

Humboldt  
County



RESOURCE  
CONSERVATION DISTRICT

## Board of Directors Meeting

*The mission of the Humboldt County Resource Conservation District is to assist private and public landowners in the planning, design, and implementation of soil, water, and forest resource conservation practices to improve and enhance natural and working lands in Humboldt County*

### SPECIAL MEETING: AGENDA

Thursday, March 12, 2026

8:30 A.M.

(Items marked with \* are attached to director packets. Packets may be requested by contacting the HCRCD at 707-296-3992 or emailing [jill@hcrd.org](mailto:jill@hcrd.org).)

### LOCATION: HUMBOLDT AGRICULTURAL CENTER

5630 South Broadway

Eureka, CA 95503

1. **CALL TO ORDER** – Christine Manhart, Chair
2. **ROLL CALL**
3. **ADDITIONS OR CHANGES TO AGENDA** (Gov. Code 54954.2(B))
4. **PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD**  
Any person may address the Board regarding any matter within the Board's jurisdiction that is not on the agenda. Speakers are asked to limit comments to three minutes. Members of the public may also comment on agenda items when they are discussed. (Gov. Code 54954.3(a)).
5. **LONG-RANGE PLANNING MEETING\***  
The Board and Staff will engage in a working session facilitated by Jen Rice Consults to develop draft long-range goals and strategies for District operations, which is anticipated to end at 12:30pm.
6. **NEXT REGULAR MEETING: April 9, 2026 at 8am**  
Meeting location: Humboldt Agricultural Center
7. **ADJOURNMENT**

Agenda Item #5 (INFORMATIONAL)  
For Special Board Meeting of: March 12, 2025

HUMBOLDT COUNTY RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT  
BOARD OF DIRECTORS

TO: Board of Directors  
FROM: Jill Demers, Executive Director  
SUBJECT: Agenda Item 5 – Long-Range Planning Meeting

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RECOMMENDATION

No Action.

SUMMARY

Attached are an Agenda and Listen Session Report prepared by Jen Rice Consults. Please read prior to the Long-Range Planning Meeting on March 12.

FISCAL IMPACT

- n/a

ATTACHMENTS

- Agenda
- Listening Session Report

# Humboldt County RCD Strategy Co-Design Session

## Agenda: March 12, 2026

(there may be adjustments)

Ag Center Conference Room

Board Meeting: 8:00 - 8:30 a.m.

A.M. snacks & hot beverages available



### 8:40 – Welcome, Purpose of the Day & Approach

### 8:50 – Morning: Board & Staff

- **Introductions:** Your Primary Insight from the Listening Campaign Report
- **Listening & Mapping: RCD Purpose**
  - Listening to each other: why does this work matter?
  - Mapping the Radical Middle: Balancing the Land-Landowner Strategic Tension (or [Polarity](#))
- **Exploring “RCD Sideboards”**
  - Finding the right balance: RCD Growth & Stability
  - Cannabis Sites: To Restore or Not to Restore?
  - Long-Term Habitat Conservation: Is Land Stewardship Part of Our Purpose?
- **Emerging “Sideboards:” RCD Purpose, Values & Decision Filters**

**12:30 – Lunch:** connect with folks you rarely get a chance to talk to

### 1:00 – Afternoon: Staff

- **Applying RCD Purpose & Sideboards: Co-Designing Experiments in...**
  - Internal Operations
  - External Initiatives
- **Agreements**

### 4:15 – Wrap Up & Check Out

- **Next Steps: Who, What, by When?**
- **What are you feelin’, learnin’ + needin’?**

# What We Heard: RCD Listening Campaign Insights

## Humboldt County Resource Conservation District | March 2026

*Advance Preparation for A Collaborative Strategy Design Session on March 12, 2026*

Prepared by Jen Rice Consults, for internal use only



### Table Of Contents

Introduction: About This Listening Campaign.....	1
1. What Everyone Agrees On: Shared Ground Across All Groups.....	2
1.1 Shared Values, Ideals, & Interests.....	2
1.2 Convergence on RCD Purpose — With An Important Underlying Strategic Tension.....	4
1.3 Growth Has Been a Success & Has Created New Vulnerabilities.....	4
1.4 The RCD's Culture Is a Genuine Strength & Needs Active Stewardship.....	5
1.5 Relationships & Partnerships Are An RCD Superpower Requiring Intentional Investment.....	5
1.6 The Richest Voices Pointed Toward Holistic, Integrated Stewardship — Including Perspectives the RCD Has Not Yet Fully Heard.....	5
2. Themes Across Groups at a Glance.....	7
3. What Comes Next: Questions & Preparation for March 12.....	7
3.1 On Purpose.....	7
3.2 On Growth.....	7
3.3 On Relationships & Partnerships.....	7
3.4 On Internal Operations & Culture.....	7
3.5 Preparation for the March 12 Co-Design Session.....	8
<b>APPENDICES: Group-by-Group Portraits.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Appendix A: Board Member Perspectives.....	1
Appendix B: Staff Perspectives.....	3
Appendix C: Landowner Partner Perspectives.....	5
Appendix D: Agency & Community Partner Perspectives.....	7

# Introduction: About This Listening Campaign

In February 2026, the Humboldt County RCD listened, conducting 52 one-to-one conversations across four interest groups: **board members, staff, landowners, and partners from agencies and community-based organizations**. Staff conducted interviews, which followed a relational guide designed to surface honest perspectives on the RCD's purpose, strengths, priorities, and strategic opportunities.

Conversations were designed for quality and depth. Interviewees — across every group — engaged with real candor, analytical sophistication, and investment in the RCD's focus on landscape-scale conservation. One sign of organizational health was clear: people who don't care don't think this carefully. What follows reflects that quality of care and depth of thoughtfulness.

*I think the purpose of the RCD is to help people be good, self-sufficient land stewards in an economically viable way.*

— Board member

This report includes findings across all four groups and is intended to help board and staff arrive on March 12 with a shared sense of what was heard — including where perspectives converge, where they diverge, and questions that invite the group to explore together.

