All About RCDs

By Christopher Rose

Just what is an RCD? Usually when you pick up a Lay of the Land, you’ll read about Solano RCD’s ongoing efforts to implement conservation practices, educate students and adults, and work with a wide array of partners to move the conservation ball forward in Solano County. This issue seems like the perfect time to take a step back and provide the conservation community with some information about RCDs in general and Solano RCD specifically. When you see our trucks driving down the road or when you sign a release form for your child to experience one of our watershed education field trips, you’ll have a clearer picture of what we are and what we’re doing to promote conservation in Solano County.

The Big Picture: 98 Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs) in the State of California are charged with contributing solutions to pressing statewide issues like climate change, drought management, clean water protection, habitat creation and restoration for fish and wildlife (including endangered and threatened species), and conservation education for youth and adults. RCDs accomplish their missions by building partnerships with tribes, and federal, state, and local agencies. They work citizen to citizen to build better communities, better economies, and a better environment.

RCDs do not advocate or regulate. Their directors guide District engagement in resource issues in an objective, science-based manner.

RCDs are stewards of public and private funds. They are subject to state transparency and accountability laws. The Brown Act and Division 9 of the California Public Resources Code require public meetings, open records, annual audits and financial reporting to the State Controller’s Office.

RCDs are governed by locally elected or appointed independent boards of Directors. RCD staff and Directors’ relationships with their communities makes RCDs trusted and efficient facilitators of locally determined conservation projects. As Special Districts created under Division 9 of the California Public Resources Code, RCDs are local subdivisions of the State.

Every RCD is unique, defined by its funding sources and the conservation issues that guide its work. At the same time, support from the Department of Conservation (DOC) and the California Association of Resource Conservation Districts (CARCD) allows RCDs across the state to pool resources and share information to leverage expertise and experience, building on lessons learned by RCDs in one location to create a better outcome for another RCD located somewhere else.

The Solano Picture: Solano RCD was formed in 1956 to conserve and enhance the living resources within its District.
The Lay of The Land

Solano RCD works with a variety of stakeholders throughout the County to restore and enhance native habitat and help landowners do the same.

Habitat Restoration: Our staff enjoys working with both private landowners and public agencies around the County to restore native riparian and upland habitat. Much of this work is accomplished with the generous help of volunteers from the community, who join us at field sites to install plants and irrigation systems.

Many of the native plants that we establish at restoration sites are collected from local seed and propagated at our Conservation and Education Center (CEC), which houses a small nursery facility.

Native seed is collected from watersheds in or near our field sites and then propagated into native plants at our CEC.

Water Quality Monitoring: Solano RCD works with the Fairfield-Suisun Sewer District and Vallejo Sanitation and Flood Control District to monitor water quality in urban streams as required by the State Water Resources Control Board. Streams are sampled for water chemistry, stream invertebrate and algae communities, sediment properties and geomorphology characteristics, such as stream bank erosion.

Landowner Assistance: Part of Solano RCD’s mission is to provide assistance and technical support to landowners in our District and across Solano County.

Twenty-one individuals, including eight full time and thirteen part-time employees, work on projects and programs across the County to implement and fulfill this mission, utilizing a budget of $1.4 million dollars in the 2015-2016 fiscal year. We build conservation solutions through partnership with landowners, governments and non-governmental organizations. We are committed to local control of environmental resources and working cooperatively with landowners to implement ground-up solutions to resource challenges.

Solano RCD is uniquely positioned to coordinate, manage and implement geographically diverse project sites, develop creative and effective multi-partner projects and provide innovative, high quality conservation education to youth and adults.

The following pages provide a sampling of the variety and depth of our work. To learn more, call our office, explore our website and talk to our partners. We’d love to work with you.

Conservation At Every Scale

By Amy King, Watershed Project Manager and Andrea Mummert Puccini, Conservation Project Manager

Solano RCD works with a variety of stakeholders throughout the County to restore and enhance native habitat and help landowners do the same.

Habitat Restoration: Our staff enjoys working with both private landowners and public agencies around the County to restore native riparian and upland habitat. Much of this work is accomplished with the generous help of volunteers from the community, who join us at field sites to install plants and irrigation systems.

Many of the native plants that we establish at restoration sites are collected from local seed and propagated at our Conservation and Education Center (CEC), which houses a small nursery facility.

Native seed is collected from watersheds in or near our field sites and then propagated into native plants at our CEC.

Water Quality Monitoring: Solano RCD works with the Fairfield-Suisun Sewer District and Vallejo Sanitation and Flood Control District to monitor water quality in urban streams as required by the State Water Resources Control Board. Streams are sampled for water chemistry, stream invertebrate and algae communities, sediment properties and geomorphology characteristics, such as stream bank erosion.

Landowner Assistance: Part of Solano RCD’s mission is to provide assistance and technical support to landowners in our District and across Solano County.

Solano RCD is uniquely positioned to coordinate, manage and implement geographically diverse project sites, develop creative and effective multi-partner projects and provide innovative, high quality conservation education to youth and adults.

The following pages provide a sampling of the variety and depth of our work. To learn more, call our office, explore our website and talk to our partners. We’d love to work with you.
acre, ranging from agricultural producers to rural residents. Our staff do field visits to assess resource concerns (such as weeds or erosion), and conservation goals (such as the creation of wildlife habitat or water conservation). Participating landowners then receive a Conservation Plan with steps for implementation as well as helpful references.

