



# East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District

**Strategic Plan  
2023-2027**



# Contents

Letter from Executive Director	3
Who is the Plan for?	4
Our Mission	5
Our Mission in Context (Soil & Water Health, Climate, and Equity & Inclusion)	6
Our Process	10
Framing Our Work	13
Guides for Decision-Making	14
What's Next	19
Letter from Board Chair	20
Credits	21



# From the Executive Director

I like to say that East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District (EMSWCD) is one of the coolest government entities you have never heard of. Because our district begins at the Willamette River in a very urbanized part of Portland and reaches out to the Columbia Gorge past Corbett – with large and small municipal partners across the way – we are different than many of our Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) counterparts across Oregon. While we have farmers who we work with and who continue to be a core focus for us, we also have a highly diverse population of people here and urban dwellers with very different soil and water health concerns.

In short, our constituents' needs are very diverse. As we began our strategic planning process, we asked ourselves: What does it mean to be a soil and water conservation district in a largely urbanized place in 2022? This plan reflects the many important conversations we had over the last several months and provides a framework that responds to those conversations and informs our work for the next five years.

And, while all the work to develop this high-level plan was at times challenging, it was also exciting. Invigorating. Hopeful. Driven. There was generally a great deal of alignment about what to focus on moving forward and why.

Nancy J. Hamilton  
Executive Director



# Who is this plan for?

Some strategic plans are exclusively internally focused. Ours isn't.

## Our Community

We crafted a plan that is easy to understand by the public and our partners. It explains who we are, what we do, and what we will consider as we face challenging goals so we can be a better partner in ensuring a healthy environment for the benefit of fish, wildlife, and people.

## Board

We crafted a plan that reflects what our leadership identified are the key priorities for what we care about. This high-level prioritization provides a framework for the Board to use as they consider recommendations from staff and constituents.

## Staff

We crafted a plan that provides our team with clarity from the Board on what is important for the District so staff can make recommendations that reflect those priorities.





# Our Mission

Our mission statement has served as "true north" for our work for the last several years. In considering possible changes, we ultimately made a recommitment to our current mission. Sometimes in planning, even when you end where you began, the focus that emerges from that is the most important and productive part of the process. Key to those conversations was clear agreement that soil and water health are the centerpiece of our work, regardless of where we do it or with whom.

While soil and water health is key, we also recognized that there are important influences, trends, and forces that will drive the direction of EMSWCD moving forward. The two that rose to the top, Climate and Equity & Inclusion, became the core lenses through which EMSWCD will approach its work moving forward.

**We help people  
care for land  
and water**



# Our Mission in Context

Our mission of soil and water health is supported by two important lenses: Climate and Equity & Inclusion.

Soil and water health are key to maintaining vital living ecosystems that support plants, animals, and humans and are core to everything we do as a soil and water conservation district.

**Soil & Water  
Health**

Climate change effects are real and far reaching and impact many aspects of natural resources conservation, which is inextricably interwoven with a healthy human habitat.

**Climate  
Action**

**Equity &  
Inclusion**

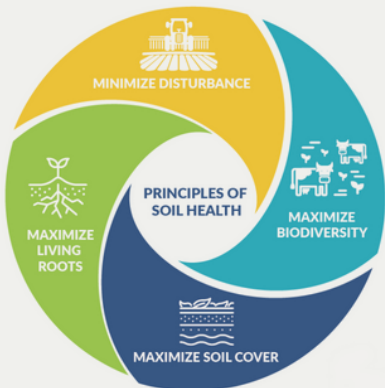
A history of marginalization and systemic disenfranchisement of low-income people and people of color has resulted in generational disparities and requires investments that provide greater access to land, nature, and a healthier environment.



