

**National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA)
Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project**



May 9, 2006

**Conference and Workshop Report
Held in Louisville, KY, April 11-12, 2006**

Conference and Workshop Purpose

In 2004 and 2005, the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA) entered into two contribution agreements with US Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to conduct an evaluation of the national conservation delivery system. This two-phase project is a partnership initiative to determine how to improve the conservation delivery system, making it more effective and efficient in achieving results in conserving our natural resources and serving the needs of our nation's citizens.

NASCA completed work on the project's first phase with the hosting and reporting of two regional listening sessions held in Ohio and Utah in June and July 2005, including participation by a broad range of national, regional and local interest groups. NASCA conducted the Phase Two effort as a continuation of the evaluation process, to build on the recommendations of the two listening sessions and to conduct outreach to under-represented interests and geographic areas. The work-product of this effort is the development of specific actions that can be taken to implement the recommendations and to achieve the desired improvements.

Under Phase Two, NASCA focused on the following sources of follow-up:

- State NASCA member follow-up within states (some areas originally under-represented), using focus group meetings, surveys, and workshops;
- NASCA outreach to added interest groups (under-represented, new partners) at the national, regional and state level; and,
- NASCA consultation with traditional partnering organizations (e.g., NRCS, NACD, NASDA).

The Phase Two process culminated in this national conference, held April 11-12, 2006 in Louisville, Kentucky, to pull together the results of Phase Two, and to pave the way for implementation of recommendations to improve the conservation delivery system. NASCA invited to this working conference persons and organizations taking part in Phase One, groups to whom NASCA had reached out under Phase Two, and those who wished to present *their ideas* about how to institute needed delivery system improvements in an effective and efficient manner. See Appendix A for a list of attendees.

The purpose of the two half-day conference and workshop was to produce specific action steps to implement recommendations that enjoy wide support among the diverse attending interest groups. The meeting was billed as a *conference and workshop* because attendees had the opportunity to both listen to diverse interests *and* to become active participants in developing detailed action steps for implementation.

Conference and Workshop Design and Conduct

Following an opening luncheon, the meeting design included two distinctly different types of sessions – a first day series of three panel discussions followed by day two breakout sessions.

1. Panel Discussions

Panel discussions each presented a dialogue by five or six panelists representing varied interest groups and areas of innovation in conservation delivery (See Appendix B). Panel topics were identified and assigned for discussion based on three general categories of recommendations from the project's first phase:

- Improve Local Decision-Making
- Simplify/Streamline; Reduce Delays and Inconsistencies
- Better Apply Technology and Human Resources

The objective for panel discussions was to identify recommendations that panelists and attendees could support, to describe examples of where innovation and success were being put into action, and to set the stage for breakout sessions. Panels developed ***strategic priorities*** for further consideration and action by breakout sessions on recommendations that received good support.

2. Breakout Sessions

On day two, all attendees participated in concurrent breakout sessions of their choice (one of the three assigned panel topics – see Appendix C), where facilitators brought forward the strategic priorities for further action. Breakout session attendees participated in discussion and debate on these, and developed detailed ***action steps*** to begin implementation.

These two distinctly different types of sessions were linked through the use of **Panel Reaction Sheets**, distributed to attendees in their registration packets for them to record their reactions (e.g., agreement, disagreement, new idea but feasible, won't work) to what the panelists described during panel discussions. Attendees completed and retained these sheets for their chosen breakout session, to facilitate a discussion on the strategic priorities and a prompt development of consensus items in the breakout sessions.

Action steps from the three breakout sessions were reported to the combined attendees at a closing luncheon. Additional comment was received and noted during discussion of these brief presentations. Action steps were well-received by the combined attendees.

Outcomes

The outcomes, or work-products, of the conference and workshop include the following:

- Strategic Priorities (panels)
- Action Steps (breakout sessions)

Also recorded as Appendix D are detailed panel notes in preliminary form. Strategic priorities and action steps are listed below.

Strategic Priorities

During each panel discussion, the moderator noted and NASCA compiled the points around which panelists found agreement that further, more detailed action was needed by breakout sessions. These were called **strategic priorities**, and were assigned to the next day's breakout sessions for discussion. These are listed below by panel.

Panel One - Improve Local Decision-Making

- Outreach and involvement of local people in informed decision making.
- Muscle up conservation districts – new and diverse partners and board members.
- Communication marketing and activities for specific audiences who need more than what we have been doing. Funding for programs. There is a wide range of audiences needing something that we are not delivering.
- Public relations, outreach and letting people know what we are doing locally.
- Flexibility in policy-making, rules and programs based on local input and adequate accountability.

