
Title 440 – Conservation Programs Manual

**Part 501 – Locally Led Conservation and Program
Delivery**

Subpart C – Local Working Groups

Amended January 2026

501.20 Purpose

This subpart has policy, procedures, and general information about local working groups established under the authority of 7 CFR Part 610, subpart C.

501.21 Responsibilities

A. Local working groups will:

1. Make sure that a conservation needs assessment is developed using community stakeholder input. See section 501.11;
2. Identify priority natural resource concerns and high-priority areas needing conservation program or technical assistance, as applicable;
3. Use the conservation needs assessment to identify applicable funding opportunities and conservation practices to address priority resource concerns and emerging challenges;
4. Recommend conservation program application sign-ups, funding criteria, conservation practices, and payment rates. See exhibit 501.51(B) for examples;
5. Take part in multicounty coordination when program funding and priority area proposals cross county lines;
6. Help NRCS and conservation districts with public outreach efforts as well as identifying information and education opportunities and producer training needs;
7. Recommend state policy updates to the state technical committee based on resource data;
8. Forward recommendations to their local designated conservationist; and
9. Adhere to standard operating procedures in section 501.23.

B. Conservation districts will:

1. Publicize local working group meetings as outlined in section 501.23(C);
2. Prepare the meeting agenda on conservation district letterhead;
3. Assemble, conduct, and chair the local working group meetings;

4. Develop the conservation needs assessment as outlined in section 501.11;
5. Develop the conservation action plan as outlined in section 501.12; and
6. Give the local working group's recommended priority resource concerns, high-priority areas, and funding requests to the designated conservationist.

C. NRCS designated conservationists will:

1. Take part in the local working group;
2. If the conservation district is unable or unwilling to chair the local working group, the designated conservationist, or designee, will carry out the duties in section 501.21(B);
3. Encourage other agencies to take part in the locally led conservation and local working group efforts, as applicable;
4. Help with identifying members for the local working group;
5. Support the development and implementation of the conservation needs assessment and conservation action plan as outlined in sections 501.11 and 501.12;
6. Help with identifying program priorities and resources;
7. Help in the development of program priority area proposals;
8. Provide technical support to the local working group and advise on program policies and procedures, and other matters of conservation program delivery;
9. Make sure that local working group members are:
 - a. Given an opportunity to comment before final recommendations are submitted.
 - b. Allowed to apply for NRCS conservation programs.
10. Analyze performance indicators and reports;
11. Report on the conservation program impacts on natural resources;
12. Prioritize the local working group's recommendations for programs, initiatives, and activities. All recommendations will be considered and adopted to the extent possible;
13. Make sure the local working group's recommendations align with the identified natural resource concerns in that local area; and
14. Elevate the local working group's priority resource concerns, high-priority areas, and funding requests to the state conservationist or state technical committee, as applicable.

501.22 Membership

- A. Membership of a local working group should represent the community with a focus on agricultural interests and natural resource issues existing in the local community.
- B. Examples of potential members include:
 1. NRCS designated conservationists;

2. Conservation district officials;
 3. Members of the Farm Service Agency (FSA) county committee;
 4. FSA County Executive Director (CED) or designee;
 5. Local Cooperative Extension Service (board members, managers, or agents);
 6. Other federal, state or local government representatives that represent a variety of interests and disciplines in the soil, water, wetlands, plants, and wildlife sciences;
 7. Federally recognized Indian tribes in the local area;
 8. Nonprofit organizations that demonstrate experience working with agricultural producers in the local area;
 9. Agricultural producers representing the variety of crops and livestock raised in the local area, including urban and organic agricultural producers; and
 10. Non-industrial private forest landowners.
- C. To make sure that the local working group's recommendations consider the needs of all groups served by NRCS, membership will include, to the extent practicable, producers with historically low participation.
- D. Individuals or groups wanting to become members of a local working group may submit a request to the applicable conservation district and the NRCS designated conservationist that explains their interest and justification for becoming a member. The designated conservationist will help the conservation district review and act on membership requests.

501.23 Standard Operating Procedures

- A. **Organization and Function.** Local working groups, advisory in nature, are assembled to give input and recommendations as outlined in section 501.21(A). Local working groups are normally chaired by the local conservation district. If the conservation district is unable or unwilling to chair the local working group, see section 501.21(C)(2).
- B. **Meeting Scheduling.** The local working group should meet at least annually at a time and place chosen by the conservation district unless otherwise agreed to by the members of the local working group. Additional meetings may be held at the discretion of the conservation district 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. A meeting notice must be published in at least one media outlet, including recommended tribal publications. The meeting notice will also be posted to the state's NRCS website.
 2. The meeting notice should be published at least 14 calendar days before the meeting except when state open-meeting laws require a longer notification period. This requirement may be waived in limited situations, as determined by the conservation district or NRCS designated conservationist.

3. The meeting notice will include the time, place, agenda items, and point of contact for the meeting.
- D. Meeting Information. Agendas and information must be given to the local working group members at least 14 calendar days before the meeting. The NRCS designated conservationist will help the conservation district, as requested, in preparing meeting agendas and necessary background information for meetings.
- E. Public Participation. Individuals attending the local working group meetings will be given the opportunity to address the local working group. Individuals may also have the opportunity to address non-agenda items at the end of the meeting if time allows. Speakers are encouraged to provide written records of their comments to the conservation district at the time of the meeting but are not required to do so.
- F. Conducting Business
 1. The meetings will be conducted as an open discussion among members. Discussions will focus on getting the relevant input and information to fulfill the responsibilities of the local working group. See section 501.21(A).
 2. The following guidelines will govern meeting discussions:
 - a. The conservation district will lead the discussion.
 - b. Only one person may speak at a time.
 - c. Every participant should have an opportunity to speak.
 - d. The conservation district or designee is responsible for recognizing speakers.
 - e. The conservation district, in consultation with those members present, may set time limits for discussion on individual agenda items.
 - f. Members may be polled but may not formally vote on issues.

Note: A poll is an informal inquiry to get information or opinions. A vote is a formal decision leading to a specific outcome.

 - g. Agenda items that are not covered because of time limits will be delayed to the next meeting.
- G. Record of Meetings. The conservation district will develop meeting summaries within 30 calendar days of the meeting. Summaries will be available to the public at the local NRCS office.
- H. Local Working Group Recommendations. NRCS designated conservationist will submit the local working group's recommendations to the state conservationist or state-designated point of contact, as applicable, within 30 calendar days of the meeting.
- I. Statewide Local Working Group Report. The state-designated point of contact will collect all recommendations and give a summary to the state conservationist for review and approval. The summary may be presented during the first state technical committee meeting of the fiscal year.