

4-1-2003

Can County Commissions Emerge as Players in Western Natural Resources Policy Development?

Joseph G. Hiller

The University of Arizona, jghiller@ag.arizona.edu

J Daniel Rodgers

University of Wyoming, jdrodgers@uwyo.edu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Hiller, J. G., & Rodgers, J. (2003). Can County Commissions Emerge as Players in Western Natural Resources Policy Development?. *The Journal of Extension*, 41(2), Article 15.

<https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol41/iss2/15>

This Research in Brief is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.



April 2003 // Volume 41 // Number 2 // Research in Brief // 2RIB6



PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE

Can County Commissions Emerge as Players in Western Natural Resources Policy Development?

Abstract

Many county commissioners in the western United States preside over rural and/or public lands-dominated counties. Their formal role in the development of natural resources public policy is poorly defined, but rapidly evolving. As part-time elected officials, they state needs for training in both policy process skills and technically oriented subject matter. A survey investigation of their nonformal learning environment was conducted. They desire more consistent involvement in issues dialogue and higher-quality interactions with various policy influencers. Commissioners overwhelmingly prefer consultation with county government officials--with more regularity, confidence, and credibility than with any other agency, consultant, or institution.

Joseph G. Hiller

Assistant Dean Native American Programs, Assistant Director Cooperative Extension
College of Agriculture and Life Sciences
The University of Arizona
Internet Address: jghiller@ag.arizona.edu

J. Daniel Rodgers

Associate Professor of Rangeland Ecology and Watershed Management, Extension Range
Management Specialist, Department of Renewable Resources
University of Wyoming
Internet Address: jdrodgers@uwyo.edu

Introduction and Problem Statement

Many county commissioners in the western states preside over mostly rural and or public lands-dominated counties. They frequently deal with natural resource issues, but their formal role in the development of policy is poorly defined, unclear, and inconsistent, except to note they have statutory land-use policy making authority. Many issues involve concerns about natural resources as well as relationships between various government agencies. The overwhelmingly majority of rural county commissioners are part-time elected officials. They are in regular need of policy process skills and technically oriented information in support of their evolving roles.

An investigation of the environment in which Wyoming county commissioners operate was conducted. It sought to develop knowledge and understanding about the resources and methods used by commissioners for gaining information and advice, and how they relate with their publics--both citizens and other government agencies alike--in specific contexts of natural resources and decision-making.

Background

Western county commissioners remain unsettled about their level of involvement in natural resources issues. Several important recent political phenomena anchor this thinking, including the Sagebrush Rebellion (Cawley, 1994), the Wise Use Movement (Witt & Alm, 1997) and the County Supremacy Movement (Reed, 1994). These campaigns appear to be either cyclical or somewhat repetitive in nature. Common in the denominator of these movements is tension between county commissioners and the federal government over issues of jurisdiction and nexus on public lands within and near county borders. Examples of issues resulting in conflict include:

- Logging,

- Grazing and recreation,
- Prescriptive/control burns,
- Mining, and
- Wildlife management.

Often these conflicts result in court actions and injunctions, which further polarize parties of interest.

Many rural counties in the West are populated with only a few small towns, which depend heavily on commercial uses of natural resources for economic survival. Commissioners have regularly returned to the issue of governmental parity and inclusivity with respect to natural resources policy affecting their "back yards."

The political relationships between western county commissioners and the federal government has been described by Cawley (1993), Brick and Cawley (1996), Budd-Falen (1996), Cigler (1994), Reed (1994), and others. Land ownership issues are particularly important in these debates. Land is different from other natural resources such as water and air by being clearly subject to legal ownership and attendant private property rights. Although water rights in many western states produce certain private property rights, water is nonetheless considered a public resource.

The federal government is omnipresent in western states' natural resources policy dialogue due to statutory obligations. Not only are many of the preeminent issues based in "the commons" (Hardin, 1968), but the federal government is the single largest landowner in the western states, as well. Reed (1994) notes that the federal government owns over one-half of the land in the 12 western states, compared to only 4% in the remaining 37 continental states. Cawley (1996) echoes that about 93% of the entire federal estate is found in the 12 western states. For most of the American population, this landlord-tenant relationship is a non-issue--only a point of intellectual curiosity at best.

As the least populated state in the nation and one in which the federal landlord owns and operates 47.7 % of the entire land base (and 83.4 % of the all public lands), Wyoming deals regularly with the federal government. Table 1 presents information on Wyoming's counties, including the percentage of public lands, sources of employment, and population (Wyoming Division of Economic Analysis, 1999). The "average" Wyoming county has fewer than 21,000 residents, yet 52 % of the land base is held in the public domain.

Table 1.
Wyoming Counties: Public Lands, Employment, Population. Wyoming Division of Economic Analysis, 1999

County Name (County Seat)	Population (1997)	Public Land (%)	Top 5 Employment Sectors*
Albany (Laramie)	29,709	30.6	G--S--R--C--Fi
Big Horn (Basin)	11,031	93.8	G--S--R--F--M
Campbell (Gillette)	32,087	24.0	M--S--R--G--T
Carbon (Rawlins)	15,845	58.4	S--G--R--Mf--T
Converse (Douglas)	12,295	75.7	G--R--M--F--Mf
Crook (Sundance)	5,794	21.0	G--F--S--R--M
Fremont (Lander)	35,888	87.9	S--G--R--C--F
Goshen (Torrington)	12,837	8.6	S--G--R--F--Mf
Hot Springs (Thermopolis)	4,681	50.8	G--R--Fi--F--M

