

COORDINATING U.S. WATER POLICY

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- Water policy is highly fragmented nationally, with responsibility for water supply and quality shared by numerous federal agencies, state and local governments, and nongovernmental organizations
- Water policy increasingly focuses on managing water for multiple uses and benefits, including water supply, irrigation, recreation, water quality, and ecosystem services
- Due to the fragmented policy and institutional arrangement, government agencies must often collaborate and coordinate agency actions to achieve management goals.
- Watershed and river-basins are increasingly serving as boundaries for holistic water management efforts
- Ecological restoration and valuation of ecosystem services from water are being incorporated actively into water management policies

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, policy in the U.S. has attempted to integrate an increasing number of goals into water management. A large number of federal agencies are responsible for managing water. State governments are also active participants in managing water, and different state systems abound for governing surface water, groundwater, and water allocation (Getches, 2001). The myriad parties involved in water policy have resulted in a high degree of fragmentation and separation of water goals. This fragmentation has steadily been changing over the past few decades. Where once the federal government focused on infrastructure projects such as building water storage and distribution systems, managing navigable waterways, and providing flood control, federal policy is increasingly focused on also providing recreation opportunities, improving water quality, and restoring natural ecosystems (Gerlak, 2006). State governments are active in water quality protection,

ecosystem restoration, and promoting use efficiency (Allin, 2008).

To address the challenges shown in Box 1, government agencies must increasingly collaborate with each other and include input and cooperation from nongovernmental organizations and private citizens. Federal agencies used to focus on one job, such as the Environmental Protection Agency addressing water quality and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers maintaining navigable waterways. These agencies, among many others, are forming new partnerships to coordinate agency actions, taking into account both the water supply and environmental impacts of management actions. These collaborative approaches are also increasingly using new tools, such as ecosystem restoration and adaptive management to build more resilient water systems that provide multiple benefits simultaneously. Adaptive management principles, including

experimentation in policy systems and increased reliance on real-time data, offer the potential for real benefits and institutions better able to respond to rapidly changing conditions (Gerlak, 2008).

BOX 1: Challenges in U.S. Water Policy

- *Overdrawing of groundwater aquifers*
- *Increasing pressure on existing supplies due to population growth*
- *Declines in water quality, especially from non-point sources including agriculture, urban development, and roadways*
- *Ecological degradation that reduces nature's ability to provide adequate flood control, wildlife habitat, storm protection, and nutrient cycling*
- *Threats of increased variability and scarcity due to climate change*

Collaboration in water policy is at a crossroads. Decades of increased collaboration has not always resulted in smooth and effective management. Natural water systems do not follow political boundaries and traditionally the federal and state governments have shared responsibility on water issues (Mandarano et al., 2008). As agency missions and management goals align more with each other, there may be potential for consolidation of federal or state agencies. Complete realignment of the institutions responsible for managing water systems could result in more streamlined and efficient decision-making and fewer policies that conflict or work at cross-purposes. On the other hand, consolidation would take time, be politically and technically difficult, and could result in diminished capacity or the emphasis of some goals over others. It seems likely that in the near future, existing water agencies will continue to find ways to share capacity and expertise while providing sustainable water supplies through improved ecosystem function and efficiency in irrigation, water transport, and industrial and domestic uses. 🌱

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