

Panel V: Models of Adaptation by Environmental Institutions

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Abstract

Climate change is one of many problems that require policymakers to think in terms of adapting to changing environmental conditions. Yet traditional institutions of government, such as the U.S. Forest Service, were constructed for continuity, not adaptation. Hence, it has been difficult for the Forest Service and other centralized agencies to incorporate adaptive management. Most natural resource management agencies were built as centralized bureaucracies in the 20th Century. These traditional bureaucracies were designed to limit public participation (because stakeholders were viewed as corrupting), and to insulate expert decision making by staff from elected officials and political appointees. Unfortunately, the procedures designed to limit corruption and insulate decision making also constrained the ability of agencies to adapt to new problems. Hence, new forms of public institutions have emerged since the 1970s that are more adaptable to environmental change. Unlike traditional bureaucracies, they are much more open to stakeholder input and electoral politics; but this openness also allow them to be more flexible. Two alternative institutional forms have become increasingly prominent. One type of institution is composed of politically-appointed voting bodies that rely on staff expertise, such as the Regional Fisheries Management Councils that operate under the Magnuson-Stevens Act (1976). Legislation can mandate that seats on the voting bodies be apportioned to represent specific interests, such as user groups, academics, agency staff, and environmental activists. Voting bodies can also respond with new policies more rapidly than procedurally-freighted bureaucracies. Another type of institution that can adapt quickly to environmental change is a multi-organizational collaborative, such as a watershed management organization. Unlike politically-appointed voting bodies, collaborative membership is more informal and fluid; and collaborative organizations may lack authority to implement the policies they adopt. Hence, there are significant trade-offs among institutional forms. The most adaptive type of institution (the collaborative model) is less stable, less predictable, and subject to a wider range of political pressures. Yet this model allows a wide variety of stakeholders to develop common understandings to environmental problems and to commit themselves to agreed-upon solutions. Politically-appointed voting bodies are subject to more formal procedures and political control than collaborative bodies, and their decisions carry the force of law. Hence, these voting bodies may represent the best balance of adaptability and legal authority for responding to the impacts of climate change.