Panel Two - Simplify/Streamline; Reduce Delays and Inconsistencies

- An increasing diverse number of land owners and operators do not know about conservation programs.
- Simplify conservation program delivery processes.
- People set the conservation goals for their communities; flexibility in implementation is critical for dealing with local natural resource priorities.
- Advocate for a resource-driven conservation planning approach as opposed to program driven.

Panel Three - Better Apply Technology and Human Resources

- Work to better utilize existing and additional organizations that are available for conservation delivery, including private and government – think outside box, including training needs, roles, other.
- The conservation partnership should do a better job at communicating and using proven technology outside the current methodology.
- Communication gaps between different groups.
- Technical Service Providers (TSPs) are not yet embraced as equal partners in the process.

Action Steps

Based on these results of panels, breakout sessions began their discussion of strategic priorities and recommendations to arrive at consensus about which recommendations from that topic area were to be taken the next step toward development of specific **action steps**. The resulting action steps are listed by breakout session below. Note that there is some overlap among these action steps, as breakout session attendees arrived at several similar action steps independently on related topics.

Breakout Session One

1. Outreach and involvement of local people in informed decision making.
 - Who? Conservation partners.
 - How? Host conservation forums (broader than farm bill) co-sponsored by stakeholder groups, ethnic groups, and organizations (i.e., county elected officials, planning boards).
 - Action Item 1: Develop a concept paper on how to engage local decision makers and a process design.

- Action Item 2: Develop a strategic planning process that includes people or groups that you would not normally work with.
2. Empower local conservation boards and councils to be the conservation gateway for services.
 - Who? State conservation agencies and state associations.
 - How? Local board and council members' understanding of their powers and responsibilities, and use of recruitment techniques and strategies for new and diverse partners.
 - Action Item 1: Develop training and credentialing systems for local boards and staff.
 - Action Item 2: Application and routine revision of the recruitment techniques and strategies.
 - Action Item 3: Develop a mentoring or sharing system for conservation districts; look at RC&D Circle of Diamonds and other mentoring techniques.
 3. Conduct communication marketing and other activities for specific audiences who need more than what conservation partners have been doing. There is a wide range of audiences needing services that conservation partners are not delivering. Therefore, funding is needed for expanded activities.
 - Who? Local conservation districts and RC&D councils.
 - How? Look at processes and examples to identify under-served audiences.
 - Action Item 1: Conduct an annual planning process that includes a self examination of under-served audiences and needs.
 - Action Item 2: Examine and include action items in annual plans to reach and connect with under-served groups.
 - Action Item 3: Include as part of an annual report provided to the state conservation agency and share among like organizations. Develop a state plan from the local needs assessments.
 4. Establish flexibility in policy-making, rules and programs based on local input and adequate accountability.
 - Who? Conservation partners and clients at all levels.
 - How? An extensive feedback system that leads to a "Yes, we can!" attitude and a climate of acceptance of local recommendations. Involve all parties when it comes to rulemaking opportunities.
 - Action Item 1: Examine current business models for customer service and improvement, including [program] exit interview techniques.
 - Action Item 2: Develop a model feedback and responsiveness system for suggestions, rules, policies, development and improvements, etc.
 - Action Item 3: Secure real commitment from partners to listen to and act upon the recommendations made at the local level.

5. Carry out public relations and outreach, letting people know what conservation partners are doing locally.
 - Who? Conservation partners at all levels
 - What? Emphasize outreach by taking information to specific audiences.
 - Action Item 1: Translate conservation accomplishments and/or benefits to non-agricultural audiences.
 - Action Item 2: Provide training and working tools for local field staff dealing with public relations.
 - Action Item 3: States should share public relations and outreach strategies.

Breakout Session Two

1. Address the increasing diverse number of land owners and operators who do not know about conservation programs.

Action Items

- Support the development of a Center for Absentee Landowners. This would be a staffed, physical center where landowners can call, e-mail, and access web information related to conservation. This information would be in multiple languages and would provide basic education to non-traditional customers.

2. Simplify conservation program delivery processes.

Action Items

- Delegate more authority to state and local level to administer programs.
- Establish a statewide system which trains and empowers local conservation staff to make decisions.
- Consolidate "Farm Bill" and traditional conservation programs into three programs - cost share, easements, and watersheds.
- Position Conservation Districts as a one-stop service center.
- Establish Stewardship Agreements (Brock Grants to states).
- Make available single practice programs (e.g., cost-share).
- Establish a multi-agency communication system shared by conservation agencies (federal, state, county, local) to reduce redundant data entry and the number of forms required for each program.

3. People set the conservation goals for their communities; flexibility in implementation is critical for dealing with local natural resource priorities.

Action Items

- Provide for broad community involvement in locally-led conservation, including planning at the watershed level.

