

WESTERN MARYLAND RESOURCE CONSERVATION & DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL, INC.

STRATEGIC PLAN



August 2004

Mission Statement

All programs and services of the Western Maryland RC&D Council are offered on a non-discriminatory basis, without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital or family status, disability or political beliefs.

The mission of the Western Maryland Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Council, Inc. is “to build and sustain resource conservation programs, raising the quality of social, economic, and environmental development in our region.”

Vision Statement

To be viewed as a reliable source of innovative environmental and conservation solutions in dealing with the challenges of population growth and pressures in the natural resources of our region.

Introduction

The Western Maryland RC&D was incorporated as a 501©3 nonprofit organization in 1993. It includes representatives from five Boards of County Commissioners, six Soil Conservation Districts (SCDs), several municipalities, grassroots organizations, and interested individuals.

Western Maryland RC&D helps people and communities care for and preserve their natural resources. Working together, individuals and their organizations can plan and carry out the projects that make Western Maryland a better place to live. The standard, over-arching goals include:

- Improving air, soil, and water quality;
- Improving waste disposal and recycling programs,
- Promoting sustainable agriculture;
- Promoting the use of forest resources; and
- Promoting tourism.

Western Maryland RC&D works to develop projects and secure funding from a variety of sources including private foundations, businesses, other nonprofits, and federal, state, and local government agencies. The organization shares projects with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and local SCDs. It also partners with such organizations as the Maryland Department of Natural Resources Fisheries Division, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources Power Plant Research Program (MDNR-PPRP), the Maryland Department of the Environment Bureau of Mines (MDE-BOM), Maryland Energy Administration (MEA), and the United States Department of the Interior Office of Surface Mining. Finally, we partner with private organizations such as the Federation of Fly Fishers, Trout Unlimited, at least four watershed organizations, and funders who share our goal of responsible conservation and development of Maryland’s precious natural resources.

This plan was created in response to recent growth of the organization, and the need for a plan enabling future project identification, including conception, development, and identification of targeted funding sources. This document will address improvement in Western Maryland RC&D’s ability to prioritize goals and projects, identify potential funding, write well-targeted proposals, and plan for building the capacity to manage these projects and their granted funds.

Purpose and Role

Sponsored by the Boards of County Commissioners and SCDs of Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington counties, the Western Maryland RC&D works to promote natural

resource conservation, protect the rural lifestyle, and improve the economic well-being of the five-county area.

The organization's role is to match natural resource conservation with rural development. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been directed toward Western Maryland RC&D projects – improving trout streams, addressing acid mine drainage (AMD), placing solar technology on Maryland farms, and re-establishing wildlife habitats. The successful completion of these projects conserves natural resources while improving the quality of life in our communities.

AREA DESCRIPTION

Western Maryland is seeing unprecedented social and economic change that is both comparable to and divergent from other rural areas of the country. State census data mirror national trends defining an ongoing decline in agriculture. Farm-business income plays a decreasing role in farm households, increasingly dependent on other sectors of the rural economy. More than half of all U.S. farm operators, for example, work off-farm – 80 percent of these working full-time jobs. In 1999, nearly 90 percent of total farm household income in the United States originated from off-farm sources¹. Of Maryland's 12,000 farms, almost half – 5,849 or 48 percent – were classified as “part-time”, according to a 1997 census by the Maryland Department of Agriculture.

At the same time, there are areas of growth. While trends have been uneven, our five-county service area boasts a growing population of 582,873 (2000 Census), an overall rise of 15 percent during the previous decade.

In our region, during the 1990s, the increase in rural population was accompanied by an increase in the average size of residential lots, translating into a rise of low home-density (acres/parcel). Thus, while more people in Western Maryland are identified as living in “rural” areas, more rural land is being consumed for residential development. The trend of rising rural population can be expected to reverse for communities that cross the line from “rural” to “urban” or “metro” classifications, as has happened in eastern counties. Such new urban classifications during the past decade are likely behind the fact that Maryland's statewide rural population declined more than 20 percent during the period.

Low-density, single-use development tends to consume natural resource lands such as farms, wetland, and forests. It certainly affects the quality of local waterways, increasing the total area of impervious surfaces such as roads, parking lots, and rooftops. Such development also increases traffic congestion with densities that are often too low to support mass transit. All of this has implications for conservation work being undertaken by Western Maryland RC&D.

