

ABSTRACT—*There are limits on an executive agency's ability to maximize public involvement and still be responsive to other equally valid goals of bureaucratic institutions. These limitations give insight into some misconceptions surrounding U.S. Forest Service efforts to "inform and involve" the public.*

Public involvement in government agency decision-making is not a recent development. Most government bureaucracies, including the Forest Service, have always conducted their business in close association with a large number of private groups and individuals. What is new about present public involvement efforts is the urgency and specificity with which they are undertaken. What used to be an informal process of maintaining contacts with key people and interested publics mushroomed almost overnight into separate, clearly articulated and, often, defensive operations. Public participation has been widely praised as a means for mitigating the general discontent of the late 1960's (7). The Forest Service has joined most other agencies in rapidly expanding its involvement programs. Unfortunately, in the rush to "involve" the public in their activities, few agencies had adequate opportunity to consider why, how, and to what end the effort was being made.

These questions can be approached by placing the goal of public involvement in an historical context. From this perspective a number of serious problem areas in the present concept of public participation can be identified (3). Some realistic and important program goals can also be articulated by clarifying what public involvement is not and cannot be, and this in turn leads to suggestions for increasing the effectiveness of public involvement efforts.

Historical Perspective

Despite the current flurry of interest in the public involvement question, the idea is not at all new. From the very beginning of our nation, we have concerned ourselves with the proper balance between public involvement and other equally valid goals of government organization and operation. Public participation is but one of several values to be considered in the operation of public agencies, and it imposes real restraints on the system's ability to achieve other equally valid goals. For example, technical expertise and competence are directly challenged by giving maximum decision-making authority to lay citizens or to elected executives. The balance has been struck in favor of one or the other of these values at different points in our history.

The era of Andrew Jackson (1830-40) is probably the first highwater mark of public participation in government. The public was involved largely through the electoral process. Long ballots and the spoils system

Public Involvement and the Forest Service

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are characteristic of this era. Around the turn of the century, graft, corruption in government, and the excesses of the spoils system, led to a shift away from public participation. The Civil Service Act and other "good government" reforms of the second period symbolize an emerging emphasis on maximizing technical and professional expertise. The reform sought to remove experts from the corrupting influence of the political process.

The Forest Service was formed during this second period and became an early touchstone of "scientific management" (4). The basic idea of the neutral competence movement is that political actors should limit themselves to defining policy directions. Technically trained experts then administer the decisions without political influence. The proliferation of "independent" regulatory and advisory boards during this period however, ultimately resulted in an unwieldy system, one maximizing professional and technical values while becoming unresponsive to public (political) direction.

A third era arose, one of efficient organization for effective leadership by elected executives. The theory is that technically proficient administrators should provide expertise, but nevertheless be controlled by and responsive to elected officials. This emphasis is typified by concern with organizational coherence and attempts to clearly define bureaucratic areas of responsibility and lines of command (1). This approach has not met the vociferously expressed needs of large segments of our society. This failure led to the protests of the 1960's and to renewed calls for public involvement in government activities (6).

The idea of public involvement in policy decisions closely corresponds to the values and institutions traditionally described as "our democratic way of life." The present emphasis, however, is significantly different from the Jacksonian concept of participation. It

presents tremendous problems, not simply in terms of democratic theory, but also in terms of administrative and policy effectiveness. The Jacksonian long ballot and spoils system facilitated public involvement in the *selection* of officials. Current involvement cannot follow that route because of the Civil Service system, which controls the selection, promotion, and tenure of most public servants. Therefore, the public is now included directly in administrative agency decision-making.

It could be argued that public input into administrative decision-making should come either through elected representatives in Congress, the President, or through various state, county, and local representative bodies. This is an important question, but it has been mooted by the rush of events. Calls for public involvement have been formalized in recently passed legislation and find validity in our basic beliefs about democratic government. Nevertheless, the theoretical questions have not been addressed and they confuse thinking about the pragmatic aspects of current public involvement programs. We are accustomed to thinking of participation in terms of representation and voting, and these ideas are simply not appropriate in the present context. The resulting confusion has diverted considerable amounts of agency effort.

