



Planning Associates Program 2008

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Critical Think Piece (CTP) Title: Addressing the Needs of the Nation's Water Resource Challenges: Short-term actions for aligning projects with broad-based goals

Introduction:

A variety of Federal, State, local government agencies, non-governmental organizations and private developers plan, conduct and influence actions that affect the nations water resources. In most cases, multiple, inter-related actions are occurring or are being planned within a given region, state, watershed or basin at any given time. Additionally, multiple Federal, State, and local agencies have regulatory oversight and permitting responsibilities associated with those actions. To enable these agencies and organizations to better coordinate and collaborate during to achieve common goals and objectives, there is a need to collect and disseminate key information to better align projects with a wider range of goals, and objectives, and to identify and capitalize on relationships that may exist among the agencies and organizations.

The Corps has promulgated principles, policies and guidance to shift the focus of its efforts from individual projects towards system-wide approaches that include collaboration with a wider range of stakeholders and consideration of a broader range of goals and objectives. These efforts have resulted in many process improvements and

successes across the country. However, to date, their application and implementation on individual projects has been inconsistent and progress towards comprehensive integrated water resource planning and management has been relatively slow. This Critical Think Piece (CTP) outlines several practical steps the Corps can implement to speed its efforts to align its actions with broad-based goals and objectives and create tools that will form the foundation for building and maintaining collaborative relationships with a more comprehensive range of stakeholders. If implemented, each proposal would apply existing tools and authorities to better align the purposes and effects of projects influenced by the Corps with the full range of national, regional, state, local, agency, and interagency objectives.

National Perspective:

To make better use of limited resources, Federal agencies are progressing towards more systematic, broad-based, national, regional and watershed-based approaches to their planning, construction, and regulatory enforcement programs. To be more successful, agencies and other stakeholders must be prepared to identify and capitalize on opportunities to share information and collaborate when planning and making decisions. Although significant progress has been made in this area, Federal agencies with water resource related missions must continue to strive to find new ways to communicate and work with other stakeholders more effectively and use the limited resources available more efficiently. These efforts should seek to find better ways to communicate with internal and external stakeholders, collect and store data, and encourage and guide collaboration efforts.

The Corps' Perspective:

Because of the breadth of the Corps' institutional authorities, it is uniquely positioned to impact nearly all water resource related projects through its civil works and regulatory programs. Also, because of its unique set of planning and regulatory responsibilities and capabilities, the Corps should assume a leadership role in advancing efforts to systematically align water resource projects and regulatory activities with the comprehensive range of local, watershed, regional, and national goals and priorities.

Corps leadership has long recognized the importance of aligning its efforts with broad-based regional goals, and there are numerous examples of individual and systemic successes across the country. However, few practical procedures or tools have been implemented operationally on a nationwide basis that encourage and facilitate the types of business practices that will be needed to consistently capture many of those benefits across the country and in all mission areas.

To realize those benefits, the Corps needs to organize and prioritize its internal coordination and outreach efforts and create a framework of guidelines and policies to build and implement systems that advance overall efforts and continually improve as their application progresses and matures. Without these tools it will be difficult for individuals and Districts to consistently identify and capitalize on synergistic relationships that may exist and align the wide range of project purposes and effects with broad-based goals.

Recommended Actions

This CTP makes practical recommendations for improvement in three distinct areas.

- 1) Improving data collection, organization, storage, and dissemination
- 2) Improving collaboration among Corps Civil Works and Regulatory functional areas
- 3) Promulgation of policies and guidelines to encourage and support external collaboration

The recommendations described below could be implemented incrementally and concurrently using a framework approach that would allow gradual progress to be made. A flexible approach would also allow implementation to be adapted at the District level to meet project specific needs. In some instances, it may make sense to approach collaborative efforts from the watershed perspective. In others it may make more sense to take statewide, regional, interstate or national approaches as opposed to the purely hydrologic watershed approach.

Framework for a Systems Approach to Internal Collaboration

To help improve collaboration among Corps Civil Works and Regulatory offices, a system of standard work practices should be developed on a nationwide basis for implementation at the District and Division levels, and a person at each District and Division should be tasked with, and be accountable for, ensuring that the work practices are consistently followed and appropriate goals and priorities are used to make project-related decisions. Some examples of basic elements this framework should address include:

- A Division Lead to coordinate and communicate priorities among Districts;
- A District Planning/Regulatory Liaison to collaborate on specific projects;
- A requirement to input CW project data into Regulatory's ORM2;
- Consistent participation of Regulatory personnel on CW projects;
- An effort to educate Civil Works personnel and Regulatory personnel about each organizations processes and authorities.

