

CLARK CONSERVATION DISTRICT
Frequently Asked Questions
Regarding the Conservation Assessment

Q: - Isn't there some way people who have homes on two or three lots can just pay the assessment for the first lot, and not any additional connected lots?

- I have 2 lots. Why am I paying you \$5 each inside city limits, when I don't want or need your help?

A: The Clark Conservation District shares the concern about homes on multiple lots. However, the laws that apply to special assessments do not allow the flexibility to make such an adjustment. Additionally, the Treasurers' office has indicated the cost of accomplishing such an adjustment would be high because it would require considerable handwork by staff. Taxpayers who own multiple connected parcels have the option of having the parcels combined into one tax parcel.

Q: Why are you not assessing forestlands? We are concerned their exemption creates an inequity.

A: The RCW, which was passed by the legislature, has special provisions for forestlands. Per parcel fees are not allowed for any forestland classification. Instead, each forestland owner can be charged only once for all the parcels they own, \$3 per owner is the maximum. Forestlands can be charged a per acre fee, but only at 10 percent of the weighted average of the other land classifications, and then only on the first 10,000 acres. This means all of Clark County's forestlands would yield around \$1,850. Because of these provisions, forestlands would need to be billed by hand for this assessment. It would not be a good investment of the taxpayer's money to spend more to collect the forestlands than it would yield. The County Commissioners have the option of adding forestlands back into the assessment roll. Considerations need to be made to the involved expense and the willingness of the Assessor and Treasurer to deal with the matter. The Clark Conservation District Board will work with the County Commissioners, the Washington Association of Conservation Districts, the Washington Association of Counties and forestland owners to address this issue.

Q: District services should be on a fee-for-services basis. Shouldn't only those who benefit pay for services? In other words, what am I getting out of it and why do I need you?

A: The entire community benefits from the District's natural resource protection programs. We all drink the water, eat the fish, build houses from the timber, garden, and farm the soil, and enjoy the diversity of wildlife and water resources. When people turn on their faucet, they know they won't be drinking pesticides, fertilizers or animal wastes from any of the District's cooperating landowners. When anyone, anywhere in the county, swims,

fishes or boats on any of our surface waters, they will know the water will not be contaminated with agricultural pollutants. Farmers, who work with the District to eliminate pollution from their property, are doing so because they want to be good neighbors. The District's assistance is the community's part in these cooperative efforts. Farmer's don't get much of benefit when they build a fence to keep their horses or cows out of surface water. They are building the fence for the people who live downstream from them -- including everyone who wants clean water.

Q: *Can't you charge less?*

A: We will need to continue to supplement this assessment with numerous grants in order to provide the level of services currently demanded from us. The assessment will be used to provide a foundation of match for our grants. It also will enable us to continue providing our current staff on board, as well as maintaining our office space and equipment needed to do our work. Because the office, district manager and accountant are fixed costs, which must be expended regardless of the amount the assessment yields, the only flex in the budget is in the number of technicians and specialists the District will hire. Considering the services the technicians and specialists deliver is the reason this assessment is being sought, any reduction in the assessment would not be a good investment.

Q: *Will the tax double next year?*

A: RCW 89.08.400 limits the assessment to \$5 per parcel per year, plus 10¢ an acre. The only way this could be changed would be by an act of the legislature. If a move to increase the amount allowed by law were sought without the support of landowners, the legislation would fail.

Q: *Will the money end up in the county's general fund?*

A: The Treasurer will send the funds to a District account, which represents the amount collected. The only portion that will be retained by the county is the amount it costs the Treasurer and Assessor to collect the money.

Q: *How can other interests participate in your annual planning?*

A: To assure District residents, and other agencies and entities, have ample opportunity for input into our annual planning process the allocation of our resources occurs during our annual planning process each fall quarter. When we sit down to plan, our cooperating agencies and entities are invited to join us.

Q: Isn't 10 years too long to commit when I don't know your track record?

A: We've been working in Clark County for over 50 years and have an established history of delivering services in a cost-effective manner. This is one of the fastest growing counties in the state. That growth is putting tremendous pressure on our natural resources. The people who live here now, and those who will be joining us, all deserve the assurance that they can count on the District to protect those resources.

Most of the grants the District apply for have 2-3 year project timelines, which means providing 2-3 years of local cash match. If the District is to develop and implement long-range programs we need more than the next two years of grant monies to deliver services.

The conservation planning process to protect water quality is proven to work best with thorough follow-up. Landowner goals and stocking densities change. New people move into the watershed. Even the people who maintain a consistent farming operation need follow-up as they phase in the full implementation of their plans. Making a ten-year commitment to the District's basic funding is one way to acknowledge the importance of the efforts of those hundreds of citizens, who gave countless hours to develop the plans. The people who live in the county deserve the assurance that the District will be able to apply for grants to improve water quality and protect natural resources.

Resource conservation plans are cooperative documents we enter into with farmers. In many cases the timelines built into implementation of the plans is 5-10 years to spread the financial impact. When we sign those plans we are saying we will be there to follow up. Every structural BMP or revegetation project we participate in includes a signed commitment from the landowner to maintain the practice for 10 years. If we insist on a 10-year commitment from them, we need to commit to being there too!

We don't just walk away after a farm plan is signed and delivered. Over the five to ten year plan implementation schedule, we provide technical expertise and engineering assistance to install the structural practices and make the management changes. We also check back with the farmer to see if there are changes in stocking rate, land use or ownership of the farm. By keeping the farm plan updated to reflect these adjustments, we assure the goals of "no fertilizer, no pesticide and no animal waste shall enter surface or "ground waters."

Without the assessment, follow-up is difficult to do because when the grant periods expire, often funds are not there to go back out to the site. The continued growth and reliance on the services we provide proves that people remain willing to make this investment in the coming years.

