

Facilitated Sessions Summary

Is the NARC&DC responsive to the needs of councils, state associations, and regional associations?

Yes:

- Lobbying, work on Capitol Hill (**times repeated: 3**)
- Legal advice (**repeated: 1**)
- Grant searches (**repeated: 1**)
- Training (**repeated: 2**)
- Publications, guidebooks (**repeated: 1**)
- National conferences are excellent
- Generally responsive to requests
- Very responsive through email and telephone
- Looking forward to new services – Grant Station and legal assistance

No:

- NARC&DC lobbying effort unsuccessful
- NARC&DC doesn't understand the money multiplier effect
- NARC&DC acts as like a subordinate to NRCS (too dependent upon NRCS money)
- Councils primarily hear from the NARC&DC at Congressional contact time
- NARC&DC sends out email and listserv but doesn't listen to bottom-up council needs

Somewhat:

- Factsheets and other publications on management issues are useful, but councils need more
- Some issues that particular states perceive as important may not be national priorities and are therefore not addressed
- Councils need more information on what the NARC&DC does (**times repeated: 1**)
- Councils need more practical advice – NARC&DC only does meetings and advocacy
- Organizational structure needs to change to be more effective – streamline
- Need improvement in telephone response time (**times repeated: 1**)
- Need better listserv

Is the RC&D program responsive to the needs of councils, state associations, and regional associations?

Yes:

- *Some* state conservationists or state program managers are very supportive – differs from state to state (compliments for WI and LA) (**repeated: 2**)
- The current administration sees RC&D as a priority
- Supports good coordinators with effective tools
- Helps with publicity/PR effort – website, news releases

No:

- POINTS reporting is too narrow and inflexible – measures used for success (acres, numbers, etc.) are inappropriate – like trying to fit round pegs in square holes (**repeated: 4**)
- POINTS database is not user friendly (**repeated: 1**)
- Does not provide full funding for coordinator positions (**repeated: 1**)
- Why isn't NRCS filling RC&D coordinator vacancies?
- Lack of program direction

- NRCS does not acknowledge the accomplishments of the RC&D program as it should
- National goals do not fully capture what RC&D councils do
- Non-RC&D staff does not support or even understand the program
- RC&D management team is not helping other NRCS units understand and support the RC&D program – NRCS supervisors do not understand RC&D (**repeated: 2**)
- Councils need better coordination with NRCS HQ – there could be a better alliance between councils and NRCS/RC&D HQ
- Why wasn't Dave White at the national conference? Isn't RC&D a priority?
- Does NRCS want to eliminate the RC&D program?
- Distribution of funds among states is unfair – special funds for relocation and budget concerns seem to be decided upon according to state conservationists' whims (**times repeated: 1**)
- Inconsistencies among states regarding support level
- Support from NRCS personnel varies considerably from person to person – inconsistent
- Budget seems to be set in a top-down manner, without input from states
- Area and annual plan guidelines/rules/review confine council creativity – NRCS focuses on natural resources, but community development is just as important
- Area and annual plan database is incorrect
- Councils need shorter turnaround time for area plan review
- There's a disconnect between NRCS and state conservationists – e.g., on area plans
- Too dictatorial on content of area plan – it almost stops being the council's plan

Is your state association responsive to the needs of councils?

Yes:

- Helps with multiregional programs (Iowa)
- Facilitates grant money for councils (Alabama, Iowa, Texas)
- Provides good training (SC)
- Helps out with the lobbying effort (Iowa)
- Offers PR material (Iowa)
- Manages good projects (Arkansas)
- Provides useful information
- Offers important networking opportunities

No:

- Understaffed and underfunded: is a volunteer operation and has no money (**repeated: 2**)
- Not organized to provide assistance to councils (**repeated: 1**)
- Needs to provide more training to councils
- Has no goals and no plan (Nebraska, Montana)
- Needs to be more diverse (not just white male)
- Problems with grant money record keeping
- Don't know what the state association even does (ID, AL)
- Don't really understand the purpose or see the value of the state association
- Are state associations supposed to reflect council needs?
- State associations are very inconsistent – many weaker or less active ones need capacity training to bring them up to some sort of standard
- Council communication with the state association is difficult

Somewhat:

- There are some conflicts, some nonresponsiveness
- Councils want more information (TX)

Is your regional association responsive to the needs of councils and state associations?

