

“New Hire” Guide to Administering the Dirt, Gravel, and Low Volume Road Maintenance Program



This document is meant as an overview of administering the Dirt and Gravel Road Maintenance Program for new staff and technicians at County Conservation Districts.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW: The Dirt, Gravel, and Low Volume Road Maintenance Program (**Program**) began in 1997 stemming from an initiative by Trout Unlimited. The goal of the Program is to reduce pollution to streams while improving the rural road network. The Program directs funding to “worksites” where road runoff is affecting water quality. The Program implements long-term fixes to rural public roads in order to create a more environmentally and economically sustainable rural road network.

CENTER OVERVIEW: The Center for Dirt and Gravel Road Studies (**Center**) at Penn State was formed in 1999 to handle the statewide education and outreach component of the Program. The Center provides: 2-Day ESM training, Annual Maintenance Workshop, website, newsletters, technical documentation, technical Assistance to Districts (for Projects, GIS, or administration), and more. The Center is funded by the PA State Conservation Commission and PA Bureau of Forestry through the Dirt and Gravel Road Program. The Center also maintains other research and educational contracts with outside entities.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE: The Program is unique in that it relies heavily on “informed local control” to function. This philosophy puts more power and decision-making and the local level, and relies on a statewide education and oversight program to insure local projects follow Program guidelines.

- **State Conservation Commission (SCC):** Administers Program Statewide at Department of Agriculture (PDA).
- **PSU Center:** Education, outreach, tech support for the Program Statewide.
- **Conservation Districts:** Run the Program within each County including: create local policy and priorities, accept Grant Applications, fund and oversee projects, track projects and spending, and submit annual reports.
- **Quality Assurance Board (QAB):** (one per District) Advises District on policies and funding priority, and ranks applications for funding. QAB only provides recommendations to the District Board. The QAB has 4 members: a non-voting chair appointed by the District, and a voting representative from the District, PAFBC & NRCS.
- **Grant Recipients:** Apply to Conservation District for funding. Do work or hire contractor to do work. Mostly townships, but PAGC, PAFBC, DOT any other public entities are eligible.

DISTRICT ALLOCATIONS: District receive Funds from State Conservation Commission through PDA

- **District Allocations:** The Program’s \$28M annual allocation is distributed by the SCC to Conservation Districts based largely on the number of unpaved roads and worksites in each county. Allocations range from \$100,000 to \$1.4M. Allocations are typically received in September. Counties receive half of their allocation up front, and must apply to the State for replenishment for the remaining funds by claiming that advanced funds have been spent. *An additional \$7M is allocated to the PA Bureau of Forestry.*
- **Spending Requirements:** Funds must be spent or committed within 2 years of receipt. Counties failing to meet this requirement will be ineligible for future allocations until they meet this spending requirement. This is determined as part of the Annual Summary Report each January.
- **Administration:** Districts can spend up to 10% of their annual allocation on Program administration, and 10% on education. Eligible expense include salary, travel, training expenses, equipment (field and office), etc.

GRANT APPLICATION PROCESS: Municipalities (and others) apply to District for Funding

- **Eligibility:** Applicants must have been to ESM training within the past 5 years in order to be eligible to apply to the Conservation District for funding. Only unpaved (not “tar&chip”) publicly-owned roads that are open to public travel for at least part of the year are eligible. Projects must also have an impact on water quality.
- **Application Cycle:** Many Districts have an application deadline each year. Some smaller counties continuously accept allocations. Find out what your District’s policy has been.
- **Project Ranking:** Each District should already have written ranking criteria to determine project funding priority developed by the QAB. This formal ranking is important as it serves to justify the recommendations of the QAB.
- **“Preemptive” site visit:** Counties who have the most success typically meet with the township BEFORE they submit applications to collaborate on creating a site plan. The earlier you get involved, the easier changes will be.
- **Notification:** The applicant should notify the Conservation District in advance as to when project works will start.

NEW HIRE CHECKLIST

1. Talk to others at District.
2. Attend an ESM training.
3. Meet and talk to your QAB.
4. Review your local policies.
5. Find out what projects are active or awarded.
6. Review the Program’s Administrative Manual
7. Take files into the field and look at old projects.
8. Familiarize yourself with DGRoads GIS system.
9. Attend a Workshop.
10. Get help from co-workers, other Districts, and Center.