¹ “Rural America: Opportunities and Challenges.” Leslie A. Whitener and David A. McGranahan. Amber Waves. v1, i1 February 2003. USDA Economic Research Service

Maryland's unemployment rate was 4.1 percent in December 2002, down slightly from 4.4 percent one year before, and less than the national average (6 percent) at that time. Maryland's steep rise in job-holders, presumably measured during the course of several years, earned it a No. 9 position among all 50 states in the “annual change ranking” of the Northeast Midwest Institute.

RURAL CONDITIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Agriculture

As noted above, a relatively high number of farm operators now identify themselves as working “part-time”, with an increasing amount of general farming being done on leased or rented land. It also might be argued that building commitment to land and water conservation among suburban and urban dwellers is more challenging than among rural people whose local economy depends on natural resources. A lower sense of responsibility for stewardship of the land has implications for Western Maryland RC&D resource programs and how they are presented.

American Farmland Trust has identified Carroll, Frederick, and Washington counties as among those areas facing the greatest threat of losing productive farmland to population growth and development.

“The ag industry is a financial train wreck,” said one Washington County farmer. “If you want to survive, you have to capture more acres – at a time when land rent and land values are rising. And no one is buying the land to farm it.”

The Western Maryland RC&D has some distance to go toward identifying opportunities and developing programs serving farmers’ needs, particularly in terms of energy and water resources. At the same time, we have several existing assets to build upon:

- The Western Maryland RC&D manages a program installing solar photovoltaic (PV) water pumping systems on the farms of eligible applicants. Sponsored by MEA, the Solar PV Water Pumping Program explores and promotes the use of solar energy as a power source to pump water on agricultural land. The Western Maryland RC&D’s performance in this area has won it attention in both the media and from project funders, who are working with the staff to increase available funding.
- We have launched a program in the karst counties to inform farms about the threats of karst topography and sinkholes. The same resources might be brought into play as we embark on an education program regarding carbon sequestration and “sustainability” issues.
- We have helped fund and manage repair of AMD discharges. AMD in the coal counties not only threaten the aesthetic beauty of farmland streams, but also endangers the health of streams, wetlands, and waterways.
- We have worked with local ag extension agents and co-ops to develop projects for economic development, the control of West Nile Virus, and “niche marketing” for farmers.

Forestry

Urbanization in Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington counties increases “development stress” on regional lands, a high percentage of which is wooded. Western Maryland RC&D has identified two challenges: 1) to retain as much forest as possible in view of increasing demand for land; and 2) to explore opportunities for marketing forests and forest products.

Forest lands offer an important environmental value toward solving the global challenge of climate change. Today, environmental planners increasingly point to carbon sequestration, where carbon is imbedded in vegetation, wood, and soils.

Even lacking full federal policy endorsement, “carbon credits” is a concept with staying power. Although virtually unknown a few years ago, today the Chicago Board of Trade is trading carbon credits as a commodity. Many U.S. based multinational companies are also acquiring carbon credits from various sources including from forest land and agriculture. Ultimately, carbon credits likely will enable these businesses to meet future carbon-reduction targets, without drastically impacting their production. Under these terms, forests and long-lasting wood products are recognized as “sinks” for storing carbon, and the high percentage of woodlands in Western Maryland could be seen as a growing potential asset to Western Maryland RC&D partners, including agricultural producers and others involved in energy production. During the short term, Western Maryland RC&D could play a role in two ways:

1. public education about carbon sequestration, especially as encouragement for retaining forest land; and
2. developing programs that encourage use of forests and forest products in ways that increase sequestered carbon.

Water Resources/Land Use

From stream repairs and the installation of solar PV water systems to the repair of AMD, the Western Maryland RC&D has been active in a wide variety of projects throughout the region. If there is a single common thread, however, it is certainly “conservation of water resources.”

Each of the Western Maryland RC&D’s projects turns on the idea of water conservation. We help install solar pumps to keep cows out of creeks, we help install AMD treatment projects to keep fish thriving in the North Branch of the Potomac and the Youghiogheny watersheds. We are exploring karst, hydrogeology, and the beneficial use of fly ash in various environmental contexts -- all toward protecting our valuable water supplies.