Q: *I live within the city limits. What can you do for me? Are you doing services to address the needs of the urban landowner?*

A. Over the past couple years we have listened to the community and worked toward adding services to address the needs of the urban landowner. Today, we're not "just for farmers." Such services include, but are not limited to:

- Soil testing assistance;
- Recommendations for lawns and gardens;
- Assistance for conserving resources on your property
- Monthly newsletters will be distributed to the community with news and articles on our local resource issues. These include a feature article, information on upcoming events, and other educational opportunities.
- Annual Plant Sale Event. We don't just sell plants. We open our office doors so visitors can check out some of the services we provide, see where "we live", and have an opportunity to check out booths by local organizations/groups.
- We developed a full-service website: www.clarkcd.org which contains staff bios & photos, a complete listing of services we provide, a calendar of events, plant sale information, news articles, project feature stories, and other valuable information.

Q: *Aren't there too many water quality agencies?*

A: The Clark Conservation District is part of a local water quality team, which includes the cities, county programs, WSU Extension and numerous citizen groups. The District, however, has a clearly distinct role in the water resource protection arena:

- We are the only organization to provide technical assistance to landowners and farmers.
- We are the only organization that can bring the services of the Natural Resources Conservation Service to our community.
- We don't do studies. Our role is on-the-ground problem solving.
- We provide an important alternative to the regulatory or enforcement based entities. All of our work is accomplished through voluntary cooperation of landowners.
- Unlike the cities and county, we can work on private lands directly for the landowner.
- We are the only organization that offers on-site assistance to landowners through education, engineering and technical and financial assistance.

Q: *Does voluntary compliance work?*

A: Getting people to change their behavior and not contribute to pollution problems can be accomplished through two approaches: regulation-enforcement, or education-technical assistance.

Regulation is unpopular because it assumes people are intentionally breaking the rules. The Conservation District believes few people knowingly pollute either surface or ground waters. Almost everyone recognizes the importance of those resources. The problem is that most people do not realize their small pollution contribution accumulates with those of their neighbors to cause the problems we see in water quality throughout the county.

The District recognizes the need for regulation to deal with intentional pollution. We also know that regulation-enforcement will never work alone to solve our resource protection problems. We must make education and technical assistance readily available so people will know how to do things right, otherwise people won't know how to change their

behavior. Education and technical assistance works! Once people become aware they are part of the problem, they start asking how they can become part of the solution. The Conservation District needs strong, well-funded programs to assure they can get those answers.

Q: *Is this tax lawful?*

A: This is not a tax. The assessment is enabled by RCW 89.08.400. Contact us for the text or go online to <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=89.08>

Q: *If there are grants, why do you need an assessment?*

A: There are a number of things the assessment does for us and the community, including:

- We are able to provide assistance to anywhere within the District to implement projects for landowners, cities, and other groups.
- Grants require matching funds (cash match and in-kind). Most of our match comes from our assessment monies;
- Grants only cover direct costs. There is not enough money available in most grants to provide for all of the following costs associated with grant work:
 - Administration;
 - equipment (that which is necessary in the field);
 - training (DOE grants do not cover training of staff, even if applicable to the grant);
 - capital purchases (such as copies, computers, etc.);
 - overhead (such as office supplies);
 - salaries & benefits of staff.
- Grants are not guaranteed. Less money is available now than was 10 years ago as State and Federal budgets tighten.
- Most state and federal grants are offered for one type of service one time only. Follow-up on project after a grant has expired is up to the local jurisdictions/funding. Our assessment enables us to continue to work with clients after grants have expired.
- The stable income the assessment provides to the District enables us to apply for grants and basically guaranties the sponsor that we can provide the match required for the grant.

Q. *Why should I pay to be regulated?*

A. We are not in the business of regulating people. We assist people to keep the regulators from enforcing issues on their property. We provide education, outreach and technical assistance to help people correct and solve problems.

Q. Who are you and what do you do?

Conservation Districts were created through state legislation as special districts, like a school district or fire district, that are self-governed. The District administers programs to assist agriculture and conserve natural resources. Districts are self-governed by unpaid volunteers who serve as Board members who establish priorities and set policy. We are funded through competitive grants.

Conservation Districts are the only grass roots, conservation delivery system that identifies problems and guides solutions voluntarily. We work closely with the Natural Resource Conservation Service and promote the use of Best Management Practices (BMPs) through Conservation Planning, Public Outreach, and Environmental Education in Clark County.

Some of the services CCD provides to Clark County residents include: Free soil testing, site visits to provide help with resource concerns, mud and manure problems, pasture related concerns; Conservation Plan development; stream/wetland restoration; workshops/lecture series; annual native plant sale; and assistance in installing conservation practices including fencing, stream and wetland restoration. These are just a few of the many services and programs. We appreciate the diversity of the land in Clark County and the diversity of ideas in its population. We are here to provide assistance to both urban and rural residents of Clark County.

Q. If agriculture is leaving the county, why are you still needed? Aren't you outdated?

A. It is true many large farms have moved out of the county. However agriculture is anything but gone from here. When the large farms are subdivided into many smaller parcels, they are converted to small farms. Over the years, demand for our services has increased as the number of parcels and small farms increase. In addition, we have broadened and expanded our services to address the needs of the smaller farms and the urban backyard. We make site visits to city lots to address lawn problems, planting for wildlife, etc.

Q. Aren't large farms really the problem?

A. The continued pressure on our water quality and habitat conditions while we are experiencing a decrease of large farms clearly shows that "large farms" are not really the problem. Many small farms are operated by people who do not necessary know the impacts of their activities on the land. Most large farms have been in operation for generations and in most cases they realize the impacts. It has become increasingly important to provide outreach to farms of all sizes.