Yes:

- it provides training for board members and councils
- it shares ideas with councils
- good communication with councils through teleconferences, etc. (southeast)
- good leadership (southeast)
- scholarships for faraway councils (Pacific Rim)
- effective meetings (said by all regions except for north central)
- promotes Circle of Diamonds membership (southeast)
- good mobilization for Congressional letter writing
- good regional newsletters and meetings (New England)
- responsive to councils (western)
- regional membership on national board helps councils stay informed (north central)

No:

- it has no authority, it's purely ceremonial in nature, doesn't do anything, has too many layers, does not offer real leadership (**repeated: 1**)
- Regional presidents have too much to do
- Too much focus on local developments – need more of the “big picture”
- Need better follow up with Congress
- Need to sell Circle of Diamonds better and follow up on progress made by councils
- No website assistance
- Councils usually bypass regional association and go straight to NARC&DC
- Apart from annual meetings, there's little communication
- Regional associations need to be more diverse
- Don't know what the purpose of the regional association is

Other comments:

- Regional associations might become unnecessary if the NARC&DC can promote better communication and sharing of state success stories
- Membership on the NARC&DC board of directors should be open to regional association members, not just regional officers
- Sometimes overlapping occurs between association levels – not clear on roles (**repeated: 1**)
- Funding is limited for regional associations to send board members to national conferences
- Regional associations have potential but are not living up to it – “need warm bodies in key positions” (Pacific Rim)

What are the most critical needs of local councils today?

Internal

- Balancing the many needs of the council
- Career development of coordinators
- More focused business attitude – councils need to think of themselves as a business
- General personnel issues

- Develop a matrix of how issues fit together
- Greater council member activity, attendance, accountability (**times repeated: 2**)
- Greater council vitality/motivation – lack of enthusiasm and commitment from council members (**times repeated: 1**)
- Diversity of council members or gaps in skills distribution – need to include professions other than agriculture, e.g., legal, financial, economic development (**times repeated: 3**)
- Council diversity – need to include more members of the community
- Recruit younger council members (**times repeated: 1**)
- Recruiting new board members – whom to approach? how? (**times repeated: 1**)
- Keep council bylaws proactive, revised, and workable (**times repeated: 1**)
- Accountability
- Strategic planning
- Specific planning areas: outreach, marketing, funding
- Program diversification
- Vision – RC&D isn't a “ready out of the box” program, it depends upon vision and leadership
- Better PR/publicity, especially connected with success stories – greater exposure to the community (**times repeated: 4**)
- More communication with politicians – local, state, and federal
- One full-time coordinator for every council (**times repeated: 2**)
- Loss of quality coordinators
- Administrative assistants for councils / build an office staff (**times repeated: 3**)
- Congressional appropriations/support for the program (**times repeated: 1**)
- Understanding OMB circulars
- State support for the program
- Training and empowerment for coordinators (criticism directed at NRCS)

External

- Summaries of legislation and legislative issues
- Legislative outreach
- Guidance from the national office
- Links with urban populations
- Greater availability of success stories that can be duplicated elsewhere
- Availability of legal and financial advice
- More training opportunities for council members (not just coordinators): orientation for new members, financial management, roles and responsibilities, PR, fee-for-services possibilities, capacity building (**times repeated: 6**)
- Funding/grants (**times repeated: 8**)
- Funding diversity – not just grants
- Matching funds
- Grant writing assistance – help writing grants or training (**times repeated: 1**)
- Better partnerships through better relationships, more sharing of funding and other resources (**times repeated: 1**)
- More peer-to-peer (council-to-council) communication outside of government boundaries
- From applicant areas: Is anyone advocating for us? What's the long-term plan? How can we fit better into the RC&D network? How will authorizations move forward?

- Health benefits and other insurance for the council and council employees – can we do this as a group or network to lower costs?

What are the critical issues your council will address in the next 3-5 years?

