Leaders’ Guide for the Agriculture Update Consensus

Introduction to the Study Process

Studies are part of League Program and, in League parlance, League Program includes all of the positions the League uses to affect public policy as well as the procedure for adopting these programs. Program is such an integral part of the League that, according to League Basics, “Program is the League’s reason for being.”

Program has three parts: 1) selection of an issue, 2) study of that issue, consensus and formulating a position, and 3) use of that position to influence public policy. All LWVUS positions are included in the League publication, Impact on Issues, 2012-2014: A Guide to Public Policy Positions, http://www.lwv.org/content/impact-issues.

This guide covers how we got here, and, secondly, the perspective of participating in a national study at the local level. The purpose of a study, at any level, is to educate members so that they can be informed participants in consensus and provide the necessary data for formulating the ultimate position.

Additional information about conducting a national study is on the LWVUS website at “Guidelines for LWVUS Studies,” http://www.lwv.org/content/guidelines-lwvus-studies.

Selection of an issue begins with the Program Planning each League is asked to do. This is where the local Leagues identify issues that deserve a study at the national level or updates of existing positions. These are issues where the LWVUS has no position, and, therefore, cannot act. Remember, Leagues cannot take action without a position.

During Program Planning before the 2012 Convention, many Leagues expressed an interest in the agriculture issue. The Agriculture Update was brought to the convention floor as a not-recommended item and adopted by the delegates to Convention 2012. Step one completed.

Study and consensus began right after Convention when the LWVUS Board appointed a study committee chair, set up the process for selecting the committee, and approved a preliminary scope and timeline for the study. This set the parameters for the study committee’s work.

The study committee’s first task was to review and suggest modifications as appropriate to the scope for the study. A scope describes the limits of the study, describes areas to explore and often includes focus areas. The culminating position will address only those issues delineated in the scope. The scope of this Agriculture Update was approved by the LWVUS Board and distributed to local Leagues to give them direction during the study process.

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study, as adopted by the LWVUS Board, states: The Agriculture Update will focus narrowly on: 1) current technology issues in agriculture including genetically modified organisms (GMOs), herbicides, pesticides, agriculture water pollution, water technology, antibiotics in livestock, and accurate food labeling; and 2) current agriculture finance issues including consolidation in agriculture industries, crop subsidies and the federal agricultural regulatory process.
The study committee began its work of refining the areas to be studied, researching and writing background information about the different areas contained in the scope, and preparing consensus questions and other materials to help direct local League discussion to consensus. All of these materials are/will be posted at http://www.lwv.org/member-resources/agriculture-update. As each local League reports its consensus (or lack thereof) the reports are consolidated, and, based on this information, a committee formulates the position which, when approved by the Board, can be used for action.

Remainder Dates for Study:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friday, April 18, 2014</td>
<td>Deadline for consensus reports via electronic survey form only. (There is no paper form.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2014</td>
<td>Member Agreement Committee decides if consensus was reached, and if so, proposes a new position statement to the Education Fund Committee, which then proposes it to the full Board for adoption.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 2014</td>
<td>Consensus result or new position statement is announced before Convention.</td>
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**What Is a Consensus?**

It is easier to say what consensus is not, than what it is. Consensus is not a vote; rather, consensus is mutual agreement of League members arrived at through discussion. During discussion, everyone has an opportunity to express their viewpoints, and the issue is examined from all sides. Consensus questions, created by the study committee and approved by the Board, provide structure for the meeting. Members discuss the pros and cons until it becomes apparent that consensus has or has not been reached on each question. A committee will analyze the consensus responses, look for areas of member understanding and agreement and, using this information, will create a position statement.

**Background materials:** After the scope was adopted by the LWVUS Board, committee members researched and wrote about various issues included in the scope, compiled a list of resources, consolidated information, developed a glossary and a list of acronyms, and proposed the consensus questions to the Education Fund Committee. The materials, resources, and an automated consensus response form are all posted at http://www.lwv.org/member-resources/agriculture-update. When the LWVUS Board of Directors approves changes to the Agriculture position created from Agriculture Update consensus responses, it immediately becomes the League’s position and is the basis for action on the issue. This type of member involvement in the consensus process tends to ensure member commitment to the resulting positions. In addition, members have the opportunity at each Convention to decide whether or not to re-adopt these positions or update them.

