Forest Management Guideline Development Through Consensus: Important Factors to Consider

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ABSTRACT

Consensus forums are one method of dealing with controversial natural resource issues. Minnesota regulators learned numerous important lessons when they used a consensus-based approach to develop voluntary site-level forest management guidelines. These include: 1) take active steps to facilitate information sharing among team leaders, 2) select team members who can effectively represent their group's perspective, who are solution-oriented, and who can help shape a compromise, 3) be prepared for problems that will arise so that they don't bog down the process, 4) use field tours as a mechanism to educate participants and to test the practicality of proposed guidelines, and 5) build in flexibility to accommodate the range of considerations which affect guideline application.

Keywords: *Best management practices, forest management guidelines, consensus, Minnesota.*

INTRODUCTION

Fundamental shifts in how we manage natural resources are occurring in response to changing societal values and advances in scientific understanding. Today, the use of a collaborative processes is expanding because they are better suited to the planning and implementation tasks than traditional public involvement [1]. A

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consensus-based approach is one collaborative method that can be used to resolve forestry issues. While there are few reported studies of consensus-based processes, published reports suggest that it is effective in situations where group decision-making is needed and that it can lead to greater commitment to the results [3, 4, 5, 10].

While the development of forest management guidelines is not new [2], use of a collaborative process during that phase can be contentious because of differences in values and expectations among participants. Guideline program designers need to be well-prepared to address the large number of stakeholders who want to be involved, the diversity of perspectives and potential solutions those individuals bring to the table, concerns about financial impacts, and unequal access to and understanding of available information when designing and working within a collaborative process.

Little information has been documented on the processes and protocols used during the guideline development process. Instead, available information focuses on describing how guideline and code of conduct programs are to be implemented [2, 11]. Using a recently completed process in Minnesota as an example, this paper identifies some of the important factors to consider when developing voluntary forest management guidelines through a consensus process. The intent of this paper is to provide guidance to parties considering the use of similar processes.

BACKGROUND

Minnesota has used nonregulatory approaches to implement management practices for protecting forest sustainability. A consensus process was used to develop Minnesota's first water quality Best Management Practices (BMPs) [6]. A similar process was used to later revise them and to develop wetland and visual quality BMPs [7, 8].

The Minnesota Sustainable Forest Resources Act (Act) was passed in 1995 as a comprehensive strategy for addressing timber harvesting and forest management concerns. The Act created the Minnesota Forest Resources Council (Council) to address and resolve important forest resource issues. Among other provisions, the Act required the development and implementation of voluntary site-level guidelines.

The Council established four technical teams to develop site-level guidelines for 1) riparian zone management, 2) forest wildlife habitat, 3) historic/cultural resources, and 4) forest soil productivity. Each team,

which included a team leader and representatives of various interest groups, was charged with seeking a consensus on guidelines for its specific topical area. A guideline development coordinator was appointed by the Council to oversee the guideline development process.

An integration team coordinated work on the topical area guidelines. This team existed to: 1) develop an integrated set of guidelines, 2) foster communication among the technical teams, 3) minimize duplication of effort among teams where common issues existed, 4) solve problems among teams, and 5) ensure compatibility of format and content among the products developed by the technical teams. To the extent possible, the integration team served as "cutters and pasters," making as few changes as possible to the guidelines.

APPROACH

A consensus was reached when "all technical team members could live with the decision." If a consensus could not be reached on a key issue, it was sent to the Council for resolution.

Guideline development included two formal steps: development and approval of a scoping document and the subsequent writing of the guidelines. Each scoping document identified and formulated team agreement on topics that would and would not be addressed during the guideline development process. Each draft scoping document was sent out for public review; the comments were addressed by the appropriate technical team; and the revised document was then reviewed, discussed, and approved by the Council.

The Council conducted a peer review of the draft guidelines for each technical team, soliciting input from 3 or 4 researchers and practitioners (i.e., loggers, forest resource managers) familiar with the topical area and Minnesota conditions. Each technical team addressed their peer review comments, made appropriate modifications to their document, and again presented their guidelines to the Council.

