

Q & A: Regional Coordination with Natural Resource Agencies: Tips & Lessons Learned

February 5, 2015

The February 5th webinar, part of a series of information-sharing webinars hosted by the Planning Community of Practice, provided tips and lessons learned on regional coordination with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service.

David Bauman of the South Atlantic Division presented and responded to questions from the field.

The questions and responses below are not a direct transcript; they have been reordered and edited for clarity. Additional questions and feedback are always welcome via email to hqplanning@usace.army.mil



Funding Regional Biological Opinion Development

The coordination required to develop Regional Biological Opinions goes well beyond the 3x3 guidelines; how are you funding that effort – through Operations, across projects?

The regional biological opinions with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are funded out of Navigations Operations and Maintenance / Dredging program, and are negotiated and managed at the Division level. The Florida Statewide and Piping Plover Programmatic Biological Opinions are generally negotiated and managed at the District level, and are funded by Navigation and Coastal Storm Damage Reduction funds, rather than specific project/study funding.

Engaging State Agencies

Would you recommend including state level agencies in your tips: Annual Interagency Meetings and Engaging Agencies Early in the Planning Process?

We would definitely encourage engaging relevant state agencies early in the planning process on a specific project.

For annual interagency meetings, it would depend on the purpose of the meeting – if it is a federal-to-federal coordination meeting covering several states and the whole region, it may not be appropriate to engage the state agencies. However, if it is something that is state specific (e.g., the Florida statewide programmatic biological opinion), or is information sharing on a broader topic, then state agencies certainly bring important information to the table.

Developmental Assignments / Agency Liaison

When you were placing a Corps employee on site with Services, were there issues with a perceived Conflict of Interest – e.g., having Corps staff write the Biological Assessment on the Corps side and then going to the Services and contributing to the Biological Opinion? In the Pacific Ocean Division, it was quite difficult to establish “firewalls” to avoid perception of conflict.

In our region, this has not been an issue so far. Both the Services have another level of review on the work our people are doing, so things that are missing or need to be addressed, such as potential conflicts of interest, will be caught in their internal review.

In the South Atlantic Division, we've also been able to invite employees from other agencies to participate in our Leadership Development Program at the Division or District level, which has also helped us understand each other's issues and cultures.

Are there tools or techniques for new Corps or Resource Agency Staff to get them up to speed with those annual meetings to understand issues / constraints?

I'm not aware of anything specific that we do to bring our new staff or their new staff up to speed. We hope the Interagency Guide to SMART Planning Feasibility Studies that the Corps is working on with NMFS and USFWS will help us set that baseline on expectations and understanding.

Considering Programmatic Biological Opinions in the Planning Process

Where should Programmatic Biological Opinions be considered in the Planning process – as a Planning constraint, a detail for Preconstruction Engineering & Design?

Developing a new programmatic or regional biological opinion generally won't be particularly helpful for a specific study or a specific project because of the scale, time and cost of development, nor will it easily fit into the 3x3 constraints of a particular study. Regional or programmatic biological opinions are most useful for similar and repetitive actions such as operations and maintenance navigation dredging and beach renourishment. A regional or programmatic biological opinion is not likely to directly contribute towards completion of a SMART Planning study, but may indirectly help by reducing natural resource agency workload, thereby allowing the agency to devote more labor to a SMART Planning study.

Does regional geospatial data sharing between the agencies play a role in the benefits of a Regional or Programmatic Opinion?

Yes, in the past, we have seen when agencies are willing to share data, they are also willing to talk to each other. So, data sharing is an important element of building and sustaining the working relationship – as well as meeting our 3x3 constraints by understanding and using available information.

In the South Atlantic Division, we are seeing the importance of regional data sharing in the Gulf Ecosystem Restoration effort. We have an inter-divisional team involving Southwestern Division, Mississippi Valley Division, South Atlantic Division, several Districts, plus Planning and Regulatory; we have found, absolutely, that geospatial data sharing plays a very important role in our internal coordination as well as our coordination with US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, Park Service, U.S. Geological Survey, Environmental Protection Agency, and other federal agencies.