



THE WALLA WALLA COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT 5-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

**Created by WWCCD Staff
and the Board of
Supervisors**

November 2025

Organization of the Walla Walla County Conservation District

The Walla Walla County Conservation District (WWCCD) is a political subdivision of the State of Washington with authorities, powers, and structure outlined in RCW 89.08. It was formed by the consolidation of two previous conservation districts—Walla Walla and South Walla Walla—on December 18, 1961. The earliest origins of the organization date back to April 22, 1941, for the Walla Walla Soil Conservation District, and February 13, 1947, for the South Walla Walla Soil Conservation District. The WWCCD's service area covers the entire Walla Walla County, bounded on the north by the Snake River, on the west by the Columbia River, and on the south by the Washington-Oregon state line.

Five supervisors govern this District, three are elected, and the Washington State Conservation Commission appoints two.

Function of the Walla Walla County Conservation District

The WWCCD collaborates with local land managers and conservation-focused partners to coordinate technical, financial, and educational resources necessary to conserve soil, water, and related natural resources in Walla Walla County.

Who We Serve & Why

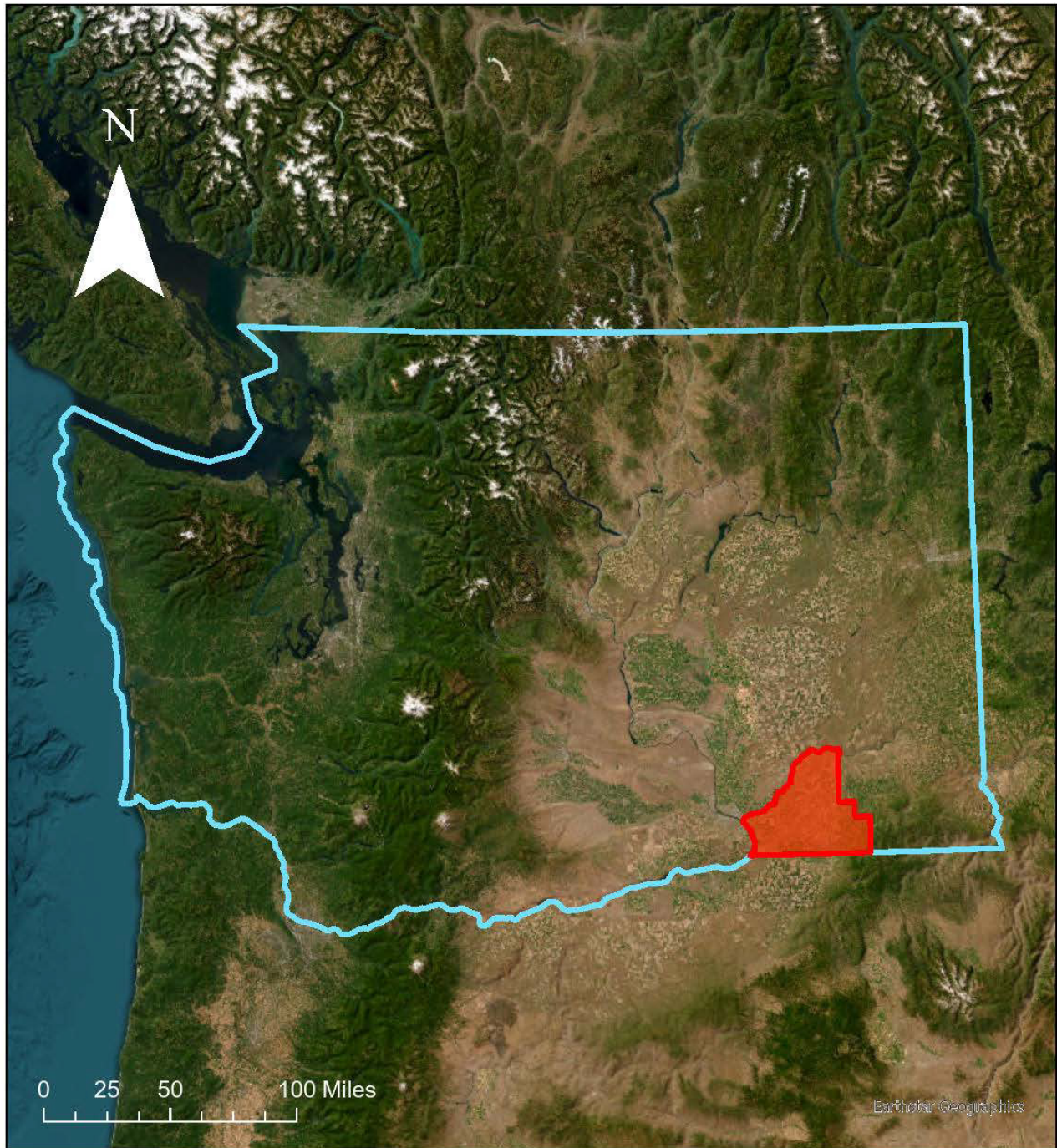
WWCCD supports community members and partners who voluntarily seek educational, technical, and/or financial assistance to implement conservation practices in the district. WWCCD staff live locally and value the area's natural resources. WWCCD aims to find cooperative solutions that benefit the greatest number of people.

