

# BENTON SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

## *Strategic Direction 2022-2027*

### **The Need**

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Our rich valley soils, the powerful Willamette River and its tributaries, our strong communities, a world-class university, and more make Benton County a place of abundance.

Yet the communities and natural resources of our county face many changes and challenges. Our changing climate is influencing everything from the availability of clean water, to increased danger from wildfire, to the health of critical habitat for plants and animals. Meanwhile, the ongoing transition from farms, ranches, and open space to housing for a growing population make careful stewardship of the land and waters at the edge of the urban growth boundary ever more important. Of course, these concerns do not occur in a vacuum: They intersect with the need to maintain the viability of our working lands, and the need to ensure that everyone, including our most vulnerable community members, has access to the benefits of a healthy natural environment.

### **Our Vision and Commitment**

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At the Benton Soil and Water Conservation District, our Board of Directors and staff are honored to serve our communities and the natural world as we join with many partners in working to meet these needs.

#### ***Our mission***

*To engage Benton County residents  
in the conservation and stewardship of natural resources  
for current and future generations.*

#### ***Our vision***

*Our vision is that the land, waters, and forests of Benton County will be healthy and resilient through the care and effort of everyone in our community, and that the benefits of conservation will be equitably shared.*

#### **This ideal future includes:**

- Healthy soils that act as the living foundation of vibrant habitats and sustainable food production, and as a crucial element in reducing and withstanding the impacts of climate change.
- Vibrant and resilient working lands, where farmers, ranchers, and foresters use conservation practices that create long-term health for the land and water and help our communities adapt to changes in climate and other conditions.
- Clean and abundant water for drinking, irrigation, and sustenance of the natural environment.
- Thriving habitats and watersheds that support diverse plants, animals, and other species.

- Collective action by everyone in Benton County—farmers and ranchers, individuals and households, businesses, institutions, and organizations—to care for and support our land and waters.

We recognize the urgency of this work in the face of unprecedented threats from climate change, development, and other pressures. With everyone contributing their own strengths and gifts, together we can steward, restore, and enhance this place we call home.

**Our commitment to this vision includes:**

- Providing support, inspiration, and education to help anyone and everyone get engaged.
- Proactively reaching out to those who face barriers to involvement in conservation and adapting our services to be accessible and welcoming to all.
- Encouraging cooperation and shared leadership from all sectors—leading efforts ourselves and providing support to the efforts of others.
- Maintaining our historic attention to working lands, while also helping people care for natural, residential, and urban areas.
- Aligning our work with statewide and regional efforts.

## **Our Values**

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Several principles guide our work, help us make decisions, and support our relationships:

**Collaboration**

Teamwork and partnership are the essence of what we do. We see ourselves as a part of a whole community of people working towards shared goals. Across all of our work we commit to listening to and understanding multiple perspectives. In our program work, we seek out places where we can bring partners together and create space for collaboration, and other places where we can join conversations convened by others. We seek to contribute our unique value to our partnerships, including actively supporting partners with funding, expertise, and other resources. Internally, we maintain both clear structures and understanding of individual roles and responsibilities, and a commitment to gathering input and involving each other when making decisions. We recognize that all collaboration is sustained by trust and respect, and that trust and respect are fostered by clear communication, consistent follow-through, and genuine appreciation.

**Community inclusion**

As a public agency, we have a fundamental responsibility to serve everyone in Benton County. This means being welcoming to all, and actively reaching beyond those who easily connect with our services to engage others who have been excluded from conservation. This value requires us to proactively extend beyond our comfort zones to examine our own blind spots, bridge gaps, and leave behind the habits of the past that do not serve our current goals. We go beyond public meeting requirements to invite and welcome people to

interact with us as we set direction for the District. We solicit and humbly receive feedback and continuously adapt to make SWCD projects, programs, volunteer service, and employment opportunities easier to understand and more accessible to all. We develop and sustain relationships with individuals and organizations representing diverse community-based partners and offer support to their projects and programs.

### **Innovation and improvement**

We are on a continuous journey of improvement and adaptation. We understand that taking risks, making mistakes, learning, and changing our approach are all part of moving forward. We embrace personal and organizational feedback with open minds and courage even when it makes us uncomfortable. We allow ourselves time to be creative, to step back from the day-to-day and think about how to evolve as an organization and as individuals. We open ourselves to many ways of learning, from training, research, direct community feedback, and from our own mistakes. Instead of saying “we can’t”, we think flexibly and creatively. We make connections to solve problems, continuously find new ways to hear from different communities, and seek new opportunities and viewpoints.

