WASCO COUNTY SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT LONG RANGE PLAN (2026–31)

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1. Executive Summary

The Wasco County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) enters the 2026–2031 period with strong partnerships, a stable tax base, and a robust grant portfolio. As of July 2026, the District is managing 39 active grants totaling more than $8.2 million, with approximately $5.4 million in remaining deliverables. Six awards are in close-out, three new grants are beginning implementation, and additional applications are pending. This level of activity reflects the District's role as a regional conservation hub and emphasizes leveraging external funding to meet local priorities.

This Long-Range Plan (LRP) integrates:

- Board priorities
- Public survey results (County-wide survey conducted March–June 2026)
- Watershed council input
- NRCS Local Working Group prioritization (2026 key concerns: water supply, wildfire, water use efficiency)
- Statutory responsibilities
- The District's new role as the Wasco County Weed Control Program lead agency
- Multi-year grant obligations
- Operational capacity and succession planning

The LRP provides a clear, forward-looking roadmap for the next five years, aligning District programs with community needs, partner priorities, and long-term resource stewardship.

This LRP serves as a strategic framework guiding the District's conservation priorities, program direction, and organizational development for 2026–2031. It is a planning document, not a regulatory or binding fiscal instrument, and does not supersede statutory requirements, Board policies, or annual budget decisions. The LRP provides direction for developing the District's Annual Work Plan and budget each year, while allowing flexibility to adjust actions based on funding availability, partner input, monitoring results, and emerging resource needs. All implementation remains subject to Board approval, grant conditions, and applicable state and federal laws.

2. Mission, Role, and Statutory Authority

Mission

"To work cooperatively with others to promote and encourage conservation and wise use of natural resources."

Statutory Authority

The District operates under ORS 568, which authorizes Oregon SWCDs to:

- Provide voluntary, incentive-based conservation
- Protect and enhance renewable natural resources
- Deliver technical assistance
- Coordinate watershed restoration
- Support water quality and soil conservation
- Partner with landowners, agencies, and local governments

District Role

The District:

- Provides technical assistance
- Coordinates conservation planning
- Administers grants and cost-share programs
- Supports watershed councils
- Implements wildfire mitigation and fuels reduction in partnership with Wasco County through the Community Wildfire Defense Grant initiative
- Leads the County Weed Control Program (education, outreach, voluntary compliance)
- Supports groundwater, surface water, and watershed monitoring
- Facilitates collaborative conservation across Wasco County

3. Partnerships and Collaborative Framework

The District's work is grounded in collaboration with a broad network of partners across federal, state, tribal, local, and nonprofit sectors. These partnerships shape the District's priorities, capacity, and long-term conservation outcomes. The list includes (but is not limited to):

Federal Partners

- Bonneville Power Administration (BPA)
- Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- Farm Service Agency (FSA)
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF)
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)
- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
- U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
- U.S. Geological Survey (USGS)

State Partners

- Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA)
- Oregon Department of Emergency Management (OEM)
- Oregon Department of Energy (ODOE)
- Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)
- Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW)
- Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF)
- Oregon Department of State Lands (DSL)
- Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT)
- Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD)
- Oregon State Fire Marshal (OSFM)
- Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD)
- Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB)

Tribal Partners

- Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs (CTWS) — Tribal Fire Management, Natural Resources, and cross-boundary coordination.

County & Local Government & Emergency Partners

- Wasco County (Planning, Public Works, Emergency Management, Wildfire Coordinator)
- City governments (The Dalles, Mosier, Dufur, Maupin, etc.)
- Port of The Dalles
- Local Rural Fire Protection Districts (RFPDs)
    - Juniper Flat, Tygh Valley, Wamic, Dufur, Mosier, Mid-Columbia Fire & Rescue

Local Collaborative & Conservation Partners

- Lower Deschutes Cooperative Weed Management Area (CWMA)
- Wasco–Hood River Forest Collaborative
- Irrigation districts and ditch companies
    - Juniper Flat, Round Prairie, Rock Creek, Badger, Lost and Boulder, The Dalles
- Watershed Councils
    - Bakeoven/Buck Hollow
    - White River
    - Fifteenmile
    - The Dalles
    - Mosier
- WyEast Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D)
- National Forest Foundation
- Local conservation organizations
- Producer groups and agricultural associations

Education & Research Partners

- Oregon State University (OSU) Extension Service
- Columbia Gorge Community College
- OWRD/USGS (Fifteenmile Basin Water Budget and related studies)
- Local School Districts (Soil & Water Stewardship Week, Earth Day Events, etc)

These partnerships shape the District's priorities and capacity. Any omissions are unintentional; this list serves to demonstrate the broad range of District partnerships.

