United States Department of Agriculture

NRCS
Natural Resources Conservation Service
210 Walnut Street, Room 693
Des Moines, IA 50309-2180

August 11, 2006

GENERAL MANUAL (GM)
340 – SPA
AMENDMENT IA1 (Part 404)

SUBJECT: SPA – IOWA AMENDMENT TO THE STRATEGIC PLANNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY, OVERSIGHT AND EVALUATION

Purpose. To provide guidance on Area Quality Reviews.

Effective Date. Upon receipt.

Filing instructions. File the attached pages in Part 404 behind page 404-4.

/s/Richard Van Klaveren
State Conservationist

Attachment

GM

IA404.13 State Quality Reviews

Area Quality Review Guidelines.

(a) Goal

To provide managers with the information they need to make strategic responses to current and emerging situations.

(b) Objectives

- To monitor progress on meeting the Agency’s Strategic Plan, goals and objectives.
- To provide an opportunity for the State Office Leadership Team (State Conservationist, Executive Assistant, Assistant State Conservationist for Water Resources, Assistant State Conservationist for Operations, and the Assistant State Conservationist for Program), Principal Staff, and Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations to evaluate accomplishments and to work on issues as an integrated team with the field staff.
- To evaluate the quality of our performance in managing the natural resources, human resources, and financial resources of NRCS in Iowa.
- To give an opportunity to area and field office employees to provide direct feedback to the State Conservationist and Principal Staff.
- Identify trends, patterns, and general management issues from a state-wide perspective by looking at area operations over time.
- To assess how effective we are in achieving a diverse organization.
- To discover useful innovations that might be nurtured and duplicated throughout NRCS.

(c) Overview of Area Review Process

The purpose of the review is to provide managers with the information and feedback needed to establish future management strategies by:

- Self-evaluation by the area on issues identified by the State Office.
- Review of the self-evaluation report by the team and an on-site validation of that self-evaluation.
- Evaluation of the current management situation in an area, including the results and effectiveness of implementation of the Agency’s Strategic Plan, mission, and related management activities.
- Documentation of “Observations for the Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operation’s consideration” that the assistant state conservationist for field operations will use to define the future management objectives and Business Plan elements.

- Documentation of “Observations for the State Conservationist’s consideration” that the State Leadership Team (State Conservationist, Executive Assistant, and all Assistant State Conservationists) and Principal Staff will evaluate to see if they reflect state-wide situations and need a strategic response by the State Leadership Team and/or the Principal Staff.
- Review of area-level Quality Assurance activities and outcomes.
- Review of identified strategic issues to improve the effectiveness/efficiency of the Area operations.

One or two Area reviews are completed each year and have two parts: one part relates to the management of the specific Area and one part relates to the management of the entire state:

- The Area-related part of the process is completed after:
  (1) the review team provides the Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations with a report that documents its observations; and
  (2) the Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations responds to the observations through his/her Business Plan.
- The state-wide part of the process is completed after:
  (1) the State Leadership Team and Principal Staff have considered the issues that seem to warrant state-wide attention; and
  (2) the State Conservationist has incorporated appropriate action into Iowa NRCS’ Business Plan or Area Review Action Plans.

An interdisciplinary team led by the State Conservationist conducts each Area Review. The Team can split up for special needs, but will usually be together and will consist of:

- State Conservationist
- Assistant State Conservationists
- Principal Staff, depending on the issues identified and which issues the Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations and State Conservationist agree to focus on.

(d) Planning and Preparing for an Area Quality Review

The State Conservationist determines Area(s) to be reviewed and appoints the Review Team Leader for each review.

The selection of the Area(s) to be reviewed each year is based upon the amount of time that has elapsed since the last review, emerging issues, new initiatives, or changes in an Area's management situation. These reviews will be identified in the state’s Business Plan under Quality Assurance.

