

June 3, 2011

TO: Oregon Technical Advisory Committee

FR: Meta Loftsgaarden, Partnership Liaison

RE: Proposal for OTAC for new input structure and process

Background: In 2008, three changes occurred that shifted how Oregon NRCS received input from partners regarding its natural resource investments:

- 1) NRCS submitted to OTAC and received approval to formalize its local work group, basin work group, OTAC structure.
- 2) Congress passed and the President signed the 2008 Farm Bill which provided the opportunity for expanded participation in local work groups. Prior to passage, local work groups could only contain federal, state and local units of government. After passage, that was expanded to include any entity or individual with an interest in natural resources.
- 3) Soon after these decisions, State Conservationist Ron Alvarado required that all field offices develop long range strategies to focus natural resource investments over the next 5-8 years. These strategies were initially developed in concert with the local work groups in 2009-10. They are designed to be a dynamic document, with ongoing input at the local level, tying into other strategies as appropriate.

In retrospect, these changes actually run counter to one another from a process perspective. The incorporation of additional members on the local work group left the basin work groups with the same members attending both meetings. The local work groups are now providing comments to the district conservationists on local priorities. The basin priorities tend to be those that occur in multiple counties.

At the same time, the policy-level discussions continue to occur at the OTAC level. This leaves Basin Work Groups without a specific function. To remedy the situation, the following is proposed:

1. **Continue with Local Work Groups.** LWGs are required by Congress and must include a diverse cross-section of conservation and agricultural producers and organizations along with local, state and federal agencies. Ensure LWGs are meeting at least once a year and that the meetings fully engage partners to provide recommendations for local priorities, track progress of existing priorities and develop partnerships that leverage resources to meet the goal of leveraging NRCS investments 2:1 by 2014.
2. **Continue with the Oregon Technical Advisory Committee.** Again, established by Congress, this committee maintains the state-wide, policy-level perspective for conservation investments. OTAC will meet 3-4 times per year as they have in the past. Ensure that OTAC is addressing issues as required within program policy manuals.
3. **Disband Basin Work Groups.** As noted in the summary above, BWGs were a useful tool when basins were established. However, given identified changes at the state and federal level, the functionality of these groups has been diminished.

4. **Establish specific natural resource subcommittees of OTAC (see examples below).**

Eliminating BWGs does bring about a challenge. OTAC members have incredible expertise, but do not have the ability to attend every local work group meeting to provide that expertise at the local level. This leaves the agency without the ability to fully engage our partners in the investments, priorities and technical expertise they bring to the table.

To remedy the situation:

- a. NRCS Oregon will establish natural resource-specific subcommittees of OTAC based on a predominance of the issue at the local level. Committees might include – water quality, water quantity, energy, aquatic wildlife and terrestrial wildlife, to name a few. The members of these committees have the ability to bring their experience, knowledge and organizational priorities to the discussion at a broad-based state or regional geographic scale
- b. As DCs are considering future funding pools (or continuation of current pools) they or their basin team leader can participate in a subcommittee meeting (most likely by teleconference). During that meeting, OTAC members can discuss their priorities and focus areas, provide suggestions to DCs for how to formulate/organize their pools to meet the top priorities and recommend options for leveraging funds
- c. The subcommittees will serve as an informal advisory board for NRCS staff who choose to establish funding pools in those areas based on local input and knowledge.
- d. A database of all available strategies will be provided to DCs after reviewed by OTAC to ensure that information is available as needed to update NRCS on partner priorities.