



# LONG RANGE STRATEGIC PLAN

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2020 – 2025

*The EMRCD provides natural resources, education, and conservation programs in Eastern Merced County. We act as an independent local liaison between government agencies and local landowners and work closely in Merced County with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. We pursue funding to assist landowners with meeting conservation objectives and/or regulatory compliance.*

## EAST MERCED RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT

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## **ORGANIZATION INFORMATION**

### **BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

Jean Okuye, President  
Joe Melo, Vice President  
Aaron Wentzel, Treasurer  
Bob Bliss, Director  
Shirish Shah, Director

### **EMPLOYEES**

Trina Walley, Interim District Manager  
Jeff Borum, Soil Health Network Coordinator (shared)  
Alec Schmitt, Ag Conservationist (shared)

Mailing Address: East Merced Resource Conservation District  
2926 G Street, Suite 102, Merced, CA 95340

### **MERCED COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

Rodrigo Espinoza	District 1
Lee Lor	District 2
Daron McDaniel	District 3
Lloyd Pareira	District 4
Scott Silveira	District 5

Mailing Address: Board of Supervisors  
2222 M Street, Merced, CA 95340

### **U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE - NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE**

Johnnie Siliznoff Acting District Conservationist

Mailing Address: USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service  
2926 G Street, Suite 102, Merced, CA 95340

## BACKGROUND OF THE RCD

In 1937, as a result of the national “Dust Bowl” crisis, when millions of acres of cropland were destroyed by drought and the devastating loss of fertile topsoil, President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw a need for soil conservation. He pushed Congress to develop a new agency called the Soil Stabilization Service (when millions of acres of farmland were destroyed due to drought and erosion) the federal government passed legislation that established the Soil Conservation Service (SCS).

“Father of Soil Conservation” and the first Chief of SCS, to boost public concern for the problem of soil erosion. Bennett became aware of the threat posed by the erosion of soils early in his career as a surveyor for the USDA Bureau of Soils. He observed how soil erosion by water and [Hugh Hammond Bennett](#) The creation of the Soil Conservation Service represented the culmination of the efforts of wind reduced the ability of the land to sustain agricultural productivity and to support rural communities who depended on it for their livelihoods. He launched a public crusade of writing and speaking about the soil erosion crisis. His highly influential 1928 publication “Soil Erosion: A National Menace” influenced Congress to create the first federal soil erosion experiment stations in 1929.

Dry land farming on the Great Plains led to the systematic destruction of the prairie grasses. In the ranching regions, overgrazing also destroyed large areas of grassland. Gradually, the land was laid bare, and significant environmental damage began to occur. Among the natural elements, the strong winds of the region were particularly devastating.

To increase the ability to respond to specific local needs, the states formed “Soil Conservation Districts” that were controlled by local boards of directors. In California, Soil Conservation Districts began forming in the 1940s, and today there are 103 districts throughout the state. Under Article 9 of Public Resource Code, Soil Conservation Districts were originally empowered to manage soil and water resources for conservation, but these powers were expanded in the early 1970s to include “related resources,” including water quality and wildlife habitat. This expansion of powers was reflected in the change of name from “Soil” Conservation Districts to “Resource” Conservation Districts in 1971.

In his 1939 book *The Grapes of Wrath*, author John Steinbeck described the families escaping the Dust Bowl: “And then the dispossessed were drawn west—from Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico; from Nevada and Arkansas, families, tribes, dusted out, tractor out. Car-loads, caravans, homeless and hungry; twenty thousand and fifty thousand and a hundred thousand and two hundred thousand. They streamed over the mountains, hungry and restless—restless as ants, scurrying to find work to do—to lift, to push, to pick, to cut—anything, any burden to bear, for food. The kids are hungry. We got no place to live. Like ants scurrying for work, for food, and most of all for land.” By 1940 2.5 million people left the Plains States, victims of the combined devastation of severe drought and poor soil conservation practices.

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

A Board of Directors that consists of five (5) volunteer Directors who are appointed by the Merced County Board of Supervisors leads the East Merced Resource Conservation District. The East Merced Resource Conservation District Board of Directors meet on the third Wednesday of every month, at the USDA Modesto Service Center conference room located at 2926 G Street, Room 205, in Merced. The meeting time is 3:00 p.m.

## PURPOSE

The EMRCD was established to improve riparian habitats, reduce soil erosion and sedimentation, conserve irrigation water, improve water and air quality, and provide Merced County residents with information about their natural resources.

To meet these goals, the EMRCD serves as a focal point for landowners and growers to access information on technical assistance, cost-sharing and administrative assistance on individual and community natural resource conservation concerns.

