

PEOPLE, PUBLIC PARTICIPATION, FORESTS, AND TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

Public participation in forest assessments, planning, and decision making has become increasingly important in recent years. Forest personnel at various levels should consider it. Concepts and approaches to solicit informed public participation need to be included in forest resource management plans.

This training would assist personnel in identifying values and making value judgments, and enhance public participation. Too often public participation becomes a forced and difficult task for agencies faced with technical data and expert opinions that are not plainly visible. Training in new perspectives and analysis of values and public participation can greatly aid personnel in this vital area. This paper emphasizes various objectives, sources, and methods of public participation for forestry and range.

Public participation requires adequate non-technical information for inputs and value considerations as well as adequate encouragement and opportunities.

Values : Formed by groups of attitudes which cluster. Values produce behavior as contrasted to attitudes which represent a

behavioral disposition, potential, or tendency. Values are an individual or collective conception (Emotional, judgmental, and symbolic components of that which is of worth, importance, or desirable). Values imply judgments of good and bad, right and wrong as well as beliefs

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Definitions :

Forester : A professional individual who has responsibility for planning and execution of activities that allow the full values of the forest resources to be perpetually obtained for human benefit and that recognizes the forest as a living biological community with inter-relationships.

Forest : Management of forest lands for the provision of the various goods and services that forests can continuously supply with attention that such yields are sustainable and that the resource base (essential ecological processes and genetic diversity) is secured.

Public participation : The involvement, informing, and consultation of the public in planning, decision-making, and management activities in environmental/forest affairs. The public actively sharing in the decisions that government makes in environmental/forest affairs by having individual and group views taken into account through various participation measures which involve the public.

The values, interdisciplinary social science, and holistic approaches of environmental administration in-service training provide forestry personnel with backgrounds necessary to further their environmental education and public participation. Training sessions on public participation should involve guest lectures in environmental education, using case studies and audio-visual materials. Training for environmental education should provide the citizenry knowledge about the

environment and its associated problems, and how to be motivated to help solve these problems (Henning and Mangun, 1989).

Until people understand why (values) they should safeguard the environment, they usually will not do so. It is essential for personnel to have some training in environmental education and how to relate this training to the public.

Some overall objectives for public participation should include :

1. to promote public involvement in planning and actions with emphasis on the non-technical aspects.

2. to keep the public informed about significant issues, problems, and changes in programs, associated values and alternatives.

3. to make sure that government and personnel understand public concerns and values and that they are responsive to them, including public identification of issues and alternatives.

4. to demonstrate that the agency consults with affected segments of the public and takes public viewpoints and values into consideration when decisions are made.

5. to foster public involvement in identifying problems, laying out and exploring alternatives, and setting forth a preferred alternative.

6. to foster a spirit of mutual trust, support and openness between government and the public through contacts for public participation.

Five basic functions for effective public participation are : (a) Identification, (b) Outreach, (c) Dialogue, (d) Assimilation, and (e) Feedback.

Identification : It is necessary to identify those groups or members of the public who may be interested in, or affected by a forthcoming action. This can be done by developing mailing lists, requesting additional names from those already included, using questionnaires or surveys to discover levels of awareness and establishing informal contacts by other means. A specific contact list should also be developed.

Outreach : The public can contribute effectively only if it has accurate, non-technical, understandable, pertinent and timely information on issues, alternatives, and decisions. Technical, specific, and detailed information will usually discourage public participation. The agency must get this information to the public in time through mailings, public service announcements, personal communications, media ads, etc. Background information, a timetable of proposed actions, summaries of lengthy documents or technical material, a delineation of issues, and specific encouragement to stimulate active participation by the public is needed.

Dialogue : Responsible personnel should exchange views and explore the issues, alternatives and consequences with the public through meetings, workshops, hearings, personal contacts, or correspondence, and may establish special groups such as advisory committees or task forces.

