

## Jefferson County Conservation District – A Brief History

On April 25th, 1946, following a vote of landowners (only landowners were eligible to vote), the East Jefferson County Soil Conservation District was formed. Bert Kruse of Quilcene and George Huntingford of Dabob were appointed by to the board by the State Soil Conservation Committee. The first elected board members were Jess Tiffany (Washington State College Extension agent), Frank Porter, and member a Mr. Smith. The first board meeting was held on October 24th, 1946. Fun fact: at the time of formation the conservation district office location (presumably the residence of a board member) was identified as Quilcene. In the first year of operation the district received 36 applications for farm plans covering 6,000 acres of farmland and 5,200 acres of woodland.

Conservation districts were born out of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. The nation was reeling from years of economic depression and a series of unrelenting droughts was ravaging the heartland of America. These factors created a perfect storm for environmental disaster; literal dust storms, in fact, brought darkness in daytime and dropped dust as far away as the east coast. The widespread soil erosion was unlike anything the country had experienced before. To combat this disaster, in 1933 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Congress created the Soil Erosion Service within the Department of the Interior. Two years later this new federal agency was moved to the Department of Agriculture and renamed the Soil Conservation Service (SCS).

Originally, the SCS set out to fight soil erosion by setting up large-scale demonstration projects and trying to convince farmers to change their farming methods. The response from the struggling farmers was less than enthusiastic. The SCS decided to regroup and figure out a more effective way to engage farmers and win over their trust. They drafted a model *State Conservation District Law* and distributed it to every state governor. The law, eventually adopted by every state, required the formation of local conservation districts in order to receive services and assistance from the SCS. The governing boards of the local conservation districts were intended to be the influential farmers of the community, elected to their positions by their peers. These local conservation leaders and conservation districts provided the grassroots participation necessary for success with their federal partners. Conservation district officials were to provide guidance and direction to the SCS by sharing their knowledge about community needs and priorities. And, it was envisioned, these conservation and farming community leaders would be the early adopters of the new conservation practices being promoted by the SCS, and thus motivate others to also adopt these practices.

Washington State adopted the Soil Conservation Districts Law (RCW 89.08) in 1939, paving the way for the creation of the State Soil Conservation Committee (now known as the State Conservation Commission) and local conservation districts. Fun fact: for many years the Soil Conservation Committee consisted of the Director of the State Extension Service, Director of the State Agricultural Experiment Station, Director of Agriculture, and two owners of farmland, and the office was located at Washington State College (later University) in Pullman. Fun fact: nearly one-quarter of the 32 pages in the original Washington State Soil Conservation Districts Law were about adoption and enforcement of land-use regulations by local conservation districts to prevent soil erosion; however, the regulatory provisions were never carried out by local conservation districts.

The first conservation districts were formed in Washington in 1941. Although now most of the state's 45 conservation districts align with county boundaries, they were originally based on watersheds, and incorporated cities were not included. At one point there were over 70 conservation districts

throughout the state's 39 counties.

In 1950, East Jefferson County Soil Conservation District expanded to include all of Jefferson County, except Olympic National Park, Olympic National Forest, and the City of Port Townsend, changing our name to Jefferson County Soil Conservation District. However, apparently some of the western portion of Jefferson County had been included in the Grays Harbor Soil Conservation District, and it wasn't until 1971 that those lands were transferred into the Jefferson County district. Also, by that time, conservation districts throughout the state had changed their names to "Soil and Water Conservation Districts."

Substantial changes were made to the State Conservation Districts Law In 1973. Among the changes were the deletion of specific terms, such as "fields" and "pastures," that implied that the districts' efforts were limited to agricultural lands. Broader land-use and environmental impact language was added. An amendment to the law also allowed for the annexation of cities and towns. The words "Soil and Water" were deleted from the names of all the conservation districts in the state to better reflect the broader natural resource conservation mandate. In 2020, Jefferson County Conservation District (JCCD) annexed the City of Port Townsend into the district.

Adhering to the original farming and soil erosion focus of conservation districts, JCCD devoted most of its efforts to improving agricultural production and drainage during our first four decades, and the SCS provided virtually all the technical assistance to farmers. The SCS maintained an office in Port Townsend into the 1970s, at which time the office was consolidated with the Port Angeles office. Like conservation districts, in 1995 the Soil Conservation Service changed its name to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

We hired our first employee, Frank Petrich, in the late 1980s. Frank worked mainly on outreach and education. A one-year grant from the State Conservation Commission in 1989 allowed us to hire a technician to work on water quality issues. That grant was awarded to both us and Clallam Conservation District (CCD), and current manager Joe Holtrop was hired to split his time between the two districts. At the end of the grant, both districts received additional water quality grants from the state, enabling each to hire technicians. Joe went to work full-time for CCD and was replaced by Al Latham, who worked for JCCD until 2011 and now serves as board chair. A list of JCCD employees can be found at the end of this article.

