



STATE OF WASHINGTON

CONSERVATION COMMISSION

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February 19, 2021

Jean Mendoza
Executive Director
Friends of Toppenish Creek
3142 Signal Peak Road
White Swan, WA 98952

Dear Ms. Mendoza:

Thank you for reaching out and sharing your concerns about the South Yakima Conservation District (SYCD) and the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC). We appreciate the opportunity to hear the issues you raised in your letter (dated January 27, 2021) and to provide clarification and assistance where we can.

You raised concern that the SCC does not adequately review conservation district programs under RCW 89.08.070(1)(b). Conservation district programs are subject to SCC review when those programs are funded by our agency. All districts must adhere to our program requirements in order to receive SCC funding, and we continuously monitor and review their compliance. We also require that USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service planning and practice standards and specifications be followed. If a conservation district is not utilizing SCC funding for implementation of a program or practice, the district must then follow any requirements or rules established by those funders and is subject to those funders' review.

You expressed concerns about the role of the SYCD with respect to the Groundwater Management Area (GWMA). It is not within the SCC's authority to direct a district to either accept or reject participation in any program or project. Each conservation district is locally led by a five-member governing board.

It is the role of the board to determine local natural resource priorities, focus the efforts of the district on those locally determined priorities, and seek funding to carry out that work. How each district determines their priorities, builds programs, and carries out associated work is within the local control of the district. That said, we understand that a lack of staff capacity and funding are factors in this situation. We are happy to initiate a discussion with the SYCD board on this topic with the aim of providing further clarity for the public as to the capabilities and role of the SYCD in this matter.

You also raised multiple concerns regarding elections and appointments to the board of supervisors of the South Yakima Conservation District:

- Regarding the “auto election” of supervisors without an election being held, the Commission recently changed our election rules, and “auto elections” are no longer allowed. Districts will be required to conduct an election even when only one candidate is on the ballot.
- With respect to whether the District adequately informed the public about their elections, this complaint was made to the Conservation Commission at their December 3, 2020 meeting during public comment. Commission staff looked into this allegation and found SYCD provided the minimum notice required under Washington Administrative Code 135-110-110 for their most recent election.
- Other concerns and issues you raise regarding the supervisor election are not violation of Commission election rules.
- Appointments of supervisor vacancies are initiated by the district.

Conservation district election transparency and integrity is something we take seriously. Our agency is in the midst of a multi-year effort to reexamine district elections and identify potential improvements that make the process better for all. Some improvements are within the Commission’s direct authority and have already been enacted, such as ending “auto elections” when only one candidate is on the ballot. Other potential reforms take more time, planning, and may require legislative action. This work is ongoing and updates are often provided at our Commission meetings.

I hope this information is helpful. Again, thank you for sharing your concerns.

Regards,



Carol Smith
Executive Director