

Washington State Conservation Resource Management (CRM) Needs Assessment and Inventory Update



Final Report

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes the findings of a comprehensive update conducted by the Whatcom Conservation District (WCD) to the Washington State inventory of Coordinated Resource Management (CRM) and Coordinated Weed Management Area (CWMA) groups. WCD also conducted in-depth interviews with CRM stakeholders, including agency representatives, conservation district (CD) staff, and CRM facilitators, to better understand both the persistent barriers and enabling conditions that affect the success of CRMs across Washington State.

The results of this project reaffirm that the CRM model remains a powerful tool for addressing complex, multi-stakeholder natural resource challenges. Representing multiple parts of the state, CRMs have created space for voluntary, consensus-based dialogue between tribes, agencies, and landowners. Participants consistently emphasized their belief in the CRM model's value. However, they also described systemic obstacles that continue to undermine its full potential. These challenges include inadequate staffing and facilitation support, inconsistent agency engagement, limited access to technical expertise, and chronic underfunding.

While CRMs tend to excel at building inclusive, respectful dialogue in their early stages, many lack the long-term capacity to sustain momentum. This report outlines key findings across five categories: stakeholder engagement, trust building, technical expertise, funding and resource constraints, and long-term commitment. It also includes peer-to-peer recommendations from CRM participants and proposes a set of targeted actions for the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) to support CRM effectiveness now and into the future.

Introduction

The Coordinated Resource Management process offers a unique framework for addressing natural resource concerns at the landscape scale by bringing together those who live on, work, and manage the land. Unlike more top-down models, CRMs are locally driven and depend on voluntary participation and consensus-based decision-making. Each CRM reflects the unique character of its ecology, people, and land uses. Yet across these differences, many CRMs share common needs, patterns, and frustrations.

With support from the SCC, WCD set out to update the statewide CRM inventory, assess current CRM needs, and identify where the SCC's future efforts might have the greatest impact. Our approach included interviews with CRM practitioners and partners from across Washington State. These conversations offered rich insights into the systemic challenges facing CRMs and suggested steps that the SCC can take in addressing them.

Although many CRMs operate with limited staffing and budgets, they consistently deliver high value by fostering stakeholder alignment, cultivating local ownership, and enabling collaborative conservation. Their value lies in creating inclusive spaces where landowners and community members help shape and carry out consensus-derived resource management strategies. Their success is rooted in trust, relevance, and local commitment, and this assessment reinforces that, with targeted support, CRMs can transition from informal coordination efforts to powerful, locally driven frameworks that sustain long-term stewardship and community resilience.

Methods

To create an updated list of all CRMs in Washington State, WCD reached out to all points of contact listed in the 2013 CRM inventory sheets, the 2013 and 2020 CRM facilitator lists, all CD executive directors, and staff at the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and Washington State University Extension.

Through this effort, a list of 92 CRMs was compiled. This number includes all CRMs listed on the 2013 inventory, as well as 7 additional CRMs previously unidentified. Based on the responses received, 26 CRMs were confirmed “Active”, 11 CRMs have “Disbanded”, 10 CRMs are “Inactive”, and 5 CRMs previously listed never actually formed. However, WCD was unable to confirm the status of the remaining 40 CRMs, despite multiple outreach attempts. See Appendix A for updated inventory lists for both CRM and Coordinated Weed Management Areas (CWMAs) in Washington State.

The WCD conducted five detailed interviews with individuals associated with a combined total of 25 active and 3 inactive CRMs. Interviews included a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions designed to identify and prioritize current needs, and to solicit advice and recommendations for both new CRMs and the SCC.

The multiple-choice portion of the interviews was designed to ascertain the difficulty experienced by each CRM in achieving 19 key actions which were divided into five categories: stakeholder engagement, trust building, technical expertise, funding and resource constraints, and long-term commitment. Answers included: very easy, somewhat easy, moderate effort, somewhat challenging, very challenging, and not applicable. Participants were then asked to describe for each category their biggest needs, and any advice or recommendations they could give to new CRMs and the SCC. Multiple choice questions were completed for each CRM individually. However, the open-ended questions often encapsulated experiences pertaining to multiple CRMs. Therefore, each portion of the interview was compiled and analyzed separately.