Mission of the Walla Walla County Conservation District

The Walla Walla County Conservation District works to conserve and enhance the county's natural resources through voluntary participation and education.

Vision of the Walla Walla County Conservation District

The WWCCD believes that complex environmental problems can be solved through voluntary cooperation rather than by regulatory mandates. We will do this by offering proactive programs that respect both landowners' needs and the County's natural resources.



Walla Walla County in Washington State

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Figure 1. Walla Walla county within Washington State.

Values of the Walla Walla County Conservation District

We believe . . .

- Promoting best management practices for agriculture and habitat.
- In voluntary compliance with local, State, and Federal regulations for natural resource management.
- In the retention and preservation of natural scenic areas, historical and archeological sites.
- In teaching stewardship of the environment as a part of school curricula, K through 12 and beyond.

Purpose of the plan

RCW 89.08.220(7)(a & e): “To prepare and keep current a comprehensive long-range program recommending the conservation of all the renewable natural resources of the district.”

Natural Resources Data & Information

The Walla Walla County Conservation District (WWCCD) encompasses approximately 807,315 acres, with 762,150 acres in private ownership and 45,000 acres managed by public agencies. These varied landscapes drain into three major river systems — the Walla Walla, Snake, and Columbia Rivers — which support key populations of Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed bull trout and steelhead. The name Walla Walla, from the Nez Perce word meaning “running water,” highlights the area's strong hydrology, with over 400 miles of perennial and intermittent streams flowing through its valleys and uplands.

Historically, the Walla Walla Basin has been shaped by its natural features and the people who have lived there. The Nez Perce and other Indigenous tribes stewarded these lands and waterways for thousands of years, relying on rich fish runs, native grasslands, and seasonal wetlands. European settlement in the mid-1800s brought intensive agriculture, transforming much of the native prairie into farmland. Today, the District balances this deep agricultural history with modern conservation efforts to protect soil, water, and wildlife resources.

