



NORTH SANTA CLARA RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis

A comprehensive assessment that can be used to strengthen operations and inform the 2025-2030 long range plan

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Table of contents

Section 1. Summary of findings and recommendations	2
Section 2. Organizational context for SWOT analysis	3
2A. Historical evolution of the District	3
2B. The District today	4
Section 3. SWOT Findings	6
3A. Strengths	6
3B. Weaknesses	7
3C. Opportunities	8
3D. Threats	9
Section 4. Recommendations	10
Section 5. Data collection and preparation methodology	11

Section 1. Summary of findings and recommendations

The North Santa Clara Resource Conservation District conducted this SWOT analysis to inform its upcoming long range plan update. The analysis synthesizes findings from 14 internal stakeholder interviews, 22 external agency stakeholder survey responses, and extensive document review conducted between October 2024 and January 2025. Below is a table summarizing the key findings from the analysis (detailed on pages 6-9).

Table 1: Summary of key findings from SWOT Analysis	
<p style="text-align: center;">Strengths (Internal)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unique financial flexibility as public agency 2. Trusted community resource 3. Technical and educational expertise 4. Skilled board and staff 5. Community access and inclusion 	<p style="text-align: center;">Weaknesses (Internal)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continuity and knowledge management 2. Director and Associate Director engagement 3. External communications and visibility 4. Resource allocation and constraints 5. Equity and inclusion implementation 6. Operational systems
<p style="text-align: center;">Opportunities (External)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. New potential funding 2. Agricultural sector support 3. Partnership development 4. Natural resource protection 5. Climate resilience and technical support 	<p style="text-align: center;">Threats (External)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Climate change and agricultural viability 2. Urbanization and land use pressures 3. Community awareness and engagement 4. Interagency tensions and perceptions 5. Resources and available funding

Recommendations: While this analysis can and should inform the District’s long range plan as intended, it also found operational issues that aren't necessarily addressed by the scope of long range planning as defined by Division 9. It is recommended that the District consider taking immediate action on the recommendations below that can be addressed outside of the long range planning process. More context for this on page 10.

Organizational health

1. Document and implement succession plan to preserve institutional knowledge
2. Conduct resource assessment to align capacity with strategic focus areas and program priorities
3. Document systematized grant pursuit processes
4. Explore additional funding mechanisms including fee for service and bond measure possibilities

Program evolution and service delivery

5. Document project selection criteria to balance opportunities with capacity
6. Consider expanded climate resilience and adaptation services
7. Deepen agricultural support services with focus on sustainability and historically underserved farmers

Community engagement and partnerships

8. Design systematic approach to enhance visibility and communications
9. Clarify environmental justice policy success metrics in the context of recent Executive Orders
10. Strengthen interagency relationships
11. Build on successful multilingual program delivery

Section 2. Organizational context for SWOT analysis

2A. Historical evolution of the District

The North Santa Clara Resource Conservation District has a rich history of local conservation efforts in Santa Clara County. Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs) were first established as non-regulatory Soil Conservation Districts through federal legislation in 1937 under the Standards Act, initially created to address the Dust Bowl crisis by serving as local liaisons between the US Soil Conservation Service (now USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service) and local landowners. California quickly adopted state provisions authorizing these districts in 1938. The primary purpose of California's RCDs under the Section 9001(a) of the Public Resources Code is to secure "the adoption of conservation practices, including but not limited to, farm, range, open space, urban development, wildlife, recreation, watershed, water quality and woodlands."

The North Santa Clara Resource Conservation District's roots trace back to two original conservation districts: the Black Mountain Soil Conservation District (formed 1943) and the Evergreen Soil Conservation District (formed 1944). The District initially covered 5,500 acres in the Calabazas Watershed and later expanded to cover most of the hilly land on the west side of the valley from the San Mateo County line to Loma Prieta Mountain. The Evergreen district began with about 10,000 acres in the Silver Creek Watershed and expanded to include most of the land on the east side of the Santa Clara Valley. In 1977, these districts merged under the Evergreen name. The organization became the Guadalupe-Coyote Resource Conservation District in 1995 to better reflect the agency's major watersheds, and in 2022 was renamed to North Santa Clara Resource Conservation District to better reflect the agency's integrated natural resource conservation approach and geographical location.

