

History of LEARN

In December of 1999 a group of grassroots activists from the Walla Walla County Farm Bureau brought a resolution to the floor of the annual convention of the Washington Farm Bureau that began a process of teaching grassroots people all over the country what their rights are and more importantly what the rights of their local governments are. Washington Farm Bureau President Steve Appel appointed a committee to develop a program of training that could be used to teach elected county officials and grassroots leaders not only their rights, but also how to engage federal and state agencies in a process that would put all affected parties at the table to develop solutions to natural resource problems.

President Appel appointed someone to chair that committee who had no idea what he was agreeing to. My learning curve has been vertical ever since. Through the patient instruction of those with greater knowledge than I possess, we have been able to develop training materials and put together training workshops to help local officials and their constituents take their rightful place at the planning table with other government agencies. This created the County Empowerment Program in the Washington Farm Bureau.

The first step was to contact attorney Karen Budd-Falen from Cheyenne, Wyoming, a specialist in natural resource law, to assist us in putting together the materials necessary to show how local planning was a legal process and the rights of local government really were protected under the laws and constitution of the United States. As a result we have developed a strong working relationship with the Budd-Falen Law Offices. That relationship has provided us with not only legal advice, but also Karen; as a speaker at our training workshops, has given people a perspective on the law and our rights that we otherwise would not have.

John Williams, Extension Agent for Oregon State University in Wallowa County offered his expertise as someone who had been involved from the beginning of this type of process in Wallawa County. John's experience in local planning has been instrumental in establishing the materials and information that counties need. John has served on the Wallowa County Natural Resource Advisory Committee since its beginnings in the early 1990's and has hands-on experience in putting together meaningful natural resource plans. Through John's efforts we have developed a strong working relationship with OSU extension to further satisfy the needs of the program and those we have been trying to serve.

With a training team assembled, we were ready to move forward into our first of many workshops to present the materials and ideas for local governments to use to protect their community stability. As I moved out among the counties and learned what their needs were, I realized that we still did not have everything needed to move into the development of the natural resource strategy that was so sorely needed. From that information gathering I became aware that we had to have not only a formula from successful counties, but also a detailed process to follow to implement that formula in every county in the United States. That created the *Writing Local Plans* seminar where we could show people how to research the law, build a working advisory committee, establish goals and identify issues, all for the purpose of writing a natural resource

strategy for the local government to fall back on if their community stability was threatened.

Our first resource book, known as *Bringing People Together*, was a three-ring binder of various forms and documents for local citizens to reference in order to empower their local government. From that binder now comes this book, *Strengthening a Nation from Within: Bringing People Together*. This latest version combines the resources previously available with the most recently developed materials to take the local government to the next step of developing the advisory group and natural resource strategy necessary to protect the custom, culture, economy and environment (community stability) of their county.

Out of the County Empowerment Program has now developed the Local Environment and Resource Network (L.E.A.R.N.). This latest project is designed to provide a national scope to the County Empowerment Program. Trying to help the planning processes of counties throughout the nation, a group of individuals from grassroots organizations across the country created L.E.A.R.N. This process is founded in federal law and the Constitution; therefore, it applies to every state and county in the United States and not just in the West or places with a high percentage of federal land. Natural resource planning covers federal, state and private lands for the purpose of coordinating the actions of all agencies from the federal to the local governments.

Today we have the knowledge, the people and now the resources available to protect our way of life and property rights in rural and urban America. This country was built on the foundation of private-property ownership and individual rights as the cornerstones of freedom. It is not only our privilege, but also our responsibility to protect those rights we hold so dear. We must not allow those responsibilities to be taken away by a central government that believes it holds the answer, for we will not like that answer when it comes.

Dave Winckler