**Local Board Roles**

There are several roles for the local League board during the study process. The board appoints a study chair and/or committee to help educate membership and the community about the study issues. It is best to have a committee to share the work and introduce less experienced members to the League process on a short-term project, but this is not always possible. Ideally, some of these members have basic knowledge of the issues and some study experience, but some may just have an interest in learning more about the subject.

With the support of the local board, the committee may schedule and facilitate community meetings about issues in the study, bring in outside speakers (local farmers, agriculture extension agents, and faculty from the agriculture department of a nearby college would be good choices for this study). Agricultural practices, farm structures and crops vary by location. As you enter the study and consensus effort, please attempt to reach out to the diverse local farm communities to learn more about the concerns and immediate issues facing your local farming economy. These meetings may be held any time in the process after the scope is determined and often include outreach to other members of the community interested in the topics to be discussed. Such meetings are a great way to gain visibility in the community and to attract prospective members.

Then, after the consensus meeting(s) are finished and the committee prepares the consensus report, it is brought to the local board for approval before it is submitted to the national study committee. Be sure in planning consensus meetings to allow time for this board approval before the reporting deadline date.

**Guide for Study Committees & Discussion Leaders**

This guide is intended as a resource for local League study committees, to help presenters and facilitators knowledgeable answer questions that may arise during discussion, in a framework focused on reaching consensus. There is more detailed information included than you will want to present.

There are more questions about agriculture than we can address in the limited time available for consensus. The Agriculture Update Committee has focused the study materials on the issues that fall within the scope of the study as defined in the charge from the LWVUS Board.

A prime responsibility of the facilitator and the study committee will be to keep the discussion focused on the consensus questions and avoid distracting asides, however fascinating they may be.

Because agriculture is a large and complicated subject with complex federal agency interactions and overlapping state authority, your presentation should be carefully planned. It should be noted that the study materials were carefully developed through literature research, with limited direct input from farmers or farm organizations. Leagues are encouraged to hold workshops in which farmers from their region can discuss their perspective on the issues identified for consensus.
The goal of the consensus meeting(s) is to come to agreement on your League’s answers to the consensus questions. The Discussion Guide to Consensus Questions section below has been compiled to help focus your discussion. It is presented in a format parallel to the consensus questions for convenience of reference. These comments and questions will enable you to “jump start” a discussion that is lagging, veered off topic or failed to start. This is not a script that must be followed, but ideas and aids to help you cover the material in a limited amount of time.

We suggest you either do your consensus meeting in one long meeting (perhaps a morning session, a break for lunch and discussion, then an afternoon session) or two shorter meetings. It is important to do background and consensus on each part at the same session so all those coming to consensus have access to the discussion during the background presentation. For large Leagues with multiple units, the study materials and consensus questions might be divided among the units, assuming the membership of the units is fairly homogeneous. The consensus responses could then be merged at the local League level. Trying to put all of the background and content in one meeting and consensus in another is tempting but can lead to several problems:

- Some members will attend one meeting and not the other.
- Those who attend the first meeting and not the second will receive good information but will not be able to participate in the consensus.
- Those who attend only the second meeting will not have the depth of background to follow the discussion; that can lead to repetition and frustrate those who have attended both.

Given the breadth of information and complexity of questions, it is important that you pace yourselves to have time to complete all questions. We suggest that you include in your consensus report as much as possible, leaving unanswered the response for topics that you were not able to get to. A partial consensus report is better than no report at all.

**Getting to Consensus**

Almost everyone has an opinion on food, and thus on agriculture. Each may have interesting stories to share. While personal insights are valuable, it is the responsibility of the facilitator(s) to keep the group focused on the consensus questions. The following are suggestions that have been found helpful in reaching this goal.

