

Conservation District Elections and Operations: Accountability and Transparency

- Conservation districts are a unique form of special district — accountability was built into their structure and governance when they were created.
- Each conservation district is subject to internal controls and oversight at the state and local level.
- The State Conservation Commission (SCC) continually works with all 45 conservation districts to review and improve the accountability and transparency of their operations, including the process for electing members of each conservation district board.

COMMITMENT TO EVALUATE ELECTION PROCESS

- Conservation districts conduct elections to fill volunteer positions on their boards outside the general elections process.
- As with any process, changes may be needed over time. The SCC reviews procedures after each election cycle to assess opportunities for improvement.

In December 2019, members of the Conservation Commission made the following commitment regarding conservation district elections:

“The Commission acknowledges the importance of the questions related to conservation district election processes. The Commission is concerned with the current legislative proposals and recommends more discussion with our constituents to avoid unintended consequences. The Commission commits to engage in evaluating potential improvements to the election process.”



Why are some conservation district supervisors elected, and others are appointed?

- ▶ Conservation districts are intended to be governed by community members and landowners who have expertise in conservation and agriculture.
- ▶ Three supervisors are elected by and accountable to their community.
- ▶ Two are appointed based on their skills and expertise by an interview and vote of the Conservation Commission.

CURRENT CONSERVATION DISTRICT ELECTION PROCESS

All conservation district elections occur in the first quarter of the year. The general process conservation districts follow is:

Aug-Sept

- Review district election policy and procedures.
- Attend SCC Elections and Appointment webinar training.

Oct-Dec

- Set election format (e.g. voting by mail, in-person polling, online).
- Notify potential candidates and voters of upcoming election (media release, outreach to community organizations, social media, newsletter, etc.).

Jan-Mar

- Host election in accordance with Chapter 135-110 of the Washington Administrative Code (Election and Replacement of Conservation District Supervisors).

By end of April

- Count and verify votes.
- Send election data and unofficial results to the SCC for review and certification.

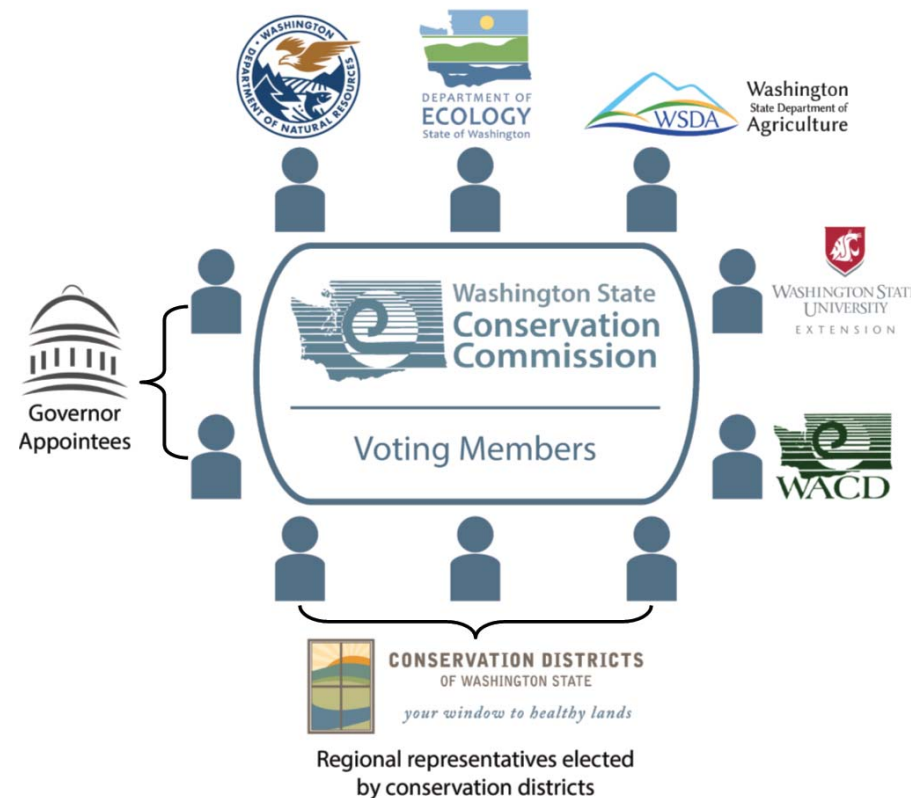


Why aren't conservation district elections on the general ballot?