Governance and operational structure

The District operates as an independent special district under Division 9 of the California Public Resources Code. For purposes of contracting with state agencies only, RCDs are considered agencies of the state, though they are not regulatory agencies. While state law provides for RCD directors to be elected to 4-year terms, districts may request their county Board of Supervisors to make appointments instead. In 2004, due to increasing county charges for biennial elections, the District's Board of Directors passed a resolution requesting the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors to make appointments to the Board.

The current governance structure includes a 5-member **Board of Directors** who serve staggered 4-year terms and are responsible for policy development, financial oversight, strategic direction, and representation of the agency. Individual Director duties include meeting preparation, strategic planning preparation, constituent engagement, legal compliance including Brown Act and Conflict of Interest Code, and completion of required training. Per District policy, directors must attend 75% of Board meetings annually, serve on appointed committees, and participate in designated external meetings.

Complementing the Board are **Associate Directors**, who serve as volunteer positions with 4-year term limits. These positions provide additional expertise in crucial areas including natural resources conservation and management, agricultural and grazing management practices, environmental health, land use, engineering, physical and life sciences, public outreach and education, and local government policy and procedures. While Associate Directors cannot vote at Board meetings, they participate in discussions during open sessions and can serve as voting members on committees when appointed. They must meet constituency requirements (being a registered voter, landowner, or employee within District boundaries, though exceptions can be made for exceptionally qualified candidates). The Associate Director structure helps preserve institutional knowledge and

provides continuity, particularly valuable given the District's challenges with knowledge retention and succession planning.

The professional **staff** are led by Executive Director Stephanie Moreno, who has been with the District since 2014 and also serves as District Clerk and Board Secretary. The Executive Director manages daily operations including policy administration, program development, and administrative oversight. Stephanie brings over 30 years of management and supervisory experience in local government, including six years as an elected County Supervisor. Under her leadership, the District has expanded its programs and strengthened administrative operations, with particular focus on improving public accountability, promoting diversity, equity and inclusion, and enhancing public outreach. Supporting program implementation are two conservation program coordinators: Andrew Lopez and Nuoxian "Teddy" Peng. Lopez has a degree in Plant Science and brings expertise in plants and integrated pest management, with particular focus on sustainable agriculture and native plants. Peng holds a degree in Sustainable Environmental Design with proficiency in GIS mapping and analysis, contributing to the District's technical capabilities.

The District also contracts with a variety of specialized **consultants** to expand its program offerings – such as community grant writing and watershed evaluations, and is able to provide services in Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish, and Vietnamese to enhance the District's ability to serve its diverse constituency.

The District maintains strong **partnerships** with many federal, state, and local agencies, particularly USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA). While the District is a non-regulatory agency, it can serve as an effective intermediary between regulatory agencies and private landowners, providing technical assistance and support for agricultural and conservation efforts.

The District's evolution from its origins as soil conservation districts to today's integrated resource conservation approach reflects its adaptability to changing environmental and community needs. Building on this legacy, the District has expanded beyond its agricultural roots to address contemporary challenges in climate resilience, environmental justice, and urban conservation.

2B. The District today

Serving approximately 583 square miles across northwestern, northeastern, and central Santa Clara County, the District provides education and technical assistance to over 300,000 constituents. Its mission is "to provide education and technical assistance to constituents and watershed stakeholders to sustainably manage soil, water and wildlife with the best available science." The District's **strategic focus areas documented in the 2019–2024 Long Range Plan** include: Agricultural Lands, Biodiversity, Water Quality, Fire Risk, Climate Change, Public Engagement, and District Operations

In 2020, the District adopted its **Statement of Diversity and Inclusion**, in which the Board of Directors committed to:

- Doing the work as an organization to learn about justice, equity, diversity and inclusions, and how they relate to the District's mission.
- Seeking to expand diversity of the Board of Directors.
- Recruiting employees and consultants whose background and experience show a commitment to diversity and environmental justice.
- Ensuring diversity and environmental justice are key components of strategic planning and programmatic work.
- Using their positions as conservation leaders to amplify diverse voices in the conservation movement.