Solano RCD staff can also help connect landowners with local, state or federal programs that provide funding to help implement management practices and conservation projects.

Our staff offers Technical Assistance for resource management practices. This includes assistance in obtaining appropriate native seeds or plants, help with planting designs or methods, on-the-ground coordination of labor, or other help. Through a cooperative agreement with our federal partners at the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), we can provide technical assistance free-of-charge to NRCS cooperators.

Solano RCD also partners with the Solano County Water agency to provide flood preparedness education and to help landowners with flood-prone properties to develop projects that minimize flooding risks that can be funded through SCWA’s small grant program.

Additionally, through our Welcome to the Watershed program, Solano RCD staff demonstrates and distributes information about best management practices for water and soil conservation, native wildlife habitat, urban gardens and agricultural and rangeland management.

Finally, Solano RCD cooperates with the Dixon RCD to operate the Dixon/Solano RCD Water Quality Coalition. The Coalition helps landowners and operators with irrigated agricultural lands to comply with the State Water Board’s Irrigated Lands Regulatory Program (ILRP). The Coalition is responsible for identifying and reporting water quality and toxicity problems in waterways fed by agricultural runoff, and assists in developing plans to address those problems. Coalition staff also offer workshops and individual consultation to assist landowners in meeting reporting requirements of the ILRP.
Watershed Education for K-12 Students

By Marianne Butler, Education Program Manager and Jamie Solomon, Assistant Education Program Manager

Solano RCD provides watershed-based environmental education to County K-12 students. Our in-classroom programs engage students in third and sixth grades and again in high school, providing CA Standards based science enrichment. We also provide water science support to all teachers in the County.

The Suisun Marsh Watershed Program teaches 6th grade students about the Suisun Marsh, one of the largest estuaries in the Western United States and home to many important species of concern. Five preparatory in-class lessons teach students about watershed science, storm water pollution, native and non-native species ecology, and human impacts on the Suisun Marsh. Participants then engage in a day-long field trip hiking, studying, and collecting data. Students participate in guided exploration of the Rush Ranch Open Space area, gaining exposure to scientific techniques that allow them to assess the health and diversity the watershed. In 2015, 1,299 students from nine different schools throughout Solano County took part in the program.

The Watershed Explorers Program takes 3rd graders outdoors to explore a nearby open space or park in their watershed. During a half-day field trip, students tour a local park and learn about the native and non-native flora and fauna of the area. They learn about the importance of native plants and pollinators, as well as the effects of various forms of pollution on the park and their local environment. In 2016, 2,135 3rd graders became Solano County Watershed Explorers.

The Biomonitoring Program is a place-based environmental education program for high school students to provide hands-on citizen science lessons about watershed health and stewardship. Prepared by eight classroom lessons covering native and non-native plant communities, stream ecology and water chemistry, students take an all-day field trip to a local creek. At the study site, students gather data to monitor creek and watershed health, utilizing chemical, physical, and biological tests. They submit the data they gather to agencies throughout the State for long-term study. In the process, students gain an intimate understanding of both the local watershed they live in and the larger regional watersheds in Solano County. The program encourages each student to consider their role as an environmental steward for the place where they live, and to consider environmental science as a potential course of study and career. In 2016, 357 high school students participated in the Biomonitoring program.
The School Water Education Program (SWEP) provides water resource education to teachers and children of all ages. The SWEP program offers a variety of resources for water education available to all County teachers and students, including: water related K-12 classroom lessons; Water Education for Teachers (Project W.E.T.), an annual teacher training that provides educators with methods to introduce water topics to their classrooms; and age-targeted materials to foster water education. In the 2015-2016 school year, 4,451 students participated in SWEP related programs and 21 teachers attended Project W.E.T. training.

The Vacaville Urban Greening Program is a restoration field trip program for elementary students in the Alamo Creek watershed in Vacaville. Students take a half-day walking field trip to explore Alamo Creek and learn about its importance to their community. Classes embark on a guided tour of the walking trails that follow the creek, discovering the plants and animals that use the creek for habitat. Students participate in a riparian restoration project, planting native grasses and shrubs in the area around the creek. In 2016, 243 students helped the Solano RCD plant native grasses throughout the city of Vacaville.

The annual Youth Ag Day is a learning fair for Solano County 3rd grade classes. This year, SWEP participated, teaching lessons about watershed science, storm water pollution, and water conservation. Students used a hands-on watershed model to learn about human impacts on their local watershed and were able to take home a variety of water conservation booklets. During Youth Ag Day 2016, SWEP educators engaged 325 students in water education.

All of Solano RCD’s education programming is funded with directed action and competitive grant funding. Though it varies from year to year, a significant portion of that funding comes from local partnerships and grants. Whenever possible, we leverage those local dollars against State and Federal funding sources to provide the greatest access to a locally tailored, high quality environmental education experience to as many Solano County students as possible.
Spring sunset highlighting common madia and golden lupine; wildflowers in a Solano County native plant hedgerow recently installed by Solano RCD. Photo courtesy of Katharina Ullmann

Get the *Lay of the Land* by e-mail!

Our newsletter is available in pdf format, for delivery by email. If you would like to start receiving the *Lay of the Land* in your email in-box instead of as a mailed paper copy, please contact Judy Powell at jkpowell@solanorcd.org