Currently, project delivery teams for Civil Works projects are required to include representatives from the Regulatory offices. However, this requirement is not being implemented consistently across the nation. Divisions and Districts with significant Civil Works programs should designate liaisons to be primary points of contact and be responsible for ensuring that actions related to internal collaboration initiatives are effectively applied. District Liaisons should also be responsible for ensuring that individual Civil Works projects consider local, watershed, state, and regional goals and priorities and that those goals and priorities are communicated to appropriate Regulatory personnel. Division liaisons should concentrate on identifying and incorporating national and interstate goals and priorities.

In addition to defining roles and responsibilities associated with internal collaboration initiatives, a standard flexible framework of basic guidelines should be developed to aid planners conducting regional and watershed based planning efforts covering all mission areas. This framework should identify the types of information that should be considered, types of sources that should be used to collect information, and basic guidance related to prioritization of competing and contradictory interests.

Some examples of the types of sources of information that should be considered

include:

- Any existing Regional Development and Watershed plans
- Any existing Endangered Species Recovery Plans
- Any existing Basin Management Plans
- Any existing Parkway Plans
- Any Regional Sediment Management Plans
- Any Special Area Management Plans
- Any NRCS Rapid Assessments.

Watershed Plans from multiple agencies Non Governmental Organizations

Multiple watershed plans, including potential ecosystem restoration activities, may already exist in a watershed that the Corps is studying. Early and thorough collaboration with other interests in the watershed probably will include the sharing of existing plans with the Corps, which will likely lead to a better combined watershed plan overall and result in better buy-in from stakeholders, NGO's and other agencies.

Watershed Policies from Federal, State, local agencies

Existing Watershed Policies of other government and non-federal agencies should be reviewed by the Corps early in the collaboration process to identify similar (and more importantly) conflicting language with established Corps Watershed Planning Policy. Significant conflicts should be identified and possible resolution established before proceeding with Corps involvement. Further, identified actions that may have already been completed may save effort and resources, especially in the gathering of data,

establishment of an existing conditions and forecasting future without project conditions within a region or watershed.

Standard Regional Collaboration Guidelines

The following are examples of guidelines that should be instituted for developing comprehensive plans of all types:

- Identify existing water-resource projects, and identify important stakeholders within the watershed or region;
- Become familiar with governing agencies/authorities/significant regulatory issues within the study area;
- Identify state/local priorities related to water resource development;
- Identify sources of data/information;
- Identify sources of sediment/pollution;
- Collaborate to identify valuable habitat/areas to protect;
- Seek opportunities for restoration or mitigation;
- Identify areas where development is generally encouraged.

Improving data collection, organization, storage and dissemination

Key pieces of information related to all Corps mission areas should be identified and a standard form should be developed to collect and compile information useful to future public and private projects. This information should be recorded for each project and should include:

- basic project information such as purpose and significant issues;

- lists of important stakeholders and activities, including adjacent local projects;
- basic geographically-oriented information about the location, elevation, local area, watershed, basin, state and region such as:
 - a delineation of public and private projects in the area;
 - flood-prone areas;
 - basic sediment source and transport information;
 - point and non-point sources of pollution and contamination;
 - lists of previous studies and reports;
 - lists of development, protection and recovery plans that have been developed;
 - lists of significant technical and engineering considerations;
 - lists (and mapped locations) of mitigation opportunities, state and federally recognized threatened and endangered species, and other species of concern;
 - Identification of important data gaps and recommendations for future data collection.

The intent of the collection and compilation of this spatial, attribute and miscellaneous data is for incorporation into tools such as ORM2, e-GIS and other systems. Information not suitable for release to the public should be qualified and all other data should be recorded in a GIS-compatible format with the intent of eventually allowing public access to it. Once a GIS system becomes functional, information suitable for release to the public should be posted for public access, use, and comment. Comments from the public should be solicited and used to help identify erroneous and missing information.

