

## Case Study: Tehama County Resource Conservation District

**Watershed:** Thomes Creek-Sacramento River; Cottonwood Creek

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*Table 1: CALFED/DOC Grant Awards*

Year	Grant Program	Project Title	Watershed	Award Amount
2002-2006	CALFED Watershed Program	Tehama West Watershed Assessment	Thomes Creek, Elder Creek	\$199,500
2005-2010	CALFED Watershed Program	Tehama West Watershed Management Program	Thomes Creek, Elder Creek	\$385,775
2006-2010	CALFED Watershed Program	Tehama East Watershed Assessment	Antelope Creek, Pine Creek	\$398,401
2004-2007	Department of Conservation-Resource Conservation District Watershed Coordinator Grant Program	Sacramento-Lower Thomes Watershed Coordinator	Thomes Creek-Sacramento River	\$132,196
2008-2011	Department of Conservation Watershed Coordinator Grant Program	Sacramento-Lower Thomes Watershed Coordinator	Thomes Creek – Sacramento River	\$211,567
2011-2014	Department of Conservation-Watershed Coordinator Grant Program	Cottonwood Creek Watershed Coordinator	Cottonwood Creek	\$236,749

### Introduction and Background

The Resource Conservation District of Tehama County (RCD-TC) was formed in 1999 as a consolidation of four local RCD’s, including Corning, Cottonwood, Lassen View, and Tehama. The geographical purview of RCD-TC includes all of Tehama County (approximately 1.75 million acres), excluding the municipal centers of Corning, Red Bluff, and Tehama, California (RCD-TC, 2017).

A Resource Conservation District (RCD) is a non-regulatory public agency operating within a specific region or locality. RCDs were originally formed as *soil conservation districts*, authorized by Congress to be local, responsive extensions of the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS; formerly the Soil Conservation Service). RCDs are independent of the NRCS, but maintain a close working relationship with the federal agency (RCD-TC 2017). The structure of an RCD, sometimes referred to as “quasi-governmental,” is a unique organizational category within Sierra Institute’s assessment of CALFED and DOC watershed program grants. Analysis of the role and effect of the RCD-TC administering CALFED and DOC watershed grants as a quasi-governmental organization can be found throughout the key findings sections of this report.

While RCD's have a significant presence in the region, including Western Shasta RCD to the north and Butte County RCD to the south, a number of watershed organizations, often community or issue driven, exist as well. Those operating within the study time frame (2000-2014) include:

- Battle Creek Watershed Conservancy
- Cottonwood Creek Watershed Group<sup>1</sup>
- Deer Creek Watershed Conservancy
- Mill Creek Conservancy

As shown in Table 1, Tehama County RCD has been the recipient of three Department of Conservation (DOC) Watershed Coordinator grants and three CALFED watershed project grants. In this case, the same individual served as the primary watershed coordinator for all three DOC coordinator grants (2004-2014). However, at times up to three staff members functioned as coordinators, performing tasks under the DOC grants.

## **Geography**

RCD-TC received three watershed coordinator grants for two different watersheds. The first two focused on the Sacramento-Lower Thomes watershed, which encompasses the cities of Red Bluff, Corning, and the northern reaches of Chico, with the Sacramento River running southward through the length of the watershed. The final coordinator grant was for the Cottonwood Creek watershed. The Cottonwood Creek watershed is located in both Tehama and Shasta counties, on the northwest end of the Sacramento valley. Cottonwood Creek is the largest tributary without a dam in the Sacramento River Basin (SRMP, 2017).

Tehama County RCD also conducted two watershed assessments in areas described as Tehama West and Tehama East.<sup>2</sup> The Tehama West watershed is a combination of 11 sub-watersheds and covers an area of over 1,000 square miles. Tehama East includes nine sub-watersheds and covers approximately 690 square miles. Flows in Tehama East are fed by snowpack from the Sierra Nevada, with progressively less snowpack-driven hydrology in Tehama West. Beyond the population centers of Redding and Red Bluff, Tehama County and its watersheds are comprised mostly of small, dispersed rural communities. Primary industries include ranching, farming, and timber production.

## **Grants**

### **Watershed Coordinator Grant (2004-2007)**

The current district manager of RCD-TC served as the initial watershed coordinator in 1999, and in a similar capacity when the organization received a watershed coordinator grant in 2000 through a DOC pilot program. Although this initial coordination is not under review in this

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<sup>1</sup> Dissolved in 2009.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for a map of the watersheds.

study, there were a number of projects and proposals instituted then that were later managed by the watershed coordinator beginning in 2004. One significant project managed by the DOC-funded position post-2004 was the Tehama West Watershed Assessment. A significant ongoing program includes the Mobile Irrigation Lab, which provided on-site evaluations of agricultural irrigation systems. The Mobile Irrigation Lab was initially funded through the Bureau of Reclamation and the California Department of Water Resources (DWR).

