



Yellowstone River *Conservation* *District* Council

**- POSITION PAPER -
Cooperative Watershed Management Act of 2008
August 2008**

I. Introduction

S. 3085. The Cooperative Watershed Management Act (CWMA) creates a granting program to help local stakeholders form or expand watershed-wide management groups to cooperatively manage their local water resources. There is no doubt that funding for watershed efforts is sorely needed, and the Yellowstone River Conservation District Council (YR CDC) applauds the efforts of Senator Jon Tester and the co-sponsors of this bill. However, we believe that modifications are necessary to improve this important piece of legislation in order to assure future benefits for Montana and the rural west.

II. Background

The YR CDC is an alliance of 12 conservation districts bordering the Yellowstone River with the goal of providing leadership in the watershed for sustainable river management. Conservation Districts (CD) are units of local government, governed by a board of elected supervisors, designed to help citizens conserve their soil, water, and other renewable natural resources. There are over 3,000 CD's nationwide and 56 in Montana, providing assistance to agencies and landowners with the following:

• Agricultural energy conservation	• Noxious weed control
• Conservation education	• Rangeland resources
• Conservation equipment	• Resource Conservation & Development (RC&Ds)
• Conservation tree plantings	• Riparian management
• Federal conservation programs	• Saline seep reclamation
• Forest fire rehabilitation	• Streambank stabilization
• Forest practices	• The Natural Streambed & Land Preservation Act (310 Law)
• Irrigation water management	• Urban conservation
• Nonpoint Source Pollution	• Water reservations

III. Recommendations

The Yellowstone River Conservation District Council offers the following recommendations:

- 1. Conservation District Cooperation.** The bill requires that the Secretary of the Interior establish a cooperative watershed management program. Regardless of which agency is granted management authority, we recommend that the CWMA be administered in close consultation with state Conservation District (CD) associations to insure rural states, such as Montana, are equally represented.
- 2. Scope of the CWMA.** The title of the bill indicates a broad-based approach to watershed planning and management, while the content of the legislation clearly defines it as a water resources bill. We recommend that the scope of the CWMA be broadened to help achieve sustainable, environmentally sound land and water use by means of the watershed approach, as the title indicates.



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3. Recognition of Existing Organizational Structures. We recommend that CDs, and CD-support organizations such as the Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Conservation and Resource Development Division (CARDD), be included in the legislation. This will help provide coordination with current watershed planning efforts in order to reduce duplication, limit competition for already scarce funding, take advantage of existing infrastructure, and leverage existing federal-state-local partnerships. This recommendation is based on the following points:

- Conservation Districts play a significant role in nearly all 53 active watershed groups in Montana.
- MACD is a private nonprofit association that has been contributing to the success of CDs in Montana since 1942. MACD is governed by a statewide Board of Directors, who also serve as CD supervisors in their own districts.
- CARDD has duties established in state statute to assist CD supervisors in carrying out their authorities and programs, including facilitation of information, activities, and programs between districts; secure the cooperation and assistance of other agencies; and administer financial assistance programs for districts.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is the position of the Yellowstone River Conservation District Council that the Cooperative Watershed Management Act of 2008 is important legislation. However, we strongly urge the authors of this bill to consider the following recommendations.

1. Revise the bill to require that the program is administered in close cooperation with state Conservation District associations to insure that rural states, such as Montana, are equally represented.
2. Expand the scope of the CWMA to include the array of natural resource issues that CDs and watershed groups are grappling with throughout Montana and the arid west.
3. Provide recognition of existing organizational structures including Conservation Districts, and CD-support organizations such as MACD and CARDD.

In closing, the YRDCDC appreciates this important legislation that has the potential to keep watershed efforts in Montana, and the nation, sustainable. We are eager to work together in drafting the final language of the bill to reflect a more integrated approach to watershed management in the 21st century and beyond.

CONSERVATION DISTRICT MEMBERS: Carbon, Custer, Dawson, Park, Prairie, Richland, Rosebud, Stillwater, Sweet Grass, Treasure, Yellowstone, McKenzie County North Dakota, Resource Advisory Council Chairman
