

Water for Agriculture, Cities and the Environment: Strategies for Engaging Stakeholders in Cooperative Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

As water is increasingly viewed as a dwindling commodity—not enough for all the uses society has for it—conflict arises. Are there ways to engage stakeholders to transform conflict into cooperation? What are some of the strategies being used? Which ones seem to work best? How could we encourage use of these strategies and experimentation with other strategies?

Introduction

Colorado State University's Colorado Water Institute (CWI) was asked to participate in an effort to engage community members in discussing potential mitigation to reduce opposition to a controversial proposed storage project. CWI believed such an approach would further polarize the community, some of whom staunchly support the storage project and some of who adamantly oppose it. Instead, in an effort to transform conflict into cooperation, they proposed an alternative approach, an educational/action project centered around the Poudre River, which is the root of the storage proposal controversy. Three years later, their project, *The Poudre Runs Through It*, is proving to be an effective means for building cooperation between agricultural, environmental, municipal, business and recreational interests.

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Background

In 2011, UniverCity Connections, the Community Foundation of Northern Colorado, and Colorado State University's Colorado Water Institute and Center for Public Deliberation joined forces to convene a community series on the Poudre River and the future of Northern Colorado's water. As many as 350 attended the educational and public deliberation sessions. The result was a resounding agreement that those who live along the Poudre and in its valley respect its values of supporting agriculture and urban water use. They love it for its recreational values. But they also want it to be a healthier river. They may disagree on how to get all of that, but they share the common values.

The Colorado Water Institute (CWI) at Colorado State University decided to build on the momentum from the educational series. The result was the convening in October 2012 of a group of 30 leaders from the Poudre's various communities in an eight month process of study and action leading to a series of action initiatives. Participating communities include those through which the river runs through—Fort Collins, Greeley, and Windsor—but also the City of Thornton, fifty miles south, who 30 years ago purchased water rights from a local ditch company with plans to move the water for municipal use through an eventual pipeline.

Participants were chosen for their expertise related to the Poudre River, including those from the agricultural, environmental, municipal, industrial, recreational, business, development, and other sectors. Another factor in the selection of participants was the intent to include individuals associated with the wide diversity of organizations with interests in the Poudre River. These leaders devoted a full day each month to learning from one another and from outside resources in order to build the relationships and the knowledge to come together to identify and develop initiatives. They learned about a number of individuals and groups already working on projects aimed at making the best use of the Poudre River and improving its health—ranging from downtown development to restoration projects.

Let's make the Poudre River the world's best example of a working river that's also healthy

That's the vision adopted by this diverse group of regional leaders as they meet to better understand both the operational and ecological needs of the Poudre River. Sharing their knowledge and experience, this work group learned together about many aspects of the Poudre River to identify opportunities for cooperative action.

In many ways, The Poudre Runs Through It group reflects the diversity of values held by stakeholders in the Poudre. Some value the river mainly as a working river--for agricultural, municipal and industrial needs. Others value its rich recreational opportunities and ecological attributes. But all stakeholders want a

river that meets human needs AND is a healthy river in its own right. In the past, these stakeholders too often found reasons not to work together. This group is trying instead to find broadly acceptable ways to meet multiple objectives: to have both a working Poudre and a healthier Poudre. They know the Poudre is a managed river and it is not their goal to return the river to its pre-development condition. They are focusing on areas for mutual gain while not letting divisive issues inhibit their thinking.

After eight monthly all-day meetings in 2012 and early 2013, the group reported on its success so far. They wrote “At times we talked among ourselves and at times we listened to success stories from around the region that provided examples of win-win collaboration. We dealt with the challenge of grasping an understanding of the multiple perspectives/stakes in the river, the challenges brought about by complex legal and institutional realities, as well as the challenges of plans for new diversions. But we also identified a variety of innovative opportunities for voluntary, collaborative solutions that may help protect habitat and water quality while respecting private property rights.”

At the close of what they labeled Phase 1, the work group launched a trio of initiatives it believes embody the dual goals of a working river/healthy river. These initiatives are in the incubation stage. Each of them will take a great deal of work and cooperation.

Three Primary Initiatives

The initiatives described below fall under the categories of “Flows, Funding, and Forum.” The Poudre Runs Through It will continue to meet with the assistance of the Colorado Water Institute and local funders through at least 2014 to help cultivate these three initiatives and to consider more than 40 other ideas that the group brainstormed. The members of the work group will build on the relationships they have formed—relationships that would have seemed unlikely less than a year before—as they consider additional ideas that may be ready to launch in the future.

FLOWS: Improving the flows of the river while protecting water rights

What would it take to manage the working river system to keep more of the water in the river at critical times and in critical places to begin to improve the river’s ecology? Given the large number of agricultural and municipal interests involved, it may be complicated, it may be expensive, and in fact it may prove impossible. Nonetheless, there appear to be at least two distinct approaches to keep more water in the river; both are being investigated. The key to each is using the river, more than canals or pipelines, as a conveyance to move water from upstream to a downstream beneficial use, and moving that water in a way that minimizes losses, does not interfere with anyone’s water rights, can be administered under Colorado water law, and is market driven without negatively affecting local economies. In

addition to these two approaches, there may be others that deserve investigation, but these are two that the group is focusing on now. Each of these approaches can benefit the other.

