

North Dakota Conservation Workforce Training and Certification Initiative

North Dakota Conservation District Employees Association

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State: North Dakota

Hydrologic Unit Code:

Watershed:

High Priority Watershed:

TMDL Development and/or Implementation (check all that apply)

<u>Project Types</u>	<u>Waterbody Types</u>	<u>NPS Category</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Staffing & Support	<input type="checkbox"/> Groundwater	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agriculture
<input type="checkbox"/> Watershed	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Lakes/Reservoirs	<input type="checkbox"/> Urban Runoff
<input type="checkbox"/> Groundwater	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Rivers	<input type="checkbox"/> Silviculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I & E	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Streams	<input type="checkbox"/> Construction
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Wetlands	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Other	

Project Location: LATITUDE: 47.5515° LONGITUDE: 101.0020°

Major Goal: To develop, implement, and sustain a statewide workforce development system that supports a highly skilled, certified, and coordinated conservation workforce capable of delivering effective, science-based technical assistance that results in measurable improvements to North Dakota's water quality. The coordinated efforts of this and existing training programs for local officials will ensure they are equipped to effectively plan and implement conservation practices and programs that improve water quality.

Project Description: The **North Dakota Conservation Workforce Training and Certification Initiative** is a coordinated, statewide effort to strengthen the technical capacity, consistency, and long-term sustainability of North Dakota's conservation delivery system. This initiative supports the development and implementation of a comprehensive training and certification framework for conservation district employees, technical service providers, and partner agency staff who deliver conservation assistance that directly supports water quality improvement and protection goals under Section 319 of the Clean Water Act.

By establishing standardized core competencies, targeted technical training, and a clear certification pathway, this project will ensure that all staff involved in planning and implementing conservation practices have the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to deliver sound conservation technical assistance. This workforce investment will enhance local capacity to identify and address nonpoint source (NPS) pollution concerns, implement effective best management practices (BMPs), and engage landowners in long-term stewardship of North Dakota's soil and water resources.

Initiative Funding Allocations:

FY26 Section 319 Funding: **\$551,956**

Match: **\$367,970**

Other local/state/federal funds: **\$90,000**

Total Project Cost: **\$919,926**

2.0 Statement of Need

2.1 North Dakota's water quality improvement efforts depend on a skilled, well-supported local conservation workforce. Conservation districts and partner agencies are the frontline implementers of water quality improvement practices across the state. However, significant gaps exist in staff training, technical certification, and consistency of conservation planning and delivery. Currently, 88% of North Dakota's Conservation Districts lack standardized professional development plans. These gaps limit the effectiveness of program implementation and hinder the long-term sustainability of local water quality projects.

To meet the increasing demand for technical assistance and ensure successful implementation of nonpoint source management practices, the partner agencies — including the **North Dakota Conservation District Employees Association (NDCDEA)**, **North Dakota Association of Soil Conservation Districts (NDASCD)**, **Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)**, **North Dakota Department of Environmental Quality (NDDEQ)**, **North Dakota Forest Service (NDFS)**, and **North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension** — have come together to develop a coordinated training and certification framework. This initiative directly addresses identified workforce gaps and ensures a consistent, statewide approach to conservation training and delivery.

In addition to strengthening technical competencies, there is a growing need for training that equips staff and local officials with strategic planning skills and the ability to apply watershed- and landscape-scale approaches to conservation. These skills are essential to help local leaders and field staff identify priority resource concerns, align projects with larger watershed goals, and coordinate conservation efforts across property and jurisdictional boundaries. Training in strategic planning, watershed coordination, and data-driven decision-making will improve the ability of conservation professionals to integrate local priorities with statewide and national water quality objectives, resulting in more efficient use of resources, measurable conservation outcomes, and enhanced service to landowners and constituents.

By developing and implementing this workforce training and certification initiative, North Dakota will ensure that its conservation professionals are not only technically proficient, but also strategically prepared to lead and collaborate in addressing complex, landscape-scale water quality challenges.

2.2 Target Audience: The primary audience for this project includes conservation district employees, local officials, and agriculture and conservation partners who are directly engaged in planning, implementing, and supporting conservation practices that protect and enhance water quality across North Dakota.