To create an updated list of all CWMAs in Washington State, WCD reached out to all points of contact identified in the 2013 CWMA inventory list and the 2024 County Noxious Weed Contact List. Representatives from county and state noxious weed programs, conservation districts, tribal entities, and several federal agencies were contacted. Through this effort, a list of 36 CWMAs was compiled. Based on the responses received, 18 CWMAs were confirmed “Active” and 5 CWMAs are “Inactive”. However, WCD was unable to confirm the status of the remaining 13 CWMAs, despite multiple outreach attempts.

Results

The results of the multiple-choice questions show that out of the five categories analyzed, the biggest challenge facing CRMs is funding and resources, with “securing funding and other resources” most commonly described as “very challenging” and “balancing short-term and long-term needs” as “moderate effort”. While the categories of technical expertise and long-term commitment were not as challenging as a whole, both “finding and evaluating data to help formulate the project” and “holding community events to promote and maintain engagement of stakeholders and community members (e.g., field day or demo day)” were described as “somewhat challenging.” The rest of the CRM activities identified by the multiple-choice questionnaire were described as either “somewhat easy” or “very easy” (Table 1, Chart 1).

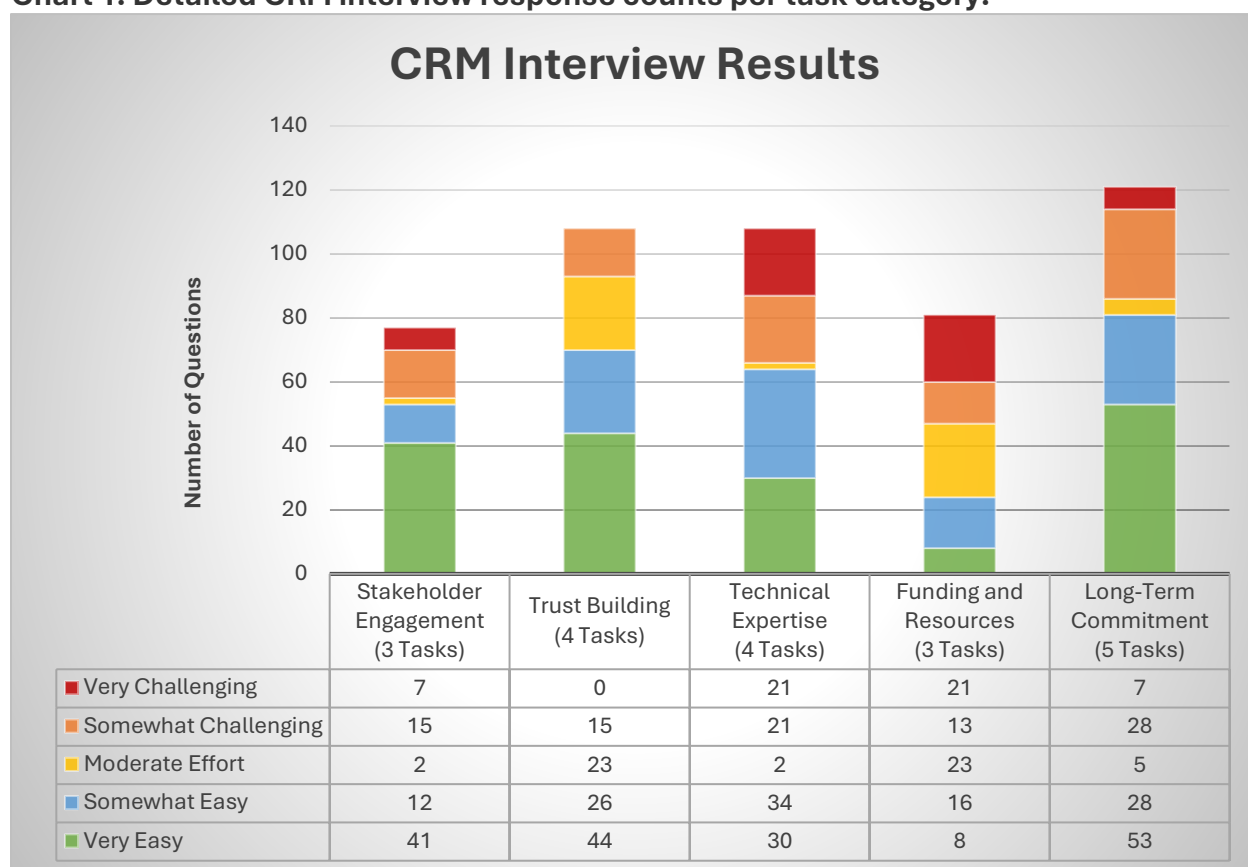
Table 1. The most common CRM interview response when asked to describe their experience accomplishing the following tasks.