The EMRCD promotes:

1. Promote voluntary and collaborative natural resource conservation
2. Improve water quality and ecosystem health
3. Increase native vegetation along the Lower Merced River riparian corridor
4. Remove invasive plants
5. Provide education and outreach programs
6. Promote recreation and water safety programs
7. Create collaborative partnerships with stakeholders

## PRIORITIES & PRINCIPLES

From the inaugural meeting August 5, 1996 of the EMRCD, the Board of Directors has been a leader in establishing local natural resource priorities and goals. Local resource concerns were coordinated with many local, state and federal conservation leaders in Merced County in conjunction with regional Resource Conservation District (WSRCD). The EMRCD has applied and received grants to begin to accomplish some of these goals.

Principles established at the inaugural meeting include:

1. The EMRCD is a non-taxing body.
2. The EMRCD is a local decision making body that directs and coordinates activities of USDA and other local, state and federal agencies within Merced County.
3. The EMRCD should be the focal point through which agencies provide services.
4. The EMRCD can establish priorities.
5. The EMRCD is locally driven and voluntary.

The primary mission areas of the EMRCD are:

1. Energy (overutilization and renewable resources)
2. Food Security
3. Groundwater (quality and quantity)
4. Biodiversity (protecting and preserving habitat)
5. Air Quality (reduction of PM 10)
6. Water Quality (best management practices)

The EMRCD prioritizes “local” resource conservation concerns and the implementation of planned activities by providing Merced County cooperators, landusers and landowners technical assistance, financial assistance, administrative assistance and representation at various workshops, meetings and public hearings.

The EMRCD has an established track record of developing partnerships with local, state and federal agencies to assist in addressing local natural resource issues. The EMRCD has been a leader in developing voluntary implementation of conservation measures through cooperative efforts and incentives in partnership with local irrigation districts, environmental organizations, University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) and USDA—Farm Service Agency County Committee and NRCS.

The EMRCD has sponsored major state and federal projects that have resulted in significant funding for on-farm improvements.

## **EMRCD BOUNDARIES**

The EMRCD sphere of influence includes the area east of the San Joaquin River to the Merced and Mariposa County lines and is bordered by Stanislaus County to the North and Madera County to the South.

## **CLIMATE**

The eastern side of Merced County is a semi-arid region with hot summers and mild winters. During normal years, rain can be expected from mid-October through April, with an average rainfall of 12-16 inches. There are approximately 295 frost-free days each year.

## **SOILS**

There are over 60 different soil series and 265 soil mapping units within the EMRCD. Some of the best soils in the world exist in Merced County and are one of the most important resources in the EMRCD. These soils produce over 200 agricultural commodities and provide native and naturalized vegetation for grazing and wildlife habitat. (Soil Survey of the Eastern Merced Area, California, September, 1964)

## **WATER**

Within the EMRCD, 2 major river systems are present. The Merced River is a major tributaries to the San Joaquin River. These river systems are host to a wide variety of threatened and endangered species including the fall-run Chinook salmon. Irrigation Districts include the Merced Irrigation District, Central California Irrigation District, and various Water Districts. Water is a precious resource that needs to be conserved for all users and future generations.

## **AIR**

The San Joaquin Valley is classified as a serious non-attainment zone for PM-10 and severe non-attainment for ozone – one hour. The EMRCD continues to pursue solutions for these very complex issues.

## **AGRICULTURE**

Agriculture is a \$3.2 billion industry in Merced County and consistently ranks in the top ten counties in the state and nation. Keeping agriculture vibrant is central to the efforts of the EMRCD. The EMRCD attempts to anticipate natural resource related issues and tries to respond with positive solutions.

# ACCOMPLISHMENTS

## AIR

- EQIP – Air Quality – BMP implementation.
- Participate with the NRCS and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to implement Conservation Management Practices (CMP).

## AGRICULTURE

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Education grant for practical solutions to Dairy Waste Management practices in partnership with UCCE, Merced County.
- EQIP Educational Outreach Proposals funded to Western United Dairymen, California Dairy Campaign, California Poultry Federation, and UCCE Dairy Waste management team in Stanislaus County.
- Additional EQIP Educational Outreach Proposals either not funded or presently under consideration with Sustainable Conservation, Committee for Sustainable Agriculture, and the Coalition for Urban/Rural Environmental Stewardship.

## CLIMATE

- Collaboration with The Nature Conservancy on Climate Adaptation Study

## OUTREACH & EDUCATION

- River education with UC Merced
- Collaboration with technical service providers on Finance 101 outreach

## SOILS

- Pilot Soil Health project in Stanislaus and East Merced counties, developing partnerships and on-farm demonstration opportunities for land-owners.

