

USDA Title 440 - Programs Manual

Part 500 - Locally Led Conservation

Subpart B - Local Working Groups

501.10 Purpose

In accordance with 7 CFR Part 610, Subpart C, local working groups are subcommittees of the State Technical Committee and provide recommendations to USDA on local and state natural resource priorities and criteria for conservation activities and programs.

501.11 Responsibilities of the Local Working Group

It is the responsibility of the local working group to –

- (1) Ensure that a conservation needs assessment is developed using community stakeholder input.
- (2) Utilize the conservation needs assessment to help identify program funding needs and conservation practices.
- (3) Identify priority resource concerns and identify, as appropriate, high-priority areas needing assistance.
- (4) Recommend USDA conservation program application and funding criteria, eligible practices (including limits on practice payments or units), and payment rates.
- (5) Participate in multicounty coordination where program funding and priority area proposals cross county boundaries.
- (6) Assist NRCS and the conservation district with public outreach and information efforts and identify educational and producers' training needs.
- (7) Recommend State and national program policy to the State Technical Committee based on resource data.
- (8) Utilize the conservation needs assessment to identify priority resource concerns that can be addressed by USDA programs.
- (9) Forward recommendations to the NRCS designated conservationist or Farm Service Agency (FSA) County Executive Director, as appropriate.
- (10) Adhere to standard operating procedures identified in Title 440, Conservation Programs Manual (CPM), Part 501, Subpart B, Section 501.14.

501.12 Local Working Group Membership

A. Local working group membership should be diverse and focus on agricultural interests and natural resource issues existing in the local community. Membership should include agricultural producers representing the variety of crops, livestock, and poultry raised within the local area; owners of nonindustrial private forest land, as appropriate; representatives of agricultural and environmental organizations; and representatives of governmental agencies carrying out agricultural and natural resource conservation programs and activities.

B. Membership of the USDA local working group may include but is not limited to Federal, State, county, Tribal, or local government representatives. Examples of potential members include —

- (1) NRCS designated conservationist.
- (2) Members of conservation district boards or equivalent.
- (3) Members of the county FSA committee.
- (4) FSA county executive director or designee.
- (5) Cooperative extension (board members or manager).
- (6) State or local elected or appointed officials.
- (7) Other Federal and State government representatives.
- (8) Representatives of American Indian and Alaskan Native governments.

C. To ensure that recommendations of the local working group take into account the needs of diverse groups served by USDA, membership must include, to the extent practicable, individuals with demonstrated ability to represent the conservation and related technical concerns of particular historically underserved groups and individuals including but not limited to women,

persons with disabilities socially disadvantaged and limited resource groups .

D. Individuals or groups wanting to become members of a local working group may submit a request that explains their interest and outlines their credentials for becoming a member of the local working group to the local working group chairperson and the NRCS district conservationist (or designated conservationist). The district conservationist (or designated conservationist) will assist the soil and water conservation district in making decisions concerning membership of the group .

501.13 Responsibilities of Conservation Districts and NRCS

A. Conservation District

It is the responsibility of the conservation district to—

- (i) Develop the conservation needs assessment as outlined in 440 -CPM, Part 500 , Subpart A.
- (ii) Assemble the USDA local working group .
- (iii) Set the agenda .
- (iv) Conduct the USDA local working group meetings .
- (v) Transmit the USDA local working group's priority area and funding requests to the NRCS designated conservationist or the State Technical Committee , as appropriate .

Note : Where a conservation district is not present or chooses not to fulfill the responsibilities outlined in 440 -CPM, Part 501 , Subpart A, Section 501.13 , the NRCS designated conservationist will have these responsibilities .

