

Executive Summary

One of the most dramatic and potentially significant changes to the West's institutional landscape has been the recent explosion of watershed initiatives. Also known as watershed partnerships, councils, or groups, these efforts typically involve both resource managers and private stakeholders, organized together at the scale of small watersheds and using consensus-based processes to address a variety of water-related problems. Common points of emphasis include water quality improvement and habitat restoration. Watershed initiatives are a relatively recent phenomenon. The Natural Resources Law Center estimates that the "movement" now includes over 400 watershed initiatives in the West, at least three times the total in 1995. (Dramatically different estimates are possible if the defining criteria are modified.) Due to their potential for moving beyond inflexible, regulatory management approaches, watershed initiatives have broad political support, and receive funding and participation from several natural resource agencies. Particularly active federal participants include the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service. Several western states have programs encouraging and supporting watershed initiatives, with the most ambitious efforts being found in the Pacific Northwest, particularly Oregon.

In this edition of the *Source Book* (the original was published in 1996), a directory of 346 western watershed initiatives is provided. Additionally, concise case studies are provided for 117 of these efforts, based primarily on a watershed survey conducted by the Natural Resources Law Center from 1998-2000. A wide variety of statistical information is provided regarding this set of watershed initiatives, covering issues such as resource problems of interest, breadth of participation, specific goals and activities, funding and related resources, and accomplishments. Results from a second survey are also included, documenting the experiences and impressions of 276 watershed initiative participants in Oregon. A brief review of community-based forestry partnerships is also provided, as these efforts are thought to be close relatives of watershed initiatives. Additional topics covered include the legal framework within which community-based groups operate, and a detailed look at a particularly active western watershed initiative: the Animas River Stakeholders Group.

Perhaps the most obvious finding emerging from these discussions is that the western watersheds movement remains vibrant and extremely diverse. Useful generalizations about structure and function are difficult to uncover, a problem that is magnified considerably as the focus shifts to evaluating performance and effectiveness. While most parties have begun to accept that watershed initiatives must ultimately be judged by how well they resolve on-the-ground resource problems, most efforts are still too young and poorly documented to support sophisticated outcome measures. Where data does exist, it is generally sufficient to encourage optimism and fuel further experimentation and effort. On the other hand, while most parties contacted by the Natural Resources Law Center laud the social benefits of local decision-making and collaboration, and feel convinced that on-the-ground benefits are forthcoming or already emerging, others remain uncomfortable with many features of watershed initiatives. Some areas of concern include potentially inadequate representation of all interests, the subordination of science and national interests to local stakeholder demands, the difficulty of addressing divisive issues through consensus-based process, the high costs of collaborative

exercises, and the lack of independently verified on-the-ground success stories. While the accuracy of these concerns is hard to assess due to data limitations and to the normative (i.e., value-based) content of many issues raised, the importance of these concerns is clearly established.

Until questions of on-the-ground effectiveness can be decisively answered, the Natural Resources Law Center recommends that policy-makers maintain a stance of “guarded optimism.” Policy-makers should continue to support experiments in community-based watershed problem-solving, but should also retain regulatory systems and demand greater documentation and accountability before watershed initiatives are given free rein to control the management of public resources.

Those lamenting the involvement of federal agencies in seemingly local resource management affairs should recognize that, in most regions, the federal agencies remain the primary source of financial resources, technical support, and implementation authority utilized by western watershed initiatives. Given the magnitude of federal lands in the West and the range of “public good” issues addressed through federal environmental legislation, this federal involvement seems appropriate on both philosophical and practical grounds. To the extent that a watershed initiative deals completely with private lands and private issues, then these observations are largely moot. This situation, however, rarely occurs in the West.

Along similar lines, those interests that see watershed initiatives as a potential replacement to the regulatory regimes of the Clean Water Act and Endangered Species Act should realize that these “regulatory hammers” are a common—often essential—stimulus behind watershed initiative formation and activity. It is possible, actually quite likely, that neither the regulatory nor the consensus-based processes can offer the on-the-ground benefits attainable when both processes occur simultaneously. This is shown repeatedly by the cases found in the new *Source Book*.