To manage these and other projects, an individual from outside the RCD-TC was hired as watershed coordinator in 2004. In an interview, the coordinator described a steep initial learning curve associated mainly with complex planned and ongoing projects. He also described extensive training opportunities that helped navigate the complexities of the position, for example, DOC's offer of CEQA and NEPA training. Other training included "extracurricular" opportunities, for example, attendance at local community and natural resource agency meetings. These were not obligatory and often scheduled outside normal work hours. The coordinator was aware from the start that "this was more than a full-time job." The RCD did, however, include hours for training staff in their annual budget.

The final report for this grant indicates a total of \$806,310 awarded through additional grants over the three-year period. This figure was reported as 610% "matched funding," ostensibly a six-fold return on the \$132,196 awarded to RCD-TC to fund the coordinator.<sup>3</sup> The majority of this funding supported planning activities such as the Tehama West and Tehama East watershed assessments, Tehama East Community Wildfire Protection Plan, and Lassen Foothills Fire Vegetation Mapping and Modeling project. Funding was also secured to maintain operation of the Mobile Irrigation Lab, which at the time of final reporting in 2007 had run consistently for six years.

### *Outcomes and Insights*

The watershed coordinator reported having a background in fire and fuels management prior to working at RCD-TC. This expertise was reflected in many of the outcomes of the initial coordinator grant. Beyond the planning efforts referred to in the previous section, the coordinator also facilitated Tehama-Glen Fire Safe Council meetings and oversaw the development of a fire and fuels management project database covering Glenn, Shasta, and Tehama counties. RCD-TC staff indicated that their watershed coordination focused largely on this type of work in the first grant period. The watershed coordinator described a degree of latitude from senior RCD-TC staff in pursuing projects that were in line with his expertise, and this autonomy laid a foundation for a good working relationship throughout the next decade.

Senior staff at RCD-TC stated that overall staff retention is high, in part because of the autonomy granted to incoming personnel. When asked about the hiring process, a senior staff member explained that new employees are expected to "make their own way" in terms of funding and continuing programs and projects relevant to their position. The same staff member asserted that this up-front agreement historically has attracted individuals who become highly dedicated to the work at RCD-TC.

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<sup>3</sup>An additional \$211,567 was awarded in 2007 following the final report's publication for an additional three years funding of the watershed coordinator position.

**Tehama West Watershed Assessment (2002-2006)**  
**Tehama West Watershed Management Program (2005-2010)**

The Tehama West Watershed Assessment (TWWA) was funded through the CALFED Watershed Program in 2002 and completed in 2006. The assessment was designed to “gather and integrate existing information on the physical, cultural, and demographic variables that characterize the section of Tehama County west of the Sacramento River” (RCD-TC, 2008). The RCD-TC’s watershed coordinator acted as project manager for the assessment, while consulting firm VESTRA Resources, Inc. was contracted to complete the majority of the assessment work. The TWWA is a self-described “existing conditions” report, the data of which was ultimately used to develop a watershed management plan as one product of the Tehama West Watershed Management Program. The TWWA included the development of a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) layers database, which RCD-TC staff considered crucial to the development of a watershed management plan.

The Tehama West Watershed Management Program (Management Program) is described as generally addressing the “environmental and social issues within the Tehama West watershed” (Tehama County Resource Conservation District 2010). The Management Program consisted of several components, including a watershed management plan, watershed condition and water quality monitoring, and public outreach and education. The watershed management plan utilized the TWWA as well as new data obtained throughout the course of the Management Program (approximately 2005 to 2010). The plan is considered a “core management document” that was intended as a “blueprint for future actions” beyond the term of the CALFED grant. The public education component was similarly intended to sustain public involvement in RCD-TC’s management activities.

***Outcomes and Insights: Tehama West Watershed Assessment***

In 2002, the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) was administering CALFED Watershed Program funding for watershed projects. A member of the SWRCB encouraged RCD-TC to submit a proposal for the Tehama West Watershed Assessment. RCD-TC staff described criticism from SWRCB following completion of the assessment, specifically, that the assessment was a “grand encyclopedia” and too general for effective use. The RCD-TC coordinator expressed agreement that certain analyses in the TWWA were limited, but attributed this to a lack of overall funding, approximately \$200,000, which is low relative to other CALFED funded assessments. Nonetheless, RCD-TC received the full amount requested and reported an additional \$200k in matching funds for the project.