4. Resource Concerns and Conditions (2026 Baseline)

4.1 Top Resource Concerns

1. Water supply (groundwater, drought, streamflow)
2. Water use efficiency (irrigation upgrades, conveyance improvements)
3. Wildfire risk & recovery
4. Watershed health & water quality
5. Soil health & erosion control
6. Invasive species management
7. Forest health & fuels reduction
8. Fish & wildlife habitat

4.2 Emerging Issues

- Renewable energy development impacts
- Urbanization and land use pressure
- Community resilience
- Post-fire watershed impacts
- Groundwater sustainability
- Access to conservation programs

4.3 Resource Base Snapshot

Wasco County's 1.5 million-acre landscape includes a diverse mix of dryland and irrigated agriculture, orchards, rangeland, forest, and urban areas. This diversity shapes the District's conservation priorities. Key land uses include:

- Dryland cropland and CRP acreage supporting small-grain production
- Irrigated cropland and orchards concentrated in lower valleys
- Extensive rangeland with juniper encroachment and invasive species pressure
- Forestlands with increasing wildfire risk
- Urban and rural-residential areas experiencing growth and land-use transitions

This baseline informs the District's program areas and long-term conservation strategies.

5. District Priorities (2026–2031)

The District's 2026–2031 priorities were developed through a structured synthesis of multiple inputs, including Board direction, public survey results, watershed council feedback, NRCS Local Working Group rankings, and partner agency consultations. Each input was reviewed for areas of alignment, recurring themes, and countywide relevance. Resource concerns that consistently ranked high across all groups (such as water supply, wildfire risk, water use efficiency, watershed health, and invasive species) were elevated as top priorities. Operational priorities were identified through internal assessment of staffing capacity, statutory obligations, grant commitments, and long-term organizational needs. This integrated approach ensures that District priorities reflect both community values and the practical requirements of delivering effective conservation programs.

Resource Priorities

1. Water supply
2. Water use efficiency
3. Wildfire mitigation
4. Watershed health
5. Soil health
6. Invasive species
7. Forest health
8. Habitat enhancement

Operational Priorities

1. Funding stability
2. Staff capacity & retention
3. Facilities expansion (shop project)
4. Mandatory policies & compliance
5. Education & demonstration projects

Legacy Priorities & Readiness

Historically, erosion control was the District's top priority. Decades of successful conservation work have significantly reduced erosion concerns across cropland, rangeland, and riparian areas. While erosion is no longer a primary driver of District workload, it remains a core value, and the District is prepared to respond quickly should new erosion issues emerge.

Similarly, feral swine, once a significant concern in south county, have been largely controlled through past collaborative trapping efforts. A small population remains, and the District is ready to re-engage partners if needed.

Urban conservation needs are also increasing. Survey feedback highlighted interest from urban residents in accessing District programs. The District's cost-share program is available to support urban conservation practices where appropriate and the District is prepared to seek additional grant funding for urban conservation projects if/when opportunities arise.

6. Program Areas & Five-Year Objectives

6.1 Water Supply & Groundwater Sustainability

Objectives

- Support long-term surface-water and groundwater sustainability
- Improve drought resilience
- Monitor outcomes of completed groundwater projects
- Support basin-scale water budgeting

Key Actions (2026–2031)

Mosier

- Groundwater & surface water quantity monitoring
- Track groundwater levels and well performance
- Evaluate long-term outcomes of Mosier Million #1 & #2 and deep well replacements

Dufur / Fifteenmile

- Partner with OWRD + USGS on the Fifteenmile Basin Water Budget
- Provide local data, landowner coordination, and technical support
- Integrate findings into future conservation planning

Countywide

- Promote off-stream storage and recharge strategies
- Support groundwater sustainability projects where feasible
- Expand drought-resilience cost-share programs

6.2 Irrigation Efficiency & Agricultural Water Management

Objectives

- Improve water use efficiency
- Modernize irrigation systems
- Reduce conveyance losses
- Support agricultural viability

Key Actions

- Cost-share for pivots, LESA, wheel lines, drip, pump efficiency
- Support ditch improvements and conveyance upgrades
- Highline Ditch Elimination Project (anticipated wrap-up FY 2026–27)
- Support irrigation scheduling and energy conservation
- Coordinate with NRCS on Farm Bill programs and promote NRCS irrigation priority initiatives
- Support energy-efficient irrigation upgrades and coordinate with NRCS and WyEast RC&D on agricultural energy conservation opportunities.
- Implement and monitor the Fifteenmile Action to Stabilize Temperatures (FAST), including coordination with ODFW, OWRD, watershed councils, and landowners; track temperature, flow, and habitat outcomes; and integrate FAST findings into future restoration and irrigation planning.
- Support in-stream leasing and other long-term management tools for streamflow restoration.

