



Oklahoma Conservation Commission

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 at each board meeting as part of the district's commitment to continuing education for leadership and staff.

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 2,107 flood water retarding dams and thousands of conservation practices. This \$2 billion dollar infrastructure provides over \$102 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 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 (NRCS). Sponsors must have the power of eminent domain so they can obtain real property and water rights for projects, and they must assure NRCS they can provide operation and maintenance of the flood control dams. Because conservation districts are local units of government 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

- Obtain land rights and permits
- Conduct public meetings
- Secure and provide funds for ongoing O&M
- Monitor easement encroachment
- Schedule and conduct regular dam inspections

- Develop & update EAPs for high hazard dams
- Work with state dam officials (Oklahoma Water Resources Board)
- Maintain relationships with landowners
- Work with NRCS at all levels to maintain working relationships essential to the watershed program

Watershed Work Plans

Watershed work plans are developed for each watershed project and provide a history of the flooding and/or other conditions prior to the watershed project, allocation of costs, description of the watershed, and projected future economic benefits.

Operation and Maintenance (O&M) Agreements

When the project is completed, sponsors will sign an agreement with NRCS assuming O&M of constructed flood control dams. This agreement is a legally binding contract with the federal government that outlines the responsibilities of sponsors to maintain the proper operation of the dams. This agreement should be reviewed periodically to ensure these responsibilities are being met.

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 conducting 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 O&M 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. Inspection reports are sent to the 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 OCC 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. Sponsors can

request assistance in rehabilitation of eligible dams from NRCS and OCC.

Assistance Available from OCC

Training workshops on O&M and other watershed responsibilities is periodically offered to district directors and employees by OCC. The Conservation Programs Division staff can provide one-on-one training if requested. OCC has watershed technicians available that can assist local district employees with minor repairs such as principle spillway towers, brush/tree removal, cattle trails, and help determining the cost and best repair methods on major problems.

Conservation District Boards Serving as Watershed Project Sponsors Should:

- Review O&M agreements annually.
- Participate in annual dam inspections and review inspection reports in a regularly scheduled district board meeting.
- 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.
- Prepare a Watershed Dam Actions Needed Plan from the annual dam inspections and submit it to OCC by August 15 each year.
- Request technical and financial assistance from OCC if needed.
- Obtain training for district directors and employees on watershed project sponsor responsibilities including O&M.
- Educate new board members and employees about the watershed program and the district's responsibilities with local projects.
- Develop and update local records that include easements, landowner information, O&M agreements, maintenance needs, and repairs completed.