District staff are the backbone of the conservation technical assistance delivery system related to implementation of best management practices (BMPs) that address nonpoint source (NPS) pollution. These employees serve as the local link between landowners, communities, and partner agencies. The training and certification initiative will provide district employees with the technical, educational, and planning skills needed to effectively design and deliver sound conservation assistance. By strengthening core technical competencies and offering specialized technical and planning training, the program will ensure consistent, high-quality service delivery and improve the overall impact of conservation efforts on water quality outcomes statewide. District staff numbers average about 115 employees across 54 conservation districts.

Local officials, including conservation district board members, water resource district boards, and other local leaders, play a critical role in setting priorities, allocating resources, and supporting the implementation of watershed-scale conservation efforts. Targeted training and education for these individuals will enhance their understanding of strategic planning, conservation policy, and best management practices. These education efforts will improve their ability to guide the locally led conservation planning process and ensure that conservation initiatives align with both local priorities and statewide water quality objectives. Total number of local officials reached would be approximately 864 statewide.

Our secondary audience are representatives from partner organizations such as NRCS, NDSU Extension, NDDEQ, NDFS, and other state, federal, and non-profit agriculture and conservation organizations. These partners provide technical guidance, funding, and educational support that can be leveraged to increase the reach of local conservation programs. Partner staff will benefit from consistent training standards, shared resources, and enhanced coordination across agencies. This alignment will strengthen collaborative delivery of conservation services and amplify the effectiveness of projects that reduce NPS pollution and improve soil and water health.

Together, these target audiences represent the network of professionals, leaders, and partners essential to successful conservation delivery in North Dakota. By providing comprehensive training and certification opportunities to these groups, the initiative will build the knowledge, confidence, and capacity needed to achieve measurable improvements in water quality and long-term stewardship of natural resources.

3.0 Project Description

3.2 Goal: The primary goal of this initiative is to build a highly skilled, certified, and coordinated conservation workforce capable of delivering effective, science-based technical assistance that results in measurable improvements to North Dakota's water quality.

Objective 1: Improve water quality through established statewide core technical competencies required for all conservation employees to ensure foundational knowledge in soil health, water quality, and conservation planning.

Task 1: Employ one FTE (coordinator) to develop, implement, and coordinate a collaborative statewide training and certification program.

Product: One coordinator to work with the multi-agency Training Strategy Committee to identify gaps in training and certification resources, develop an annual training needs inventory, and coordinate content development, delivery of training, and support.

Cost: \$335,426

Task 2: Create a blended training model combining online and in-person learning.

Product: An online learning management system with modules that correlate to national, state, and local training curricula to deliver asynchronous training opportunities, an employee driven professional development planning model, and training/certification tracking system. Includes new content and curriculum creation and adaptation of existing content.

Cost: \$325,000

Task 3: Conduct 5 regional and 2-3 state-wide training sessions annually to add field experience, showcase successes, and improve coordination across the state.

Product: Increased field technical skills, conservation planner certifications, and local level on the ground planning experience resulting in an increase in Section 319 projects across the state.

Cost: \$169,500

Objective 2: Identify local priority resource concerns and associated technical skill needs based on the Locally Led Conservation process.

Task 4: Conduct workshops and mentoring for staff and local officials utilizing standardized national guidance and resources for successful Local Working Groups.

Product: Collaborate with partners to host and/or support 5 regional and 1 statewide training session annually on methods to develop strategic and annual plans involving stakeholders, partners, and local communities. The focus will be on landscape level conservation planning through exercise-based training on how to tie planning to measurable outcomes related to water quality improvements.

Cost: \$75,000

Objective 3: Evaluate and maintain employee competencies and certifications to ensure continued professional growth and long-term workforce sustainability.

Task 5: Implement a strategy for evaluating and communicating outcomes from trainings, asynchronous courses, workshops, and needs assessments.

Product: A framework for ongoing review of training needs and certification standards. A statewide database of completed trainings, certifications, and employee professional development plans.

Cost: \$15,000

3.3 Project Milestones - See Attached Milestone Table, Attachment 1

3.4 Appropriateness of Lead Project Sponsor: The North Dakota Conservation District Employees Association (NDCDEA) was officially formed on February 11, 1991, with the purpose of promoting professionalism and providing training and networking opportunities for district employees throughout the state. In addition to supporting district employees, NDCDEA advocates for diverse partnerships and collaboration opportunities to increase effectiveness and efficiency in the delivery of conservation programs. NDCDEA is a strong partner in the conservation delivery system that includes District Supervisors, the North Dakota Association of Soil Conservation Districts, the North Dakota State Soil Conservation Committee, and State and USDA conservation agencies.

