

Oregon Department of Agriculture, Water Quality Program
Input from SWCDs Regarding Focus Areas
January 26 - February 5, 2021



ODA requested input from all Oregon SWCDs on their experiences and perspectives with Focus Areas (FA). ODA received responses from 31 SWCDs (69%). Responses received were spread fairly evenly across the state, except for a lower response from northwest Oregon.

Summary of Yes-No responses to 7 questions:

(Majority response is in red font; see below for full wording of questions)

	1. Require FAs?	2. Min 25% SOW?	3. 2-year Milestones?	4. Change reporting?	5. Challenges?	7. Adaptive Mgmt?	8. Help meet WQ Goals?
Yes	4	12	8	17	29	25	24
No	23	15	23	11	2	6	4
Yes & No	0	2	0	0	0	0	3
?	3	1	0	0	0	0	0
Blank	1	1	0	3	0	0	0

FA = Focus Area; SOW = Scope of Work; WQ = Water Quality; ? = “?” provided as question response.

ODA summary of take-home messages:

1. It is a good concept to work strategically in small geographic areas.
2. It can be difficult for an SWCD to have a Strategic Implementation Area (SIA) and FA at the same time.
3. There are challenges related to getting landowners to participate in a voluntary-only process with no dedicated implementation funds.
4. ODA should consider improvements to Focus Area reporting.
5. SIAs may be more effective at improving AgWQ due to landowners motivated by the compliance aspect, along with the dedicated funding for SWCDs.

Summary of narrative responses from SWCDs:

1. Should FAs be required for all SWCDs?

- Yes:
 - ‘Only if no SIA’ (2 responses)
 - Helps SWCDs support ODA in meeting ODA goals
 - Helps SWCDs focus on their sub-watersheds and understand the concerns that are there
- No:
 - Some support of the concept (systematic approach to addressing water quality), but the approach wasn’t effective in their area

- ‘One size doesn’t fit all’ was a common theme; FAs may not fit into an SWCD’s strategy and SWCDs have different capacities and relationships with landowners
- Issues: already full workload outside of FA, FAs may not align with partners’ funding priorities, not enough time to do both a FA and an SIA, poor landowner response makes it hard to show progress
- Rather spend money where landowners are receptive than in an FA where they are not

2. Is 25% minimum of Scope of Work (SOW) funds reasonable for FAs?

Answers were split about 50/50, but written responses showed more concerns

- ‘Yes’: some felt that the amount was reasonable, some used a greater percentage, some felt the funds should be available for use in an SIA instead; one said it was the ‘only way to get projects done’.
- ‘No’: Lots of comments on reducing the amount or making the amount optional. Several indicated it was hard to spend the 25% due to lack of landowner response, and they would have preferred to have the flexibility to spend it outside the FA where landowners were more responsive. Recommendations included:
 - 10-20%
 - Option to use the funds in an SIA
 - Allow the entire SWCD area to be a FA (ODA note: requires Management Area-wide assessment)
 - Set \$ amount based on size of FA and expected landowner response

3. Is the 2-year timeframe for milestones reasonable?

Answers showed some misunderstanding about the 2-year timeframe and what it was supposed to accomplish. ODA believes this is left over from early ODA messaging, which suggested that SWCDs should achieve land condition improvements in the first two years of a Focus Area. The recommendations seem to boil down to this:

- 2-year reporting is acceptable for inputs and outputs
- 4-7 year timeframe is better for outcomes; it takes at least 2 years to create relationships with landowners
- A couple SWCDs pointed out that a long-term commitment to the FA needs to be made at the beginning to create quality projects and achieve outcomes

4. Changes to Focus Area Action Plan (FAAP) and reporting?

Answers addressed many different desires:

- Timeframes: suggestion varied from 6 months to once during the life of the FA (or SIA)
- Content and Process:
 - Focus more on outcomes and less on dollars spent
 - Eliminate ‘# of handouts’
 - Include partner accomplishments (funded by non-SOW sources)
 - Improve formatting of narrative quarterly reporting
 - Incorporate reporting into the SOW and not separately in the FAAP
 - Report more like SIAs to capture all the work, not just SOW-funded
 - Develop FAAP once, with actions planned for the entire timeframe to look at the big picture