In 2021, the District expanded its diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts by formally adopting an **Environmental and Social Justice Policy** establishing three objectives: 1) Dissolving existing environmental justice barriers, 2) Rectifying historical imbalances affecting marginalized communities, and 3) Increasing transparency in decision-making. The policy outlines specific principles for implementation:

- Minimizing environmental burdens in low-income communities and communities of color.
- Ensuring programs and investments don't negatively impact vulnerable populations.
- Promoting projects that avoid, minimize, or mitigate climate change impacts on vulnerable populations
- Working as an organization to learn about justice, equity, diversity and inclusion.

The **2023–2024 Annual Work Plan** details current programs implementing these principles:

- Farm and Ranch Resilience Program: Provides multilingual assistance to historically underserved farmers and ranchers through bilingual outreach and culturally appropriate technical assistance
- Urban Agriculture Technical Assistance Program: Delivers education and technical support to urban farmers to improve food security
- Zero Emissions Neighborhood (ZEN) Project: Implements urban greening measures in disadvantaged communities
- Post-Disaster Technical Assistance Program: Assists agricultural producers affected by natural disasters
- Wildlife Habitat Program: Advances scientific knowledge through research and develops projects to restore, enhance and protect wildlife

The District has achieved notable success in multilingual program development, including providing technical assistance and educational workshops for Asian and Spanish growers with limited English proficiency, and offering multilingual community gardening and climate adaptation educational opportunities in disadvantaged communities.

The District is a non-regulatory agency but maintains partnerships with federal, state, and local regulatory agencies. It works closely with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA), providing outreach, education, and technical assistance to agricultural producers and urban growers, including those who have been historically underserved, through federal cooperative agreements.

Section 3. SWOT Findings

3A. Strengths

Document review, internal interviews, and external surveys consistently highlight the District's unique position as a trusted, non-regulatory agency with specialized technical expertise and strong community connections. The District has built these core competencies over decades of service and they enable the District to effectively bridge gaps between government agencies, private landowners, and diverse community stakeholders. The following strengths provide a foundation for future growth and impact.

"RCDs have the flexibility to do what other public agencies can't - work on private property and move quickly."

1. Unique financial flexibility for a public agency

- a. Resource conservation district structure expedites decision-making
- b. Ability to work on private property
- c. Discretionary funding from property taxes
- d. Access to grant opportunities unavailable to other organizations
- e. Division 9 enables the State to contract with RCDs for services without going through a formal bidding process.
- f. Facilitator between larger agencies and small communities

2. Trusted community resource

- a. Non-regulatory and trusted intermediary for sensitive environmental issues
- b. Strong collaborative relationships across public, private, and nonprofit sectors
- c. Strong track record of grant partnership and administration
- d. Provides effective grant writing support to organizations with limited capacity
- e. Valued strategic advisor/thought partner

3. Technical and educational expertise

- a. Deep understanding of local ecology and climate adaptation strategies
- b. Track record of successful pilot programs
- c. Effective and valued technical assistance and interactive workshops
- d. Technical expertise in environmental review and implementation support
- e. Track record in scientific research and publications that educate the community

4. Skilled board and staff

- a. Highly capable Executive Director with deep institutional knowledge
- b. Mission-driven staff
- c. Directors and Associate Directors have diverse expertise and connections
- d. Strong consultant network

5. Community access and inclusion

- a. Multilingual staff
- b. Coordinates translation services effectively
- c. Strong track record of culturally-appropriate program delivery (ex: Multilingual technical assistance for historically underserved farmers)
- d. Active engagement with diverse communities through tailored outreach
- e. Connects underserved communities to additional resources (e.g., FSA services)

3B. Weaknesses

Document review, stakeholder interviews, and survey responses reveal several operational challenges that could impact the District's effectiveness if not addressed. These challenges stem primarily from the growing scope of programs with static staffing levels as well as opportunities to enhance internal and external communication processes. Each finding represents an opportunity to strengthen the organization's ability to serve its mission and community effectively.

