

What is Collaboration?

*“..., Americans must move away from polarization. We must work towards a **shared vision** -- a vision that conserves our forests and the vital resources important to our survival while wisely respecting the need for a forest economy that creates jobs and vibrant rural communities.”* **Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, August 2009**

An integral part of many partnerships is the collaborative process. In natural resource management, **collaboration** increasingly refers to a process where groups with different interests come together to address management issues across a specified geographic region (e.g., forest, watershed, or landscape). In other words, the goal of collaboration is to build and promote a collective vision for how to manage the land. Through collaboration, groups that may disagree are able to explore their differences, identify common interests, and seek common-ground solutions.

A collaborative relationship may be documented through a formal arrangement, but often it is not. It is important to note that well-defined collaborative processes **do not transfer government authority**; government agencies remain responsible for their actions and retain their decision-making authority.

Why Collaborate?¹

The collaborative process can offer a lead agency many benefits, including:

- **Better Information.** By engaging diverse expertise a collaborative body can reach a more informed agreement and advise decision-makers accordingly. Similarly, a diversity of perspectives, transparency and openness inherent to collaboration tends to encourage creative thinking, which can also lead to more informed and better decisions.
- **Fairer Process.** Effective collaboration involves most or all interests involved in an issue. This increases the likelihood that important interests, particularly those from traditionally disadvantaged or under-represented communities, will be invited to participate.
- **Better Integration.** Since collaboration emphasizes a sharing of ideas, opinions, and sometimes resources, it can enhance integration and coordination among parties. For example, NEPA’s interdisciplinary framework has the potential to allow agencies to integrate, coordinate, and streamline the multiple reviews and analyses associated with different legal and permitting requirements and serve to reduce delays and make time lines more predictable.
- **Conflict Prevention.** Parties working collaboratively often surface and resolve differences as they arise, thus preventing conflict or at least mitigating its impact down the road.
- **Social Capital.** Collaborative processes can build trust between people who will work together on other projects, lead to the formation of partnerships, and increase public confidence in government.
- **Easier Implementation.** Collaboration can enhance and ease the implementation of a decision. If stakeholders feel vested in a decision, they will have a stake in its implementation. They can also

¹ “Collaboration in NEPA—A Handbook for NEPA Practitioners.” 2007. http://ceq.hss.doe.gov/ntf/Collaboration_in_NEPA_Oct_2007.pdf

bring the knowledge they gained during the collaborative process to bear on decisions relating to monitoring, enforcement, and other issues.

- **Enhanced Environmental Stewardship.** Collaboration can promote stewardship of human and natural resources through mutual understandings and cooperation.
- **Reduced Litigation.** Collaboration can reduce the likelihood of litigation by including key stakeholders early and often, solving problems at the lowest possible level as they arise, and building agreements between stakeholders. Even if litigation ensues, the collaborative process may help narrow issues and make them more amenable to agreement.

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