



GOLD RIDGE

RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Strategic Plan 2020-2025



SUPPORTING LOCAL AGRICULTURE AND CONSERVATION
OF NATURAL RESOURCES SINCE 1941.

OUR MANDATE, OUR PURPOSE

Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs) have a unique history as one of the earliest grassroots conservation organizations in the nation. The catastrophic soil losses witnessed during the Dust Bowl Era of the 1930s sparked national recognition that conserving American’s abundant natural resources—in particular, its agricultural soils—would require the establishment of agricultural conservation agencies at all levels of government. The movement began with the creation of the United States Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service. In 1994, Congress initiated a major reorganization of the USDA and renamed the Soil Conservation Service the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to better reflect the broad scope of the agency’s mission.

In 1938, the State of California passed enabling legislation for the establishment of local soil and water conservation districts (the original name of RCDs). The mandate of these locally-led “special districts” of the State of California was and continues to be providing landowners, primarily owners or managers of farms, ranches, and timberland (working lands), greater access to scientific and technical expertise, along with technical and funding assistance for conservation activities and planning.

RCDs work closely with the NRCS in the provision of on-farm conservation activities and planning assistance. RCDs also maintain collaborative relationships with other federal state a local agencies.

The Gold Ridge RCD encompasses 134,000-acres of western Sonoma County, was established in 1941 and is comprised of a diverse landscape of terrestrial and aquatic habitats from estuaries and large expanses of coastal prairie and shrubland to Redwood and Douglas Fir forests, oak woodlands, and thousands of miles of streams and rivers flowing to the Pacific Ocean. This land, the traditional territory of the Coast Miwok, Southern Pomo and Kashia, is now a community of small towns, family farms and ranches. Today, the area supports small dairies, sheep and cattle ranches, heritage orchards, viticulture operations, nurseries and row crop farms. Many of the district’s programs and partnerships continue to focus on agricultural resource challenges and conservation.

The District programs continually evolve to address California’s pressing issues like climate change mitigation, food security, reducing the impact of drought and floods, protecting clean water, creating and improving habitat for fish and wildlife, including restoration of critical habitat for endangered and threatened species like Coho salmon, and most recently, promoting healthy forests and reducing the risk of wildfire, all through local action. Gold Ridge RCD works citizen-to-citizen to build better communities, better economies, and a better environment, while also expanding and stewarding its partnerships with other agencies and organizations.

The RCD is governed by a locally appointed, independent board of directors. Our leaders are also your neighbors — they live in the district and understand the local resource needs and concerns. Our team consists of conservation scientists and outreach and administrative professionals who are skilled at developing, implementing, and monitoring many types of projects. Gold Ridge RCD works at many scales — from the individual landowner to entire watersheds. The District’s monthly board meetings are open to the public and our 2020—2025 strategic plan was informed by valuable input from district residents, businesses, and strategic partners.

OUR MISSION

The Mission of the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District is to provide technical assistance, access to funding, education, community facilitation, natural resources planning, voluntary natural resources monitoring, and efficient and impactful use of public funding in cooperation with others to benefit the natural resources on which we all depend in partnership with our community.

OUR VISION

Our vision is for a district with healthy and sustainably managed natural resources, providing clean and abundant water resources; diverse, climate resilient terrestrial and aquatic habitat; and a thriving agricultural landscape in balance with community needs and the natural world, now and for future generations.

We envision a future for western Sonoma County that includes:

A thriving and diverse agricultural economy sustained through principles of soil health, water conservation, and widespread adoption of climate beneficial/resilient land management practices.

Watersheds that provide healthy levels of terrestrial and aquatic habitat for native fish, wildlife, and plant communities through conservation, restoration, and sound science and monitoring.

Healthy, resilient forests that maximize ecosystem service benefits, such as carbon sequestration and habitat provision, without endangering homes and neighboring communities from susceptibility to catastrophic wildfire.

A shared culture of conservation that is inclusive of all members of the community gained through community engagement, citizen science and monitoring, environmental education, and community watershed planning.

In 2020-2025, we will strive to realize this vision by:

Partnering with other agencies and organizations to develop and fund programs to reduce greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions, increase carbon sequestration, improve on-farm and community water security, and increase biological diversity through habitat conservation and restoration.

