

**Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts
Position Paper on Support for VASWCD and District Education Programs**

ISSUE: The provision of appropriate levels of funding to support environmental education programs of Virginia's Soil and Water Conservation Districts and the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

IMPORTANCE: The quality of the environment depends upon the attitudes and practices of the citizens of tomorrow, as well as the citizens of today. In Virginia, local SWCDs, as well as the VASWCD, are primary agencies for providing knowledge and information about the environment and the importance of conservation. Partnerships with school systems, the business community, and state agencies allow the statewide infrastructure of SWCDs to facilitate providing quality conservation information to the interested public. There is no dedicated source of funding for environmental education programs, public or private, in the state of Virginia.

The source of grant funding (319 Grant Program) that once supported Envirothon and Youth Conservation Camp is no longer available due to changes in grant criteria focusing on impaired waters. The VASWCD is constantly looking for replacement funds to administer these programs.

STATEWIDE PROGRAMS:

- **Envirothon** – The Virginia Envirothon Academic Competition has existed since 1995. Since then, Envirothon has been awarded the 2001 Environmental Stewardship Award from the Virginia Petroleum Council & the Commonwealth of Virginia and has placed in the top 15 at the National Envirothon for the past eight years. Envirothon is a natural resources competition for high school students. Teams of five students compete in the areas of: soils, forestry, aquatics, wildlife, an environmental issue, and an environmental issue oral presentation. Students are tested on the topics above and their ability to apply that knowledge to solve real-life environmental problems. The 2003 Environmental Issue is “The Conservation and Preservation of Agricultural Lands.”

Goals

- 1) To promote a desire to learn more about the natural environment and develop knowledge and skills to apply the basic principles and practices of resource management and ecology.
- 2) To promote stewardship of natural resources and develop critical thinking skills, cooperative problem-solving skills, and decision making skills of students to balance the quality of life and the quality of the environment.
- 3) To provide students with experience in environmentally oriented activities that enables them to become environmentally aware, action oriented citizens.

By incorporating the Envirothon curriculum into classrooms, Conservation Districts in Virginia and across the nation are taking a notable lead in responding to the public school system's need for a strong, hands-on approach to environmental education. In 2002, over

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five hundred students in the Commonwealth of Virginia participated in this year long event. Envirothon teams spend the academic year working with a coach and advisors to improve their knowledge and skills in the aforementioned subjects. Numerous Ecology Clubs, 4H Clubs and FFA Clubs have resulted from the Envirothon Program. Six Area/Regional Competitions were held to determine the eighteen teams that advanced to the State Competition, held at the State Arboretum of Virginia. In May the Harrisonburg High School Team won the State Envirothon and represented the Commonwealth of Virginia at the National Envirothon held at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. The team placed 9th overall out of forty-nine teams.

- **Youth Conservation Camp (YCC)** – For over 25 years, the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts has sponsored week long summer conservation camps for high school students (grades 9-12) on the campus of Virginia Tech. The program brings together about 90 interested students for a week of learning about Virginia's natural resources from conservation professionals and faculty from Virginia Tech. Most of the instruction is hands-on and outdoors. The purpose of the camp is to broaden students' knowledge of conservation and prepare them as future decision makers in resource management. Camp participants are selected based on their interest, teacher recommendations and/or essay applications and come from rural and urban backgrounds. Many students pursue education and career goals in the areas covered in the camp curriculum, including: forestry, agriculture, water quality, E&S, stormwater management, wildlife, conservation and land use planning, using new conservation technology, soils and groundwater issues. Scholarships are provided by the 47 Soil and Water Conservation Districts in Virginia. In 2003, Youth Conservation Camp will be held July 6-12.

DISTRICT PROGRAMS:

- **Natural Resources Conservation Week (fall) - Soil and Water Stewardship Week (spring)** - VASWCD disseminates information and activity packets to all districts during these celebrations.
- **Environmental Education field days for school children**– Districts sponsor field days to expose school children to conservation themes and ideas. The Staunton River Field School (implemented by the Halifax SWCD) is a great example of this activity oriented toward middle school students.
- **Teacher Field Trips and Trainings** – Districts sponsor multiple events during the year that involves outreach to teachers. Natural Bridge SWCD sends up to ten teachers on a weeklong “Blue Ridge to the Bay” trip in cooperation with and under the guidance of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. Teacher training is correlated to Virginia’s Standards of Learning and qualifies for the continuing education recertification credits.
- **Poster Contests** – Poster contests with a conservation theme connect SWCDs to elementary schools.
- **Water Quality Monitoring Projects** – Many SWCDs initiate watershed monitoring programs as a way to generate information to be used in local or state decision-making. However, they have found it to be an excellent method to demonstrate the sources and effects of non-point source pollution to the public.

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- **Exhibits and newsletters** – Many SWCDs have displays and exhibits at their local festivals and events to educate the public about the district practices and programs. Newsletters are another way to promote the value of conservation within our communities.
- **Ag Field Days and Farm Tours** – Tours of farms and developments that implement Best Management Practices is an often-used technique to educate the public about methods of reducing pollution.

There are other state agencies that have environmental education programs. Each summer the Virginia Department of Forestry offers Forestry Camp to over 100 students. The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries provides several outdoor education programs. Natural Resource Conservation Service partners in each activity. Districts use partnerships as an attempt to make programs work cooperatively and efficiently.

Policy

- We need to make Districts and the VASWCD leaders in the big picture plan for providing environmental education on all levels in the Commonwealth. The Association has approved the concept of developing a program that would be administered through the Educational Foundation of VASWCD. The program would solicit private contributions to support not only the Envirothon but other district-based initiatives as well. A program such as this would give a potential supporter the option of flexibility by allowing a choice of where and how to contribute.
- The legislature could offer assistance in creating incentives above the tax write off currently existing for businesses, private foundations, and philanthropists that contribute to this fund. A program of public recognition is only one of the incentives that could be created.
- Impress upon the legislators the leadership role that districts are already playing with environmental education and how much more work is necessary.

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