

Barriers to Diversity on the Cooperative Board

Phil Kenkel

Bill Fitzwater Chair

As I discussed in a previous newsletter, agricultural cooperatives trail most other cooperative sectors and most investor-owned corporations in terms of gender diversity in their boards of directors. That gives rise to the question as to whether there are barriers to the cooperative board. One issue is membership status. It is not always obvious whether a wife, farming with her husband, is eligible to run for the board of directors. In some cooperatives both the husband and wife are voting members while in others only the husband is listed as a member. A woman who is interested in running for the board can obviously apply for membership but the ambiguous membership status likely discourages participation. Because of the one member-one vote structure, it is important for cooperatives to have as many active and interested members as possible on their voting roles. Getting both halves of the farm family on the voting roles has benefits beyond expanding the pool of board candidates.

Another potential barrier is the nominating committee. Regardless of whether the committee is made up of a mix of directors and non-directors or only non-directors, the committee often has strong links to the board. The nominating committee may, consciously or unconsciously, select candidates similar to the existing board. Not all cooperatives have a policy requiring multiple board candidates. When a cooperative has a culture of incumbent board members running unopposed it is difficult to encourage a female member to run for the board. If the nominating committee is not actively identifying quality female candidates or if the election appears biased toward the status quo, the likelihood of female board members is diminished.

In my next newsletter I'll discuss some simple, practical ideas for increasing board diversity.

2-20-2015