NDCDEA develops, coordinates, and hosts training and leadership opportunities for district employees including technical training, youth and adult outreach, and leadership. NDCDEA utilizes partnerships in the coordination of sound technical training delivery. NDCDEA has a strong history of bringing partners to the table to collaborate on projects and encourage conversation. Most recently NDCDEA has added two full-time positions that will work directly with this project, a state-wide Training Coordinator and a Programs and Projects Coordinator. The NDCDEA Training Coordinator will serve as the central facilitator for this initiative — coordinating needs assessments, compiling training resources, and ensuring delivery aligns with state and federal conservation and water quality priorities.

Implementation of this initiative will be guided by the Training Strategy Committee (TSC), composed of representatives from the partnering agencies listed above. The TSC will guide curriculum development, review training materials, identify certification standards, and oversee implementation of the training framework.

NDCDEA has a history of successfully administering state and federal grants, including a 2024 NRCS Conservation Collaborative Grant award totaling \$795,000. The organization manages successful Outdoor Heritage Fund grants (totaling \$12,407,000) for statewide tree planting initiatives. There is also an NRCS Conservation Delivery Planning Partnership Agreement to provide technical and financial assistance to conservation districts for work on USDA Farm Bill directives.

4.0 Coordination Plan

The NDCDEA will lead the project in collaboration with NDASCD, NDDEQ, NRCS, NDSU Extension, NDFS, and NDSSCC. These partners are signatories on the 2025-2029 Statewide Technical Training Strategy. Local conservation districts and officials will participate directly in training and planning exercises to enhance conservation delivery capacity.

1. ND Association of Conservation Districts (NDASCD) – commit to support in the form of financial means, logistic support, and outreach. They will continue to support the Training Coordinator position per an existing MOA with the NDCDEA.
2. ND Department of Environmental Quality (NDDEQ) - oversee Section 319 funding and assist in providing subject matter experts for content and training development. They will also serve on the Training Strategy Committee.
3. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA NRCS) – provide technical assistance and subject matter experts to assist in content development, training, and outreach. They will serve on the Training Strategy Committee.
4. NDSU Extension - provide technical assistance and subject matter experts to assist in content development, training, and outreach. They will serve on the Training Strategy Committee. In addition, coordination between the Training Coordinator and Soil and Water Leadership Development program staff will ensure complimentary content development and messaging.
5. ND Forest Service (NDFS) - provide technical assistance and subject matter experts to assist in content development, training, and outreach. They will serve on the Training Strategy Committee.
6. ND State Soil Conservation Committee (NDSSCC) – provide support for training initiatives to ensure messaging is shared and coordinated between employee training and district board training.

4.2 Letters of Support – see attached, Attachment 2

4.3 Partner Project Coordination: This initiative represents a unified, multi-agency collaboration to build workforce capacity for conservation delivery in North Dakota. Synergy gained from work being done through the Soil and Water Leadership Development program and this initiative will further strengthen efforts to provide training and resources to more effectively implement conservation planning, best management practices, and soil and water quality improvement efforts.

The use of existing resources, tools, and successful training models from other states such as Minnesota and Washington will accelerate implementation and avoid duplication of effort.

5.0 Evaluation and Monitoring Plan: Evaluation will include both qualitative and quantitative measures:

- Pre- and post-training assessments to measure knowledge gain.
- Tracking of certifications achieved and Job Approval Authority levels obtained.
- Participant feedback surveys on training quality and relevance.
- Annual training needs assessment surveys.
- Annual review by the TSC to assess progress toward workforce development and water quality goals. Results will be reported annually to NDDEQ and partner agencies and used to guide adaptive improvements in training delivery.