The integration team merged the four new sets of guidelines plus the existing water quality, wetland, and visual quality BMPs into a draft guidebook. After the Council conducted a public review of the draft guidebook, the integration team made Council-approved modifications prior to its final approval [9].

LOOKING BACK

Minnesota's most recent experience with the development of guidelines was different from previous efforts. While some of the difference was due to the complexity of having four technical teams operating simultaneously, other dissimilarities were due to having larger technical teams; more interest groups represented; some teams that were more polarized; difficulty in building trust; increased access to information and other contacts through the Internet; and increased concerns about economic impacts to landowners and loggers.

The most recent process has several strengths and weaknesses associated with it. There are also several general recommendations to help others who undertake a similar process.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The consensus approach avoided unfair voting situations, given unequal representation across all resource values. It made it possible for a "win-win" situation because all perspectives were brought into the solution. Also, considering the voluntary application of guidelines in Minnesota, implementation will be facilitated because of common ownership among all interest groups. If votes had been taken, those who lost a vote might hesitate to implement the guidelines.

Use of a consensus approach can offer an opportunity for one or more team members to cause the resolution of an issue (or the entire process) to be delayed or even fail. As a result, the process can become subject to undue influence by a minority perspective. Also, it may take longer to reach a consensus than it would to reach a decision under a voting process. For these reasons, the technical team may fail to reach a consensus on one or more issues, resulting in no action on those concerns.

General Recommendations

Based on our experiences, several recommendations are offered to assist other guideline program designers. Those recommendations are categorized according to 1) team leader selection, support mechanisms, and roles, 2) team member selection, 3) guideline development process - planning considerations, 4) meeting logistics, 5) running meetings, and 6) writing guidelines.

Team leader selection, support, and roles

- Select team leaders or facilitators based on whether the perspective of their organization or employer is seen as moderate; they as individuals are not committed to a

predetermined outcome; they are aware of all stakeholder perspectives; they have had previous experience in successfully facilitating other groups; they can commit the necessary time to the process; and they have a thick skin, are good listeners, and can maintain a sense of humor.

- Provide training for team leaders on how to deal with different cultures if they are represented within a technical team.

- Build support mechanisms for the team leaders so that they can freely share information with each other about facilitation approaches and to discuss group process issues.

- Clarify up-front whether team leaders are expected to serve solely as a facilitator or whether they can also serve as a team member.

Team member selection

- Select team members based on their ability and willingness to identify suggestions for resolving issues, think "outside of the box," be solution oriented, speak directly for their organization instead of waiting for that organization to tell them how to respond, help shape a compromise to a position that they can live with, and commit the necessary time to successfully complete the process.

- Ensure a broad range of representation on the technical teams, including members from the practitioner, science, and lay communities. Viewpoints that are excluded may later impede implementation of the guidelines. Balanced against the need to incorporate all viewpoints is the need to keep the technical teams small enough to ensure that they function efficiently.

- Convene an integration team with a limited number of individuals from each team when two or more technical teams are operating simultaneously. Carefully consider when and how to select membership for that smaller team. Appointing the team too early may not result in the selection of appropriate members.

- Discourage use of alternates.

Process-planning considerations

- Convene a panel of scientists to first synthesize existing pertinent information where it is critical that guidelines are science-based. If they cannot agree on the scientific and technical issues, ensure that competing views are fully represented.

- Ensure that all team members have reasonably equal access to scientific and technical experts.

- Do up-front planning among team leaders to identify and prepare for some of the problems that will arise.

- Develop a clear definition of how your process (e.g., consensus, voting) will be applied.

- Limit the scoping process to no more than 3 - 5 meetings.

- Develop a mechanism for breaking deadlocks. Use appropriate resources (e.g., a professional facilitator) to move the team forward if problems arise.

- Set realistic deadlines.

- Make it clear who has final decision-making authority.

Meeting logistics

- Meet in a location where distractions will be minimized and where participants will not be leaving the room to conduct other business.

