

## PROJECT EVALUATION

NRCS asked local sediment committees and local SWCD offices to evaluate the project including the accomplishments and project strengths and weaknesses. Specifically the committees and individuals on the committees were asked to respond to three questions, including:

1. What were the positive aspects and the accomplishments of the project?
2. What were the negative experiences or limitations of the project?
3. What are the suggestions for improving the project in the future?

Eighteen different counties responded with more than 100 individual written comments. Appendix 5 contains a representative verbatim listing of the comments received from the committees and/or the committee members. There were numerous common themes throughout the various comments received. These are summarized as follows:

### **1. The committees liked the local sediment committee approach!**

The majority of the comments received indicated that the committees liked the local sediment committee approach. This approach offered them the opportunity to develop local solutions which in turn helped sell the project to landowners. Counties commented that the committee approach strengthened partnerships with other organizations.

### **2. The sediment committee approach created more public awareness of the sediment problem in the harbor.**

Several committees commented that both they and the public better understood the magnitude of the harbor and dredging problem. This was especially true for counties far up in the watershed away from the harbor, and also for those that attended the 1997 tour of the Port and the Harbor.

**3. The committees felt that activities carried out resulted in actual sediment reduction on the land.**

Numerous comments attested to the belief that the projects funded resulted in actual sediment reduction on the landscape. Several commented on the visibility in their local neighborhood of some of the practices funded such as filter strips. Comments were received as to the effect of observing reduced erosion.

**4. The committees felt the local approach offered opportunities to develop new practices and work with new individuals.**

Comments were received to the effect that the counties worked with new individuals who were attracted to the new programs. The approach offered flexibility, innovation and the opportunity to try new techniques. A particular benefit expressed was that the project offered opportunities to fund solutions which were not or could not be funded by traditional soil conservation programs.

**5. The project suffered from lack of personnel resources and from poor timing.**

Many comments were received to the effect that the program was one more program to implement without adequate staff resources to carry it out. As a result this hurt the communication, follow-up and documentation completed as part of the project.

The project timing coincided with the simultaneous introduction of numerous new USDA conservation programs and also agency reorganization and downsizing. Many of these new programs came with much different procedures and guidelines which required a considerable amount of time for the NRCS and SWCD field staffs to learn and implement. The new programs generated a large workload which had to be serviced with less personnel available. As a result of the timing, the field staff's were not able to devote as much time to the project as they wanted to or should have.

Because of the limited amount of funding available, NRCS committed three-fourths of the funding to the grant pool which would result in direct funding to landowners to implement sediment reduction projects on the land. It was felt it was important to be able to show results in the pilot project. The amount of funds used for personnel was limited to that needed to support the project coordinator position. **In any future projects it will be necessary to utilize part of the funds received for personnel to provide the technical assistance needed to implement the project.**

The project also coincided with the USDA initiation of the "Locally Led Process" which utilized Local County Work Groups to oversee USDA conservation programs at the county level. The concept of both the Toledo Harbor Local Sediment Committees and the USDA Local Work

Groups is that local people can best address local conservation problems. In theory, these two groups should have come together as one and the same and both programs should have complemented each other. In most instances this happened. But, ironically, in a few cases the timing, the newness, and the two different terminologies served in the beginning to confuse people at the local county level. This problem has diminished with time as the field staffs have become more comfortable and familiar in working both with the project and also within the new locally led process.

The project also suffered from poor timing in that the project coordinator retired under optional retirement during the project as a result of a NRCS nationwide buyout opportunity. This necessitated the appointment of an acting project coordinator as a colateral duty since all existing project funding had been obligated or utilized. This served to delay the completion of this final report.

**6. The project suffered from a lack of sufficient funding and no assurance of a longer term commitment. Numerous counties commented that one of the major limitations of the project was lack of adequate funding and stable long term funding.**

The original NRCS Soil Conservation Proposal requested more than \$16.5 million over a 6 year implementation period and a 14 year maintenance period. The pilot project funded was for \$750,000 over a two year period. The grant requests which came in could easily have used twice this amount. The project advisory committee felt it prudent to fund at least some grant projects in each county in order to gain awareness, exposure, and support for the demonstration project. This spread the available grant money fairly thin amongst the project counties. In some cases counties had elaborate strategies but only had the financial means to fund part of the activities. In other cases good ideas and grant requests were denied for lack of funds, or the funds allocated reduced below what was needed. This frustrated the local people.

In some cases the strategies contained projects that needed to be multi-year in scope to be effective. However, available funding was limited to two years and there was uncertainty as to if future funding was forthcoming. This limited the ideas in the local committee strategies to short term activities. In some cases it dampened enthusiasm because counties did not want to sell the project on a large scale basis with no long term resources or guarantee of funding.

**7. Project communications and coordination were not always effective.**

The committees offered several comments critical of project communications and of communications and leadership from the NRCS project coordinator. NRCS has taken steps to address these issues and improve leadership and communications. Numerous other factors also affected project communications. The project commenced at a time of agency reorganization and downsizing within NRCS, which challenged all communication channels within the agency. Leadership changes also occurred in several positions in Ohio during this time period. The result was that it took a while for new communication lines to develop and for new people to learn and understand the project. NRCS has recently taken steps to restructure and improve lines of communication.

Communication was also affected by the lack of available staffing. Several ideas were proposed during the project that would have improved communication, including a project newsletter. However, these were never carried out due to lack of available staff time.

**8. The project was hampered in the beginning by the lack of up front funding to NRCS and the local committees.**

The different cultures of the Corps of Engineers and the NRCS hampered the project in the beginning. NRCS and Soil and Water Conservation Districts operate grant projects with money in hand. This is necessary because legally, local Soil and Water Conservation District supervisors can only obligate funds which they have. Landowners want firm commitments that their projects have been approved and funded before they go ahead. Under the structure of most conservation programs, grant funds are allocated to soil and water conservation districts who then proceed to obligate them to landowners and approve them on the basis of the grant guidelines and a conservation practice agreement. Funds are then paid to landowners when they complete the terms and conditions of the conservation practice agreement. In many cases landowners depend on quick turnaround of cost share reimbursement in order to have the financial means to carry out the practice. NRCS originally entered into this project with the assumption that it would be carried out in this manner.

Conversely, the Corps traditionally has operated on a contractual basis. It viewed the project as a contract for which NRCS would be paid project funds only after the contract was completed.

These differences served as obstacles to delay implementation of the project in the beginning by slowing transfer of funding. Eventually a procedure was worked out where NRCS, out of its own budget upfronted funds to the sediment committees so that they could operate. NRCS was willing and able to do this so as not to hinder the success of the pilot demonstration project. However, it cannot operate this way on a larger scale and **in any future long term project a way must be found to upfront operating funds for the project.**

**9. The committees recommended the project continue with the approach of using grants to local sediment committees to provide local leadership and involvement.**

The comments indicated solid support for continuing the project with the local sediment committee approach to the project. There were also numerous comments indicating the need to make improvements in the project limitations as discussed above. These include:

- Adequate Staffing
- Better Communication
- Adequate Funding
- Stable Long Term Funding
- Upfront Funding