

A History of the San Joaquin County Resource Conservation District

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With Special Thanks to Mario Milani, NRCS

“The soil is the one indestructible, immutable asset that the nation possesses. It is the one resource that cannot be exhausted; that cannot be used up”

U.S. Bureau of Soils announcement, 1909

“If we are bold in our thinking, courageous in accepting new ideas, and willing to work with instead of against our land, we shall find in conservation farming an avenue to the greatest food production the world has ever known – not only for the war, but for the peace that is to follow”

1943, Hugh Hammond Bennett, “Father of Soil Conservation”

1934: The Dust Bowl

Dust storms had always been a constant threat, especially in the Midwest, and it was well-known that erosion of the topsoil could decrease a farm’s productivity. By the early 1930’s, the soil of the southern Great Plains had become powder-dry due to a combination of overgrazing, a 7-year drought and the removal of native grasses to plant wheat. The addition of wind to this mix completed the recipe for disaster. The first major wind storm in 1934 swept away nearly 350 million tons of topsoil.



Dust Bowl, National Archives Photo

Windstorms continued stripping away the dry soils through 1938, damaging nearly 100 million acres of farmland forcing many to leave the Great Plains for the West. Once viewed as simply beneficial, conservation was now seen as a necessity upon which the economy and the nation’s welfare depended.

1935-1938: Soil Conservation Service and Soil Conservation Districts

The economic devastation caused by the Dust Bowl prompted the federal government to declare the erosion problem a menace to the national welfare and establish the Soil Conservation Service

(SCS) in 1935¹. The primary mission of the SCS was to assist farmers in reducing erosion and protecting soil. Soon after the formation of the SCS, came the establishment of Soil Conservation Districts (SCDs). Formed in 1938, to respond quickly to local needs, SCDs were controlled by local boards of directors, and were empowered to manage soil and water resources for the purpose of conservation. In 1971, SCDs were given the additional responsibility of assisting in the conservation of “related resources” in addition to soil and water and were renamed *Resource Conservation Districts*, or RCDs. Today, there are approximately 3,000 conservation districts throughout the United States referred to by several names under different state laws:

- ! Resource Conservation Districts in California
- ! Soil Conservation Districts in most of the Northern Plains
- ! Soil & Water Conservation Districts in much of the Southeast/Midwest and Hawaii
- ! Conservation Districts on the East Coast
- ! Natural Resources Districts in Nebraska, and
- ! Land Conservation Departments in Wisconsin

The San Joaquin County Resource Conservation District is one of 103 Resource Conservation Districts in California.

1954-1956: Stockton Soil Conservation Service Office Opens & San Joaquin County’s First Soil Conservation Districts Form

The Stockton Soil Conservation Service opened its doors in 1954 in response to the Flood Protection and Prevention Act of 1954. This Act authorized the Secretary of Agriculture to work with state and local agencies to plan and implement projects conserving the nation’s soils. To assist in this endeavor, the first of seven Soil Conservation Districts (later Resource Conservation Districts) was formed in San Joaquin County in 1956. Here is the story of a few of the county’s original conservation districts (please refer to the map on the following page for locations of each former district).

(1) 1958 - Liberty Soil Conservation District

Formed in response to flooding from Dry Creek and tributary creeks in the area, the Liberty SCD also dealt with irrigation and drainage improvement of farmland. *Early Names from the Liberty SCD:* Bruce DeVinny (President); Herbert Buck, Jr.; Eldon Emslie; Lloyd Vizelich; Jim Lind

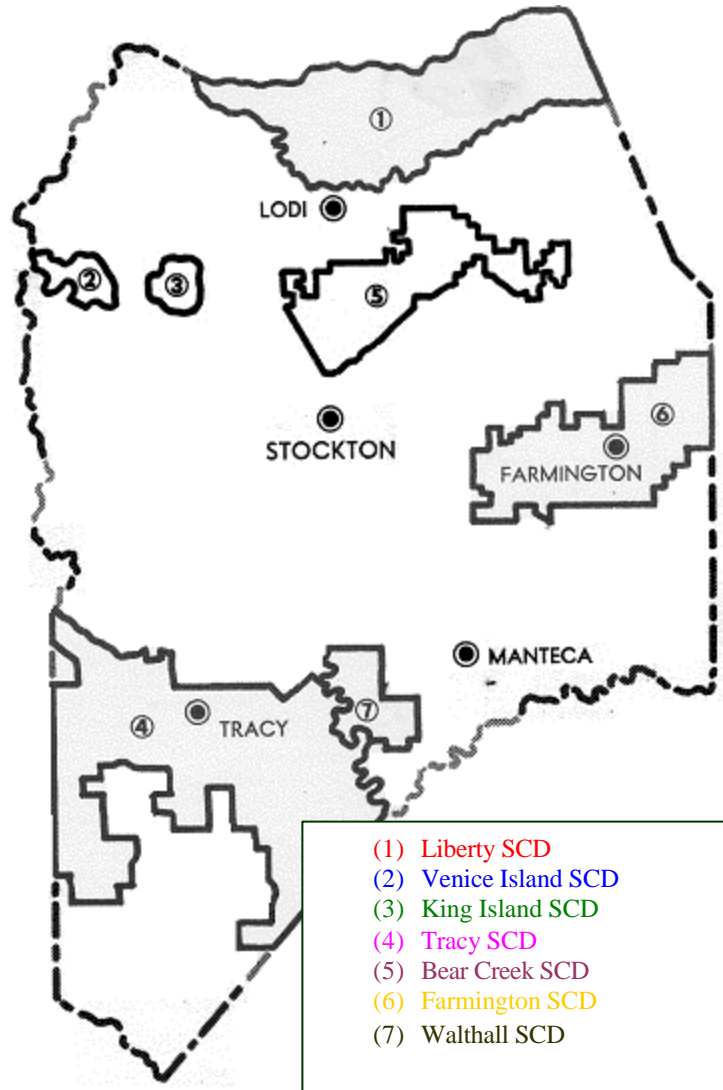
Directors and Cooperator visit stock water and irrigation reservoir holding 45 acre feet of water, with a 40 acre adjoining wildlife habitat area. July, 1959