The Appendices provide richer, group-specific portraits with representative quotes and additional analytical texture. They are intended as a resource for deeper exploration — before, during, or after March 12, and as a lasting reference for future planning conversations. All quotes are presented anonymously; interviewee identities are known only to the facilitator.

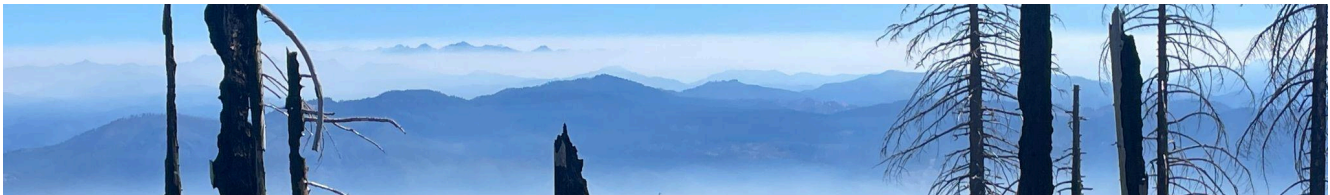
## Who We Heard From

- Board members: 7
- Staff: 15
- Landowners: 8
- Agency partners (including regulators, resource managers, and funders): 14
- Community-Based Organization Partners: 6
- One Tribal Representative
- One elected official

*I feel like we're finally hitting a bit of a stride in the restoration community that we're trying to look holistically and bring traditional ecological knowledge to the table and work with our tribal partners... how do we look from ridge to valley and address the watershed as a whole?*

— Staff member

Greater representation of agency and community partners than private landowners is worth naming plainly, given that the board consistently identified landowners as the RCD's most important constituency. The relative abundance of agency voices in the results are not a full picture of external priorities; it reflects a wide variety of types of agency representatives and who was accessible to sit down for a conversation.



# 1. What Everyone Agrees On: Shared Ground Across All Groups

## 1.1 Shared Values, Ideals & Interests

What follows represents the strongest common ground in the results. These themes emerged across board, staff, landowners, and partners — independently, without prompting. The fact that voices from inside and outside the organization converged on the same territory, using similar language, is analytically significant. These are not consultant-constructed themes. They are the organization's own values, reflected back from every direction.

### Values: What All Groups Believe to Be True

The following top themes are not merely values the RCD claims for itself. They are what the people the RCD serves, and the people who serve alongside it, named as what makes the relationship worth having.

- Stewardship as genuine service, not compliance or transaction — "leaving the land better for my daughter" is a landowner's phrase capturing what every group said in different words
- Trust as the foundational currency of every external relationship — named explicitly by landowners and echoed by partners who linked trust to staff continuity
- Doing the hard thing — taking on complex, multi-party projects others won't touch, which partners across sectors praised as the RCD's defining capability
- Collaboration over competition with partner organizations — named by board, staff, and partners alike as both a value held and a practice to strengthen
- Honesty and transparency, even when the news is difficult — including honest timelines with landowners and honest communication about project constraints
- Humboldt County's distinctive stewardship culture — described by a field-based partner as "an unspoken rule of stewardship... quite prevalent around here, even in the ag world, in the forestry world." Landowners named it as an intrinsic motivation. The RCD did not create this culture; it exists in the community the RCD serves. That is significant.

### Ideals: A Future All Groups Are Reaching Toward

- An RCD that is the trusted first call for any Humboldt County landowner or conservation partner navigating complexity — partners described exactly this in their own words: "the perfect intermediary... who can be very much in touch with landowners and the community"
- An organization disciplined enough to say no — so its yes means something — echoed by partners who advised a Vision-Purpose-Strategy-Tactics filter for every new commitment
- Growth that strengthens rather than dilutes what makes the RCD exceptional — the shared fear of all groups, and the shared aspiration
- A board and staff that function as genuine partners on the same path, not parallel tracks
- A regional conservation workforce that is stable, well-paid, and locally rooted — an ideal named most forcefully by external partners, but one that board and staff affirmed through their commitment to local hiring

### Collective Interests Keeping Them Invested: Near Unanimous Across All Groups

**Financial sustainability and boom-bust resilience.** Every board member and the strong majority of staff named concern about what happens when state and federal grant funding contracts. This fear is not abstract — it is grounded in awareness of political volatility, government fiscal realities, and the RCD's rapidly expanding payroll. External partners amplified this independently and with urgency. A fire partner asked: "What are the other RCDs regionally doing that are working... figuring out ongoing funding and stable base funding to keep everyone going with not so much volatility?" A funding partner urged the RCD to pursue block grants and more

stable funding instruments. The convergence across internal and external voices on this theme makes it the clearest strategic priority entering the workshop.

**Sideboards: growth with intention, not grant-chasing.** A concern about the "dog wagged by the tail" — taking on more to feed payroll — came up in five of seven board interviews and in the strong majority of staff interviews, using remarkably similar language. "You got to have sideboards on it. And we don't need to chase rabbits outside the sideboards." External partners echoed this without prompting. One partner advised the RCD to strictly adhere to a "Vision, Mission, Strategy, Tactics" framework to



avoid mission creep. A nonprofit warned against the organizational tendency to "go inward" and assume what the people the RCD serves need rather than continuing to ask. Landowners reinforced the same instinct in plain terms: "Make sure the RCD knows who it is working for and who it is serving — it's the community and it's the producers." All groups want principled decisions about scope, not reactive ones.

**Culture protection.** Board and staff, without being asked, named organizational culture as something precious that must be actively protected as the organization grows — a concern echoed independently by external partners. The risk that all groups named is the same: growth without intention destroying what makes the RCD exceptional. See Section 1.4 for a deeper look at what staff and partners said about the specific conditions that threaten and sustain this culture.