The RCD-TC coordinator believed the assessment was ultimately most valuable as a landscape-scale analysis that aggregated information on vegetation, land use, fisheries, wildlife, and water quality within the watershed. The assessment also provided the foundation for the Tehama West Watershed Management Plan, a component of the Tehama West Watershed Management Program.

### ***Outcomes and Insights: Tehama West Watershed Management Program***

The Tehama West Watershed Management Program (Management Program) was initiated in 2005. There were some notable issues limiting the overall effectiveness of the program. RCD-TC's final report for the program candidly expressed the challenges associated with several program elements, including the administration of the grant, funding, and maintaining interest and momentum internally and with the public.

RCD-TC's final report for the Management Program cited new requirements within the SWRCB agreements process that contributed to difficulties in grant administration and reporting. The scope of work created through the SWRCB agreement is one example of this challenge. As stated in the final report, RCD-TC's project description was initially a three-page narrative, but was transferred to an outline format through the agreements process to create the final scope of work. RCD-TC states that the change in format created confusion, as a portion of outlined tasks differed from those in the initial proposal. Further, there were redundancies in the tasks created through the alteration. Adding to the administrative challenges was the requirement for two additional documents, a *Quality Assurance Project Plan (QAPP)* and a *Project Assessment and Evaluation Plan (PAEP)*. These additional documents were new to RCD-TC. While staff attended workshops and meetings to better understand the requirements, RCD-TC continually had difficulties managing the suite of reports.

Other challenges in the Management Program included inconsistent funding and its effect on project implementation. A state bond freeze interrupted the funding for the Management Program, which in conjunction with staffing changes for RCD-TC, disrupted the momentum of the project. There were also challenges in creating public interest. For example, RCD-TC had proposed holding five public workshops to review the watershed management plan. The workshops were sparsely attended, which prompted RCD-TC to mail out project drafts to elicit comments. RCD-TC received a one-year extension for the Management Program, which was concluded in 2010.

### **Watershed Coordinator Grant (2008-2011)**

RCD-TC received a second consecutive watershed coordinator grant in 2008 and the same individual served as the coordinator. With this grant, two additional RCD-TC staff members contributed to the watershed coordinating effort (e.g., grant writing and administration). Throughout this period, approximately \$1.75 million in additional grant funding was awarded out of the \$5.75 million requested by the coordinators. Another significant outcome included an increase in fee-for-service revenue in programs managed by the watershed coordinator and RCD-TC staff. Fee-based services included the Mobile Irrigation Lab, accounting and financial management, CEQA environmental analysis, and GIS services.

The watershed coordinator and RCD-TC continued to emphasize fire and fuels management projects throughout the grant cycle, with a reported \$706,600 in grant funding awarded. RCD-TC staff indicated that fires and fuels management projects garnered the greatest response from landowners via their public involvement process, and were widely supported by local agencies,

nonprofits, and other entities throughout Tehama County. This stands in contrast to other environmental issues (e.g., wildlife), which, according to RCD-TC staff, had low participation rates from the public. Ultimately, fires and fuels management projects were considered a successful method for gaining public support and consistent funding.

### ***Outcomes and Insights***

RCD-TC was impacted by a state “bond freeze” in 2009, which effectively halted projects reliant on state bond funds. The Tehama West Watershed Management Program was one of these projects, and other RCD-TC projects were affected as well. According to RCD-TC’s State of the District report in 2012, there had been conversations among board members and staff to prioritize fee-based revenue in response to uncertainty in the state budget and, more broadly, the Great Recession beginning in 2008.

RCD-TC staff noted that funding diversification was critical in ensuring RCD-TC’s continued success during this period of economic uncertainty. Success, in this case, included stability in staff, ongoing programs, and new initiatives. Throughout the period of RCD-TC’s second coordinator grant, the organization markedly increased its provision of technical expertise and services to local organizations. Using grant funding, the three RCD-TC coordinators contributed to the organization’s fee-for-service strategy by (1) securing capital assets for ongoing programs (e.g., a wood chipper), (2) providing technical expertise (e.g., CEQA compliance/permitting, GIS), and (3) administering contracts and agreements for local agencies and clients.