**Before the consensus meeting, committee members should:**

- Review the study materials on the LWVUS website.
- Make sure that the consensus questions have been reviewed and save time at the end to make sure your information is sent to your local board for review.

**Understand the ingredients of a successful meeting:**

- There is a common focus on content.
- There is a common focus on process.
- The discussion leader or facilitator maintains an open and balanced conversational flow.
- Someone is aware of protecting individuals from personal attack.
- Everyone’s role and responsibility are clearly defined and agreed upon.

In other words, everyone on the committee is on the same page.

**Assign specific tasks to committee members. Decide:**

- how much time to allot to each section of the discussion,
- who will present each part,
- who will facilitate the consensus part of the meeting if different from the presenters,
- who will be the recorder, and
- who will make sure the results of your consensus get to your LWV board for approval before completing the online form at http://www.lwv.org/member-resources/agriculture-update.

**Decide how to present the study material:**

Break the presentation into manageable chunks that lay people can understand. Be careful to explain any jargon and acronyms. A variety of voices and styles help people stay focused. Be prepared to answer questions for clarification along the way. The material is complicated in some areas and you will want to check for understanding.

**Schedule a practice session prior to the presentation/consensus meeting:**

During a practice session is helpful to have an experienced League member present to help with timing and balance between background and discussion. The recorder should come away with what needs to be recorded and what to do with questions and opinions about topics not covered by the consensus questions. (Suggestion: Have another sheet of chart paper labeled as “parking lot” where these may be noted for discussion at a later time.) Many Leagues with multiple units will hold training ahead of time for the unit leaders. This is important so that the unit leaders understand the scope, are prepared for the discussion and understand the reporting procedures.
It is important to be aware of any place where there might be a conflict and be prepared to discuss it. Copies of the local, state and national positions should be available for reference at the meetings.

Make sure committee members are familiar with any agriculture positions your state or local League may have adopted, and also the current LWVUS Statement of Position on Federal Agriculture Policy. Consult Impact on Issues, 2012-2014: A Guide to Public Policy Positions at http://www.lwv.org/content/impact-issues in the section on Natural Resources, page 56.

Other Related LWVUS Positions
The current League agriculture position continues to address important areas of concern in agriculture, and provides ample opportunity for robust advocacy in areas of sustainable farming, environmental protection, a recommended shift from farm subsidies to market-driven pricing, and appropriate investment in research. Other League positions and principles provide additional support for advocacy in these areas. We list these here so that Leagues will not waste time on related issues that are already in LWVUS positions or are outside of the scope of this study.

1. Pesticide and herbicide use, chemical fertilizers, crop management practices and concentrated animal operations all impact air and water quality. While these are of ongoing concern, LWVUS positions on Environmental Protection and Pollution Control already offer a solid framework for advocacy at every level, with specific attention to the responsibility of federal agencies to ensure compliance.

`…. The League believes that although environmental protection and pollution control are responsibilities shared by all levels of government, it is essential that the federal government provide leadership and technical and financial assistance. The federal government should have the major role in setting standards for environmental protection and pollution control. Other levels of government should have the right to set more stringent standards. Enforcement should be carried out at the lower levels of government, but the federal government should enforce standards if other levels of government do not meet this responsibility. Standards must be enforced in a timely, consistent and equitable manner for all violators in all parts of society, including governmental units, industry, business and individuals. ...` (Impact on Issues 2012-2014, p 50.)

While agricultural coalitions have pushed for exemptions from standards articulated in the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act, the League position states clearly that standards should be applied across all parts of society, with the federal government ensuring enforcement if states do not fulfill this responsibility.

2. The League’s Position on Immigration (Impact on Issues 2013-2014, p. 71) states that immigration policies should meet the “Economic, business, and employment needs of the United States ....” State immigration laws combined with federal inaction on immigration reform, including expansion of the guest worker program, has caused a migrant agricultural labor shortage. According to the American Farm Bureau Federation in 2012, the lack of labor was expected to result in up to $9 billion in losses from unharvested produce. Up to 70% of agricultural laborers are estimated to be undocumented workers.