B. NRCS Designated Conservationist

It is the NRCS designated conservationist's responsibility to participate in the USDA local working group and to—

- (i) Encourage and assist other USDA agencies to participate in the locally led conservation and working group efforts , as feasible .
- (ii) Assist with identifying members for the local working group .
- (iii) Help identify program priorities and resources available .
- (iv) Assist in the development of program priority area proposals .
- (v) Comply with the National Environmental Policy Act, nondiscrimination statement , and other environmental , civil rights , and cultural resource requirements .
- (vi) Support and advise the local working group concerning technical issues , program policies and procedures , and other matters relating to conservation program delivery .
- (vii) Ensure that populations are—
 - Provided the opportunity to comment before decisions are rendered .
 - Allowed to share the benefits of, not excluded from , and not affected in a disproportionately high and adverse manner by Government programs and activities affecting human health or the environment .
- (viii) Analyze performance indicators and reports .
- (ix) Report the conservation programs ' impacts on resources .
- (x) Perform the responsibilities of the conservation district where a conservation district is not present or chooses not to fulfill the responsibilities outlined in 440 -CPM, Part 501 , Subpart A, Section 501.6A .
- (xi) Give strong consideration to the local working group's recommendations on NRCS programs , initiatives , and activities .
- (xii) Ensure that recommendations , when adopted , address natural resource concerns .

501.14 Standard Operating Procedures for Local Working Groups

A. Organization and Function

Local working groups provide recommendations on local natural resource priorities and criteria for USDA conservation activities and programs . Local working groups are normally chaired by the appropriate soil and water conservation district (SWCD). In the event the SWCD is unable or unwilling to chair the local working group , NRCS district conservationist (or designated conservationist) is responsible for those duties .

B. Meeting Scheduling

The local working group should meet at least once each year at a time and place designated by the chairperson , unless otherwise agreed to by the members of the local working group . Other meetings may be held at the discretion of the chairperson . Meetings will be called by the chairperson whenever there is business that should be brought before the local working group .

C. Public Notification

- (1) Local working group meetings are open to the public and notification must be published in one or more newspapers, including recommended Tribal publications, to attain the appropriate circulation.
- (2) Public notice of local working group meetings should be provided at least 14 calendar days prior to the meeting. Notification will need to exceed the 14-calendar-day minimum where State open meeting laws require a longer notification period. The minimum 14-calendar-day notice requirement may be waived in the case of exceptional conditions, as determined by the chairperson or NRCS district conservationist (or designated conservationist).
- (3) The public notice of local working group meetings will include the time, place, and agenda items for the meeting.

D. Meeting Information

Agendas and information must be provided to the local working group members at least 14 calendar days prior to the scheduled meeting. The district conservationist (or designated conservationist) will assist the local working group chairperson, as requested, in preparing meeting agendas and necessary background information for meetings. The minimum 14-calendar-day notice requirement may be waived in the case of exceptional conditions, as determined by the chairperson or NRCS district conservationist (or designated conservationist).

E. Public Participation

Individuals attending the local working group meetings will be given the opportunity to address the local working group. Opportunity to address nonagenda items will be provided if time allows at the end of the meeting. Presenters are encouraged to provide written records of their comments to the chairperson at the time of the presentation, but are not required to do so. Written comments may be accepted if provided to the chairperson no later than 14 calendar days after a meeting.

F. Conducting Business

- (1) The meetings will be conducted as an open discussion among members. Discussion will focus on identifying local natural resource concerns that can be treated using programs and activities identified in 440-CPM, Part 501, Subpart A, Section 501.0C. All recommendations will be considered.
- (2) The following guidelines will govern meeting discussions:
 - (i) The chairperson will lead the discussion.
 - (ii) Only one person may speak at a time. Every participant should have an opportunity to speak. The chairperson or his or her designee is responsible for recognizing speakers.
 - (iii) The chairperson, in consultation with those members present, may establish time limits for discussion on individual agenda items.
 - (iv) State Technical Committees are advisory in nature and all recommendations are considered.
 - (v) Members may be polled, but voting on issues is not appropriate.
 - (vi) The chairperson will defer those agenda items not covered because of time limits to the next meeting.

G. Record of Meetings

Summaries for all local working group meetings will be available within 30 calendar days of the meeting and will be filed at the appropriate local NRCS office.

H. Input to State Technical Committee

Local working group recommendations are to be submitted to State Technical Committee chairperson, the district conservationist (or designated conservationist), or both (as appropriate) within 14 calendar days after a meeting.

I. Response to Local Working Group Recommendations

The designated conservationist will inform the local working group as to the decisions made in response to all local working group recommendations within 90 days. This notification will be made in writing to all local working groups members and made available for the public at the appropriate local NRCS office.