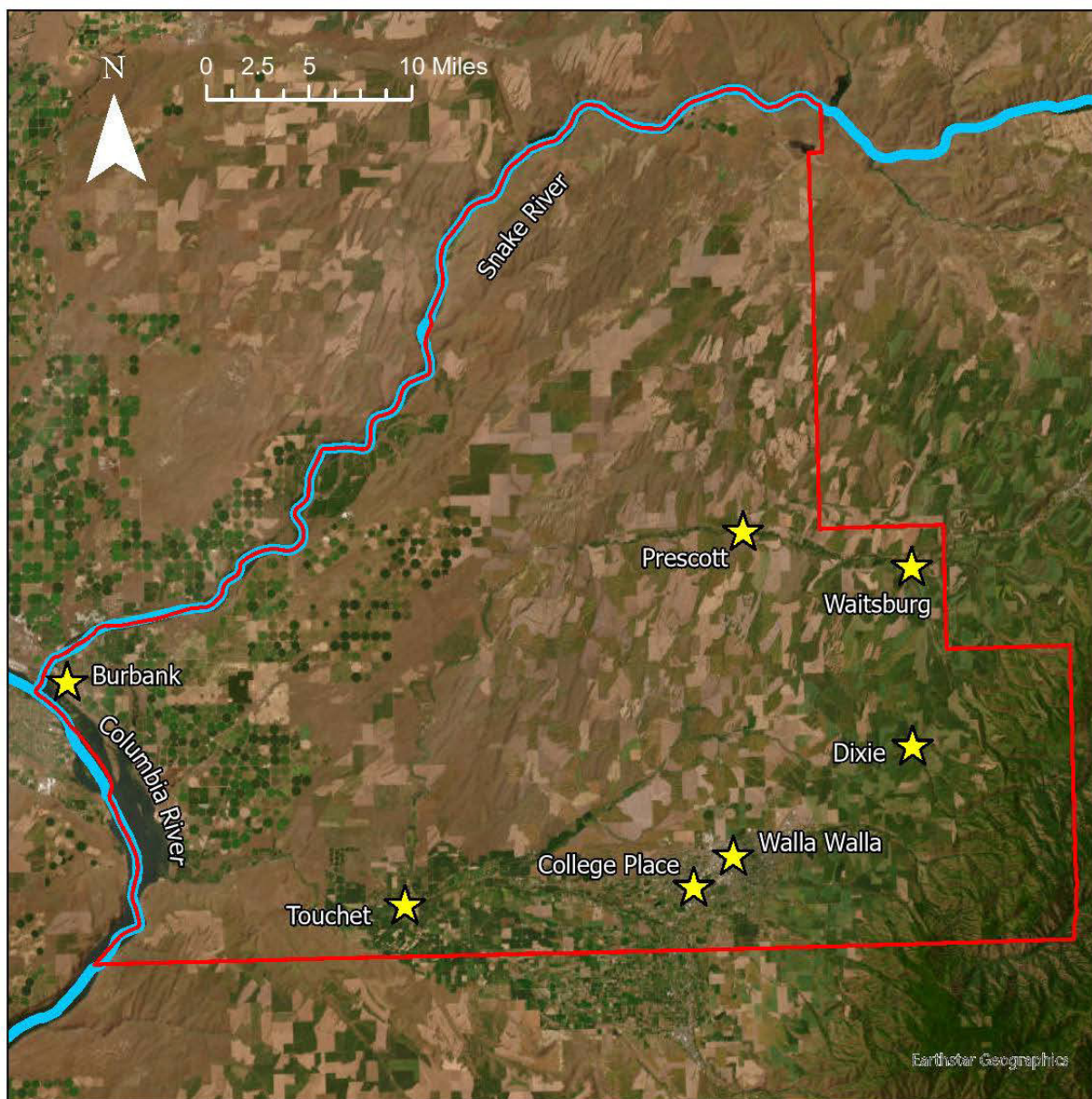
As of 2025, Walla Walla County accounts for nearly 25% of the state’s Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) acres, highlighting the commitment of local landowners, WWCCD staff, and partners. These efforts have restored miles of riparian habitat, improved water quality, and increased fish passage throughout the basin.

The county’s population of approximately 63,000 residents is spread across communities such as Walla Walla, College Place, Waitsburg, Prescott, Touchet, Burbank, and Dixie, as well as

surrounding rural areas. Agriculture remains the backbone of the local economy and land use, with 510,000 acres of dryland cropland and over 88,000 acres of irrigated land supporting various crops. The region is known for its dryland wheat production, the Walla Walla Sweet Onion, and a growing network of vineyards and wineries. Native alkali bees, essential pollinators for alfalfa seed and other crops, thrive in the area's dry conditions, underscoring the close connection between agriculture and native ecosystems.

