

conservation at work.



Strategic Plan 2021-2024

Introduction

The purpose of this Strategic Plan is to guide the RCD’s high-level decisions for the next three years. Our approach with the Plan was not to identify every activity the RCD will carry out in service to our mission, but rather to identify the greatest opportunities to grow and improve how we deliver on that mission.

Development of this Plan was led by a Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) that included Board and staff members. This Committee solicited feedback at multiple steps in the process, including an initial survey of internal (Board & staff) and external (partners, general public) stakeholders. Based on the survey results, the SPC developed updates to our Vision and Mission statements, and identified four themes representing key opportunities for growth and improvement within the RCD. These themes included Programs & Offerings; External Engagement; Internal Mechanisms; and Individual & Team Support. We formed Theme Committees for each topic and charged them with developing a goal and actions strategies to advance each goal. The RCD also engaged with a professional facilitator to help us articulate our organizational values.

At the same time this Strategic Plan was being developed, the RCD engaged with a consulting firm to conduct an Information Technology Assessment and develop a Strategic Technology Plan. The RCD’s Technology Committee (consisting of Board and staff) was the internal lead on this project, and numerous staff provided feedback through surveys and interviews during the information gathering phase of the project. The Strategic Technology Plan identifies numerous projects and initiatives, which are incorporated by reference in this plan (in Goal 3) and included as an Appendix.





Vision and Mission

Sonoma RCD sees a future where the natural resources of Sonoma County are abundant and available for the benefit of all people, agriculture, ecosystems and the economy.

Bridging the needs of the community and natural resources by empowering people through reliable expertise and action to strengthen the resilience of Sonoma County.

How We Work

The RCD uses a strategic filter to help us decide which issues to focus on and how to influence those issues. We examine current natural resource issues, and ask important questions including:

- What impact do we want to have? We examine what we want to achieve and how we can measure that impact.
- What do our constituents think? We conduct outreach to understand the needs and concerns of the public.
- Is there funding for this work? Because the RCD depends primarily on grants and contracts for our funding, we factor our agency partners' funding priorities into our strategic thinking.
- Does the RCD have capacity to do this work? The RCD's current staff capacity includes scientific, practical, engineering, educational, administrative and partnership development expertise. We look for projects that maximize our existing skillsets or come with funding to build new capacity.
- What partnerships or connections can we leverage? The RCD works with dozens of partners. We look for ways to engage the right partners to maximize natural resource impact and avoid duplication of efforts.

Programs and Services

We work under a programmatic umbrella called LandSmart®. The LandSmart Program is carried out through partnerships with landowners striving to achieve productive lands and thriving streams. It is a regional collaborative with Napa County, Gold Ridge, and Mendocino County RCDs. The purpose of this collaborative is to provide consistent services across a broad geography while being responsive to local needs, and to leverage the expertise of neighboring RCDs to provide services greater than those we could deliver alone. Our four program areas under the LandSmart umbrella are:

Planning & Assessment: LandSmart Plans assist landowners and managers in identifying and prioritizing management practices according to their individual needs, goals and timelines. The planning process balances the landowner's management goals with practices that preserve and enhance natural resources, delivering a plan that is both informative and actionable. Examples of LandSmart Plans include:

- Vineyard water quality plans that meet the requirements of water quality permits
- Forest management plans that meet the needs of cost share programs such as EQIP and CFIP
- Carbon farm plans identifying opportunities remove CO₂ from the atmosphere while improving the farm's resilience to climate change

Other property-specific assessment services include:

- Vineyard irrigation system evaluations
- Groundwater well monitoring
- Technical assistance on a variety of natural resource topics

The RCD also conducts planning and assessment on a watershed scale, working with partners to develop watershed management plans, historical hydrology assessment, and streamflow studies.

On-the-Ground Projects: LandSmart On-the-Ground projects help people put their conservation plan or watershed-wide management plan recommendations into action. The RCD works in partnership with landowners and managers on projects to conserve, protect, and restore natural resources. Technical staff can help with project development, engineering, construction oversight, permitting, and environmental compliance. On-the-Ground projects can result from LandSmart Plans, landowner ideas, or other natural resource priorities. On-the-Ground projects implemented through this program achieve natural resource and land management goals and include:

- Erosion control on roads, gullies, and streambanks
- Soil health improvement for productivity and carbon sequestration
- Alternative water supply development, such as rainwater catchment
- Manure and pasture management
- Enhancement of fish and wildlife habitat
- Post-fire watershed recovery
- Forest and fuels management

