



# COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

*Bringing the University to You*

---

## Fact Sheet-01-24

### Walker River Basin Advisory Committee Project: Evaluation of a Collaborative Process

Loretta Singletary  
Extension Educator, Central Area

#### Introduction

Historically, water disputes in the arid west have been complex and heated. The current dispute in the Walker River Basin is a good example. The Walker River Basin drains the Sierra Nevada southeast of Lake Tahoe and flows almost 160 miles to its terminus at Walker Lake. The basin headwaters include Mono County, CA, Lyon, and Mineral Counties, NV and the Walker River Paiute Reservation located above the terminus Walker Lake. Walker River, like many western rivers, is over allocated. In 1992, the US joined with the Walker River Tribe to file claims for a water right for the Reservations' Reservoir (est. 1933) and for lands added in 1936. All water right holders upstream of the reservation are defendants. The river chronology indicates that Walker Lake's surface elevation and water quality have declined steadily since 1882. There is a build up of total dissolved solids, especially salts. The lake's viability has been diminished as a fishery for the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout. The Walker Lake Working Group, a special interest group organized to protect Walker Lake with support from Sierra Club and Audubon Society in 1994, moved to intervene existing litigation and file a new and senior claim to water rights to establish a minimum lake level at Walker Lake.

#### The WRBAC Project: A Collaborative Process

In April 1998, the US Bureau of Reclamation circulated a call for proposals in response to congressional language concerning the Walker River Basin. Reclamation stated that it would: *work with local interests to identify ....and quantify contributions that voluntary conservation measures can make to solving the water resources problems in Walker Lake and the basin as a whole.* In response, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension organized a diverse group of stakeholders in the Walker River Basin to draft a proposal that also served as an agreement to work collaboratively. The proposal was selected for funding (\$280,000), formally initiating the Walker River Basin Water Conservation Project.

Upon notification of the award, Cooperative Extension helped the stakeholders' group establish an organizational structure to implement the project which identified the group as the **Walker River Basin Advisory Committee (WRBAC)**. WRBAC is comprised of eight interests extending from the headwaters of the Walker River to its terminus at Walker Lake, two members representing each of the four geographic sections. The four sections include the headwaters in California (Antelope Mutual Water Company, Mono County Resource Conservation District and Mono County government); middle basin (Walker River Irrigation District, Walker River Water Users Association and Lyon County government; tribal lands (Walker River

Paiute Tribal Council and Water Resources Office), and; Walker Lake (Mineral County government and Walker Lake Working Group).

Nevada Cooperative Extension designed and facilitated the collaborative process used by WRBAC to accomplish its goals. The process involved elements of various other collaborative processes, including joint-problem solving, public issues education, citizen research and study groups, study tours, public forums, and consensus building. WRBAC collaboratively identified and investigated potential solutions to the dispute. The resulting research listed conservation measures, including benefits and costs. In May 2000, a public forum featured this final report. At that same time, the US Department of Interior ordered an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) to assess the impacts of Federal water rights acquisition to resolve the dispute. Given that the WRBAC had accomplished its goals, the group collectively decided to suspend its activities until the EIS and a Federal "Record of Decision" is determined and/or until litigation is resolved.

### **Conducting the Evaluation**

Evaluating a collaborative process involves consideration of both subjective and objective measures of success. A successful collaborative process should satisfy several measures. Questions to ask include: *Does the outcome satisfy the dispute? Do the participants feel they affected decisions or outcomes? Did the process improve relationships and communication between parties? Was the process fiscally and time efficient? Was the process fair? Does the outcome offer joint gains for parties? Did the process include all stakeholders? Are stakeholders able or willing to act on the decisions?* These measures were used to develop 16 questions specific to the WRBAC project. Several questions asked about measures to determine overall success of the process while several asked about individual measures of success. A review of collaborative process literature was used to develop these questions.

In January 2001, all individuals who had attended at least one WRBAC event received the evaluation. Each evaluation included a two-page questionnaire, a cover letter that explained the purpose of the questionnaire, instructions for completing the questionnaire, and a self-addressed return envelope. Of the 121 evaluation participants, 38 returned completed questionnaires resulting in a 31 percent response rate.

### **Evaluation Results**

On a scale of 1 to 5 with "1" being "ineffective" and "5" being "very effective", respondents were asked to circle the number that best indicates how effective the WRBAC project was in providing a collaborative process to address and potentially resolve the Walker River dispute. Respondents were given an opportunity also to indicate that they "didn't know." Figure 1 illustrates highest ratings representing "effective and very effective." Table 1 lists the 16 questions asked and the percentage responses for each question.

