

## **AZ NRCS State Technical Committee Meeting**

April 17, 2013 – 9:00am

### **Opening remarks**

Curtis Elke, AZ NRCS Acting State Conservationist, welcomes the assembled group. Outlines agenda and emphasizes that this meeting belongs to the participants, asking, “What do you want to get out of it?” Emphasizes that NRCS wants to be transparent as an agency, and work internally and externally to define and communicate our roles and responsibilities.

### **President’s Proposed Budget for Fiscal Year 2014 (released April 10, 2013):**

In mandatory programs, NRCS was budgeted \$3.1 billion

- For the 12 mandatory programs, a decrease of over \$700 million as compared to FY2012
- \$1.35 Billion for EQIP, a \$400 Million decrease from FY 2013

Also noted that budget figures were based on an extension of Farm Bill programs through Fiscal Year 2014, so the numbers could change if Congress passes a new Farm Bill this year.

Discretionary funding is lower today than it was in Fiscal Year 2009, but the agency is still delivering a record number of services.

In discretionary programs: \$807.9 million – this is roughly equal to FY12.

The breakdown is:

- \$713.4 Million for the Conservation Technical Assistance Program
- \$77.5 Million for the Soil Survey Program
- \$8.5 Million for the Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting Program
- \$8.5 Million for the Plant Materials Program

Funding is not proposed for the Watershed Rehabilitation Program

The budget does not request funding for the Emergency Watershed Program; this program is usually funded through supplemental appropriations following natural disasters.

### **Staffing**

Mr. Elke also indicated that Arizona is exploring staffing questions – goal is to put the right people with the right skills in the right places. As part of this process, he will be leading a workload analysis meeting in early May.

To reiterate the idea that Arizona is uniquely important, it was identified that although Yuma county is comprised of only 7% privately-owned land, it produces approximately 90% of U.S. grown-vegetable crops from October through April.

Mr. Elke agreed that there is a need to improve our operations, to become more effective and efficient, and noted that this is not unique to Arizona.

Meeting participants suggested that the Technical Service Provider program could be helpful, but also indicated that the paperwork and requirements can be daunting.

### **Future Funding**

Arizona NRCS and its future funding will likely be allocated based on the following criteria:

1. Implementation rate (Are practices being installed timely?)
2. Obligation rate (Are we sending money back?)
3. Contract cancellation rate
4. Contract de-obligation rate (due to cancellation and modification)
5. First year practice implementation rate
6. Number of applications (the need targeting resource concerns)

Mr. Elke shared that Arizona NRCS has challenged itself to write better/shorter contracts (averaging two-to-three years in length). This way the original work can be completed, providing tighter controls, and if additional work is wanted later, producers can apply again and new contracts can be written.

It was suggested that the field office staff ask each applicant, “What are you ready, willing, and able to do *this* year?” It was further stressed that communication between the contract holder and the Field Office is critical.

It was asked if NRCS can stop working with producers who have a history of canceled contracts. Mr. Elke answered that NRCS is not allowed to deny anyone an application, and that if they meet the ranking criteria, NRCS is not allowed to *not* obligate the funds. That having been said, Mr. Elke continued, it is important for NRCS staff to have these frank conversations with producers, and help them understand that they may be keeping other producers from receiving assistance.

Additional challenges identified by meeting participants:

- Local ranking questions don’t always meet the varied concerns in a particular area (for example, in one area, if application doesn’t address water as a primary resource concern, it’s not likely to be funded – this creates a challenge for producers who have already handled their water concerns).
- Arizona NRCS is not taking advantage of the knowledge held by the local producers
- State Land issues – producers need permission before implementing improvements – that system can take months or even years; NRCS sends letters if practices haven’t been started in the first year. Important to understand the timelines producers are dealing with and to incorporate that into the NRCS protocol.
- Hiring/Retention challenges – Arizona NRCS no longer hires “the best of the best” – staff doesn’t have the experience in the specific land-use areas that we have in Arizona. Suggested that AZ NRCS increase on-the-job training opportunities to increase confidence levels in staff who may not have as much field experience.
- National priorities stand in contrast to concept of locally led conservation – how can National leadership become more familiar with local (Arizona) needs? It was suggested that more NHQ staff visit our producers directly.
  - Under Secretary Harris Sherman coming to Flagstaff
  - Deputy Under Secretary Butch Blazer coming to Durango, CO/4 Corners Area
  - Astor Boozer, West Regional Conservationist, coming to Phoenix in May

### **Partnerships:**

Arizona NRCS is actively searching for a variety of partnership opportunities that would help with strategic conservation – that is, providing financial and/or technical assistance to target areas that will see the most benefit from the assistance.

