THE SONOMA RCD'S VISION IS OF A FUTURE WHERE THE NATURAL RESOURCES OF SONOMA COUNTY ARE SUSTAINABILITY CONSERVED FOR THE BENEFIT OF HUMANS AND NATURAL SYSTEMS.

IT IS OUR MISSION TO EMPOWER AND PARTNER WITH LANDOWNERS AND THE COMMUNITY TO ADDRESS SONOMA COUNTY'S MOST PRESSING NATURAL RESOURCE CONCERNS.
MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND BOARD CHAIRMAN

Dear Friends of the RCD,

This year has truly been a time for us to reflect on our past, make the most of the present, and plan for our future.

In late 2016, we had the pleasure of celebrating Sonoma RCD’s 70th anniversary with many of you. In addition to enjoying a great party together, we honored several partners that evening for their collaborative conservation efforts: Sally Weed of Weed Farms; the Carbon Cycle Institute; Joe Maloney of Analy High School; and Jeremiah Kahmoson of Windsor Oaks Academy. Folks like these inspire us to keep pursuing the RCD’s mission each and every day, and help make that mission a reality through their dedicated partnership.

We also said a big goodbye this year, to Kara Heckert who served as the RCD’s Executive Director for over a decade. Kara led the RCD through a period of change and growth, always with an eye toward the people and natural resources of our District, and the RCD’s ongoing sustainability. We thank Kara for her service and wish her the best in her future endeavors.

Looking back at this year, it is apparent that we made the most of each day to achieve conservation outcomes. The pages of this report contain stories and statistics about the year’s accomplishments, each of which is the result of hard work and dedication – by our staff, Board, partner organizations, and participating landowners. Thank you to every person that contributed to the work of the RCD this year!

Our board, staff, and partners also took time this year to invest in the RCD’s future, by participating in a strategic planning effort to set our direction through 2020. We are so very grateful to those of you who shared your insights with us, and we know that our strategic direction (soon to be released) is more thoughtful, robust, and likely to succeed as a result of your participation.

In the time that this report was being prepared, our County experienced catastrophic firestorms that will change our community for years to come, perhaps forever. Though the focus of our work will undoubtedly change as a result of these events, our commitment to collaborative conservation remains the same. We look forward to partnering with you all in the coming years, as we continue to steward the resources of this County that we all love.

In partnership,

Walter J. Ryan, Jr.    Valerie Minton Quinto
Board Chairman     Executive Director

In early 2017, the RCD embarked upon a strategic planning process to chart the course of the organization from now until 2020. To launch this process, staff and board engaged diverse stakeholders to help identify future operating priorities, the most substantial natural resources concerns in our county today, and to hear about our organization’s strengths and weaknesses. The RCD board and staff then came together to envision the next three years of our district, define our vision, identity and outline a strategic direction. As we endeavored to identify the most relevant and meaningful ways to serve our mission in the coming years, and to evaluate the strategies and capacity needed to succeed in rapidly changing times, the stakeholder feedback was a tremendous and foundational resource. Many commented on our knowledgeable and friendly staff, how we collaborate in addressing natural resource issues, as well as our responsiveness to the needs of our constituents. We look forward to sharing our approved plan later this year with our community.

SONOMA RCD NEW STRATEGIC PLAN TO ADDRESS OUR COMMUNITY’S NATURAL RESOURCE CONCERNS
Exceeded the target of conservation technical assistance to 72 landowners on 15,000 acres by providing assistance to 190 agricultural and rural landowners on over 28,000 acres.

- Exceeded the target of 1,000,000 gallons of water saved/stored with 2.7 million gallons.
- Exceeded the targets of 1 mile of instream habitat improved with 1.7 miles.
- Exceeded the target of four County coordination meetings with 58 meetings convened or attended with county organizations.
- Exceeded the target of 700 youth reach with 1,849 youth engaged through various educational opportunities.
- Exceeded the target of submitting eight grant proposals by submitting 36 competitive state and federal grants totaling $21,205,560.

This contract is a direct investment into protecting our local ecology and into the local economy. RCDs almost exclusively hire, contract and purchase from local businesses to get the work accomplished.

COUNTY MOU WITH RCDs SUPPORTS COUNTY’S STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

- Community is proactive in mitigating and adapting to the causes and impacts of climate change to safeguard the environment, human health and the economy.
- Protect, maintain and manage parks, public lands and open space systems that promote recreation, health, agricultural viability and protects watersheds, promotes biodiversity and contributes to the economic vitality.
- Agricultural resources are preserved, valued for food and for maintaining links to our County’s heritage.
- Community members have access to clean air, water, and safe, reliable solid and liquid waste management systems.
- Community understands and supports the services provided by the County.
- Increased or enhanced community-based partnerships.

