

NASCA Local Working Group Conference Call

by Roy Gillis

Local Working Group: Positive Points

1. From the beginning of Local Working Groups (LWG), Tennessee Soil Conservation Districts (SCD) have felt it could be very beneficial to program promotion.
2. With the expansion of the LWG to include non-governmental entities and the removal of Federal Advisory Committee Act requirements the benefits could further enhanced.
3. We also felt this could be a way back to involvement of SCDs in program use and priority as we had continually moved away from that involvement since the 1985 Farm Bill and the onset of compliance.
4. I wish this is what we had seen since the LWG came into play, but it is not.

Local Working Group: Difficulties

1. TACD's first concern is that the USDA/NRCS really never took this effort seriously. It has functioned sporadically in some parts of the state and not at all in others. We have had numerous discussions about the function of the LWG but have seen little change. Without the outward appearance that the federal agency will seriously consider recommendations, it has been difficult to get SCDs to really take hold and utilize the function and purpose of the LWG. Admittedly, there has been a continual moving away from District involvement in program activity ever since the NRCS staff was diverted from traditional activities to complete compliance requirements. And, unfortunately, there has not been a strong effort to return Districts to that traditional role.
2. It is difficult for non-technical Supervisors, volunteers, to get a real grasp of the resource condition and trend in their county or District. Years ago, we use to do River Basin Studies in the old Watershed Program which did get Supervisors involved in the science that helps us understand those resources. One would think that with GIS capability improving that would not be a problem but that resource has remain very single computer centered in writing an individual's farm plan and never used to help the District Board better understand the changes in use, development and other factors that need to be understood to develop the plans and activities called for in Part 500 of the NRCS Directives. This too we have discussed several times but have not been able to work anything out to date.
3. Timing is everything. Volunteer District Boards meet once a month and need 2 to 3 months to have significant activities completed. And, Boards meet from the first week to the last week of

the month and this has some Districts nearly a month behind the deadline even before they are aware. Again, the LWG process has not been institutionalized and just pops up as needed. I have seen requests from NRCS for the LWG process to be completed within 2 weeks and have not seen the request be more than a month out from the deadline the DC has to get information back to the state office. I will point out the state is sometimes forced into the deadline by the National office. NRCS Directives say the LWG should make public notice at minimum of 14 days prior to a meeting. And, it directs the public have 14 days to offer comments after the meeting. Throw in a couple community meetings and a couple working meetings for the LWG and the process has to take 60 days+ to complete by directive. Given those pressures, most Boards just tell the DC to do whatever is needed and it is forgotten about. Again, serious processes have to have the support and appreciation of all parties or they fail.

4. Back on the plus side, we are attempting to get Districts to see this as their process period, set up a permanent committee with various groups having set slots they should appoint members to fill and to have a minimum of 3 meetings per year. With the new farm bill we would like to see this start this summer with meeting 1 seeking input on priority resource needs, meeting 2 making recommendations to the NRCS state folks and, meeting 3, meet to review the implementation of the recommendations for success or failure before starting the process over again with meeting 1. Resource conditions and trends continue to be a problem we are still working on but hope to get better support as the process picks up.

In closing, the LWG is a good idea, could work, hasn't completely died yet but Supervisors have to feel their input, time and local knowledge is being utilized to help their community. This is why we are here today.

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