6.3 Wildfire Mitigation & Community Resilience

Objectives

- Reduce wildfire risk
- Improve roadside fuels conditions
- Support community resilience
- Strengthen cross-boundary coordination

Key Actions

CWDG Roadside Fuels Reduction Program

- Implement the $2.47M CWDG subaward (2024–2029)
- Support the County's follow-up R4 CWDG proposal (NW Wasco County)
- Use a transparent, documented scoring framework
- Coordinate with ODF, OSFM, Fire Depts/RFPDs, NRCS, USFS, BLM, ODFW, CTWS
- Bundle projects for efficient contracting
- Maintain alignment with CWPP and NHMP

Roadside Fuels Advisory Working Group

- Multidisciplinary advisory group
- Provides technical input
- Supports prioritization and prescription development
- Ensures cross-boundary coordination
- SWCD retains contracting authority under CWDG subaward

Community Resilience

- Support defensible space education, including conducting assessments and providing prescriptions and recommendations for fuels reduction around homes
- Coordinate post-fire watershed recovery
- Integrate wildfire considerations into watershed planning
- Promote NRCS Wildfire Restoration and Prevention Initiatives

6.4 Watershed Health, Water Quality & Habitat Projects

Objectives

- Support watershed councils
- Improve stream and rangeland health
- Reduce pollutants
- Enhance riparian & upland function
- Support aquatic and wildlife habitat enhancement activities
- Support long-term watershed resilience through coordinated monitoring, adaptive management, and targeted restoration.

Key Actions

- Continue implementing the Agricultural Water Quality Management Area Plan as the Local Management Agency (LMA) for ODA, including biennial reviews, LAC coordination, and outreach.
- Maintain and expand CREP riparian buffer planning and mid-term management support in partnership with NRCS, FSA, OWEB, and BPA.
- Implement the Wasco County Pesticide Stewardship Partnership (PSP) Strategic Plan (2024–2028), including monitoring, outreach, and targeted education to address pesticides of concern such as malathion and glyphosate. While detections have declined significantly over the past decade, the District remains prepared to respond if pesticide issues re-emerge.
- E. coli monitoring (Mill Creek)
- Support watershed action plans (OWEB-funded)
- Maintain fish monitoring in Fifteenmile (OWEB + ODFW)
- Implement large wood in-stream projects as opportunities arise
- Support rangeland health and upland watershed function through grazing management assistance, juniper control partnerships, and erosion-prevention practices.
- Promote NRCS Initiatives such as Range Enhancement and the Fifteenmile Basin Fish Screen Replacement Project

6.5 Soil Health & Erosion Control

Objectives

- Reduce erosion
- Improve soil function
- Support sustainable dryland and irrigated agriculture

Key Actions

- Promote no-till, cover crops, residue management
- Support precision agriculture
- Support range and pasture improvements
- Although erosion is no longer a dominant countywide concern, the District will maintain readiness to address emerging erosion issues on cropland, rangeland, construction sites, and riparian areas.

6.6 Forestry & Habitat

Objectives

- Improve forest health
- Reduce fuels
- Enhance habitat

Key Actions

- Provide technical assistance to private forest landowners to support fuels reduction, forest health, and habitat restoration where feasible.
- Support Forest Collaborative groups in both Hood River and Wasco Counties (multiple USFS, OWEB, NFF grants)
- Implement fuels reduction and thinning through projects such as CWDG
- Promote NRCS EQIP Forest Health Initiatives
- Support oak woodland restoration (primarily through the East Cascades Oak Partnership, currently funded through an OWEB FIP grant)

6.7 Invasive Species & Weed Management

Objectives

- Implement the County Weed Control Program (SWCD Board serves as the Weed Advisory Board)
- Provide education, outreach, and voluntary compliance
- Support EDRR and strategic treatments
- Support early detection and rapid response for emerging invasive insects and pathogens.
- Assist partners with monitoring of terrestrial invasive species such as feral swine, Mediterranean oak borer (MOB) and spotted wing drosophila (SWD).