Beyond its farmland, the District includes large areas of native forest and rangeland, providing vital wildlife habitat, watershed protection, and open space that shape the region's identity. From salmon streams to fertile valleys, the Walla Walla Basin continues to emphasize the connection between natural heritage, working lands, and community care.





Major Towns of Walla Walla County

The major towns within Walla Walla County and the two major waterways, the Columbia and Snake River, form our boundaries.

- ★ Cities
- ▭ Walla Walla County
- Major Rivers

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Figure 2: Major towns within Walla Walla County and surrounding water bodies.

Criteria for Selecting Conservation Priorities:

The District Board establishes priorities based upon input from staff, partner agencies, landowners, and others. The criteria used by the District Board to select the priorities identified in this document include some or all of the following:

- o **Grass-roots conservation concerns brought forth by constituents;**
- o **Natural resource data regarding local resource conditions;**
- o **Local partner agency priorities;**
- o **State defined resource priorities;**
- o **Federally defined resource priorities.**

Strategic Goals and Objectives of Natural Resources:

The Walla Walla County Conservation District's strategic priorities focus on conserving, protecting, and improving the region's diverse natural resources. These priorities guide the District's planning, project implementation, and community involvement efforts to promote sustainable land and water management in both rural and urban areas. By addressing key resource concerns—such as water quality, soil health, fisheries, forests, and air quality—the District collaborates with landowners, agencies, and local partners to foster resilient ecosystems and thriving agricultural communities. Education and outreach are also crucial parts of this strategy, connecting people to conservation through workshops, technical assistance, and urban-suburban engagement. Together, these focus areas demonstrate the District's commitment to long-term environmental stewardship and the health of the Walla Walla Basin.

- 1. Water Quality**
- 2. Water Quantity**
- 3. Soil**
- 4. Education**
 - a. Subgoal: Suburban/Urban**
- 5. Wetland**
- 6. Air**
- 7. Fisheries**
- 8. Upland Habitat and Range**
- 9. Forest Health**

Water Quality:

With over 400 stream miles flowing through the District and much of the valley floor underlain by a shallow gravel aquifer, agriculture and water interact continuously. Historically, this interaction resembled farming up to the banks of a waterway, where all vegetation shading the water was removed. It has also appeared as runoff into both surface and groundwater, from both agricultural and urban sources. Because of this, the major Walla Walla County waterways are listed on the Washington Department of Ecology's (ECY) 303(d) list of impaired waterways. These impairments include temperature, fecal coliform bacteria, sediment, dissolved oxygen, and pH.

Goal 1: Continue work on and adjacent to Walla Walla waterways that are identified on the ECY 303(d) list of impaired water bodies.

Objective 1: Seek funding to assist in the continued adoption of precision agriculture and other innovative, sustainable farming techniques.

Objective 2: Continue outreach to livestock producers to assist in the installation of runoff control measures.

Objective 3: Seek funding to implement monitoring of key water quality parameters.

Objective 4: Support activities that promote the adoption of BMPs on the design, construction, and management of both instream and upland practices that benefit water quality.

Goal 2: Continue the installation of riparian buffers along all waterways in the Walla Walla Basin while also strengthening the health of established buffers.

Objective 1: Provide technical assistance and funding through available programs to landowners for the implementation and maintenance of riparian buffers.

Objective 2: Seek funding to establish a plant propagation program.

Goal 3: Continue supporting land managers with water quality concerns.

Objective 1: Provide technical assistance and connect landowners to funding to address water quality concerns.

Water Quantity:

In 2007, the Water Resource Inventory Area (WRIA) 32 Walla Walla River Basin Instream Flows Rule was officially adopted. This rule set establishes minimum streamflow levels to preserve wildlife, fish, environmental, and navigational values. Since then, the Basin has battled with climate change, drought, and development, straining this already scarce resource. WWCCD has participated in the Walla Walla Water 2050 Strategic Plan, which has identified numerous projects focused on water quantity.

Goal 1: Continue working with irrigators across the county to manage and meter water usage.

Objective 1: Seek funds to assist irrigators in installing irrigation efficiency projects.