Conservation work cannot be done from behind a desk or through a windshield, Mr. Elke affirmed, adding that local leadership is critical to success, and the agency and its partners will, together, figure out how to get it all to work.

### **Arizona NRCS: Formula for Success**

- Conservation Planning Certification requirements more defined
- Job Approval Authorities more defined
- Improve Agency Transparency
- Continue to find creative solutions that allow us to provide efficient service, even as we cut costs
- Keep thinking outside the box
- Continue to strengthen existing partnerships while seeking new partnerships and coalitions to help promote an ethic of conservation stewardship in Arizona
- Increase organizational effectiveness and efficiency
- Get high quality conservation on the ground and produce the results our customers and stakeholders expect

### **Mr. Elke asks the group for feedback:**

#### Engineering Concerns

- Yuma area would like engineering assistance located closer to their field offices
- Hualapai SWCD also expresses concerns with engineering – “over-engineer” – meaning that the designs provided are often more complex than necessary, creating a more difficult or expensive project for the landowner

#### Planning Process Concerns

- Yuma area would like the planning process to be simplified and for there to be more coordination with the various agencies involved.
- Parker Valley NRCD concurs with Yuma’s concern regarding agency coordination, particularly regarding Tribal interactions (typically include: BIA, FSA, NRCS, Tribal Governments, at least)
  - It is mentioned that the “red tape slows or stops progress and that turns people off so they walk away.”

#### Communication / Partnership Concerns

- By and large, District Conservationists aren’t attending conservation district meetings. That should change.

- “One-size-fits-all” doesn’t work: what works in Phoenix doesn’t necessarily work in Northern Arizona; can the Washington, D.C. decision-makers visit Arizona – and travel to the different areas – to see, firsthand, what Arizona producers are experiencing?
- Relationship between the districts and NRCS has been deteriorating, and can/should be improved.
- Parker Valley NRCDC concurs with Yuma’s concern regarding agency coordination, particularly regarding Tribal interactions (typically include: BIA, FSA, NRCS, Tribal Governments, at least)
  - “Red tape slows or stops progress and that turns people off so they walk away.”

Mr. Elke identifies areas in which concerns are already being addressed, adds that there is still more work to be done.

Arizona NRCS is actively improving the working relationship with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), with Tribal governments and other USDA agencies involved an ongoing series of meetings designed to let the staff members get to know each other and identify the roles and responsibilities set forth by the recent Memorandum of Understanding.

Arizona NRCS is clearing the engineering backlog, and State Conservation Engineer, Dave Beyman will be available in the afternoon session to discuss more specific engineering-related items.

Mr. Elke agreed that the relationship with the conservation districts is the heart of NRCS, citing Hugh Hammond Bennett and the partners’ history since 1935, and remarking that NRCS has become a \$4 billion agency, and that it can’t achieve its mission of getting conservation on the ground without the help of the conservation districts.

### **Annual Meeting Schedule**

To address questions about meeting frequency and advance notice, AZ NRCS proposed that the third Wednesday in July, October, and April be standing dates for State Technical Committee meetings. Participants also suggested that perhaps the meeting could be held in rotating locations throughout the State.

***The next meeting of the State Technical Committee will be held on July 17, location to be determined.***

### **FY2013 Statistics**

#### **Arizona FY2013 Allocations Handout (Dennis Kimberlin presenting)**

EQIP (General) program \$6.3 million

If you look at all of the orange tabbed ones – those are all of the EQIP initiatives

- In EQIP (General + Initiatives) \$10.5 million (only 60% of what we got last year)
  - And good possibility that in 2014, it will be less
- EQIP Air Quality – received \$ 1.7 million – last year we were at \$2.2 million
  - Probably won’t be able to spend all that and will send some back
    - If there’s no demand, we have to send it back – if there’s demand, we do everything possible to get that obligated.