More than half of the respondents indicated WRBAC very effectively satisfied several measures to qualify as a successful collaborative process. These include: *more citizens became aware of the dispute; more citizens learned about issues causing the dispute; participants felt they were treated fairly and with respect; adequate opportunities were provided to learn about technical aspects of the problem; adequate opportunities were provided to hear information presented by diverse interests; adequate opportunities were provided to interact and network with diverse interests involved; more citizens became involved in the dispute; individuals better understand the views of others involved in the dispute; adequate opportunities were provided to share individual views; individuals improved skills to share their views; more citizens learned about possible solutions; individuals learned how to collaboratively manage disputes; individuals improved relationships with others involved; and individuals improved skills to collaborate and collaborate with others.* Less than half (47%) rated as effective *improved individual abilities to help others clarify the problem.* And, 38% percent rated as very effective that *as a result of WRBAC, individuals believe that lasting solutions to the dispute are possible.*

Figure 1

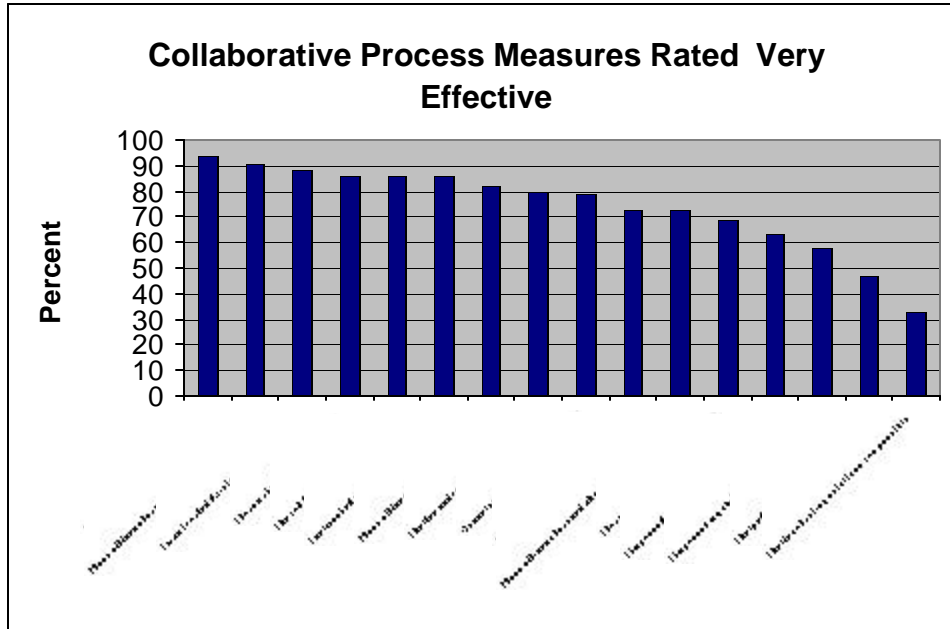


Table 1

<u>Ordered by percent indicating effective</u>	<u>Percent Effective</u>	<u>Percent Ineffective</u>
As a result of the WRBAC project, more citizens became aware of the dispute	94	0
As a result of the WRBAC project, more citizens learned about the issues causing the dispute	91	3
Through the WRBAC project I was treated fairly and with respect	88	3
WRBAC project provided me adequate opportunities to learn about technical aspects of the problem	86	6
WRBAC project provided me adequate opportunities to hear information presented by diverse interests	86	3
WRBAC project provided me adequate opportunities to interact and network with diverse interests involved	86	3
As result of the WRBAC project, more citizens became actively involved in the dispute	82	6
WRBAC project helped me to better understand the viewpoints of others involved in the dispute	80	6
WRBAC project offered me adequate opportunities to share my views with others involved in the dispute	79	3
WRBAC project improved my ability to communicate my views to others involved in the dispute	73	9
As a result of the WRBAC project, more citizens learned about some possible solutions to the dispute	73	9
Through the WRBAC project I learned about collaborative ways to manage disputes	69	15
WRBAC project improved my relationship with others involved in the dispute	63	7
Through the WRBAC project I improved my skills to participate in a collaborative process	58	21
As a result of the WRBAC project, I helped others to clarify the problem	47	9
As a result of the WRBAC project, I believe lasting solutions to the dispute are possible	33	32

### **Selected Comments about the WRBAC Collaborative Process**

#### **What participants “liked best” about the WRBAC collaborative process included the following:**

- Field trips and site visits.
- Gathering everyone to one table.
- That all areas of the [river] system were represented.
- The public was able to hear knowledgeable people present their findings.
- Good opportunity to hear opposing ideas. The final [research] report.
- Providing education on the subject to all parties involved.
- The facilitation and the way that the meetings were handled. Everyone was able to voice their opinions without being criticized. People had to listen.
- The number of participants.
- The involvement of numerous people with a wide variety of viewpoints, and the many opportunities for everyone to present their views publicly. It greatly increased the general knowledge about where various interest groups were coming from.
- An increase in interest in Walker Lake and how the Walker River functions.