Objective 2: Where needed and feasible, incorporate aquifer recharge into piping designs.

Objective 3: Seek funding to complete the Gardena Farms Irrigation District #13 Upper Canal Piping.

Goal 2: Encourage residential water conservation.

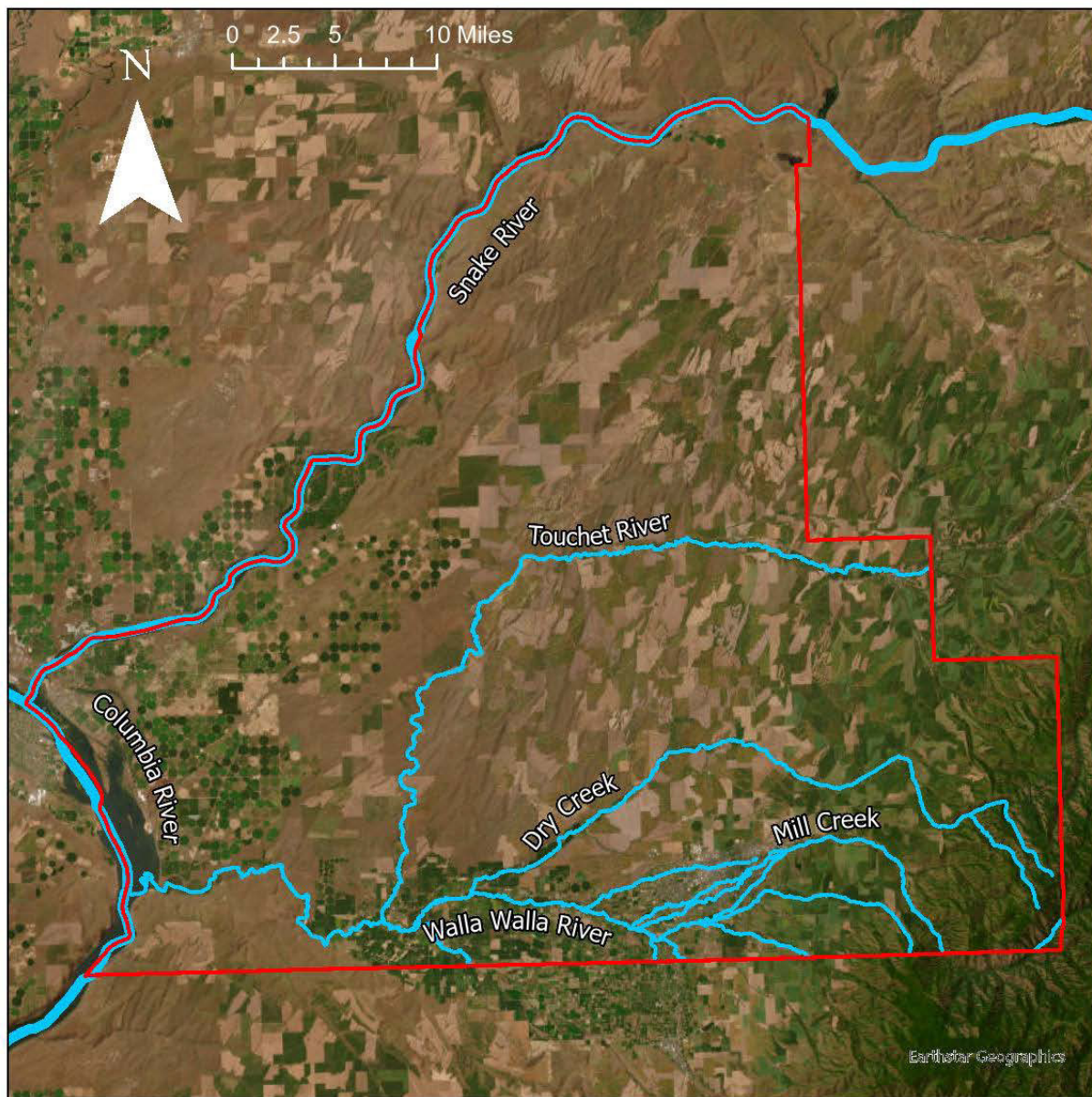
Objective 1: Work with partners, particularly municipalities, to encourage water conservation in the urban areas of the District.

