



5-Year Plan (2021 to 2025)

Walla Walla County Conservation District

For More Information Contact:

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Organization of the Walla Walla County Conservation District

A political subdivision of the State of Washington – authorities, powers and structure contained in RCW 89.08.

The Walla Walla County Conservation District (**WWCCD or District**) is a consolidation of two previously organized conservation districts – the Walla Walla and South Walla Walla conservation districts. Consolidation was on December 18, 1961 with the earliest organization dates back to April 22, 1941 for the Walla Walla Soil Conservation District. The WWCCD consists of 762,151 acres of privately owned land and approximately 45,000 acres of publicly managed lands totaling 807,315 acres. These lands drain into the Walla Walla, Snake, and Columbia Rivers, all of which host populations of listed bull trout and steelhead. The population of 60,000 people lives mostly in the cities and towns of Walla Walla, College Place, Waitsburg, Prescott, Touchet, and Burbank. The District includes unincorporated lands within the Walla Walla County boundaries. The majority of the acreage of Walla Walla County is agricultural with approximately 595,000 acres of total cropland including over 101,000 acres under irrigation (USDA NASS, 2017). Native forest and rangelands make up the balance of the District. Tourism has been on the increase with the growth of the Walla Walla Valley wine industry with well over 100 wineries.

Function of the Walla Walla County Conservation District

To make available technical, financial and educational resources, whatever their source, and focus or coordinate them to meet the needs of the local land manager with the conservation of soil, water and related natural resources.

Mission of the Walla Walla County Conservation District

WWCCD is dedicated to the conservation and restoration of the natural resources of Walla Walla County, facilitated by working on a voluntary basis with landowners to identify opportunities and create solutions, while consistently providing education, information, and assistance whenever possible.

Vision of the Walla Walla County Conservation District

The WWCCD believes that many complex environmental problems can be solved through voluntary cooperation rather than by regulatory mandates. We do this by creating and then implementing proactive programs that respect both the needs of the landowners and the natural resources of the County.

Values of the Walla Walla County Conservation District – We believe . . .

- In the retention and viability of prime agricultural land for agricultural purposes.
- In promoting good management practices and adequate conservation measures for the sustainable use of land and water resources.
- In planning and implementation of point and non-point pollution abatement measures.
- In assistance to land users for voluntary compliance with local, State and Federal mandates for natural resource treatment.
- In promotion of teaching stewardship of the environment as an integral part of school curricula K through 12.
- The fundamental nature of resource problems demand effective coordination of resource programs, more realistic financing, and positive leadership.
- In the retention and preservation of natural scenic areas, historical and archeological sites.
- There is a need for more, not less, attention to soil and water conservation, forestry, energy, public land management, sediment control, and related resource efforts upon which the future health and well-being of our District depends.
- In public involvement in all resource conservation activities affecting Walla Walla County.
- In the necessity of public education and awareness of all natural resource issues.

Natural Resource Data and Information

- Water resources in the basin are under critical stress due to reduced snow pack, increased demand on the aquifer, overallocation of water rights, and other competing needs.
- Water quality continues to be a pressing issue with major Walla Walla County streams on the Washington Department of Ecology (WA-ECY) 303d list of impaired water bodies. Many riparian areas are still in need of restoration.
- Mid-Columbia Steelhead and bull trout are present in basin waterways and listed as endangered species in need of continued protection.

- Erosion continues to be a major concern for long-term agriculture sustainability.
- The urban/suburban landowners not involved in agriculture still impact the natural resources of the region, especially along area waterways that are also critical habitat for endangered species.
- Wetland habitat critical for the survival of many species is rapidly disappearing from the Walla Walla County landscape due to urban expansion
- Air quality is increasingly a focus for regulatory agencies. Walla Walla has over 45,000 acres of agriculture land with low precipitation and a high hazard with wind erosion.

Priorities, Measures of Success and Goals:

Water Quantity: In late 2007, the Water Resources Inventory Area (WRIA) 32 Walla Walla River Basin Instream Flows Rule was officially adopted. This rule set minimum levels of stream flow to preserve wildlife, fish, environmental and navigational values. Since then climate change, drought, and development have continued to affect this critical resource. Piping projects to improve irrigation efficiency and reduce diversion have made substantial improvements in water flows. However, the area has a long history of reaching critically low flows during the late summer months. *Measurements of success* will include sufficient water left instream to meet fish habitat requirements while maintaining flows for irrigated agriculture.