### **Excellent public service**

We take pride in providing high-quality service. We demonstrate this value by having deep expertise on our team and providing effective programs that help the community steward our collective resources. We provide fast, friendly, and knowledgeable responses to questions and requests. We are dedicated to helping community members find resources to implement their own conservation ideas and priorities. We seek funds on behalf of our constituents, and we nurture a broad network of partners who can support community needs or requests that we can’t meet. Internally, we know we can count on each other to follow through and do our work thoroughly. We are dedicated to impeccable accountability in our fiscal management and in our adherence to the many laws governing public agencies.

## **About this document**

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The Benton SWCD’s 2022-2027 Strategic Direction describes our goals and strategies for moving towards this vision over the next several years. This document was created by the Board of Directors and staff of the Benton SWCD over the winter and spring of 2022.

### **The preplanning process included small group discussions, interviews and focus groups with:**

- *SWCD Directors:* Nate Johnson (Chair), Bob Morris (Vice Chair), Jerry Paul (Treasurer), Kerry Hastings (Secretary), Eliza Mason, Henry Storch, and Graham Trask.
- *SWCD Associate Directors:* Rana Foster, Marcella Henkels, and David Barron.
- *SWCD Staff:* Holly Crosson (Executive Director), Michael Ahr (Natural Resource Conservation Program Manager), Linda Lovett (Operations Manager), Donna Schmitz (Resource Conservationist), and Teresa Matteson (Resource Conservationist). The

District's Communications and Community Engagement Coordinator position was open while this Plan was developed.

### **Representatives from partner organizations and agencies included:**

- Xan Augerot - Benton County Commissioner
- Karen Finley - Benton County Farm Bureau member
- Andy Gallagher - Red Hill Soils
- Amy Garrett - Oregon State University, Small Farms Program
- Kathleen Guillozet - Bonneville Environmental Foundation, Watershed Program Director
- Karen Hans - Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife
- Cheryl Hummon - Oregon Department of Agriculture, Water Quality Program
- Amy Kaiser - Natural Resources Conservation Service, District Conservationist
- Nicole Maness - Willamette Partnership, Resilient Habitat Partner
- Jessica McDonald - Greenbelt Land Trust, Executive Director
- Beth Myers-Shenai - Oregon Department of Agriculture, Noxious Weed Program
- Eric Nusbaum - Oregon Department of Agriculture, SWCD Program
- Cory Owens - Natural Resources Conservation Service, Assistant State Conservationist Partnerships
- Courtney Schaff - Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, Business Operations Manager
- Brad Withrow-Robinson - Oregon State University Extension, Forestry and Natural Resources
- Holly Purpura from the Marys River Watershed Council was invited to participate in a focus group but was not able to attend. Holly Crosson and Michael Ahr held separate meetings with Kristen Larson of the Luckiamute Watershed Council and Clinton Begley of the Long Tom Watershed Council to discuss current and future collaborations between BSWCD and the Councils. We also reached out to Calapooia Watershed Council.

Benton SWCD staff and directors gathered for facilitated strategic discussions February through April 2022. All directors and staff reviewed and commented on several drafts of the strategic direction. The Board of Directors approved BSWCD's 2022-2027 Strategic Direction on June 13, 2022.

### **Updates to the Strategic Direction**

Acknowledging that our operating environment and organization are changing rapidly, we plan to check back regularly on this Strategic Direction document. We will incorporate the goals, strategies, and measurable objectives into annual workplans, staff reports, and annual reports. As new information is learned, we will update our action planning and, if warranted, our major strategies.

## Overarching strategic themes for 2022-2027

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Four strategic themes are woven throughout the five goals of this strategic direction document:

➤ **Climate**

We will increase our focus on reducing greenhouse gases and creating climate resilience.

➤ **Targeted impact**

We will make sure BSWCD programs are directed toward specific audiences and outcomes.

➤ **Equity**

We will increase inclusion and access for marginalized and under-resourced communities.

➤ **Collaborative leadership**

We will work with our partners to strategically leverage our specific organizational strengths in pursuit of shared goals.