Objective 2: Provide technical assistance to landowners implementing water-wise landscaping.

Goal 3: Continue participating in local water forums, including the Walla Walla Water 2050.

Objective 1: Work with local partners to identify projects within the District that bring water savings to boost instream flows, benefiting fish, people, and farms.





Waterways of Walla Walla County:

Natural Areas of Concern for Current and Future Projects

- ▭ Walla Walla County
- Streams

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Figure 3: Major rivers and streams where active and future projects will occur.

Soil:

There are approximately 600,000 acres of cropland in Walla Walla County, with over 80% classified as Highly Erodible Land (HEL), which is vulnerable to both wind and water erosion. Up to 25% of those acres are enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), but the remaining acres remain at risk of significant erosion due to soil type, hill slope, wind, and water. These risks can be mitigated through implementing best management practices such as conservation cover, residue and tillage management, and critical area plantings.

Goal 1: Encourage producers to implement Best Management Practices for general soil health.

Objective 1: Educate and hold workshops for land managers to learn about BMPs for reducing erosion, improving soil structure, and retaining soil moisture.

Objective 2: Pursue funding to assist producers in switching to a low till/no till system or other soil health practices.

Objective 3: Continue collaborations with partners and educators to promote soil health.

Goal 2: Continue efforts and collaborations to monitor soil health and landowner participation.

Objective 1: Periodic evaluations of vegetative cover to monitor changes over time.

Objective 2: Pursue funding and partnerships related to soil health monitoring and program participation.



Education:

WWCCD recognizes the importance of educating policy makers, students, community members, and land managers to achieve the District's mission by continuing effective outreach programs. This will include things like newsletters, workshops, and classroom learning opportunities.

Goal 1: Continue education and outreach directed towards land managers.

Objective 1: Hold an annual meeting focused on agricultural practices.

Objective 2: Hold farmer-focused workshops with partners around the district.

Goal 2: Continue providing outreach, education, and volunteer opportunities to community members.

Objective 1: Pursue funds to hold workshops focused on urban conservation practices.

Objective 2: Continue participation in partners' outreach/education events.

Objective 3: Pursue opportunities to utilize volunteers for hands-on learning during project implementation.

Goal 3: Pursue funds to continue K-12 and higher education.

Objective 1: Provide opportunities for hands-on learning of natural resource conservation.

Objective 2: Provide assistance to partner agencies implementing on-the-ground education.



Wetlands:

Wetlands provide key ecological functions for wildlife in Walla Walla County, including water storage, water quality improvement, and habitat for migratory birds. Challenges of monitoring wetlands in Walla Walla County are their size and scarcity. Though many wetlands in Walla Walla County are mapped in the National Wetlands Inventory (NWI), recent efforts by Walla Walla County Conservation District staff have shown that these maps are inaccurate. Many wetlands mapped in the county follow the contours of major waterways and are mapped in the middle of river channels, while others may be remnants of historical agricultural practices.

Goal 1: Assist partners in managing wetlands in the District.

Objective 1: Assess available wetland maps for accuracy.

Objective 2: Collaborate with land managers to identify and manage agricultural BMPs adjacent to wetlands.

Goal 2: Wetland protection and restoration.

Objective 1: Seek funding to support the protection and restoration of wetlands in the county.

Objective 2: Provide technical assistance to landowners with wetlands.



Air:

In the western portion of Walla Walla County, approximately 45,000 acres are at high risk for wind erosion. This is due to the low annual precipitation and sensitive soil types. At times, the area has exceeded air quality standards for particulate matter (10 pm). Wind damage can include dust storms and damage to crops. While maintaining soil cover is essential, high residue management is sometimes necessary. Agricultural field burning is used to remove high crop residue loads and to control pests and diseases. Agricultural burns are carefully monitored by the Department of Ecology to minimize impacts on air quality.