## WATER

- State Water Resource Control Board grant to provide monitoring stations at key locations to monitor pollutant loads and develop the monitoring tools necessary for future planning.

- Provide project verifications in Merced county for CDFA – State Water Efficiency and Enhancement Program (SWEEP) grant recipients.
- The Merced River Alliance Grant in the early 2000s, working with the Upper and Lower Merced River Watershed Groups, and with a large Biological Assessment Manual.

## 2020 – 2025 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

During the next five years, the East Merced Resource Conservation District (EMRCD) will commit to conserving, improving and sustaining the natural resources, environment and economy of Eastern Merced County. We will assist our conservation partners in ways that will benefit our EMRCD Cooperators. The EMRCD has recognized three strategic issues that it will focus on over the next five years.

### Strategic Issue #1: Enhance the RCD’s capability to implement its mission through continuous improvements in management, operations, and the visibility of the RCD.

#### Goal #1: Improve efficiency of RCD operations and maintain a unified vision

Desired Result #1: Restructure staff positions

Strategies to achieve the above result:

1. Establish and Implement District Manager staff position
2. Establish and Implement Conservation Planner staff position
3. Provide training and development for staff and board

Desired Result #2: Increased funding opportunities and diversification

Strategies to achieve the above result:

1. Partnerships on regional grant applications
2. Plan ahead for grant funding proposals
3. Implement fundraising opportunities

#### Goal #2: Increase the visibility of EMRCD within the community

Desired Result #1: Increase EMRCD visibility throughout urban communities

Desired Result #1: Increased level of networking and strategic partnering

Strategies to achieve the above result:

1. Present at local city government, school boards, community groups



## 2020 – 2025 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES CONTINUED

Desired Result #2: Collaborate with research institutions and private industry in emerging technologies and conservation practices. Strategies to achieve the above result:

1. Creation of Conservation Field Trial for “biochar” and other innovations
2. Creation of Soil Health Demonstration project with outreach

Desired Result #3: Provide education regarding natural resource use and conservation to general public and landowners. Strategies to achieve the above result:

1. Continue river education outreach events with UC Merced and other partners
2. Co-host a Local Workgroup Stakeholder meeting with USDA NRCS

**Strategic Issue #2: Encourage communication between landowners and the EMRCD to develop programs that address resource priorities and aid landowners in conservation practices.**

### **Goal #1: Increase communication between RCD and landowners**

Desired Result #1: Creation of well-attended annual meeting where farmers with adequate representation throughout the county can voice opinions.

Strategies to achieve the above result:

1. Engage landowners at point of contact regardless of project
2. Maintain online presence and information
3. EMRCD presentations/info booths at partner organizations

Desired Result #2: Increased participation in landowner programs

Strategies to achieve the above result:

1. Create effective marketing materials for our programs
2. Actively promote our website
3. Encourage participants in our programs to share with others

### **Goal #2: Develop and expand programs addressing resource priorities benefiting landowners**

Desired Result #1: Implementation of an Irrigation Water Management Program to assist landowners understanding of water use and regulatory programs related to water use.

Strategies to achieve the above result:

1. Promote and expand water quality and quantity conservation programs
2. Provide education and outreach
3. Research and identify other programs as needed

Desired Result #2: Increased implementation of management practices that improve water quality and quantity, soil health, and conservation

Strategies to achieve the above result:

4. Promote and expand water quality and quantity conservation programs
5. Promote and expand soil health conservation programs
6. Promote and expand restoration and easements programs
7. Provide education and outreach through workshops
8. Research and identify other programs as needed

## PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

The East Merced RCD will create annual implementation plans to be adopted each year by the RCD Board of Directors to provide specific yearly strategies based on the programs and priorities set in place. Implementation is ultimately based on availability of funding, as strategies identified in this plan require revenue far beyond what is reliably available to the RCD through property tax revenue. Funds are sought from a variety of sources including State and Federal grant programs, agreements with local and regional government agencies, and general fundraising.

Several existing and pending grant agreements have been acquired to carry out a significant portion of this strategic plan. However, additional funding will be necessary to implement the plan through 2025. The most likely sources of funds are additional grants and agreements with local and regional organizations. Some initiatives may also require donations from local organizations. For the past several years the RCD has had an annual budget of approximately \$200,00 and a staff of 1-2 employees with most of funding for contracted specialist on grant specific projects.

### Priority Implementation Items:

1. Staffing
2. Landowner workshops and education
3. Networking with other organizations

### Harder to achieve with limited funding:

1. Program development
2. Fundraising for projects
3. Research projects