The State Conservationist and assistant state Conservationist for field operations will establish date for the review and time frames for the pre-work. The Assistant State Conservationist for Operations and assistant state conservationist for field operations will work together to plan the review. The Assistant State Conservationist for Operations will keep the State Office Leadership Team and Principal Staff updated on what's happening.

The Principal Staff will be asked to suggest topics that they'd like to have considered during the upcoming review. A consolidated list of the topics suggested for each Area will then be sent to the Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations five to six weeks prior to the review.

Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations provides to the State Office Leadership team at least two weeks prior to their visit, in case there are changes required:

- **A Self Evaluation report, addressing the issues identified by the Principal Staff and State Office Leadership Team.**
- **A list of strategic issues to be reviewed during the field review that the Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations has discussed with the State Conservationist and State Office Leadership Team.**
- **A list of people to be contacted.**
- **A proposed agenda.**
- **A proposed list of pre-work.**

The purpose of these items is to help the Review Team and the Area reach early agreement about the field sites to be visited, the topics that will be discussed at each site, people who will be available for discussion at each site, and externals to be visited with.

The Area's proposed pre-work should include:

- Any information the Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations wants the Review Team to become familiar with before they visit the Area.
- A summary of initiatives and special emphasis areas.
- A summary of safety information.
- A summary of the changes in the diversity of the workforce that have occurred in the past three years.
- A summary of what the Area has been doing with HEL/Wetland Compliance.
- Background information for items identified in the self-evaluation report.
- A summary of quality assurance activities and use of quality assurance data from the BEST system.
- A sample of field office and RC&D operational plans (business plans, area plans, etc.).
- Spot check summaries from the past two years.
- Any technical reviews by Principal Staff in the past two years.

The Area's pre-work does not need to include specific information on sites that are to be visited during the review. Site-specific information is normally distributed on site.

A conference call with the Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations and Review Team should occur at least one week prior to the review to discuss logistics, the basic process that will be used, and the schedule for the week.

(e) Conducting the Review

The on-site portion of the review is completed in one week or less. At the beginning of the review, there will be a Round-Table, to give the field offices an opportunity to talk about their issues and for the field employees to hear from the State Conservationist. The field visits should start late Monday afternoon and be completed no later than Thursday afternoon, allowing the team sufficient time to write their finding and recommendations. During the on-site portion of the review, the Review Team will focus its attention on the Area's responses in the self-evaluation report and/or other issues identified by the Area rather than on specific functional program activities.

Team members are expected to prepare for each day's activities by reviewing the pre-work material and the objectives for each site visit.

The Review Team's observations are documented as "issue statements" narrative descriptions, or lists of recommended actions. Judgments, such as "the Area needs to" or "the Area should" will not be included in the report.

The Review Team's observations should be organized into four major sections:

- **Commendations**--notations of some of the positive things observed, including the accuracy of the self-evaluation done by the Area.
- **Comments on the Self Evaluation Report.**
- **Observations from the week for the Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operation's consideration. Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations will include the actions agreed to in his/her Business Plan.**
- **Observations for the State Conservationist's/Principal Staff's/Leadership Team's consideration. Lead person will present the recommendations to the Principal Staff/Leadership Team for their consideration. If agreed to, the lead person will write an Action Plan.**

The review will be simple and interactive. The closeout documentation will be available within three weeks following the review.

(f) Guidance to Areas Preparing for a General Management Review

- Plan for good exposure to as many field offices or parts of the Area as possible.
- Make effort to include all program aspects of the Area, including RC&Ds, and engineering offices.
- Look at opportunities to have field-oriented experiences
- Make key external contacts an integral part of the review.
- Assure there is time for the review team to just listen to Area employees.
- Allow some time for unique, specific Area issues.
- Provide the opportunity for the review team to share state/national direction and strategies.
- Consider and look for chance to informally network at picnic, barbeque, or other event.
- Provide review team ample time to meet and prepare observations of the day.
- Plan for a Round-Table on Monday with all managers and a morning closeout on Friday with Area Office Staff.