



Oklahoma Conservation Commission

District Directors' Responsibilities: A 10-Minute Guide Series

This is one in a continuing series of informational/discussion topics designed to help conservation district directors become more informed and knowledgeable about their responsibilities. It is suggested that board members review these guides before a board meeting and then have a ten minute discussion on them at a meeting.

Guide No. 13 - Watershed Sponsor Responsibilities

Most conservation districts in Oklahoma are primary sponsors for watershed projects. Oklahoma has 129 watershed projects in the state that include 2,105 flood water retarding dams and thousands of conservation practices. This \$2 billion dollar infrastructure provides over \$75 million in annual benefits to the state. Being a project sponsor has responsibilities that must be taken seriously. It is important that district board members have a good knowledge and a clear understanding of their responsibilities for the watershed projects in their districts.

Why Are Conservation Districts Watershed Project Sponsors?

The USDA Watershed Program requires a local entity of government to be a watershed project sponsor. The Watershed Program is a locally organized and planned program with assistance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Sponsors must have the power of eminent domain so that they can obtain real property and water rights for projects and they must assure NRCS that they can provide operation and maintenance of the flood control dams.

Because conservation districts are local units of governments and by law have responsibility for the state's natural renewable resources, they have always been the logical ones to be project sponsors. Plus, early conservation district leaders saw this program as the answer to serious flooding and erosion problems in the state and took on this responsibility.

Project Sponsor Responsibilities

When projects are new, sponsors obtain land rights and permits for construction of flood retarding dams and other conservation practices. After dams are constructed, sponsors assume operation and maintenance duties, monitor easement encroachment, develop and update emergency action plans for high hazard dams, conduct regular inspections, and work with state dam officials (Oklahoma Water Resources Board) and NRCS to ensure dam safety.

What is an Operation and Maintenance Agreement?

It is a legally binding contract with the federal government in which the sponsors agree to operate and maintain installed measures in a watershed project, such as dams, wetlands, irrigation measures and other conservation practices.

What is Operation?

Operation is the administrative and management activities necessary to keep the dam safe and functioning as planned. This could include having an emergency action plan for high hazard dams, maintaining good working relationships with landowners, maintaining records and reports and making inspections.

What is Maintenance?

Maintenance is recurring activities necessary to keep a dam in safe and functioning condition. Activities include removal of trees from dams or in spillways, repair of principal spillways and repair of damage caused by flooding or vandalism.

How Often Should Dams be Inspected?

This is spelled out in the operation and maintenance agreement and in most cases is annually. Dams should also be inspected immediately after heavy rains that might cause damage to the dam or spillway.

Conservation districts have responsibility for the inspections, but should always involve the NRCS staff. Inspections reports are sent the Oklahoma Conservation Commission and to the NRCS state office by December 31 each year.

Emergency Action Plans

Sponsors are required to work with local officials to develop an Emergency Action Plan (EAP) for those dams classified as "High Hazard". These are dams with homes, businesses, roads or other structures located downstream from a dam where loss of life could occur if the dam failed.

The EAP assigns critical roles including surveillance, notification, and evacuation as well as identifying the dam break flood zone, evacuation routes and critical contact list.

Help is available from the Oklahoma Conservation Commission in development of these EAPs.

Rehabilitation of Aging Dams

Rehabilitation is all necessary work to extend the service life of a dam and meet applicable safety and performance standards. NRCS administers a program that provides technical assistance and 65% of the rehabilitation cost.

Only dams that are classified as 'High Hazard Dams' are currently eligible for NRCS assistance in rehabilitation. Rehabilitation funds can not be used for operation and maintenance.

Sponsors can request assistance in rehabilitation of eligible dams from NRCS and the Oklahoma Conservation Commission.

Watershed Training

Training on operation and maintenance and other watershed responsibilities is periodically offered to district directors and employees by the Oklahoma Conservation Commission. The National Watershed Coalition also conducts watershed training sessions.

One-on-one training is available from OCC watershed technicians. These OCC employees can also assist local district employees with minor repairs on inlet towers and help determine the cost and best repair methods on major problems.

Conservation District Boards That are Watershed Project Sponsors Should:

- ◆ Review operation and maintenance agreements annually.
- ◆ Inspect all dams annually.
- ◆ Inspect dams after heavy rainstorms.
- ◆ Monitor easement encroachment. If violations are found, take immediate action.
- ◆ Keep an up-to-date list of landowners and contact them regularly.
- ◆ Be on the watch for new landowners where a flood retarding dam is located. Educate new landowners about the dam and how it works, easements and other watershed issues.
- ◆ Maintain and prioritize repairs needed on dams and request technical and financial assistance from the Oklahoma Conservation Commission if needed.
- ◆ Obtain training for district directors and district employees on watershed project responsibilities including operation and maintenance.
- ◆ Educate new board member and employees about the watershed program and the district's responsibilities with local projects.
- ◆ Develop and update local records that include easements, landowner information, operation and maintenance agreements, maintenance needs, and repairs completed.