Category	Difficulty	Activity
Stakeholder Engagement	Very Easy	Identification of project stakeholders
	Very Easy	Accessing a trained facilitator
	Somewhat Easy	Reaching group consensus
Trust Building	Very Easy	Establishing ground rules for group interactions
	Very Easy	Enabling all voices in the group to be represented
	Somewhat Easy	Communicating effectively to the group
	Somewhat Easy	Reducing skepticism or resistance in the group
Technical Expertise	Very Easy	Determining geographic boundaries of project
	Somewhat Challenging	Finding and evaluating data to help formulate the project

Category	Difficulty	Activity
	Somewhat Easy	Ongoing monitoring and evaluating project (i.e., adaptive management strategies)
	Somewhat Easy	Communicating technical information effectively to stakeholders
Funding and Resources	Very Challenging	Securing funding and other resources
	Somewhat Easy	Prioritizing projects for funding
	Moderate Effort	Balancing short-term and long-term needs
Long-Term Commitment	Somewhat Easy	Developing an adaptable plan that is easily modified to address unforeseen circumstances (e.g., changing weather patterns)
	Very Easy	Developing a plan that ensures project is sustainable for all stakeholders (e.g., rotating roles, plan for changes in membership)
	Somewhat Challenging	Holding community events to promote and maintain engagement of stakeholders and community members (e.g., field day or demo day)
	Very Easy	Measuring success of project efforts (e.g., through an annual review process)
	Very Easy	Communicating success to stakeholders, news media, and the general public

While the total number of responses for each category are not directly comparable due to a variable number of tasks listed per category, Chart 1 offers additional insight into the relative spread of responses for each category.

Chart 1. Detailed CRM interview response counts per task category.



It is important to note that the CRMs represented by the interviews are considered “mature” with many years— in some cases, decades— of operational experience. Therefore, the needs of new CRMs may differ slightly from those expressed by this assessment. The results of the open-ended questions were compiled and summarized by each category below.

Stakeholder Engagement

CRMs generally perform well at bringing people together. Most groups are able to identify key landowners, agency partners, and community stakeholders relatively easily, especially in areas with established relationships. Early stages of CRM formation often benefit from strong social capital, with participants motivated by shared challenges or overlapping land use concerns.

However, once a CRM is underway, the more difficult task becomes maintaining consistent engagement over time. Staff turnover is a recurring challenge, especially among agency partners. New agency personnel often arrive with little context or familiarity with the CRM process, forcing remaining members to reestablish expectations and rebuild momentum. Landowner changes due to inheritance, sales, or shifting priorities also erode

continuity. Without dedicated staff to track participation, update contact lists, and facilitate re-engagement, CRMs struggle to maintain their base.

Several CRMs also noted challenges with inclusivity. There is often tension between the desire to include all interested stakeholders and the need to keep the group manageable and productive. Groups expressed interest in guidance on how to identify and incorporate diverse voices such as tribal representatives, small parcel landowners, or recreational groups without sacrificing focus or cohesion.

Trust Building

Participants widely recognized the CRM model's strength in fostering trust and open communication. When well-facilitated, CRM meetings offer a rare space where landowners, agencies, and technical experts can engage as equals. Establishing ground rules and mutual respect early in the process was viewed as essential for effective collaboration.

Yet trust is fragile. Many CRMs operate in landscapes shaped by historical conflict, institutional mistrust, or regulatory tension. Participants described skepticism between landowners and agencies, particularly when prior plans or agreements were later overturned or deprioritized by new agency leadership. When agency representatives participate inconsistently or lack authority to make decisions, it undermines the collaborative premise of the CRM process.

