

KEEPING THE "PUBLIC" IN PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Welcome to the third in a series of SCS public participation courses conducted over the last two years.

Because this is the third course it is different from the other two; this one emphasizes the skills needed to effectively involve the public.

We have involved the public, but:

--We don't have all the answers (yet) <sup>1)</sup> on how best to achieve a two-way flow of ideas between our agency and all the people affected by our programs.

~~--We don't have all the answers yet~~ <sup>2)</sup> on how to find the people that we ought to involve or on how to help them share their concerns.

~~--We don't have all the answers yet~~ <sup>3)</sup> on how to train SCS people, conservation district officials, or State commission members to design and carry out a successful public participation effort.

But as we gain experience and as you participate by telling us what you need, we will shape these courses for you.

I hope that you will take a cue from the topic of the course...that you will not only listen and take notes but also ask questions of each other and give and take ideas. We welcome your thoughts in your evaluation about improving future courses.

This can be the most helpful course you have taken in a long time, if you seek the answers to the questions you have.

---

Remarks prepared for Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator of the USDA Soil Conservation Service, for the Public Participation Course, Ft. Collins, Colorado, November 13, 1978.

Public participation may well be the most important course you will take in a long time. It is one of our most important responsibilities.

Many of you have been using some public participation techniques for a long time.

Information specialists have been using communication skills to provide information to the public. Planning specialists, RC&D coordinators and district conservationists have discussed projects with the public and gotten their cooperation.

We want to help you sharpen your skills, and to help you fit them together into an effective design for public participation. We want you to understand and use some techniques that may be new to you, some principles behind them, and some basic objectives that guide them.

Many of you already have learned about participation through the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act which may include the biggest public participation effort ever made in the United States. In RCA, public participation has been more than a nice thing to do...it was mandated by the Congress.

From your experience with RCA, some of you may feel that public participation is no easy thing to do. There are no hard and fast rules. There is no standard recipe for getting the desired result. Some people might feel uncomfortable about doing public participation. Yet many of you also found in RCA or other program efforts that public participation is an opportunity to be tremendously creative about your work. It can be...may already be...an exciting experience.

We do have an early advantage in the Soil Conservation Service; our employees already are people-oriented. Soil and water conservation district leaders, our closest partners, also are people-oriented and they are "local people." Their suggestions about the RCA appraisal and program are essential for achieving soil and water conservation. Their participation is the first step toward commitment.

We also may have an early disadvantage in public participation: Because we have used some of the techniques we may not have seen the need for greater effort or newer approaches. We may have misread some of the questions or conflicts in SCS-aided projects and thought people had an ax to grind or were mistaken in their opinions or facts.

If some of our efforts at public participation did not pan out very well it may have been that public participation, just as the environmental impact statement was at first, was treated as an add-on to the planning process. It must be an integral part of planning.

You need to talk with and listen to the public at several stages. From talking and listening we gain insight into the effect of conservation activities on the social and political structures in the community where you are working toward conservation. From our interaction with news media, they help package and deliver direct communications with the public.

You need to analyze and evaluate what you hear from the public and fit it into your planning. Then you need to feed back to the public what people's ideas are, what you did with them, and what gaps may still remain.

At the same time, you need to reflect back on your public participation activity--was it the best you could have made it?

Did you hear from the people who would be affected by the SCS-assisted activity? Did you respond adequately to the people? How can you use what you learned from public participation in the next stage of planning?

I had the privilege of being part of a major look at the Great Lakes basin and related public participation effort. In a six-year study of pollution from land-use activities around the Great Lakes, the Canada-U.S. "PLUARG experts" produced complex and voluminous findings and a rather long set of recommendations for achieving or maintaining water quality in the Great Lakes.

It was a painstaking process of finding people to serve on a panel; it was to be a broadly based group with representatives of business, industry, labor, government, agriculture, and education. We prepared for their meetings; interacted with them before, during, and after meetings; and ran ideas up the flagpole. Panelists worked very hard, too. They studied documents, researched points they raised, wrote statements of their positions.