“We are trying to take on more programs and we want to do more in our district... But we only have three staff. There aren't enough staff to take on more and more projects.”

1. Continuity and knowledge management

- a. No adopted succession plan for key leadership positions
- b. Concentrated institutional knowledge in Executive Director role, desire for more formalized knowledge transfer systems

2. Director and Associate Director engagement

- a. Current meeting structure limits opportunities for meaningful strategic discussions and relationship building among Directors and Associate Directors
- b. Meeting participation patterns suggest a need to reevaluate Associate Director engagement strategies
- c. Some Directors and Associate Directors feel discouraged from providing input at meetings

3. External communications and visibility

- a. Some external stakeholders unclear about the District's purpose and capabilities
- b. Limited systematic approach to external communications and outreach

4. Resource allocation and constraints

- a. Limited documented criteria for evaluating potential projects
- b. Limited ability to expand services due to staffing and financial constraints
- c. Board and committees sometimes make decisions with limited opportunity for staff to evaluate potential impact

5. Equity and inclusion implementation

- a. Insufficient board evaluation of Environmental Justice Policy implementation and targeted success metrics
- b. Board composition does not always reflect the desired demographic diversity

6. Operational systems

- a. Some existing technology infrastructure could be better leveraged
- b. Grant pursuit process needs further systematization

3C. Opportunities

Document review, internal interviews, and external surveys pointed to numerous opportunities that can be leveraged by the District to increase funding, deepen partnerships, and evolve programs and services. They noted increased government funding for conservation and rising demand for technical assistance. These opportunities could strengthen both organizational capacity and program effectiveness while advancing regional conservation goals. The following opportunities align well with the District's strengths, could help address some of the identified weaknesses as well as mitigate identified threats.

"We're uniquely positioned to bring state and federal resources to our region that wouldn't come here otherwise."

1. New potential funding

- a. Increase in available government grant opportunities
- b. New conservation funding streams (wildlife, agriculture, fire prevention)
- c. Possibility of bond measure funding and implement a fee-for-service program

2. Agricultural sector support

- a. Demand for technical assistance to new and historically underserved farmers (Multilingual services, support accessing federal and state programs and resources, basic agricultural technical assistance)
- b. Partner interest in conservation practices including carbon farming and sequestration, soil health management and testing, and habitat enhancements
- c. Cross-sector collaboration on food systems and agricultural sustainability
- d. Countywide need for agricultural land preservation

3. Partnership development

- a. Rising interest in permit coordination among agencies
- b. Cross-sector collaboration and planning opportunities (public, private, nonprofit)
- c. Small agency support opportunities

4. Natural resource protection

- a. Large-scale watershed and aquatic habitat restoration potential
- b. Native habitat restoration
- c. Wildlife corridor protection and wildland-urban interface management
- d. Groundwater recharge and water quality improvement needs
- e. Ranch roads improvement opportunities (supports water quality, fire management, wildlife habitat)

5. Climate resilience and technical support

- a. Growing demand for climate adaptation expertise and support
- b. Rising interest in fire risk reduction and drought resilience
- c. Increasing need for conservation planning and scientific monitoring

3D. Threats

Document review, internal interviews, and external surveys revealed critical threats that could limit the District's ability to deliver services and its mission. These include climate change impacts, loss of farmland and open space, interagency tensions, and resource constraints. Understanding these threats is essential for developing mitigation strategies and ensuring long-term organizational sustainability and program viability. The following threats emerged as key themes from the analysis.

"If we lose open space and agricultural land to development, the work associated with the land becomes moot."