Internal/operations:

- Congressional appropriations/support for the program (**times repeated: 1**)
- Sustainability and long-term funding for council projects and budgets (**times repeated: 6**)
- Diversity of funding (**times repeated: 2**)
- Preparation for financial independence
- High work burden for council coordinators
- Loss of coordinator
- Need for paid staff to supplement coordinator (**times repeated: 3**)
- Improved board capacity
- PR for councils – telling the RC&D story better (**times repeated: 2**)
- More effective partnerships
- Involving youth in council projects and management, succession planning (**times repeated: 5**)
- Keeping up with evolving technology
- NRCS support for RC&D – councils need support from NRCS in general (i.e., NRCS stands behind the program) and also access to all the various types of support that NRCS can provide
- Ability to react to change
- Flexibility
- Remaining relevant to the community: “Why are we here? Are we in touch with our area?”
- Time commitment and constraints (**times repeated: 1**)
- Need to adapt to NRCS policy changes

Community and project themes:

- Changing demographics
- Outreach to new and small farmers
- Partnerships with Native American tribes
- More assistance for the underserved
- Support for agricultural businesses
- Conservation / natural resource education – reconnect people to the land (**times repeated: 1**)
- Brain drain in rural areas
- Community vitality
- Internet and broadband access in rural America
- Job creation and retention, especially good-paying jobs (**times repeated: 3**)
- Relief from regulatory burdens – permitting processes
- Community business/job development – tourism/agritourism/ecotourism, value-added products (**times repeated: 1**)
- Timber industry
- Community energy planning
- Energy conservation
- Energy – development of green/alternative/renewable energy (**times repeated: 4**)
- Provision of affordable energy to rural communities
- Biomass and forest fires – wildland/urban interface (**times repeated: 2**)

- Waste treatment – failing infrastructure (**times repeated: 4**)
- Recycling and innovative use of waste products
- Water quality and quantity – drought, flooding, pollution, storm water (**times repeated: 4**)
- Streambank erosion
- Air quality
- Land use planning, protecting agricultural lands, retaining open spaces (**times repeated: 2**)
- Urban conservation
- Historical preservation
- Cultural preservation – knowledge and customs in Tribal communities
- Climate change
- Local food (**times repeated: 1**)
- Organic food production
- Foreclosure counseling
- Affordable housing (**times repeated: 1**)
- Endangered species
- Invasive species (**times repeated: 4**)
- Insect-borne diseases – Lyme disease

What services do local councils, states associations, and regional associations need from the NARC&DC?

DC-centric/lobbying:

- Serve as a bridge between council voices and RC&D program administration – work locally to gain Congressional support (**times repeated: 1**)
- Better capturing of RC&D activities (performance measures) that show RC&D's strength
- Better sharing of success stories and contact information for success stories – need to create a database or catalogue with summaries (**times repeated: 2**)
- Advocacy for more money and one full-time coordinator per council (**times repeated: 1**)
- Lobbying/legislative liaison – two-way communication: with Congress about councils and with councils about Congress (**times repeated: 4**)
- More effective lobbying effort: the OMB complaint (re: councils paying their own way) has not been effectively answered
- Continued lobbying for funding of shovel-ready projects (not just the RC&D program)
- Branding and marketing of RC&D, both internally and externally (**times repeated: 1**)
- More vigorous lobbying – stronger stands on relevant issues, better explanation of the value of coordinators (**times repeated: 2**)
- PR on all state results to elected officials – nice booklet with pictures
- Create a flow chart of lines of authority and staff (both government and private) involved with RC&D
- Training and support within USDA/NRCS
- More training for USDA – it needs to understand and support RC&D better
- National partnerships with private industry
- Create partnerships with other federal agencies outside the USDA
- More transparency from the NARC&DC

Council-focused/local:

Training

- More help on legal and accounting issues – personal assistance, model documents & policies (by-laws, etc.) **(times repeated: 4)**
- Training on how to fundraise – locate grants, sponsors, foundations
- Identify trainers – e.g., Sarah Knight
- Training – topics: new members, develop local leaders, mentorship **(times repeated: 4)**
- Web-based training **(times repeated: 4)**
- Make PowerPoint presentations from the National Conference available

