



Public Participation in Resource Planning

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What is it?

Public participation is central to successful locally-led resource planning. A core working group of stakeholders spearheads the planning effort by serving as the Planning Committee. This partnership of local interests comes together to develop the resource plan. In addition, the Planning Committee periodically engages non-committee stakeholders in the planning process.

The “public” are all the stakeholders in the resource-planning area. The public includes those who serve on the Planning Committee, and those who are not actively involved in the planning process. This fact sheet focuses on *non-committee* members of the public, and ways that Planning Committees can understand and work with them. This information will help Planning Committees answer four questions:

Why is public participation in locally-led planning important?

Who should be involved?

When should they be involved?

How can they be involved?

Why is it important?

Involvement of the public in the planning process is necessary for the Planning Committee to make better decisions. Public involvement results in decisions that have the support and commitment of the community, are responsive to local needs, and meaningfully reflect the wishes of the community.

Public participation also:

- Contributes the direct, immediate knowledge of community members about resource conditions.
- Reduces the likelihood of conflict, legal action or other delays and expenses by incorporating local issues and concerns early in the planning process.
- Improves citizen awareness of issues and increases public understanding of projects.
- Empowers citizens and helps them to understand that they can have positive effects and influence in their community.
- Increases the potential for plan implementation by demonstrating broad community support for its components.

Who should be involved?

One way to think of the non-committee public is in four main groups:

1. Politicians
2. Decision-makers and power holders
3. Activists
4. Ordinary citizens

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The Planning Committee needs to reach all these members of the public. This may require different communication approaches for each group.

When do we do it?

At a minimum, public input is critical at the following times during planning:

1. Early in the process to build support in the community for the planning effort.

2. During development of the plan to get input on:

- resource concerns
- objectives
- alternative strategies

3. After the plan is completed to inform the community about the plan and implementation efforts.

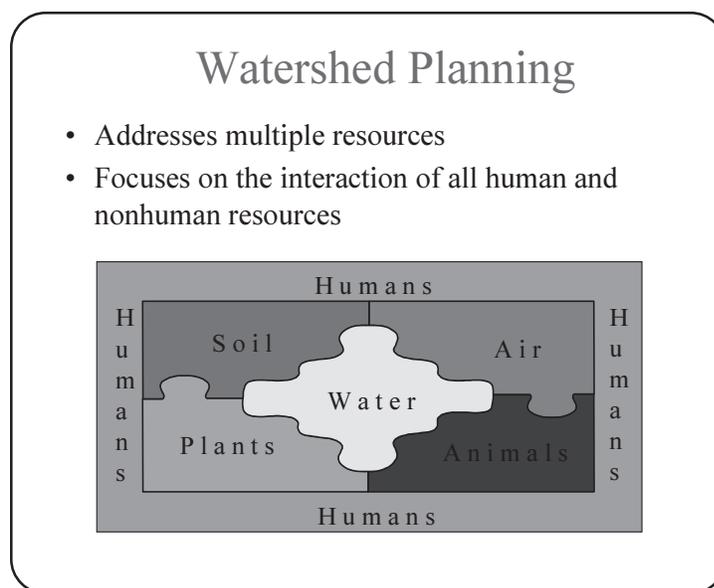
How do we do it?

“Public participation” often brings to mind public meetings. While meetings are a useful tool for garnering public input, there are many, many other ways to obtain input from the public, such as citizen advisory panels, interviews, newsletters, charrettes, or focus groups.

The Planning Committee should select public participation methods based on the level of participation required to achieve their objectives. All public participation techniques vary in the extent to which they actively involve the public in the decision-making. Some techniques are suitable only to inform the public of decisions already made; others involve the public in all stages of the decision-making process.

The three categories below group public participation techniques according to the amount of input they yield for decision-making, and how helpful they are for the typical Planning Committee objectives in the context of locally-led planning.

When selecting public participation methods, the Planning Committee should also consider their commitment to obtain and use public input; expectations and needs of the public; availability of necessary skills, time, and other resources, including in some cases an experienced facilitator for some of the more complex methods.



Information-Only

Information-only methods are essentially “take-it or leave-it” approaches. They are usually one-way communications, e.g., the Planning Committee prints a brochure to educate the public about their watershed. These methods may be appropriate during the earliest stages of the planning process to build support in the community for the planning effort, or after the plan is completed to keep the public informed about implementation. Information-only methods will not provide insight about the content of a resource plan desired by the public. Information-only techniques should not be used when people are expecting and want more involvement in the decision-making.

Some Information-Only Methods

- Print and distribute leaflets, newsletters, video
- Brief media through press releases and press conferences
- Give presentations at meetings of other local organizations
- Dedication ceremonies and tours

Consultation

Consultation methods offer some choices to the public about what will happen. However, they do not provide an opportunity for people to develop their own ideas or participate in putting plans into action. Consultative methods may be appropriate when the Planning Committee wants input on the resource concerns which they have identified, the objectives they have developed, or the various alternatives suggested by Technical Advisors. Consultation is also appropriate to obtain information about existing ecological, socio-economic and political conditions in the planning area.

Some Consultative Methods

- Surveys
- Meetings or interviews with community leaders
- Advisory committees
- Simulations
- Design charrettes or other workshops

Collaboration

Collaborative techniques entails the highest level of participation of the public in the decision-making process. Collaboration essentially means “deciding together” and involves developing ideas and options in partnership with others. As such, collaboration requires more time and the techniques are more complex. Collaborative public involvement entails multiple public participation techniques. Considered in its entirety, the NRCS locally-led resource planning process is essentially collaborative. Collaboration with the non-committee public may be appropriate to generate ideas about resource concerns, objectives, and alternatives, and to implement elements of the resource plan.

Description of a Typical Collaboration Method

1. Use information-only methods to start the process
2. Do stakeholder analysis to determine who should be involved
3. Form partnerships with stakeholder organizations for input and to carry out action items
4. Use brainstorming, Nominal Group Technique, citizen surveys, focus groups and other techniques to develop ideas and alternatives