- ▶ It's very expensive. Depending on the number of votes cast, it easily could cost over \$1M per year.
- ▶ Money spent on elections is taken from already inadequate budgets that conservation districts rely on to assist people with conserving our water, air, soil, and other natural resources.
- ▶ It's been tried before. Conservation district elections were on the general ballot in 2002. For many districts it took years to pay off the expense. Some never could.
- ▶ After 2002, lawmakers decided it was cost-prohibitive to put conservation district elections on the general ballot and changed it to the system we have today.

Elections monitoring and certification

- During a poll-site election, Conservation Commission members and staff may monitor conservation district elections without notice.
- The SCC canvasses election returns to verify results and determine if the election was conducted according to requirements.
- Conservation Commission members (depicted right) certify by vote all conservation district elections found to be in compliance.



STATE-LEVEL OVERSIGHT OF CONSERVATION DISTRICT OPERATIONS

In addition to local oversight provided by each conservation district board, oversight of district operations also occurs at the state-level.

Tracking accountability and performance

- The Conservation Commission employs the **Conservation Accountability and Performance Program (CAPP)**, a list of 15 statutory laws and requirements that all conservation districts must meet.
- Full compliance with CAPP standards is the threshold to receive state funds from the SCC.
- Funds are withheld from any district that fails to achieve 100 percent on a CAPP evaluation.
- CAPP was a key reason **the SCC received the State Auditor's Stewardship Award in 2019**.
The award also recognized the SCC's coordination with the State Auditor's Office and conservation districts with completing audits and following through with recommendations.

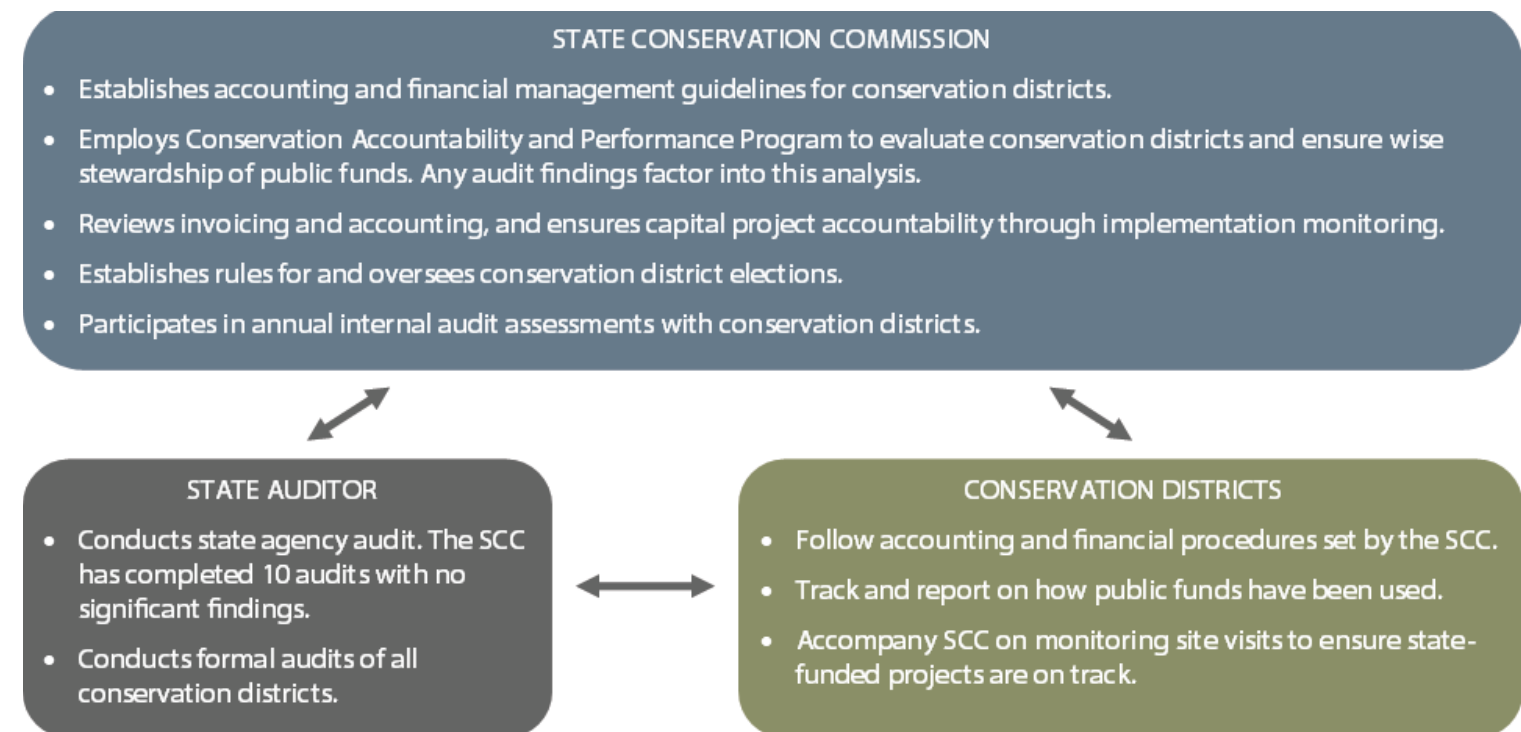
STANDARD 1

Compliance with Laws (required standard)