- Encourage state and federal agencies to provide for greater program implementation flexibility. Train local staff on opportunities for flexible approaches.
 - Train conservation district supervisors and staff as to their authority and responsibilities (e.g., clearinghouse coordinator).
 - Put NRCS technical specialists in the field and hire administrative staff to do data entry.
 - Train conservation supervisors and staff on emerging program needs (watershed management, energy alternatives, airsheds and ecosystem management approaches) so as to better position conservation districts for future opportunities.
4. Advocate for a resource-driven conservation planning approach as opposed to program driven.
- Action Items
- Establish a process to pay for resource-driven conservation planning (e.g., salaries/expenses for NRCS employees; general funding).
 - De-couple technical assistance funding from programs.

Breakout Session Three

1. Work to better utilize existing and additional organizations that are available for conservation delivery, including private and government – think outside box, including training needs, roles, other.
2. The conservation partnership should do a better job at communicating and using proven technology outside the current methodology.
3. Address communication gaps between different groups.
4. Resolve the issue that TSPs are not yet embraced as equal partners in the delivery process.

Action Item	Responsible Party	Timeline
Develop state partnership agreements; include the traditional partnership, NGOs, TSPs, etc.	State agencies	1 Year
Hold an annual gathering of conservation partners (include non-traditional partners).	State agency or state association	1 year
Develop national and local conservation marketing plans.	NACD and state associations	1 Year
Develop a national conservation list serve.	National partnership	1 Year
Provide landowners with simplified summary of a comprehensive conservation plan.	NRCS, TSPs, cons. districts	1 Year

Develop web resources in downloadable formats to utilize IPODs, CDs, and other readily available technology.	NRCS IT Team	6 months
Create incentives for landowners to maintain a conservation plan.	NRCS/TSPs	Prior to next Farm Bill
Establish EPA recognition of a conservation plan as a TMDL component.	NRCS/EPA	Prior to next Farm Bill
Have comprehensive conservation plans weighted positively on EQIP score.	Local EQIP working group	1 Year
Increase the number of certified TSPs as conservation planners to handle 80% of the planning workload.	NRCS	2 Years
Train potential TSPs for conservation planning.	NRCS/partners	1 Year
Rename NTE rate as technical assistance incentive rate.	NRCS	October 2006
Create or enhance state TSP liaison with NRCS in each state.	NRCS	October 2006
Simplify and streamline quality assurance oversight and review of TSP work.	NRCS	Next Farm Bill

Special Notes

Two methods were used to make sure that all ideas and comments were captured at the conference and workshop. These include use and collection of **question/comment cards** for panels, and collection and review of certain **Panel Reaction Sheets** described above.

Each panel discussion was followed by a short question and answer period. Attendees were invited to place questions and comments for the panels on index cards during each discussion. These were collected and given to moderators to use during the question and answer period. Because not all questions could be answered in the short time allowed, and because it was important to capture the thoughts and ideas in every question, moderators retained question/comment cards for the breakout sessions, where they were incorporated into the discussion. Cards were also retained after the meeting to make sure that ideas expressed on the cards were documented in this conference and workshop report (see Appendix E).

Panel Reaction Sheets proved useful during breakout sessions in helping attendees quickly identify which recommendations enjoyed sufficient support to warrant development of action steps. Further, attendees were asked to return Panel Reaction Sheets for the two panel topic areas for which they *did not attend* a breakout session. This information was useful in checking responses to panel ideas that might not otherwise have been presented in breakout sessions. Review of the responses contained in these (otherwise unused) Panel Reaction Sheets indicates, in many cases, a reinforcement of the consensus developed in

breakout sessions by other attendees and broad support for several actions. These and other responses in returned Panel Reaction Sheets are described in Appendix F.

The three breakout sessions differed somewhat in how they presented their results. To preserve the original context for their action steps, these presentation differences have been retained in this report. Only one breakout group included timelines in their action steps.

Further Actions

NASCA will incorporate the results from this conference and workshop into a final report for Phase Two of the Conservation Delivery System Evaluation Project, together with other results and information received during the project's second phase. The final report will describe input, recommendations and implementation actions that NASCA received and compiled during the project's two phases.

The final report will also outline the process that NASCA will undertake to develop consensus among NASCA member state agencies regarding implementation actions, to consult with partners about the best implementation approach, and to communicate to partners about opportunities for *their* action and contributions to help improve the conservation delivery system, based on recommendations and action steps developed during the project. Under a third contribution agreement with NRCS, NASCA plans to continue work to advance recommendations and track implementation of improvements developed under this project.

Acknowledgements

This conference and workshop was made possible in part by a contribution agreement between NASCA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service. NASCA thanks the conference panelists who gave of their time and shared their varied experiences during this conference and workshop, and all who made time in their busy schedules to attend and participate. NASCA expresses appreciation to the Kentucky Soil and Water Conservation Commission, and to Steve Coleman, Director, KY Division of Soil and Water Conservation, for assisting NASCA in hosting this conference and workshop. NASCA also thanks Jeaneen Hooks, President, Open Door Consulting, for meeting planner services.

