibility to include new developments, but do not let the district get sidetracked from the plan.

## **G. Monitoring and Evaluating Plans**

This Guidebook cannot go into all the details about monitoring and evaluation, but it is important that districts recognize some basic facts.

1. Monitoring and evaluation processes are usually the most neglected portions of plans, often left to the last minute and given insufficient attention.
2. Since competition for limited funds is steadily increasing, monitoring and evaluation are becoming more important and are given increased attention by funders.
3. Monitoring and evaluation activities should relate to the district’s total program, not just the grants requiring such. They focus on funding (“Are we on budget? Are funds being spent as budgeted?”). They may also focus on conducting meetings (“Are we starting and adjourning as scheduled?”). Other factors include objectives in the Business Plan and Annual Work Plan, personnel performance, board functioning, the work of volunteers, education efforts, record keeping, consistency with vision and mission, public relations, etc.

4. Monitoring and evaluation activities should not be done only at the end of a grant period or the fiscal year. They should be conducted throughout, from beginning to end.
5. The most important factor influencing the district's ability to conduct effective monitoring and evaluation activities is the quality of the plans. For monitoring and evaluation to be done effectively and efficiently, clear goals, measurable objectives, detailed work plans, careful workload analyses, detailed budgets, good record keeping, clearly defined employee responsibilities, and quality monitoring and evaluation standards and methods are essential.
6. The type of objective used determines the degree of complexity in monitoring and evaluation. Product objectives require a low level of expertise and effort. "Was the product produced? On time? In sufficient quality and quantity?" On the other hand, impact objectives are very difficult and require extensive data collection and possibly professional assistance to devise an adequate evaluation strategy.
7. Semi-annual and even quarterly reviews of the plans are advised. Changes may be necessary to eliminate or adjust objectives no longer appropriate or to incorporate a new requirement or opportunity not known when the plan was first written.
8. Directors and managers must look at their operations with at least three major concerns in mind.
  - a. Achievement. "How well are we doing? Are we reaching our objectives? Are we on schedule? Are we still on course? Have we served the consumers we wanted to serve? Is money being spent as planned? Are we doing the things we said we would do?"
  - b. Improvement. "How can we do our job better? Are we using the best methods? What changes might produce better results? What is needed for improvements to be possible? Do our employees have the knowledge and skills required to perform as desired?"
  - c. The Future. "What impact will today's operation have on next year? Are we heading toward our long-range goals and objectives? Have we built in flexibility and responsiveness so we can adjust to changes and react to the unexpected? What survival threats loom ahead of us? Have we already started to prepare for what we will face in the future?"
9. Evaluation in all three areas in item #8 requires good information and accurate, complete records.