

Executive Summary: 2026 SCC Strategic Planning Survey

The 2026 Strategic Planning survey was deployed during the first week of May 2026 to provide commissioners input from the community. The below narrative weaves together insights from conservation district managers, supervisors, SCC staff, state and federal partners, and other collaborators. The following information reflects the big-picture themes and perspectives from the survey.

Big-picture takeaway

Respondents overwhelmingly urged SCC to reinforce its foundational role: supporting a strong, locally led, voluntary conservation system.

They expressed broad confidence in the value of voluntary conservation while emphasizing the need for SCC to modernize internal systems, rebuild trust, and secure long-term operational stability.

Key themes

Modernizing SCC's systems is the most urgent priority

The most consistent theme across all respondent groups is the need to overhaul SCC's foundational systems, particularly within grant and IT processes. Many described these systems as outdated, burdensome, slow, and inconsistent.

Respondents highlighted the need for:

- A modern, user-friendly grant management system
- Multi-biennium contracting
- Reduced administrative burden
- More consistent guidance and faster turnaround
- Replacement or major overhaul of CPDS (with PRISM noted as a possible model)

This modernization is viewed as essential to SCC's future success.

Rebuilding trust and strengthening relationships

Many district leaders and SCC staff expressed concerns that the relationship between SCC and conservation districts has drifted toward formality, compliance, or top-down control. Respondents want SCC to:

- Re-establish a “true partnership” between conservation districts and SCC staff so both conservation districts and SCC feel respected and part of the solution.
- Improve responsiveness and transparency
- Value local expertise
- Ensure feedback processes are meaningful and lead to action

A return to shared leadership between the commission and conservation districts as well as mutual trust was described as critical.

Stable, sustainable, flexible funding for all conservation districts

Respondents emphasized that reliable, flexible funding is essential to maintaining voluntary conservation statewide. Responses included calls for:

- Permanent operational capacity funding
- Support for basic staffing needs (administration, technical assistance, outreach, monitoring)
- Reduced administrative hurdles so more time can go toward conservation delivery
- SCC serving as a strong advocate for stable, statewide funding

SCC’s most inspiring strength

SCC’s most inspiring strength is its unique ability to provide statewide leadership, consistency, and credibility for voluntary conservation—powered by a dedicated, knowledgeable, and collaborative staff. SCC serves as a trusted convener and champion for voluntary, non-regulatory conservation, bridging local needs with statewide goals in a way no other agency can.

Many responses reframed this question to highlight the strengths of conservation districts, noting that the agency exists to serve conservation districts.

The need for better data, metrics, and GIS information

Respondents repeatedly emphasized the need for SCC to strengthen its capacity to measure, map, and communicate the outcomes of voluntary conservation.

Priorities include:

- Modernized data systems
- Stronger GIS and mapping capabilities
- Clear, science-based metrics
- Improved statewide reporting
- More intentional communication and storytelling about conservation success

Many see this as essential for future funding and public trust.

Internal organizational stability and workforce retention

Respondents described several internal challenges that affect program and service delivery:

- High turnover, particularly among Regional Managers
- Limited internal capacity
- Need for clearer priorities and communication
- Desire for more professional development opportunities

“Stability” is one of the most frequently mentioned internal needs.

Emerging trends to monitor

Respondents identified several environmental, social, and political trends that will shape the future of voluntary conservation:

Environmental trends

- Farmland loss
- Water scarcity and drought
- Increased wildfire risk
- Climate impacts on soil, water, forests, and species
- Rising project costs

Social and political trends

- Anti-government sentiment
- Pressure to demonstrate measurable outcomes
- Funding uncertainty
- Aging farmer population
- Growing costs and barriers for new producers
- AI/data center development pressures on rural lands

What people would miss most if SCC disappeared

Respondents overwhelmingly identified the following:

- SCC's funding for voluntary conservation
- Regional Managers and the coordination they provide
- A unified statewide system for conservation districts
- Representation in Olympia and advocacy for conservation district priorities
- Program guidance, technical support, and statewide cohesion

Small and resource-limited districts would be especially impacted.

Strategic planning survey summary detail

Below is a synthesized set of themes that appeared repeatedly across conservation district managers, supervisors, SCC staff, state partners, and federal partners.

The overarching theme: Fix and modernize SCC's grant and IT systems

Respondents consistently cite:

- Grant management systems are outdated, overly burdensome, slow, inconsistent, or restrictive.
- CPDS is "clunky" and outdated; PRISM or other modern tools are strongly desired.
- Districts want multi-biennium contracts, faster contracting, reduced administrative burden, and clearer guidance.
- Many conservation district managers said SCC has slipped from being "the best" at efficient pass-through funding and must reclaim that role.
- Many respondents view a functional, transparent, user-friendly grant management system as the most impactful change SCC could make.