Appendices

Appendix A	Conference and Workshop Attendees
Appendix B	Panelists
Appendix C	Breakout Session Rosters
Appendix D	Panel Notes
Appendix E	Question/Comment Cards
Appendix F	Returned Panel Reaction Sheet Remarks

Appendix A
Conference and Workshop Attendees

First Name	Last Name	Affiliation	Title	State
Adrian	Baber	Arkansas Natural Resources Commission	Chief	AR
Morse	Brown	M.L. Brown Consulting	CEO	MI
		Delaware Dept Natural Resources and Environmental Control		
Michael	Brown	Division of Soil and Water Conservation	District Operations Administrator	DE
Stan	Buman	Agren, Inc		IA
Tony	Burnett	USDA, NRCS	ASTC Operations	KY
		Alabama State Soil and Water Conservation Committee	Director	AL
Steve	Cauthen	Indiana Department of Agriculture	Assistant Director	IN
Jerod	Chew	Washington Conservation Commission	Executive Director	WA
Mark	Clark	Kentucky Soil and Water Conservation Commission, Division of Conservation	Director	KY
Steve	Coleman	WA Association of Conservation Districts	President	WA
Fred	Colvin	NASCA	Executive Director	VA
Jim	Cox	Franklin Soil and Water Conservation District	District Manager	ID
Lyla	Dettmer	National Conservation District Employees Association	President	NJ
Robert	Dobbs	South Dakota Assn of Conservation Districts	Executive Director	SD
Angela	Ehlers	Minnesota Project	Agriculture and Environmental Policy Specialist	MN
Tim	Gieseke	Ohio Dept Natural Resources		
David	Hanselmann	Division Soil and Water Conservation	Chief	OH

Wes	Harris	University of Georgia	Special Projects Coordinator	GA
Rodney	Hendrickson	USDA/NRCS	RC&D Coordinator	KY
David	Howell	Quail Unlimited	Director, Ag/Wildlife Services	IN
Jim	Inglis	Pheasants Forever	Regional Biologist	OH
Charlie	Ingram	National Association of State Departments of Agriculture	Director, Legislative and Regulatory Affairs	DC
Pete	Jahraus	South Dakota Department of Agriculture Division of Resource Conservation and Forestry	Assistant Director Conservation Programs	SD
Kevin	Jeffries	Kentucky Association of Conservation Districts	President	KY
Gus	Jordan	USDA, NRCS, Financial Assistance Programs Division	Branch Chief Conservation Improvement Programs	DC
Al	Kean	Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources	Chief Engineer	MN
Roy	Kendrick	Alabama Association Of Conservation Districts	1st Vice President	AL
Jim	Lacy	National Association of Conservation Districts		KY
Louise	Lawrence	Maryland Dept Agriculture Office of Resource Conservation	Chief, Resource Conservation & Exec State Soil Con	MD
Tamara	Lawson	Indiana State Department of Agriculture Division of Soil Conservation	Director	IN
Alfonso	Leal	USDA-NRCS	Assistant State Conservationist (Field Operations)	TX
Ray	Ledgerwood	Washington Conservation Commission Western Resource Conservation & Development Council	Program Coordinator	WA
Joe	Leichtnam	Iowa Women in Agriculture	President	SD
Shirley	Lindaman	US Fish and Wildlife Service Brookings Wildlife Habitat Office (retired)	Landowner	IA
Carl	Madsen	Madsen Gardens	Owner/Operator	SD

Juan	Marinez	Michigan State University	Assist to Director of Extension	MI
Kurt	Mason	USDA-NRCS	District Conservationist	KY
		ODNR - Division of Wildlife		
Luke	Miller	Wildlife Management and Research	Program Administrator	OH
		National Conservation District Employees		
Cindy	Moon	Association	Vice-President	IL
		Arkansas Association of Conservation		
Debbie	Moreland	Districts	Program Administrator	AR
Thomas	Mouser	West Virginia Conservation Agency	Area Director	WV
Dennis	Pate	Validus	Director of Planning	IA
Jean Mari	Peltier	National Council of Farmer Cooperatives	President	DC
Piper	Potthoff	Agren, Inc.		IA
Ron	Rohall	Westmoreland Conservation District	Vice-Chairman	PA
Eric	Rupprecht	Wilcox Professional Services	Professional Engineer	MI
David	Sawyer	USDA, NRCS	Kentucky State Conservationist	KY
		National Association of Resource		
Joan	Smith Freeman	Conservation and Development Councils	1st Vice President	CA
		Mississippi Soil and Water Conservation		
Don	Underwood	Commission	Executive Director	MS
Dave	Vogel	NASCA	Program Consultant	NC
		Michigan Department of Agriculture		
Gordon	Wenk	Environmental Stewardship Division	Director	MI
		Kentucky Division of Forestry		
Stewart	West	Forest Stewardship	Program Coordinator	KY
Deena	Wheby	USDA - NRCS	Assistant State Conservationist	KY
Lillian	Woods	USDA, NRCS	National Technology Support Coordinator	DC
Hank	Zygmunt	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency	Region 3 Agriculture Advisor	PA

