
Consensus

SCCWRP staff have the good fortune of serving at the interface between science and water quality management. This is both a privilege and a challenge. The privilege is that so few scientists receive our level of attention from the water quality management community. The challenge is to capitalize on that opportunity by effectively communicating complex scientific subjects in a sufficiently understandable manner that managers feel comfortable using our work as the basis for their decisions.

Achieving managerial comfort also requires that the information we present represents scientific consensus. SCCWRP scientists are capable of crafting our own answers to management questions, but consensus gives managers greater confidence that they are acting on supportable information, rather than an extreme or individual point of view.

Achieving consensus among scientists is not a trivial accomplishment. Scientists are generally individualistic and sometimes contrarian. Scientists are trained to seek out flaws in previous work and to conduct studies that expose those flaws. These traits often lead to improved knowledge in the long term, but can impede productive communication in the short term.

SCCWRP's approach is to seek out common ground among scientists, rather than focusing on differences. Divergence of opinion and scientific uncertainties are inevitable, but focusing agreement into workable consensus is essential to effective water quality management. The secret is to remember that consensus often means that nobody is entirely happy with the outcome, but no one is unhappy enough to walk away from the potential for greater good.

So how do we achieve consensus? It starts with meetings, lots of meetings, and then more meetings. Presently, we average 14 meetings per month at our facility, an environment designed to foster information exchange. Mostly, though, it is the attitudes of our staff, as we seek to hire and promote people who can look past their personal views to forge a community view. Our scientists help differentiate minor points that are more distracting than relevant to ensure we remain focused on the major points of contention for which agreement is crucial.

Another contributor to consensus is our emphasis on conducting projects in partnership, providing a connection between some of the country's top scientific experts and the local management community. Open discussions related to project objectives and implementation provide an invaluable opportunity for scientists to understand and affect the way science is communicated to managers, while our member agency staff gain first-hand understanding of the complex nature of environmental issues, effectively bridging the gap between these worlds. Most scientists see the opportunity that SCCWRP affords them to affect communication of science to managers and are enthusiastic about working with us.

I hope that the SCCWRP Commission continues to value our commitment to consensus building and that our partners will continue to engage in the dialogue that strengthens our ability to serve our Commission.



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