*Question: How do you sign up for TSP funds?*

*Response:* If you sign up for a contract, and want to get a Technical Services Provider (TSP) to design the practice, NRCS can put a line-item in the contract. We haven't done much of that lately because we haven't had many TSPs registered in Arizona. TSPs are individuals who have met NRCS criteria, received specific training, are certified, and are listed in the NRCS Technical Registry (TechReg).

*Follow-up Question: How is the payment share determined for a TSP?*

*Response:* Depends on the particular practice: NRCS have a scale that shows how much we can pay a TSP for each practice.

*Follow-up Question: New Mexico works with the State Association to manage the funds, and then the TSPs work with the State Association at a district level. Can Arizona do that?*

*Response:* This is possible, but would take research to make sure that all regulations and policies are complied with.

*Follow-up Question: What are requirements for TSPs? Degree requirements pose a barrier.*

*Response:* Contact Kristin Graham Chavez ([Kristin.grahamchavez@az.usda.gov](mailto:Kristin.grahamchavez@az.usda.gov)) for more information on TSPs in Arizona. Also, training is made available, both in-person and online. Kris will also have details on training opportunities.

### **Arizona FY2013 Farm Bill Program Deadlines (Dennis Kimberlin presenting)**

This year, for the roll-out of the Farm Bill programs, we chose later "batch dates" – January and April.

The first batch ("batch date" is the date applicants must apply by) must be obligated by Friday, April 19.

Second batch: deadline to file application is April 19 and the obligation date is July 1.

### **Arizona FY2013 Obligations Status as of April 11, 2013 Handout (Dennis Kimberlin presenting)**

Initiatives at the top and then General just below. Obligations by Field Office in the last three columns.

Under Initiatives:

- *Air Quality* – top line says we have allocation of \$1.7 million – and under "Selected for funding" the amount is \$382K (still have second batch)
  - But, can't obligate if there's no demand. Right now, if AZ NRCS had to send money back, it would be about \$1.3 million, but because of the second batch, someone can still apply and use some of those funds.
  - After the second bath, AZNRCS is likely to return about \$1 million dollars – this isn't the preferred scenario, but the conditions attached to Initiative allocations require that if the money isn't obligated, it doesn't go back into general EQIP bucket – it goes back to National.
- *Energy* – \$104K that could be returned, but AZ NRCS is likely to use it all, so that's good news.

- *Organics*: Sarah Brown from Portland, Dennis Kimberlin, Kris Graham Chaves – all have done workshops, just can't generate interest in the program. Don't even have one application this year.
  - Has AZ NRCS asked organic farmers to provide feedback?
    - Meeting participants provided feedback on possible obstacles for producers to participate in the Organics Initiative.
      - What are the limits? Limits may explain reluctance.
        - \$80K limit over 6 year period. \$20K limit per year. Mr. Kimberlin noted that larger groups can sign up under regular EQIP. This Initiative is specifically designed for smaller producers.
      - Could be the paperwork
      - Maybe the irrigation history issue – barrier to new producers
      - Availability of water: If the producer doesn't have access to the water? Hauling water is expensive.

If a producer can show that the land has been farmed and that they are an agricultural producer, they can get in the organics program.

Despite the identified challenges, there are people out there who are organic growers, or who want to transition into organics, who could take part in this. Arizona NRCS has not been able to connect with those producers yet and that's one place where the NRCS could use the assistance of the Districts to share the information.

Additionally, concerns expressed about how National Initiatives apply to Arizona specifically.