Approach A: Instream flow designation for a section of the Poudre

One way to improve river flows is to officially designate a length of river between specific points as needing a specified minimum flow. Such a minimum flow designation is recognized by Colorado law, established by the Colorado Water Conservation Board in conjunction with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and water dedicated to such a reach is administered within the state's water right priority system. One such stretch—that could improve both the ecology of the river and its recreational and aesthetic values—could be through the City of Fort Collins. Water leased or otherwise acquired upstream of Fort Collins could then be run through the designated instream flow reach, applied to the beneficial use created by an instream flow right in the designated reach, and used in turn by downstream agricultural or other users. This is a long process with no guarantees, and it would ultimately be expensive. However, if done well, it would protect (and perhaps even improve) the river's diversions for agricultural and municipal use while also helping to protect some of the river's environmental values.

Approach B: Regional Conveyance Cooperation

A second option to use the river as a conveyance may involve regional stakeholders with a need to move water from the Poudre River to other areas for municipal or other uses. For example, cities or water districts that currently divert water from the Poudre River upstream from Fort Collins, or plan to do so in the future could, during certain times or under certain conditions, move all or part of that water further downstream of the Poudre through Fort Collins and perhaps Windsor before diverting it to other uses. Using the river as a conveyance could add water, that for years has been diverted from the river, back into at least a portion of the Poudre. These considerations also figure into trying to develop a win-win arrangement between The City of Thornton and other users as that city gets closer to enacting its plans to move the water it owns south for municipal use. These conveyance enhancement concepts would likely be very expensive for the stakeholders and their ratepayers, and would require a very high level of collaboration, cooperation and public support for successful implementation. But the benefits to the river of such stakeholder collaboration could be significant.

Both Approaches A and B have elements in common. Both would require the replacement, retrofitting, enhancement or construction of major infrastructure such as treatment plants, diversion and head gates, as well as adding telemetered flow measurement. All such changes would be expensive, but doable, and might provide additional benefits such as fish and recreational passage. Both too would require new cooperative agreements among water rights holders to maximize the efficiency of the river—for both working AND healthy river goals.

Flow Education

Any approach to improving flows will involve considerable expense and therefore

require public support. Public support can only come through education. Therefore the group has identified as a priority broadening public understanding of key water management concepts. For example, since the right to take water from the river is usually measured in cubic feet per second, it would be helpful to understand just how much a “CFS” really is. Yet few beyond the experts understand flow measurement, and fewer still pay much attention to how much river flows fluctuate through time, or even from place to place along the river. In order to help everyone better understand river flows, a subgroup of The Poudre Runs Through It has imagined a simple but effective project. They will place some attractive flow gages and interpretative signs at strategic places along the river (probably one in Fort Collins and one in Windsor, initially) to help the public visualize flows as measured in cubic feet per second. Sometimes something simple is just what it takes to invoke an “aha” moment.

FUNDING: Translating Vision into Reality

“Putting your money where your mouth is” will be required to achieve the goal of making the working river a healthier river. None of the improvements envisioned will be easy or cheap. They will require engineering and legal fees. They likely will require expensive retrofit of infrastructure and measurement and extensive educational campaigns. They may require lease or purchase of water rights. Finding the money for ventures like these is not simply a matter of a few bake sales or even finding a few well-endowed foundations willing to step up to the plate. Funding the transformation of a working river to a working river/healthy river will require major dollars—public dollars. The Poudre Runs Through It has undertaken an initiative to investigate how such funding could be generated. They will look at successful models, such as Larimer County’s Open Space Tax or the state of Colorado’s GOCO fund, and others, for inspiration. They believe that those who live in the Poudre River Basin will respond enthusiastically to this vision. Studies show that most everyone loves and benefits from the Poudre. They want it to continue providing for their agricultural, urban, and recreational needs. But all of them want the river to be healthy and clean, and that all takes money.

FORUM: Convening for Cooperation

Another initiative will be the establishment of an annual Poudre River Forum to bring together all the communities that benefit from the Poudre to celebrate and cooperate. A one-day gathering will feature presentations and panels, think-tank topics, and fun. The purpose of the forum is to convene the wide diversity of those who care about the river to collaborate on how they can meet the dual goals of working river/healthy river. A subgroup is now planning for the first Forum to take place early in 2014. What’s the scope of this vision? At least 300 people -- maybe as many as 500 -- meeting annually to strategize for a healthier working river.

Conclusion

As the gap between water supply and demand increases throughout not only the arid western United States but elsewhere throughout the country and the world, conflict is sure to increase. Strategies to bring together diverse groups with diverging interests are needed. In this case, a neutral entity—the Colorado Water Institute at Colorado State University—sought to build on the common values of diverse stakeholders to build relationships and multiple benefit initiatives that can make a significant contribution toward fulfilling those common values. The debate about building new storage has not disappeared, and it will not. But a strong group of stakeholders has broadened its understanding of the underlying and broader issues of which the storage debate is only one part. These stakeholders are leaders in their communities and have already influenced a more finely nuanced conversation about the Poudre River. And more, they have launched concrete initiatives which have the backing of groups such as farmers and environmentalists who have traditionally been at opposite ends of a polarized debate. Further experimentation with collaboration building strategies such as this is needed.