Goal 1: Continue to partner with Ecology to issue burn permits for Walla Walla County.

Objective 1: Educate land managers in BMPs associated with agricultural burning.

Goal 2: Encourage BMPs to reduce agricultural burns.

Objective 1: Education on residue management alternatives.

Objective 2: Continue to seek funding and collaborate with partners on cover crop feasibility.

Goal 3: Address air quality concerns associated with agricultural practices.

Objective 1: Promote innovative practices and equipment to reduce fossil fuel emissions.

Objective 2: Pursue funds to address air quality concerns.



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 are also present in the upper reaches of the Touchet and Walla Walla Rivers, as well as Mill Creek. Past efforts to control high-water flows have unintentionally caused habitat loss. Culverts and other structures can create fish passage barriers. Unscreened or poorly screened irrigation diversions have affected fish populations. Confined floodplains and poor water quality have also harmed fisheries in the District. Below are goals to improve fish habitats and remove barriers in the Walla Walla Basin.

Goal 1: Assist landowners and area partners in addressing fish passage concerns in Walla Walla County.

Objective 1: Continue assessing potential fish passage barriers identified on the Washington Fish and Wildlife barrier assessment list, prioritized by local partners.

Objective 2: Provide assistance and pursue funding to landowners and other agencies in the removal of barriers.

Objective 3: Provide assistance and pursue funding for screening irrigation diversions for landowners.

Goal 2: Pursue funds for restoration projects related to instream and riparian habitat.

Objective 1: Continue participation with the Regional Technical Team, Lead Entity, and Snake River Salmon Recovery Board.

Objective 2: Continue collaboration with other local partners on stream restoration projects.

Goal 3: Identify and address areas in Walla Walla County with significant limiting factors.

Objective 1: Continue vegetative change analysis and other monitoring efforts on riparian areas.

Objective 2: Pursue funding for watershed-level assessment and prioritization plans.



Upland Habitat and Range:

Native grasslands used for forage production are located mainly on the sandy river terraces along the lower Snake and Walla Walla Rivers, in the foothills of the Blue Mountains, and scattered within the dry cropland area. It is estimated that there are 180,000 acres of rangeland in the District. Much of the native rangeland is invaded by Rush skeletonweed and yellow starthistle, and maintaining plant productivity on this generally marginal land is a significant concern. The foothills of the Blue Mountains are especially vulnerable to wildfires.

Goal 1: Continue building working relationships with area ranchers.

Objective 1: Provide workshops and funding (when available) to livestock-specific BMPs.

Goal 2: Maintain and/or implement upland wildlife habitat.

Objective 1: Apply for funding to implement and/or maintain wildlife habitat in the upland ecosystems.

Objective 2: Continue partnerships with agencies and landowners that focus on upland habitats.



Forest Health:

Maintaining wildfire resiliency through forest management practices is important. Less than 10% of the District is forested, but half the population of the District receives its domestic water from the Mill Creek Watershed, located in the Blue Mountains in the eastern part of the county. Though the watershed spans primarily Columbia County and Oregon, private landowners adjacent to it reside in the District. Forested landowners can help reduce the risk of forest fires by maintaining their properties. This includes thinning, limbing, and clearing out the understory while also removing dead and dying trees. WWCCD continues to build relationships with landowners in these and other forested areas of the county.

Goal 1: Continue work with Walla Walla County and the City of Walla Walla, as well as conservation work crews, to conduct mitigation work on private properties adjacent to the Mill Creek Watershed.

Objective 1: Pursue funds to cover work crews' costs.

Objective 2: Secure funds to purchase a new chipper for the work crews, increasing the acres thinned on private property around the watershed.

Goal 2: Continue working with partners and landowners to address natural resource concerns pre- and post-wildfires.

Objective 1: Work with Emergency Management and other partners on updating the Hazard Mitigation Plan and Community Wildfire Preparedness Plan.

Objective 2: Provide technical and financial assistance (when available) to landowners following damage from wildfires.