Perhaps more than any other recent event, the 2002 drought made Marylanders more aware of the limits of our natural resources, especially of water. Western Maryland aquifers were under stress, brought by increasing domestic, industrial, agricultural, and other demands of what has always been taken for granted as an abundant natural resource. Many local residents and policy-makers have raised questions about the regional water supply.

The health of the Chesapeake Bay continues to dominate water issues of the region with a lot of emphasis on improving nutrient management in agriculture. Fully appreciating the importance of a healthy Chesapeake Bay is a challenging task for the Western Maryland region. While all of Western Maryland, with a small portion of Garrett County, is located in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, its distant proximity makes it difficult to make a direct connection. In 2004, eleven tributary strategy groups met to develop strategies on how to achieve reduction goals for nitrogen and phosphorus. All eleven plans are now under review by the Environmental Protection Agency. In any event, Western Maryland RC&D will play an important role in helping to implement the plans.

Information gathering is expected to play a significant role in future resource planning. State and local agencies are asking themselves about the water supply, exploring hydrogeological surveys for their service areas. MDE's oversight of surface water and watersheds may become more exacting. Planners are increasingly considering water use patterns and practices, peak water usage times and "high-use" areas.

Uniform, representative, and reasonably complete hydrologic data are needed in order to understand, protect, and prudently develop and manage the state's surface and groundwater resources. Basic information on the chemical and physical quality of the water in Maryland's streams and aquifers is needed for water-resources planning and water quality assessment.

Western Maryland RC&D continues to play a role in this area. The organization has responded to the need for monitoring, recording, and interpreting water flow and water quality for several projects initiated by the MDE-BOM and MDNR-PPRP.

Education for Sustainability

The concept known as sustainability is by no means foreign to the agricultural community and rural tradition. In former times, sustainability was exemplified by a "waste not, want not" philosophy. It was demonstrated by the use of all parts of a slaughtered animal – feathers, skin, hooves, etc. – and not seeing anything go to waste. Sustainability lies at the heart of the cardinal rule, "Don't eat your seed corn!"

During the 1980s, the international community, including the United States, recognized that the world's growing population is supported by a finite supply of water, food, energy, and other vital resources. This awareness translated into a renewed commitment to sustainability, culminating in the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. There, more than 100 nations, including the United States, identified the need to "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Since that time, we have seen a wave of growth in applying the principles and practices of sustainability. Today, it plays a role in the planning done by corporations – from BP-Amoco and Intel to Wal-Mart and Home Depot – as well as by local and state governments. The citizens of Western Maryland need to be part of this growth, and the Western Maryland RC&D can play a pivotal role in promoting sustainability and other concepts in conservation.

Public education programs offer a great opportunity to assist area residents in making wise resource decisions. The Western Maryland RC&D can act as a catalyst, in this sense. Following are needs identified by the educational community in our region:

- Equipment needs for students completing environmental awareness projects. These might include water sampling equipment, plant and animal identification books, field microscopes, ecology text books, weather data equipment, horticultural resources, including seeds and plants.
- Educational literature accessible in our five-county area. Listed needs include: videos on current local Maryland environmental issues; reports on the Chesapeake Bay and its watersheds; books, including plant/animal/soil identification; magazines and newsletters; maps; computer software.

- Teaching resources, including hands-on activities, demonstrating concepts in Maryland’s environmental curriculum. Example concepts include: “Humans depend on natural resources.” or “Earth’s features and conditions support life.” Adequate environmental/natural resource programs and equipment such as microscopes, buckets, boots, nets, pH meters, and computers are needed for use by students and teachers.
- Environmental education centers where students can get hands-on experience linked to theoretical information learned in the classroom. Western Maryland is a logical location for camps and nature centers where the natural world can be observed. Models might be adopted, or partnerships made, with existing programs that target “at risk” or “gifted and talented” students.
- Teacher in-service programs and access to environmental resource speakers. Environmental programs such as Project Wind, Project Learning Tree, Nature Scope, and Ag in the Classroom require teacher awareness and need to be geared toward various grade levels. A list of resource speakers may be promoted to cover such subjects as wetlands, recycling, environmental careers, pesticides/herbicides, land management, and others.