Supporting landowners to voluntarily comply with or exceed federal, state, and local environmental regulations through our LandSmart program, creation of a Districtwide CEQA programmatic permit, project permitting assistance services.

Working with our partners to develop, fund, and implement projects that reduce extractive demand on water sources, increase water supply security, and reduce excess storm runoff.

Assessing and documenting environmental conditions and trends and using this information to guide conservation activities to inform partners and community members.

Collaborating with partners and land stewards throughout the district on ways to restore and enhance habitat for native plants and animals and promotion of on-farm biodiversity.

Reflecting Gold Ridge RCD's full commitment to community and conservation through our operations at every level.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Collaboration: Conservation in Sonoma County depends on the collaboration of individuals, community organizations, and government agencies. Gold Ridge RCD works with others to leverage our collective strengths in pursuit of shared goals.

Non-Regulatory: RCDs work only on a voluntary basis and are not regulatory, making us a trusted resource for our community.

Empowering Self-led Stewardship: The most powerful way to keep our environments healthy is when individuals have the tools to do it themselves and to pass that knowledge to others. Gold Ridge RCD strives to empower those who are inspired to steward the land with which they have access.

Equity and Inclusion: The Gold Ridge RCD is committed to cultivating and preserving a culture of inclusion, diversity, equity, and connectedness. We are able to grow and learn better together with a diverse team. The collective sum of the individual differences, life experiences, knowledge, innovation, self-expression, and talent that our employees invest in their work represents not only part of our culture, but our reputation and achievement as well. In recruiting for our team, we welcome the unique contributions that individuals bring in terms of their education, opinions, culture, ethnicity, race, sex, gender identity and expression, nation of origin, age, languages spoken, veteran's status, color, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and beliefs.

At Gold Ridge RCD, each of us contributes to inclusion—we all have a role to play. Our culture is the result of our behaviors, our personal commitment, our curiosity, how we collaborate, and the ways that we courageously share our perspectives and encourage others to do the same. In turn, our inclusive culture inspires us to try new things, speak openly, and be bold. It brings us together in ways that help us stand out. Our inclusive culture empowers all of us to connect, belong, and grow.

Regional Partnership: Watersheds, wildlife, and climate do not divide along county lines. We proactively work with regional and state partners and coalitions to address some of our most pressing shared resource concerns. We share with and learn from our partners and bring cutting-edge conservation innovations to Sonoma County.

Trust and Integrity: In all its work, the Board of Directors and staff act as professionals, treat others equitably and with respect, and behave in an honest, ethical, and inclusive manner.

OUR COLLABORATORS AND FUNDERS

OUR COLLABORATORS:

The Gold Ridge RCD's collaborators embody our community at large: District landowners and land managers, residents, businesses, federal, state, and local agencies, local resident groups, farmer and rancher groups, students, parents, teachers, contractors, and volunteers—in essence, anyone interested in conserving or restoring our natural resources.

OUR DISTRICT WATERSHEDS AND COMMUNITIES:

Our primary geographic areas are the watersheds of Atascadero and Green Valley Creek, Dutch Bill Creek, Estero Americano, Laguna de Santa Rosa, the lower Russian River (including the Estuary), Salmon Creek, Sonoma Coast and Willow Creek. Our District also includes the City of Sebastopol and the towns and rural areas of Bloomfield, Bodega, Bodega Bay, Forestville, Graton, Monte Rio, Occidental, and Valley Ford.

NRCS – RCD PARTNERSHIP:

Gold Ridge RCD maintains a close working relationship with USDA's NRCS. Both organizations provide voluntary technical and funding assistance to agricultural and forest landowners for conservation planning and implementation activities. Often, NRCS federal dollars are heavily leveraged by the RCD when applying for state and local grant dollars. NRCS staff also bring much needed scientific and technical expertise to conservation activities and planning in the District. This special relationship spans the history of the organization.

Gold Ridge RCD also maintains a close working relationship with Sonoma RCD, Napa RCD, Marin RCD, and Mendocino County RCD on jointly developed programs such as LandSmart™ (landsmart.org) and the North Coast Soil Hub (soilhub.org), as well as on-going staff and resource sharing. Gold Ridge RCD is a member of the California Association of Resource Conservation Districts (carcd.org) and the National Association of Conservation Districts (nacdnet.org). Visit the RCD Project Tracker website (rcdprojects.org), an open source conservation data portal managed by Gold Ridge RCD, to learn more about the accomplishments of RCDs in California.