RCD-TC’s emphasis on fee-for-service and applied projects also contributed to good working relationships with local agencies and municipal leaders. A senior staff member at Tehama County Public Works (TCPW) stated that the primary watershed coordinator was a major influence in collaborating with RCD-TC on county projects. In his words, the watershed coordinator “was able to effectively communicate and coordinate with various agencies in the area.” Collaborative projects with TCPW included fuel breaks, road clearing, and developing GIS products. The TCPW staff member did note, however, that finding financial support for monitoring activities was a constant challenge in collaborative projects, particularly tracking re-vegetation in fuel breaks. The watershed coordinator was aware of the monitoring issue, and maintained there were limited opportunities to finance monitoring and maintenance activities through grants or other public funding sources. RCD-TC and the watershed coordinator also routinely participated in the Tehama County Board of Supervisors meetings and provided input for county projects that had the potential for negative environmental impacts.

### **Tehama East Watershed Assessment (2006-2010)**

The Tehama East Watershed Assessment (TEWA) was initiated in 2006, complementing the previously completed Tehama West Watershed Assessment. This CALFED grant was yet another RCD-TC award affected by the state bond freeze in 2009. Released in 2010, the TEWA states that the organization “struggled with funding for [the watershed assessment] during the past year, going through stop and start cycles during the past two years” (Tehama County Resource Conservation District 2010).

Senior RCD-TC staff indicated that the TEWA was not only inconsistently funded, but generally underfunded as well. The funding challenges ultimately led to an assessment that was considered too broad for future planning, a criticism that parallels the one levied at the TWWA by SWRCB. According to staff, there was also little public involvement in the assessment process, and the assessment is “not used today” except to leverage other grant funds.

According to RCD-TC staff, the Tehama East Community Wildfire Protection Plan (Protection Plan), is utilized more often than the TEWA, and recommendations from the Protection Plan are included in the TEWA under the “fire management” section. The Protection Plan was completed in 2008 under a separate funding source from the TEWA and is not a focus of this case.

### **Watershed Coordinator Grant (2011-2014)**

RCD-TC received a third consecutive coordinator grant in 2011, with the same individual serving as primary coordinator. In contrast to previous coordinator grants for the Sacramento-Lower Thames Watershed, this grant designated the Cottonwood Creek watershed as the primary focus area. Prior to this grant period, the watershed was the purview of the community-based Cottonwood Creek Watershed Group (CCWG). The CCWG was an incorporated non-profit entity until 2009 when the organization dissolved and RCD-TC assumed management of its projects. This transition allowed RCD-TC to submit a DOC proposal for coordination in the Cottonwood Creek Watershed. The shift in focus area did not significantly change the priorities of the coordinator, however, as RCD-TC continued to advance their ongoing projects and programs throughout Tehama County.

The final report for this grant describes the overarching objective of the coordinator to develop “project work and other sources of revenue in order to achieve a greater level of financial independence and stability for the RCD-TC” (RCD-TC, 2014). The report states that \$2.7 million in grant funding was acquired for the organization throughout this period out of a requested \$4.0 million. As in previous final reports, RCD-TC provided a list of specific grant proposals, the author, and program area. In this case, 67% of this new grant funding total can be attributed to the work of the watershed coordinator.

### ***Outcomes and Insights***

This was the third and final successive coordinator grant received by RCD-TC through the DOC program. At the time of the grant award, RCD-TC staff were beginning to face the challenge of sustaining the coordinator position beyond the life of the DOC program. RCD-TC staff maintained that this conversation had been ongoing, as funding for the 2011-2014 grant period was also uncertain. RCD-TC staff had learned from DOC that there would be a limit on the number of grants awarded to watersheds associated with previous coordinator grants. With its two previous coordinator grants, continued funding to RCD-TC was therefore at risk. This development, in part, contributed to the shift in focus area from the Sacramento-Lower Thames to the Cottonwood Creek watershed, an area that had not received any DOC funding for a coordinator position.

Cottonwood Creek Watershed Group (CCWG) members were interviewed regarding their involvement with the RCD and the ultimate transition to RCD management. CCWG was formed as a community driven organization focused on management of Cottonwood Creek with input from adjacent communities. CCWG members expressed skepticism over the RCD's intentions for the area, an expression of concern many Cottonwood Creek residents feel about loss of local control to a "quasi-governmental" organization. The CCWG and RCD-TC maintained a working relationship, however, with CCWG assisting in RCD-TC's preparation of the 2011-2014 coordinator grant proposal.

