

Environmental and natural resources problems rarely respect political boundaries. Pollution, for example, affects whole ecosystems—not just a single jurisdiction. Different levels of government need to work together across jurisdictional lines to address these kinds of problems, and they need processes to do so. Environmental and natural resources issues also affect the health and well-being of all citizens. Collaborative processes provide effective ways to include citizens voices in forming and implementing public policies.

Below is a case that illustrates different ways collaborative approaches can be used to address environmental issues.

Collaborating on Flood Mitigation Plans on the Northern Plains

Problem

In 1997, a devastating flood struck the Red River basin. The flood caused severe damage along the river, which flows north along the Minnesota-North Dakota border into Manitoba and empties into Lake Winnipeg. Since the '97 catastrophe, three consecutive years of spring and summer tributary flooding left weary residents and communities throughout the Red River Basin in dire need of flood control measures.

In a context where repetitive flood disasters have put local economies, individual livelihoods, whole communities, and natural resources at risk, basin-wide flood mitigation makes economic, social, and ecological sense. But in a region that spans so many jurisdictions, how could such a diverse group find a common forum and methods for addressing their divergent needs?

Process

To plan for future floods, and address the damage already done, the Federal Emergency Management Agency sponsored an International Flood Mitigation Initiative (IFMI). The Canadian Province of Manitoba provided additional funding for the initiative. Because the basin spans two nations, three states, a province, and hundreds of municipalities, the effort had to be coordinated across all these jurisdictions.

The repeated flooding and mounting damage gave each jurisdiction a strong incentive to work together. The entire watershed needed ways to coordinate their efforts, because each section of the River basin affects the others. And any good plan would have to encompass not only the whole geographic area, from upper to lower basin, rural to urban, and tributary to mainstem of the Red River, but also the entire spectrum of damage mitigation, from economic development to environmental dimensions of the problem. The Consensus Council was asked to design and facilitate a collaborative process to bring the various actors together to develop plans for addressing future flooding.

An IFMI group was formed, representing the provincial government of Manitoba, the states of Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota, the Canadian and U.S. federal governments, and the business and nonprofit sectors. IFMI took a grass roots approach, holding community meetings to solicit public comments on values and priorities.

The IFMI group met 14 times over a span of two years. Each meeting was held at a different location in the basin and consisted of an evening meal and discussion followed by a full day of meetings.

To begin the process, IFMI participants developed a shared understanding of the problem. They agreed that the area constitutes one transboundary watershed community. New partnerships between the public and private sectors and nonprofit groups would need to be forged to reduce future flood damages.

Based upon these shared understandings and input from community meetings, IFMI participants developed a vision, mission, and goals to guide their work together. This helped them stay focused on their larger objectives. Participants realized that to address flood resilience for communities, it would also need to consider economic development, social, and ecological opportunities.



Roger Moe
Minnesota Senate
Majority Leader

“Legislating has never been easy, and it’s getting much more difficult as issues become more complex. These complex emerging issues require new skills to operate effectively in the legislative environment. Legislators need resources like the Policy Consensus Initiative to help teach us the skills of consensus building so we can deal with these issues more effectively.”

The IFMI group moved on to build agreements on strategies, policies, projects, and partnerships for mitigating potential damage from future flooding. After IFMI had done the bulk of its work generating possible actions for flood control, a second round of community meetings was held to allow citizens to review and assess the tentative IFMI agreements.

Results

Fourteen distinct initiatives, affecting institutions from schools to legislatures, have sprung from the IFMI agreement.

The governors of Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota and the Canadian Province of Manitoba signed a Memorandum of Understanding to meet regularly and develop joint transboundary management of the Red River basin.

Legislators from all four jurisdictions met to explore joint legislative efforts to mitigate flood damage and enhance the economic development and the environment of the Red River basin.

Public and private media have coordinated a central shared public media information system for local leaders and citizens about flooding and preparation, response, and recovery processes.

All basin school systems—in both countries—now share a public education process regarding flooding and the environment of the Red River basin.

The Red River Institute, a shared research facility, coordinates technical research among the colleges and universities in the Red River Basin and orchestrates full basin mapping.

So far, a total of \$2 million has been raised to implement IFMI initiatives.

Lessons Learned

- Public involvement during a collaborative process can be important to identifying public issues and priorities and to gaining input and support for solutions.
- A crisis creates a sense of urgency that can be an opportunity to bring people together from across political boundaries to collaborate to address the crisis and benefit their communities.

For more information on this case contact:

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