List of Initiatives is partially reviewed:

- Last year Arizona obligated \$2.2 million in Air Quality. The numbers are lower this year, and Arizona NRCS suspects that's because regulations changed to disallow engine replacements – engine replacements comprised the bulk of the work last year.
  - Arizona NRCS was eventually able to obtain approval to do the engine replacements, but the numbers were recalculated and now a tractor is worth more for trade-in than in the program. Arizona NRCS is in the process of working that out so that the funds are more in balance.
  - It is also noted that Air Quality is not looked on favorably in Yuma, because there are larger concerns with EPA and AZDEQ regulations, and producers are reluctant to participate in something that could be detrimental to the county in the long run.
- StrikeForce Initiative is targeted toward Tribal and other historically underserved individuals – Arizona NRCS will obligate the full amount.
- Arizona NRCS will be sending money back in Organics (about \$100K) and in Air Quality (about \$1 million)

One barrier to producer participation with NRCS involves trust issues. Communications have sometimes been unclear regarding eligibility questions and as a result, some producers have found themselves ineligible in various situations. Ongoing situation in Flagstaff discussed.

Mr. Kimberlin identifies that although AZ NRCS is likely to send back Initiatives money, the State will obligate all of the general EQIP monies available.

### **Arizona FY2013 General EQIP Handout (Dennis Kimberlin presenting)**

Handout is a large spreadsheet consolidated to one page: 24 Field Offices, and the top line is the initial allocation given to each field office.

- If number is red, that means that there is a good possibility that the dollars will get swept and distributed to another Field Office.
- Arizona is split into two Areas. The money will stay within the original Area until all offices in the Area confirm they have no more demand for the money, and only then will be made available to the other Area.

### **Payment Schedules**

Several months ago, AZ NRCS asked every field office to submit their problems with the FY13 payment schedules

From the submissions, AZ NRCS identified seven different practices that were problems.

*Irrigation Ditch Lining* is really not a problem anymore because many years ago we split this out as separate line items. Recently, AZ NRCS has been combining ditch lining and appurtenant structures such as gates, culverts, and ports into a single practice scenario, however, by doing so an average cost had to be determined for the practice. It was easier to write the contract using this approach, but the producer didn't benefit on a cost basis. Now it's being done by separate line items again – creates an extra step for the planners, but better for the producer in that it more closely estimates the true cost of the practice, so AZ NRCS supports National's decision on separating out ditch lining and appurtenant structures.

*Pipeline costs* have traditionally been estimated (measured) by feet but now on the regional payment schedule will be estimated by pounds. AZ NRCS engineering staff has developed a lookup table that converts the feet of pipe planned into pounds. The pounds of pipe are then written into the contract to determine the total cost of the practice installation. The look up table was discussed because an NRCS planner commented that the conversion is not working properly and needs to be corrected. NRCS engineers are looking into this comment and will correct the conversion table where necessary

There were many comments on the units of measurement of pounds for the pipeline practice. Everyone thought it was counter-intuitive to have it in pounds and recommended that it be changed back to feet. A change back to feet as the unit of measurement would make it much easier to plan and contract the practice. Mr. Kimberlin concurred and indicated that we would discuss this issue with the National and Regional Cost Teams for the FY-14 Program Year.

On the cost-lists, Arizona NRCS has 81 practices for EQIP. Excluding the two practices discussed above, Arizona has problems with only 5 practices out of 81.

Understanding this, Arizona NRCS would like support from the State Technical Committee to proceed with the following proposal: AZ NRCS approaches NHQ by saying that 95% of the cost list works for Arizona, and the State understands the need for consistency. However, would like to have the flexibility

to make changes on the 5% identified as problematic. Requesting the ability to make minor changes to reflect what is needed in each specific state; to modify costs and add additional scenarios if needed.

Attendees agree that this proposal is a good way forward. Mr. Kimberlin advises participants to meet with District Conservationists, to collect more data. Attendees are encouraged to use his PowerPoint presentation to identify the resource concerns that show problems and then to gather hard evidence – receipts, etc. Anecdotal information won't be enough.

## **National Planning Procedures Handbook (NPPH) Presentation (Steve Smarik Presenting)**

Mr. Smarik begins by reading the following paragraph from the first slide of his PowerPoint presentation:

One major shift that is evident in the amendment is the treatment of Resource Management Systems (RMS). NRCS will continue to assist clients in developing complete RMS plans, however the reality is that RMS plans are developed over a period of time, often many years, and are the result of the relationship developed between planner and client. This amendment stresses that conservation planning is progressive and adaptive, working toward the goal of developing an RMS level plan over a period of time.