IN SPRING OF 2016, the Sonoma County Venture Conservation (SCVC) partnership officially commenced, a core group of partners striving to address climate change and drought resiliency. These core partners include Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, Sonoma and Gold Ridge RCDs, NRCS, Pepperwood Dwight Center for Conservation Science, Sonoma County Water Agency and a Technical Advisory Committee of thirty organizations. The partnership secured $8 million through the Natural Resources Conservation Services’ (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP).

A visit from NRCS Chief Jason Weller, on a trip from Washington, DC, and the NRCS State Conservationist for California, Carlos Suarez joined the SCVC for a kickoff event and county tour. “This project is about fulfilling your vision,” said Weller. He continued by telling the group that they had brought together an impressive constellation of partners representing research, science and agriculture to sustain both agriculture and open space. “I do a lot of travelling and I am very impressed by what you have assembled here—you guys in Sonoma are innovators.”

The goal of the Sonoma County Venture Conservation partnership is to create a platform for large-scale, coordinated conservation action in our county including identifying high-priority conservation easements and projects to improve water supply and water quality and enhance wildlife habitat on local agricultural lands. The partnership will leverage local knowledge, funding, and resources with RCPP funding to match federal funds 2:1.

Individuals in photo above from left to right:
- Michael Thompson sonoma county water agency
- Jennifer Walser natural resources conservation service
- Jason Weller natural resources conservation service
- Brittany Jensen gold ridge rcd
- Carlos Suarez natural resources conservation service
- Bill Keene sonoma county agricultural preservation open space district
- Kara Heckert sonoma rcd
- James Gore 4th district supervisor
- Lisa Micheli pepperwood preserve

SONOMA COUNTY VENTURE CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP
INVESTING IN GROUNDWATER SUSTAINABILITY

In 2014, the state of California adopted The Sustainable Groundwater Management Act of 2014 (“the Act” or “SGMA”). While the Act is a complex piece of legislation, its primary goals are:

■ To ensure that the significant groundwater basins in California (those designated as high and medium priority by the Department of Water Resources) are “sustainably managed,”
■ To provide local groundwater agencies with the authority and the technical and financial assistance necessary to sustainably manage groundwater.

To achieve its stated goal of sustainability, the Act required that Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (“GSAs”) be in place in each significant basin by June 30, 2017. The Sonoma RCD stepped forward, along with a number of other local agencies, to help form GSAs in three basins: Petaluma Valley, Santa Rosa Plain, and Sonoma Valley. These GSAs are required to adopt Groundwater Sustainability Plans (“GSPs”) by January 31, 2022, and plan to develop the GSPs with the help and guidance of Advisory Committees and other interested stakeholders.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE SONOMA RCD TO BE INVOLVED?

While the Act specifies what types of agencies are eligible to form GSAs, it does not require any particular agency to take part in forming a GSA. As an eligible entity, it was up to the RCD to decide whether we should participate in the formation of GSAs in Sonoma County. We are very proud of the trusted relationships we have with our district’s landowners that we have fostered over the last 70 years, and as such, we do not take decisions such as this one lightly. We chose to be involved for two key reasons:

First, we believe that our work over the last 70 years with hundreds, if not thousands, of groundwater users gives us an understanding of their issues and concerns. We can be a voice for those concerns on the governing board of each GSA.

Second, the RCD has been involved in voluntary groundwater management in the Sonoma Valley and Santa Rosa Plain basins since 2006 and 2011, and also has ample experience implementing on-the-ground conservation projects, monitoring groundwater levels, and working with local communities on natural resource issues. We believe that we are part of the solution to effective groundwater management, and that our collaborative and science-based approach will enable us to effectively bridge environmental concerns with the pragmatic needs of groundwater users.

As a member agency of each GSA, the RCD holds one seat on each governing board, and also appoints one member of the community to each advisory committee. We encourage you to get involved by attending board meetings, advisory committee meetings, and voicing your questions, concerns, and ideas. The RCD will continue to listen to input from our community, and work to represent your interests.

LEADERS OF TOMORROW: A CAREER JUMPSTART FOR JOSE REYES

The RCD’s longest standing youth education program, FARMS Leadership, provides hands-on experiences to urban, suburban and rural high school youth at working farms, agri-businesses and universities throughout Sonoma County. Annually approximately 30 students are selected to participate in the year long program exploring themes of sustainability, natural resource management, nutrition, college and career opportunities, and leadership. We will be celebrating our 20th anniversary in the coming academic year.