Assimilation : Public viewpoints and preferences are assimilated into final conclusions by merging the results of the "Outreach" and "Dialogue". The agency must demonstrate that it has understood and fully considered all public concerns in its decisions and actions. Assimilation would include : (1) Documentation--the agency should briefly summarize public views; and (2) Content or Responsiveness Summary the summary should describe the public participation activity, including names of those who participated and the matters on which the public was consulted. It should summarize the public's views, important comments, criticisms, and suggestions, and set forth the agency's responses. Evaluations of public participation should contain quantitative and qualitative aspects of the basic values, issues and alternatives involved.

Feedback : The agency should provide feedback to participants and interested parties on the public's involvement. Feedback may be personal letters or contacts, including phone

calls, if the number of participants is small. With a large number of participants, the agency may mail a responsive summary to those on the list or may publish it. The feedback should include a statement of the action taken and indicate the effect the public's comment had on that action (Environmental Protection Agency, 1984).

Various techniques are valuable for obtaining public inputs to decision making, and for imparting information or developing understanding. Each has certain advantages and disadvantages. Personnel must select those techniques which fit the problem and assure : (a) decision making quality, (b) adequate public involvement, (c) expeditious handling of management activities, and (d) public acceptance and support. In selecting a given technique, some general questions can be : (1) When should public involvement occur? (2) What types of public input are wanted? (3) How is the public input to be used? and (4) Who are the publics from which the input will be required?

The following represents a random list of some techniques available for public participation, as adapted and summarized from Forest Service, A Guide to Public Involvement in Decision Making (Forest Service, 1971) and the National Park Service, Public Involvement in Planning (National Park Service, 1978).

1. Formal Public Hearings : Formal hearings produce official hearing records of all information presented by all individuals, groups, and organizations. Although public hearings comply with legal requirements, they tend to involve high costs for recording, slow down the decision-making processes, and often intimidate the general public. Thus, public hearings are often employed because they are officially required.

2. Public Meetings : Open public meetings permit participation by all interested people. They may involve panel discussions and public forums. The former provide expert testimony and information to the public on complicated issues in a number of professional areas. A panel of experts can provide the public with all information pertinent to a plan or decision. Panels may be composed of professionals with alternative viewpoints representing different interpretations on information. Panels are oriented toward information-giving, although questions and answers are often a part of the format. Panels can be of formal (audience and experts on a formal basis) or informal (people talking informally to experts) nature. Public forums provide formal presentation of public viewpoints in cases where alternative perspectives are based on values and interests other than those represented by the government perspective.

A public forum is organized so members of the public can present their viewpoints, critiques and proposals to other people and to the agency itself. The stage for public forums should be set with a brief presentation of facts upon which the decision can be based. A group of alternative solutions with or without their pros and cons may be introduced. Clear guidelines, time limits, and "rules" should be given to those making presentations so that all have adequate time and orientations. All participants should be free to ask questions and make their views known.

3. Guided Workshops : These provide an opportunity for public discussion, debate and clarification of issues, proposed actions, and consequences of actions. If values, self-interests, and arguments are expressed, it is possible to correct rumors, create mitigating elements, and provide information. Public opinion is seldom organized or consistent over time and guided workshops create an opportunity for public judgment to crystallize and become consistent. Decision making can be eased to the extent that the atmosphere of public opinion is clear.

A guided workshop is characterized by two activities : facilitation of commentary and recording of ideas. Facilitation is a method of verbal communication intended to clarify messages by reducing distracting effects.

It serves to check the accuracy of what is being heard. Recording is the creation of a written record of the points which are being made. This is usually done with a large notation pad completed in full view of the people in attendance. The joint efforts of facilitating and recording are to maintain a focus on the topic issue and to avoid ambiguity.

Guided workshops : (a) can be used with large audiences, (b) establish an informal atmosphere conducive to openness, (c) increase participants awareness of the variety of interests and opinions with which the plan must deal, (d) place recorded public input on display so that misinterpretation of public comment can be identified and corrected, (e) permit personnel to hear input first-hand and to have the opportunity to clarify ideas or comments for their for their own understanding, and (f) provide facilitating techniques which can be used to ease tensions, clarify statements, and foster common understanding. Guided workshops require personnel to have public speaking skills.

