

Public Participation in Forest Planning



Attributes of Success

By Bruce Shindler and Julie Neburka

Federal ecosystem and adaptive management programs encourage collaboration with local forest communities. Such programs offer opportunities not only to experiment with approaches to forest management but also to capitalize on local knowledge and build support for management decisions. But for natural resources professionals, questions persist. What do we want from the public? What do they expect from us? How do we *do* public participation? What would a successful participatory process look like?

These same questions confronted the implementation team of the Central Cascades Adaptive Management Area on Oregon's Willamette National Forest. One place to look for answers was the public participation efforts of the not-so-distant past. We consulted with Forest Service personnel and local citizens to examine processes previously undertaken on the Willamette and learn from their experiences about the success and pitfalls of agency-public interactions.

Comparative analysis

An often-cited problem with learning how to conduct public processes is that every community is different, and each situation is unique. What works under certain conditions may not be relevant in other situations. In comparing five long-term planning processes that occurred between 1989 and 1995, therefore, we looked for common elements that stood out across settings. The groups varied from one organized to examine and advise on the forest's timber sale program to one that developed a new management plan for three designated wilderness areas.

We interviewed 31 citizen and USDA Forest Service participants and asked for their best recollections of what had happened in those groups. Many were veterans of a range of Forest Service public meetings. We noted obstacles and frustrations but were particularly interested in those attributes that contributed to positive interactions or outcomes. Within

each public process we found elements that were consistently connected with success, along with other elements that were almost always cited as counterproductive.

"Successful group efforts have to be small and local—places where the war won't be won or lost."

1.

Groups whose members are selected for their understanding of the issues and willingness to commit to a group process are more effective. Establishing ground rules for the selection process helped achieve what one agency staffer called a “representative, committed group with balance and fairness.”

Handpicking participants is not always an option, but in several cases group organizers used a criteria-based application process conducted by the interest groups themselves, rather than basing membership solely on interest group affiliation and ending up with individuals who tended to represent positions. The criteria in this creative strategy included knowledge of the relevant issues (not merely an interest in them), willingness to actively participate, and commitment to a year’s worth of meetings. Application forms also included rules and expectations about participation.

From a practical standpoint, staffers noted that the approach meant “we didn’t have to work with just whoever showed up each night.” Having a stable, ongoing group eliminated the time spent at each meeting bringing new members up to speed.

2.

Meetings are much more productive if structured to promote full group interaction, rather than simple information sharing and feedback. Potential participants want to make a difference, not be subjected to what one colleague describes as the “three Is of federal public involvement: *Inform, solicit Input, then Ignore.*” Unfortunately, that’s not just a smart quip. People frequently complained of too many meetings conducted as “fishing expeditions,” convened only for the purpose of conveying information. One citizen member characterized her experience as being “*talked at* 90 percent of the time.” Another observed a shortcoming in her group’s communication by noting “the Forest Service talked to us, we talked to them, but we citizen members never talked to each other.” Perhaps one individual spoke for many when he said, “I am not interested in attending a never-ending series of meetings if they are just supposed to make me feel better because I was involved.”

The message seems clear: when inviting the community to participate, natural resource agencies must define and articulate their reasons for involving the public and then make good on their

commitment. Participants told us this must include “sincere and genuine leadership, not necessarily meetings conducted by polished facilitators.” In the most successful cases, outside facilitators were quickly jettisoned and replaced by “regular, honest people with whom the group felt more comfortable.” Leaders who were good listeners—but kept the group from straying by reminding them of their mission—were highly valued.

3.

A group whose purpose is defined and whose end product is identified at the outset is inherently more successful. One Forest Service member attributed his group’s success to “knowing what your objectives are when starting the process and knowing why you are involving people and using their time.” When groups begin with a jointly identified common focus, their success can be measured by meeting

objectives and then reinforced by seeing results of their efforts on the ground.

The obverse appears to be true, too. “We were not successful because we didn’t start out to be successful,” was how one frustrated participant characterized his experience. Citizens who volunteer are largely task

oriented, but many find it difficult to contribute in a poorly conceived public involvement process where clarifying roles and identifying goals are not always part of the agenda.