Conservation Districts fulfill their legal requirements as Political Subdivisions of the State of Washington and comply with all laws and the Washington Administrative Code.

Compliance with Laws and Requirements	Citation (link to RCW or WAC)	Yes	No
1. Annual report of accomplishments was submitted on time, in the prescribed format to the WSCC	RCW 89.08.070 (11)		
2. District Long Range Plan submitted on time & meeting RCW and Commission requirements	RCW 89.08.220 (7)		
3. District Annual Work Plan submitted on time & meeting RCW and Commission requirements	RCW 89.08.220 (7)		
4. The District has made a demonstrated effort to address their top resource needs identified in their Long Range Plan	RCW 89.08.220 (7)		
5. Upon request, District contracts and agreements have been submitted to the Commission	RCW 89.08.210		
6. Supervisor Elections & Appointments are conducted according to RCW and WAC requirements	RCW 89.08.190 & 89.08.200 WAC 135-110		
7. All State Auditor identified issues (during SAO audits) have been resolved to the extent possible	RCW 89.08.070 (12)		
8. Open Public Meetings Act is followed including executive sessions	RCW 42.30		
9. State Public Records Act is followed	RCW 42.56		
10. All Board Supervisors and Public Records Officers are current on the required Open Public Meetings and Public Records Act Training	RCW 42.30.210 & RCW 42.56.150		
11. Annual reporting to State Auditor's Office completed correctly and on time	RCW 89.08.210		
12. Keeping public informed of conservation district activities.	RCW 89.08.220 (13)		
13. State Ethics laws for public officials are being followed	RCW 42.20 & 42.23		
14. District in compliance with terms of Commission/District Master Agreement	RCW 89.08.070 (5)		
15. Demonstrated diligence in complying with state and federal statutes related to contracting, non-discrimination, labor laws, etc., through adoption of up-to-date policies and training.			

SCC and conservation district coordination with the State Auditor's Office



EXPLORING IMPROVEMENTS TO CONSERVATION DISTRICT ELECTIONS

- The SCC is committed to finding a cost-effective way to increase local participation in conservation projects and in electing conservation district leaders.
- The SCC and districts are looking for opportunities to improve election transparency, inclusivity, and efficiency.
- The SCC is following a thoughtful process that's informed by broad stakeholder feedback. This approach helps ensure that any changes made will 1) increase election participation and engagement with voluntary conservation services, and 2) work for all 45 conservation districts and the diversity of communities that they serve.



What has the SCC recently done to examine and potentially improve conservation district elections?

- ▶ Sept 2018: Commission members authorized agency staff to begin rulemaking process for making changes to the administrative code for conservation district elections.
- ▶ Jan July 2019: The SCC formed a Conservation District Election and Appointment Committee (CDEAC) that met five times to review and propose updates to election procedures.
- ▶ Sept 2019: Commission members reviewed and moved to send proposed CDEAC election changes out for comment.
- ▶ Nov 2019: SCC staff surveyed all conservation districts to gather input on potential significant changes to elections.
- ▶ Dec 2019: Commission members reviewed comments on CDEAC proposed procedure changes and survey input. Commissioners committed to continuing this process of evaluating improvements to the elections.

Considerations moving forward

- Cost is an issue — putting every conservation district election on the general ballot or mailing a ballot to every registered voter could cost over \$1 million per year. That would be taken from the limited funding that districts and landowners rely on to improve our natural resources.
- Conservation district elections must be inclusive. All eligible voters within the district boundary have the right to know about and participate in elections.
- Boards should be representative of the diverse people, cultures, and land uses within the district. People from all communities, including those that are traditionally underserved, deserve equal opportunity to run for election or apply to serve on their conservation district.
- Conservation district elections are non-partisan, and it's important to keep it that way. This allows them to unite people around our shared interest in healthy natural resources.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Contact

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Washington State
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CONSERVATION DISTRICTS
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