Western Maryland RC&D – Goals & Priorities

The following goals have been developed for Western Maryland RC&D:

- To strengthen the region’s rural economy;
Water Management – NRCS Goal 2.2
- To increase cooperation with other organizations and agencies;
Land Mgmt. – NRCS Goal 4.1
- To develop and strengthen public education programs serving environmental awareness;
Community Development – NRCS Goal 4.1
- To develop programs that improve environmental quality;
Community Development - NRCS Goal 1.2 and Goal 4.2
- To improve solid-waste management techniques, reducing pollution; and,
Land Management – NRCS Goals 1 & 2
- To build for the future: Developing RC&D’s capacity.
Land Conservation

In the context of issues and circumstances discussed above, we can examine each of these goals more closely.

GOAL 1: Strengthen the region's rural economy.

Tourism is a strong industry in Garrett and Allegany counties, and clean running streams are a principal drawing card. The “coal counties” are plagued, however, by a large number of acidic and acid-sensitive creeks and streams. The Western Maryland RC&D has been able to assist watershed groups, local governments, and the MDE-BOM in the work of remediating the effects of AMD in the region, but there remains much to be done.

The Western Maryland RC&D has been able to explore new avenues, largely introduced through MDNR-PPRP. These projects employ coal combustion products (CCPs), a notably fly ash in flowable grout mixtures, designed to harden and bond with native rock and reduce contact of clean groundwater with the coal residue and pyretic material that causes AMD. The CCP grout fills the voids left by mined coal, robbing the opportunity for mined-out tunnels to transform clean water into AMD.

Developing a wider array of applications for fly ash will have a positive effect on rural economies, as we develop cheaper means of dealing with AMD and the karst-related geotechnical problems, not to mention road construction, farm applications and other tasks. Western Maryland RC&D is contracted to develop new ideas and projects involving CCP use, a task that is consistent with developing the region's rural economy.

Objectives

Objective 1.1 - Develop, fund, and manage proposals for MDNR-PPRP.

Objective 1.2 - Assist MDE-BOM and watershed groups with AMD and other clean-water projects.

Objective 1.3 Maximize use of the local workforce in order to provide Western Maryland RC&D with needed services;

Objective 1.4 Develop Local Internships;

Objective 1.5 Local Contracting (lab services, construction, IT, etc.), and

Objective 1.6 Explore and develop projects that use promising new energy concepts including methane and solar.

Strategies

Strategy 1.1 – Seek grant funding for MDNR-PPRP project proposals

Strategy 1.2 – Protect water resources through beneficial use of CCPs

Strategy 1.3 – Increase the use of volunteers and local talent for completion of projects and project follow-up studies

Strategy 1.4 – Seek funding for the use of interns for project activity

Strategy 1.5 – Seek new projects in stream restoration, watershed management and AMD monitoring and abatement

Strategy 1.6 – Use new energy concepts such as solar and methane

GOAL 2: Increase cooperation with other organizations and agencies.

The Western Maryland RC&D will broaden and improve its relationships among important stakeholder groups such as elected officials, regulatory agencies, and other environmental groups (non-government organizations), educators, business leaders, and community leaders. In this regard, the Council has endorsed the idea of undertaking a stakeholder assessment to help us better understand the needs and priorities of our principal constituency. Such an undertaking will require a substantial commitment of time and resources and will only be initiated after careful thought and planning.

Objectives

- Objective 2.1 - Conduct a Stakeholder Assessment to identify critical regional issues. The RC&D can use this assessment to assist in the identification of solutions and add value to the work of organizations responsible for managing those issues.
- Objective 2.2 - Schedule get-acquainted meetings with county officials to identify needs and potential projects.
- Objective 2.3 - Demonstrate use/disposal of coal ash via PPRP projects and develop means of communicating success.
- Objective 2.4 - Use board members' ties to other organizations.
- Objective 2.5 - Board invitations for appearances by other groups.
- Objective 2.6 - Explore use of methane digesters to fuel electric plants and other waste-to-energy projects; and
- Objective 2.7 - Establish budget goals for a newsletter.