Appendix B **Panelists**

Panel One – Improve Local Decision-Making

Moderator – Ray Ledgerwood, WA

Morse Brown, CEO
M.L. Brown Consulting
Livonia, MI

Steve Coleman, Director
Kentucky Soil and Water Conservation Commission
Division of Conservation
Frankfort, KY

Angela Ehlers
Executive Director
South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts
Pierre, SD

Jim Lacy
National Association of Conservation Agencies
Campton, Kentucky

Shirley Lindaman
Iowa Women in Agriculture
Dumont, IA

Joan Smith Freeman, First Vice-President
National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils
Orland, CA

Panel Two – Simplify/Streamline; Reduce Delays and Inconsistencies

Moderator – David Hanselmann, OH

Stan Buman
Agren, Inc.
Carroll, IA

Charlie Ingram, Director
Legislative and Regulatory Affairs
National Association of State Departments of Agriculture
Washington, DC

Appendix B *continued*

Carl Madsen
Brookings, SD

Don Underwood, Executive Director
Mississippi Soil and Water Conservation Commission
Jackson, MS

Hank Zygmunt
US Environmental Protection Agency - Region 3
Philadelphia, PA

Panel Three – Better Apply Technology and Human Resources

Moderator – Michael Brown, DE

Juan Marinez, Program Director
Michigan State University
Extension Director's Office
East Lansing, MI

Luke Miller, Program Administrator
Ohio Department of Natural Resources
Division of Wildlife
Columbus, OH

Dennis Pate, Director of Planning
Validus
Urbandale, IA

Jean-Mari Peltier, President
National Council of Farmer Cooperatives
Washington, DC

Eric Rupprecht, P.E.
Wilcox Professional Services
Saginaw, MI

Lillian Woods
National Technology Support Coordinator
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Washington, DC

Appendix C

Breakout Session Rosters

Breakout Session #1 – Improve Local Decision-Making

Adrian Baber, AR
Morse Brown, MI
Steve Coleman, KY
Lyla Dettmer, ID
Angela Ehlers, SD
Joan Smith Freeman, CA
Pete Jahraus, SD
Kevin Jeffries, KY

Louise Lawrence, MO
Alfonso Leal, TX
Ray Ledgerwood, WA
Shirley Lindaman, IA
Kurt Mason, KY
Cindy Moon, IL
Thomas Mouser, WV

Breakout Session #2 – Simplify/Streamline; Reduce Delays and Inconsistencies

Stan Buman, IA
Steve Cauthen, AL
Jerod Chew, IN
Fred Colvin, WA
David Hanselmann, OH
Rodney Hendrickson, KY
Charlie Ingram, DC
Gus Jordon, DC
Roy Kendrick, AL

Carl Madsen, SD
Debbie Moreland, AR
Piper Potthoff, IA
Ronald Rohall, PA
David Sawyer, KY
Don Underwood, MS
Stewart West, KY
Hank Zygmunt, PA

Breakout Session #3 – Better Apply Technology and Human Resources

Michael Brown, DE
Mark Clark, WA
Robert Dobbs, NJ
Tim Gieseke, MN
Wes Harris, GA
David Howell, IN
Jim Inglis, OH
Al Kean, MN

Tammy Lawson, IN
Joe Leichtnam, SD
Juan Marinez, MI
Luke Miller, OH
Dennis Pate, IA
Eric Rupprecht, MI
Deena Wheby, KY
Lillian Woods, DC

Appendix D **Panel Notes**

Panel One - Improve Local Decision-Making

Panelists' introductory remarks referenced several important needs in this topic area:

