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Reclaimed Water Policy in Washington State: Unitary and Polycentric Opportunities and Challenges

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Reclaimed Water Policy in Washington State: Centralized Challenges and Polycentric Opportunities

Thomas Hunter and Dr. Troy Abel, WWU, Huxley College on the Peninsulas.

The Perils of Traditional Water Policy

In May of 2014, all 39 counties in Washington State were declared to be in a state of drought. This has thrust the topic of reclaimed water to the forefront of our states water vision, however traditional policy frameworks hinder the opportunity to realize a bright reclaimed future.

• The complex water resource problems of tomorrow can only be solved by a policy framework that can champion policy arenas which are more polycentrized and in turn, solve the complex problems that arose during the lifespan of traditional policy frameworks (CWA, SDWA).

Stakeholders Identify the Challenges

Data collected during a survey of all active reclaimed water facilities based on the 2014 Ecology map shows that a policy framework in which weak feedback links are reduced and entities nest together in the collective choice arena could improve foster equity, inclusivity, information, accountability, organizational multiplicity, and adaptability. Below is a brief look at the results of that survey.

- In 2014 there were 28 facilities managed by 21 different organizations, of which 11 responded. This resulted in a 52% response rate.
- 100% of reclaimed facilities survey respondents described positive and negative externalities when it comes to managing potable resources via reclaimed water allocation.
- 75% of reclaimed facilities surveyed have not maximized their facilities reclaimed capacity.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guidance</th>
<th>Governance</th>
<th>Combine</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPA</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECY</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOH</td>
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<td>4.685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>4.65</td>
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Adding the governance ranking to rate these three organizations o-so on overall reclaimed water policy guidance...

- When asked the question...
  - What guidance have you received from EPA, Ecology, or DOH regarding the placement, feasibility, or location of your reclaimed facility?
    - 100% of reclaimed facilities survey respondents indicated that they feel little to no support or guidance from state or federal agencies in reclaimed water governance.

Direct Quotes from Survey Respondents

- “Dealing with Ecology on the new Rule has been challenging because so much of their decision making seems to be based more on interactions between their own water quality, water resource, and management divisions rather than the input from the utilities and other stakeholders. They have been very difficult making the potential impact of their decisions on the utilities that have to apply those on a day-to-day basis.”

Opportunities Realized Through Polycentric Governance Model

Over 24 questions were asked across various reclaimed water managers of multiple demographics, varying socio-economic climates, counties of blue and red political affiliation, and many different aquifers. The overwhelming theme was that the system is failing to allow those impacted most by water policy in Washington State by decreasing the ability to advise and reform policy in a meaningful way.

“Bureaucrats sometimes do not have the correct information, while citizens and users of resources do.”

Elinor Ostrom

At the center of these findings is the idea that distributing decision-making throughout a collective choice arena, within an overall nested governance system, limits the number of weak feedback loops and increases the ability for co-management to be both adaptive to the specific region and efficient in creation and improvement of policy.

Acknowledgements and Citations

- For a full list of resources and acknowledgment see the online version of this paper.