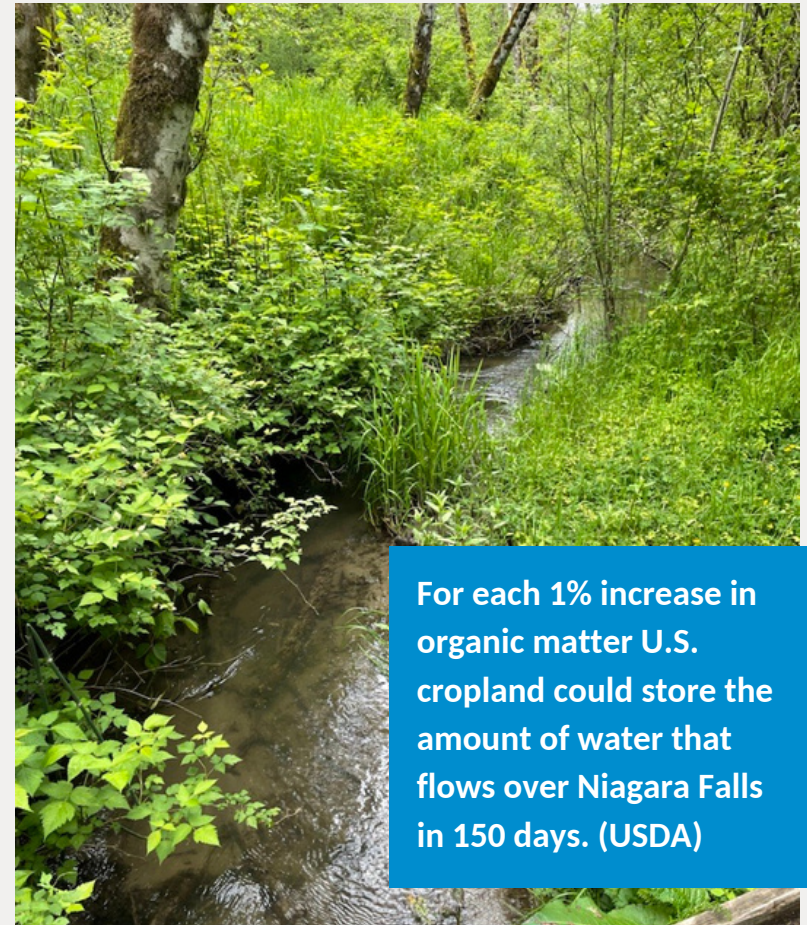
## Soil & Water Health

Soil and water health are the foundation of thriving ecosystems and what humans rely on every day for food, hydration, and livable communities. There is increasing recognition that healthy soil and water also helps protect us against, and adapt to, a changing climate.

Soil and Water Conservation Districts sprang up in response to human mismanagement of our soil and water resources decades ago. Events like the Dust Bowl highlight the potential level of degradation, but soil and water loss and contamination happen at a local level with far ranging negative impacts, like farmland infertility, low salmon runs, polluted drinking water, urban heat islands, and unhealthy human environments, especially in neighborhoods where residents have been historically marginalized.



Our role as an SWCD is to ensure people have the skills, knowledge, and tools needed to be good stewards of our soil and water resources. Simple steps, like keeping living roots in the soil, minimizing soil disturbance, and maintaining plant-cover helps ensure soil stays where it is supposed to—and not in our waterways—and allows it to do its job: feed plants, filter pollutants, store carbon, slow the movement of water so it is available during the dry season, and house complex communities of organisms. We are here to help people care for soil and water because it is good for our community, wildlife, and the health of our planet.



For each 1% increase in organic matter U.S. cropland could store the amount of water that flows over Niagara Falls in 150 days. (USDA)

## Climate Action

# Climate Action

We live in a changing climate that is rapidly becoming less hospitable for human habitation. While the global community—especially rich nations who are responsible for the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions and beneficiaries of carbon-dependent economies—has been slow to act, there is finally a groundswell of momentum to course correct. In Oregon alone, responding to the climate crisis has been identified as a key focus for virtually every state agency and most of our partner organizations. Unprecedented federal and state funding will soon be available to help combat the impacts of a warming planet and EMSWCD is committed to leveraging those dollars with local resources to help protect against the worst impacts of climate change.

The climate crisis is an issue for everyone, but it is particularly significant for SWCDs. For decades now, our work to ensure healthy soil and water has been at the core of climate action. For example, healthy soil is one of the primary tools to store carbon and slow—and eventually reverse—the climate crisis. Similarly, healthy watersheds function to make our communities more resilient against wildfires, droughts, and excessive rain events. But this is not enough, and we are committed to being a leader in the work for climate mitigation and adaptation and partnering with other government entities, nonprofits, and our community to maximize our impact.

