

Local Work Groups – Conservation District perspective of past efforts (pre 2008)

Structure:

- Typical membership on the LWGs includes: Conservation Districts, NRCS, EPA, Extension, County Commissioners, State Natural Resource Division/Agriculture Department, USDA FSA.
- Include only membership of government entities to meet the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA)
- Conservation Districts continue to assemble and conduct the LWG meetings with support from the NRCS District Conservationists.
- Annual statewide evaluation meetings are held with LWG chairs and NRCS District Conservationists to review progress, examine program objectives, review complaints, and discuss recommendations for program delivery.

Benefits:

- LWGs identify and review annually a listing of natural resource priorities specific to their area and based on their local knowledge and expertise.
- Annual evaluations by LWGs lead to revisions to the natural resource priorities, eligible practice, cost share rates, hold downs, and ranking points system.
- Local involvement has led to support, marketing and success of the EQIP program.
- NRCS has been able to use nearly all the recommendations put forth by the LWGs.

Progress:

- Developed an area specific ranking criteria sheet including point structure for use in EQIP cost share program application process.
- Made improvements in ranking criteria points system, recommended practice listing, cost share %, and practice hold downs.
- Evaluation of funds spent for conservation practice application by each of the local work groups and the STAC.
- Utilized LWG recommendations for prioritizing CSP watersheds in the 2nd and 3rd year.
- Successive allocation and reallocation of funding within the LWGs based on natural resources needs and priorities.

Issues:

- Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) requirements of only government entities serving on the LWG, where the State Technical Committee is not subjected to the FACA legislation.
- Some early concerns that insufficient funds were made available to forestry projects, have largely been addressed through coordination and cooperation.
- Some agencies sent multiple representatives to “railroad” their priorities into the LWG process – have addressed this through LWG policies for single member participation from any one agency or organization.

Recommendations for the future:

- In the few states where LWGs have operated successfully - offer maximum flexibility from the national directives as a reward and recognition for successful LWG operations.
- LWG operating structure and ground rules were important to begin and continue the process.
- Open more opportunities for non-government organizations to have membership on LWGs by exempting LWGs from FACA requirements as done currently with the STAC.
- Include stakeholder input into the LWGs regarding USDA Conservation program delivery
- More flexibility at local level for local ranking criteria use to get the desired results on local resource issues.
- Share successful techniques, session designs, EQIP & WHIP rating processes, throughout the nation.
- Utilize LWGs input and ranking criteria for other USDA, federal, state, and local program priorities for implementation.
- Provide opportunities for strengthening “matching” opportunities for partners (public and private) that want to match USDA program funding with their funding at the LWG level – give preference to the match cost share activities