Jose Reyes was only a sophomore at Windsor Oaks Academy when he joined the FARMS Leadership program in the class of 2016. He grew up around livestock alongside his grandparents and identified his passion for animal science early on. His high school has offered our program to its students for the last nineteen years and our curriculum supported the high school’s newly adopted “Big Picture Learning” program.

When asked what FARMS Leadership meant to him in one word, Jose responded, “motivating.” He went on to describe one of his favorite experiences during the FARMS Leadership program year, when we toured the Laguna de Santa Rosa and stopped at the Beretta Dairy. “This day helped me make my decision about a career with cattle,” he said. He is currently pursuing an Associate’s Degree in Animal Science while completing high school early and working at the SRJC’s Shone Farm, which ranked the number one college farm in the nation last year.

“If it wasn’t for FARMS leadership, I wouldn’t have learned more about agriculture and received a scholarship so I could go to college.” — Jose Reyes

BY THE NUMBERS

55k gallons of rainwater stored on rural lands benefiting salmonid habitat.
16 vineyard irrigation evaluations conducted.

10,168 community members reached through sponsored events, workshops and public outings.
147 youth directly engaged in agriculture and natural resource education programming.
Small-scale dairy operations account for only a small percentage of the area in the Laguna watershed, but represent an important link between its past and its future. Pasture grazing, intensive animal feeding operations, manure lagoons, and dairies have been identified as potential sources of excess nutrient loading to the Laguna watershed. In 2013, the Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs) were awarded a State Water Resources Control Board, Nonpoint Source Pollution Control Program Federal Clean Water Act Section 319 (h) grant to reduce nonpoint source pollution in the Laguna. The Laguna de Santa Rosa Dairy Enhancement Project was a planning and implementation project that offered assistance to dairy livestock owners and managers within the Laguna watershed.

Building on past cooperative nutrient management efforts in the Laguna dairy community, the main goal of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Dairy Enhancement Project, which came to a close in June 2017, was to assist dairy operators within the watershed to maintain compliance with current and future water quality standards. The project engaged 92 percent of dairies amounting to approximately 4,093 acres of the Laguna watershed. The project successfully implemented 20-on-the-ground BMPs that included projects such as riparian fencing, pasture seeding, soil amending, irrigation improvements, silage and/or manure storage improvements, stormwater management, and clean water diversion projects among other efforts.

After two years of planning and construction, the Porter Creek Streamflow Enhancement Project, funded by the CA Wildlife Conservation Board, E. & J. Gallo Winery, and Sonoma RCD is functioning and releasing water to benefit coho salmon in this critical spawning and rearing stream. In 2014, during the historic drought, Gallo offered to release water from an irrigation reservoir on one of its properties to benefit the endangered coho in adjacent Porter Creek. Employees recycled old irrigation pipes and built a temporary system to release water, but they realized that a permanent system was needed to ensure survival of the coho through future droughts. With generous support from the Wildlife Conservation Board, the permanent system is now in place and releasing water into Porter Creek. Each spring the system will release flows that mimic storms that will allow year-old coho smolt to migrate out to the Russian River. In the summer and fall, a small continuous flow of water will be released that will ensure that coho have enough habitat to survive until the winter rains arrive. Additionally, a group from UC Berkeley will be studying fish habitat response to the streamflow augmentation.

This was a banner year for the LandSmart planning program in the Sonoma Creek watershed, an area of high priority because of excess sediment in tributaries supporting steelhead trout and Chinook salmon. With regulations adopted in July 2017 by the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board, many landowners have taken a proactive approach by working with the LandSmart planning program prior to the adoption of the regulation or in advance of the required compliance timeframes. The planning process has allowed landowners and managers to achieve conservation outcomes greater and faster than what might be driven by regulation alone.

MacLeod Family Vineyards, Jack London Vineyard, Wildcat Mountain Vineyard and Santo Giordano Vineyard are the first 20 local vineyards in the Sonoma County watershed to develop and implement best management practices identified in their LandSmart Plans. These four properties qualified to receive a total of $250,000 aimed at improving water quality on the ground, with projects selected from their plans. An additional $663,850 in grant funds has also been awarded to the RCD and will be made available starting in late 2017 to implement additional on the ground projects with vineyards in the Sonoma Creek watershed who complete a LandSmart plan. This progression from planning to on the ground implementation marks a major milestone for the LandSmart planning program. In the past year alone, the RCD engaged 12 local vineyards covering over 2,200 acres and identified over 100 vineyard best management practices.

