

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 2499

As Reported by House Committee On:
State Government & Tribal Relations

Title: An act relating to modernizing conservation district election procedures and requiring financial disclosures from district supervisors and candidates for district supervisor.

Brief Description: Modernizing conservation district election procedures and requiring financial disclosures from district supervisors and candidates for district supervisor.

Sponsors: Representatives Gregerson, Pollet, Reeves, Hill, Stearns, Macri, Obras and Reed.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

State Government & Tribal Relations: 1/27/26, 2/3/26 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Lengthens conservation district supervisor terms from three to four years.
- Removes the requirement that a certain number of conservation district supervisors be landowners or operators of a farm.
- Permits conservation districts to choose to hold their elections under Title 29A, the typical election process used for federal, state, and many local offices.
- Requires conservation district supervisors, as well as certain candidates, to submit a Statement of Financial Affairs (F-1) for public disclosure.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT & TRIBAL RELATIONS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 4 members: Representatives Mena, Chair; Stearns, Vice Chair; Doglio and Farivar.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 3 members: Representatives Waters, Ranking Minority Member; Walsh, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Chase.

Staff: Connor Schiff (786-7093).

Background:

Special Purpose Districts.

Special purpose districts are local governments formed for a limited purpose that are separate from a county, city, or town government. There are more than 80 types of special purpose districts in Washington, providing services such as fire protection, libraries, water and sewer treatment, and mosquito control.

Conservation Districts.

Conservation districts are special purpose districts that are organized to promote the conservation of renewable natural resources. They are supported by the State Conservation Commission (SCC). There are 45 conservation districts in Washington.

A conservation district may be formed when 20 percent of the voters within the proposed district area file a petition with the SCC. A public hearing is then held and, if the SCC determines that public health, safety, and welfare warrant the creation of the district, the SCC must determine whether district creation is practicable. To assist in its decision, the SCC must call an election to submit the proposition to the voters in the proposed district area. If a majority of voters in a proposed district area support creation of the district and the SCC determines creation is practicable, the district is created.

Board of Supervisors. The board of supervisors of a conservation district is comprised of five members, three of whom are elected to staggered three-year terms. Two of the three elected supervisors must be landowners or operators of a farm. The other two supervisors are appointed by the SCC; one must be a landowner or the operator of a farm.

Voting Rights. The SCC may determine the qualifications necessary to vote in elections for board supervisors. By SCC rule, an individual registered to vote in the county where the district is located and who resides within the conservation district boundaries may vote.

Election Mechanics. For the creation of a district, the SCC sets the date of the election and designates the polling places. For elections to the board of supervisors, the board of supervisors sets the date of the election during the first quarter of the calendar year. The SCC must establish procedures for elections, canvass the returns, and announce the official results.

Washington State Institute for Public Policy Study. In 2023 the Washington State Institute for Public Policy was directed to study the costs of conservation district supervisor elections. The final report, issued in June 2025, summarizes election costs, funding sources,

voter turnout, and projected election costs under alternative policies.

Title 29A Elections.

Other than some types of special districts and a few other exceptions, local government and special district elections are conducted under Title 29A. Candidates file for office during a filing period in May; a primary is held to narrow the field to two candidates in August; and a general election is held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. General elections for local government candidates are conducted in odd-numbered years, except for counties in which the charter specifies even-year elections. Special elections may be called by a county auditor on one of four days (one in February, one in April, and the date of the August primary or November general election) when the legislative authority so requests.

Ballots are mailed to voters by the county auditor, who largely conducts the elections at the county level, and returned ballots are canvassed by a county canvassing board. Each registered voter is entitled to one vote in the local government races for the jurisdictions in which the voter resides. Elections are overseen by the Office of the Secretary of State. The Public Disclosure Commission (PDC) oversees campaign finance laws and rules for these elections. Candidates and elected officials are required to report certain campaign finance information to the PDC. Candidates and elected officials in political subdivisions with fewer than 2,000 registered voters as of the date of the most recent general election are exempt from campaign reporting requirements. Elected conservation district supervisors are also exempt from these requirements.

Statements of Financial Affairs.

Every year, all elected officials and executive state officers must file a Statement of Financial Affairs (F-1) for the preceding calendar year with the PDC. Every candidate for such elected offices must also file an F-1. According to the PDC, F-1s are intended to allow the public to assess whether state officials may have conflicts of interest. "Executive state officer" is defined to include the director of many state agencies, councils, and commissions.

Subject to certain monetary thresholds, F-1s must include information about a person's:

- bank accounts, savings accounts, and insurance policies;
- debts;
- other public or private offices, directorships, and positions as a trustee;
- other sources of compensation;
- real property ownership and interests within Washington; and
- acceptance of food, beverage, and gifts.

Candidates and elected officials in political subdivisions with fewer than 2,000 registered voters as of the date of the most recent general election are exempt from the F-1 reporting requirements. Conservation district supervisors are also exempt from these requirements.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

Conservation district supervisor terms are lengthened from three to four years. The requirements that two of the three elected supervisors be landowners or operators of a farm and that one of the two appointed supervisors be a landowner or the operator of a farm are eliminated.

