

San Mateo Resource Conservation District

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Plan

2025-2029

ADOPTED 11/21/2024

Our Call to Action

Our vision is that coastal San Mateo County will be environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable. In support of that vision, our mission is to be a local hub for conservation, helping the people of San Mateo County build a more thriving natural environment for all. The health of the land and the wellbeing of people are deeply interconnected. This is why we help the land by helping people, and help people by helping the land.

These aspirations do not exist in a vacuum. They are undermined by broader societal structures, both historic and current. We are not truly sustainable while marginalized groups face unequal access to the benefits of nature or disproportionately bear the brunt of environmental degradation, including related natural disasters.

A successful approach to conservation is holistic and integrates multiple systems, e.g. ecology, hydrology, geology, policies and regulations, funding and finance. We believe that truly effective conservation must also consider systems of oppression and inequality. In this document, we identify some of those systems, our place in it, and chart a path forward for San Mateo Resource Conservation District to ensure diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) in our work.

We recognize that the threats posed by biodiversity loss, climate change, pollution, and other environmental harms affect some people more than others. Furthermore, the benefits of thriving ecosystems and a healthy environment are not experienced equally. Multiple barriers contribute to inequity, such as:

- **Land ownership.** Land ownership is a key factor in building intergenerational wealth, accessing natural resources, and having influence over land management decisions. This is particularly true in the work of resource conservation districts, which were largely created to serve landowners—a focus that remains embedded in our enabling legislation. Landowners can also make decisions regarding the management of their land that can affect others. Marginalized groups have faced disproportionate and systemic barriers to owning land through discriminatory laws, HOA covenants, and banks discriminating against people of color¹ by denying loans or offering predatory loans.^{2,3,4} Land ownership is a particular obstacle in San Mateo County, which has the highest cost of housing in the nine-county Bay Area and among the costliest in the state. This is exacerbated by San Mateo County having greater income inequality than any other county in California. The average income of the top 1% of residents is nearly 50 times greater than the average income of the bottom 99%.
- **Settler colonialism.** The land that today forms our district was stewarded by Native people for over 10,000 years. Since their arrival, colonizing settlers committed genocide, forced assimilation, displaced, and enslaved the people who were indigenous to this area;

fundamentally altered how natural resources are managed; and disrupted or lost much of the local indigenous knowledge of land management.

- **Power and influence.** People with more resources and capacity have more access to decision-making and decision-makers. As a result, they have more influence on setting community priorities and allocating resources. Barriers to participation can include language spoken, work schedules, childcare, competing priorities (often involving basic living needs), feelings of non-belonging in public forums, fear of retribution from landlords or employers, and more. In the area we serve, there are significant discrepancies between community demographics and representation in public leadership positions.
- **White Environmentalism.** Conservation in the United States has historically prioritized the activities, perspectives, and values of white environmentalists.^{5,6} This has narrowed the lens on the definition of conservation, often parsing environmental issues as separate from equity issues and viewing people as separate from nature. It has also shaped what is considered knowledge, prioritizing Western science and academic knowledge over lived experiences. People of color are not only underrepresented in conservation; they also report feeling uncomfortable in these overwhelmingly white spaces.⁷ Meanwhile, studies have found that people of color in the U.S. support environmental policy and can be more likely to care about climate change.⁸
- **Career pathways.** Expectations for college degrees, unpaid or low paying internships, and low-wage entry-level positions pose significant hurdles for people from traditionally low-income communities. Implicit biases in the hiring process, such as bias towards those who communicate similarly or are more relatable to the interviewer, can further exclude candidates from different backgrounds. People of Color face additional obstacles in advancing to leadership roles, with racial diversity often limited to lower-level and non-leadership positions.^{9,10} Frequently people of color are hired for administrative or outreach roles rather than delivering environmental programs. Retention rates for conservationists from marginalized groups are also lower.¹¹ Another barrier is that specialized trade workers who implement conservation projects are often not included in the conservation community or recognized in conservation career pathways. These careers are often overlooked, even though they can be accessed with lower barriers to entry and higher-level wages.
- **Discrimination in agriculture.** Farmers of color have historically faced barriers in receiving financial aid and technical support from the USDA^{12,13} and Agricultural Extension Service,^{14,15} in addition to discrimination from banks in lending for farm ownership.¹⁶ While many farms provide fair employment and good worker conditions, some do not. Many farmworkers experience unjust labor practices and unsafe housing. These impacts are compounded for farmworkers from more vulnerable communities with less access to services and resources due to issues such as language barriers and immigration status.
- **Climate justice.** Climate change disproportionately impacts people of color, Native American, low-income, and disabled communities.^{17,18} They also face greater challenges in recovering from climate-related impacts, often prolonging their hardship.¹⁹ For instance, during wildfires, those with more resources can afford to evacuate to other homes or hotels that remove them from hazardous conditions. Similarly, during floods some people can work remotely or have