- **Build capacity of our local conservation districts and partnership; implementation of programs needs to be the role of local decision makers.** This includes diversifying funding sources, and building administrative and technical staff capacity. Conservation programs can only be implemented if there is adequate local staff to see those programs through. Need a “keep it local” attitude, and a common vision for conservation.
- **Better outreach to the changing customers of our conservation program.** Reference was made to how agriculture is experiencing drastic change (e.g., many farmers no longer depend on tobacco and support prices; changing land use to livestock; new landowners). In a Kentucky example, new customers, including more urban areas, are being reached through unique environmental grants for community projects, such as metal recycling, white good pick ups and dead animal removal programs, to **reach a diverse group of citizens** and address their local and environmental concerns.
- **Training local leadership**, through supervisor basic training and staff training to know their responsibilities.
- **Being patient as we develop delivery systems, and diversifying the audience.** We need to be flexible when dealing with policy making. We have to become comfortable with one another; get to know your customers. Many potential customers are just beginning to understand conservation, and need a very basic message. Materials need to be developed tailored to help people to better understand what it is that we are trying to say [the conservation message].
- **Building networks with new customers.** In the state of Iowa there are over 16 thousand women land operators. There, women have established a network - a group of women across the state that holds local meetings and seminars for women who are farmers. These include information about farm business planning, dealing with renters, conservation and marketing. This group is funded by grants and contributions made by individuals. The group depends on strong local support and leadership.

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- **Dealing with a changing agriculture through enabled local leadership and decision-making.** What makes local leadership successful is that you enable local leadership with funding and education, and helping local workers look past boundaries, to improve decision making capacities. We should value the opinions of the local workgroups, and we should respond to their ideas and encourage them to participate in meetings. Agencies should fully support partnerships.
- **Create innovative local programs,** such as South Dakota's Bootstrap Program, to look past the traditional definition of "local" to include the entire community – its agriculture, environment, economy, etc.
- **We should do a better job telling our story and delivering our conservation message.** Today's citizens are too many generations removed from the land to understand what conservation is. We need to simplify and streamline programs to make them more understandable. We need more training of local leaders, and local leaders need to be politically active in promoting conservation.

The moderated discussion further developed some of the ideas included in introductory remarks:

- Diversifying the audience will help us to identify problems or issues of which we are not now aware, and will allow us to reach people that we now do not reach. We should respond to changing demographics. We have to have diversified decision makers so that you can best meet the needs of the community. We have to reach out to and involve our youth. Bring different people into the process even though they think differently. This includes recruiting local people in the community and involvement of different people in the community.
- Expanding the capacity of local leaders to make informed decisions, and assisting them in better understanding their authority, will help them bring to bear the appropriate resources to address their identified resource concerns. Building the capacity of the locals to make and implement informed, consensual decisions will require that we bring everyone to the table, share information, respect everyone's input, and support local decisions.
- Educate the public and local boards as to what the delivery system does. With changing age and demographics, we are interacting with new people who do not understand conservation. For example, if we do not figure out how to educate people in urban areas, then we do not send anyone to Congress who understands conservation programs.

Appendix D *continued*

- We should come up with better ways to become accountable on the conservation and environmental benefits that result from local conservation programs. As another example, setting aside money for small projects can demonstrate to non-traditional customers what conservation is about, and reaches out to folks who have different local concerns.
- Adjust programs to assist smaller farmers. There is a perception that farm programs are funded in such a manner that the larger you are the more money you get.

Panel Two - Simplify/Streamline; Reduce Delays and Inconsistencies

Panelists' introductory remarks and moderated discussion referenced several important needs in this topic area:

- **Adapting to the 2007 farm bill.** What does agriculture need for the 21st century? How can current programs be improved or merged with new programs? NASDA is proposing a new Agriculture Stewardship Agreement (state block grant) concept, whereby state agriculture departments, in cooperation with other state agencies, administer cost-share and technical assistance funds according to state needs. NASDA indicates that this would help streamline programs, reduce paperwork, and provide one stop shopping, using a cooperative agreement between the state and USDA. Ultimate goal would be local decision making. (*See also more discussion on this idea in Appendix E – Question/Comment Cards.*)
- **Reaching non-participants (e.g., multi-cultural landowners, absentee landowners).** Many landowners are removed from decisions on their land. Cash renters are less likely to practice conservation. There are very big benefits to reaching these absentee landowners. Iowa and three other states are participating in a project to establish a Center for Absentee Landowners, to provide basic information and assistance with programs and contacts. Absentees include corporate and recreational landowners, as well as many women landowners now responsible for decisions on their land. Also, under-served and under-represented landowners need more timely information, and need tailored programs to reach different audiences. Technology can assist this effort, such as computer BMP animation (applied via DVD or web-based), being developed in Iowa, to educate non-traditional customers in what conservation practices look like, what they do, and how the process works.
- **Simplify conservation program delivery process.** There are too many programs, too many required high-level decisions, too many rules. Make things more general without making them cookie-cutter. Add flexibility and

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simplify the process by pushing decision-making to the lowest level possible. Some landowners do not need complicated programs; get back to basic conservation plans.