Goals:

- Seek funding to assist irrigators to install irrigation efficiency projects.
- Seek funding to complete the Gardena Farms Irrigation District #13 Main (Upper) Canal Piping.
- Where needed and feasible, incorporate aquifer recharge into piping designs.
- Participate in the DOE Walla Walla Water 2050 Initiative
- Support and participate in Local Water Plan development

Strategies: Work with irrigation districts and other irrigation groups to identify inefficient irrigation water delivery systems and to improve on farm application efficiencies. Further, as funding allows, work with water users to design and install meters for irrigation withdrawals as required by law. Actively participate in local forums promoting improved stream flows and seek input from stakeholders as to the direction WWCCD should take in regards to other water saving projects.

Water Quality: Major Walla Walla County streams are on the Washington Department of Ecology (WA-ECY) 303d list of impaired water bodies. The District and partners such as NRCS have made strides in reducing nutrient transfer through 3/4 adopting of low-disturbance tillage techniques including direct seeding (no-till) and precision agriculture techniques. *Success will be measured* by the removal of streams from the 303d list.

Goals:

- Seek funding to assist in continued adoption of precision agriculture and other innovative sustainable farming techniques.
- Support activities that promote adoption of Best Management Practices (BMPs) on design, construction and management of road rights-of-way and field roads
- Outreach to livestock producers to assist in the installation of runoff control measures.
- Continued emphasis on buffer installations.
- Seek funding to implement monitoring of levels of transport of sediment, fecal coliform, dissolved oxygen and increased pH.
- Emphasize wetland restoration projects identified through the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) and other critical areas such as geologic hazards, frequently flooded areas, aquifer recharge areas, and essential wildlife habitat.

Strategies: Actively participate in local forums including the Snake River Salmon Recovery Board (SR-SRB) and other county initiatives that promote addressing TMDL. Work with landowners to install buffers and to implement upland conservation practices to reduce sedimentation.

Water Quality--Riparian Restoration: Miles of area waterways lack functioning riparian buffers. A functional riparian buffer provides a myriad of [water quality benefits](#), from shading the river to retaining sediment in the field where it belongs and out of rivers. Buffer restoration projects were initiated in 1998 and now account for over 3,400 acres of forested riparian buffers installed through the Conservation Riparian Enhancement Program, or CREP. Challenges include failing river banks that cannot be planted and farm bill payment rules that keep some eligible acres out of the CREP program. The *measurement of success* in Walla Walla County will be to establish riparian buffers on 85% of the [eligible](#) streambanks in Walla Walla County.

Goals:

- Seek funding to install habitat restoration projects to moderate rapid river bank movement to an acceptable level to promote the reestablishment of functional riparian buffers.
- Promote the program and assist landowners expressing an interest in restoring riparian areas and provide funding when possible
- Monitor existing CREP buffers to ensure long-term success of the plantings

- Seek funding for additional funding sources for acres not eligible for CREP
- Evaluate the effectiveness of riparian buffers through water quality monitoring
- Include riparian area management, buffer needs, and stream restoration in District outreach meetings including the Annual Meeting and farmer hosted winter mini-sessions.

Strategies: Coordinate with WDFW, SR-SRB, WA-ECY and other entities and land users to identify and develop design solutions including new and innovative techniques. Continue to work closely with core partners NRCS and Farm Services Agency (FSA) to promote a strong buffer program in the District.

Fisheries: All the major perennial streams in Walla Walla County are home to Endangered Species Act (ESA) listed Mid-Columbia Steelhead. ESA protected bull trout also are found in the upper reaches of Mill Creek and the Touchet and Walla Walla Rivers. Previous actions (e.g., armoring river banks) to control high-water flows have inadvertently resulted in habitat loss. Culverts and other structures have resulted in fish passage barriers. Unscreened or inadequately screened irrigation diversions have impacted fish populations. The district has been working with landowners to help recover these protected species by [restoring habitat](#) and helping irrigators find [fish screen solutions](#). While local actions may not be sufficient to fully recover protected fish, *success will be demonstrated* by a robust and stable population in the aforementioned rivers.