paid time off, while others (e.g. hourly laborers) risk losing income. Additionally, social inequality is predicted to compound with worsening climate conditions^{20,21}.

Our Responsibility, Our Opportunity

RCDs were born of systems of inequity, and we have perpetuated those systems. Primarily, we were envisioned as a resource for people who own land. This is clearly expressed in our enabling legislation (CA Public Resources Code, Division 9) and other documents and practices throughout our history. Furthermore, a key mechanism to ensure our community-led conservation is the requirement that our boards of directors be landowning residents of our districts. While there are notable exceptions to these requirements (RCDs are enabled to work with non-landowners and non-landowners can serve as directors if certain criteria are met), landownership is nonetheless “in our DNA” and frequently expressed as a core component of RCDs’ brand and identity.

Goal #3 of the RCD’s 2021-2024 Strategic Plan is, “People throughout our community equitably share the benefits of and connection to our natural resources.” A primary strategy identified to achieve that goal was to develop a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan. It was later decided to include Justice.

RCDs are perfectly positioned to bring inclusive and equitable conservation to communities:

- We work across boundaries with diverse entities and diverse interests. We can bring services and resources (financial, technical, educational) to landowners, tenants, tribes, government agencies, non-profit organizations, farm owners, farm laborers, and community members alike.
- The collective impact of our work can benefit everyone- clean air, clean water, thriving wildlife, resilience to flooding and drought and wildfire, viable local food systems, and more. Furthermore, the environmental degradation that we reverse often disproportionately affects those who are most vulnerable.
- RCDs are enabled with authorities to provide diverse services and directly consider economic sustainability as a component of conservation. Collectively, this enables us to work on conservation justice where it is mission aligned.
- RCDs were formed with a keen awareness that thriving human communities and healthy natural resources depend upon each other. This is why we were created as conservation agencies that serve people. Our approach is to bring boots-on-the-ground solutions that benefit both the environment and people.
- We provide free, confidential, nonregulatory assistance in support of voluntary conservation. This positions us to offer government support to assist people of little economic means as well as those whose trust in government has been eroded.
- Our enabling legislation ensures that our board of directors is comprised of community members. If we are intentional about representation on our boards, it can advance equity and inclusion in conservation leadership.

- RCDs were designed to evolve with changing needs and priorities. This enables us to address emerging issues and opportunities that are of greatest concern to those we serve in support of thriving communities, landscapes, and economies.