Education: LandSmart Education inspires our community to learn about and participate in natural resource conservation activities through a variety of opportunities. The RCD offers on-farm youth education programs to students ranging in age from elementary to high school combining innovative hands-on experiences with classroom learning to help students develop leadership skills and understand local agriculture and our diverse ecosystems. Youth education programs include:

- TEAM (Teaching Environmental and Agricultural Memories) elementary school field trip program invites students to several diverse agricultural properties, and highlights the role that Sonoma County's agricultural landscape plays in environmental stewardship.
- FARMS (Farming, Agriculture, and Resource Management for Sustainability) Leadership program, a year-long cohort program for high school students which provides innovative, hands-on experiences to youth at working farms, agri-businesses and universities.
- FARMS Advanced builds on the foundation created in FARMS Leadership, expanding on topics including: careers in agriculture, land stewardship, natural resource conservation, and leadership skill building. The selected cohort is made up of no more than six FARMS Leadership alumni or FFA students enrolled in their junior or senior years of high school.

We also design and deliver technical workshops for landowners, land managers and the public in order to provide innovative scientific and field tested natural resource conservation tools to promote healthy watersheds. These LandSmart workshops are often in collaboration with regional RCDs, watershed groups, and agencies in partnership with local working landscapes. Workshops comprehensively cover topics like soil health, rainwater catchment, forest management, and farm conservation planning.

Funding

While RCDs are organized as public agencies, we operate much like nonprofits, writing grants and securing donations to pay for our work. We receive a small fraction of our annual budget (approximately 5%) from property taxes, and we leverage those funds to bring millions in grant dollars to our community. However, grant funding only partially covers the costs of our vital conservation work, making community support essential to the RCD.

Goals & Action Strategies

Goal 1: Advance solutions to address the most pressing natural resource concerns and further climate resiliency for Sonoma County.

Action Strategy	Timeline
<p>1. Evaluate current and future planning efforts to promote climate resilience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Expand on current planning offerings to include and promote climate adaptation and resilience strategies. b) Continue watershed scale data collection, partnership building and planning in watersheds where lack of information is a barrier to project development and implementation. 	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>As additional needs are identified</p>
<p>2. Explore potential partnerships for program development.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Explore need to provide or complement existing partner services around stormwater management, flood control, groundwater recharge, and urban streambank restoration. b) Explore opportunities to partner with organizations to incorporate the health and well-being of underserved community members into our programming. 	<p>FY 2021-2022</p> <p>FY 2021-2022, and ongoing</p>
<p>3. Implement LandSmart On-the-Ground programs that support natural resource and community health.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Continue to implement existing LandSmart On-the-Ground programs expanding to include a focus on alternative streamflow enhancement, carbon farming, and forest management. b) Identify additional funding sources to implement management practices identified in planning documents for increased climate adaptation and resilience¹. c) Expand LandSmart On-the-Ground to more visible and/or public lands. 	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>FY 2022-2023</p> <p>FY 2022-2023</p>

¹ Climate adaptation and resilience strategies/practices include soil health improvement, carbon farming (land-based carbon sequestration), groundwater sustainability, water security, and forest management.

Action Strategy

Timeline

4. Be of service to the community and partners by providing reliable technical expertise.

- a) Continue to serve as a technical resource for the community, both proactively and in response to natural disasters including fires, floods, and drought. Check in at least annually to evaluate and improve mechanisms for playing this role.
- b) Continue to provide technical assistance and support to partners and community members in achieving regulatory compliance.
- c) Continue focus on securing technical assistance funding that covers the entire district and all SRCD offerings.

Ongoing

Ongoing

Ongoing

Goal -1 Expected Outcomes

- Δ Planning and On-the-Ground programs become more closely integrated, leading to more implementation of planned practices.
- Δ The RCD increases our impact on climate resilience and helping Sonoma County to meet 2030 carbon neutrality goal.
- Δ Technical assistance services continue to improve in quality, effectiveness, and efficiency.
- Δ The RCD builds and strengthens partnerships to expand the impact of our programs without reinventing the wheel.
- Δ Programs reach a more diverse cross-section of our community.



Goal 2: Promote a shared culture of conservation, respect, and reciprocity with all community members, which focuses on the interdependence of the community and the land.