In a nutshell, what that is saying is that NRCS used to do conservation planning as a complete holistic look at the whole farm or the whole ranch – every resource concern would be examined, all alternatives would be presented. Producers could opt to progressively apply them.

The change now is that NRCS approach is to acknowledge that a producer may have many different resource concerns, but that the producer may only want to address a single concern. Under the new NPPH, this would be okay – essentially, it allows NRCS and the producer to build a relationship over time and move into expanded work as producers become ready to do so.

Planning process itself hasn't changed; it's the NRCS approach that has changed.

FROM SLIDE 2:

600.0 B., Conservation Plan - A conservation plan is the record of decisions and supporting information for treatment of a unit of land meeting planning criteria for one or more identified natural resource concerns as a result of the planning process. The plan describes the schedule of implementation for practices and activities needed to solve identified natural resource concerns and takes advantage of opportunities. The plan may include component plans that address one or more resource concerns.

Natural Resources definition

SWAPA + HE (Human and Energy) – the “E” part is new

FROM SLIDE 3:

G. Planning involves more than considering individual resources. It focuses on the natural systems and ecological processes that sustain the resources. Ultimately, the Earth is one ecological system, embodying all the smaller subsystems into one interconnected system. The relationship between living organisms and the environment are part of an ecological system's complexity and are not fully

understood. Predicting both onsite and offsite effects upon ecological components is essential and is an inherent part of conservation planning.

❖ **Removed the sentence from one section of the Handbook:**

The planner strives to balance natural resource issues with economic and social needs through the development of resource management systems (RMS).

❖ **The new sentence is included in 600.0 I**

I. Conservation planning can be implemented successfully using current knowledge and technology, while recognizing that the art and science of natural resource management will continue to evolve and will never be complete or finished. The planner strives to balance natural resource issues with economic and social needs through the development of the conservation plan.

FROM SLIDE 4:

Added: Consideration of indigenous stewardship.

Added: Planning by its nature is both progressive and adaptive.

FROM SLIDE 5:

Added about 90 terms and about 44 new acronyms. Glossary included.

Planning criteria – required minimum level of treatment that we ask for in addressing a resource concern.

FROM SLIDE 6:

Planning standard: stressing that we are moving toward an RMS level of management. Alternatives are based on resource concern and not necessarily on Resource Management System.

FROM SLIDE 7:

600.40 E. (2) (i) changed to clarify that an alternative does not have to be an RMS, but must treat a resource concern.

- ❖ Old: An alternative is generally a Resource Management System (RMS). It could be a single practice or simply an adjustment to present farming operations.
- ❖ New: An alternative treats one or more resource concerns. It may be a single practice or an RMS.

SLIDE 10:

Environmental Evaluation – reinforces the need to do (EE) – required to do this, just like NEPA.

Assumption is that NEPA is part of the planning process. As NRCS is talking about what can be done, it's also looking at an exploring what are the effects are.

FROM SLIDE 11:

Conservation plans may include component plans to provide greater detail in addressing one or more resource concerns.

- Comprehensive Nutrient management planning
- Nutrient management planning
- Integrated pest management planning

- Conservation activity plans (TSPs produce for the agency)

If it's not a resource concern, NRCS doesn't have to address.

*Question:* Arizona Western College has a 10-acre farm land lab that is blowing away. However, Field Office has said that the College must sign a Highly Erodible Lands Declaration must be signed before NRCS can work on it. Is this an accurate reading of the policy?

*Response:* Yes – this is part of the sod-busting rules from the 1985 Food Security Act. If working with highly erodible lands, sands or loamy sands, regulations state that landowner must sign the Declaration.

*Question:* How big is a Planning Land Unit?

*Response:* Ranch: no smaller than a pasture, and for Farm: no smaller than a field.

When pastures/fields are atypically large, AZ NRCS will work with producer/land owner to find the right boundaries.