FUNDING:

Only a small portion of our funding comes from property taxes assessed within our district boundary. Approximately 85% of our revenue comes from competitive local, state, and federal grant programs, professional service agreements with the County, and philanthropic grants.



OUR GOALS

Goal #1: Inspire, enable, and cultivate a shared culture of conservation that includes all community members.

Goal #2: The District's natural and working landscapes provide maximum ecological and community benefits, and increased resiliency to anticipated climate impacts such as floods, fires, drought, and sea-level rise.

Goal #3: Design and deliver relevant, outstanding, and voluntary resource conservation programs in the District that positively impact natural resources, agriculture, wildlife, and communities.

Goal #4: Assist communities to effectively plan for and monitor the health of our watersheds so they provide safe drinking water, sustainable irrigation water, and intact habitat for native fish, wildlife, and plants.

Goal #5: The Gold Ridge RCD Board of Directors and staff have the capacity, tools, and financial resources to implement the strategic plan goals.

Goal #1: Inspire, enable, and cultivate a shared culture of conservation that includes all community members.



Strategies

1. Increase culture of inclusivity in RCD conservation program development and delivery.
 - 1.1. Partner with a diverse array of organizations, including new community partners, to assess community interest, needs, and assets related to natural resources.
 - 1.2. RCD staff and board engage in activities and processes to increase cultural awareness and responsiveness.
 - 1.3. Increase cultural responsiveness of current programs and communications.
 - 1.4. Diversify the staff and board of RCD to reflect the community it serves.
 - 1.5. Increase integration of RCD's education, watershed, and technical assistance programs.
2. Redesign outreach methods and strategies to be more inclusive and wide reaching.
 - 2.1. Increase virtual or self-led offerings.
 - 2.2. Translate programs into Spanish.
 - 2.3. Adjust curriculum to ensure culturally relevancy.
 - 2.4. Create spaces for people to come together to talk about shared interests
 - 2.5. Utilize diverse outreach tools such as podcasts, newspapers and radio.
3. Expand youth education programs to reach more students.
4. Expand adult education and volunteer programs to include underserved communities.
 - 4.1. Show up to underserved community offerings to listen and learn about community needs and opportunities.
5. Increase reach and impacts through partnership with non-traditional groups.

Potential Outcomes

- ♣ RCD programs, board, staff, and volunteers reflect the demographics of western Sonoma County.
- ♣ Community members share a conservation ethic and consider natural resources as an important community assets.
- ♣ All community members feel empowered to participate in conservation activities and community efforts.

Goal #2: The District’s natural and working landscapes provide maximum ecological and community benefits, and increased resiliency to anticipated climate impacts such as floods, fires, drought, and sea-level rise.



Strategies

1. Assist farmers and ranchers in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing carbon sequestration.
2. Conservation activities are based on sound science and benefit the environment, agriculture, and community well-being.
3. Increase RCD’s leadership in climate change response and resilience.
 - 3.1. Participate in the development and implementation of a comprehensive County climate action plan with robust goals, measures, and policy and funding support for increased carbon sequestration on working lands.
 - 3.2. Revise RCD outreach materials to show how conservation actions relate to climate change mitigation and response.
4. Assist individuals and communities to be prepared for wildfire and improved forest health.
 - 4.1. Build the RCDs’ collaborative forest management program through planning, outreach, and grant writing.
 - 4.2. Support the work of the Fire Safe Sonoma, local Fire Safe Councils and other collaborative efforts in the region.
 - 4.3. Support community in cultivating an ethic of active management
5. Assess unmet needs RCD could contribute to in preparing for and responding to disasters such as sea level rise, fires, floods, and drought.

Potential Outcomes

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|--|---|
| ♣ Help Sonoma County meet its 2030 zero carbon goal | ♣ Healthier forests |
| ♣ Communities are more prepared and resilient in the face of wildfire, sea level rise and climate change | ♣ Sustainable local food production in the face of Climate Change |

Goal #3: Design and deliver relevant, outstanding, and voluntary resource conservation programs in the District that positively impact natural resources, agriculture, wildlife, and communities.