Water quality was the primary focus in the late 1980s and early 1990s, due in part to the availability of grant funding from the state. Current water quality specialist/fisheries biologist Glenn Gately was hired in 1994 to do water quality monitoring, which he continues to do to this day.

Over the past 30 years we've made tremendous progress working with land users to improve water quality in our area streams, as is well documented by Glenn (his reports are available at <http://www.jeffersoncd.org/what/water-quality-monitoring/>). We've also made considerable headway with improvements to salmon habitat, particularly restoration of riparian forest buffers along many miles of streams.

In the 1990s, salmon habitat restoration began to receive increased attention, due largely to the extirpation of the Chimacum Creek chum salmon runs. Also, the late 1990s listing of various salmon runs as threatened under the Endangered Species Act began to shift the focus, as well as the availability of grant funding. JCCD began sponsoring or co-sponsoring salmon habitat restoration projects, many in

partnership with the North Olympic Salmon Coalition.

We continue to place most of our attention on water-related resource concerns. Early efforts to improve water quality by fencing livestock out of streams contributed to uncontrolled growth of reed canarygrass in our small, slow-flowing streams. In an effort to combat the shade-intolerant reed canarygrass and reduce water temperatures, we worked with many landowners to plant forested buffers along the streams. Those efforts accomplished their goals of improving water quality, cooling the water, and reducing reed canarygrass impacts. However, these newly reforested stream buffers also provided highly desirable habitat for beaver. Improving habitat and an end to most beaver trapping has resulted in increased beaver populations, more beaver dams, and more impactful flooding of once highly productive agricultural land.

The many ecological changes these landscapes have experienced over the past century, some of which were unforeseen, have led many to reflect on our role in altering, manipulating, and managing this fragile ecosystem. It took decades of hard work to drain the boggy land so it could be farmed. Today much of the vast drainage infrastructure, primarily in the Chimacum watershed, no longer functions as originally intended, sometimes a casualty of simple neglect and sometimes a consequence of the challenges posed by current-day regulations. And as Mother Nature has a habit of doing, she is reclaiming the landscape. Looking forward, we have an opportunity to assist in this ecological restoration process and maybe find the sweet spot that results in both productive farmland and healthy ecosystems.

Collaboration with partner organizations like the Jefferson Land Trust, North Olympic Salmon Coalition, WSU Extension, and others has helped foster the development of the area's small farm movement. This has helped to preserve some of our valuable farmland and keep it productive. This highly successful collaboration will be critical as we contemplate the future of the land and the habitat it supports.

Perhaps our most noteworthy recent accomplishment was successfully securing stable funding in 2018 through a system of "rates and charges" approved by the county commissioners. This long sought-after achievement provides us with financial security that we never had before. Although it only makes up about one-third of our annual budget, it gives us a reliable financial foundation to build on. Now, rather than being entirely or almost entirely dependent upon grants and the priorities associated with them, we have flexibility to pursue local priorities.

As we reflect on the first three-quarters of a century here at Jefferson County Conservation District, it amazes us to see how far we've come. During the early decades, the USDA Soil Conservation Service provided the assistance to landowners, and like other conservation districts, our boards helped determine priorities but had little control over the directives coming out of Washington DC. Over the past 35 years we've assumed increasingly more authority and control over our role in natural resources conservation. And now with stable local funding, the destiny of natural resources conservation is in our hands.

## Jefferson County Conservation District Employees

1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Michael Purser																		
	Frank Petrich																	
		Joe Holtrop																
			Bruce Marston															
								Doug Humes										
				Al Latham – 22 years														
										Glenn Gately – 28+ years								
											Rosie Taylor - 20 years							
2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
						Al Latham												
																	Glenn Gately	
							Rosie Taylor											
Luke Cherney																		
								Tracy Kier										
								Jerry Clarke										
								Dana Ecelberger										
									Craig Schrader									
										Jill Zarzeczny								
											Al Cairns							
												Sharon Yeh						
																	Joe Holtrop	
																	Sierra Young	

Michael Purser, Technician – 1986-87

Frank Petrich, Office Manager – 1987-89

Joe Holtrop, Technician – 1989-90

Bruce Marston, Office Manager – 1990-92

Al Latham, Technician/Manager – 1990-2011

Rosie Taylor, Administrative Assistant – 1995-2011, Manager – 2013-15

Glenn Gately, Water Quality Specialist/Biologist – 1994-present

Luke Cherney, Planner – 2005-2008

Tracy Kier, Office Manager – 2013-present

Jerry Clarke, Technician/Planner – 2013-18

Dana Ecelberger, Manager – 2013-15

Craig Schrader, Technician/Planner – 2014-18

Jill Zarzeczny, Manager – 2015-17

Al Cairns, Manager – 2017-20

Sharon Yeh, Planner – 2019-20

Joe Holtrop, Manager – 2021-present

Sierra Young, Planner – 2021-present