## Specific Goals and Strategies for 2022-2027

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**Goal #1:** Ensure that the soil, water, and ecosystems of Benton County, including diverse habitats on wild, working, and urban lands, are protected, restored, and resilient.

**Strategies**

1. Orient the District’s materials and technical assistance for landowners and land managers to prioritize practices that reduce climate impacts and/or help our natural systems and communities become more resilient.
2. Define a suite of services that help all interested landowners and land managers implement key soil, water, and habitat conservation practices while proactively focusing on landowners and land managers in areas with a high potential conservation benefit, including benefits to soil health, groundwater, agricultural water quality, Oregon White Oak habitat, and other areas of focus.
3. Respond to high-impact urban conservation opportunities at the intersection of urban and rural lands, and those where we can amplify the efforts of local government partners.

4. Increase engagement of landowners and land managers representing the full diversity of Benton County including Tribal communities and farmers of color.
5. Disseminate information to help landowners and land managers develop wildfire resilience, and work with partners to define Benton SWCD's role in providing specific technical assistance in forest health and wildfire resilience.
6. Coordinate partners to strategize and implement invasive species control and habitat enhancement projects through the Benton Cooperative Weed Management Area and Willamette Mainstem Cooperative.

**Goal #2:** Deliver engaging education and outreach opportunities that inspire residents throughout Benton County to protect and restore soil, water, and habitat.

### **Strategies**

1. Orient the District's educational materials and programs to prioritize practices that reduce climate impacts and/or help our human and natural systems become resilient to climate change.
2. Increase the use of compelling and accessible digital outreach including web, social media, and video to help urban residents and rural landowners value and promote the health of water, soil, and habitat for native plants/wildlife and human communities.
3. Work with partners to evaluate and align youth education offerings to identified community needs and strategic goals.
4. Leverage the annual Native Plant Sale to reach more diverse residents and promote conservation learning among customers.
5. Collaborate with a broad spectrum of businesses, community-based organizations, and volunteers to promote practices that support healthy and resilient soil, water, and habitat.

**Goal #3:** Develop clear, consistent communications so people throughout Benton County can easily participate in Benton SWCD services and take action to steward our resources.

**Strategies**

1. Develop and implement a strategic communications plan to increase the visibility and understanding of Benton SWCD and expand its reach to new audiences.
2. Ensure the Benton SWCD team includes professional communications and marketing skills, knowledge, and abilities.
3. Clarify program descriptions and other information to make Benton SWCD’s services more accessible and understandable.
4. Collect and disseminate stories, statistics, and visual resources to communicate Benton SWCD’s goals, services, and impact.
5. Enhance internal coordination and collaboration to support communications strategies for Benton SWCD and all programs.
6. Regularly evaluate communications and outreach efforts to ensure desired impact including accessibility to diverse audiences.

**Goal #4:** Enhance strategic partnerships and revenue to increase Benton SWCD’s impact.

**Strategies**

1. Identify traditional and emergent opportunities for funding and partnership with state and federal agencies and private funders, and use a strategic filter to help Benton SWCD staff evaluate and pursue the most impactful opportunities to support local needs.
2. Strengthen the Benton SWCD’s partnership with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to maximize benefit to landowners and communities in Benton County.
3. Meet regularly and coordinate efforts with local conservation partners including the four watershed councils operating in Benton County and the Confluence group of local conservation nonprofits.

4. Seek stronger partnerships with the natural resources departments of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians and Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.
5. Enhance partnerships and potential fee-for-service relationships with local institutions including Benton County, local cities and towns, and Oregon State University to achieve shared goals.
6. Evaluate the potential to develop sponsorships and donations from local businesses, individual donors, and other non-traditional partners.

**Goal #5:** Implement operations that support highly effective programs and services.

**Strategies**

1. Adopt and use an equity focus to evaluate Benton SWCD’s programs and adapt them to ensure equitable access by all community members.
2. Evaluate and adapt district programs by holding annual strategic plan reviews, creating adaptive workplans, and conducting a comprehensive community-based assessment to better understand conservation / information needs and community perspectives on how the District’s services and outreach can improve.
3. Increase board/staff collaboration by actively learning about each other and each other’s work, holding more joint meetings and celebrations, and creating space for informal and unstructured interaction and community-building.
4. Create a transition and operations plan reflective of changing workplace trends, anticipated staff retirements or other turnover, and professional development needs.
5. Ensure District operations meet the highest standards of public agency administration.