A district board of supervisors may choose to conduct its elections under Title 29A instead, by majority vote after public notice and hearing. Rules and guidance developed by the State Conservation Commission (SCC) for conducting supervisor elections do not apply to a district that chooses to conduct its elections under Title 29A. For districts that hold elections under Title 29A, supervisors and candidates are subject to the campaign disclosure requirements that apply to other Title 29A elections. Both elected and appointed supervisors, as well as candidates for supervisor, in those districts must also file a Statement of Financial Affairs (F-1) with the Public Disclosure Commission (PDC). Consistent with the existing exemption for political subdivisions with fewer than 2,000 registered voters, elected supervisors and supervisor candidates in districts that hold their elections under Title 29A and have fewer than 2,000 registered voters are exempt from campaign finance and the F-1 reporting requirements. Appointed supervisors in these districts are granted a conforming exemption from the F-1 reporting requirements.

All elected and appointed supervisors in districts that continue to conduct their elections under the supervision of the SCC, rather than under Title 29A, must file F-1s with the PDC. Candidates for supervisor in these districts are exempt from the F-1 reporting requirements.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill removes the requirement that candidates for elected supervisors in conservation districts that hold their supervisor elections under the supervision of the State Conservation Commission (SCC) submit Statements of Financial Affairs (F-1s) to the Public Disclosure Commission. The substitute bill makes clarifying corrections related to the frequency of conservation district board elections. The substitute bill also clarifies that rules and guidance developed by the SCC for conducting supervisor elections do not apply to a district that chooses to conduct its elections under Title 29A.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available. New fiscal note requested on February 4, 2026.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill contains multiple effective dates. Please see the bill.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) This proposal has been discussed for numerous years. This proposal modernizes conservation district elections, which have not been updated in a long time. The bill removes some outdated requirements and reflects how conservation efforts affect everyone. Requiring Statements of Financial Affairs (F-1s) is good government and necessary for transparency. Conservation districts manage a lot of taxpayer dollars and determine where these dollars go; it is important for the public and journalists to know if district supervisors have a particular interest in where public dollars are going. Many elected officials and candidates for office file F-1s, and they are not deterred from holding office. There are constitutional issues with requiring property ownership as a qualification for an elected official. This proposal does not go far enough; all conservation district supervisor candidates should also have to report campaign finances. Requiring primaries for conservation districts that hold their supervisor elections under Title 29A would be challenging and prohibitively costly. Conservation districts should also have the opportunity to revert their elections back to the supervision of the State Conservation Commission. The F-1 reporting requirement for supervisors could be excluded from this bill. This is a common sense improvement that would increase the accessibility and visibility of elections. Currently, conservation district elections have very low voter turnout. Constituents have indicated that they feel the election system for conservation districts is broken and seems secretive.

(Opposed) Elections should be fair; conservation district election procedures reflect the unique features of conservation districts. Supervisors are the boots on the ground and are well qualified to serve their roles. Conservation districts bring incentive programs, not regulatory compliance. Supervisors are volunteers; F-1s should only be required where the positions are salaried. Requiring F-1s would deter many qualified individuals from serving on district boards. There is no evidence that there are problems with the current F-1 exemption for supervisors. Conservation districts have more oversight than other districts; they are committed to transparent and cost-effective elections. The agricultural world is very competitive, and individuals are putting their business operations at risk if they disclose their financial affairs. Conservation district boards have not had enough time to scrutinize and vet this proposal. Conservation districts have diverse needs and diversity in funding.

(Other) Conservation districts do not regulate or collect taxes. Conservation districts have indicated that they want certain changes, but they have not been engaged in conversations about certain other changes in this bill. There are some technical problems and concerns about unintended impacts to conservation districts. Conservation districts have a comprehensive audit system in place. Conservation districts are mostly grant-funded and grant funds cannot be used to go on the general ballot; some conservation districts would have to lay off staff to move to the general ballot. This proposal is trying to fix a problem that does not exist. Volunteer supervisors are intimidated by the potential disclosure of financial information; requiring F-1s would be a deterrent to people serving on a district board. Disclosure of financial information is a business issue, not just a privacy issue. Removing the landownership requirement would phase out people who are meant to be

empowered under the current rules.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Mia Gregerson, prime sponsor; Representative Gerry Pollet, 46th District; Conner Edwards, Professional Campaign Treasurer, CG Edwards PLLC; Julie Wise, King County Director of Elections; Cassie Clayton, Northwest Progressive Institute; Shannon Grimes, Sightline Institute; Csenka Favorini-Csorba, King Conservation District; Ann Murphy, League of Women Voters of Washington; Rosa Mendez-Perez, King Conservation District; and Brittney Bush Bollay, King Conservation District.

(Opposed) Christy Cox, Elected Board Chair, Clallam Conservation District; Kim Williams, Clallam Conservation District; Tom Salzer, Washington Association of Conservation Districts; Linda Lyshall, Snohomish Conservation District; Amy McKay, Washington Association of Conservation Districts; and Caleb Gwerder, Washington Farm Bureau.

(Other) Dani Madrone, Washington State Conservation Commission.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.