"Oregon's watersheds will continue to experience the impacts of significant climate changes, including but not limited to increased water temperatures, altered stream flows increased extreme events, and increased wildfires. These changes will affect fish and wildlife populations and may lead to changes in species distribution; reduced population sizes; decreased extent, availability, and quality of habitat; displacement of native species by invasive species, and other impacts..." (Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board)





## Equity & Inclusion

Throughout American history, Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) have been forcibly removed from and denied access to land. They have experienced significantly greater impacts from contaminated water and soils, polluted air, flooding, fire, and the increasing effects of climate change. Oregon and our region is no different. Oregon began as a whites-only state through a series of **Black exclusionary laws** that were designed to discourage Black Americans from living here in the first place (Oregon Public Broadcasting). Historically SWCDs were mandated to work with landowners. In our district 50% of our constituents do not own land, perpetuating disenfranchisement.

As a soil and water conservation district, we play a critical role in interrupting this cycle. We must engage in and build meaningful relationships with historically marginalized stakeholders and diverse local communities in order to do our work differently. By investing in efforts that foster diversity, equity, inclusion, and environmental justice, we endeavor to create more effective and enduring conservation benefits for all.



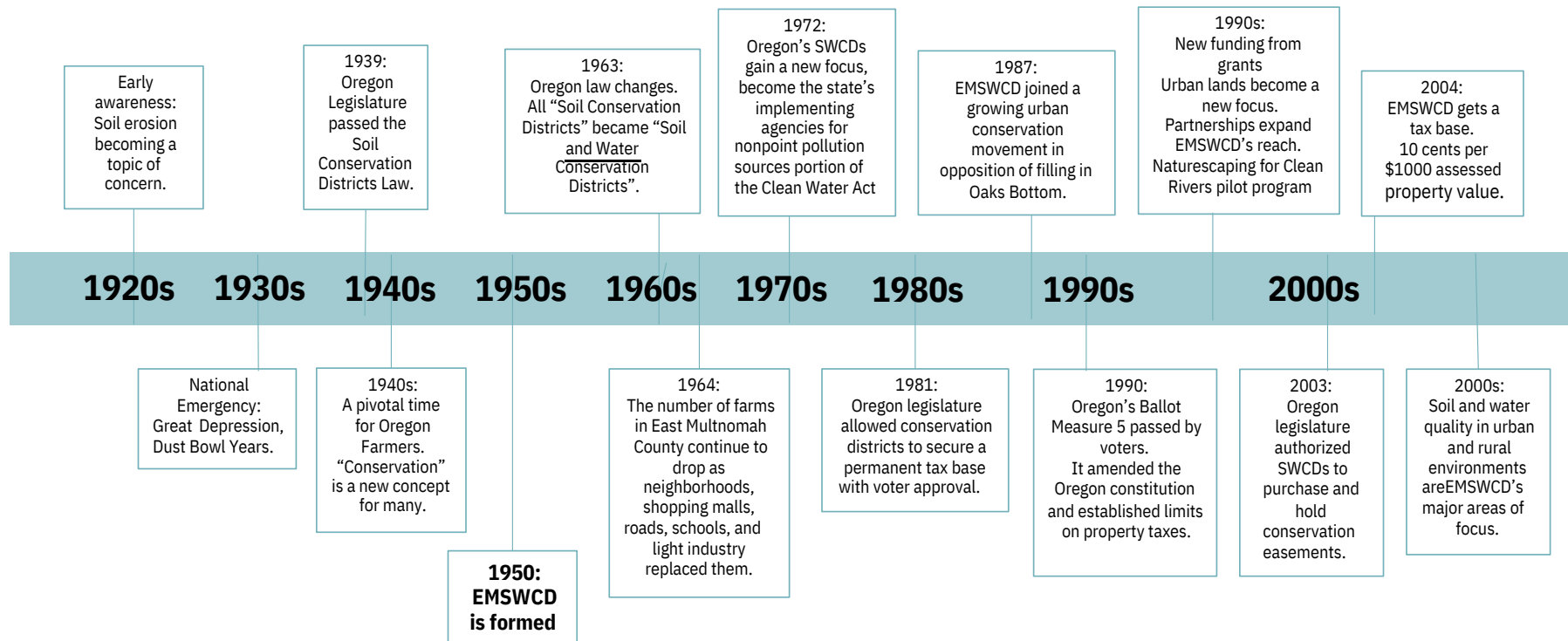
At least 72 people died in Multnomah County alone from the heat dome in August of 2021 when temperatures hit 116 degrees. 42 of those who died were living in neighborhoods identified as “heat islands” which typically sustain the highest temperatures because of several factors, including too much pavement and not enough greenery. (Oregon Public Broadcasting)

# Our Process

As we launched our strategic planning process in early 2022 we recognized that we all needed to have the same baseline of information for our work. Our process included understanding our history, listening to our community, and engaging our board and staff.