GRANT ADMINISTRATION: Conservation District is Responsible for Project Oversight

- Contract:** The “grant application” and other documentation become attachments to a two-page contract.
- Advances:** Up to 50% of the project funds can be advanced to the applicant before work begins. At least 30% of the project funds must be held until project completion and inspection.
- Eligible Costs:** All materials, equipment, and labor costs to complete the project are eligible. There is no statewide requirement for matching funds from applicants (although the Program average nearly \$0.45 per dollar spent). Often applicants will donate some or all labor and equipment time as “in-kind”. Up to 10% of the project cost can go towards engineering and/or permits. Equipment rental is eligible, but no equipment can be bought.
- Cost Overruns:** Cost overruns can be made at the discretion of the District Board. They can be made for up to 20% of the original contract. Overruns of over 20% should be handled in a new or separate contract.
- Field Visits:** It is not necessary for District staff to be on-site for all project work. Some oversight is typically required though, especially early in the project, to insure both parties will be satisfied with the finished road.
- Project Completion Report:** Summary page with project deliverables and cost breakdown for the project. Typically completed during final project inspection to officially close out project.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES: Learn more about the Program’s ESM Practices

- Environmentally Sensitive Maintenance (ESM) Training:** 2-day classroom training held by the Center. The ESM training focuses on the specific ESM practices to be used on projects in the field. Both Conservation Districts and participating townships are required to attend one every 5 years. The Center holds 8-12 ESM trainings at various locations around the State each year. The training is free of charge to public entities.
- Annual Maintenance Workshop:** 2-day “conference” with concurrent classroom sessions and field trips to active and completed projects. The Workshop is held at a different location every fall and typically attracts 150-250 attendees from across Pennsylvania. Workshop topics and field sites change each year.

GIS & REPORTING: Districts Track Projects and Submit Annual Report

- DGRoads GIS System:** To cut down on paperwork and facilitate project tracking, the Program uses a customized GIS interface called “DGRoads”. This system is housed on a computer at each Conservation District. The system is used to track project location and details such as what was done and what was spent.
- Annual Summary Reports:** Each year on January 15th, reports are due using the DGRoads GIS system. Project data from the previous year must be entered for all completed and contracted projects.
- GIS help:** Center staff typically visits each region of the state offering GIS help late each fall.

QAQC: Quality Assurance / Quality Control Effort: The QAQC process is a collaborative effort between the Center and the Program. The QAQC team visits each Conservation District individually in an effort to evaluate and improve the Program at the County level. The QAQC team visits approximately 20 Districts on an annual basis.

PROJECT WORK: On the Ground Projects: The best way to get familiar with project work is to attend an ESM training as soon as possible. Then take some project files into the field to look at some projects that have already been completed. Talking with the townships that completed those projects is also recommended.

Paved Low Volume Roads: Paved LVRs with less than 500 vehicles per day were made eligible for Program funding in 2014. Look for more details in the administrative manual.

MORE HELP:

- www.dirtandgravelroads.org:** The Center and Program website contains information including technical bulletins, blank forms, GIS program download, reference material, training information and schedule, and more.
- Center:** Outreach and education is what the Center does! From a simple question, to GIS help, to help with project design, to onsite project assistance. 814-865-5355
- SCC:** For more “Programmatic” questions, contact the Program Coordinator at the SCC at 717-787-2103.

TYPICAL PROJECT LIFECYCLE

1. Applicant attends ESM training.
2. Applicant notifies District of desire to do a project.
3. District meets with applicant on site to come up with a workplan together, or make recommendations to applicant’s plan.
4. Applicant submits application.
5. QAB recommends project for funding based on established criteria.
6. District Board approves project and a contract is signed with the applicant.
7. 50% of funds are advanced to the applicant.
8. Applicant notifies District of start of work.
9. Project work is done by township or contractor, with oversight from District.
10. District conducts final inspection and fills out Project Performance Report.
11. Remainder of funds is paid to applicant.
12. District enters project data into GIS system.
13. Data for project submitted as part of Annual Report on January 15th.

PROJECT HARD FILES MUST INCLUDE

1. Signed Contract with all attachments, including grant application and project sketch showing project location and site layout (what was done and where).
2. Contract amendment if applicable.
3. Copies of receipts for all expenses paid.
4. Completed and signed Project Completion Report.