¹ The Soil Conservation Service later becomes the *Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)* as part of the Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994.

(2) Venice Island Soil Conservation District

Encompassing all of Venice Island, its main concern was with maintaining levees. It was also responsible for related irrigation and drainage work. *Early names from the Venice Island SCD:* Dante “Dan” Nomellini (President), P.E. Mulcahy, Joe DiNapoli, Richard DiNapoli



(3) 1958 - King Island Soil Conservation District

Formed originally for the maintenance of levees around King Island, the district also addressed irrigation and drainage work associated with levee maintenance. *Some of the Founding Directors of the King Island SCD:* E. “Dick” Marchetti (President), Victor Leonardini, Gino Pellegrini, Fred Piacentini, Jack Klein

(4) 1956 - Tracy Soil Conservation District Formed in response to farmland flooding from Corral Hollow Creek in 1955, the Tracy SCD was instrumental in the formation of the Corral Hollow Creek Flood Control Zone by San Joaquin County. Tracy SCD also facilitated the Jerusalem Drainage Project which installed a 31-mile pipe collector system to provide a drainage outlet for flooded farmland. This project saved 12,300 acres of orchards and other crops from the damage that would have resulted from a high water table. The Tracy SCD also was responsible for irrigation improvements on farmland within its boundaries. *Some of Early Names from the Tracy Soil Conservation District:*

Arthur P. King (President), John O. Paulson, John C. Currier, Manuel R. Furtado, Ernest J. Pombo



Water table level investigations are being made by the directors and SCS engineers preliminary to the development of specifications for placing of tile drains. Cooperators have installed about 3 miles of tile drains in 1959.

A drainage tilting project is being completed in a field bordering the west side of Patterson Pass Road. Some 6,400 feet of six-, eight- and 10-inch pipe is being laid in a 160-acre field farmed by Tony Furtado and Manuel Costa and a 100-acre field owned by Mary Brown and farmed by Bob Patterson. The pipe, laid in a sleeve of gravel will carry water from the high water table field to a West Side Irrigation District drainage ditch east of Patterson Pass Road. Shown at the tiling operation, left to right: Ike McElvaney, contractor from El Centro; Bob Stroud, engineer with the U.S. Soil Conservation Service; Manuel Furtado, president of the Byron-Bethany Irrigation District and director of the Tracy Soil Conservation District; and Mario Milani, soil conservation engineer. Tracy Press Photo.



(5) 1956 - Bear Creek Soil Conservation District

The first Soil Conservation District in San Joaquin County, formed in 1956, in response to flooding along Bear Creek and in North Stockton during the winter of 1955. *Some of Bear Creek's First Directors:* Vernon Lehman (President), Dahl Burnham, R.E. "Ray" Burson, W.B. Parker, W.B. "Bert" Kitto, Cecil House, Earl Swain, Peter Robustelli secretary), Joe Furtado (current member, San Joaquin RCD)

(6) 1958 - Farmington Soil Conservation District Formed to serve the farm area around the town of Farmington in East-Central San Joaquin County, its major accomplishments included improving irrigation and drainage structures.

Some Names Associated With the Farmington SCD: Albert Honthaas (President), Virgil Groves, Alfred Sorrenti, Ellis R. Orr, Thomas V. Erle

(7) Walthall Soil Conservation District Eldrid Brown spearheaded the formation of this district, which formed in 1957. It was southwest of Manteca along the east side of the San Joaquin River. The main challenge it faced was flooding along Walthall Sough from the San Joaquin River. It also provided assistance to farmers in the form of land leveling to improve water distribution and the improvement of irrigation systems. ***Some Early Walthall Directors:*** Fred Picchi (President), Emil Filippini, Thomas Kell, Charles W. Hunt, Joe Vieira, Ralph Burson

Today: The San Joaquin County Resource Conservation District

Today, the San Joaquin County Resource Conservation District is the only RCD in San Joaquin County. Formed in the early 1980s, our Resource Conservation District encompasses all of the unincorporated regions of San Joaquin County and includes those areas formerly found within the original soil conservation districts.