### **Strong Majority Interests Across Groups**

**Building and sustaining strong relationships, supported by better communication.** Across all groups, the primacy of relationships emerged as a core organizational value — the foundational currency of everything the RCD does. Board members named it as central to the RCD's identity and effectiveness. Staff named it in the context of landowner trust, which takes years to build and can be damaged quickly. Landowners put it most plainly: "Shared goals. Open communication. Relationships. What gets in the way? Time." Partners named it as the reason they choose to work with the RCD. The communication gaps named throughout this campaign are symptoms of an organization that has grown faster than its relationship infrastructure. Section 1.5 explores what this means in practice — and what it will take to sustain it.

*New staff must understand that projects take time and that we must approach landowners with a partnership mentality, not an enforcement or a funder objective mentality.*

- Landowner

**Local contractor and workforce prioritization.** Both board and staff value keeping RCD project dollars in the local economy. External voices were among the strongest on this point. Multiple partner organizations named it unprompted as a priority they actively watch. One community partner said the RCD's local hiring focus was their top takeaway: "As we grow larger we need to stay focused on hiring local folks for local projects." A fire-focused partner went further: "We cannot do [this work] without supporting a workforce with consistent work that pays well." A rural firefighter partner described the stakes: local organizations need a consecutive flow of projects to hire and retain staff year-round rather than depending on large out-of-area contractors who don't know local ecology. Landowners named the same value: serving their community means ensuring the economic benefit of conservation stays local.

**Hiring a Registered Professional Forester on staff.** Named as an urgent need by board and staff alike. External agency partners flagged this independently as both a liability risk and a capacity gap.

## 1.2 Convergence on RCD Purpose — With An Important Underlying Strategic Tension

Across board, staff, landowners, and partners, there is striking alignment around a core idea: the RCD's most irreplaceable function is to serve as a **trusted bridge** — between landowners and regulatory systems, between on-the-ground practitioners and funders, between local knowledge and statewide policy.

The words people used varied by group. A majority of board members talked about protecting landowners from complex regulatory environments and helping good stewards stay economically viable. Staff spoke about doing "the hard thing" — taking on complex, multi-partner projects others won't touch. Agency partners praised the RCD's ability to "move projects from concept to implementation in a way that builds trust." A Native-led community partner described the RCD as able to look for grants and supply and collect data so that practitioners on the ground can focus on actually doing the work.

*You have a rare ability to balance community priorities with fisheries and wildlife restoration, and to move projects from concept to implementation in a way that builds trust. That balance is invaluable.*

— Agency partner

Beneath this convergence, however, lies an important tension: **is the RCD primarily in service to landowners — advocating for them to regulatory and funding agencies — or is it in service to the landscape?** These two orientations are often aligned, but not always. When they diverge (as with cannabis remediation, or with planning frameworks like SHaRP), the absence of a clear, shared answer creates friction.

## 1.3 Growth Has Been a Success & Has Created New Vulnerabilities

No one in this listening campaign disputed that the RCD's growth has been remarkable or that the work has been meaningful. The concern is not growth itself — every group affirmed the work has been meaningful and the trajectory right. The concern is what has been outpaced: the internal systems, strategic guardrails, and culture infrastructure needed to sustain it. Section 1.1 captures what everyone wants; this section names what's at risk if the organization doesn't catch up.

**Board members** worry about mission creep driven by payroll and pressure from funders' objectives. The phrase "sideboards" — defining what the RCD does *and does not do* — came up independently across multiple board interviews. The concern is not growth itself, but growth without strategic intentionality and grounding in clear purpose. Several board members wondered whether or not the RCD should become a landowner for long-term maintenance purposes.

*It can take 25 years to build collaborative relationships and then it can take like one comment or one failure [to destroy them]... Really need to evaluate our capacity to actually deliver.*

— Agency partner

**Staff** are proud of what they've built and are showing signs of strain. Burnout, middle-management gaps, and operational friction — invoicing and payment delays, fragmented office space, shared vehicles — are not just inconveniences. They are strategic drag that affects the RCD's ability to deliver on its promises to landowners and partners. Several staff noted that working consistently above their pay grade, without a clear career ladder, puts a strain on internal relationships and staff retention.

*Take it just the right amount of slow.*

— Staff member

**Partners** are watching. Multiple agency partners named reputation as the RCD's most valuable asset and cautioned that one significant project failure — with an organization now operating at this scale — carries far more risk than it once did.

The shared message across groups: the pace of growth has outrun some of the internal systems, culture clarity about "how" the RCD operates, and strategic guardrails needed to sustain it. March 12 is a chance to catch up.

## 1.4 The RCD's Culture Is a Genuine Strength & Needs Active Stewardship

One of the most consistent findings across staff interviews — and something partners noticed externally — is that the RCD has built something unusual: **a workplace with genuine camaraderie, low drama, a bias for doing hard things, and people who care deeply.** This is no small thing in a field marked by turnover and burnout.

Staff described it this way: "Work culture is great... we strike a good balance of working really hard and also having silly moments." Another noted simply: "I've never worked in an office where there wasn't some form of backstabbing and gossip... but here, everybody seems to get along and it makes work good."

At the same time, several staff explicitly named what could erode this culture: insufficient compensation for high-level work, the absence of a defined career ladder, difficulty accessing leadership during busy periods, and the physical fragmentation of operating across two offices. These observations are not complaints about the mission — they are evidence that people want to stay and want conditions that let them thrive.

The question March 12 can surface: **what does the organization need to put in place now, before the culture shifts in ways that are harder to reverse?**

*Protect what we currently have already — like protect our work culture and the trust and responsiveness we have to the community... keep growing, but don't forget where you come from.*

— Staff member

## 1.5 Relationships & Partnerships Are An RCD Superpower Requiring Intentional Investment

Across all four groups, the RCD's relationships and partnership model emerged as a core advantage. The organization's ability to convene, to navigate complex challenges, collaborate with landowners without making them feel coerced was praised by landowners, staff, and agencies alike.