#### **In contrast, what participants “liked least” about the WRBAC collaborative process included:**

- The final report. Some of the alternatives were “impossible” and not realistic.
- The way that it came to closure or lack thereof.
- That the project ended.
- Voting membership makeup. Would have like it to be more inclusive—not about stacking the deck but in allowing more stakeholders a say/vote.
- Environmental groups/Mineral County were often silent.
- Did not resolve the issue.
- WRBAC was heavily influenced by agricultural interests and water users.
- Scope was limited by funding and grant wording.
- Frustration with predetermined positions of some participants, primarily governmental and special interest.
- The unwillingness of some parties to participate.

#### **What participants “would like to have changed” about the WRBAC process included:**

- It was not about consensus and it could have been—would have liked more time for facilitated discussions on various issues.
- Some of the ideas on the “laundry list” were unreasonable and not an option in water management.
- Continue funding so that WRBAC could detail the more promising options.

#### **Summary comments about the WRBAC project included:**

- A real sincere effort on part of the extension team to do a good job.
- It has been the only group within the Basin to sit at the table and discuss alternatives. All “agendas” were put on the table.
- I think there should be more projects like the WRBAC that work on specific projects. The tours were a great idea.
- I had hopes of this being ongoing—trying to keep everyone at the table!
- This was an excellent project that needs to be continued on some level.

## Conclusions

To summarize, an evaluation of the WRBAC project indicated that the collaborative process used effectively helped to raise awareness of the dispute and to teach citizens about the issues underlying the dispute. Additionally, the process provided adequate opportunities to learn about technical aspects of the problem, hear information presented by diverse interests, and interact and network with diverse interests. Participants felt they were treated fairly and with respect.

The collaborative process did not effectively convince participants that lasting solutions to the dispute were possible. Still, 85 percent of the respondents rated the WRBAC project as a success overall.

Evaluating a collaborative process can be as complex as the dispute for which it is designed to manage. Collaborative processes are both unique and multifaceted in that they involve both subjective and objective measures that determine success. The WRBAC project required objective outcomes, including meeting the goals of the funding agency and producing a final research report. To accomplish these outcomes, however, the group had to work collaboratively to identify potential water conservation methods to resolve the dispute. The process of working together to accomplish this required many subjective measures to be satisfied. These included, for example, improved understanding of the dispute and technical aspects involved, increased awareness of the dispute by the public, improved relationships with others in the dispute, good group communication and networking, and feeling respected by others involved, to name a few.

It is important for extension professionals who choose to apply collaborative processes to resource disputes to recognize successes and learn from failures. In the case of the WRBAC project, for example, any future efforts should involve more education targeted at improving individual skills as well as group skills. Whether or not a collaborative process results in resolving the dispute or a “negotiated agreement” is influenced by numerous variables, some over which the facilitator or stakeholder group have no control. These include intervention from outside forces such as state and federal government agencies, mandated actions such as EIS’s or the emergence of a new special interest group with demands not considered previously. It is impossible to control for the possibility of such influences. It is possible, however, to focus on designing a process that remains flexible enough to account for such influences should they arise. It is important also to determine if the natural resource dispute is a viable candidate for collaborative processes. Assessing readiness to collaborate is an important precursor to any collaborative process. In some situations, however, collaboration is requested even when readiness levels are not ideal. A dispute that has moved into arbitration, for example, is beyond the scope of a collaborative process. In such situations, collaborative processes can have positive impacts and successes on several levels but are not likely to resolve or produce lasting solutions to the dispute.

## References

Gray, B. 1991. Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

Singletary, L., A. Ball, and M. Rebori. 2000. Managing Natural Resource Disputes: A Comprehensive Guide for Achieving Collaborative Agreements. Extension Bulletin, EB-00-33. University of Nevada Cooperative Extension.

Wondolleck, J.M. and S. L. Yaffee. Making Collaboration Work. Island Press: Covelo, CA.

<p>The University of Nevada, Reno is an Equal Opportunity/ Affirmative Action employer and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, creed, national origin, veteran status, physical or mental disability, and in accordance with university policy, sexual orientation, in any program or activity it operates. The University of Nevada employs only United States citizens and aliens lawfully authorized to work in the United States.</p>
--