

Forest Policy Development: State Boards, Commissions, and Councils*

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Abstract

Beginning early in the 1900s and continuing through the present, governments, in conjunction with the forestry community, have been involved in developing boards, commissions, and councils to engage citizens and organized interests in the policy development and implementation process regarding the use and management of forest resources. With the advent of a number of forest practice laws and guidelines, these boards, commissions, and councils have recently come to the forefront in formulating and implementing forest resource policy, yet there had been little effort to examine this form of government. This presentation reviews the findings of a national survey of the chairs of these entities and state foresters regarding the structure and function, membership, operation, finances and staffing, effectiveness, issues addressed, stakeholder perceptions, management of conflict, and future prospects of these state level boards, commissions, and councils.

Key words: Boards, Commissions, Councils, Policy Development, Conflict Management

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Purpose

Although public boards, commissions, and councils are not new incarnations of public administrative structure in the United States, their continued use and increasing proliferation has heightened concerns regarding their appropriateness and effectiveness. Research regarding this subject area is scant at best, which has left administrators and elected officials with little evidence to recommend the creation or termination of these types of entities. In addition, little is known about the structure, characteristics, and effectiveness of these entities to aid decision-makers in their construction. These entities also seem to be increasingly used as a venue in which conflicts are managed within the political arena. This is another virtually unexplored area within the literature, especially the relationship between structural and operational characteristics and the ability to successfully resolve disputes and manage conflict. This study seeks to inform those interested in the employment or operation of these entities, resulting in better decisions regarding their employment and operation of such entities. Specifically this study sought to: (1) define the current national landscape of state forest resources boards, commissions, and councils; (2) evaluate the operational effectiveness of these entities; and (3) recommend design improvements to increase organizational effectiveness, especially in managing conflict. This was accomplished through an extensive literature review, national survey, and case studies.

Characteristics

Thirty states were identified as having a state forest board, commission, or council that met the study parameters. Twenty-nine of thirty entities responded to a survey, as well as 13 of 20 state foresters residing in states with no entity fitting the study criteria. A number of factors were analyzed as being predictors of the existence of these entities. The percentage of a state that is forested and total forest related employment were found to be significant predictors, whereas total forest land and various types of ownership patterns were found to not be significant.

The structure and function of these entities varies widely. The thirty bodies had been established, mostly by state law, between 1885 and 2000, of which about half were

established prior to 1980. The majority of these entities are accountable to the governor, with a few accountable to state legislatures, dual executives, or the governor and the state legislature. All but one entity (97%) indicated that they serve an advisory role to executives, agencies, and legislative bodies. Other important functions include (1) provide for additional public input (62%); encourage coordination between agencies and interests (59%); engage diverse interest groups in policy formulation (41%); promulgate rules (34%); provide a forum for conflict management (31%); and oversee the state forestry agency (31%); among a host of others.

The membership of these bodies varied widely as well, with the number of members ranging from 7 to 24. Non-industrial landowners and the forest industry are the most heavily represented interests on these bodies. Academic and research personnel, environmental groups, state agency representatives, the general public, timber harvesters, county and local government officials, and fish and wildlife interests are represented on at least a third of these bodies. This representation varies regionally as well. Other characteristics were investigated as well including method of appointment, member compensation, leadership and decision-making, finances, staffing, and organizational effectiveness.

These entities were found to address numerous issues in the forest resource arena. Those most commonly addressed included (in rank order): (1) state forest management, (2) timber harvesting, (3) forest health and productivity, (4) fire management, (5) watershed management, and (6) private forest landowner assistance. Many other issues were mentioned with many of particular importance in specific regions. Issues surrounding timber harvesting consumed the most time of these entities. The majority of entities noted that the number of issues addressed has moderately increased over the previous 5 years.

Conflict Management

Despite the perception that these entities are rife with conflict, most entities indicated that conflict occurs infrequently within these bodies and rarely posed significant costs to the organization. The costs of conflict were noted to be much higher in the Western region and lower in the Southern region. Many attributed their ability to manage conflict through strong

member cohesion. Seventy-five percent of respondents felt that conflicts over forest policy would increase in their state without the existence of these entities. However, those states without one of these entities were very mixed in postulating whether conflict would decrease if a board, commission, or council were employed. No statistical relationship was found between ability to manage conflict and operational characteristics.

Recommendations

Judging from the lack of information in the literature and the comments of a number of authors, the work of public boards, councils, and commissions are often underappreciated and especially uninvestigated. Many authors convey compelling reasons for the employment of these public entities, but often with very little direct supporting evidence of their benefit. Part of the intention of this study was to help to provide more direct evidence, either negative or positive, regarding the benefit of these entities. Going forward we recommend the following be considered:

- States without such an entity should consider adoption.
- Need to consider unique situational characteristics in entity design, including:
 - Appropriate size,
 - Appropriate level of diversity,
 - Appropriate tenure arrangement, and
 - Adaptability.
- Foster conflict management abilities, trust, stability, and familiarity.
- Clearly define mission and goals of entity.
- Establish clear lines of accountability and defined roles.
- Maintain big picture focus.
- Encourage periodic organizational assessments.
- Embrace positive effects of conflict while minimizing detrimental effects.