4.

Groups in which the decisionmaker has a regular presence believe their contributions are taken more seriously by the agency. For many participants, the active involvement of the decisionmaker was an important indicator of the value of their work. In fact, citizens from one study group stated they would not have participated if the forest supervisor had not attended their meetings. Participation by the district ranger or the forest supervisor helped legitimize the efforts of the entire group. Successful groups took their work more seriously, knowing that their recommendations were relied on and used.

The flip side of that successful element was the complaint of some participants that their comments or suggestions were not incorporated into staff reports. They wondered “where the information came from” that did make it into planning documents. The concern here seems to be trust and confidence in agency follow-through.

“Unless the group’s job is closely defined, meetings waste people’s time, energy, and good will.”

5. Working with current and reliable information adds considerably to a credible process.

Having sound scientific data that inform the decisionmaking process is not a new idea. That managers and citizens together analyze information to form alternatives, however, may be a more groundbreaking notion. Such efforts required substantial resources, such as updated inventories, field monitoring, and GIS layers, but everyone agreed the payoff from accurate, trustworthy information was high. In addition, staffers recognized that "it provided the agency with an opportunity to really learn about its own data." From a citizen's perspective, support of this kind upped the ante for participation. One group member reflected, "We took meeting preparation as a serious responsibility because we knew we were given good information and would have a chance to discuss it."

6. The "care and feeding" of participants is important. Often-overlooked common courtesies, such as advance distribution of meeting notes and written materials, mean a great deal to volunteers. Defining terms early on also helped; addressing questions like "What's a riparian zone?" got everyone working at a similar level. Prompt and direct answers to citizen members' questions added to the agency's credibility. One person remembered, "There was not excessive control over resource specialists in our group; they didn't look over at the forest supervisor or district ranger before they answered our questions." Finally, providing drinks and snacks at lengthy meetings was uniformly praised as an indication that the agency cared about the group and its work.

7. The experience of getting to know "the other side" is beneficial to outcomes. Although acrimony was often a factor at many meetings, the cumulative effects of group experience should not be undersold. Participants repeatedly emphasized how their positions softened as they got to know others at the table and realized that their personal concerns were often common concerns. One individual even said the sole success of his group lay in "building relationships." The most successful groups were those whose members could talk freely, thus learning the intent behind each other's positions.

The Forest Service has used these improved relationships as building blocks for other public forums. In some cases, citizen participants have formed

loosely knit coalitions with "allies in other camps" to address problems more effectively on their own.

8. Willingness to filter out "noise" from national interest groups can help participants stay focused on their common goals. Distinguishing the local issue from larger national concerns was important. In the words of one member, "It's easier to get something done if you can fly below the radar screen of the national interest groups."

Long-time area residents often had considerably more experience with the local landscape than the district ranger or representatives of national interest groups. For local people, success was measured by the extent to which their

own ideas and concerns were given serious consideration and the agenda was not driven by federal agency politics or national debates.

Where issues have become high-profile and national groups have staked out their positions, however, local public participation efforts may not work, and natural resources managers may need new, improved models for public participation designed to build consensus.

The eight attributes of success represent a rather straightforward, almost intuitive set of sensible guidelines for citizen involvement. As many participants acknowledged, however, in the heat of public decisionmaking it was easy to become distracted and forgo the important elements that contributed to productive outcomes. Moreover, no single group process could be termed an absolute model for success. Nevertheless, from a learning standpoint, we should not overlook the common message: that basic organizational skills, attention to detail, commitment to constituents, and good leadership—all things people normally expect from our natural resources agencies—often mean the difference between success and frustration. **TOP**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bruce Shindler is assistant professor, Department of Forest Resources, Oregon State University, Corvallis 97331; Julie Neburka is researcher, Legislative Policy and Research Office, State of Oregon, Salem. Support for their research was provided by the Cascade Center for Ecosystem Management, USDA Forest Service, and the People and Natural Resource Program, USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station.

"Our leader was not a great public speaker, but he was sincere, and he kept us on track."