Approximately 50 percent of Sonoma County is forested by conifer and oak woodland species, lands that provide vital habitat for endangered species, clean water resources, recreation for communities, as well as financial resources critical to livelihoods and our local economy. The Sonoma RCD, in partnership with its regional LandSmart partners, Mendocino County RCD, Napa County RCD, and Gold Ridge RCD, has just released a LandSmart Forest Management Plan template in order to provide comprehensive planning services to forestland owners and managers throughout our district. This program is financially supported by the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service’s Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

For decades, the RCD has partnered with forestland owners to develop and carry out habitat enhancement, salmonid recovery, rural roads improvements, alternative water supply development, and provide technical assistance services. LandSmart Forestland Plans will add another tool to the RCD’s toolbox for assisting forestland owners.

These plans are designed to cover all content areas required by the California Cooperative Forest Management Plan template, with additional emphasis on carbon beneficial practices.

As we continue to face years of drought, I had an interesting idea to help protect coho in the Russian River watershed and needed a partner who could successfully find the grant money and make it happen. The Sonoma RCD is that partner.

— JOHN NAGLE OF E. J. GALLO AND NEW BOARD DIRECTOR AT THE RCD

BY THE NUMBERS

3,452 acres of conservation farm plans completed.
AGRICULTURE LEADS IN CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION ACTION

FEDERAL RANGELAND COMPOST FIELD TRIAL UNDERWAY IN SONOMA COUNTY

It may have gone unnoticed by the traffic along Lakeville Highway but an exciting project has begun: a truckload of compost was spread on a test plot staged within the active grazing pasture at Sears Point Ranch, a large rangeland property owned by Sonoma Land Trust. This test plot is one of 15 plots established last winter on ranches across the state that will evaluate if compost can improve soil health on California’s diverse rangelands.

Previous research has already shown that applying as little as a half-inch layer of compost to grazed rangelands can increase carbon storage below ground and improve soil health parameters, including increases in productivity and soil water holding capacity. The goal of this research trial, coordinated by the Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and funded in part by local compost advocates John Wick and Peggy Rathmann, is to gather enough research data to support the use of compost and encourage more ranchers to adopt this healthy soil practice through federal assistance programs. Sonoma RCD is excited to announce that we have been selected to complete this research field trial and is excited to assist in future data collection efforts at our local test plot.

NORTH COAST SOIL HEALTH HUB

Farmers are finding soil health is key to sustainable farming, enhancing on-site resources, and increasing climate resilient systems. Mendocino, Napa and Sonoma county farmers and partners are working together as the North Coast Soil Health Hub, and are networking with the California Farmer-to-Farmer Soil Health Network. Soil Health Hubs are agriculturally focused networks that address region specific needs, successes and challenges. Regional hubs are focused on specific needs for specific crops, soils, climate, land management practices, and marketing. The North Coast Soil Health Hub is starting with the vineyard industry but will build the network to include other agricultural industries in the three counties over time.

Together we are shifting focus to maximum soil health with goals of increased profit, system resilience, and dependable soil biological ecosystems. State-wide, farmers, RCDs, educators, and partners see the need to enhance access to resources and opportunities for sharing on-farm innovation. The network’s efforts include: hosting farmer-to-farmer workshops, running long-term experimental demonstrations, and sharing information via a web platform.

BY THE NUMBERS

389 riparian plants were installed on agricultural properties which will help sequester 14.6 metric tons of carbon annually.

HISTORICAL HYDROLOGY STUDY: PREFACE TO THE FUTURE OF THE PETALUMA RIVER

The Petaluma River has long been a significant resource in shaping the southernmost point of our District culturally, economically and ecologically. Thus to best understand how to address current natural resource needs and understand future impacts, the RCD and partners need tofirst understand the slough’s historic hydrology. In partnership with the San Francisco Estuary Institute, the RCD is currently developing a Petaluma Watershed Historical Hydrology Study. This report will help identify and prioritize multi-benefit wetland restoration opportunities in the watershed, while filling a critical gap in the integrated picture of historical conditions in the North Bay. With the final study to be completed in early 2018 the information and data collected will assist the RCD and its watershed partners to discuss resource management, restoration efforts, groundwater recharge, and flood control through a whole new lens.

RCD AND PARTNERS TO BEGIN FLOW STUDIES IN MARK WEST AND MILL CREEKS

Creeks. The RCD and our partners have been working on streamflow-related issues in these watersheds for almost a decade, and the newly-funded studies will add an important tool in our toolbox for identifying stream reaches and projects with the best potential to improve streamflow for coho salmon while securing water for the people that also depend on it.

