



## **National Association of Conservation Districts**

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### **Talking Points on the America's Great Outdoors Initiative**

#### **Background**

On April 17, President Obama launched the America's Great Outdoors initiative as an attempt to reshape U.S. conservation policy. Obama said the nation's growing population, pollution and other factors are "putting a rising strain on our lands." Government cannot address conservation issues alone, and he urged private industry, local communities, Native American leaders and volunteers to help protect America's outdoors. He hopes to build on "a breathtaking legacy of conservation that still enhances our lives."

The President also signed a memorandum directing the Secretary of Interior, Secretary of Agriculture, Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality to map out broad goals that the administration can pursue in the next few years, including forming coalitions with state and local governments and the private sector; encouraging outdoor recreation by Americans; connecting wildlife migration corridors; and encouraging the sustainable use of private land. The memorandum also pays special attention to bringing young Americans into the conversation.

A series of listening sessions will take place this year in different locations nationwide, culminating with a report to the President by November 15, 2010.

#### **Through the America's Great Outdoors Initiative, the Administration should consider working with Conservation Districts to multiply conservation benefits across the nation.**

- Conservation districts have been involved in delivering locally-driven conservation across America for more than 70 years. No other conservation or environmental group in the country implements more conservation practices on the ground. Conservation districts exist in virtually every county and community in the nation, where they work on meaningful, landscape-scale projects that produce verifiable improvements in environmental quality.
- Conservation Districts have established well-worn pathways to America's farms and ranches and private landowners.
- In addition to raising crops and livestock for America and other parts of the world, our farmers and ranchers improve the habitat and populations of America's wildlife and fish. Better connections with state and federal fish and wildlife agencies should be examined.
- Working lands encourages private landowners to be better stewards of the land.

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- Conservation districts help private landowners [give specific examples of work in your state]
  - implement farm, ranch and forestland conservation practices to protect soil productivity, water quality and quantity, air quality and wildlife habitat;
  - conserve and restore wetlands, which purify water and provide habitat for birds, fish and numerous other animals;
  - protect groundwater resources
  - assist communities and homeowners to plant trees and other vegetation to hold soil in place, clean the air, provide cover for wildlife and beautify neighborhoods;
  - guide developers in controlling soil erosion and protecting water and air quality during construction;
  - provide technical expertise to landowners to identify, apply for, and participate in local, state and federal conservation programs; and
  - reach out to communities and schools to teach the value of natural resources and encourage conservation efforts.
  
- Policymakers have pursued various policies to conserve farmland, ranchland, forests, and critical environmental areas. One of the greatest challenges is recognizing the interconnectivity of all state and local land-use decisions. Urban land use planning impacts surrounding lands.
  
- Increased land fragmentation with smaller parcels of land presents challenges to manage the land effectively. Increased funding for technical assistance to manage these lands is critical.
  
- Landowners, by the nature of their work, are conservationists. There should be greater emphasis on how to structure policies in a way that support landowners to become better stewards while providing the maximum level of ecosystem services, or public benefits possible.
  
- Conservation Districts have been working with young people to pass on a legacy of caring for natural resources. Districts sponsor numerous summer camps and outdoor days for youth. We believe that it is important for youth to recognize that individual decisions, made by individual landowners, have the greatest influence on conservation in the United States. Basing those decisions on an understanding of nature and natural processes benefits us all.