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October 4, 2007

MEMORANDUM

TO: Council members

FROM: Peter Paquet Manager, Wildlife & Resident Fish

SUBJECT: Update on Data Management

PROPOSED ACTION: None. Informational only.

SIGNIFICANCE

On October 2, a meeting of executives from state, federal and tribal natural resource agencies was held to discuss regional data management issues and priorities. Attached you will find a briefing paper which provides background information on the issues discussed. A summary of the meeting outcomes is being prepared by the Ross & Associates who facilitated the meeting and will be available next week. Staff will circulate this to the Council members prior to the Missoula meeting.

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Summit Briefing Paper: Issues and Options

Based on Deputy Interviews

Prepared by Ross & Associates Environmental Consulting, Ltd.

Consistent deputy comment: “There is a need for a clear statement of purpose and goals before we’ll commit resources to a regional data sharing effort.”

I. Background

In preparation for the October 2nd NW Summit “Sharing Information to Improve Decisions,” fifteen senior executives and deputies from across state and federal agencies were interviewed to gain insight on regional information issues and possible options to improve the current situation. This paper summarizes points made during the interviews and outlines questions and options to be considered during the October 2nd Summit.

II. General Observations

The interviews indicated diverse perspectives on regional information use and integration. Following are overall observations:

- While some agencies currently participate in or support various data partnerships and recognize the value of doing so, deputies from other agencies do not know what these are or how they serve regional information objectives.
- Some federal agencies have specific internal data protocols designed to promote national data consistency. Their ability to endorse or adopt regional standards is limited.
- Not all agencies have a need for data from other agencies, although many do and frequently identified data sets such as fish population or abundance as being of interest and challenging to collect. Many agencies assumed NOAA would and should supply these data.
- Agencies generally want to know what options for coordination exist and want flexibility on how to engage in the partnerships.
- Some agencies are not interested in or able to fund shared regional efforts. Reasons include: funding is project driven or currently dedicated to internal coordination with limited external options.
- Interest in a centralized “anything” is limited – although some agencies identified the need to more effectively integrate some information for specific purposes (e.g., across ESUs or populations). There is greater interest in cross-walking data systems among agencies to make data more usable.
- There is interest in having more effective means to make joint decisions or potentially having “someone in charge,” but sensitivity about mandates.
- Monitoring (e.g., fish abundance) is a main topic of interest – with recognition of the value of shared protocols and a consistent sampling framework.
- There is some interest in coordinating development of a shared data set of common interest/use.

III. Issues

Deputies identified several major issues that impede regional efforts to use information for decision-making, including the following:

- Political energy is lacking to carry out integrated or regional information management and organization.

- Data do not exist for many variables that are critical to know (e.g., fish populations) or are of poor quality and limited for decision making
- Comparisons in condition or status are difficult to make across states or watersheds
- Information is impossible to integrate from diverse sources - making it difficult to see "big picture" of condition
- Data quality is often questionable and frequently difficult to ascertain
- It's impossible to find needed information or data (need better inventory of who has what)
- There is no agreement on critical factors that should be considered in making decisions - e.g., habitat condition, status of populations, risk of environmental contamination
- The ability to collect data from some locations is limited by some agencies
- It is difficult to determine if the investments made in species recovery are the most effective (this may require a "broader" view of the data).
- Questions such as the following are challenging to answer:
 - What's going on in my watershed/ecosystem?
 - What is recovery, how do we get there, how well are we doing?
 - What needs to be monitored and how?

IV. Topics for Discussion

The Summit provides an opportunity to address and explore many of the above identified issues. The agenda has been set to clarify a focus and identify potential institutional steps forward. The following questions are of interest to executives.

- A. **How do executives reach agreement and make joint decisions on regional issues?** Deputies indicated an interest in working with other agencies to address environmental issues of common concern. There is interest in establishing means for joint decision-making on regional information issues. A process that allows agencies to participate, rather than mandating participation is critical. Several expressed interest in formation of an Executive "Steering Group" to identify issues, set direction, establish responsibilities, direct staff, and commit resources. The Summit provides an opportunity to discuss the willingness to commit to such an entity and potential means for implementation.
- B. **What's the critical issue(s) to address?** Deputies identified several issues outlined above. Executives could focus discussion on one or more of the issues leading to identification of a topic of concern to several agencies and concrete steps to begin to address it.
- C. **What is the relevant geography?** The deputies expressed different ideas about the extent of the "region," and interest in varying levels of resolution. In some cases there was interest in focusing only on a specific domain, in particular where there is current political attention and resources (e.g., Puget Sound). Others thought it necessary to acknowledge data requirements across larger areas. Some recognized the critical need to consider scale or resolution in establishing monitoring programs to ensure that appropriate data are collected to support specific decisions. Executives could decide to focus on a specific geographic area to conduct a pilot for an institutional and technical infrastructure, but this would have to be done with clarity on how it informs a broader regional effort.

- D. **What data are needed?** Some deputies suggested there be a focus on a data requirement of common interest (examples included LiDAR and fish population data) and demonstrate an approach to collaboratively develop the data set. This could involve a commitment to dedicate resources to a shared data development effort and steps outlined for how data should be collected (e.g., common vocabularies and protocols or shared sampling locations), aspects of managing the data (e.g., distributed network, central repositories), effective means to manage quality (e.g., review processes), and data maintenance responsibilities. The focus in this discussion could be on data that are valuable to a number of participants, not currently available, and not possible for one agency to fully fund and collect.
- E. **What gets measured and how?** Deputies acknowledged interest in knowing that the actions they've implemented are achieving the desired results, for whatever purpose. The ability to determine this frequently hinges on effective monitoring. Various agencies monitor many aspects of the environment, but there is little incentive and no institutional structure to collaboratively collect and integrate these data for use by others. Discussions could explore what it would take institutionally and technically to address this challenge, what is working now, and what is needed.
- F. **What data exist, where are they, and how are they accessed?** Deputies expressed frustration at not being able to identify who has what data and how to make use of data when they do exist. The needs for more effective communication and infrastructure to promote information integration and data sharing were clearly identified. Agencies nationwide have dealt with this challenge in a variety of ways. Technical staff can be tasked by executives to collaboratively explore approaches to address this and bring options forward for executive consideration. Some entities already exist to perform these functions. Examination of the roles they play, what works or doesn't, and how current efforts can be improved are critical questions to pursue. Deputies do not envision extensive central repositories for data, but continued agency management and control of resources. Concerns exist about how individual data are used, the number of entities with data collection and management responsibilities, and national directives that may control means to access data.
- G. **Who pays?** Deputies recognize that a collaborative effort requires resources. Many said they are currently expending all available funds to address standards and guidelines for internal compliance or that everything is funded on a project-basis. Some indicated that if clear responsibilities could be delineated and data collected and made accessible to meet multiple demands, some current resources might be re-directed. Deputies offered suggestions ranging from key agencies with designated responsibilities to provide funding for specific data sets (that may not necessarily meet the needs of all), a shared dues/joint funding model where equal contributions are provided to support activities of general benefit to all, and incentive funding based on multiple agency contributions to another agency to develop a data set that meets more than the needs of the collecting agency. Executives can discuss how, when, and what to address in terms of resource issues.