Action Strategy	Timeline
<p>1. Increase culture of inclusivity in RCD conservation program development and delivery.</p>	
<p>a) Provide program outreach materials in multiple languages representative of the community.</p>	Ongoing
<p>b) Analyze current partnerships: tribes, NGOs, agencies; identify geographic scope of current partnerships and gaps in coverage. Include new community partners, assess community interests, needs, and assets. Use findings to inform current and future RCD programs and strategies.</p>	Ongoing
<p>c) Identify and build relationships with land uses not historically served to protect soil, water and wildlife resources (ex: urban landscapes, equine facilities, community gardens, emerging agricultural crops, coastal waters).</p>	Ongoing
<p>d) Develop a marketing and communications plan to inform how we engage with our diverse communities, support Strategic Plan outcomes, and grow/diversify revenue.</p>	Start: FY 2021-2022 Complete: FY 2022-2023
<p>2. Build recognition as a trusted and key player in providing conservation services that address community needs.</p>	
<p>a) Design and begin distributing survey for people who have participated with RCD planning and on-the-ground projects to garner feedback to improve services long-term.</p>	FY 2021-2022
<p>b) Gather and catalog success stories to inform future reports, social media campaigns and marketing materials.</p>	Annually
<p>3. Create digital marketing collateral to inform our communities about natural resource conservation in novel ways.</p>	
<p>a) Prioritize video development and podcast participation to improve RCD visibility, share information, and highlight conservation project successes.</p>	Ongoing
<p>b) Evaluate website and eNewsletter translation technology and implement ADA web compliance updates as needed.</p>	Evaluate: FY 2021-2022, Implement in subsequent yrs.
<p>c) Continue to grow digital engagement.</p>	Ongoing

Action Strategy

Timeline

4. Improve RCD scope and impact with youth and community education and involvement.

- a) Increase integration of education program with other RCD programs.
- b) Expand youth education programming and youth volunteer/intern programs to inspire a diverse next generation of conservationists.
- c) Adjust youth curriculum to promote cultural relevancy and support California State Standards at all grade levels served.
- d) Evaluate expansion of adult and community education opportunities and explore utilization of partner volunteer staff for project implementation when appropriate.
- e) Increase visibility at partner and community events, including events the RCD has not traditionally attended. Explore providing one-on-one technical assistance as a walk-up service at events.

Action Strategy Ongoing
Ongoing

FY 2022-2023

Ongoing

FY 2022-2023

Ongoing

Goal - 2 Expected Outcomes

- Δ RCD programs and messaging become more responsive and relevant to our community.
- Δ Informational resources are accessible to more people in our community.
- Δ The RCD's messaging promotes not just our programs but also a shared ethic of conservation that inspires individual actions.
- Δ Education programs grow the next generation of conservationists, representing the full demographics of our community.



Goal 3: Enhance the RCD’s adaptive, technical, and operational capacities to effectively balance mission and financial health.

Action Strategy	Timeline
<p>1. Update policies and procedures.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Fiscal Policies & Procedures (incl. Procurement & Operating Reserves) b) Record Retention Policy c) Data Sharing Policy d) Grants Policy e) Create a summary of staff administrative requirements as a resource for new and existing staff. 	<p>FY 2021-2022</p> <p>FY 2021-2022 or FY 2022-2023</p> <p>FY 2021-2022</p> <p>FY 2022-2023</p> <p>FY 2021-2022</p>
<p>2. Continue to maximize recovery of costs on grants.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Develop a decision-making framework to evaluate applying for grants that do not permit full recovery of costs. 	<p>FY 2021-2022</p>
<p>3. Monitor and respond to opportunities for revenue diversification to enable the RCD to meet community needs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Evaluate RCD capacity required to pursue appropriate fee-for-service opportunities. b) Continue to monitor open calls from foundations and remain responsive to foundation interest in the RCD’s work. c) Establish an annual individual giving fundraising goal and evaluate the return on investment for fundraising strategies. 	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>Annually</p>



Action Strategy	Timeline
4. Continue to improve financial literacy among staff.	Ongoing
5. Continue to improve structure and transparency around employee compensation.	FY 2021-2022
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Conduct a compensation survey and update the compensation schedule. b) Establish clear processes for promotions within the compensation schedule. 	FY 2021-2022
6. Centralize prevailing wage compliance and other grant administration tasks, where applicable, under one position.	FY 2022-2023
7. Develop a Continuity of Operations Plan for emergencies	FY 2021-2022
8. Implement projects & initiatives identified in the RCD's Strategic Technology Plan (Appendix A to this Strategic Plan).	Timelines for each project/ initiative identified in Appendix A Ongoing
9. Continue to rebuild operating reserves.	Ongoing

Goal 3 - Expected Outcomes

- △ Financial understanding and transparency within the RCD are improved.
- △ The RCD continues to grow its financial stability in service to its programs and mission.
- △ Policies and procedures are clear and accurate, facilitating more efficient implementation.
- △ Technology systems are more reliable and secure, and technology is effectively used to support the RCD's operations and program delivery.



Goal 4: Promote resilience, professional growth, and a strong board-staff partnership at the RCD.