*Question:* Who puts the NPPH together?

*Response:* Conservation Planning Division at National Headquarters.

*Follow-up Suggestion:* In the future, it would be a good idea if a lay/non-NRCS person could be involved in the development of the new process? The plans are too large, heavy, complex.

Progressive plans should be much smaller than the plans producers are currently used to, so the new NPPH should help with some of the challenges of large plans.

*Question:* Is it possible to write one NEPA or EE/EA for each geographically similar area?

*Response:* No – NRCS is required to go on-site and specifically visit the land, and confirm that there are no adverse effects to the work that is being done.

*Question:* Regarding the integration of NEPA into the conservation planning process, are those same criteria going to be applied to private lands?

*Response:* No, the Council of Environmental Quality allowed NRCS to abbreviate that process. There is no public portion of scoping on private lands. That said, if Federal lands are involved, it's that Federal agency's responsibility to get that NEPA or EE/EA done. That can be a delay, if the agency isn't ready to sign off.

## **Locally Led Conservation – How to Develop a Conservation Needs Assessment and Conservation Action Plan (Kris Graham Chavez presenting)**

### What is locally led conservation?

All of the community stakeholders performing all of the following:

- Assessing their natural resource conservation needs
- Setting community conservation goals
- Developing an action plan
- Obtaining resources to carry out the plan
- Implementing solutions
- Measuring their success

The concept is based on the principal that communities are better suited to solve their own issues.

Local could mean District Board (this would be the leader) but could include city government, depends on how District wants to structure this, and if it impacts/involves city planning.

- Can be organized however the community wants to organize, for example: by community area, by conservation district, by geographic priority area, by resource concern, or by type of producer (organics, etc.).
- This structures encourages neighbors, both urban and rural, to work together.
- Remember that the resource concern is the main organizing principal – the programs can be fit in later.
- Critical to know the local resource concerns – NRCS can't pay on anything unless there is a resource concern.
- Leadership and public involvement. Since it's in the law, the conservation districts are charged with facilitating cooperation and agreements among agencies, landowners, and others; developing comprehensive conservation plans and bringing them to the community. Include members of the public who are familiar with the specific local resource concerns.
- Representation in group should reflect the community's make-up (if community is primarily comprised of rancher, invite ranchers; same with organics producers, high tunnel, etc.).

#### Conservation Needs Assessment (CNA)

- Input from all different agencies – it's the platform for making decisions. It's a comprehensive analysis of work needing to be done, and it is based on public input.
- Needs assessment must be resource based, not program based. The purpose of the CNA is to assure that the efforts address the most important local resource needs.
- Assessment will be the basis for selecting the type and extent of needed conservation systems and practices, and will also be the basis for making recommendations on funding priorities.
- Kris Graham Chavez will email out the example of a table of contents for review/ideas.

*Comment:* Concerned that environmental protection groups are getting lots of government grant funding and they're becoming very vocal in the Santa Cruz/Pima area. That, while producers are not getting funded. Worried now that those voices are going to outshine those of the Agriculture community.

*Response:* Jason Kepler's presentation will address questions regarding membership in the LWG.

#### Conservation Action Plan – comes after Needs Assessment

- Identifies priorities, establishes timeframes, roles and responsibilities, tools needed, budget required

- Could be used as a Long Range Plan (LRP), but requires more technical info than a typical LRP

#### NRCS Roles/Responsibilities:

The NRCS district conservationist will support the development of conservation action plan by:

- Providing overall planning assistance
- Identifying non-USDA programs that may be of assistance
- Explaining appropriate USDA conservation programs and services.

For example: Critter groups/connection with Game Department – partnerships with Conservation Districts – puts money on the table that's not Federal. Elk groups, ducks, antelope foundation, etc. Have tons on money in the bank for use on the ground. Antelope has NFWF grant.

#### Implementing the Action Plan – Community Stakeholders will:

- Work with the leadership of the conservation district, obtain the needed programs and services to address the problems identified by their conservation needs assessment.
- Coordinate existing assistance, available through private organizations, Federal, State, Tribal, and local agencies, including USDA
- Ensure that appropriate program application processes are followed
- Develop detailed proposals for new programs
- Seek financial, educational, and technical assistance as necessary.