At the same time, partnership health requires ongoing tending. Multiple voices named **communication and timeline transparency** as the most important improvement the RCD could make. Landowners need clear information about how long grant-funded processes and regulatory requirements take. Partners need clarity about roles to avoid "lane drift." The board needs complete financial reporting far enough in advance to exercise genuine fiduciary oversight.

Several partners also named **succession and burnout** as partnership risks, not just internal ones, to avoid losing years of relationship capital. One close partner said directly to the ED: "We both need to figure out how to foster people who can carry this work."

*Shared goals. Open communication. Relationships. What gets in the way? Time.*

— Landowner partner

## 1.6 The Richest Voices Pointed Toward Holistic, Integrated Stewardship — Including Perspectives the RCD Has Not Yet Fully Heard

Some of the most generative perspectives in this campaign came from voices outside the RCD's traditional landowner orbit — Native-led community organizations, tribal partners, and agency representatives working at the intersection of fire, water, and traditional land management. These voices converge on a vision of stewardship that goes beyond any single habitat type, program, or grant cycle.

Several agency partners described the current moment as a genuine inflection point: **for the first time in a generation, land managers, funders, and Indigenous practitioners are beginning to work side-by-side across watershed, forest, and fire domains. The RCD is well positioned to play a central role in this emerging collaboration — if it chooses to.**

Two tribal government and Native-led organization partners offered perspectives that stand out for both their warmth toward the RCD and their practical insight. A Native elder whose organization has worked closely with the RCD expressed genuine gratitude: the inclusion of tribal monitors on projects, the respectful handling of cultural easements, and archaeological support work were each named as examples of the RCD being a strong partner. Their asks are concrete and actionable: ensure that tribal priority areas are included in the Community Wildfire Protection Plan; help secure funding for specific environmental remediation needs; and above all, overcommunicate to prevent rumors that erode trust. They also raised a subtle but important planning concern — the RCD must work with tribal elders before naming cultural sites on any public maps, as prior disclosure of sensitive locations has invited looting and desecration.

A director of a Native-led organization brought a sweeping perspective on the current moment in forest health: people who were previously barred from gathering on their own ancestral homelands are now working alongside landowners, agency staff, and RPFs with chainsaws and using cultural fire. Traditional Ecological Knowledge, long dismissed, is increasingly recognized as essential science. Their message to the RCD: the people doing the hard work of translating that knowledge into the language of grants and bureaucracies are exhausted and often feel unheard. Supporting them is strategic. The metaphor for collaborative energy they see building: "It takes a village to raise a child... all of these people are sharing information... so we're all nurturing the baby."

It is worth noting that Native and tribal partnerships emerged as a broad priority from staff and agency partners, but was only noted by one board member. This is a useful data point, not a criticism. The RCD's board reflects the agricultural and timber landowner community it has long served, and those relationships remain foundational. The question the results invite is simply that, as the RCD grows in regional reach and influence, **are there communities — including lower-capacity tribes and Native-led organizations — whose stewardship goals align closely with the RCD's own, and could benefit from exactly the kind of technical and grant support the RCD provides?** That question is worth at least a conversation on March 12.

*I'm a huge advocate of tribes being represented and being served... there is good that could come from governmental organizations like ours to truly serve and partner and work with tribes.* — Staff member

*To really rely on and actually support and motivate them too — because sometimes they feel like, well, nobody's listening.* — Native-led community organization partner, on Indigenous practitioners' knowledge

## 2. Themes Across Groups at a Glance

Theme	Board	Staff	Landowners	Partners
RCD as trusted bridge/navigator	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓
Concern about growth without sideboards	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓	✓
Relationships investment and communication/timeline transparency as top improvement	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓
Culture as competitive advantage	—	✓ ✓	—	✓
Burnout/staff capacity and space as strategic risk	—	✓ ✓	—	✓ ✓
Maintenance of treated areas as looming gap	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓	✓
Financial sustainability / boom-bust concern	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓	✓ ✓
Holistic, watershed-scale integration as opportunity	✓	✓ ✓	✓	✓ ✓
Native/tribal partnership as strategic priority	✓	✓ ✓	—	✓ ✓

✓ ✓ = raised by multiple voices in this group; ✓ = raised by at least one voice

### 3. What Comes Next: Questions & Preparation for March 12

These questions are not rhetorical. These results offer an opportunity for the group to explore them together.

#### 3.1 On Purpose

- What is the RCD in service to — the landowner, the land, or both — when different answers to that question can point strategy, resources, recruitment, and activities in different directions?
- What does the RCD *do*? What does it *not* do? Can we leave March 12 with experimental sideboards?
- When it comes to cannabis, maintenance strategies, or administrative systems, what learning opportunities need to be sought out to test priorities and shape them to fit?

#### 3.2 On Growth

- What does it look and feel like to operate in balance with the right speed of organizational evolution — not too fast, not too slow? What does a balance of growth and stability look and feel like?
- What internal systems, staff and compensation structures, and career pathways need to catch up with current and projected scope and scale of operations, as well as program ambitions? What internal systems updates will serve the RCD regardless of changes ahead?

#### 3.3 On Relationships & Partnerships

- What would proactive outreach and relationship-tending look like to landowners? To lower-capacity Native-led groups and non-federally recognized tribes — does the board see opportunity there?
- How might the RCD grow a culture of listening to invest in landowner relationships and feedback?
- Are there important relationships and partnerships that are missing to better achieve the RCD's purpose? If not now, then if you project the RCD's evolving role into the future?

#### 3.4 On Internal Operations & Culture

- What do staff need from the board, and what does the board need from staff? Specific agreements?
- What would it take to go from "great culture" to "culture and internal operating systems we can sustain through growth"?

