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COMMENTS ON INTERIM RULE TECHNICAL SERVICE PROVIDER ASSISTANCE (7 CFR PART 652)

EXCERPT FROM GAO REPORT #02-295

Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) released a study on April 2, 2002 by the General Accounting Office (GAO) on how USDA conservation programs can better address environmental concerns.

The report, GAO Report #02-295, "Agricultural Conservation - State Advisory Committees' Views on How USDA Programs Could Better Address Environmental Concerns," states that all USDA conservation programs provide inadequate technical assistance to producers.

The report also criticizes USDA for not making programs broad enough and for not using flexibility to modify programs, so more can be done to better address critical environmental needs at the local level.

The GAO report is based on a nationwide survey of over 1,400 state technical committee members. Its introductory letter to the Senate Ag Committee states that "Farmers, ranchers, and private forest landowners own and manage more than two-thirds of the continental United States' 1.9 billion acres and thus are the primary stewards of our soil, water, and wildlife habitat. Because of this important responsibility, how private land is used is increasingly being recognized as vital to the protection of the nation's environment and natural resources." The report states that

- "[State technical committee] Members indicated a preference for program elements that provide increased flexibility that would enable the programs to better adapt to the diverse situations faced by landowners across the nation as well as increased emphasis on local conservation priorities."
- "... members would like to be able to tailor new or existing programs to the farming practices in their states as well as increase emphasis on programs that keep lands in production."
- In fact "Eighty percent of committee members believed that programs should emphasize local conservation needs while only 24 percent would emphasize national needs."

The report says, "Committee members cited several elements of the current programs that hinder achievement of environmental objectives." For example

- "Most of the current programs allow landowners to implement only a limited selection of conservation practices. More than 80 percent of members viewed allowing a broad array of conservation practices as 'very' or 'extremely' important in modifying current programs or designing new programs."
- "...three-quarters of members identified the need for less stringent eligibility requirements."
- "About 70 percent of members also said that providing eligibility to all types of operations is an important design element."
- "More than two-thirds of members cited program provisions that do not allow landowners to receive compensation for maintaining previously implemented landowner-financed conservation practices as a hindrance ..."
- "About 60 percent of members indicated that the prohibition on the USDA's sharing the cost of the construction of waste structures for large livestock and poultry operation 'somewhat' or 'greatly' hinders achievement of environmental objectives by limiting eligibility."
- "In addition, more than half of the members believed that the application process for EQIP enrollment is a hindrance. For example, some members told us ... that the EQIP application process is unnecessarily cumbersome and entails too much paperwork and staff time."
- "Finally, committee members noted that all the programs lack adequate technical assistance to support landowners in planning and implementing conservation practices."

The report concludes by saying, "Committee members believe USDA's conservation programs do not adequately address the needs of some regions and types of agricultural operations. Historically, USDA's conservation programs have focused on soil erosion resulting from crop production in the Corn Belt and Plains regions. Increasingly diverse agricultural operations, including those operations not served by the current conservation programs, play a role in conservation efforts. As USDA reported in September 2001, the success of USDA's conservation programs will depend on programs extending coverage to a broader base of agricultural operations across geographic regions."

To download a copy of the GAO report, go to http://privatelands.org/download/GAO_Report.pdf (requires the Adobe Acrobat Reader; to download for free, click [get reader](#)).