- **Recognize that decisions on the land are very personal and unique** (not just economics) for landowners. Throw out the rules, and say, “Yes, we can!” People should set the conservation goals for their communities. Process should be resource-driven as opposed to program-driven. Simplify rules and regulations to get money where it’s needed. In a resource-driven approach, we must share information in the development of programs, and allow a more efficient delivery of funds to the local level. Think outside the box; expand your partnerships to include everyone possible, and to use all funding possible. Forget about turf. Use partnerships to get conservation on the ground.

Panel Three - Better Apply Technology and Human Resources

Panelists’ introductory remarks referenced several important needs in this topic area:

- **Consider all partners; better communication** at all levels; make sure to look at the big picture in terms of technical and administrative resources; consider need for streamlining and cost savings.
- **Diversification in recognition of the changing face of agriculture.** With the change in farmer demographics (e.g., increase in minorities and women; age changes), the delivery system must adapt to reach out to many who are not participating in conservation programs. Concepts such as a Welcome Wagon idea, or adapting technology through use of DVDs or IPODs for education, would help to interface with new farming groups, and would help to become a part of their social and economic networks. Educate operators about the importance of management.
- **Improve use of cooperative and contribution agreements.** Some states have taken advantage of the opportunity, under contribution agreements, and via grants with conservation districts, for hiring and co-locating technical specialists in traditional conservation services with areas such as wildlife and forestry. In these cases, the delivery system works best as “seamless” delivery, and when staff is co-located to provide a single point of access for landowners. Some examples involve management of workload backlog, delivering options in wildlife management, and marketing and planning for CREP.

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- **Overcome challenges.** We face personnel cutbacks, limitation in staff expertise and training, selling of programs instead of addressing landowners' needs, and too much paperwork. We need a high priority on better communication, more diversity in local offices, better conservation planning, and more adaptive contribution agreements.
- **Need to take advantage of private sector and non-governmental organizations' resources and capacities.** Technical assistance is not the exclusive realm of the public sector. The private sector and public agencies should work together to accomplish shared conservation goals. Greater communication and understanding is needed between agencies, TSPs and NGOs and producers. It is important to eliminate or reduce inconsistencies in how TSPs/NGOs services are attracted, marketed, regulated, scheduled, and reviewed. Payment rates (NTE) should be adjusted to create fair compensation. Paperwork burden should be reduced.
- **Greater emphasis must be placed on proper conservation planning,** with the assistance of contribution agreements, TSPs/NGOs, to reduce the current trend of "cookie-cutter" plans.
- **Expand participation by new delivery system partners.** As farmer-owned companies, agricultural cooperatives are expanding their role to include services related to conservation. A new cooperative stewardship initiative is proposed to include co-op services related to stewardship of natural resources, economic viability at coop level, and strengthening rural communities. Farmer committees need to participate locally, to drive local issue identification and action. This could be funded under the Rural Development title of the Farm Bill. (*See also more discussion on this idea in Appendix E – Question/Comment Cards.*)

The moderated discussion further developed some of the ideas included in introductory remarks:

- Employ TSPs to help make system more user-friendly – working outside normal business hours, creating downloadable materials, adapting technology.
- Consider impacts of program rules on eligibility and participation by producers of a diversity of food products around the country. Avoid traditional focus on mid-western products (e.g. consider FL, CA, TX production).

Appendix D *continued*

- Establish a common purpose, and apply both a traditional and new mechanism of stewardship assistance.
- Be more accessible outside of traditional business hours, and think bilingually.
- Consider state examples of how to supplement the NTE rate to more fairly compensate TSPs.
- Local conservation districts functioning as clearinghouses will need a way to rank the services provided by TSPs.
- As local committees with a traditional make-up often tend to focus on traditional issues, we should be sure to strike a balance between locally led and targeted resource initiatives and issues.

Appendix E

Question/Comment Cards

Panel One - Improve Local Decision-Making

1. Address the issue of recruiting and retaining motivated, involved local conservation district supervisors, given aging population of supervisors and agricultural producer community, and difficulty in getting younger people to volunteer.
2. Address same with respect to sustainability of local boards and potential to expand services at the local level.
3. What are the most important tools and other types of assistance that state and federal agencies can provide to enhance local decision-making?
4. Need to better develop conservation planning as a tool, because it has value in progressing toward state and federal conservation goals, and because planning leads to a “resource-driven” approach. Subsidize increased effort at planning, by training certified crop advisors [and others] to become certified conservation planners.
5. How does the need for added local flexibility and decision-making connect with the need to establish rules governing Technical Service Providers and their creativity in developing solutions?
6. Locally-led should be real – it should be codified into federal programs by Congress.
7. Need more public education about what conservation districts and their partners can and do accomplish.
8. Need to build capacity of local district supervisors and staff to know their responsibilities and to make informed decisions, and to define resource needs locally and “plug into” available programs.
9. Make local decision-making a balanced approach between goals of local, state and federal partners.