#### 3.5 Preparation for the March 12 Co-Design Session

The morning session will bring board and staff together to make sense of what was heard, find common ground, and co-design shared values, a rough statement of purpose, and decision filters that will guide the Long-Range Plan. In the afternoon, staff can dig into the operating practices and culture, apply the morning principles to sketches of programmatic and operational priorities, and outline commitments for followup.

The intent is not consensus on every question, or to finalize agreements that will need real-world testing and refinement. It's a clear shared language and sense of purpose that will enable the organization to make hard calls — about which grants to pursue and which to pass, on cannabis cleanup, on land ownership — without relitigating the same debates.

These conversations are a remarkable start. The sophistication and generosity with which board members, staff, landowners, and partners engaged in this process is itself a sign of organizational health. The group's work on March 12 will build from there.

***You're kind of like a little bit of glue... you work with the state and you work with the feds and you work with private landowners.***

- Landowner

*More detailed findings with representative quotes from each group appear in the Appendices below. Each appendix is intended as a resource for deeper exploration — before, during, or after March 12, and as a lasting reference for future planning conversations.*

# APPENDICES: Group-by-Group Portraits

*Appendices are a resource for deeper exploration of a diverse range of perspectives over time — before, during, and well after March 12 as a reference for future strategic conversations.*

## Appendix A: Board Member Perspectives

**Participants:** Seven board members spanning multi-generational ranching and timber, dairy farming, and ecological/environmental professional backgrounds. Interview depth was high across the board; members engaged thoughtfully with complex strategic questions, often with a clarity and historical perspective that reflects long organizational memory.

### How Board Members Define the RCD's Purpose

Board members are broadly aligned that the RCD's core function is to help landowners — especially traditional agricultural operators — navigate a complex and often hostile regulatory and funding environment. The words and framings varied, but a common thread ran through them: the RCD is a bridge between what landowners need and what the system makes available to them.

One long-tenured member offered the clearest articulation: "I think the purpose of the RCD is to help people be good, self-sufficient land stewards in an economically viable way." Another framed it around advocacy: "It's important to assist landowners to engage and deal with 'evergreen' regulatory pushes, go to hearings, get the grants to be good stewards." A third described the RCD as an essential "broker" and "navigator" — helping landowners survive intensely complicated and uncoordinated regulatory and funding processes.

Related to the "land conservation" side of the land-landowners equation that was noted in Section 1.2 (since most land conservation and restoration efforts are supported by public funds), while no interviewee explicitly named stewardship of public funds as a core organizational value, several board members raised concerns about their ability to fulfill their fiduciary duties — suggesting that responsible management of public dollars for this work is implicitly understood as important, even if it has not yet been articulated as a shared principle.

There is a diversity of perspectives among the board. Some are more comfortable with a broader ecological mandate and less anchored to traditional agriculture as the primary constituency. This variation is worth naming openly — not to resolve, but to make sure different orientations inform the sideboards conversation.

### On Growth: The "Dog Wagged by the Tail"

The phrase appeared in multiple board interviews, independently. The concern: as staffing grows and payroll commitments deepen, the RCD may find itself pursuing grants not because they align with mission but because they keep people employed. One board member noted: "You would get into a situation as an organization where you're going out just getting grants just for the sake of grants... the dog wagged by the tail... because we have a staff now that we have to keep busy... You've got to have sideboards on it."

A second, related concern was raised independently by multiple members: the RCD appears to have become a significant landowner without an explicit board-level strategic decision to pursue that direction. "Talk about the dog getting wagged by the tail. Suddenly you become a major landowner... It happened because you just let it happen." Whether and how the RCD engages in land ownership is a genuine strategic question the board has not fully addressed.

A veteran board member identified what may be the most underacknowledged operational risk: the lack of followup and maintenance on completed projects. "An aspect of that that gets shoved under the table and it's going to show up more in the next 10 years is followup. We're out there doing all this stuff and we're opening

the stand up... If you don't do followup on that, it's going to be worse than it was before you started... nobody looks at it." This concern was echoed independently by staff and landowners.

### **On Cannabis Remediation: A Values Debate**

Cannabis cleanup was the most emotionally charged topic among board members, and the responses revealed a genuine values divide rather than a simple policy disagreement. Several longtime members feel strongly that public funds should not subsidize cleanup of land that was deliberately damaged through illegal activity. Others — particularly younger members — see it as pragmatic restoration: the damage exists, the watershed is affected, and asking who caused it doesn't fix the sediment load.

One member offered a philosophical reframe worth carrying into March 12: "Is it about holding a grudge against the people who did the damage, or is it about fixing the damage?" The goal for the session is not to adjudicate this debate but to develop a decision filter — criteria that distinguish between situations and give the ED clearer guidance than "it depends on who asks."

### **On Board Governance & Operations**

Multiple members flagged the same governance concern: financial reports delivered the morning of a board meeting don't allow meaningful oversight. "One of the consistent threats from the growth is I'm not totally comfortable with our financial reporting... one of our challenges is a lot of times we don't get the financial report till the morning of the board." The consent calendar was also named as a vehicle that has accumulated too many items deserving scrutiny: "I think too much stuff gets put on the consent calendar without maybe enough background information, or help tracking things over time... you also don't want to rubber stamp stuff."

One longtime member reflected on the degree to which a single large project had consumed board bandwidth: "In all fairness I've been on the board quite a while and that has been the elephant in the middle of the living room for over 10, 12 years... it took 80, 90% of our effort." The listening campaign itself helped surface how much other work is now happening — and how much more visible it could be to the board.

### **On Partnerships & Advocacy**

Board members consistently identified the Water Board and other regulatory agencies as sources of frustration — describing situations where regulatory staff obstruction, lack of clarity, and inconsistency costs landowners tens of thousands of dollars and where, as one member put it, "it becomes an ego battle" even when the landowner is demonstrably right. Several members see the RCD's most important unmet role to provide more vigorous state-level advocacy on behalf of regional producers — particularly ensuring that state funding rubrics actually reflect Humboldt County's land types and agricultural systems.