- Ensure that there is adequate and functioning support equipment available. A portable computer connected to a projector can facilitate document revision.

- Provide travel and lodging reimbursement for attendance at meetings, meals, and per diem payments to members who are self-employed or who will forgo income as a result of participating.

- Conduct field tours as early and as often as needed to educate participants about issues, terminology, and concepts and to evaluate potential guidelines.

- Consider two-day meetings, particularly when a sustained effort is needed to reach agreement on specific issues. They provide opportunities to work longer on critical issues than do one-day meetings.

Running meetings

- Recognize that the process will need to move forward with those that attend and actively participate in meetings.

- Set aside any discussions that are not directly pertinent to the current issue. Return to these issues at an appropriate time in the future.

- Produce and distribute a detailed set of meeting minutes to team members soon after each meeting.

Writing guidelines

- Identify the target audience (those who will use the guidelines).

- Ensure that the individual guidelines are appropriate to the range of landscapes or ecoregions they are intended to address.

- Consider having the team leader draft documents, including guidelines, that are then reviewed and modified by team members. An alternate approach is to ask individual team members to draft guidelines in their area of expertise. Biases can be removed if the team has the opportunity to modify each proposal.

- Define terms precisely and ensure that all team members agree to those definitions and interpretations.

- Recognize that a "one size fits all" approach for guidelines may not be appropriate in all cases. Build in flexibility, where needed, to accommodate a range of considerations such as ownership objectives, site conditions, and equipment configurations.

- Use the best available scientific information, including information on costs and benefits. Recognize that the science of one discipline may disagree or conflict with the science of another.

- Write guidelines that are easy for users to understand and implement.

- Indicate the rationale for the guidelines to facilitate the education process. This can be accomplished through an introductory section or a statement with each guideline.

- Focus initially on what everyone can agree to and then determine where the lack of consensus, if any, lies. Lack of consensus may be due to a difference in perception of the meaning of words or the overall impact of a guideline.

- Ask all team members if they are comfortable with a decision before moving on when using a consensus process. If most of the team members have orally indicated support, individually ask others if they are in agreement.

CONCLUSIONS

While consensus forums are not a panacea for every natural resource issue, they can provide innovative, long-term solutions if they are managed properly. While it was a long and sometimes arduous process, the consensus process was successful in Minnesota. The process, with appropriate modifications, could be successfully applied elsewhere to address similar or other issues.

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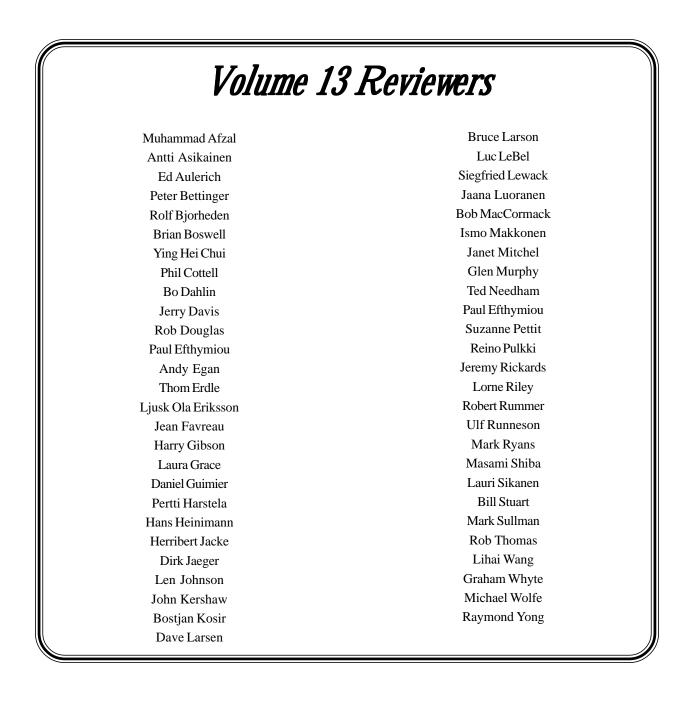
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