6.0 Budget: See Budget Tables, Attachment 3

Attachment 1: Milestone Table

Task/Responsible Organization	Group	Output	Qty	SFY 26				SFY 27				SFY 28				SFY 29				SFY 30			
				Quarter*				Quarter*				Quarter*				Quarter*				Quarter*			
				1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
OBJECTIVE 1: Conservation Planning Training to Improve Water Quality																							
Task 1 - Employ Statewide Training Coordinator	1,2	Training, Content/Curriculum Development, Planning, Coordination	1 FTE		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Task 2 - Build Online Learning Management System	1,2,3,4,5,6	Online content, courses, employee development plan, and certification tracking	1 Learning Management System				x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Task 3 - Annual Regional & State Training	1,2,3,4,5,6	Regional and Annual in-person training modules to increase technical skills and conservation planner certifications.	5 regional sessions, 2 statewide opportunities							x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
OBJECTIVE 2: Improve Watershed Conservation Planning at the Local Level																							
Task 4 - Build Resources, Mentorships, and Knowledge of Locally Led Conservation Planning	1,2,3,4,5,6	Workshops and mentorship programming	5 regional sessions, 1 statewide session					x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
OBJECTIVE 3: Evaluation																							
Task 5 - Framework for review of training needs, progress, and cerfication standards	1,2,3,4,5,6	Evaluation framework, needs assessment, ongiong curriculum development	Annual reporting					x				x				x				x			x
OBJECTIVE 4: Reporting																							
Task 6 - Reporting progress	1,2	Reporting	Annual Progress reports					x				x				x				x			x
Group 1: ND Conservation District Employees Association - Provides administration, supplies and financial support for the project Group 2: ND Association of Soil Conservation Districts - Provides administrative, technical and financial assistance for the project Group 3: Natural Resources Conservation Service - Provides technical assistance in the planning, design and delivery of training, serves on State Training Strategy Committee Group 4: N.D. Dept. of Environmental Quality Division of Water Quality - Oversees Section 319 funding, monitoring and overall evaluation of the project, serves on State Training Strategy Committee Group 5: NDSU Extension - Provides technical assistance in the planning, design and delivery of training, serves on State Training Strategy Committee Group 6: ND Forest Service - Provides technical assistance in the planning, design and delivery of training, serves on State Training Strategy Committee																							
* Quarter 1 - July/September Quarter 2 - October/December Quarter 3 - January/March Quarter 4 - April/June																							

Attachment 2: Letters of Support



NORTH DAKOTA FOREST SERVICE

"To care for, protect and improve forest and natural resources to enhance the quality of life for present and future generations."

October 30, 2025

Dustin Krueger, President
North Dakota Conservation District Employees Association

Dear Dustin:

The North Dakota Forest Service is pleased to provide this letter of support for the North Dakota Conservation District Employees Association (NDCDEA) EPA 319 project.

This effort will be instrumental in addressing growing education and training needs for North Dakota's soil conservation districts. The funding will result in natural resource professionals providing current, science and standards-based technical assistance to landowners across the state. The impact on the ground will include improved water quality, decreased soil erosion and enhanced natural resources statewide.

The NDCDEA has a proven track record of working with landowners through state and federally funded conservation programs and has the capability to develop, administer and expand programs to meet identified need. As a close partner, the North Dakota Forest Service has worked with the Association on prior efforts and stands ready to coordinate with and assist the NDCDEA with this opportunity.

The NDCDEA will deliver the program with the highest level of transparency, accountability and professionalism, making them the perfect entity to lead the effort.

Sincerely,

Tom Claeys, State Forester



STATE SOIL CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

NDSU Dept 7080 | PO Box 6050 | Fargo, ND 58108-6050 | Office (701) 231-4308

November 07, 2025

ND EPA 319 Grant Review Committee,

On behalf of NDSU Extension Soil Conservation and the State Soil Conservation Committee, we support for the North Dakota Conservation Workforce Training and Certification Initiative led by the North Dakota Conservation District Employees Association (NDCDEA).

NDSU Extension's mission is to provide practical, research-based education that strengthens agriculture, natural resources, and communities. A well-trained, coordinated conservation workforce is essential to that mission and this initiative is in alignment with that goal.

This effort will help solidify the backbone of North Dakota's conservation delivery system by creating a unified training and certification program for Soil Conservation District (SCD) employees. Standardized training and shared resources mean that district staff across the state will have the knowledge, tools, and confidence to plan and implement effective conservation practices that protect our soil and water. It will also allow partners to better understand the training and capabilities of our SCDs to better work together on conservation initiatives and best practices. For NDSU Extension, it will allow us to better coordinate training opportunities that compliment and support the established NDCDEA's curriculum.

We value the collaborative approach of this project and look forward to supporting the development of consistent, science-based training that strengthens both local capacity and statewide conservation outcomes.

Sincerely,

STATE SOIL CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

Paula Comeau
Soil and Water Leadership Development State Program Coordinator



NORTH DAKOTA ASSOCIATION OF SOIL CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

3310 University Drive
Bismarck, ND 58504
(701) 223-8518 • 223-8575

November 6, 2025

Mrs. Emily Novak, NPS Coordinator
North Dakota Department of Environmental Quality
4201 Normandy Street
Bismarck, ND 58503-1324

Ref: ND Conservation District Employees Association Workforce Training and Certification Initiative Funding Support

Dear Emily,

The North Dakota Association of Soil Conservation Districts (NDASCD) proudly supports the NDCDEA Workforce Training and Certification Initiative and asks for funding consideration through the ND Department of Environmental Quality program.