Goals:

- Seek funding to install habitat restoration projects to improve in-river habitat by developing cool water refuge pools, installing complex woody structures, and demonstrating new and innovative solutions to restore habitat.
- Seek funding to assist irrigators install screens that meet all NOAA fish screen criteria
- Work with area partners and landowners to identify fish passage barriers; seek funding to remove barriers while meeting landowner needs
- Seek funding for comprehensive design of river reaches instead of piecemeal approaches.

Strategies: Promote project support through active participation with the SR-SRB, Regional Technical Team (RTT), and Lead Entity Committee. Promote the concept of working with the river in all restoration work, including long-range comprehensive planning efforts that evaluate river reaches and develop designs that complement and enhance previous work and provide a foundation for continued efforts. Promote project support through active participation with the SR-SRB, Regional Technical Team (RTT), and Lead Entity Committee.

Soil Erosion & Quality: Of the approximately 600,000 acres of cropland in Walla Walla County, over 80% is classified as Highly Erodible Land (HEL). While approximately 25% are enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the remaining acres continue to be at risk for significant erosion due to soil type, hill slope, wind and water, factors not under the control of the agriculture producer. However, adoption of low-disturbance (generally no-till) tillage and other practices have greatly reduced erosion as compared to conventional farming. Cover crops are an emerging practice to help prevent erosion while improving soil structure, capture and retain soil moisture, and increase residue level.

Goals:

- Seek funding to complement NRCS programs such as EQIP to encourage adoption of innovative practices such as cover crops.
- Assist NRCS as needed to ensure continued success of CRP and other programs that assist producers in establishing permanent vegetative cover on highly erodible acres
- Promote the use of Grassed Waterways to create permanent cover on concentrated flow areas as an eligible practice under the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

Strategies: Include education and information on direct seed and other soil-protecting Best Management Practices in WWCCD mini-sessions, workshops, and at the annual meeting. Monitor vegetative cover using aerial imagery to demonstrate the continued work of area producers to protect erodible land.

Range and Pasture: Native grassland used for the production of forage is located mainly on the sandy river terraces along the lower parts of the Snake and Walla Walla Rivers, in the foothills of the Blue Mountains, and scattered within the dry cropland area. It is estimated there are 180,000 acres of rangeland in the District. Much of the native rangeland suffers from the invasion of Rush skeletonweed and yellow starthistle and maintaining plant productivity of this generally marginal land is a significant concern. The foothills of the Blue Mountains are especially vulnerable to wildfires. With a few exceptions, local ranchers have been slow to respond to district outreach, so the primary *measure of success* will be establishing a working relationship with these producers.

Goals:

- Build a working relationship with area ranchers by facilitating the work of WSU extension
- Ensure area ranchers are aware of funding opportunities through Firewise and other programs intended to help mitigate the danger of fire.

Strategies: Use outreach tools to inform area ranchers of NRCS programs and other funding sources to assist them in maintaining rangeland health. Seek to add area ranchers to the newsletter list. When needed, assist local ranchers in responding to Dept. of Ecology mandates regarding water quality impacts from livestock ranching.

Suburban and Urban: It is estimated that there are approximately 12,500 acres in Walla Walla County devoted to commercial activity and residential development. Owners of homes build on or near flood prone areas are turning to the district for guidance and assistance. These land users can have a significant impact on natural resources and the viability of agriculture. The district is working to inform urban dwellers of the benefits and hazards of the critical areas near their homes.

Goals:

- Build our outreach efforts to assist urban landowners mitigate impacts to natural resources
- Meet with County Commissioners and city councils to discuss options to promote implementation of practices that promote resource protection (VSP).
- Seek funding to promote programs like CURB
- Review and provide input into proposed critical area or growth boundary changes through various planning (Walla Walla County Hazard Mitigation Plan, Wildfire Protection Plan, Comprehensive Plan, SEPA reviews, Walla Walla Watershed 2050 and other planning processes)

Strategies: Work with the County and cities to reduce the impact suburban and urban development has on natural resources. Promote and maintain the viability of prime agricultural land for agricultural purposes. Offer direct assistance to landowners in flood mitigation practices.

Wetland Resources: Wetlands are an important part of aquifer recharge and provide critical habitat for many species of birds and amphibians. The major wetlands of the county are located in the Wallula area and not actively farmed. The known smaller wetlands total less than a few acres each and are impacted by urban expansion and improvements to transportation infrastructure. The measure of success for the district is to have no net loss of wetlands in our county.