- ODA should meet with SWCD every 6 months to evaluate the FA process
- One asked the purpose of the reporting: how is it used? What is the purpose of monitoring?
- Streamside Vegetation Assessment (SVA) tool:
 - Was length of time to do SVA and the detail involved worth it?
 - Limits of using SVA to show progress
 - Modified the SVA or added additional methods to make assessment more relevant to their area
 - Allow NRCS' SVAP instead of SVA

5. Have you faced challenges with Focus Areas?

- Answers tended to focus on the following key issues:
 - Lack of landowner engagement in a voluntary process
 - Lack of landowner financial resources
 - Not enough dedicated funding for implementing projects
 - Farmers need incentives to take productive land out of production
 - Partners have different funding priorities
 - SWCD staff changes
 - COVID
- Some other answers:
 - Hard to get enough landowners engaged in one area to show progress
 - Can't address issues on federal/tribal lands with SOW/FAAP funding
 - When does a FA close? Projects are never-ending in any area...
 - Small SWCD staff
 - Rural residential landowners are bigger contributors to the AgWQ problem, but the FA funds don't apply to them
 - No venues for group outreach events in some FAs; staff not comfortable going door-to-door in rural areas

6. What factors contributed to achieving/not achieving milestones?

- Achieving:
 - Making milestones more realistic
 - Use grant money to incentivize projects
 - Have FA open for a long time; it takes time to make landowner connections and progress is slow at first
 - Willing landowners that manage large portion of land in FA
 - Securing large blocks of funding
 - Good partnerships
 - Willing landowners
- Not achieving
 - See Question 5, above
 - 2-year milestones for outcomes is unrealistic
 - Delays in implementation
 - Grant funding cycles
 - NRCS short on Cultural Resources and Engineering staff
 - Not having the data to convince landowners there is an AgWQ problem related to THEIR operations

- Lack of financial incentives to convert ag land to wildlife habitat
- Landowners interested in technical assistance from SWCDs, but wary of accepting government grant funding

7. Have you used adaptive management to improve your Focus Area process?

Almost all SWCDs used adaptive management; sometimes efforts didn't help:

- Quarterly outreach flyer
- Modifying outreach based on local customs/culture
- Changed assessment method to better capture work (several variants on this response)
- Increased size of FA to better use the funds
- Cultivated partnerships
- SWCD taking stronger leadership position on partnership projects
- Learned from SIA process how to select an FA: will never select a FA without having pre-existing landowner connections
- Cuttings costs
- Took advantage of NRCS National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI)
- Better understood what practices landowners wanted
- Only select FAs where NRCS has or plans a Conservation Innovation Strategy (CIS)

8. Do FAs help you achieve your AgWQ goals?

- Yes:
 - By addressing issues that might have been overlooked
 - By working with new landowners, which helped broaden reach across the landscape
 - Good prep for SIAs
 - Aligned with partner priorities too
 - FAs provide clear priorities and goals
 - Helped raise awareness of AgWQ program
- Caveats:
 - Only when landowners are willing
 - Yes, but take time away from walk-ins and opportunistic work
 - Feels like a failure when landowners won't buy in to the FA
 - Limited to voluntary efforts
 - Only in a small area, not the entire SWCD area
- No:
 - Better to spend time cultivating landowners county-wide to reach those that want to do voluntary work

9. Is there anything else you would like ODA to know?

- Several SWCDs expressed gratitude to ODA for being flexible and helpful
- If we are going to be doing SIAs, why are we doing FAs?
- Whether SIAs or FAs, working in small watersheds is way to show improvements
- Voluntary only is a hard sell
- Encourage WQ monitoring in FAs
- Like idea of moving from FA to SIA
- Additional funding in the AgWQ grant would be helpful
- SIA process more successful than FAs in addressing issues