Action Strategy	Timeline
<p>1. Strengthen the RCD’s professional development (PD) offerings for staff and board.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Include training fees and expenses and staff time for PD in the annual budget and communicate what has been budgeted to staff. b) Develop clear information on how professional development requests are evaluated. c) Identify, prioritize, and deliver group trainings facilitated by professional consultants or organizations beneficial to all staff, board, or both (e.g., board financial training, cultural competency, DEI training, mental health awareness, conflict resolution training, wilderness first aid training). d) Encourage informal cross-training such as shadowing among staff and between board and staff to promote organizational information sharing and cohesion. e) Expand Director onboarding to include increased written resources, mandatory training, and opportunities for mentorship from other board members. 	<p>Spring of each year (annual budget process)</p> <p>By end of 2021</p> <p>Identify during the Spring of each year (annual budget process); deliver trainings annually</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>New board manual completed by September 2021; mentorship program TBD</p>
<p>2. Thoughtfully evaluate staff capacity needs and increase capacity where feasible</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Conduct an organizational capacity assessment to evaluate factors such as leadership, operations, and grant writing. b) Based on assessment adjust existing staff responsibilities, hire new or temporary staff, and engage consultants accordingly to reduce over subscribing staff. 	<p>FY 2021-2022</p> <p>FY 2022-2023</p>
<p>3. Prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion in staff recruitment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Identify and implement opportunities to eliminate bias in the RCD’s hiring processes. b) Identify and utilize new channels for publicizing open positions to reach a more diverse pool of candidates. 	<p>FY 2021-2022</p> <p>Ongoing</p>

Action Strategy

Timeline

4. Build the RCD's "bench" of Associate Directors

- a) Recruit at least 2 new Associate Directors, focusing on recruiting individuals with key skills, connections, and demographics that reflect the community in order to strengthen the RCD's reach.
- b) Identify and utilize new channels for publicizing open positions to reach a more diverse pool of candidates.

Over course of 3-year SP period

Ongoing

5. Strengthen connection and working relationships between board and staff.

- a) Include staff presentations on programmatic work at board meetings at least 4 times per year.
- b) Offer opportunities for group interaction between board and staff at least twice per year.
- c) Leverage Directors' skills and expertise, as needed and where appropriate, to support RCD operations and programs.

Annually

Annually

Catalog Director skills & expertise annually

Goal 4 - Expected Outcomes

- △ Staff and Board understand the PD opportunities available to them and are empowered to engage
- △ Staffing structure meets the needs of the organization and supports manageable staff workloads
- △ Diversity of staff and Board is increased to better reflect the demographics of the District we serve
- △ The RCD is well-prepared for Director succession
- △ Board and staff work together as a cohesive team, while maintaining the appropriate separation of responsibilities



Acknowledgement

We are grateful to the partners and community members who took the time to provide input during this strategic planning process. Our work truly is a team effort, extending beyond our Board and staff to our organizational partners, funders, participating students, teachers, and community members. And of course, our work would not be possible without the landowners and managers who invite us onto their property to work side by side in conservation.

RCD Board

Bruce Abelli-Amen, Chair | Technology Committee member
John Nagle, Vice Chair | Strategic Planning Committee member
Walt Ryan, Director
Jennifer Kuszmar, Director | Theme Committee member
Vickie Mulas, Director Ron Rolleri, Director
Ariana Reguzzoni, Director | Strategic Planning and Theme Committee member
Beth Bruzzone, Associate Director | Strategic Planning Committee member
Dennis Murphy, Associate Director | Strategic Planning and Theme Committee member
Delmar Friedrichsen, Emeritus Director
Earle Cummings, Emeritus Director | Theme Committee member

RCD Staff

Valerie Quinto, Executive Director | Strategic Planning, Technology, & Theme Committee member
Adrienne Pettit, Director of Finance | Theme Committee member
Christine Kuehn, Education & Communications Manager | Strategic Planning and Theme Committee member
Aaron Fairbrook, Program Manager | Theme Committee member
Erica Mikesh, Partner Engineer | Strategic Planning and Theme Committee member
Jessica Pollitz, Engineer | Themes Committee member
Keith Abeles, Soil & Water Specialist
Jason Wells, Forester | Theme Committee member
Kevin Cullinen, Project Manager | Technology Committee member
Kari Wester, Project Manager | Theme Committee member
Anya Starovoytov, Project Manager | Theme Committee member
Katie Robbins, Project Manager | Theme Committee member
Shannon Drew, Program Assistant | Theme Committee member
Jacob McDaniel, GrizzlyCorps Fellow
Wendi Asuncion, Staff Accountant
Kristopher Ballard, Office Assistant