### **Select Board Quotes**

*We need to put the sideboards on: what are we doing and not doing?*

*If you start to slide just because you've got bad news for people, it's not going to get any better by waiting.*

*You lose [trust] in miles and build it in inches.*

*Ecological disaster, eventually. [In response to: what's the risk if we don't get it right?]*

*We need to be brutally honest about managing financial reserves... planning for the inevitable day when state/federal funds dry up so the organization doesn't die a slow death.*

## Appendix B: Staff Perspectives

**Participants:** Fifteen staff members across forestry, agriculture, watershed restoration, and administration. Interviews were notably candid, analytically rigorous, and — taken together — represent some of the most substantively sophisticated thinking in the entire set of results. Staff demonstrated not only deep operational knowledge but genuine strategic understanding of the organization's trajectory.

### What Staff Love About This Organization

The affection is real and consistent. Across nearly every staff interview, people named the culture as a genuine standout — low drama, no backstabbing, a willingness to tackle hard projects, and a shared sense of mission that connects the work to something larger than any single grant. One staff member's description captures what several said in different ways: "I think just the culture of who we are as an organization and what we can offer — I think it's really unique, of doing the hard thing, of being willing to pick up a really big, crazy project."

Staff also expressed genuine connection to the landscape and the communities they serve. Water, watershed health, fire resilience, and the intrinsic value of the places they work on came through in almost every interview, with real feeling behind the words. "I feel like the first thing that comes to mind is our water. Protecting our watersheds is vital."

### What Staff Are Worried About

The concerns staff raised were specific, consistent, and — crucially — focused on problems that are solvable:

*Burnout and compensation.* Several staff report regularly working at a level above their job description — carrying program management responsibilities without corresponding titles or pay. The warning is direct: failure to address this will result in staff turnover and the loss of the landowner relationships that took years to build.

*Career pathway.* Multiple staff members described wanting to grow with this organization — and not seeing a clear ladder. "I think we could have multiple project coordinator levels... I definitely would like to see more opportunities for folks to move up so when we do get good people, they don't drift away because they're either not learning new skills or... the cost of living is crazy." The desire for professional development — RPF licenses, fire certifications — was mentioned in nearly every field staff interview. These aren't abstract wishes; they're retention signals.

*Operational friction.* Funders' invoice turnaround timelines and invoicing delays that leave local contractors waiting for payment were noted by multiple staff as a reputational risk the organization can't afford. "We try to work with local contractors, but it's a hindrance to them if we can't pay them for 90 days." Vehicle access and office fragmentation were also raised as daily sources of lost time and momentum. One staff member put it plainly: "Having just ONE office to report to would be helpful... lots of staff time is consumed by the friction of borrowing vehicles from partner agencies."

*Executive bandwidth.* Several staff noted with respect — not frustration — that the ED's capacity is stretched so thin that it creates a bottleneck for the rest of the organization. This was offered as a structural observation, not a personnel criticism.

### What Staff Want from the Board

Staff were thoughtful and direct when asked what they need from their board. The most consistent ask: **get out into the field**. Multiple staff suggested board members come to project sites — not to supervise, but to understand firsthand what the work looks and feels like. "Come out with us for a day... come to a treatment area sometime, whether it be a fuels treatment or a burn."

Staff also pointed to underutilized board expertise — particularly in forestry — and expressed interest in seeing working subcommittees revived as a way to vet ideas and build informed board engagement in program areas.

### **On Tribal & Native Partnerships**

Staff were the most consistently and passionately vocal group on this topic. One staff member's framing was particularly clear: "We all have our biases... sometimes we could be really focused on agricultural landowners where there's a strong history. I'm a huge advocate of tribes being represented and being served... there is inherent justice that could come from governmental organizations like ours to truly serve and partner and work with tribes." Another noted that giving up on tribal collaboration after early, short-term difficulties is one of the most common — and costly — organizational missteps. This is another realm of work that can only succeed with strong, long-term relationships.

### **On the Larger Vision**

Several staff articulated a vision of the RCD's future that was notably expansive and ecologically integrated. One staff member spoke to the opportunity and the obligation together: "It's great that we're growing... but with that growth, responsibility also increases." Another named what's at stake if the organization doesn't coordinate across its own programs: "I think it'd be really sad if we all went about our own different projects without having coordinated efforts with each other... we miss opportunities to amplify our efforts."

### **Selected Staff Quotes**

*Stay dynamic, stay flexible — there are going to be unforeseen challenges.*

*Maybe we would create a standardized set of initial questions... we go out to a ranch, farm or dairy and have a cup of coffee in the kitchen and look at maps and talk... slow but surely building trusting relationships is the way this works. (On the "kitchen table" outreach model)*

*I think there is a risk of growing too quickly and... outgrowing your small community, family feel with the RCD.*

*I would want to see more depth built into our programs before we go broader... nail the projects that we do have before getting more projects on board.*

*I think it'd be really sad if we all went about our own different projects without having coordinated efforts with each other... we miss opportunities to amplify our efforts.*

*What's exciting for me is the direct kind of implementation work we get to do through the habitat program... the ability to quickly respond to needs on the ground is something the RCD has lacked in the past. We're not just in the background holding the funding, we're also in the field and doing the hard work with them.*

*Somehow streamlining invoicing and making it quicker to invoice contractors — we try to work with local contractors, but it's a hindrance to them if we can't pay them for 90 days.*

*I think we could have multiple project coordinator levels... so when we do get good people, they don't drift away because they're either not learning new skills or... the cost of living is crazy.*

## Appendix C: Landowner Partner Perspectives

**Participants:** A smaller group than agency partners — itself a data point worth noting, making it a starting point for future listening, not a final picture. Participants included multi-generational dairy and ranching operators, small landowners with public-sector employment backgrounds, family forest operations, and agricultural producers new to the RCD. The diversity within this group, though small in number, produced substantively different perspectives worth distinguishing.