#### Evaluating results

- Locally led conservation does not end when the conservation action plan has been implemented.
- The effectiveness of plan implementation should be evaluated to ensure that the community stakeholders' planned goals and objectives are achieved.
- An evaluation should be made to determine where the actual results differ from those anticipated.
- This difference may result in retracing one or more of the steps in the locally led conservation effort.

The NRCS district conservationist will support the conservation district and the community stakeholders in evaluating the results of their locally led conservation efforts by:

- Assisting in the evaluation process.
- Providing updated natural resources information and assessments.
- Keeping them aware of changes in the USDA programs and the program delivery process.
- Assisting in interpreting the impact of conservation action plan implementation on the condition of the natural resources.

The conservation districts know what their needs are. The past process has been a roundabout and overly complicated way to get those resource concerns identified, but now the need is to get the conversation at LWG meetings focused on how to identify what kind of funding is needed in order to get the conservation on the ground.

**Meeting participants requested that this information be available to the conservation districts no later than June 6.**

Communication Strategy: Stefanie Smallhouse has been charged with giving these same presentations to all the conservation districts. Arizona NRCS will present to the District Conservationists. The decision was made to start with the State Tech Committee to obtain support from the members for this plan.

### **Local Work Groups – More than just DCs and Conservation Districts (Jason Kepler presenting)**

*In achieving a desired natural resource condition, human values determine the scope and extent of problems and the associated corrective actions to be taken. – NRCS NPPH*

That's why you guys are here, and why we have Local Work Groups.

#### Purpose

- Identify and provide recommendations to NRCS on local and State natural resource priorities
- Conservation activities and programs
- Ensure that your conservation needs assessment is developed
- Local Working Groups are subcommittees of the State Technical Committee

#### Membership

- More than just DCs and conservation districts
- Diverse and focus on agricultural interests and natural resource issues in local community
- Include agricultural producers and other interests representing the crops and livestock raised in your areas
- Potential members may include:
  - DC (REQUIRED)
  - Members of the conservation district Board
  - FSA County Committee
  - FSA County Exec Director
  - Cooperative Extension
  - Irrigation Districts
  - Agricultural Groups and Associations
  - State or local elected or appointed officials (county commissioners, for example)
  - Federal and State agencies

#### How to Invite/Manage Requests to Join:

- District Conservationist assists the conservation district in making LWG membership decisions (note: LWG should take lead role). Those wanting to join your LWG may submit a request to LWG chairperson and the DC.
- LWG chair and the DC may also invite potential members.

### Primary responsibility of LWG

- Ensure that Conservation Needs Assessment is developed using local community stakeholder input
- Identify local priority resource concerns and high-priority areas
- Make recommendations to NRCS on program practices, costs, etc
- Assist NRCS and the local conservation district with public outreach efforts (like organics, for example)
- ID local producers' training and education needs

### Primary responsibilities of Conservation District

- Conservation Needs Assessment (with assistance from DC)
- Assemble LWG
- Set the meeting agenda
- Conduct the meeting
- Transmit LWG results and recommendations to NRCS

### Responsibilities of District Conservationist

- Assist in the development of Conservation Needs Assessment
- Assist in identifying program priorities and available resources in local area
- Support and advise on matters relating to conservation program delivery
- Assist with identifying potential members for your LWG
- Report to LWG on our conservation program's local impacts
- Inform the LWG of decision made in response to recommendations
- Perform the responsibilities of a conservation district where a conservation district is not present or active

### LWG Standard Operating Procedures

#### Public Notifications

LWG are open to the public – notification must be given with at least 24 hours advance

#### Meeting scheduling

- Should meet at least once each year
- Additional meetings may be held at the discretion of your chairperson and/or State Technical Committee

#### Public Participation

- Presenters are encouraged to provide written records of their comments
- As time allows an opportunity to address non-agenda items will be provided at the end of LWG meetings
- Call to the public will be included on the agenda for those wishing to address (AZ law doesn't require, but NRCS does)

### Conducting Business

- Meetings will be conducted as an open discussion among members
- LWG members may be polled, but voting on issues is not appropriate
- Focus discussion on identifying local priorities and concerns that can be treated using NRCS programs and initiatives
- LWGs are advisory in nature and all recommendations are considered

### Record of Meeting

- Minutes are required in accordance with Arizona Open Meeting Laws
- Minutes for LWG meetings should be made available at local NRCS office

### Input to State Technical Committee

- Local Working Group recommendations should be submitted to State Technical Committee and the District Conservationist

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LWG – we have two different types – Tribal and off-reservation? Do they get together?