## Understanding Our History

As the infographic here illustrates, we have been around for a long time and what SWCDs do has changed significantly since they were created by the state legislature in 1939. We have gone from solely helping farmers to reduce soil erosion to a recognition that soil and water health are fundamental pieces of supporting our natural and human environments.





# Our Process

## Listening to Our Community

We regularly engage farmers, community members, partners, and advisors. These ongoing conversations are an important way for us to understand the needs of our community and helped inform our plan.

Our grant recipients shared what priorities and approaches are emerging for them, as well as how we can think more inclusively about how we do this work. Community Engagement Liaisons (CEL's) provided community experience and understanding of our programs. The Coalition of Communities of Color provided an analysis of that outreach.

From these inputs we learned we need to consider the barriers to access some of our programs may present. We determined that we need to reach out more broadly and conduct deeper stakeholder engagement in an ongoing way to ensure we stay on-track for the long haul. That will be a key ingredient to ongoing implementation of this plan.



# Our Process

## Understanding Our Partners

We also looked at what other SWCDs and our partners are saying in their strategic plans. Understanding partner priorities informs our planning and helps ensure our work complements the efforts of other SWCDs in the region. This included a review of what other government entities are doing because, as a public agency, we must remember to consider the unique responsibilities we have in serving the people of our district.

## Engaging with Board and Staff

We engaged both the board and the staff in a series of workshops, exercises, and surveys to uncover what is most important to consider in order to meet our mission of “helping people care for land and water.”

Our planning process was supported by a cross-discipline team who worked to consider and prepare ideas for Board consideration. This greater degree of staff involvement marked a change from previous planning efforts.





# Framing Our Work

Our strategic planning process helped us to discover that our work can be defined across three core areas, moving away from geographic delineations and instead consider how work is different based on the outcomes we want.

We also recognized it was more important to consider our emphasis in these three areas rather than specific programs. This will allow us to better collaborate on issues of soil and water health, climate, and equity and inclusion so critical to address in our region as these challenges exist across rural and urban boundaries. For each area we have identified key priorities that our work must support.

## Agriculture and Working Lands

Lands utilized for farming and grazing.



## Natural Spaces

Areas of land and water managed for healthy fish and wildlife habitat.



## Urban and Built Environment

Human-dominated spaces that include both the built and natural environment.





# Key Priorities for Our Work

A survey of Board and staff identified a set of priorities across our work areas. These include: **Water Quality, Soil Quality, Climate Change Impacts, Equity and Inclusion, Farmland Access, Water Conservation, Fish and Wildlife Habitat, and Local Food Production.**

Therefore, our key work areas will focus on the following:

## Agriculture and Working Lands

**People work land in both rural and urban settings.**

- We will strive for economic resiliency of farmers, helping with access to land, and sharing resources for urban gardening.
- We promote sustainable practices that support soil and water health, and mitigate climate impacts by creating strong networks for sharing information and best practices.

## Natural Spaces

**Natural spaces are prevalent in our region in both urban and rural settings.**

- We promote soil and water health in these systems, including access to people historically excluded.
- We will partner with organizations that focus on building healthy and accessible spaces throughout our District.

## Urban and Built Environment

**Our built environment requires a unique approach to addressing soil and water health.**

- Our focus needs to span residential, commercial, industrial, community, and open spaces.
- We will develop innovative approaches to addressing the ways in which the built environment can support healthy habitat for all people and wildlife.

# Themes to Consider

Several recurring themes emerged as the work unfolded:

**Communications and Outreach:** As discussions occurred across the many programs we provide and the various constituencies we serve, we recognized that we must rethink how we communicate, who we are trying to reach and what we are hoping to accomplish. This work is currently too siloed, not readily accessible, and not reaching many who we need to reach.



What are our next steps  
in designing a new  
collaborative approach to  
this critical work?

**Leveraging Our Funding:** While we are fortunate to enjoy financial security because of the tax base provided to us by taxpayers, it can also create complacency. We are too insular and falling behind on emerging strategies that are being pursued by our colleagues and others around the state. This is particularly evident as we consider the significant funding that will be generated by the federal Inflation Reduction Act, much of which is targeted toward climate change mitigation efforts.



What could we accomplish  
if we were able to leverage  
additional dollars for our  
district?

**Accountability:** We must find ways to measure success that responds to our core priorities.



How does this translate into  
doing things differently than  
we have in the past?