3. The League’s Position on Meeting Basic Human Needs (Impact on Issues 2013-2014, p. 74) states that “Persons who are unable to work, whose earnings are inadequate or for whom jobs are not available, have the right to an income and/or services sufficient to meet their basic needs for food, shelter and access to health care.” Nutrition assistance programs (SNAP, WIC, school breakfast & lunch programs) comprise more than 70% of USDA’s budget. In November 2013 SNAP recipients experienced a reduction in benefits when a temporary prior increase (authorized during the 2008 recession) expired. SNAP funding has been a major topic of disagreement between the House and Senate during the Farm Bill negotiation process.

**Tips for Consensus Meetings**

**Explain the ground rules and meeting structure**
The facilitator should explain the meeting ground rules at the beginning—how the meeting will be structured, how much time will be devoted to what.

**Review the difference between voting and consensus**
Explain the difference between a majority vote and coming to consensus as the sense of the meeting. A senior League member or board member can help the facilitator explain. The time devoted to this will depend on the experience of the members participating.

**The role of the discussion leader/facilitator is to make sure that:**
- everyone has a copy of the agenda/program and knows what to expect,
- meeting format and ground rules are understood up front,
- members understand they have a role in the meeting/consensus, and
- everyone stays on track until the day’s goal is met.

**Define the recorder’s role**
The recorder should be at the front of the room in clear view of the members participating. It is best to record on large easel paper that can be viewed by everyone. After each question, check back with the participants to make sure the consensus of the
room is captured before you move on. After each section, make notes to include in the comments sections of the consensus report. Remember, these are limited to 200 words or less in each comment box. Comments are optional, not required.

**Review state and local positions**
Facilitators and presenters should be knowledgeable of any state and local agriculture positions and present any possible conflicts up front.

**Ask the group’s help in keeping on topic**
People will usually cooperate if they understand why you must ask them to keep their comments focused. A “Parking Lot” easel sheet is often helpful so they do not feel ignored. The focus should be on what government can do about the issues, since that is the focus of League positions and advocacy. Explaining up front encourages positive peer pressure.

**Make sure everyone understands the materials presented**
Encourage people to ask questions when they do not understand something. This material is often complicated and the language may be unfamiliar. Including the glossary in the handouts as a reminder of what terms mean, may be helpful. Asking for raised hands, when material is unclear, can help assure everyone is included.

**How to handle “breaking news”**
Many of the issues we are discussing are currently in the news, both nationally and locally. These may distract from the work of the consensus meeting(s). Events may happen the morning of your meeting. If you are aware of them, present them up front before starting the discussion. Explain that these events or current legislation, however interesting, are not a part of the consensus process because League positions are intended to provide a long-term basis for advocacy. Acknowledge the concerns and move them to the “parking lot” for discussion at another time. This is the role of the local study committee.

**If you have a “talkative group”**
You know your League. If they like to talk, have trouble keeping focused, or have a lot of opinions, it may be useful to have a timed agenda and a time-keeper to assist the facilitator.

**The importance of the end of the meeting review**
It is important to allow ten or fifteen minutes at the end of the meeting for the recorder to review the notes and reaffirm the sense of the meeting. This is reassuring to everyone that his/her thoughts have been heard.

**After the Meeting**
**Schedule a committee debriefing:** Schedule a meeting of your committee to debrief as soon as possible after the consensus meeting(s) so discussion is still fresh in their minds. Early access to the recorder’s notes by email is helpful. **Do not** file the report electronically yet. Prepare your report using the WORD version that is included in this kit and present it to your local League board for approval. If you have had more than one meeting or come to consensus in multiple unit meetings, it will be the job of the committee to consolidate these reports and make one report for your board. After that approval, one delegated person will go to the website and file the online report at http://www.lwv.org/member-resources/agriculture-update. Full instructions will be provided when you log into the website to access the consensus response form, and only one report per League will be accepted.