The Soil Conservation Districts in North Dakota will benefit from this statewide initiative by addressing conservation planning, technical training and certification. We have seen an increase in staff turnover within the 54 county offices due to the lack of training and certification that an employee needs to successfully complete their technical requirements. This initiative will help in developing individual planning requirements and tracking modules that will target conservation practices. These training modules may include soil health, water quality and quantity, rangeland management and wildlife habitat. This collective effort within the partnership aligns, with national conservation planning directives for employee training.

It is important to build a strong training platform that utilizes the skill set of each employee. We will see the increased benefit of staff retention, more in-depth conservation planning and the ability to expand statewide programs to our local producers. The NDASCD Board of Supervisors supports this initiative and will contribute in the partnership collaboration for a successful delivery.

Sincerely,

Rhonda Kelsch
Executive Director
NDASCD

Attachment 3: Budget Tables

Part I: Funding Sources	SFY26	SFY27	SFY28	In-Kind	Totals
FY26 Section 319 Funds	\$161,340	\$192,732	\$197,884		\$551,956
Subtotal	\$161,340	\$192,732	\$197,884	\$0	\$551,956

Other Federal & State Funds	SFY26	SFY27	SFY28	In-Kind	Total
Natural Resources Conservation Service (TA)	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$25,000		\$75,000
ND Forest Service (TA)	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000		\$15,000
Subtotal	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$0	\$90,000

State & Local Match	SFY26	SFY27	SFY28	In-Kind	Total
ND Conservation District Employees Association (TA & FA)	\$27,266	\$27,266	\$27,268	\$74,170	\$81,800
ND Soil Conservation Districts	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$137,000	\$0
ND Forest Service (TA)	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$10,000	
NDSU Extension Service/SSCC (TA)	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$5,000	
ND Association of Soil Conservation Districts (TA & FA)	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$30,000	\$30,000
Subtotal	\$37,266	\$37,266	\$37,268	\$256,170	\$111,800

Total Project Budget	\$228,606	\$259,998	\$265,152	\$256,170	\$753,756
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TA - Technical Assistance
FA - Other Financial Assistance
SFY = State Fiscal Year

	SFY26	SFY27	SFY28	Total	Cash	In-Kind	319 Match	Total
Personnel/Support								
Salary	\$106,400	\$111,720	\$117,306	\$335,426	\$60,000	\$74,170	\$201,256	\$335,426
Travel	\$5,000	\$12,000	\$15,000	\$32,000	\$12,800		\$19,200	\$32,000
Equipment/Supplies	\$2,500	\$2,500	\$2,500	\$7,500	\$3,000		\$4,500	\$7,500
Subtotal	\$113,900	\$126,220	\$134,806	\$374,926	\$75,800	\$74,170	\$224,956	\$374,926

Objective 1: Conservation Planning Training to Improve Water Quality								
Learning Management Systems	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$75,000	\$30,000		\$45,000	\$75,000
Curriculum Development and Content Production	\$80,000	\$85,000	\$85,000	\$250,000	\$0	\$100,000	\$150,000	\$250,000
In-Person Technical Training/Workshops	\$30,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$130,000	\$0	\$52,000	\$78,000	\$130,000
Subtotal	\$135,000	\$160,000	\$160,000	\$455,000	\$30,000	\$152,000	\$273,000	\$455,000

Objective 2: Improve Watershed Conservation Planning at the Local Level								
Mentorship and Locally Led Conservation Workshops	\$15,000	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$75,000	\$0	\$30,000	\$45,000	\$75,000
Subtotal	\$15,000	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$75,000	\$0	\$30,000	\$45,000	\$75,000

Objective 3: Evaluation								
Implement Assessment and Evaluation Framework	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$15,000	\$6,000		\$9,000	\$15,000
Reporting and Administration*	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0		\$0	\$0
Subtotal	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$15,000	\$6,000	\$0	\$9,000	\$15,000

**Included in Task 1 (Personnel/Support)*

Total 319 Non-Federal Budget	\$268,900	\$321,220	\$329,806	\$919,926	\$111,800	\$256,170	\$551,956	\$919,926
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