Promulgation of policies and guidelines to encourage external collaboration

The Corps needs to expand and make a priority its outreach to other agencies and non-governmental organizations. This should begin to occur on local and regional settings, but eventually, it should expand to broader national and possibly international settings. Although the Corps recognizes the importance of this approach, little investment of needed resources has occurred to implement real change.

Standardized guidance should be developed to determine when and how to expend resources at key times, with appropriate agencies. This has been accomplished to a limited extent at some districts and on some projects but needs to be universally applied. Systems approaches need to be implemented to execute the guidance on a District-by-District basis, with the recognition that each District has differing missions and priorities. Guidance should be flexible enough to recognize these differences. District management structures have to be flexible and willing enough to adapt to supporting the outreach resources required to develop and sustain partnerships with potential stakeholders to implement worthwhile projects.

Two Outreach Coordinators should be assigned at each District in order to develop outreach and coordination plans, to be executed under the auspices of the Planning Division and Executive Office. Outreach efforts would be then coordinated with not only stakeholders of current and potential projects, but through District Congressional Offices to facilitate total involvement.

Division Outreach Coordinators not only would need to meet regularly (via telecon) to update events and discuss potential partnerships, but also to discuss national partnerships – generally including other prospective Federal agency alliances, and potential partnerships with national non-profit alliances, such as Coastal America, Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, National Wildlife Federation, and the Great Lakes Commission as well as industry and development groups. It will be necessary to develop new relationships where none exists today. Lastly, a list of funds that local sponsors could use as part of the local cost share should be developed to support Section 2007 of WRDA 2007.

Concurrent Corps Planning/Corps Regulatory/EPA meetings

Corps and EPA missions overlap significantly but true collaboration on specific projects rarely occurs. The EPA and Corps Regulatory offices are influential forces but don't have the tools needed to consistently affect projects. A corporate-wide approach to earlier EPA and Regulatory involvement in the planning process in combination with access to the most relevant data would result in more efficient use of limited resources and more timely project implementation.

Regional Meetings

Regional Division meetings with local and regional agencies and stakeholder groups ideally need to occur on a yearly basis to build regional collaboration, technical exchange, and educate stakeholders. Issues need to be resolved locally or regionally before national agency headquarters get involved in project specific issues whenever possible.

Open Houses

Conducting Open Houses is another strategy that is effective in building relationships between agencies and stakeholders. Less formal than regional meetings, Open Houses allow for working-level personnel to discuss current and potential project issues and ramifications in a more relaxed atmosphere. Stakeholders and agencies can voice their concerns and ideas more openly while building interpersonal relationships with Planning, Environmental, Regulatory and Project Management staff. This will result in better project “buy-in”, especially with stakeholder groups who have less knowledge of the Corps planning and project implementation process.

Ecosystem Meetings

Ecosystem Restoration Meetings should include Watershed Policies and Plans as a focus. Since Ecosystem Restoration projects generally are more sensitive to changes that occur in other locations in a watershed (as a whole) than other business-line projects, special emphasis should be given to focusing on Corps watershed-approach Policies and Plans when planning ecosystem restoration projects. These projects also generally garner more interest from agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and NGO’s such as Ducks Unlimited; as such, the Corps should expend more effort to educate them on policies that govern our planning and implementation process involving such projects.

Conclusion

While the gulf between declining budgets and demands for water resource investments is steadily getting larger, the sustainability of resource agencies continues to be increasingly reliant upon the collaborative sharing of resources, data, and ideas.

Implementation of the recommended actions would meet one or more objectives of the Civil Works Strategic Plan, Actions for Change, Environmental Operating Procedures, and the Planning and Policy Community of Practice Charter. Through promoting this philosophy at the Corps, the following additional benefits, beyond extending resources, are derived:

- The development of a (more) capable workforce through cross-functional and interagency collaboration;
- The fruits of developing wider coalitions through positive advertisement will likely create more opportunities for work;
- The enhancement of the Learning Organization and the sustenance of the Corps as a world-class public engineering organization
- Provide sustainable development and integrated management of the Nation's water resources.

The Corps needs to invest the resources required to develop the internal and external relationships discussed in this CTP in order to carry out our established missions.

Delaying in this investment only allows our agency to fall further behind, as other agencies such as the NRCS and USFWS are discovering and capitalizing on the benefits of collaboration. Delaying this involvement further will only cost us more in the long run and perpetuate the negative perception other organizations have of the Corps.