### A Note on Sample Size and What It Means

The board has consistently identified private landowners as the RCD's primary constituency. Challenges with engaging landowners due to their own time constraints, much less other dynamics, is worth naming as a strategic curiosity about how to consider it an opportunity. Several voices in the campaign — from both board and staff — advocated for dedicated, non-transactional relationship-building time that would, over time, create the conditions for this kind of listening to happen more naturally.

### What Landowners Value

Landowners who participated were largely positive about the RCD and knowledgeable about its value. The consistent theme: the RCD makes regulatory and funding processes survivable for people who lack the expertise, time, or connections to navigate them alone. One multi-generational operator described it with characteristic directness: "We want to leave the land better than how we found it." The RCD, in their view, is one of the few organizations that actually helps them do that.

A watershed restoration specialist and farmer with 20 years of regional experience offered a holistic take: "I feel like you guys do a great job helping landowners identify conservation concerns or problems and then identifying solutions and funding sources and connecting those dots... your application process has been really geared toward the farmer and makes it very achievable."

A longer-tenured producer with multi-generational range, forestry, and pasture land described the RCD's most unique contribution as staying in the "radical middle" — maintaining relationships with traditional landowners who might otherwise disengage from conservation work entirely.

### On Generational Outreach: "If It Shows A Tree, the Cow Guy Won't Look"

One of the most vivid and practical observations in the entire set of results came from a board member with deep landowner roots, describing why older-generation operators don't engage with the RCD's materials: "If [your material] shows a tree on it, the cow guy is not going to look at it. If it's got a cow on it, the tree guy is not going to look at it." This is not a trivial communication problem — it's a strategic one. Tailoring outreach by sector, by generation, and by relationship rather than by program is a fundamentally different approach to landowner engagement than what the RCD currently practices.

The same interviewee described the ideal outreach model with affection: "You almost need the people person. All they do is drive around and meet with people. The retired guy from the coffee shop who wants to talk all day. That's the guy you want to send out... You don't get through the gate and you don't get to the land without connecting up with the people." This concept — "kitchen table money," as interviewers began calling it — was independently validated by a senior staff member who described it as dedicated, non-transactional funding specifically secured to allow relationship-building outside of grant delivery pressure.

### What Landowners Want More Of

The single most consistent request: **honest, proactive communication about timelines.** Grant-funded projects move slowly; the gap between "yes, we're working on this" and actual implementation is often longer than operators expect or can absorb. The request isn't for faster projects — it's for clear expectations upfront and

early disclosure when things are running behind. One interviewee put it directly: "Just say 'as of this date this is where we are' and leave it at that." Another: "The timeline in the future I think needs to be explained to people and what the hurdles are."

Landowners also named **maintenance of completed projects** as a serious and growing concern. The risk isn't just ecological — it's relational. When treated areas aren't followed up on, landowners feel abandoned mid-process. One producer described this as a looming crisis the organization isn't yet taking seriously enough.

### **On the Risks of Leaving Legacy Landowners Behind**

As the RCD expands into new program areas, several landowner voices warned of a real friction risk: traditional, single-sector operators — particularly dairies — who have worked closely with the RCD for years may feel deprioritized as staff attention and program resources shift toward diverse, larger-scale, multi-partner projects. "There may be friction even from your more traditional landowners... I could see that group feeling like they're being left out or left behind because they've historically had your undivided attention." This is not inevitable, but it requires intentional attention to relationship maintenance alongside program expansion.

### **On Growth Discipline: A Landowner Version of "Sideboards"**

Landowners didn't use the word "sideboards," but they named the same concern in their own language. A multi-generational dairy operator was direct: the RCD risks serious consequences if it expands too much or too quickly on grant funding alone, including the painful prospect of having to lay off staff when funding inevitably contracts. The warning was practical, not theoretical — grounded in watching organizations in this region cycle through boom and bust.

A nonprofit partner to farmers put the underlying risk in relational terms: as the RCD grows, there is a gravitational pull toward going inward — toward assuming what the people it serves need, rather than continuing to ask them. "The bigger you get, the more you have to guess or project needs... really checking that your systems are working with the farmers." The risk isn't just strategic drift; it's the erosion of the trust-based, responsive culture that landowners and farmers named as the RCD's most distinctive quality.

Taken together, the landowner perspective on growth discipline is less about organizational structure and more about fidelity: to the people the RCD was built to serve, and to the relational model that makes it effective. The sideboards question — what does the RCD do, and what does it not do — is, from the landowner vantage point, inseparable from the question: whose interests drive those decisions?

### **Selected Landowner Quotes**

*We want to leave the land better than how we found it.*

*Just say "as of this date this is where we are" and leave it at that.*

*New staff must understand that projects take time and that we must approach landowners with a partnership mentality, not an enforcement or a funder objective mentality.*

*Don't expand too much or too quickly on grant funding — you risk having to lay off staff down the road.*

*It's all connected and every aspect of it is helpful. You can't do one without the other. (About integrated conservation.)*

*The bigger you get, the more you have to guess at project needs. Or the more you go inward to what you think would be best for people... really checking that your systems are working with the farmers.*

*I feel like we're finally hitting a bit of a stride in the restoration community — trying to look holistically and bring traditional ecological knowledge to the table and work with our tribal partners... how do we look from ridge to valley and address the watershed as a whole?*

## Appendix D: Agency & Community Partner Perspectives

**Participants:** The most diverse group in the campaign: federal and state agency partners (NOAA/SHaRP, CalFire, Water Board), county wildfire resiliency programs, the Prescribed Burn Association, Fire Safe Councils, tribal nations and tribal-led organizations, Native-led community health and conservation organizations, and agricultural and forest landowner partners with deep regional roots. The breadth of this group — and the quality of thinking it brought — is one of this campaign's most significant assets.

