Conservation District Week

April 18-24, 2021

Thank You for Supporting the Commonwealth’s 66 Conservation Districts!

2021-2022 Budget

The Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts, Inc. (PACD), representing all 66 of the Commonwealth’s conservation districts, thanks members of the PA House and Senate, as well as the Governor, for supporting the districts by providing the funds necessary to preserve and protect our Commonwealth’s natural resources through the state budgetary process. Governor Tom Wolf’s proposed budget recommends continued funding for conservation districts in both the PA Department of Agriculture (PDA) and PA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) budgets.

Conservation districts have enjoyed partnering with state agencies in the past and are looking forward to working with them efficiently and cost-effectively in the future. By maintaining the “Transfer to the Conservation District” lines in the PDA and DEP budgets, districts will be able to continue providing the Commonwealth with the services Pennsylvania citizens have enjoyed and grown accustomed to receiving.

**To ensure that conservation districts can accommodate agency and community needs, and to maintain current programs and services for local communities, PACD is respectfully requesting the Commonwealth’s 2021-2022 budget keep level funding in the “Transfer to the Conservation District Fund” lines in both the PDA and DEP budgets, even though these lines have not been increased since the 2004-2005 fiscal year.**

Third Party Reviewer Legislation

PACD opposes any legislation allowing for third party permit reviews. The concern is that these private reviews will actually hinder the permit review process, resulting in permit approval delays, and create the potential for permits that are below state standards. This legislation could also mean the same private firms who develop the permit application would be the reviewer of those permit applications. To avoid potential conflict of interest, many federal permit programs prohibit third party private consultants from permit review and approval.

**For these reasons, PACD opposes third party permit reviews.**

Statewide Expedited Review Legislation

Senator Gene Yaw is planning on introducing legislation that creates a statewide expedited review permit approval process designed to reduce the timeframe for a permit approval. Many conservation districts already have an established expedited permit program for Erosion and Sedimentation NPDES permits, and PACD is working with Senator Yaw to ensure that those districts will be able to continue with their current process.

**Please consider supporting language in the legislation allowing conservation districts to continue with their current expedited permit program.**

Restricted Use Funds

PACD opposes any amendment of restricted use fund laws that would discontinue non-lapsing funds such as the Conservation District Fund. Currently, all money not spent in the Conservation District Fund beyond the end of the state’s fiscal year stays in the account. Legislation has been introduced that would transfer the unused, but committed, money to the state’s general fund.

Specifically, the Conservation District Fund is money that has been allocated for specific projects, but not necessarily reimbursed by the end of the state’s fiscal year. The fund provides money for staffing; project implementation, including water quality and best management practice projects; educational programs; and training; to all conservation districts. Consequently, the transfer of these dollars back to the Commonwealth’s general fund on July first of every year has the potential to negate important community projects that have already been obligated.

**PACD opposes legislation to eliminate restricted use funds.**

Education Curriculum

PACD recently urged the PA Secretary of Education Noe Ortega to include the subjects of environment, ecology, and agriculture in its proposed science education standards. It is imperative for students of all ages to understand the importance of protecting our state’s environment and our state’s number one industry, agriculture. Since the new proposed education standards eliminate all mention of “environment, ecology and agriculture” for some age groups, the concern is that teachers may not be able to engage students in meaningful natural resource discussions and relevant, real-world learning. The inclusion of specific standards in these areas would allow for the integration of natural resource educational experiences.

**PACD supports the inclusion of “Environment, Ecology and Agriculture” to be part of Science Education Standards**

Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program

PACD supports legislation creating an Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program. If enacted, this program will direct targeted dollars for use in implementing farm conservation measures in areas with the most critical need to improve local water quality. The program will direct funding to county conservation districts, and will give conservation professionals in those areas the flexibility to determine and finance cost-effective farm conservation practices for local water quality improvement.

The proposed Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program is modeled after the successful Dirt and Gravel Road program administered by the State Conservation Commission. Each year, the Commission allocates funding to county conservation districts based on a formula that looks at the volume of impaired streams and miles of dirt roads. The legislation uses the same approach in financing farm conservation measures that effectively improve the quality of Pennsylvania’s waters in a cost-effective way.

**PACD supports an Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program**

The Definition of Pollution

PACD opposes any legislation that would change the definition of “pollution” allowing for accidental discharges to Pennsylvania’s ground and surface water to go unreported and, therefore, not be subject to fines and penalties. Under current Pennsylvania law, all discharges regardless of the size must be reported to DEP.

**PACD opposes redefining the word “pollution to allow for small spills to be a non-reportable event.”**