The Coast Range Watershed Institute will serve as lead technical consultant to develop a comprehensive hydrologic simulation model for each watershed. In Mill Creek, the effort will be enhanced by the participation of Trout Unlimited, who will work with the RCD to collect groundwater elevation data in a targeted reach to refine the model. In Mark West, the effort will be enhanced through the participation of Pepperwood Preserve, Sonoma County Regional Parks, and the Friends of Mark West Watershed, in order to collect on-the-ground data that can refine the model, and then use model outputs to identify pilot projects on public and preserve lands. In each watershed, the RCD will coordinate stakeholder involvement and technical input in order to make the models as robust and useful as possible.

UNDERSTANDING OUR WATERSHEDS FOR FUTURE MANAGEMENT TO IMPROVE WATER QUALITY

STUDIES IN MARK West AND MILL CREEKS

Over the years, watershed partners have worked diligently to monitor, catalog and analyze data from Mark West and Mill creeks to accurately address natural resource concerns, and meet watershed scale natural resource management goals that provide solutions for both wildlife and rural communities. To augment this great work, the RCD is excited to announce that we have been selected by the Wildlife Conservation Board to receive Proposition 1 funding for flow studies in both Mark West and Mill Creeks.
PARTNERS

2016-2017 FUNDERS (*)
Abraham Lincoln Elementary School
Advanced Viticulture, Inc.
Bioengineering Associates, Inc.
California Association of RCDs
*California Coastal Conservancy
*California Department of Conservation
*California Department of Fish and Wildlife
*California Department of Food and Agriculture
*California Department of Water Resources
*California State Water Resources Control Board
Carbon Cycle Institute
Carpe Diem High School
City of Petaluma
*City of Santa Rosa
Coast Range Watershed Institute
Community Alliance with Family Farmers
Conservation Corps North Bay
*County of Sonoma
*Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria
Friends of Mark West Watershed
*Friends of Petaluma River
Gold Ridge RCD
Laguna High School
LandPaths
*Lapeo Agricultural Land Trust
Marin RCD
McDowell Elementary School
Mendocino County RCD
Napa County RCD
*National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
*National Marine Fisheries Service
North Bay Agricultural Alliance
*North Bay Watershed Association
North Bay Water District
North Coast and Bay Area Regional Water Quality Control Boards
Occidental Arts and Ecology Center
*O’Connor Environmental
Pepperwood Preserve
Pivot Charter School – North Bay
Purisima-Chantil, Inc.
Pt. Blue Conservation Science STRAW project
Pacific Watershed Associates
Regional Climate Protection Authority
Roseland Elementary School
Russian River Watershed Association
Russian Riverkeeper
San Francisco Estuary Institute
Santa Rosa Junior College
*Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District
*Sonoma County Farm Bureau
*Sonoma County Water Agency
*Sonoma County Wildlife Protection
*Sonoma Land Trust
Sonoma Mountain High School
Sonoma State University
Sonoma Valley High School
Streamline Engineering
The Center for Land-Based Learning
Trost Unlimited
University of California Cooperative Extension
US Army Corps of Engineers
*US Environmental Protection Agency
US Fish & Wildlife Service
*USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
Western United Dairymen
Williamette Partnership
Windsor Oaks Academy
*Numerous local landowners
*RCD Program Funder 2016-2017

SONOMA RCD STAFF
Valerie Minton, Executive Director
Adrienne Petit, Director of Finance
Betsy Tillman, District Administrator
Jeff Schreiber, Program Development Manager
Erica Mikesh, Partner Engineer
Keith Abeles, Water Management Specialist
Kari Wester, Project Manager
Christine Kuehn, Education and Communications Specialist
Aaron Fairbrook, Project Manager
Anya Starovoytov, Project Manager
Justin Boddell, Project Manager
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PARTICIPATE

in developing a conservation plan,
or on the ground project to protect soil, water, and wildlife habitat.

JOIN US

attend a technical workshop to gain the latest information on resource conservation.

INVEST

in your local RCD with a tax deductible donation to support conservation programming.

SIGN UP

to receive our monthly e-newsletter to get the latest updates on RCD programs, funding opportunities, and events. www.sonomarcd.org

2016-2017
BY THE NUMBERS

70 years of Service to our District.
3 new Directors.
78 local landowners partnered with the RCD’s LandSmart Planning, On-the-Ground, Education and Water Resources programs.
Staff trekked 110 miles with the Russian River Confluence community in an effort to celebrate the Russian River Watershed and partner towards a regenerative future.
113 technical assistance calls.
2,212 local landowners, partners and community members reached through monthly eNewsletter.

2016-2017