### The RCD as Seen from the Outside

The view from agency and community partners is largely one of genuine appreciation, strategic trust, and something rarer: specific, concrete praise for what the RCD does that others can't. Partners value the RCD's flexibility, its community rootedness, its technical depth, and — most distinctively — its ability to move things from planning to implementation in ways that build rather than erode community trust.

One federal partner described it well: "The Humboldt County RCD stands out as a flexible, community-rooted organization. Because it is directed by people who live and work here, the RCD understands both landowner realities and ecological needs."

Partners also praised what they called the RCD's "collaborative sponsoring" model — the way it designs projects that build meaningful roles for smaller, local partners, and increasingly helps those partners develop their own capacity to pursue funding independently. "It's also nice to see that some of those partners are starting to be able to get their own funding... When you build that capacity, they can do more themselves." This model was described as unusual and difficult to replicate.

### Where Partners Want More

Partners were candid about friction points without being critical. "Lane" definition came up repeatedly: as the RCD grows, it becomes more important to be explicit about where its role ends and a partner's begins — both to avoid duplication and to prevent the RCD from spreading itself so thin that quality suffers. One close agency partner described the risk: "We could get a little drift... we do need to be careful or mindful about it so we don't confuse our target audience."

Succession planning and burnout were named as risks not just for the RCD internally, but for the partnership ecosystem it has helped create. One partner said plainly: "I don't really understand how you have time to do anything... we both need to figure out how to foster somebody who can carry this work." Another described losing years of relationship-building momentum when key staff at partner organizations turn over — and warned the RCD to take seriously the risk that its own institutional memory could face the same kind of disruption.

Several partners also raised the need for the RCD to communicate its services more clearly to potential partners and landowners, even experienced professionals. One RPF with decades in the field said: "Even me as a natural resources person, I don't completely understand what all of your services are."

### On Fire, Water & the Holistic Opportunity

Agency partners working at the fire-water-forest intersection described an emerging shift in how regional conservation work is being conceptualized — away from siloed programs and toward integrated, watershed-scale management. The RCD is increasingly at the center of this shift, and partners are explicit about wanting that to continue and deepen.

A federal fisheries partner articulated the vision: "Integrated restoration, linking agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and water management. Stronger implementation pipelines, moving SHaRP priorities into shovel-ready

projects." A Fire Safe Council partner described the RCD's collaborative sponsoring model as central to building the regional capacity needed to operate at that scale — and warned that abandoning it under growth pressure would be a serious mistake.

The Prescribed Burn Association relationship was named as an area of underinvestment. An agency partner noted: "Other RCDs actually run their own PBAs... I think there may be a significant opportunity to support more grassroots burning efforts, including developing our own fire program." This was echoed by a staff member who noted that an RCD staff member is actively pursuing CARX certification — a concrete next step already in motion.

### **Tribal & Native-Led Partners: A Close-Up**

The voices from tribal and Native-led organizations were among the most generous, most practically grounded, and most forward-looking in the entire set of results.

A Tribe's representative described the RCD partnership with warmth and specificity. The inclusion of tribal monitors on projects was praised as meaningful — not performative: "In that way we've avoided any problems at all." The RCD's support for an archaeological study at a previously unresearched ancestral village site was described as "amazing." Priority requests include: amending the Community Wildfire Protection Plan to include tribal priority areas that were left out; securing funding to remove abandoned vehicles leaking fluids into a native Coho stream; and continuing to bring the RCD's physical presence into their community. They closed with a request that was both specific and broadly applicable: "Overcommunicating is important for the RCD to do with communities we work in."

They also raised a nuanced challenge that deserves a dedicated conversation: before any cultural sites appear on planning maps or shared databases, the RCD must engage with tribal elders to determine how — or whether — those sites should be named. Prior experience has shown that making the location of significant sites public has invited looting and desecration. The RCD's instinct to be transparent and thorough in its planning documentation can inadvertently cause harm if not handled carefully.

The director of a Native-led organization described a broader vision rooted in long ecological continuity: years ago, Native people weren't allowed to gather on their own ancestral homelands. Now, traditional ecological knowledge is increasingly recognized as legitimate science — though imperfectly and incompletely. The RCD's role, from this perspective, is to handle the bureaucratic and grant infrastructure that allows on-the-ground practitioners to actually do the work — and to actively support the people who do the exhausting work of translating between knowledge systems and institutional languages. "To really rely on and actually support and actually motivate them too — because sometimes they feel like, well, nobody's listening."

Their vision for the region: "The baby is growing. And we're like all parents... it takes a village to raise a child, right? So right now, that's happening with this — all of these people are sharing information... so we're all nurturing the baby."

### **Selected Agency & Community Partner Quotes**

*It can take 25 years to build collaborative relationships and then it can take one comment or one failure to damage that... just being careful of trying to not get so much on deck that something major fails.*

*You have a rare ability to balance community priorities with fisheries and wildlife restoration, and to move projects from concept to implementation in a way that builds trust.*

*The collaborative way that the RCD puts projects together with partners... is kind of unique... it's also nice to see that some of those partners are starting to be able to get their own funding — when you build that capacity, they can do more themselves.*

*Clearing some brush, clearing the land so that we could do a study, an archaeological study because our village hasn't had any archaeological research... and that the RCD was so positively responsive was just amazing.*

*Because we have these significant cultural sites... do we name the sites or we just leave it as cultural sites? A lot of times sharing that information makes people do the wrong thing.*

*We're all interconnected somehow by our water.*

*The big elephant in the room is that the economy of Southern Humboldt has crumbled... we have a bunch of workforce that's available now... I would really encourage the RCD to stay local with its employment.*

*Successional planning — that's kind of a gap right now... how do we connect those older farmers that have infrastructure and equipment to the young people that want to take over? (Agricultural succession as regional opportunity)*

*I appreciate the outstanding talent that you guys are continuing to hire.*

*You guys bring this really high level of expertise.*

*[The Humboldt RCD provides] a lot of leadership [to all North Coast RCDs].*