Publications

- Factsheets: role of coordinators, role of executive director, nonprofit reporting requirements, self-sufficiency, programs offered by USDA agencies
- Guidebooks (sustainability, financial management, etc.) are good
- *Catalyst* – neutral opinion

Communication

- Direct mail to council members
- More communication from NARC&DC to regional and state associations and local councils **(times repeated: 1)**
- More council member input in national issues – bottom-up leadership **(times repeated: 1)**
- More user-friendly listserv
- Listserv is good, but topics are scattered
- Make listserv available to all (council members, council offices)
- More conference calls and other communications **(times repeated: 1)**
- Communication and feedback from NARC&DC to and from local councils on the usefulness of information provided
- Podcasts (or other audio recordings) of National Conference trainings
- Faster response time on telephone calls

Other

- NARC&DC Regional coordinator to represent local needs and assist regions **(repeated: 1)**
- National conferences – good for networking, training – perhaps every two years? **(times repeated: 2)**
- Maintain a volunteer hour database
- Computers for all
- National PR campaign – national accomplishments of the RC&D program should be known locally **(times repeated: 1)**
- More funding opportunities for local councils **(times repeated: 2)**
- Grant writing clearing house – e.g., password-protected database to share grant proposals **(times repeated: 1)**
- Assistance with uniformity of program administration and the national director (?)
- Update/expand/improve the NARC&DC website **(times repeated: 2)**
- More user-friendly website
- Post guidelines for important compliance issues on the website
- Evaluation of regional and national meeting topics and schedules
- Provide more details on council success stories so that others councils can duplicate them
- Focused/concentrated support for troubled councils
- Connect applicant areas to RC&D networks, including creating a liaison at national level
- Serve as an umbrella to enable RC&D to purchase insurance more cheaply, process payroll

What can the NARC&DC do to address those needs?

General DC-centric or national

- Clarify the specific role of the NRCS to NARC&DC
- Show program accountability to Congress
- Clarify the NARC&DC's relationship with the NRCS and USDA
- Work with the NRCS to revamp POINTS **(times repeated: 1)**
- "Ferret out" friend from foe at the NRCS and other agencies
- Strengthen the relationship with the NRCS chief
- Cultivate more respect for the RC&D program at the national level (Congress, USDA, NRCS)
- Seek other federal partners for RC&D – through contracts, changes to legislation **(times repeated: 1)**
- Advocate for higher funding levels
- Determine who at the federal level is the stumbling block for understanding RC&D
- Do a better job of reporting RC&D activities and successes to Congress **(times repeated: 1)**
- Create committees to address RC&D needs composed of representatives from national, regional, and state levels
- Run a nationwide campaign to inform the public of RC&D activities and accomplishments **(times repeated: 1)**
- Seek alternative sources of program funding – e.g., nationwide planned giving program
- Find corporate sponsors
- Need a change of leadership style between councils and national level
- NARC&DC needs more money so that it can do more
- Seek funding for the NARC&DC from sources other than dues
- Put all policies on the national website
- Post agendas and minutes from NARC&DC board meetings to the website

For councils

- Communicate more often and better with councils – e.g., what has the national association done? What services are available? How are annual dues used? **(times repeated: 4)**
- Listen better to councils
- Direct mail to council members
- Electronic distribution of all materials (publications, factsheets, etc.) **(times repeated: 1)**
- E-communication (emails and web-based info)
- Provide a hierarchy (council/state/region/national) of information flow
- Legislative alerts to targeted audience
- Services: grant search, grant writing, self-sufficiency training, legal assistance **(repeated: 1)**
- Factsheets on the role of coordinators, executive directors; how to buy buildings and pay for staff, indirect vs. direct costs; how to sign up for the listserv
- Publications and guidebooks **(times repeated: 1)**
- More training on new/emerging issues (e.g., new IRS 990 form)
- Training at all levels **(times repeated: 2)**
- Training at regional and national meetings
- Update training materials