4. Informal Small Group Meetings : These can be invitational meetings with interested individuals or groups. A series of meetings may be necessary to cover the variety of groups as well as to keep the attendance small enough for informality and thorough discussion. The subject matter covered and the format of the meetings should stick to

the basic issues. Informal meetings are productive if they are used early in the decision-making process, especially when personnel are gathering information and developing alternatives. This technique permits concerned people to participate and to have a meaningful input at a time when informed points of view are most helpful.

5. Advisory Committees: An advisory committee (board or commission) is a standing body formally established to advise or make recommendations. The background knowledge and the understanding of policies and programs of a committee allows it to provide sound advice. It should represent a wide range of groups and interests. Advisory committees can be very effective as a sounding board for proposals and as an indicator of public attitudes and interests. However, the selection of members may introduce bias so that the membership may not represent the entire range of the public interests. Regularly scheduled meetings of advisory committees can provide a continued forum for disseminating information, clarifying issues, obtaining advice, and gaining support.

6. Ad Hoc Committees: An ad hoc committee is a temporary committee to address specific issues and recommend solutions. When an issue is resolved or recommendations

completed, the committee is dissolved. Committee recommendations can be by majority, consensus, or expression of individual point of view. Selection of membership should be oriented toward fair representation from sources and views that reflect general public opinion.

7. Working Groups: A working group consists of a manageable number (usually under twelve) of motivated members of the general public who want to be involved in the long term management and planning of an agency. The group has autonomy and no formal relationships with the agency. Ideally, the working group will have a spectrum of viewpoints associated with the diversity of its membership. The working group is usually served by resource person from the agency. This individual basically supplies information. The agency assigns tasks to the working group and indicates that their inputs will be considered in decision-making. After various meetings, the working group presents its consensus recommendations in the form of written responses to the tasks after studying and discussing the issues and working out their own intergroup compromises (Brewer, 1978).

8. Key Contacts: Advice obtained from key knowledgeable individuals about public issues provides counsel worthwhile to the decision-making process. Key contacts

include people who are opinion leaders within the local community or region such as elected or appointed officials, media representatives, active members of organized groups, businessmen, and respected citizens. Too close a relationship with a few selected individuals should be avoided so that opportunities for the broad solicitation of public points of view are not overlooked.

The emphasis should be on gathering their opinions about issues, ideas, etc., while not asking them to support any position. Strengths of key contacts are: (a) input and valuable insights can be obtained from informed, influential people, who can often indicate important aspects of public opinion; (b) key people can inform others about issues and stimulate input; (c) the involvement of key people can contribute to public understanding and acceptance of decisions; (d) input can be obtained personally, and in depth and detail; and (e) they are sounding boards for ideas, issues, or approaches before they are finalized.

9. Letter Request for Comments:

Letters can be very effective when the individuals contacted have the necessary knowledge of the issues. Letters should address the broad interests and not be limited to the local area. Letters may be used with other methods

to provide a public feeling of involvement to assure good decision-making. For example, fact sheets on management alternatives can be included in the letters. Follow-up on letter contacts and responses is essential.

10. Show Me Trips: Field trips early in the planning stage are very effective in involving the public and assuring an understanding of the issue(s). Show-me trips set the stage for quality and meaningful participation. Interplay among participants helps clarify the issues and identify possible consequences. Show-me trips require detailed preparation, and trial runs are advisable.

11. Personnel Contacts with Public:

Many organizational personnel routinely contact the public in carrying out their jobs and through community activities. For example, personnel serving on local and regional committees have excellent opportunities to influence planning on regional or community projects, and to acquire information on current attitudes and interests of local and regional people by listening to their comments. Personnel need to be thoroughly informed so they can be a valuable bridge to greater understanding.

12. Standard Information Techniques :

Standard information techniques include : (a) the type of audience to be reached, (b) the

length of time available to prepare materials, (c) the amount of details expected to be covered, and (d) the scope of the audience to be reached.

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