Our Approach

The plan below is grounded in our purpose, call to action, responsibility, and opportunity described above as well as the following principles that guide how we understand and approach DEIJ work:

1. DEIJ is not a program or outreach. It does not occur solely or primarily outside of the organization. It is also not limited to one or a few members of the organization, regardless of their role. For meaningful and lasting impact, DEIJ must be embedded in all facets of our work for all staff and directors.
2. We are not alone in this work. We operate in a larger ecosystem of communities, nonprofits, government entities, working in their unique roles towards more just and equitable futures.
3. This work is nonlinear and iterative. It requires continuous reflection, adaptation, and improvement rather than following a straightforward path.²²
4. Real change will require new ways of working and thinking. Power and capacity must be shared, relationships built, and our understanding of conservation must be expansive.
5. Big changes often come from small actions. By embedding equity into every aspect of how we do this work and valuing incremental progress, we trust that these small actions will lead to significant and lasting outcomes.
6. The wellbeing of land and people are interconnected. While the systems that harm one harm the other, embedding DEIJ principles into our work benefits the land, people, and communities.

Our Plan

Organizational Excellence

1. Cultivate an inclusive work environment.

- 1.1. Offer tailored accommodations whenever feasible.
- 1.2 Provide different ways to give feedback and insights for different cognitive styles and preferences.
- 1.3 Align our language with our principles and be willing to change as many times as needed.

2. Foster a culture of learning, dialogue, and growth

- 2.1 Create spaces for continuous learning, model a culture of growth that embraces open dialogue and grace, and set expectations for cultural humility. [Note: The

Executive Director has a key responsibility for modeling and setting these expectations for culture.]

2.2 Provide learning opportunities for staff and directors.

3. Bring equity to organizational systems and practices .

4. Ensure that internal rewards systems (e.g. promotions and salary increases) express organizational values.

5. Demonstrate integrity and take appropriate risks when representing our values externally.

5.1 Demonstrate our DEIJ values publicly.

5.2 Stand behind our values when it involves some risk or cost.

Conservation Priorities and Services

6. Include people from disempowered, marginalized, underserved, vulnerable, colonized, and displaced communities as partners, advisors, consultants, and contractors.

6.1 Include these voices in priority-setting.

6.2 Recognize that resources for these groups to participate may be limited, invite them anyway, and create the conditions, as feasible, for effective and inclusive participation.

6.3 Support Native environmental stewardship.

7. Design and implement projects that directly benefit these communities.

8. Strengthen disaster resilience in communities vulnerable to climate change.

8.1 Collaborate with community-based organizations for disaster resilience.

8.2 Seek flexible funding for disaster response.

8.3 Hold accessible community meetings about natural resource management and natural disaster preparation.

8.4 Design and implement nature-based hazard mitigation projects that directly benefit vulnerable communities.

9. Foster equitable access to programs and services.

9.1 Expand and deepen relationships with farmworkers and Spanish speakers.

9.2 Provide services to farms and community gardens that strengthen food access and sovereignty.

9.3 Foster access to information about RCD programs and services.

9.4 Identify and reduce barriers to funding work that benefits vulnerable communities.

10. Support the capacity of partner organizations that serve marginalized communities when needed.

11. Foster diverse and inclusive leadership in conservation on the board of directors.

Conservation Workforce

12. Promote access to careers in conservation.

12.1 Implement equitable hiring practices.

12.2 Offer mentoring and information to a diversity of early career professionals and students.

Support paid opportunities for youth to gain conservation experience and be

12.3 thoughtful about how unpaid internships can widen opportunity gaps.

12.4 Increase awareness of conservation careers.

13. Promote practices that are thoughtful and supportive of laborers employed by contractors completing RCD projects.

Ensure worker safety and wellbeing are integrated into project design and

13.1 implementation.