The result was that when the formal PLUARG report was submitted this summer, the panelists were satisfied because they felt they had influenced the experts who shaped the recommendations. The experts were satisfied, because they felt the panelists had helped fill in some gaps regarding the social and other effects of water pollution and its control. The Commissioners who received the recommendations and are now considering them seem satisfied, because the views represented came from a wide constituency and not from just a few scholars.

- 5 -

I hope you will have the same satisfying results from your public participation efforts.

It will be important for you to try...because public participation is a way of life now and will be in the future in local, State, and national government. It will continue to be a way of life in the Soil Conservation Service.

President Carter issued a mandate for all Federal agencies to improve their decisionmaking process for "significant" program actions. Secretary Bergland has issued Secretary's Memorandum 1955 calling for greater involvement of the public in our "significant decisions." It applies mainly to national programs at the Washington level, and we are not going to put any big demands on local or State SCS people to help meet these initiatives. But you should know about them.

They are designed to give the public an opportunity it has not had before to influence major public policies and actions...before they are set in concrete.

Public participation in designing new programs at the national level is something new for us...our tested constituency is at the local level. National views, or those expressed through national organizations, had been mainly aimed at the Congress. President Carter's new thrust is to provide the same opportunity in the Executive Branch. It gives the public a chance to test significant decisions and it gives policymakers a chance to hear others before the big decisions are made.

Some of you may already have heard about or attended the national meetings held for RCA, for the Rural Clean Water Program, and for the Rural Abandoned Mine Program.

There will be more activities like these meetings, national in scope but held for the most part out in the States to give more opportunity to people to present their views.

Public meetings won't be the only effort to achieve a meaningful public response for significant decisions...we will try a number of other methods, too. The Rural Clean Water Program meetings were by far the best attended, probably because people could see how the program would affect them immediately and opinion over the administration of the program differed.

Meetings to review the intent and result of RC&D efforts were well attended. For the national RCA meetings and those on RAMP, attendance was medium at some locations, small at others. Any public participation effort--just as any parent-teacher meeting or organization business meeting--has to be ready for a small attendance.

Remember as you plan for public participation, though, that the measure of participation is not quantity of people in attendance at a meeting but the quality of their response. The facts and feelings that they tell us are important. If we develop better programs that take into account what they think, then our programs will be more favorably received in the community, and more fully supported and used.

To implement Secretary's Memorandum 1955, Deputy Administrator Vic Barry chairs a new public participation task force...You knew there would be another task force.

This one's role will be to evaluate current public participation activities, identify needed improvements, develop recommended revisions to policy, and recommend an SCS public participation plan that will be a model for Washington Office decisionmakers.

SCS also is holding a course on Public Participation for Executives, next month in Kalamazoo, Mich. It will be the first time for such a course on major policy issues in public participation.

State Conservationists and assistants and others who attend will be better able to support you in your public participation activities and will understand the skills, time and money needed to do a meaningful job.

I think you already understand the value of being open with people, including people within SCS and conservation districts, about resource issues and views--in terms that people can understand.

A public participation effort built on that kind of openness can give the Soil Conservation Service the same good reputation for responsive government that it already has for its technical skills.

Along the way you will help the Service retain its reputation for technical excellence, and gain fresh support for the programs it shares with conservation districts and others.

The American public is increasingly interested in natural resource improvement. At the same time it is interested in obtaining the most benefit possible from the dollars it spends for public programs. It is highly concerned about inflation and about tax levels.

In the Soil Conservation Service, then, we will continue to give the public opportunities to express their views, and take those views into account in fine-tuning our programs.

I greatly appreciate the contributions you are making toward more responsive government.

- 8 -

You help SCS activities meet the major criterion that Administrator Mel Davis pointed out at the recent meeting of SCS State Conservationists:

HELPFULNESS

- to farmers and ranchers and other land users;
- to communities;
- to all the people of this country who depend on the continued well-being of our natural resources.

Have a productive and satisfying course!

#####