1. Climate change and agricultural viability

- a. Increasing severity and frequency of climate impacts:
 - i. Extended droughts threatening agricultural viability
 - ii. Rising wildfire risks requiring enhanced prevention and response
 - iii. Extreme weather events damaging watersheds and infrastructure
 - iv. Heat impacts on soil health and water retention
- b. Growing complexity of resource management challenges
- c. Rising demand for climate adaptation support potentially overwhelming capacity

2. Urbanization and land use pressures

- a. Accelerating loss of agricultural lands and natural areas to development
- b. Increasing urbanization impacts on watersheds requiring more resources
- c. Potential for increased community conflicts around competing land uses and resource demands
- d. Challenge of balancing urban and rural needs

3. Community awareness and engagement

- a. Limited understanding of RCD's purpose and role among key stakeholders

4. Interagency tensions and perceptions

- a. Strained relationship and history of conflicts with Valley Water
- b. Perception of RCD as adversarial by some agencies limits potential collaborations and joint conservation efforts

5. Resources and available funding

- a. Growing competition for conservation funding
- b. Increasing demand without matching resource growth
- c. Unpredictability of federal and state funding availability and reimbursements
- d. Recent Executive Orders likely will require the District to choose between federal funding opportunities or its environmental and social justice policy initiatives

Section 4. Recommendations

The North Santa Clara Resource Conservation District conducted this SWOT analysis to inform its upcoming long range plan update. While this analysis can and should serve as a key reference document in the long range planning process, it found several operational issues that may require more immediate attention and are outside of the scope of a long range plan as defined by Division 9¹. It is recommended that the District consider taking immediate action on the recommendations below that can be addressed outside of the long range planning process.

The following SWOT analysis recommendations identify key areas where the District can build on its strengths and leverage opportunities while addressing weaknesses and challenges:

Organizational health

1. Document and implement succession plan to preserve institutional knowledge
2. Conduct resource assessment to align capacity with strategic focus areas and program priorities
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Program evolution and service delivery

5. Document project selection criteria to balance opportunities with capacity
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Community engagement and partnerships

8. Design systematic approach to enhance visibility and communications
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11. Build on successful multilingual program delivery

¹ Division 9 of the California Public Resources Code is the legislative framework that establishes and governs Resource Conservation Districts in California
North Santa Clara Resource Conservation District SWOT Analysis

Section 5. Data collection and preparation methodology

This SWOT analysis was conducted from October 2024 through January 2025 by Megan Fluke, Executive Consultant, Coach, and Facilitator. The process involved three main data collection methods:

- A. Document review:** Internal documents reviewed included Long Range Plans (2013-2024), Annual Work Plans, Environmental and Social Justice Policy, Board meeting minutes, the District's website and LAFCO's 2011 Countywide Water Service Review.
- B. Internal stakeholder interviews:** Fourteen structured interviews were conducted virtually in November and December 2024. Interviewees included 6 directors (current and former), 5 associate directors (current and former), and 3 staff members. Each 30-45 minute interview explored the District's mission, programs, internal resources, challenges, community needs, and future concerns. Responses were kept confidential and anonymized.
- C. External stakeholder survey:** A 6-question survey was distributed to 57 external partner organizations and stakeholders, with 22 responses (39% response rate) received from conservation organizations, agricultural partners, educational institutions, and local agencies. The survey asked for their perspective on the District's purpose and role, service accessibility, value, partnership opportunities, and future priorities. To support inclusive participation, stakeholders received the survey in English, Spanish, and Chinese, with multiple reminder notices sent over a three-week period. Responses were kept confidential and anonymized.

The SWOT Analysis preparation process started with a systematic analysis of interview transcripts, survey responses, and document reviews to identify recurring themes. Cross-referencing findings across different data sources to validate conclusions and identify areas of alignment or divergence. From there, the SWOT analysis report was drafted by Megan Fluke with an emphasis on clarity, simplicity, and implementability for board and staff use. The drafted analysis was then reviewed by the Executive Director and legal counsel for accuracy and clarity. This current version was finalized to be posted in advance of the February 2025 District Board of Directors meeting.