

Working With the Media

USDA • Natural Resources Conservation Service • July 1999

What is it?

Use the local media as a tool to educate members of the community about the purpose and progress of the areawide planning effort. Inform the media about Planning Committee objectives, invite them to meetings, and include them on tours and other functions.

Why is it important?

A successful planning effort requires cooperation, education, and action throughout the planning area. Working with the Planning and Technical Advisory Committees and partners is critical, but just as important is the task of keeping the larger public informed of planning activities. To develop a resource management plan that will be embraced by the community, local citizens must first understand the committee's purpose, the resource problems and issues, and the personal benefits of the final plan. The local media can help accomplish this. The media can also help educate residents about basic conservation concepts and issues.

How do we do it?

Media coverage can be "hard news" --news about the river or creek and statistics on the quality of the habitat, or it can be "soft news" --feature stories about the people behind the plan, people that are making a difference by the little things they do. Give the media valuable background information on basic concepts like watersheds and how they function, soil erosion, wetlands, flooding issues, water quality, and the idea of interconnected ecosystems. Information of this kind can be used at any time and will provide meaningful support for your cause.

Try to have a single contact person represent the Planning Committee so that consistent messages are conveyed to the public. Good contact people are the Chair of the Planning Committee or an NRCS or SWCD representative who has worked well with the media in the past.

There are two approaches to working with the media during resource planning. The first strategy is to submit your own information and news releases to the local media. This is recommended during the early stages as the Planning Committee gets established, and especially if there is a considerable amount of conflict or disagreement within the group. By writing your own press releases, you control the content and timing of the information shared with the public.



At the appropriate time you can provide lists of identified and ranked resource concerns, desired future conditions, and alternatives to the media. When Technical Committees produce new inventory information or review previously compiled data, share these reports as well. Some of this information and these ideas have probably never made it to the public eye. Keep in the forefront how the final plan will benefit local residents. Keep reminding the public what it will mean to them.

Consider providing information for stories that profile committee members, agencies, and partners. There's always a good story about how people and partners are working together to address a common problem. Newspapers need stories like that and readers enjoy feature stories because they are about people.

Give the media a map of the watershed boundaries. They can run an article asking readers to see if they live in the watershed. Then provide a list of 'Do's and Don'ts' for homeowners, streamside landowners, businesses, and others within the watershed, telling them what they can do personally to protect the health of their watershed.

The second strategy is to let the media cover your committee's progress as you develop the resource plan. To do this successfully, involve the media early in the natural resource planning process. Let them "tell your story" as it unfolds with each meeting. If the media can attend the meetings, even better. This lets them in on the complexities of resource planning and helps them convey how important resource issues are to communities, businesses, farmers, and the future.

Key Points

As this information becomes available, provide media packets with factsheets or information about:

- Committee members, mission statement, and purpose
- Identified resource problems
- Inventory data or local statistics
- Solutions/alternatives
- Watershed boundaries
- Agency profiles of all project partners
- Description of the NRCS resource planning process
- Tips on what local residents can do to improve water quality or reduce sedimentation