

Comments key to NEPA process says Hageman and Brighton

Many farm and ranch operators find it nearly impossible to run a successful operation and keep up with daily policy decisions that impact agriculture. In Wyoming, however, an organization is offering a helping hand.

Attorneys Harriet Hageman and Kara Brighton formed the Wyoming Conservation Alliance (WCA) to create a clearinghouse for natural resource policy issues and to help Wyoming agriculturists stay involved in the regulatory processes. The pair presented their organization's work at a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Forum sponsored by the Wyoming Farm Bureau on May 30.

The WCA stresses the importance of regulatory participation with legislation like NEPA. Brighton says a lot of money and involvement is placed in the legislative process but the more important aspect is what happens within the implementing agencies after the bill is passed.

To reiterate their point, Hageman pointed out that

the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is only 34 pages long while the Department of Interior's ESA regulations are a hefty 1,660 pages.

"Which part do you really think is being implemented?" Hageman asks the audience. "What is being stated in the ESA or what people who have never been elected are interpreting the ESA to mean?"

Hageman also used the NEPA statute as an example saying the act is only 18 pages and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) under NEPA has regulations stacking up to 70 pages. Hageman says this is only the tip of the iceberg because NEPA requires each individual agency to adopt its own NEPA regulations.

"We don't see people lobbying regulatory agencies the way they do with the legislature, but it is the agency that adopts the rules and regulations," she says.

Hageman says the only way to lobby at the regulatory level is by providing comments. The difficult part for

many agriculturists is finding the time within the agency-established comment period to study a complicated Environmental Impact Study (EIS) or other documents.

That is why Brighton and Hageman formed the WCA.

"We wanted to help Wyoming agriculture and other groups participate in this process," Brighton says.

Brighton says groups like the Sierra Club and Defenders of Wildlife make it very easy for their members to make comments, pointing to a single case that brought in a staggering 1.2 million comments.

"The people we spend our time with are typically too busy raising their families, trying to make a living, serving on the school board, being a county commissioner; doing those kinds of things," Brighton says.

The WCA provides the tools to make it easier for people to participate in the regulatory processes. The WCA

makes it their mission to inform and educate people and to compile the information in a way that's quick and easy to understand.

"I figured out one time that almost 96,000 pages of federal regulations are published each year," Hageman says. "Fifty percent of our state's surface is owned by the federal government and that can have a pretty heavy federal regulatory impact on the state."

The WCA monitors federal and state agencies to inform members of the proposed and final rules making their way through the regulatory processes like NEPA. By compiling up-to-date natural resource issues in one document, WCA members can obtain the information they need to participate in the process.

"What we believe about the WCA is that consistent oversight will lead to consistent participation," Brighton says.

Quick Facts about NEPA

- Signed into law Jan. 1970
 - NEPA is a national environmental policy setting procedural requirements that must be followed to reach a decision involving a federal action
 - Agencies recommending federal actions "significantly affecting the quality of the human environment" must submit a detailed statement on:
 - The environmental impact of the proposed action
 - Any unavoidable adverse environmental effects
 - Alternatives to the proposed action...and more
 - The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ)
- under NEPA imposes regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of NEPA

The other aspect to the regulatory issues have a greater impact on agriculture and more now than ever, it affects your everyday life," Hageman says.

For more information on the Wyoming Conservation Alliance contact the office at (307) 638-6038 or e-mail director@wyoalliance.com. Liz LeSatz is the Summer 2008 intern for the Wyoming Livestock Roundup and can be e-mailed at liz@wylr.net.

"What we know is that