- Make web-based training courses (webcasts, etc.) and training PowerPoints available (**times repeated: 3**)
- Develop local leaders
- Focused meetings and discussions with leadership – program and NARC&DC
- Encourage involvement from councils
- Publicize/market its services more vigorously to councils and the public
- Website: include financial training info, success stories, easy-to-find links to councils, make home page more user-friendly, upgrade FAQs
- Easier access to success stories – info on what works for councils (**times repeated: 1**)
- Create an internet chat room
- Create a website template that councils can use to create their own websites
- Quarterly/monthly contact system with federal legislators to let councils know what has been said and when
- Expedite the Circle of Diamonds process
- Do a better job of explaining the importance of the Circle of Diamonds
- Use a different procedure when sending out materials – not all the publications are useful, and some remain unused
- One-page document to highlight the top three issues that the NARC&DC is working on

For state associations

- Offer more training – e.g., capacity/skills building (**times repeated: 3**)
- Develop local leaders
- Conference calls to discuss important issues
- More communication with state leaders (**times repeated: 1**)
- Help them incorporate and become legal entities
- Update the NARC&DC website
- Every state association needs a program manager
- Identify priority statewide issues
- Be more organized, especially when talking about statewide projects
- Market RC&D better (**times repeated: 1**)
- Find new state-wide partnership opportunities

For regional associations

- More communication with councils (**times repeated: 1**)
- More e-communication (emails and web-based info) in particular
- Voluntary dues
- Develop local leaders

What can the RC&D program (NRCS) do to address those needs?

At the DC office – program-wide:

- Provide more funding
- Train NRCS personnel so that they know their roles
- Educate other NRCS personnel about what RC&D is all about
- RC&D supervisors and program managers need special training to increase their knowledge of the RC&D program

- Resolve conflicts, overlapping authority, and insufficient coordination among state program managers and conservationists – they sometimes have different goals, and councils are stuck in the middle
- Partner with the SBA, RD, and others – the NRCS can't do everything necessary to effectively support the RC&D program (**times repeated: 1**)
- Closer cooperation between RC&D, NRCS, and NACD
- Look at the USDA mission instead of focusing on NRCS
- Better connections and communication among the various NRCS/RC&D levels (**times repeated: 1**)
- Hold town hall meetings every few years with NRCS and RC&D leaders (state conservationists and RC&D program managers)
- Decrease the number of top-down directives and the insistence with which they are applied/enforced: they often depart from grassroots needs
- Improve the NRCS website
- Resolve the program funding issue: some potential coordinators don't want to apply for vacancies because of the uncertainty of funds
- Come together with the NARC&DC to craft common messages
- Better communication between national HQ and states
- Take a bottom-up – not a top-down – approach: RC&D is by nature a bottom-up program, but the USDA insists on top-down directives, criteria, etc.
- Facilitate better communication between state program managers, state associations, and state conservationists
- Program managers are forced to wear too many hats
- Funding for states (i.e., the allocation among states) needs to be more transparent
- Each council should receive the same amount of money
- When it's time to draft the next Farm Bill, have an RC&D representative on the advisory board
- If the NRCS wants to defund RC&D, then it needs to provide a strategy and tools so that the program can become self-sustaining
- Policy Advisory Board needs to be more active

For councils & coordinators:

- Fill coordinator vacancies / provide full-time coordinators for all councils much more quickly (**times repeated: 3**)
- Don't assign coordinators to multiple council areas
- Promote success stories more and recognize council work in full (**times repeated: 1**)
- Offer more training opportunities (**repeated: 2**)
- Decrease the administrative burden placed upon coordinators
- More stability for coordinators: one council had four coordinators in one year
- Poor coordinators (with the wrong skill set) need to be let go or made to retire
- Allow the coordinator job description to adapt to council circumstances
- Consolidate coordinators' office with other USDA offices or a USDA service center
- Coordinators' supervisor should be an RC&D state coordinator
- Reviews of coordinator performance should include council performance, including area plan with recommendations for improvement

- Coordinator cans & cannots: “immunity” for coordinators, both sides of ethics approach training
- Provide project funding
- Develop more opportunities to work with other USDA agencies
- Provide funding for an assistant
- Provide more positive publicity from state public affairs offices
- Councils need to understand NRCS and its employees better
- Allow for updating of area plans: changing conditions need to be reflected, otherwise plans can become out of date
- For rejected area plans: give clarification of SMART goal shortcomings to make correction easier