Strategies

- Strategy 2.1 – Survey the five-county residents for input on prioritizing solutions to mutual and identified problems and opportunities
- Strategy 2.2 – Schedule meeting with elected appointed and career county officials
- Strategy 2.3 – Disseminate results and information about PPRP project activity
- Strategy 2.4 – Maximize the effectiveness of board members and their affiliations with other groups with shared goals and interests
- Strategy 2.5 – Schedule a special guest and topic at each Quarterly Council Meeting
- Strategy 2.6 – Work with the Maryland Energy Administration on methane digester and biomass projects
- Strategy 2.7 – Develop a newsletter

GOAL 3: To develop and strengthen public education programs serving environmental awareness.

Objectives

- Objective 3.1 - Develop materials on Western Maryland and carbon sequestration;
- Objective 3.2 - Develop materials on sustainability;
- Objective 3.3 - Develop Internship program;
- Objective 3.4 - Use available programs to meet equipment needs for students completing environmental - awareness projects, including waste sampling equipment, books, etc.

- Objective 3.5 - Prepare/improve display to be used at educational events;
- Objective 3.6 - Prepare a brief general classroom presentation; and
- Objective 3.7 - Develop/organize seminars/workshops on topics of interest (water supply, carbon sequestration, and sustainability)

Strategies

- Strategy 3.1 – Respond to requests for information and information products (calls, letters, e-mails, personal requests)
- Strategy 3.2 – Develop a campaign to distribute information on RC&D projects
- Strategy 3.3 – Apply to programs for interns
- Strategy 3.4 – Seek grant funds to monitor AMD sites
- Strategy 3.5 – Construct a portable display which is multi-dimensional in content for various events
- Strategy 3.6 – Classroom/presentation appearances
- Strategy 3.7 – Calls for display/representative appearances

GOAL 4: Develop programs that improve environmental quality.

Objectives

- Objective 4.1 - Schedule get acquainted meetings with important stakeholders, potential funders, and other potential partners.
- Objective 4.2 - Actively seek new partnerships and projects that require them;
- Objective 4.3 - Increase cooperation at project feasibility/design stage; and
- Objective 4.4 - Develop and/or improve plan of outreach to county commissioners and others.

Strategies

- Strategy 4.1 – Develop meetings with potential partners and funders
- Strategy 4.2 – Increase the amount of funds dedicated to new projects
- Strategy 4.3 – Develop public information mailings at various stages of completion
- Strategy 4.4 – Respond to requests for assistance in environmental quality projects

GOAL 5: To improve solid-waste management techniques, reducing pollution.

Objectives

- Objective 5.1 - Develop Frederick County methane project and others dealing with solid waste management.
- Objective 5.2 - Examine means of bringing carbon sequestration into planning and strategy;
- Objective 5.3 - Develop projects that improve waste management on the farm (solar, CCP barriers, etc.) as well as non-rural; areas; and
- Objective 5.4 - Promote parallel efforts to deal with this issue by farmer co-ops, watershed groups, and others.

Strategies

Strategy 5.1 – Develop projects using new energy concepts, notably methane;

Strategy 5.2 – Increase the visibility given to the issue of carbon sequestration in Western Maryland RC&D materials;

Strategy 5.3 - Develop projects that improve waste management on the farm, as well as non-rural areas

Strategy 5.4 – Seek new partners in waste management projects.

GOAL 6: To build for the future: Developing Western Maryland RC&D's capacity.

It is recommended that we place special emphasis here, and work to increase public awareness of the Western Maryland RC&D and its projects throughout the region, toward growth in the program's budget, staff, and project list.

Objectives

Objective 6.1 - Write plan to take on the role of an Integrator Contractor for MDNR;

Objective 6.2 - Develop Outreach/Marketing Tools;

Objective 6.3 - Develop Stakeholder Assessment;

Objective 6.4 - Develop five-year plan and budget; and

Objective 6.5 - Identify and pursue new sources of funding for Western Maryland RC&D programs.

Strategies

Strategy 6.1 – Act in the capacity of integrator for the mutual benefit of both MDNR-PPRP and WMRC&D

Strategy 6.2 – Devise a method for showcasing the project accomplishments of the WMRC&D Council

Strategy 6.3 – Seek new funds for discretionary budget

Strategy 6.4 – Maintain a five year plan and budget

Strategy 6.5 – Develop growth in staffing

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