What Public Involvement Is Not

The Forest Service explicitly states that it is not interested in holding plebiscites, yet much of its considerable effort to involve the public creates a contrary impression. First of all, in seeking expressions of public sentiment, administrators too readily assume that involvement must be keyed to specific decisions on policy alternatives. Thus public contacts usually attempt to elicit a "yes" or "no" on one of two or three specific management alternatives for a clearly defined area. The plebiscite idea receives further impetus by the way the agency normally summarizes public comments in environmental impact assessment material. Both the Forest Service and the public can be seriously misled when input is arranged in a chart displaying "pros" and "cons" on a particular issue (2). Moreover, summary statements of input, such as "45 percent favor a wilderness designation" and "13 percent want motorcycles," delude people into thinking that a vote is being held. Interested groups then try to "stuff the ballot box" by flooding Forest Service offices with letters supporting a specific cause or issue. The Service then must decide how to deal with the input it has elicited. This is especially difficult because there are no traditional or widely accepted formulas for dealing with input at the agency level comparable to voting in elections. When public involvement was limited to voting, such questions as how to weigh input and what to do with it after it is analyzed, simply did not arise. Because public participation at the agency level is less well defined in our system, questions such as these preoccupy Forest Service personnel.

In spite of tendencies creating the opposite impression, the Forest Service is not holding, does not wish to, and could not if it wanted to, hold a plebiscite.

Nevertheless, the Forest Service's approach to public involvement has misled both the public and its own personnel. This confusion is most clearly articulated in the Forest Service's "get out the vote" approach. The simple truth is that people's interests vary and their interest in participating varies. John Q. Public has opted out of the discussion. When he does become interested, often because of direct personal interest, he ceases to be John Q. and becomes another interested individual seeking to have his personal needs met through special pleading. Concern for "hearing from the silent majority" distorts the involvement program by focusing on the mere number of responses: how many came to the meeting, how many letters came in?

Just as it cannot hope to hear from everybody, the Forest Service cannot and should not feel responsible for eliciting the interested concern of every real or potential group in the population. The Forest Service does not function as a representative body and it does not have unlimited management options. If there are five or six viable alternatives for managing a unit or a forest, it does not make any difference who speaks up for each one, so long as all are explored. The Forest Service should consult representative groups in order to define and explore the full range of management options rather than the full range of ethnic, geographic, or professional groups in society.

The Forest Service has, over the past decade, developed a new constituency among groups concerned with the environment, recreation, and preservation. For a number of historical and political reasons they have not usually been among the Forest Service's basic support groups. The pressure for "public" involvement has come largely from them. Basically, the program has succeeded in bringing a broader and more inclusive spectrum of interests into the Forest Service deliberations. It is doubtful whether the program can generate any more inclusive or expanded involvement and it is not at all clear that it should try.

Inadequate advice to field personnel on how to deal with this problematic activity is a major source of misunderstanding. Much Forest Service literature says that public involvement is a "tool" to improve decision-making (5, 8). Public input, however, by introducing additional factors and increasing the decision-maker's visibility, often makes decision-making more difficult without making decisions any "better." Decisions actually may not be very different than they would have been without public involvement. Similarly, it is not clear that decisions made with "adequate" public involvement will be more readily accepted by the public. Generally, as diverging points of view proliferate, more interests have to be compromised. This may result in increased and mobilized dissatisfaction with a decision rather than greater acceptance of it. Public involvement is therefore a highly problematic adjunct to a decision-making program. It is not productive to try to "sell" the program to Forest Service personnel by minimizing or masking the difficulties. Problems have become apparent because real limitations and potentialities of public involvement have not been made clear.