Key Actions

- Implement grants through OSWB, ODFW, BLM, USFS, OPRD, Port of TD, USACE
- Coordinate with Lower Deschutes CWMA
- Conduct voluntary weed inspections
- Provide landowner education
- Support countywide weed mapping
- Develop and maintain a County Priority Weed List
- Maintain readiness to coordinate with partners on feral swine detection and response should populations increase in south county.
- Monitor and reduce populations of Spotted Wing Drosophila (SWD) to support PSP goals by reducing reliance on malathion applications in orchard landscapes. The District will initiate SWD trapping in 2026.
- Assist partners with monitoring for Mediterranean Oak Borer (MOB) to protect oak woodlands and forest health; initiate MOB trapping in 2026.

Weed management activities delivered through voluntary, cooperative approaches. The District does not have regulatory authority; enforcement authority remains with Wasco County. District staff will not enter private lands without landowner permission.

6.8 Agricultural Resilience Initiative

Objectives

- Strengthen agricultural viability
- Improve soil, water, and fire resilience
- Support producers facing drought, weeds, and wildfire risk

Key Actions

- Cost-share for conservation practices
- Soil health and water quality improvements
- Irrigation modernization
- Weed control and native grass reestablishment
- Wildfire resilience and firebreak support
- Technical assistance for conservation planning
- Drainage and water management improvements

7. Organizational Capacity & Governance

Objectives

Strengthen District governance, staffing, facilities, and operational systems to support long-term program delivery, fiscal stability, and succession readiness.

Key Elements

Governance & Leadership

- Board succession plan (adopted 2025)
- Annual cycles (budget, work plan, audit, reporting)
- Maintain clear Board–staff roles, decision thresholds, and communication pathways to support effective oversight and operational continuity.

Governance Structure

- *Board of Directors:* Elected and appointed Directors provide policy direction, fiscal oversight, and statutory governance under ORS 568.
- *District Manager:* Reports directly to the Board; responsible for organizational leadership, fiscal and risk management, personnel supervision, and implementation of Board-adopted plans.

Staff Capacity & Coordination

- Staff roles support cross-program coordination
- Maintain cross-training so at least two staff members are proficient in each major functional area.
- Support staff development through training, certifications, and mentorship aligned with program needs.

Facilities & Infrastructure

- Facilities expansion (shop project, 2026–2029)
- Integrate chemical (herbicide) storage, equipment maintenance, and field-readiness improvements into the shop project.

Recurring Programs & Community Engagement

- Maintain core recurring programs including the annual tree and shrub sale, workshops, crop tours, neighborhood meetings, and equipment rental programs.
- Maintain and improve the H.A. Miller Demonstration Nursery as a site for education, demonstration plantings, and community engagement.
- Expand outreach to urban residents and small-acreage landowners, including access to the District's cost-share program.

Operational Systems

- Maintain robust financial management, grant tracking, and compliance systems to support the District's robust grant portfolio.
- Ensure that reporting for all grants and major programs is scheduled within the District's existing annual cycles and completed in a coordinated and timely manner.

Staff Roles & Responsibilities

The District enters the 2026–2031 planning period with 11.0 FTE supporting conservation delivery, watershed coordination, wildfire and weed programs, fiscal administration, and organizational operations. All positions operate within the District's organizational structure under the supervision of the District Manager and in alignment with Board-adopted plans, policies, and priorities.

Leadership & Administration

District Manager (1.0 FTE) – Provides overall leadership, fiscal and risk management, personnel supervision, grant and contract oversight, and Board support. Ensures compliance with ORS 568 and all statutory requirements.

Assistant District Manager / Grants & Program Manager (1.0 FTE) – Manages grants and contracts, supports budgeting and compliance, administers the District Cost Share Program, coordinates public contracting processes, and provides cross-program operational leadership.

Office Administrator (1.0 FTE) – Manages bookkeeping, payroll, HR administration, public meeting compliance, records management, and office operations. Conducts purchasing and supports public contracting processes. Serves as the primary point of coordination with the District's auditor and audit firm.

