

# HOW TO SET UP AN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

## Membership Criteria

In the introduction, we gave an overview of becoming a joint lead or cooperating agency status under NEPA guidelines. Now we want to explore in more depth how to set up a local advisory committee and what requirements should be placed on membership in that committee.

The first thing to understand is that people won't generally be interested in giving more of their time to another committee unless they feel directly affected by a regulatory action of a government agency or maybe a lawsuit that will affect the use of their property. Knowing this, having an issue that will affect people directly will always make this commitment more palatable. Finding issues that will affect people involved in natural resource industries such as farming, ranching, timber, home building or recreation is not very hard. With only these industries as a starting point, it shouldn't be difficult to find people who will be affected by a regulation that reduces their ability to use their land or other resources, such as water.

A few rules to live by for the committee and its individual members can be very helpful in keeping the activities of the committee moving. For example, here are a few guidelines to consider adopting:

### Committee responsibilities

- Keep the process simple
- Keep the local government involved and aware of work being done
- Keep county residents participating
- Be driven by the private sector
- Establish the meeting and process rules at the first committee meeting
  - Term limits is a good idea (2-3 years)
  - Meeting length (2 hours is long enough)
  - Chair and vice-chair
- Conduct efficient meetings
- Be goal oriented
- Leave ego at the door
- Establish how the press will be dealt with, who will answer questions and what information is to be given

### Committee membership criteria

- Knowledge of county
- Technical expertise
- Commitment to the process
- Represent the county's diversity
- Have solution-oriented thinking
- Dedication to follow-through
- Possess a cooperative, not combative, spirit
- Trust others and be trustworthy

You may have noticed the principles discussed here are also found in the introduction to this book because we are relying on the successful experience of Wallowa County, Oregon. While these are only suggested guidelines, your committee will be much more productive if expectations

are set in the beginning. We emphasize the importance of involvement from the private sector for a reason: they bring the most to the table and have the least amount of time to spend on the problem. These attributes create a desire to find a solution and pursue it efficiently. Private sector people know from first-hand experience what the issues are and probably have an idea of how to solve the problem with the least amount of waste, in both effort and resources. The other reason for private sector leadership is that these people are not being paid to be there like a government employee is; this gives them more incentive to be efficient.

Let's discuss briefly what we mean by these criteria. Why do we emphasize something like keeping the process simple? The task of sitting down and writing a natural resource strategy can be very daunting and will keep people from stepping forward to help if you don't simplify the work as much as possible. This also goes hand-in-hand with working efficiently: You can accomplish a lot more when everyone understands the process and what is expected. At its first meeting, the committee should establish rules for how the committee will operate so that all the members know immediately what is expected of them and whether they will be able to operate within the guidelines set forth. You should also establish terms for those sitting on the committee, even though many will gladly stay on for additional terms; everyone needs the option of getting off the committee for a break. These limits also serve as an opportunity to bring on new faces and fresh ideas. Don't forget, this is a process that if done correctly, will live beyond any individual and will be carried on by the next generation of resource providers.

As an advisory committee, you are responsible to the local governing body, and as such you have to keep those elected officials involved with and apprised of the work you are doing. This will not only help them understand what you are doing and why, but also will help make them your ally when you want to adopt the work you have spent so much time doing. Remember, the local government has the voice for dealing with government agencies and if they don't like what you are doing, you are wasting your time.

Egos can get in the way of any cooperative process; we want to develop the kind of working relationship with everyone at the table that will allow us to speak openly and constructively and to prevent any one person from taking credit for the work being done. I know one person who told me his committee members were either going to leave their ego at the door when they came to the meeting or the rest of the committee was going to take it away from them after they got in the door; the choice was theirs.

As for individual criteria, again we are not trying to set hard and fast rules, but every person at the table should be there for what they have to contribute, not what they will get out of it. Things like knowledge and expertise are fairly obvious, but have you considered how committed you are to this process? Your dedication and your ability to work with people can make or break this kind of a process. You have to be able to sit across from someone you disagree with, even if you don't particularly like the individual, and be willing to stay there until you find some common ground, and you will. Believe it or not, if you back up far enough you will often find that most people want the same end result, but their roads to that result can be as different as a cow trail and an interstate. Now keep in mind that I'm talking about two people who live in the same county and truly want what is best for the county and not just to serve their own interests.