



Discussion Topic

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Policy Development: Still a Grassroots Farm Bureau Activity

As many populist organizations try to convince the public that they own the patent on grassroots activity, Farm Bureau is the real deal.

Each year about this time, county Farm Bureau policy development committees meet to get the process started, where the tallest blade and the wildest crabgrass are given equal consideration. "Everyone in the organization can express an opinion," said Sarah Black, Director of Michigan Farm Bureau's Public Policy and Commodity Division. "Anyone who has a new idea or an idea about an existing issue can get that idea moving at the local level."

In recent years, Black said, it has not been uncommon for county policy development committees to submit 800 to 1,000 policy recommendations per year. "They go through them all" Black said, "and it doesn't matter if the recommendation comes from associate or regular members." Acknowledging that policy about farm issues comes primarily from regular farmer members, nothing is off the table at the local level. "Sometimes we already have policy in place, as we do on many issues, but it's important to review them periodically," replied Black.

After the counties exhaustively pare down the list into a workable document of recommendations, the list is sent to the state policy development committee, where it is further discussed and refined. A few months later, a list of proposed new policies, including refinements of existing policies, is developed for delegates to discuss at the State Annual Meeting each December. Delegates vote on each proposed policy, both state and national. Recommendations for national policy move on to the American Farm Bureau Federation's annual convention, where some from Michigan have already made it into national Farm Bureau policy.

"Whether on the state or national level, county Farm Bureaus can get pretty fired up when their policy makes it through," Black said. "For example, St. Joseph County wrote a good chunk of our state water policy. The issue is of particular importance to them there, and it's proof that our members have a say in steering their statewide organization." What all this means is that members should get involved in policy that steers the state organization for the next year.

"Especially in Michigan with our tremendous agricultural diversity, we need all the voices to be heard," Black said. "It's what will ensure that we continue to have true grassroots policy-making. And it's the grassroots process we go through every year that makes Farm Bureau's voice heard in the state legislature and in Congress. Elected officials know what true grassroots activism is all about. If they don't, Farm Bureau members have the lobbying staff - and all the members who get involved - to remind them."

QUESTIONS

1. How can your county increase involvement in the annual policy-making process? How can your county involve associate members who have a vested interest in where their food comes from?
2. How can you ensure that the diverse needs of Michigan agriculture are met through the policy development process?
3. How can you be sure new members, or those who haven't been involved in policy decisions before, understand what grassroots efforts really mean to them?