



# Establishing Operating Procedures for the Planning Committee

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## What is it?

Operating procedures address how the Planning Committee members will function as a team. Operating procedures are not directly related to the substantive resource issues the Planning Committee is working to solve. Rather, they concern procedural things such as who will chair the committee, how member absences will be handled, who will take meeting minutes, and how agendas will be distributed.

Operating procedures for Planning Committees are similar to the bylaws of boards, councils and commissions. However, because the newly-formed, volunteer Planning Committee does not have legal responsibility for the operation and management of an organization, the formal written bylaws typical of boards is not warranted. Instead, it's usually sufficient for the Planning Committee to make decisions about the procedures that will be effective throughout the planning process, and document them in the meeting minutes. Later, if the committee reorganizes as a membership group accepting public funds, applies for non-profit status, or achieves some other legally-recognized status, then more formal documentation of procedures will be needed.

## When do we do it?

Discussion about procedures which will guide the activities and functions of the Planning Committee should take place during the first few meetings.

## Why do we do it?

Making procedural decisions early on helps move the Planning Committee from a disparate group of individuals to a cohesive, organized committee. Operating procedures helps the Planning Committee stay focused throughout the planning on the resource problems and solutions. Meetings are not spent debating what to do about an absent committee member or deciding who should take notes. A consistent record of committee proceedings is maintained. Members know who to call with questions between meetings, and they're confident of when the committee will normally meet. In short, operating procedures adds consistency and reliability to the planning process, and helps the committee get things done.

## How do we do it?

Decisions about operating procedures are made by the Planning Committee. With assistance from a facilitator, resource planning specialist, District Conservationist, or other key individual, the Planning Committee should discuss the following:

### • *Planning Committee Leadership*

The Planning Committee selects a Chairperson. Some Planning Committees chose two Co-Chairs to share responsibilities. The Chairperson is the primary liaison between the Planning Committee and NRCS (and other Conservation Partners who are lending planning support). The Chairperson works with the Planning Committee to establish meeting agendas. He or she is responsible for sending correspondence to Planning Committee members between meetings,

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communicating with the Technical Advisory Committee, and in general, working with NRCS and other partners to make sure the planning effort is proceeding on schedule. The Chairperson is often designated as the primary contact person who can answer questions and provide information to the public.

The Planning Committee decides how a Chairperson will be selected. Typically one or more people on the Planning Committee volunteers to act as the Committee Chairperson. Sometimes, members will nominate someone. If more than one person is interested, the Planning Committee may want to vote and “elect” the person receiving the most votes.

#### • *Attrition and Absenteeism*

The Planning Committee decides how absences among Planning Committee members will be handled. People occasionally miss meetings. Most committees establish a procedure for member absences which indicate if an individual misses a meeting, then the decisions made at missed meetings cannot be disputed by the absent member. In another words, the process continues even if someone cannot attend a meeting.

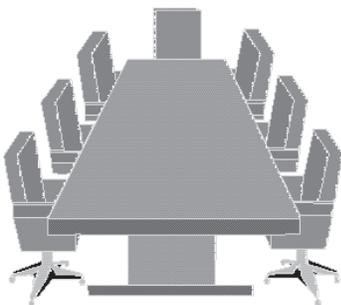
On occasion, people may also need to drop out of the planning process. Adding new members can be problematic in the middle of the planning process because new members may not agree with what has taken place, and “starting over” may be discouraging to the rest of the committee. On the other hand, new stakeholders should generally agree with the decisions of the Planning Committee because the Planning Committee should be representative of all the views and interests in the planning area.

In any case, one or two people resigning from the Planning Committee usually does not cause problems and does not warrant replacing them. However, if many people are no longer participating, then it may suggest that interest and support for the planning is lacking. Heavy attrition warrants an honest look at whether the community supports and is interested in the planning project.

#### • *Tenure*

The planning process tends to take a year or more. Usually Planning Committee members want to stay involved through the entire process. After the management plan is completed, give everyone an opportunity to end their participation with a sense of accomplishment and provide closure for a job well done. Then, any individuals who wish to remain active during the implementation of the plan can chose to do so, and those who don't can end their participation.

It is important to distinguish between the tenure expected of members during the planning phase compared to tenure during implementation. To successfully complete a resource plan, consistent participation from the same group of stakeholders is needed. However, once the resource plan is completed, a more fluid mix of participants to guide implementation is preferred. Of course, not all Planning Committees formally “reinvent” themselves as Implementation Committees, but if they do, the goal is generally to have an on-going advisory committee that can help insure implementation of the plan. Because these implementation committees may be indefinitely active, it's critical that new stakeholders continually become involved.



#### • *Meeting Location*

A regular meeting time and place helps committee members consistently attend meetings. The Planning Committee decides how often they will meet, and for how long. Many committees meet once a month, though meeting more frequently can move things along faster. It's best to limit any meeting to two hours, except for special events like watershed tours or conferences.

#### • *Decision Making Process*

The Planning Committee determines how they will make decisions. Most substantive decisions are best made by consensus. The group has consensus when everyone can support the decision. With consensus, each person may not agree with every aspect of the decision, but they can lend their support to it. Less substantive decisions, such as who will chair the committee, can be made by vote.

#### • *Authority in Decision Making*

Usually, each stakeholder on the Planning Committees has equal decision-making status. The Chairperson may act as the spokesperson for the group, but does not have more authority than anyone else. Furthermore, each committee member represents the community at large.

#### • *Other Issues*

Other procedural issues that the Planning Committee will want to address include how agendas will be distributed, confidentiality of meeting discussions, public communication, and roles and responsibilities of members.

### **The Next Step**

After the Planning Committee has established their operating procedures and agreed on the planning area (see "Defining the Planning Area"), they will need to identify the resource concerns. Refer to the factsheet "Identifying Resource Concerns."

### **For more information**

*"Developing Effective and Efficient Local Committees,"* by Delwyn Dyer and Oscar Williams, Alabama A&M and Auburn Universities and Tuskegee Univ., Cooperating, 1999.

*"Developing Effective Boards, Councils, or Commissions,"* by Delwyn Dyer and Oscar Williams, Alabama A&M and Auburn Universities and Tuskegee Univ., Cooperating, 1999.