

Planning Nuts and Bolts: Issue Identification

Now we're going to be talking about identifying issues. So what we want to do is we want to identify specific planning issues that we're going to address and, more importantly, actually identify issues and distinguishing them between interests and positions.

So in the planning context, issues are matters of concern about existing and potential land and resource allocations, levels of use, production related to management practices, points of interest in discussion and situations upon which an individual or group can act.

And why is issue identification important? Well, the issues are the primary driver behind the plan. Addressing issues is one of the most important and primary purposes of the planning process. A clear identification of issues is probably one of the most difficult components that the ID team will face. Distinguishing between the issues, positions, attitudes that you may receive during scoping and boiling those down into actual issues themselves.

Issue identification can also develop a shared vision. It shifts emphasis away from involvement to ownership. It leads to a greater individual responsibility and accountability on the land and, hopefully, leads to long term involvement, interested and improved understanding of the land and resource needs.

I think that's very important, Bobby. One of the things that you're doing is you're trying to reach out. We've talked about collaboration; we've talked about this concept of scoping trying to get the input from different entities. Well, they're going to be coming out trying to voice their opinion about certain uses, trying to voice their concerns. And it's BLM's job to get through, weed through these, what can be flash points, emotional things, and really hear what issues are involved in their particular input. And as part of the scoping, as part of developing that scoping report we talked about in another segment, we want to make sure that you're getting buy in; you're telling the different folks that are giving feedback, that we heard you. And one of the ways to do that is make sure that you're clearly defining what issues that you've heard them say and then how are you going to respond to that.

Right, and what you'd normally would hear from an interested stakeholder or from a member of the general public isn't necessarily the issue that you would put in the plan. What you're going to get from them, you're going to get attitudes, you're going to get positions, you're going to get interests which then you, either as a BLM ID team, have to distill down into an issue or you have, if it's during a scoping meeting or during similar action out in the world, it would be an opportune time then to discuss and talk with the individual or the group to find out what exactly is the issue that's behind their statements and comments.

That's right and you know in going through, you work with BLM in doing the planning process, so have I and worked with a lot of federal agencies on their NEPA actions. Sometimes it's really hard to get beyond that attitude that folks have when

Planning Nuts and Bolts: Issue Identification

they're giving input. They're creating a position, a line in the sand if you will, saying, we don't want this kind of use in this area. When they're concerned, their actual issue might be something very finite. It might be related to what they think is a conflicting use, which actually might be compatible or the uses might be compatible on a time-sensitive basis. You know, spring time plants enjoyment versus a fall recreation activity. All of these things really need to be, it's the BLM's job really, to walk through them so that they can distill it down and understand it and it's easy to dismiss somebody as being emotional; dismiss somebody as not being reasonable. But all of these input sectors that you have, you're going to get an underlying issue related to it, and if you boil it down to that, I bet a lot of times, you'll go through the planning process and be able to at least consider that and possibly address it in a way that it could be win win.

The BLM IDT should plan on spending time, time together and the individual resource or individual use specialist actually talking about the comments about the attitudes and the emotions and the position statements that they got and how do they reflect and how do they feed into their particular resource or their particular use.

That kind of leads us into how to capture and frame issues. We often have difficulty actually asking the public or even other cooperating agencies or even the internal BLM, about how do you ask them for an issue. How do you ask them for their concerns or their comments? In distinguishing those from interest and positions, and keep in mind that the general public, and even cooperating agencies, have never had any formal training or understanding on actually how to provide comments to a NEPA document or to a plan.

Also consider that you should focus on the effects, not the causes. And also, the last bullet on your slide indicates questions versus statement format. Some BLM offices prefer their issues to be captured as a statement and some prefer them to be captured as a question and either way works. The question, why would it be a question, well the BLM staff that have put those issues in question say, well then my management and my allocations will then answer the question about the resource issue.

I think the question can help people feel more comfortable with the statement. People are more comfortable agreeing on things like what the effect is. There's a water quality issue within this stream and it's harder to fish or there's a consideration related to - - or there's a lack of availability of a recreation area. And so everybody can agree on that effect, it's the cause issue that becomes part of the problem. So if we can all ask the question in terms of what's your concern, it's not necessarily about the fact that there's a use that you think that is causing sedimentation in the stream as much as you're concerned about the sedimentation in the stream. And then it's BLM's job to go through the planning process to say well, how are we going to address that? So it is an important element of saying, can we distill this down to a question? Can we all talk about what we agree on related to that effect and how we can get to some of the causes of it.

Planning Nuts and Bolts: Issue Identification

One of the key points in this next slide is the idea that we - - during the public involvement, we cast the issues that the public can understand and not necessarily in BLM terms. It's important that we involve the public, the cooperating agencies, and use language that they can understand. It's also important to educate them on BLM resource, BLM resource uses and the language and sort of the legal side bars that each of them are confined to.

We also want to use the issues to basically help the public understand the planning process. What is an issue and what is its role? The BLM staff, the BLM managers, it's really important that you get your interested and affected public to understand the fact that the entire process is issue-based and that the role of the issues and the comments that they're providing and how they are distilled into issues, are going to be basically the foundation of the plan itself.

If I can add, don't forget to keep those folks in the loop. So people give input, they want to make sure that you've heard them, and that you've responded. So if somebody gives input, gives a lot of participation in the process and then all of a sudden they don't hear from BLM for a year and all of a sudden a plan comes out and they're saying, well, how did they address my issue or did they address my issue. So it's important when you've asked folks to, basically, participate in the process, make sure you get them involved or at least keep in them up to date or apprised of the situation. Sometimes websites are great ways to do that where they can check in to see the status, timelines of when documents are coming, other meetings you might want to involve them in. Just a little thought to keep them involved.

And just as a note too, there's been, on occasion, a BLM plan start that got its funding pulled for various reasons and they had really involved and engaged stakeholders including some really litigious special-interest groups that when they plan start its funding pulled and they basically stopped the planning effort, nobody actually went out and informed those folks that this has happened and they'd spent nearly a year coming together and sitting in meeting and talking about what their issues were and resource impacts. And all of a sudden, they didn't hear from the BLM for five or six months and it was because the plan actually had gotten stopped, but the BLM hadn't notified the interest groups and it, of course, the plan's going to start up again and you're going to have to work with those same people, so it's important to keep those folks in the loop, in the long term.

Factors influence, scope of issues, planning criteria. BLM collaborative reviews, the BLM decision space, it's real important, internally and externally, to talk about what the BLM decision space is and what its authority is when it comes to issues. And it would really be an excellent idea to talk with your state office about those because you've got other plans in your state that are on-going, other plans across the west that are on-going and to get a little feedback from them on how they are dealing with some of these issues.

Planning Nuts and Bolts: Issue Identification

Well, what we're going to do, it's time for an exercise. So we want your interdisciplinary team to do an exercise. You can find the exercise by going to the exercise tab for this lesson. Good luck.