What Public Involvement Can Be

There are, however, many good reasons for involving the public in the activities of the Forest Service. Most of the appropriate goals are familiar to the point of being hackneyed. They require emphasis, though, to counterweigh the inappropriate preoccupations treated above. The first and most obvious goal is to educate the public about the nature and activities of the Forest Service. A better informed public is better able to understand the budgetary constraints and legal requirements which limit management options available to a forest ranger or supervisor. Public education can also clarify specific Forest Service goals and procedures. Clearcutting is only the most obvious case in which inadequate explanation of the agency's viewpoint has resulted in a distorted public perception of Forest Service activities.

Public involvement can also build support for the agency and its programs—actively establishing contacts, allies, and advocates within the attentive and involved public. This goal runs counter to much Forest Service thought regarding public involvement. Rather than appear to be trying to “sell” the agency at public meetings, agency personnel frequently assert that they are just trying to “listen.” This is silly. The Forest Service is going to gain allies *and* adversaries, whether it intends to or not, as it opens its programs to public discussion. Therefore, it ought to be explicit in trying to maximize gains and minimize losses.

A third goal of the public involvement program is to educate the Forest Service. This can mean simply obtaining information regarding public preferences and priorities in land management. Moreover, by consulting with groups and individuals who are knowledgeable about its lands, the Forest Service can learn a great deal. This is especially true regarding subjects like history and archaeology in which it lacks expert personnel. Finally, and most importantly, by emphasizing the necessity for and appropriateness of public involvement in decision-making, the Forest Service can sensitize its own highly trained professional staff to the legitimacy of the public's interest in setting priorities.

These three goals for public involvement do not exhaust the full range of potential gains, but they are valid and are approachable through an effective involvement program.

Recommendations

Unfortunately, confusion within the Forest Service about the potential of the public involvement program has misdirected effort away from establishing durable, open communications with interested groups and citizens and headed the agency in the rather fruitless direction of soliciting marginally useful yeas and nays from as many individuals as possible.

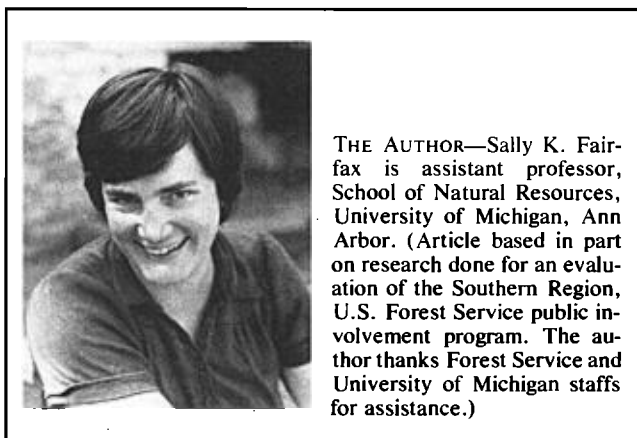
The program could be vastly and easily improved by a few very simple changes in procedure. First, the presumption that public involvement ought to be keyed to specific decisions and plans ought to be cast aside. Frequently voiced agency disenchantment with

hearing the same thing over and over from the same people is ironic because the input is structured by repeatedly asking the same questions. A proper emphasis on durable conversations rather than sporadic incantations of yea and nay would probably do a great deal for variety and substance in the dialog. Secondly, relieved of the pressure to simply code pros and cons, agencies would be more credible if they legitimately pointed out that they are not holding plebiscites. Appropriate energy then could be put into establishing genuine communication rather than in fruitless attempts to achieve the veneer of respectability that a nosecount of the masses confers. Finally, continuing encouragement should be given efforts to expand involvement strategies beyond the “listening session” format. Such a formal speech-making event is not appropriate to most of the program goals (3).

The basic message is that the Forest Service should relax. The agency's mission has traditionally been one of balancing and choosing between competing goods in an arena for which standards are not clearly articulated. It is not reasonable to suppose that the ambiguities of the public involvement question are so unique or intolerable that they must be resolved by rigid attitudes and procedures. To allow that to happen is quite simply to reduce the program to a sterile ritual which will benefit neither the public nor the agency. ■

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