# Themes to Consider

Several recurring themes emerged as the work unfolded:

**Agricultural and Land Stewardship, Farmer Pipeline and Economics:** The average age of farmers and land stewards is increasing. The challenges in making a living as a farmer are becoming more difficult and few young people can or want to enter this line of work.



What role can we play in supporting farmers at different stages of their careers?

**Teaching and Learning:** We have long offered a wide variety of workshops and technical assistance programs across the district.



With the new lenses of Climate Action and Equity & Inclusion, how do we continue to evolve and improve?

# Themes to Consider

Several recurring themes emerged as the work unfolded:

**Regional Demographics:** Characteristics of the population in our district continue to trend to more urbanization and a greater diversity of people and communities.



How do we ensure that our work keeps pace with the people who live here?

2020 Census Data for EMSWCD	Outside Urban Growth Boundary	Within Urban Growth Boundary	Total
Black or African American	101	39,591	39,692
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific	26	4,891	4,917
Hispanic or Latino	690	91,961	92,651
American Indian and Alaska Native	59	4,395	4,454
Some other race	31	3,794	3,825
White	8,394	415,552	423,946
Asian	286	50,892	51,178
Two or more races	658	44,194	44,852
Total Population	10,245	655,270	665,515
Total Acres	131,761	97,738	229,500

# Critical Questions

Given these priorities and emerging themes, we identified critical questions that can help us make decisions on the best strategies to employ to achieve the outcomes we prioritize.

- 1. Priorities:** What is the soil, water, climate, and/or equity concern?
- 2. Source:** What is the source or who is contributing to the issue or concern?
- 3. Niche:** Who else is working in this realm and what are the critical/unique gaps that EMSWCD can fill?
- 4. Resources:** How can we best leverage our strengths, expertise, and resources?
- 5. Partnerships:** Who else should be “at the table”? How can we partner and solicit input most effectively?
- 6. Creativity:** How can we think differently given our new lenses of Climate Action and Equity & Inclusion?
- 7. Flexibility:** What can we do each year to respond to emerging opportunities and challenges?



# What's Next?

A strategic plan must be flexible enough to adjust with change but not so vague that it doesn't offer guidelines for work that starts, ends or evolves.

This plan is intended to strike that delicate balance. Our goal ultimately is that our plan becomes a central tool for decision making and program development moving forward.

## Our Community

Keep us accountable, stay involved. We will continue to gather stakeholder input on how we can work with you to best meet our mission.

## Board

Will ensure annual work plans align with our mission and priorities and can measure the district's success by considering what is achieved against these core criteria and priorities.

## Staff

Will use the high-level framework to develop specific program strategies annually to meet the mission.



A final thought before we begin the actual work that this plan informs. As we noted at the top of this document, as we all did this work, we experienced a sense of excitement. We were invigorated. We felt hopeful. We felt driven. And so, we intend to harness all that, along with some fear and anxiety because change can be hard – and continue to provide high quality, responsive, relevant services to everyone we serve.

This process itself has brought us to a place where we're ready.

## From our Board Chair

The East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District has a 5-member Board of Directors who are elected by the voters of our district. We are entrusted to make thoughtful decisions that ensure the long-term health of our district's soil and water, to serve as good stewards of the tax dollars provided to us, and to listen to our community as needs change and challenges present themselves.

To say we have come a long way since the inception of Soil Districts decades ago would be an understatement. Looking forward beyond 2022, we are forced to consider existential threats to our future from a warming planet. Here at East Multnomah, we have a growing urban population with different needs than our traditional farm focus of years gone by. The strategic plan developed here is intended to guide our work in the face of these changes and ensure that we continue to provide programs and services to our constituents that respond to these changing times without losing our core focus of helping people care for land and water - from the western border of our district at the Willamette River all the way past Corbett in the Columbia Gorge.

This plan will guide our decision making for the next five years and I am grateful for the many people who helped inform the work.

In service,  
Mike Guebert  
Board Chair



# Credits

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## Special Thanks to:

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Chris Aldassy • Whitney Bailey • Julie DiLeone • Nancy Hamilton •  
Katie Meckes • Dan Mitten • Kathy Shearin • Rowan Steele •  
Chelsea White-Brainard

And to our facilitators, Chris Wallace Caldwell with Catalysis LLC and Jamila Dozier with New Theory Consulting LLC. They patiently and deftly walked us through the journey of a multi-month process to help us identify what we need as we move forward for the next five years.

