

Planning Nuts and Bolts: Data

Now we're going to talk about data and data gathering. The objectives, well, after our discussion today, you should have an understanding of the role of data in the planning process, the types of data that you're going to use, how to evaluate data as part of a data gap analysis, and we're going to describe, briefly, the IT applications that you're going to use in data collecting.

The role of data in the planning process; it's an indicator of a hard look required by NEPA. It's the basis for all of your planned decisions. It's an inter-disciplinary team unifier. The collection of data and the sharing of data during the planning process is a team unifier. It's also a fundamental part of the administrative record.

Yeah, Bobby, and I just want to emphasize that. We talked about administrative record in an earlier segment and sometimes the ID team folks won't necessarily be thinking about admin record issues as they're going out and collecting information and compiling that. But as we talked about with the pyramid where the record of decision was that top layer and that's where the plan approval happens. It's only as good as the underlying data that's been collected, so it's really important to be thinking about how you're collecting the data, how you're referencing certain pieces of information and how you're going to include that as part of the record that eventually supports the decision. There have been challenges to BLM decisions where the underlying data was not well documented. And the courts have invalidated BLM decisions based on inadequate records related to data so it really is a fundamental part of the administrative record and very important.

Thanks, Ken. A very frank discussion needs to happen in your field office regarding what data you have. It's important that all of the resource specialists look through their files, look through their GIS files, look through their hard files, to find out exactly what they have and determine from that what they're actually going to need in order to develop management actions and allocations as part of the planning process. Through that discussion and through that process you're going to determine what you need and then when do you actually need to acquire it. Do you need it at the beginning? Do you need it sometime during the development of alternatives? During the analysis? So the determination of when you're going to acquire it is important. And then who's going to acquire it. Are you going to have the resource specialist go out and find it and acquire it? Are you going to ask your contractors, if you have one, to find the information or your collaborators or cooperating agencies providing it to you? And also, if there's a cost associated with it. So, is there a monetary cost associated with buying the data; do you need GIS Landsat? Do you need some kind of information that's publicly available that doesn't cost anything? And then, a discussion of the cost is, if the cost of the information isn't exorbitant, then you should include it in the EIS. If it is, then in the EIS you're really going to need to state why the information in the EIS is incomplete or unavailable, the relevance of that information to evaluating the reasonable, foreseeable, significant effects. And then, summarize the credible, scientific evidence about the impacts. And always, always remember to use the methodology that's accepted by the scientific community for your particular resource.

Planning Nuts and Bolts: Data

And, Bobby, if I could just interject right here. One of the fundamental components of NEPA is making sure that you're not speculating, that you're not guessing. So, that's an important element of not doing a worse case analysis. NEPA, in the early days, in the late 1970's, early 80's, before most of you were born I'm sure, used to actually have a provision saying, do a worse case analysis where you don't have complete information. But the NEPA regulations were actually revised in the early 1980's to specifically eliminate that component because, of course a fundamental issue in NEPA is having information on the record and reasonably foreseeable assumptions based on that information. And a worse case analysis was really almost encouraging guessing and we don't want to do that ever in a NEPA analysis. So, it's important where you have the information, great; where you don't have the information, say why you don't have it, what are the elements associated with why you don't have it and then do what is most reasonable based on the information you do have.

Let's talk a little bit about the data that's furnished from collaborative agencies, cooperating agencies, and partners. It's really important that you inform your cooperators and collaborators early on in the process if you have a data need that they can supply. It's important to give them an early heads up so that they have an opportunity to assemble and review and provide you the information in a timely fashion.

It's also important as a BLM to review the information that they're providing you and determine the voracity that the information was collected. Is the information, was the information collected from the cooperating agency or the collaborator? Was it collected by a third-party contractor? What type of data is it? And is it something that you can stand behind and use in your R&P? Remember that the data must be consistent. It has to have suitable delivery format and meet BLM and federal data standards.

A little discussion about data, data analysis. The question often comes up, what type of data can we include in the R&P and in the analysis? And the slide that you have in front of you there identifies four types of, sort of, power, in the data. The statistical stuff that's been statistically analyzed and determined to be statistically valid. Quantitative that has actual numbers and values associated with it. Qualitative, which is making, sort of, a judgment call without actually having a quantitative number basis and professional judgment. And the question often comes up, well can I use, or can we use professional judgment if we don't have the information, if we don't the studies, which make determinations for us? And the answer is, yes. Professional judgment, BLM Resource Specialists, are perfectly capable of making the judgment call on resource impacts and resource analysis. It's important to remember that the data that you are using needs to be peer reviewed internally at a minimum and that you should be looking out there for other data that may have, may contrast the decisions and the discussions that you have. So, in another words, if there's data out there that actually has different results than yours, comes to different conclusions than yours, then you need to have a discussion internally to talk about exactly what that means, which data should you rely on, totally disclose the information, disclose the fact that there is conflicting information out there. But you need to have an IDT discussion and decision based on that.

Planning Nuts and Bolts: Data

A little discussion of the data stewards and data administrators. So, the Resource Specialists, the subject matter experts, are going to be your data stewards. Those are the individuals that collect the data or receive the data, that review the data for their resource or their resource use. They're going to ensure that the information has, basically, the data, federal data standards, have been implemented. The data administrators; so your technical experts, coordinated data stewards, those folks that are going to retain and share the information for the IDT. So, they're going to take the information basically from the Resource Specialist, they're going to take it, they're going to compile it, they're going to make sure that the information is the most up to date so that when the Resource Specialist are using the data, the information, and the mapping, that they have the most up to date information; the most up to date maps that are available. And it's important that you include both the data stewards and the data administrators on the planning team.

So, BLM standards; so BLM has a standard for their data and for their mapping that should have a consistent look and feel about the data that create a consistent quality for the data. And remember that there is an FGDC standard for data. Spatial and non-spatial metadata standards and that you, as an ID team, you as a BLM Resource Specialist, are responsible for ensuring that the data actually meets the metadata standards. And you should involve IT just to make sure that you fully understand, and the IT issues, fully understand the metadata issues. And the question that often comes up, well, exactly, what is metadata? Metadata, in short, is basically data about the data. It says, it tells you where the data was collected, when it was collected, who collected it and how, generally, it was collected. It really requires that the Resource Specialist identify the data standards if metadata has to be applied to the data, that the Resource Specialist is the one that's doing that. IT can definitely help you, but the Resource Specialists are really the responsible parties here.

Essentially after the metadata is applied, then GIS, your IT folks, are going to take over. The GIS will help coordinate the projection and the size of the data. But keep in mind, that Resource Specialists are those responsible parties for helping apply the metadata if it isn't already there.

If you identified that your data is outdated or you think it might be outdated, then you really should take a look at risk assessment. So, you take a look at the data and can your decisions that you're making in your plan actually be based on that information? Just because it's actually old doesn't mean it's necessarily outdated. But if you think it might be, if you decide that it is, then you should actually continue to looking for better information and better data that might be out there. If you decide that you can use the data that is available, it's old but you feel that you can base your decisions on it, then you should go ahead and put it in the R&P, but explain and document what it is and where you got it.