Conservation Planning & Technical Assistance

Conservation Technicians/Planners (3.0 FTE) – Provide NRCS-aligned conservation planning, technical design, practice layout, construction inspection, equipment management, and producer assistance. One position also serves as the County Weed Program Lead, providing technical guidance, coordinating with the District Manager to ensure weed management remains integrated with the District's broader conservation mission, priorities, and planning frameworks.

Lower Deschutes CWMA Coordinator (1.0 FTE) – Coordinates the CWMA partnership, seasonal crews, grant administration, mapping, treatment planning, and interagency collaboration. Works closely with the District Manager and County Weed Program Lead to

ensure weed management remains aligned with District priorities and integrated with other conservation programs.

Natural Resources Technician (1.0 FTE) – This position provides flexible support across the District's weed management, invasive species, and conservation programs. Duties include field treatments, mapping, and program support during the active spray season, with continued capacity to assist with office functions during non-field periods. Responsibilities include clerical and organizational support to NRCS as needed, note-taking for the Forest Collaborative outside of the weed field season, leading the annual tree and shrub sale, and assisting with education and outreach. This position remains fully integrated into District operations and may be reassigned or redirected as District needs, grants, and priorities evolve.

Watershed Coordinator (1.0 FTE) – Coordinates the five area watershed councils and the Coordinating Board; supports water quality programs including FAST, PSP, and E. coli monitoring. Participates in PSP strategic discussions as part of the advisory committee process led by ODA and DEQ. Physical PSP water sampling is conducted by a Conservation Technician/Planner, with the Coordinator assisting with data interpretation, communication, and integration into watershed planning.

Watershed Technician (1.0 FTE) – Supports watershed projects, defensible space implementation under CWDG, cost-share program delivery, monitoring, and field coordination with landowners and contractors. This position is also being cross-trained in NRCS conservation planning. During the active weed field season, the Watershed Technician provides Forest Collaborative note-taking support so the Natural Resources Technician can focus on seasonal weed work.

Seasonal Weed Technicians (0.50 FTE total) – Two seasonal positions (0.25 FTE each) supporting field treatments, mapping, EDRR, and Deschutes River corridor work during peak season.

Facilities & Operations

Custodians (0.50 FTE total) – Two part-time custodians (0.25 FTE each) providing custodial and facilities support for the USDA Service Center.

Succession & Cross-Training Readiness

The District's staffing approach for 2026–2031 emphasizes organizational continuity, shared responsibility, and cross-training across all program areas. With a small team serving a large and diverse county, maintaining overlapping competencies and flexible roles is essential to sustaining service delivery and reducing administrative overhead. This integrated structure helps ensure that no single program or position becomes isolated or

overly dependent on one individual, and that all staff remain connected to the District's core conservation mission. By strengthening cross-training and internal coordination, the District supports long-term resilience, operational stability, and the ability to deliver high-quality conservation services to the community.

8. Funding Strategy & Grant Obligations (2026–2031)

Active Grants (as of July 2026)

- 39 active grants
- $8.24M approved
- $5.39M remaining

Pending Grants

- 8 grants totaling $803k pending
- 4 grants for ~$1.4M in development

Funding Strategy

- Maintain diversified funding
- Align grant development with capacity
- Integrate grants into annual work plan and budget
- Use early screening ensure capacity and alignment

9. Implementation Timeline (2026–2031)

2026–27

- Finalize LRP (early in 2026-27 FY)
- Adopt priority weed list
- Site Team meeting for shop
- Mosier groundwater monitoring
- Fifteenmile Basin Water Budget partnership
- CWDG roadside fuels & defensible space implementation
- Highline Ditch elimination wrap-up

2027–28

- Shop site work
- Irrigation and water use efficiency expansion
- CWMA and weed program expansion
- Watershed council action plan implementation

2028–29

- Shop construction including chemical (herbicide) storage integration
- Agricultural resilience initiative expansion
- Continued wildfire mitigation

2029–30

- Watershed restoration
- Post-fire recovery
- Evaluate optional shop components

2030–31

- Review progress
- Update priorities
- Prepare next LRP cycle

10. Evaluation, Reporting, and Adaptive Management

Evaluation Tools

- Annual Work Plan
- Annual Report
- Quarterly grant reporting
- Watershed council coordination
- Monitoring data
- Mid-cycle LRP review (~2029)

Adaptive Management

The District will adjust priorities and actions based on:

- Monitoring results
- Partner input
- Funding availability
- Emerging issues
- Community needs