The role of the facilitator is critical in building and maintaining trust. Skilled facilitation helps manage conflict, surface disagreement constructively, and ensure that marginalized voices are heard. However, most CRMs lack access to professional facilitators. Facilitation duties are often assumed by overextended conservation district staff or agency personnel, limiting the process's effectiveness. Participants repeatedly emphasized the need for neutral, well-trained facilitators who understand the local context and can guide the group through complex discussions.

Technical Expertise

Effective CRMs require a strong technical foundation. Participants identified a consistent need for support in developing baseline resource inventories, interpreting GIS and monitoring data, and designing implementable conservation practices. While some conservation districts have in-house technical staff, others rely on inconsistent partnerships with agency personnel or private consultants.

One of the most persistent challenges is reconciling different monitoring methods and data sources. Landowners, agencies, and scientists often collect data using different protocols, making it difficult to compare results or track progress across projects. This lack

of standardization hampers both adaptive management and the ability to demonstrate outcomes to funders or the public.

Several participants highlighted the value of incorporating local, experiential knowledge alongside formal technical assessments. Ranchers and landowners bring years of observation and practical insight, which is often overlooked or undervalued in formal planning processes. CRMs that were able to integrate both institutional and local knowledge reported stronger community buy-in and more relevant, place-specific outcomes.

Funding and Resource Constraints

Without question, the most critical barrier to CRM success is a lack of stable, adequate funding. Participants described working under “bare bones” conditions, with no staff dedicated to the CRM effort and limited funds for coordination, outreach, or project implementation. Most rely on short-term grants or patch together resources from multiple sources, often with no administrative support.

This scarcity affects every facet of CRM work. Without funding, groups cannot retain facilitators, update technical data, or conduct meaningful stakeholder engagement. Even when strong plans are developed, they often go unimplemented due to lack of financial and staff capacity.

CRMs also face challenges navigating the complex landscape of conservation funding. Many funding streams are narrowly focused or highly competitive. CRMs often lack the time or expertise to identify and apply for appropriate grants. Participants expressed a desire for more flexible, long-term funding that could support general operations, relationship-building, and implementation, rather than just short-term deliverables.

Long-Term Commitment

Despite the obstacles, CRM participants remain committed to the model and its long-term promise. Groups that succeeded over time did so by establishing routines, documenting progress, and sharing leadership responsibilities. Annual evaluations, adaptive planning, and regular meetings helped these CRMs weather external disruptions such as wildfires, drought, or agency turnover.

However, sustaining long-term participation requires more than goodwill. It depends on having the resources to maintain engagement, evaluate outcomes, and adapt to changing conditions. Many CRMs have strong intentions but lack the time or staff to carry out even basic planning tasks. Hosting community events, updating stakeholders, or rotating committee leadership often falls through the cracks due to limited capacity.

Participants underscored the need to build CRMs with sustainability in mind from the beginning. This means investing not just in technical planning, but also in communication, documentation, and shared ownership structures that can persist even as individual participants change.

CRM Peer Recommendations

Participants offered several consistent insights to peers across the state. Many recommend that new CRMs begin with focused, achievable goals to build early momentum. Starting small allows the group to develop trust before tackling more contentious issues.

Others emphasized the importance of professional facilitation, not just to guide meetings, but to foster inclusion and manage disagreement. Neutral facilitators help prevent one agency or stakeholder from dominating the process.

Another common piece of advice was to plan for turnover from the start. Groups should document decisions, establish clear roles, and create simple evaluation tools so that institutional memory does not disappear with personnel changes. Visual tools such as maps and monitoring summaries were praised as effective ways to engage landowners and ground discussions in shared understanding.

Finally, several participants encouraged CRMs to publicly celebrate their work. Field days, newsletters, and media coverage help remind stakeholders and the public of the value of collaboration and can attract new participants and partners.

CRM Recommendations to the SCC

Based on these interviews and assessments, the data analysis recommends several strategic actions the WSCC can take to directly address the barriers facing CRMs and enable their long-term success. The following tiered recommendations are grouped by priority (Table 2).