Sometimes Hualapai get together with Big Sandy

Tohono O’odham usually attends

In Yuma, Parker comes down (CRIT Tribes), mainly because we all farm the same.

Lots of benefit in that happening, but often problem is frequently logistical – are there options that can be explored here – meeting half-way, etc. (often nothing in between)

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### **Strategic Approach to Conservation (Dennis Kimberlin presenting)**

Food for thought. This is not our policy, but it’s something that we think wraps it all together and draws on the LWG and locally led conservation. It all goes together. Needs assessment.

There are other funds out there – it’s important – and other states are taking advantage of it. After CNA is there, then you need to paint a picture. Take an office – maybe you only have three resource concerns, but they’re really important resource concerns. Then, create a portfolio that says: to address these concerns, over the next five years, it’s going to take this much money.

It’s going to take time, but once this is done, each Field Office will know what it’s going to take to get conservation on the ground.

Portfolio can be shared with legislative people or other potential funders, to say – this is what it’s going to take, this is what NRCS can do – then go get the rest of the money.

Thought on conservation strategies. Suggested outline of how we can put this on paper. We want to get a standard format on this.

Also – once we know how much each office needs, we can add it all up and identify how much money AZ needs.

If you think this has merit, we'll get it on the agenda for next meeting. We need to be proactive on this.

### **Thoughts about this meeting.**

- Thanks for coffee/donuts.
- Get the grassroots perspective.
- Get the users involved early on, we'll have a lot more success in getting the money out to where it should be.
- Listening Sessions etc usually held in major metropolitan areas – suggest State Technical Committee meetings in rural areas.
- Bring it back to where you work through the conservation district to get that locally led conservation.
- What about have a showcase of one or two districts at State Tech Committee meetings. Welcome idea.
- Make the State Technical Committee meeting an all-day event and include a tour of a farm or ranch and how they've implemented programs.

### **Engineering (Dave Beyman presenting)**

Has heard concerns that there is too much documentation, and plans are too complicated.

Provides a visual aid: Large box containing a selection of just some of the technical reference binders outlining what is required by the agency.

Question: How did we get here? Things used to be so much simpler.

Response: The higher dollar values involved in contracts have changed the oversight levels; using more taxpayer money, so under more scrutiny.

Follow-up Question: Yes, but the actual *design* hasn't changed. How have we gotten to this complication level?

*Response:* Lots more eyes on us, watching what we spend and how we spend it. Must have documentation.

The re-engineering requirements make no sense – it is not our policy to go through and re-engineer and redesign your existing policy. (referring to the National Engineering Policy). Arizona NRCS, and the agency as a whole, has to do its due-diligence and evaluate existing systems. If NRCS ties in a new system, allocates monies, the agency has to be confident that it will all work together. Agency has to document that it will work, otherwise carries a responsibility should something go wrong.

Maybe it's not so much the documentation as it is the timing – growers want something done today/this year/but engineers are looking at several offices. May take a year or two or three to get through the

system. On the other hand, NRCS pays 75-95% of practice installation. There may be some trade-offs with that kind of financial assistance, but quality won't be one of those trade-offs.

The concern is raised that Washington, D.C. is taking away flexibility to deal with local topography issues in different areas of the country. Participants request that Arizona NRCS bring that message to National leadership.

### **Closing Comments**

Mr. Elke thanks the participants for their time, attendance, and attention. Emphasizes that together, we can make a difference, and encourages all to contact Arizona NRCS offices with any questions.

**Meeting Adjourned 2:30pm**