On POINTS/reporting database

- POINTS needs to be updated and made more flexible to capture the variety and value of RC&D projects (**times repeated: 7**)
- Mine the data in the POINTS database for information other than long-term performance goals (**times repeated: 1**)
- Find a way to give coordinators credit for successful projects when those projects don’t fit among mainstream USDA objectives/goals (**times repeated: 1**)
- More acceptance of council projects that don’t jibe with NRCS priorities
- Revamp the POINTS database by asking councils how success should be measured
- Show how councils can break projects into smaller pieces to better measure and show success
- Be willing to listen to and accept interim progress on projects
- Find a way to capture project research and preparation work in POINTS
- Capture not just the outcomes but also the processes in POINTS
- Tutorial/training on reporting in POINTS
- Needs to recognize the unique relationship with business and nonprofits
- Make POINTS user-friendly

What can state associations do to address those needs?

- Hire staff for the association – it needs a permanent staff presence
- Needs more buy-in from councils or needs to do a better job of selling projects to them
- Every state association should have a website and newsletter
- Post meeting agendas and minutes – for greater transparency
- More e-communication (emails and web-based info)
- Voluntary dues
- Need to look for more project and funding opportunities for councils (**times repeated: 1**)
- Provide training
- Help councils meet their priority needs – energy and climate change
- Incorporate – become a legal entity
- Communicate more and better with councils – e.g., set up periodic teleconferences with council presidents (**times repeated: 1**)
- Hire paid staff – this would provide more stability and responsiveness
- Create goals and plans – too often the purpose of state associations is unclear
- State association presidents should attend one local council meeting every year

- Create statewide annual reports – summarize project results into a booklet for legislative/lobbying/PR use (**times repeated: 1**)
- Create a marketing plan for the state association
- Be more active in DC
- Create a website for the state that councils can use
- Perform council performance reviews using area plans as the basis
- Work collectively at the state level with other conservation partners

What can regional associations do to address those needs?

- Clarify their purpose, role, achievements to all involved, but especially to councils (**times repeated: 1**)
- More and better communication with councils – listen better (**times repeated: 2**)
- Better communication with state presidents
- Improve communications at all levels and in all directions – state, regional, and national
- Develop a better defined role and clear responsibilities
- Need to improve regional leadership and capacity through training so that regional associations can play a greater role
- Annual meetings at the regional level
- Help identify training topics for state and regional meetings
- Transfer information from the national level to state associations
- Create a website and link it to both local councils and the NARC&DC website
- Newsletter and listserv for regional happenings
- Regional association presidents should attend one state meeting every year
- Set term limits (**times repeated: 2**)
- Apply for grant funds
- Help develop a means to record all volunteer time for NRCS
- Develop working relationships with regional NRCS conservationists
- Lobby at the regional level
- Synthesize projects results from the region – create an annual report
- Provide funds to send delegates to the Leadership Forum
- Network more among each other – region-to-region networking
- Bring more NARC&DC training to state and regional meetings (**times repeated: 1**)
- Update training for coordinators
- Provide training to council members (esp. on ethics)
- Training topics suggested: language training, cultural awareness
- Need to bring additional counties into existing councils

Of the critical issues mentioned, which should the national association address?

Prioritize (*only one facilitated group did this*) ---

- Marketing of RC&D, both internally and externally
- Advocacy – issues: more money and one full-time coordinator per council
- More funding opportunities for local councils
- More communication from NARC&DC to regional and state associations and local councils
- Training

Concerns have been raised in Congress about underperforming councils. Funding for RC&D is in decline through the federal appropriations process. Coordinators can no longer serve in a full time capacity for councils. If Congress cuts funding further, what actions should be taken? Should underperforming councils be eliminated? What are the characteristics of an underperforming council?