Tier 1 — Critical Investments (Short-Term Priority)

The most urgent barrier facing nearly all CRMs is lack of consistent funding and staffing. Without dedicated capacity, CRMs cannot facilitate meetings, follow up with stakeholders, implement projects, or evaluate outcomes. These core functions underpin every other success factor.

Recommendation 1: Establish a Multi-Year CRM Capacity Grant Program

This fund should provide flexible operational support for CRM coordination, including facilitator time, stakeholder outreach, communications, and basic logistical costs. The

program must be designed to offer predictable multi-year support rather than short-term project-tied grants. This type of investment would stabilize CRM operations and significantly improve their ability to deliver results over time.

Recommendation 2: Create Regional CRM Facilitation Hubs Within Conservation Districts

Facilitation emerged as the second most critical need. Many CRMs are guided by overextended staff who lack formal facilitation training. Regional hubs housed in local conservation district offices would train and support skilled, neutral facilitators who could serve multiple CRMs, providing continuity, trust-building, and conflict management. Hubs could also coordinate peer learning and support networks across districts.

Tier 2 — Strategic Enhancements (Mid-Term Priority)

Once staffing and coordination are secured, CRMs will require support to navigate complex partnerships and technical implementation challenges.

Recommendation 3: Formalize Interagency CRM Participation Protocols

Agency turnover and inconsistent involvement were frequently cited as causes of lost momentum and damaged trust. The SCC can work with partner agencies such as DNR, WDFW, and the USDA Forest Service to share clear participation expectations as outlined in the existing 2015 MOU, identify decision-capable representatives, and establish onboarding practices for new staff. These formal agreements will help insulate CRMs from institutional instability.

Recommendation 4: Develop a CRM Technical Services Pool

CRMs routinely face technical questions that exceed the expertise of local staff. A shared pool of on-demand professionals including GIS analysts, range scientists, soil technicians, and monitoring specialists would fill these gaps. These professionals could also assist in standardizing monitoring methods and synthesizing data across projects.

Table 2. Priority Matrix of CRM Needs and Recommended Actions

Category	Recommended Action	Priority Level	Rationale
Funding & Capacity	Establish a multi-year CRM Capacity Grant Program	 High	Essential to sustain staff and planning; a prerequisite for all other functions.

Category	Recommended Action	Priority Level	Rationale
Facilitation Support	Create regional facilitation hubs within conservation districts	 High	Skilled, neutral facilitators are key to stakeholder engagement and trust.
Agency Engagement	Formalize interagency CRM participation protocols	 Moderate-High	Institutional continuity is needed to maintain trust and implement plans.
Technical Expertise Access	Develop a CRM technical services pool	 Moderate	Help translate plans into action, especially where CD staff are overextended.

This tiered approach recognizes the interdependence of CRM functions and the structural barriers that limit current performance. By prioritizing foundational investments in funding and facilitation first, the SCC can unlock the capacity of local CRM groups to manage natural resources collaboratively, sustainably, and with greater resilience to change.

CWMA Recommendations to the SCC

Updating the CWMA inventory revealed frequent turnover among agency noxious weed program coordinators, underscoring the importance of maintaining a current list of contacts for CWMA statewide. Therefore, it would be beneficial for the SCC to share the 2025 CWMA inventory with the Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board (WSNWCB) and collaborate with WSNWCB staff to keep the list updated. Several noxious weed coordinators expressed interest in receiving the updated inventory, and the WCD encourages the SCC and the WSNWCB to coordinate efforts to distribute it to them.

Conclusion

The CRM model continues to offer a powerful framework for collaborative conservation in Washington State. But the work of collaboration is not free. It requires skilled facilitation, consistent technical support, long-term funding, and strong institutional relationships. Without these elements, even the most committed CRM participants struggle to sustain progress.

The recommendations in this report are grounded in the lived experiences of those working in the field of natural resource management. They reflect a deep belief in the value of the CRM model, alongside a clear-eyed understanding of what is needed to make it viable for the future. By implementing these recommendations, the SCC can ensure that CRMs are preserved and strengthened as vital engines of locally led conservation across the state.