Strategies

- 1. Anticipate future regulations and requirements and develop strategies for assisting landowners and managers in our district.
- 2. Prepare LandSmart Plans with landowners/land managers to document the practices that protect natural resources, identify opportunities to maintain or improve the quality of natural resources, and prioritize management practices according to needs, goals, and timelines.
- 3. Work cooperatively with landowners and land managers to meet domestic and agricultural water needs, while ensuring that streams have sufficient flow to support aquatic and riparian ecosystems.
 - 3.1. Work with our partners to develop, fund and implement projects that conserve water, reduce extractive demand on water sources, increase water supply security, and reduce excess storm runoff, including off-channel storage, rainwater catchment and hydrology projects.
 - 3.2. Prioritize projects which aim to restore multiple natural resource functions and increase community water security.
- 4. Plan and implement conservation projects aimed at improving water quality throughout our district for wildlife and people.
 - 4.1. Provide information, training in practical skills, and opportunities to participate in projects that help enhance water quality, prevent non-point source pollution, and protect aquatic ecosystems.
 - 4.2. Assist all water users access to clean and sufficient water
- 5. Support small parcel landowners with tools to support resource conservation and enhancement.
 - 5.1. Establish and build natural resource conservation improvement guidance and educational materials for small parcels.

Potential Outcomes

- ♣ Empowered residents improve natural resources
- ♣ Increased community water security
- ♣ Reduction of flooding and erosion
- ♣ Regulated community has the resources to meet and/or exceed requirements
- ♣ Better Streamflow

Goal #4: Assist communities to effectively plan for and monitor the health of our watersheds so they provide safe drinking water, sustainable irrigation water, and intact habitat for native fish, wildlife, and plants.



Strategies

- 1. Use monitoring and science to guide conservation activities and evaluate proposed management projects and strategies.
 - 1.1. Disseminate this information through workshops, reports and educational presentations with the aim of increasing involvement in resource conservation efforts.
 - 1.2. Proactively share watershed health information with partner organizations, community leaders, and residents to inform decision-making.
 - 1.3. Incorporate historical ecology into planning.
- 2. Create more programs to educate and empower citizen scientists including kids in classrooms.
 - 2.1. Enable citizen streamflow connectivity monitoring allowing people to upload information.
- 3. Identifying opportunities to engage with underrepresented community members in beginning stages of planning.
- 4. Provide guidance to the Santa Rosa Plain Groundwater Sustainability Agency.
- 5. Collaborate with community partners to plan for increased availability and access to locally-produced food in Sonoma County.

Potential Outcomes

- ♣ Awareness of watershed issues by elected officials and general public.
- ♣ Key plans developed.
- ♣ RCD guidance used in achieving targeted environmental and social outcomes.
- ♣

Goal #5: The Gold Ridge RCD Board of Directors and staff have the capacity, tools, and financial resources to implement the strategic plan goals.



Strategies

1. Cultivate increased support from local government for outreach, education, forest management, climate resilient agriculture, restoration, and monitoring.
 - 1.1. Work with the County and the RCPA to integrate carbon farming into climate action planning and response goals and measures.
2. Seek additional private sector funding for RCD programs.
 - 2.1. Increase applications to private foundations with a focus on multi-year funding.
 - 2.2. Increase outreach and communication with the agricultural community.
 - 2.3. Conduct an individual donor campaign.
 - 2.4. Work with leaders of corporate sustainability and carbon in setting initiatives to fund carbon farm plans and practice implementation.
3. Increase connections, coordination, collaboration, and partnerships with higher education and science institutions.
4. Develop a strategic marketing and communications plan to support RCD's revenue and program goals.

Potential Outcomes

- ♣ Engaged and Diverse Board
- ♣ Community engagement with the RCD
- ♣ Staff retention and satisfaction
- ♣ Robust, diverse funding for programs



2776 Sullivan Road, Sebastopol, CA 95472
Goldridgercd.org 707.823.5244

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Gold Ridge RCD Staff
Sonoma County Ag Preservation & Open Space District
Paige Greene