



Upper White River Basin Leadership Session

November 2, 2000
Mountain Home, Arkansas

The Leadership Session of the White River Basin Forum 2000 determined a framework for planning and carrying out cooperative watershed efforts between Arkansas and Missouri. The principles of the 1999 Memorandum of Agreement will be addressed by a leadership group, the “Upper White River Basin Forum (the Forum),” and by subordinate workgroups assigned to specific issues.

The leadership-workgroup structure was the consensus of participants in the Nov. 2 facilitated Leadership Session, which included senior managers of the agencies that signed the 1999 MOA (the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality and the Arkansas Soil & Water Conservation Commission), interest groups from both states and others.

The directors of the agencies that signed the MOA agreed to meet to further develop the roles and responsibilities of the Forum, determine members of the leadership group and plan for establishing the subordinate workgroups.

The leadership-workgroup structure was chosen as the most productive way to put into action the mandates of the MOA. The MOA was the culmination of the first joint-state White River Basin Forum in Branson, Missouri, on Oct. 27, 1999. It commits the three agencies to plan, develop and implement cooperative efforts to address water quality concerns in the river basin, to share information and data, to identify bi-state projects and to meet at least annually.

Under the organization adopted in Mountain Home, the leadership group (the Forum) would plan, set objectives and facilitate communication. The Forum would present concerns and findings of the workgroups to the directors of the three MOA agencies and other constituencies.

Participants of the Nov. 2 Leadership Session captured their shared objective in a vision statement: “To protect and improve water resources of the Upper White River Basin to support quality of life and economic viability.”

Discussion was lively and candid, exploring watershed concerns, the benefits of working cooperatively and the inherent challenges to effective, cooperative work among the geographically and organizationally diverse agencies and groups. The meeting was facilitated by Lisa Gandy of FTN Associates, an environmental consulting firm in Little Rock. A summary of discussion follows.

Summary of Discussion:

Initial Issues for Consideration

Participants expressed diverse concerns, including the need to identify broad goals, the need to acknowledge interests that vary across the region, monitoring needs, funding questions, use of voluntary versus regulatory measures, fish and wildlife interests, engaging EPA Regions 6 and 7, and reaching agreement on what are the water quality problems in the Upper White River Basin.

Benefits of Working Cooperatively

Participants recognized that entities in both states bring their own strengths and technical expertise “to the table,” and that they share the same “clients,” such as fishing, recreation and tourism interests. They cited the potential for reducing duplicated efforts, increasing efficiency, and presenting a cohesive, effective image to citizens and potential funding sources.

Challenges and Constraints

Agencies in the watershed have different organizational structures and perhaps differing missions and philosophies. Agency administrations are geographically distant. Participants cited lack of communication, time constraints, competing environmental challenges and limited financial resources. The sheer number of stakeholders impedes consensus and productive work.

Topics Presented by Steering Committee

While planning for the 2000 Conference, a steering committee composed of agency and private interest representatives from both states identified three initial topics for the Leadership Session: monitoring, information-sharing and Best Management Practices. However, structure and organization for interstate cooperation emerged as the focus on Nov. 2. Participants sought to first establish a framework for working on topics such as the steering committee had proposed.

Structure

The session produced a model composed of a leadership group and several workgroups. The leadership group would serve not only as a planning board for the topical workgroups, but also as the liaison to the directors of the MOA agencies. Additionally, some participants stressed the need for leadership and accountability, while others cautioned against creating a “new bureaucratic organization.” Individuals expressed concern that non-profit groups and other interests “have a voice” in proceedings.

Structure Model



Workgroups – Responsibilities

Proposed responsibilities included: technical work, planning, assessment, information sharing, implementing projects, tracking results and re-evaluation.

Leadership Group – Responsibilities

Participants envisioned a leadership group that identifies initial and ongoing needs and objectives, leads planning, coordinates outcomes from workgroups and facilitates communication. The group would have an advisory role with the MOA agencies, but some participants also suggested an accountability and outcome-assurance function. This group will be known as the Upper White River Basin Forum.

Leadership Group – Membership

Proposed constituencies included the MOA agencies, elected officials, non-profit citizen groups, wildlife interests, business, academia and the Forum workgroups. Participants debated the appropriate size of the group, seeking to balance issues of inclusiveness and productivity. A range of 12 to 15 members was proposed, but some argued for fewer or more members.

Decisions

Representatives of the MOA agencies agreed to meet to establish the UWRBF, determine membership and further define its role and next course of action. The MOA agencies agreed to solicit participants.