Panel Two - Simplify/Streamline; Reduce Delays and Inconsistencies

1. Do away with [federal] programs and pool funding for conservation into a system of state block grants.
2. Conservation districts have an agreement with the USDA Secretary to deliver conservation programs. How will a system of block grants to states (e.g.,

Appendix E *continued*

the Agriculture Stewardship Program proposed by NASDA) honor these existing agreements?

3. NASDA's proposed Agricultural Stewardship Program (state block grants) is seen as a threat to those state conservation agencies that are not agricultural departments. How will "reinventing the wheel" in those states streamline the process, and how will state agriculture and conservation agencies work together?
4. NRCS has chosen to implement a plethora of program rules in some cases when program funding is limited. The goal was to limit eligibility (e.g., CSP). Isn't there a better way, given that the panel has expressed a desire for fewer rules?
5. What can be done to solve the problem of a history of slow service and confusing federal procedures?

Panel Three - Better Apply Technology and Human Resources

1. [Noting comments by private sector representatives about working times convenient to the farmer] speaking from personal experience, [the author has found that] many public agency employees *do* work nights and weekends to meet landowners on their terms.
2. Why is re-distribution of technical and administrative functions between NRCS and FSA not being seriously considered? Is there an asset gap by not more efficiently utilizing FSA administrative capability?
3. Need to identify practices and services for which private sector TSPs make sense, and make it work.
4. Conservation technical assistance (CTA) must be sought from many sources, and funding partnerships among local, state and federal government is key.
5. Why should funding for agricultural cooperatives' services in delivering conservation come through the Rural Development Title [as is proposed by agricultural cooperatives], rather than through existing mechanisms under the Conservation Title?

Appendix F

Returned Panel Reaction Sheets

Panel One - Improve Local Decision-Making

Attendees who participated in other breakout sessions included comments on their Panel Reaction Sheets that favor actions proposed by this topic breakout group, primarily in the following areas:

- Local focus; community grants.
- Resource-driven, not program driven.
- Need to be patient in outreaching to potential customers (i.e., ethnicities, women landowners) associated with farming and conservation.
- Local boards need more flexibility to address needs of diverse groups; the landscape is diverse also; use local working groups to get the involvement of local people.
- Put in place the people needed to enhance local decision-making.

Returned reaction sheets indicated three areas which are achievable but pose challenges:

- Local staff is simply too busy doing traditional programs to concentrate on diversifying their funding sources and clientele.
- Difficulty energizing local leadership.
- Resolving how to better apply TSPs in relation to enhancing local decision-making and flexibility.

Panel Two - Simplify/Streamline; Reduce Delays and Inconsistencies

Reactions to this panel topic by those who attended other breakout sessions included support for:

- Reducing the number of programs, and customizing to meet local needs.
- State block grant funding approach, including use for local targeting of certain resource needs.
- Promoting collaborative efforts by stakeholders.
- Don't overlook the role for private TSPs to help plan and implement conservation.
- Federal programs need outcome measurements that relate to resource protection, enhancement and improvement; results driven.
- Establishment of an Absentee Landowner Center

Returned reaction sheets indicated these areas which are achievable but pose challenges:

- More thought must be put into the opportunity to develop local delivery systems and the TSP process into a more meaningful and practical tool.

Appendix F *continued*

- Noting the difference between large and small TSPs, and cautioning against “stacking the deck” in favor of one group.
- Reducing program rules.
- Developing a national targeted watershed program.
- Appreciating that customers’ decisions on the land are very personal.

A returned reaction sheet cautioned that some ideas won’t work:

- No rules – must have some level of rules to assure reasonable use of public funds.

Panel Three - Better Apply Technology and Human Resources

Reactions to this panel topic by those who attended other breakout sessions included support for:

- Establishing an agricultural cooperative stewardship initiative.
- Partnerships with agricultural cooperatives as a means of delivering conservation message, education, etc.
- Incorporate regional differences and local flexibility; one size does *not* fit all.
- Making technical centers available to meet community needs.
- Establishing a “welcome wagon” approach for outreach to new or non-traditional customers (e.g., women landowners and operators).
- Making information available to potential customers through technology such as DVDs and IPODs.
- Speeding the pace of government review of TSP work.
- Improve communication with *new* partners.

Returned reaction sheets indicated these areas which are achievable but pose challenges:

- Increasing reliance on private sector TSPs.
- Co-location of a more broad technical assistance staff network.
- Direct partnership between local conservation districts and TSPs.

A returned reaction sheet cautioned that some ideas won’t work:

- Conservation districts ranking TSP work quality.

Other notes from this topic included:

- TSPs need to market their value to producers, who might then agree to support enhancing the NTE or “not to exceed” payment rate.
- Consider use of on-farm assessments to fund targeted local resource needs.