

## **Stewardship: Part 1 of 4**—by Chris Evans, District Administrator

What is stewardship? We hear the word used a lot in the natural resource field.

Having grown up in agriculture, I knew stewardship before I knew what it was. There was an inherent understanding that if you treated the land and your resources well, they would do the same for you. Going to college, I learned the “book” part of stewardship—the definitions—especially as they relate to the natural world.



Upon preparing to write this edition of the CD newsletter, I asked a couple of supervisors what they think stewardship is. Our newest Supervisor, Jeanette Nordahl, said that she thinks stewardship is “thoughtfulness, consideration and respect”. Jeff Ryan, had a pithier comment, but it boiled down to “taking care in your actions because they will likely directly affect you”. Merriam Webster’s online dictionary defines it as

“the activity or job of protecting and being responsible for something; the conducting, supervising, or managing of something; especially: the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care”. Stewardship implies that careful use of a resource is important because in the long-term, it will pay off.

To me, stewardship has always essentially meant “balance”: use, but not abuse; thinking about future generations.

When I look at our county, I see diversity in the type of land ownership. However, each of us is responsible for our own piece of the county. There are 3 main types of ownership on private land: ranchers/farmers, the small acreage landowners, and urban properties. Each of us is also responsible for the things we do “out there” whether on public land, in town or wherever, because our actions can have a direct effect on soil health, air quality, plant quality and water quality for a larger area.

The defined mission of the Lewis & Clark Conservation District is “to provide Leadership in the Conservation and Wise Use of Soil, Water and related Resources”. This mission basically defines our realm of stewardship: We are here to help Landowners—big and small—to the best of our ability, and do it fairly & equitably. We try to achieve that mission in several ways.



First, the CD is the lead in convening the Local Work Group. This work group assists NRCS in coordination of their programs. We call the meeting and welcome anyone who’d like to be there. Based on the need on the landscape in the county, the group tries to define the highest priority for the county, to help NRCS determine what the greatest natural resources stewardship concern is for our residents. Future articles will discuss NRCS programs and how they tie into the Local Work Group recommendations. But, while federal programs are important and are a part of the CD’s planning, enrollment in programs for the sake of checking boxes on a list and getting an allotment of funds from Washington D.C. lacks the concept of true stewardship, it’s not simply about money, but about meeting the needs of local landowners, both small and large. Sometimes, that one cross-fence or off-stream water supply can have a more meaningful effect on the larger landscape than that “full deal plan” by a neighbor that ranks higher simply because they have more land uses to treat or can afford to

take on larger projects than a beginning or smaller operation can cash flow.



The second way we help landowners is through our varied education programs, including the website, newsletters, workshops and seminars, camp sponsorships and the Envirothon. A large part of the CD budget every year is set aside for education purposes. We try to assess the needs for education every year when we revise our Annual Plan of Operations which is also tied into our annual budget.

A priority is to provide education for both large and small acreage landowners, and young people as well as adults.



The third way we help is financial. We have access to grant funds, even though they're diminishing. We also have our regular operating budget as noted in reference to education projects. Some of that budget is set aside for stewardship efforts, including cost share programs for water well testing, invasive species control, direct assistance for some projects and our cost share program for installation of practices.



Another way we help is by partnering with other entities. If you look at our Annual Plan, we list a lot of the partners that we work with regularly. Historically our main partner has been the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

Back in the early days of land conservation in the late 1930's when Conservation Districts were born, the Soil and Water Conservation Districts were the mechanism for NRCS to work in counties nationwide. Formation of the CD brought NRCS (then, Soil Conservation Service) assistance to landowners. Today, we have a larger variety of partners, from nonprofit organizations, to county, state and other federal entities.

A final word for this issue: there's been a lot of talk lately in the land conservation agencies about soil health. Soil health IS an important facet of stewardship, because soil is the foundation for things that grow. After all, crops, hay, forests and even lawns rely on healthy soils. If soils are healthy, there is less wind-blown erosion, and air quality improves. There is less water erosion and water quality improves. But sometimes we get caught up in the individual buzzword of the year, and forget how that topic ties into the greater whole of the landscape and how we as stewards of these landscapes care for our properties. It's important to remember that everything is tied together. Thinking of the whole, thinking of the future, and considering balance, that is real stewardship.

In 2017, the CD is going to run a total of 4 articles, of which this is first, on stewardship. The next three issues of *The Explorer* will cover the different land uses in the county (forest, crop and range) and what stewardship means in each land use. Our primary goal in these issues is for you, the individual landowners of Lewis & Clark County to understand you play a part in all of this. Whether you are considered a "small" or "large" landowner, cattle, small acreage forestry, large grain crop, or urban landowner we have tools to help address your questions and concerns, and that each of you has value to our service center and to the partners we work with.

This article was printed in the January 2017 issue of the Lewis & Clark Conservation District newsletter, *The Explorer*.