Goals:

- Encourage landowner participation in the new CREP practice for wetlands
- Seek funding to assist land managers in protecting and restoring wetland acres

Strategies: Coordinate with other agencies on existing monitoring. Measure wetlands using contracted acres in the NRCS Wetland Reserve Program and aerial imagery. Continue progress on the VSP program to monitor and promote wetland restoration efforts.

Air Quality: In Western Walla Walla County, there are approximately 45,000 acres in major soil associations with low annual precipitation at a high hazard for wind erosion. At times, the area has exceeded air quality standards for particulate matter (10pm). Wind damage can include blowouts, abrasion damage to crops, and deposition damage, so maintaining soil cover is essential. Agriculture field burning used to remove high crop residue loads and for weed and disease control is carefully monitored by the Dept. of Ecology to avoid air quality impacts. The district continues to explore alternatives to field burning and the use of cover crops to mitigate wind erosion.

Goals:

- Promote the use of Continuous CRP and other conservation cover practices to maintain fragile lands in protective cover
 - Assist landowners in adopting cover crops
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Forest Health Challenge and Goals:

There are about 21,000 acres of private commercial forest in the District. There is an additional 1,000 acres deemed to be of non-commercial value. Less than 10 percent of the District is forested. There are obvious opportunities to increase production of wood products through early stand thinning, pre-commercial thinning, and properly timed harvest. However, due to the nature of forest soils in the District, protection of the base resource, the soil, is paramount. Cutover areas, skid trails, logging roads, and landings must be properly planned and treated to prevent accelerated erosion and sediment damage to nearby streams that are home to ESA listed fish species.

Strategies: Continue to promote forestry emphasis in EQIP through participation in the Snake River-Local Working Group and local forums.

Actions:

1. Promote remedial action to correct culvert issues that impact fish passage associated with forest roads through participation with NRCS Snake River-Local Working Group.
2. Promote fire prevention and recovery awareness.

Information – Education

The Walla Walla County Conservation District recognizes the importance of educating policy-makers, students, and land managers in achieving the mission of the district by continue an effective outreach program including annually newsletter issues, one CD annual meeting, a series of farmer-hosted mini-sessions, community events, K-12 and college students, workshops featuring CURB and/or small landowner pasture management, and project tours for agency contacts/legislators/policy makers.

Goals:

- Help K-12, community members, partners, and legislators understand the importance and benefits of our watershed and the use of best management practices (BMPs).

Strategies:

1. Host and/or participate in a series of informational mini-sessions, tours, community events and annual meeting and highlighting BMP examples.
2. Maintain a website, publish a series of newsletters, and develop factsheets to promote education of our watershed and BMPs.

Critical Geographic Areas

- Intermediate Precipitation Zone (14 to 18 inches annually) – highest potential water erosion hazard.
- High Precipitation Zone (greater than 18 inches annually) – intermediate potential water erosion hazard.
- Low Precipitation Zone (less than 14 inches annually) – lowest potential water erosion hazard.
- Wind Erosion Prone Zone (less than 12 inches annually) – highest hazard wind erosion.
- Streams on the WA-ECY 303d list of impaired water bodies.
- Streams with ESA listed species utilization for passage, rearing and/or spawning.
- State and local and private road rights-of-way with sediment impacts on streams.
- Bridges and culverts on federal, state and private lands that impede upstream passage of salmonids.
- Walla Walla County 18.08 designated Critical Areas including the following: Fish & Wildlife Habitat areas, Wetlands, Frequently Flooded Areas, Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas (shallow gravel aquifer), and Geologically Hazardous areas (steep slopes, erosion prone, and seismic).

District Operations

The Walla Walla County Conservation District and employees solicit for grants to assist land managers. Employees require technical training needed for them to carry out the responsibilities of their positions. Each employee must have a working knowledge of each program offered in order to direct clients to the correct program contact.

Goals:

- Help farmers and ranchers make informed land and water management decisions by offering a variety of technical assistance and solicit grant to help with financial assistance.
- Maintain positive fiscal practices, RCW reporting, supervisor training and elections.
- Continue training and evaluating performance of employees to improve our level of technical assistance.

Strategies:

1. Ascertain employee training needs and provide for the opportunity for training; provide timely supervision as needed and conduct individual annual performance appraisals.
2. Administer grants in accordance with approved guidelines. Carry out supervisor elections & appointments according to policy guidelines. Update the annual work plan and long range plans according to the needs of the community and partners.

