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State Technical Committees: Begin and End with the Producer in Mind

ISSUE

Questions have been raised about the composition (membership) of State Technical Committees (STCs) and how to increase participation to amplify the voice of the agriculture community. STCs seem to vary across the country in terms of activity level (full committee, subcommittee, and local working groups) and how frequently they convene. From those who are active participants, a common concern is that STC membership has become too broad and some participating organizations seem to believe the STC has more sway than an advisory committee. Additionally, some participants are not producer friendly.

BACKGROUND

STCs were established to advise the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and other USDA agencies in making technical decisions related to federal conservation programs. By statute, the committee is an advisory body with no implementation or enforcement authority.

Committee composition is determined by the state conservationist, who serves as the chairperson, and includes representatives from the following agencies/groups:

- NRCS
- Farm Service Agency (FSA)
- FSA State Committee
- U.S. Forest Service
- National Institute of Food and Agriculture (formerly the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service)
- Each of the federally recognized American Indian Tribal governments and Alaskan Native Corporations encompassing 100,000 acres or more in the state
- Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts
- State departments and agencies within the state, including the following:
 - Agricultural agency
 - Fish and Wildlife agency
 - Forestry agency
 - Soil and Water Conservation agency
 - Water Resources agency
 - Agricultural producers representing the variety of crops, livestock, or poultry raised within the state
 - Owners of nonindustrial private forest land
 - Nonprofit organizations (as defined under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986) that demonstrate conservation expertise and experience working with agricultural producers in the state
 - Agribusiness
 - Other federal agencies and persons knowledgeable about economic and environmental impacts of conservation techniques and programs as determined by the State Conservationist.

The make-up of STCs has been modified through the years. The 1996 Farm Bill expanded committees beyond federal and state government employees to include agricultural producers, representatives from agribusiness and non-profit groups, and interested individuals with demonstrated expertise in natural resource conservation. The 2008 Farm Bill removed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a statutorily identified member of the committee, although state conservationists have the discretion to include the agency. The bill added “agricultural producers and other professionals that represent a variety of disciplines in the soil, water, wetland and wildlife sciences” and “owners of nonindustrial private forest land” as members of the committee. Congress removed the requirement that agricultural producers have “conservation expertise” to serve on the committee. A state conservationist may consider adding other individuals or groups upon request.

Committee responsibilities include:

- Providing information, analysis, and recommendations to USDA on conservation priorities and criteria for natural resources conservation activities and programs, including application and funding criteria, recommended practices, and program payment percentages;
- Identifying emerging natural resource concerns and program needs;
- Recommending conservation practice standards and specifications;
- Recommending state and national program policy based on resource data;
- Reviewing activities of the local working groups to ensure state priorities are being addressed locally;
- Making recommendations to the State Conservationist on requests and recommendations from local working groups; and
- Assisting NRCS with public outreach and information efforts and identifying educational and producer training needs.

Specialized subcommittees of the STC may be formed by a state conservationist to address matters such as ranking criteria for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Recommendations from this group are to be presented at an STC meeting. According to national operating guidelines, STCs are to meet at least twice annually. Local working groups are also considered to be subcommittees of the STC and provide input on local and state conservation priorities.

FARM BUREAU POLICY

Farm Bureau policy supports improvements to the STCs to make them more ag friendly by encouraging producers’ participation and input. This could be accomplished by:

- Narrowing the composition of the STCs in statute;
- Limiting the discretion of state conservationists to include organizations outside of production agriculture;
- More clearly defining the composition and role of State Technical Committee subcommittees and local working groups; or
- Directing USDA to hold at least one listening session annually in every state for farmers, ranchers and other users of Farm Bill conservation programs. This would be in addition to the current State Technical Committee advisory role.