The relationship between CCWG and RCD-TC highlights certain dynamics of natural resource management in Tehama County as expressed by informants. Specifically, grassroots organizations form, in part, to address the needs of local stakeholders within a specific watershed or management area. The RCD-TC coordinator described difficulties in managing ongoing projects within Cottonwood Creek Watershed that had been inherited from the CCWG. The RCD-TC coordinator asserted that the CCWG projects were generally focused too narrowly to have a significant impact on the landscape. For example, RCD-TC assumed management of an invasive species (*Arundo donax*) eradication project that required complete landowner buy-in and continued maintenance to be effective. While the project was ultimately completed, landowner participation was limited by the absence of a legal mandate to eradicate the plant, and maintenance was considered difficult and costly in the long-run.

Finally, one individual expressed criticism of one attribute of the DOC coordinator program, the requirement that a specific watershed be designated as the focus of the coordination. To RCD-TC, limiting the scope of the coordinator to a specific watershed was "constricting" and inconsistent with the goals of the organization to prioritize and implement projects throughout the county. It can be argued that this "scale-mismatch" between organizations (RCDs versus DOC) can be resolved with a larger landscape-level perspective that encompasses both watershed and administrative boundaries.

## **Key Findings**

RCD-TC received over \$1.5 million in funding through the CALFED and DOC watershed programs over the course of the period examined. These funds supported programs related to fire and fuels management, forest resource and fish passage improvement, sediment control, and invasive plant mitigation.<sup>4</sup> The RCD-TC coordinator worked continuously for 12 years under these programs and continues to be a program manager for the organization as of 2017, the time of this assessment.

Through interviews with the coordinator, RCD-TC staff, and partners, a number of themes were uncovered relating to the impact of the coordinator including: the personal attributes of a coordinator; organizational structure and culture; and the rural political landscape.

The RCD-TC coordinator described a unique circumstance that led to a fruitful career as a part-time watershed coordinator: financial stability at the end of a previous career. This individual

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<sup>4</sup> Respondent B, pers. comm.



lamented the fact that coordinators are typically at either the start or end of their careers, implying that compensation is too low to attract mid-career professionals who may have greater financial obligations (e.g., families, mortgages). Moreover, respondents described a challenge in finding job candidates who are willing to live and work in rural Tehama county. A senior staff member at Tehama County Public Works has observed a decline in those of younger generations seeking long-term employment with the agency.

RCD-TC staff significantly benefited from the watershed coordinator position, with one staff member even suggesting that “everything we’re doing has really come out of the watershed coordinator program.” In addition to increased funding from grants, the watershed coordinator program also increased RCD-TC’s capacity indirectly, for example, in the form of more fee-for-service work. This revenue allowed the organization to apply for grants that disallowed overhead charges. In short, according to one staff member, the program “stabilized the workflow” at the RCD-TC.

The range of projects and programs managed by the watershed coordinator suggest a great deal of autonomy and flexibility in that position. This notion is supported through the coordinator’s description of a “long leash” from the outset, and that the RCD-TC district manager ultimately “trusted his judgment.” This autonomy, as it relates to the success of the coordinator, is inextricably linked with the personal attributes of the individual and the overall culture of RCD-TC. The coordinator was able to effectively pursue and manage projects and programs to effectively sustain his career for an extended period. As mentioned previously in this report, all incoming staff at RCD-TC were expected to follow a similar model within their own positions.

The political landscape of Tehama County includes generally conservative sentiments and libertarian ideals that are strongly-held by many private landowners. This is consistent with much of rural northern California and, at times, creates barriers to public engagement for government or quasi-governmental organizations. The coordinator in this case was required to navigate this broad political spectrum to effectively engage the public in natural resource management decisions. Both the coordinator and RCD-TC ultimately found a niche within their programming for which there was public support as well as beneficial ecological outcomes. For example, the emphasis on fire and fuels management projects often yielded tangible outcomes that the public could, see, understand, and support. Similarly, the highly-visible Mobile Irrigation Lab served to assist agricultural producers become more efficient in their operations.

The RCD-TC coordinator also suggested that his extended tenure contributed significantly to building relationships in the communities served. Watershed coordinators developed numerous long-term relationships with various public agencies (e.g, Cal Fire, BLM, USFS, CDFW, USFWS, California Water Quality Control Board, Tehama County Public Works Department), environmental organizations (e.g., The Nature Conservancy, various watershed conservancies), and other RCDs. With these broad and deep relationships formed, coordinators were able to forge agreements that allowed the RCD-TC to complete project work on short notice and with low procurement costs.<sup>5</sup> In sum, watershed coordinators helped RCD-TC become more responsive to stakeholder and institute the type of projects and programs that could garner widespread support in the communities they served.

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<sup>5</sup> Respondent B, pers. comm.

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