Trust, relationship repair, and rebuilding with conservation districts

A major theme across the responses:

- Many district managers feel the relationship with SCC has deteriorated and feels "top-down," "parent-child," or "managed rather than supported."
- SCC staff also report internal misalignment and desire stronger, clearer communication.
- Respondents call for:
 - Respect for local knowledge
 - Genuine collaboration
 - Meaningful, not performative, engagement
 - Responsiveness to feedback

- Transparency about decisions and constraints

Stable, sustainable, flexible funding for conservation districts

Nearly all respondents emphasized the importance of funding, specifically:

- Permanent operational funding is repeatedly cited as critical.
- Many define “sufficient basic funding” as:
 - A minimally staffed functional conservation district (director, admin/finance, technical, education/outreach, monitoring).
- Districts worry about:
 - Unpredictable funding
 - Overreliance on short-term CCA funds
 - Administrative burdens eating into conservation delivery
- Many ask SCC to serve as the state-level advocate for sustained, equitable funding across all 45 conservation districts.

Strengthening locally-led, voluntary conservation

Respondents deeply value Washington’s voluntary model and fear:

- Regulatory pressure will increase if voluntary outcomes aren’t demonstrated.
- SCC’s actions sometimes drift toward “priority-setting” rather than supporting district-defined priorities.

People want SCC to:

- Reinforce the philosophy that districts lead and SCC supports.
- Protect voluntary conservation as a statewide strategy.
- Demonstrate outcomes to justify the voluntary approach in a changing political climate.

Better data and ways to demonstrate outcomes

Survey respondents indicated desire to have:

- Modern data systems to compile, map, analyze, and communicate impact.
- Scientifically sound metrics linking voluntary practices to measurable watershed or climate outcomes.
- A “storytelling and data” approach to build legislative and public confidence.

Many emphasize that SCC needs:

- A statewide reporting system
- Strong GIS capabilities
- Clear outcome-based metrics for BMPs
- Ability to aggregate district data into coherent statewide impact narratives

Emerging trends respondents are tracking

Across responses, these trends surfaced consistently:

Environmental and natural resources trends

- Farmland loss and agricultural viability concerns
- Water scarcity and drought
- Increased wildfire risk
- Climate change impacts on soil, forests, water, species
- Invasive species, habitat degradation, extreme weather

Social and political trends

- Rising public distrust in government
- Anti-regulatory/anti-government sentiment
- Increasing pressure to show measurable results
- Need to engage younger generations
- Aging farmer population and cost barriers for new farmers
- AI-driven pressures on agricultural land (e.g., data centers)

Operational trends

- Rising costs of conservation projects
- Staff retention challenges, especially among Regional Managers from the district perspective
- Funding instability at state and federal levels

Organizational culture and the need for stable leadership

Several respondents point to the following trends as worth paying attention to:

- Understaffing
- Difficulty absorbing turnover
- Need for clearer decision-making pathways
- Staff wanting more involvement, transparency, and professional growth
- Desire for more internal cohesion and structure to reduce friction and burnout

SCC's inspiring strength is conservation districts

Across all groups, the most consistently named strength is:

"Trust and connection with local communities."

Conservation districts:

- Have long-standing relationships with landowners
- Understand local landscapes and needs
- Can achieve voluntary conservation where regulation cannot
- Provide a human, place-based connection that no centralized agency can replicate

District respondents overwhelmingly state this is SCC's most important asset and must be protected.

Opportunities

A. Fix SCC's systems before pursuing new initiatives

B. Build science-backed, large-scale riparian restoration

- Statewide, science-based riparian buffer standards
- Large-scale riparian forest buffer implementation (especially for temperature reduction)
- Coordinated cross-agency buffer alignment

C. Strengthen cross-boundary collaboration with key groups

- Tribes
- Federal and state agencies
- Urban communities

- Nonprofits and private landowners

D. Expand outreach to small acreage and urban landowners

E. Professional development, training, workforce development

SCC's values

The following values appeared repeatedly:

- Trust
- Accountability
- Transparency
- Flexibility
- Consistency
- Collaboration
- Equity
- Respect for local knowledge
- Efficiency
- Stability
- Stewardship and science-based decision making
- Clarity in purpose and communication

What people would miss if SCC disappeared

Across all respondent groups, the most cited losses are:

- Funding. (This is by far the top answer.)
- Regional Managers.
- Coordination across the 45 conservation districts.
- Advocacy and representation for conservation districts at the state level.
- Voluntary conservation infrastructure and statewide consistency.
- Trusted technical support and project expertise.
- Small districts would be devastated without SCC.