Criteria/means to identify underperforming councils:

- Ability to meet goals in council strategic plans or area plans (**repeated: 5**)
- Use the POINTS system to measure low performing councils (**times repeated: 2**)
- Money – the size of council budgets and ability to leverage federal funds (**times repeated: 1**)
- Money – councils should be able to match federal funding (i.e., raise at least \$150K) (**times repeated: 2**)
- Money – ability to pay dues to NARC&DC
- Scope or scale of projects – larger ones should count for more
- Smaller projects should be just as important as larger ones
- Self-sufficiency – independence from outside assistance
- Actions/partnerships with local or state organizations
- Added value to the community
- Determine if the council is really necessary for its community – who else can fill its role?
- Number of total volunteer hours (**times repeated: 1**)
- Frequency of meetings of entire membership (should be at least 3-4 times/year) – a council that no longer meets is a failed, or at least a failing, council
- Lack of a quorum at meetings (**times repeated: 1**)
- Circle of Diamonds membership (councils with enhanced memberships would score double) (**times repeated: 2**)
- Number of success stories
- Survey councils' local partners and/or sponsors
- Coordinator fails to show up
- Inadequate employees
- Councils need to be self-supporting – answer the question, “If the coordinator left, would the council survive?”
- What do the NRCS and Congress regard as “underperforming”?
- Whatever the criteria and methods, they must use standardized measurement
- Difficult to set criteria – conditions vary by state
- Projects vary greatly from council to council and can not be a determining factor in performance assessment
- Population bases across council areas may vary greatly and have large impacts upon activities

Approaches to take with underperforming councils:

- Ask councils if they want to cease operations or merge with another council – consolidate councils (**times repeated: 1**)
- Be careful to identify those councils that do not have a full-time coordinator
- Determine which councils can be productive without a coordinator – if some strong councils can graduate from their federal funding and sustain themselves, then more resources will be available for underperforming councils
- So-called “underperforming councils” should not be eliminated

- Coordinators' time dedicated to council work should not be reduced
- Keep funding to help underachieving councils achieve their mission
- Provide a probationary period – if the council can't become self-sufficient, move funding to another council
- First try to fix an underperforming council before eliminating it
- Provide a probationary period of two years
- Provide training for coordinators – undertrained coordinators result in underperforming councils
- Closer supervision of coordinators
- NRCS should evaluate coordinators of underperforming councils
- Take into account that it takes a while for coordinators to settle into their posts and become effective
- Council members need to be held accountable as well as coordinators
- Other councils need to be given an opportunity to pitch in and assist the underperforming
- *Comment:* "It's not fair that the worst performing get the most aid – e.g., GM."
- We need to understand why Congress and/or the NRCS are asking these questions about underperforming councils

If funding for the program is cut:

- Seek funding from other sources – other NRCS, USDA, federal agencies **(times repeated: 2)**
- Share coordinators among councils **(times repeated: 2)**
- Give up nonprofit status and become for-profit businesses – privatize RC&D **(times repeated: 1)**
- Consolidate councils **(times repeated: 1)**
- Merge with another (non-RC&D) nonprofit
- Eliminate underperforming councils
- Ask participating counties for larger contributions
- Ask states for funding – work with state legislators for support **(times repeated: 1)**
- Share costs – the council can pay for office space, phone, etc.
- Councils can provide an office assistant
- Every council needs a Plan B
- NARC&DC needs to find alternative funding sources
- Change the limits on required elements in the program
- Use Pay Pal to help with donations
- Lobby to make program funding mandatory
- Councils can provide their own office space
- Run a PR campaign to show the worth of the program

What other comments do you want to make?

What other concerns do you have that you want the NARC&DC to address?

- There are no underperforming councils, although there are underperforming coordinators and council members. There are only councils that have not realized their full potential. A specific, detailed, helpful, cheerful, loving, team approach needs to be devised to work with these councils to define, measure, and reach expectations to meet critical RC&D needs.
- The RC&D program periodically needs an injection of new blood at all levels to avoid stagnation and entrenchment.

- Coordinators are a liaison to councils – the NRCS does not control councils – and sometimes councils go in a direction that the NRCS does not approve of. In those cases, the coordinator should not be criticized.
- The list of recommendations that comes out of the National Conference facilitated sessions should be posted on the NARC&DC website so that conference participants and the public can see them. Concrete plans should also be made to put the proposed changes into place.