13.2 Highlight and celebrate workers' contributions.

13.3 Support professional development and equitable opportunities for workers in conservation.

13.4 Recognize all roles in project planning and implementation as important and critical to project success.

Communities of Practice

14. Engage with others centering DEIJ in their work to learn, share, and collaborate.

-
- ¹ Our use of terms like POC, DEI, and others reflects our current understanding and intention. We remain open to adapting our language as we grow in this work, honoring the evolving nature of inclusive and respectful language. We also understand that there are differing opinions about which terms are most accurate or preferable.
- ² Moore, Eli, Nicole Montojo, and Nicole Mauri. "Roots, race, & place: A history of racially exclusionary housing in the San Francisco Bay Area." (2019).
- ³ Reft, Ryan. "How Prop 13 Shaped California's Racial Covenants." KCET website (September 20, 2017). <https://www.kcet.org/shows/lost-la/segregation-in-the-city-of-angels-a-1939-map-of-housing-inequality-in-la> (2017).
- ⁴ Cyrus, R. (2023, June 2). Predatory Lending's Prey of Color. The American Prospect. <https://prospect.org/economy/2023-06-05-predatory-lendings-prey-of-color/>
- ⁵ Purifoy, D. (2018, June 22). How environmentalism in academe today excludes People of Color (opinion). Inside Higher Ed | Higher Education News, Events and Jobs. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/06/22/how-environmentalism-academe-today-excludes-people-color-opinion>
- ⁶ TAYLOR, D. E. (2016). The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection. Duke University Press.
- ⁷ Johnson, Stefanie K. "Leaking talent: How people of color are pushed out of environmental organizations." *Report published June* (2019).
- ⁸ Benegal, S., Azevedo, F., & Holman, M. R. (2022). Race, ethnicity, and support for climate policy. *Environmental Research Letters*, 17(11), 114060.
- ⁹ Sun, P. (December 17, 2020). "Structural racism is a barrier to leadership advancement in nonprofit organizations" *Race, Research & Policy Portal*. <https://rrapp.hks.harvard.edu/structural-racism-is-a-barrier-to-leadership-advancement-in-nonprofit-organizations/>
- ¹⁰ Green 2.0. (2023). *2023 NGO & Foundation Transparency Report*. <https://diversegreen.org/wp-content/uploads/green2.0-2023-report-card.pdf>
- ¹¹ Johnson, Stefanie K. "Leaking talent: How people of color are pushed out of environmental organizations." *Report published June* (2019).
- ¹² U.S. Department of Justice. (2010, February 18). Department of Justice and USDA Announce Historic Settlement in Lawsuit by Black Farmers Claiming Discrimination by USDA [Press release]. Retrieved July 30, 2024, from <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/departments-justice-and-usda-announce-historic-settlement-lawsuit-black-farmers-claiming>
- ¹³ Casey, A. R. (2021). Racial equity in U.S. farming: background in brief ([Library of Congress public edition]). Congressional Research Service.
- ¹⁴ Minkoff-Zern, LA., Sloat, S. A new era of civil rights? Latino immigrant farmers and exclusion at the United States Department of Agriculture. *Agric Hum Values* 34, 631-643 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1007/510460-016-9756-6>
- ¹⁵ Harris, C. V. (2008). "The Extension Service Is Not an Integration Agency": The Idea of Race in the Cooperative Extension Service. *Agricultural History*, 82(2), 193-219.
- ¹⁶ Daniel, P. (2013). *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American farmers in the age of civil rights*. UNC Press Books.
- ¹⁷ Berberian, A. G., Gonzalez, D. J., & Cushing, L. J. (2022). Racial disparities in climate change-related health effects in the United States. *Current Environmental Health Reports*, 9(3), 451-464.
- ¹⁸ Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment. (2024, January 29). Indicators of climate change: Impacts on California tribes. OEHA. Retrieved from <https://oehha.ca.gov/climate-change/general-info/indicators-climate-change-impacts-california-tribes>
- ¹⁹ EPA. 2021. Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States: A Focus on Six Impacts. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, EPA 430-R-21-003.

²⁰ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2024. Compounding Disasters in Gulf Coast Communities 2020-2021: Impacts, Findings, and Lessons Learned. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27170>.

²¹ Islam, N. and J. Winkel (2017), "Climate Change and Social Inequality", UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) Working Papers, No. 152, UN, New York, <https://doi.org/10.18356/2c62335d-en>.

²²