

## District 10-Minute Guide Series

This is one in a continuing series of informational/discussion topics designed to help conservation district directors and employees become more informed and knowledgeable about their responsibilities. It is suggested that employees and board members review and then have a 10-minute discussion on a selected guide during each board meeting as part of the district's commitment to continuing education for leadership and staff.

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### **Guide No. 4 – Cooperator Agreements**

Conservation districts have used district cooperator agreements since the formation of districts to work with landowners and land users for the purpose of protecting, conserving, and practicing wise use of the renewable natural resources under their control. The cooperator agreement covers landowners, non-landowners, businesses, and organizations who wish to become cooperators with the conservation district

#### **What is a District Cooperator Agreement?**

Every district has its own cooperator agreement form, although most are very similar. Most are a one-page document signed by individual(s) and by a board member. A template cooperator agreement form that can be utilized by any district is available on the OCC website.

For over 75 years producers have entered into cooperator agreements with districts. In the agreements producers that own land agree to develop and carry out a conservation plan and maintain conservation measures and the district agrees to provide technical and other assistance. Non-landowners, organizations, and businesses agree to work with the district to carry out projects and promote the district's programs and mission.

When districts were first formed, they obtained cooperator agreements from landowners and used them to request the Natural Resources Conservation Service (known then as Soil Conservation Service) to provide technical assistance and assistance in the development of a conservation plan for the cooperator.

As time passed the formality and use of the district cooperator agreement has changed. The document is neither legally binding nor required for an individual to receive technical assistance from the NRCS. However, a signed

cooperator agreement is required for an individual to serve as a district director and some districts require a cooperator agreement to be on file before an individual can rent equipment, etc. from the district.

#### **Who Can be a District Cooperator?**

Historically, a district cooperator either owned or operated a farm or ranch. However, there is no provision in the statute that states that an individual must own land.

Older forms of the cooperator agreements imply that the cooperator must be a landowner. The cooperator agreement template on the OCC website provides boxes that can be checked for landowners or non-landowners, organizations, and businesses.

Some districts sign up non-traditional cooperators who provide assistance to the district with conservation education and other projects but who may not own land or operate a farm or ranch.

#### **Approval of District Cooperator Agreements**

A cooperator agreement must be approved by the district board of directors during a regularly scheduled board meeting and signed by an authorized district director to be in effect.

The name of each cooperator for whom an agreement is approved must be listed in the board meeting minutes.

### **Importance of District Cooperator Agreements in Election or Appointment of District Board Members**

For individuals to file as candidates or be appointed for a position on the board, they must have a cooperator agreement on file with the district or have filled out an application requesting a cooperator agreement.

Prior to 2008, a cooperator agreement had to be on file for 30 days prior to filing for election or appointment. Now people can fill out an application for a cooperator agreement during filing period and immediately file for election. But the application must be part of the agenda for the next regular board meeting and a cooperator agreement approved and signed at that meeting.

### **District Document**

The district cooperator agreement is a district document. The approval of these agreements is done in open session at a board meeting. They are not a part of the approval process for USDA conservation plans and contracts and are not a document authorized for review in an executive session.

Therefore, these files should be maintained in a manner which keeps them current on a monthly basis.

It would be beneficial for districts to go through their files and develop a database of current district cooperators.

### **Other Uses of Cooperator Agreements**

Conservation districts represent their cooperators when developing annual and long-range plans, promoting needed conservation practices in the district, and searching for funding and other resources needed by landowners.

When talking to legislators, civic groups, and other agencies and organizations, district officials can use the number of district cooperators to make the

point that the district is not just a board of five members.

When people sign up as district cooperators, they agree to cooperate and support the district and in turn the district agrees to support their conservation efforts. Cooperators actually become part of the conservation district.

### **Other Resources**

District Cooperator Agreement section of the Conservation District Handbook and the District Resources section of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission website at [conservation.ok.gov](http://conservation.ok.gov).