Trends Impacting Conservation in the Walla Walla County Conservation District

Positive Trends

- Most land users continue to be proactive in solving conservation problems.
- There is protection of riparian zones along streams.
- Farm Bill provisions support conservation programs.
- The number of acres benefitting from conservation programs has increased.

Negative Trends

- Current resource concerns are complex and often require either extensive engineering or community collaboration.
- Increased presence of and chemical resistance of weeds throughout the county.
- There is greater dependence on federal and state agency funding.

- There are agricultural lands being developed with little regard to impacts on natural resources.
- The costs of agricultural production are increasing – especially fuel, fertilizer and agro-chemicals.

Strategies to Address Trends

- Urban/suburban impacts due to encroachment – develop programs to help rural land owners keep land in production e.g. through the promotion of conservation easements.
- Assist with the update of the County Critical Area Ordinance to protect streams and wetlands from the impacts of development.
- Continue to promote the good work of the conservation partnership with state and federal agency representatives, legislators, and policy makers through individual and group communication, project tours, and participation in workshops.
- Continue to participate in local forums that work towards addressing local natural resource issues.

Staffing Needs

The WWCCD has five full-time and three part-time/on-call staff members to implement the 5-year strategic plan of the District. Staffing is based on grant funds available. Staffing needs include:

- *Administration*: District Manager, grant manager/bookkeeper
- *Walla Walla County programs (VSP & Ag Burn Permits)*: coordinator
- *Stream Restoration*: engineer, conservation technician (2-3)
- *Riparian Buffers*: conservation scientist, conservation technician
- *Irrigation Implementation*: conservation technician

Annual Budget Needs

<i>Program</i>	<i>Full-Time Employee</i>	<i>Estimated funding</i>
Riparian Buffers	1.5	\$120,000
Walla Walla County programs	1	\$76,000
Stream Restoration	2.5	\$166,000
Irrigation	.25	\$20,000
District Operations	1.25	\$95,000
<i>subtotal</i>	<i>6.5 FTE</i>	<i>\$477,000</i>
Overhead	-	\$80,000
<i>Total</i>		<i>\$557,000</i>

Key Decision Makers

- Blue Mountain Land Trust
- Bonneville Power Administration
- Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation
- Kooskooski Commons
- National Marine Fisheries Service
- Snake River Salmon Recovery Board
- Tri-State Steelheaders
- USDA – Natural Resources Conservation Service
- USDA – Farm Services Agency
- Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council
- Walla Walla Community College
- Walla Walla County Commissioners
- Walla Walla Watershed Management Partnership
- Washington Department of Agriculture
- Washington Department of Ecology
- Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife
- Washington Recreation & Conservation Office
- Washington State Conservation Commission
- WSU Cooperative Extension

This working draft has been reviewed and approved to serve as the basis for WWCCD operations. It is understood that this 5-year strategic plan is a work in progress and subject to revision and modification as the District continues to carry out efforts to update the WWCCD Long Range Plan.

Signed: _____



Date: _____

02/01/2021

Benchmark	Timeline	12 Month Actions
Improve flow levels in surface waterways and shallow aquifers	Ongoing	Aid in the Walla Walla Watershed 2050 process, continue to seek funding for large irrigation efficiency and aquifer recharge projects. Enhance wetlands
Maintain and expand riparian buffers	Ongoing	Assess ~15 contracts for CREP re-enrollment, conduct 15 mid-management reviews on existing CREP contracts, assist landowners with 5 new contracts, seek opportunities to expand where CREP is not an option.
Improve water quality and fish habitat	Ongoing	Develop 5 stream restoration projects to assist fish habitat and flood resiliency.
Provide technical assistance regarding erosion, tillage alternatives, forestry management and agriculture burn BMPs	Ongoing	Provide 2 workshops, assist 10 land managers and 30 agriculture burn applicants.
Inform the public of resource concerns, watershed processes and BMPs	Ongoing	Provide annually newsletter issues, one CD annual meeting, a series of farmer-hosted mini-sessions, community events, K-12 and college students, workshops featuring CURB and/or small landowner pasture management, and project tours.
Maintain statutory compliance	Ongoing	Maintain positive fiscal practices, RCW reporting, supervisor training and elections