Johnson (Buffalo)	6,786	40.3	S--R--G--F--Fi
Laramie (Cheyenne)	78,473	10.6	G--S--R--Fi--C
Lincoln (Afton)	13,871	78.9	R--G--S--F--M
Natrona (Casper)	63,638	54.9	S--R--G--M--C
Niobrara (Lusk)	2,618	17.3	G--F--S--R--T
Park (Cody)	25,671	84.6	S--R--G--C--F
Platte (Wheatland)	8,540	19.8	G--R--F--C--Fi
Sheridan (Sheridan)	25,199	35.1	S--R--G--C--T
Sublette (Pinedale)	5,696	84.1	S--G--R--F--C
Sweetwater (Green River)	39,738	72.3	S--R--G--M--T
Teton (Jackson)	13,924	99.1	S--R--C--G--T
Uinta (Evanston)	20,287	46.4	S--G--R--M--C
Washakie (Worland)	8,630	74.4	S--G--R--Mf--F
Weston (Newcastle)	6,505	28.8	S--R--G--M--Fi
* C = construction, F = farming, Fi = FIRE (financial, insurance, real estate), G = government, M = mining, Mf = manufacturing, R = retail, S = services, T = TCPU (transportation, communication, public utilities). Based on total number of employees.			

A New Movement or a New Tactic?

It is suggested that the Sagebrush Rebellion, the Wise Use Movement, and the County Supremacy Movement have provided the foundation for the development of a now-persistent position by many western county commissions to have a larger role in commons issues such as natural resources public policy and the federal domain. The most recent development in this saga is cooperating agency status as authorized under provision of the National Environmental Policy Act (40 CFR 1500-1508; 1969).

Evidence of the new approach can be found in Wyoming, where two counties (Park and Teton) received formal cooperating agency status with the federal government relative to the Winter Use Plan for Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. The two counties doggedly remained engaged with federal agencies to achieve such status in the development of policy for natural resources and land use management in their own "back yards." In contrast to the Sagebrush Rebellion, the Wise Use Movement, and the County Supremacy Movement, cooperating agency status represents tangible accomplishment on the part of commissioners. As a result of this designation and formal status, commissioners are entitled now to an elevated level of participation in policy building.

Because several boards of county commissioners have demonstrated they are capable of achieving parity with federal agencies on commons issues, it has become even more important to understand these commissions better. Are they well equipped to deal with the various federal agencies? How do they inform themselves about natural resources and how do they prefer to relate with other players in the policy arena? Where do they receive most of the information used to form the basis of their decision making?

The study discussed here explored how commissioners in Wyoming develop and operate their collective roles and relationships with other government agencies. It investigated what preferences in self-directed learning commissioners employ and how/with whom they consult for outside assistance and advice in the formulation of their natural resources-based decisions.

Methods

There is a small body of literature that deals with county commissioners' attitudes, behaviors, decision-making, and public policy. Literature describing commissioners and natural resources policy is even more scarce. A mail-out survey instrument was designed based on the research questions, literature review, and a series of pre-project interviews with current and former county commissioners, as well as appropriate local, state, and federal agency personnel. The initial instrument was pre-tested with former commissioners, modified, and administered in spring, 1999.

The entire population of Wyoming county commissioners was queried, and a 66 % response rate was realized. Much of the instrument utilized multiple choice, yes/no, scaled Likert-style responses and several tally lists. Responses were coded and subjected to frequency analysis. Contingency tables were constructed for 48 different combinations of questions and their associated responses. Questions that dealt with the same general attribute were grouped together as indices to provide for the qualitative and quantitative assessment of commissioner responses. The resulting attribute indices were:

- a. Demographic profile,
- b. Attitudes about natural resources issues and behaviors as commissioners in decision-making settings,
- c. Specific key natural resources issues of importance and interest,
- d. Information sources, preferences, and self-directed learning styles, and
- e. Relationships with the public and other governmental agencies.

Results and Discussion

Most of Wyoming's commissioners are male (72 %), about half are college graduates (56 %), and 59 % come from farm/ranch backgrounds. The most prominent subgroup of commissioners is those who derive current income from agriculture (44 %).

Over 63 % of Wyoming commissioners discuss natural resources issues at more than half their meetings. The top three issues are:

- Land use planning,
- Public access to natural resources, and
- Water.

Commissioners are more interested in the political rather than the technical aspects of natural resources and more interested in the technical than the legal aspects. The most preferred method for receiving information on these issues is via public presentation by experts. Commissioners prefer to seek advice and counsel from county government officials rather than other providers such as consultants or land-grant university Extension personnel. Generally, knowledge on issues is not sought from outside reading or other media. Commissioners prefer to increase their knowledge in conventional manners, consulting with friends and experts, as well as attending occasional technical meetings.

Commissioners place higher value on different sources of natural resources issues information. Their favorite methods of becoming more highly informed on natural resources issues, however, are:

1. Seeking constituents with known or presumed expertise and concerns/interests (45.7 %),
2. Reading (30.4 %), and
3. Consulting with experts (23.9 %).

Respondents preferred to do most of their learning on natural resources issues from meetings and training situations, including public presentations by experts (62.2 %), followed by newspapers and magazines (37.1 %). Overall, radio programs, television, and the Internet were not viewed as useful for learning.

Over 82% of Wyoming commissioners feel their level of involvement in natural resources issues is not appropriate--either too little or inconsistent. Over 80% feel that public involvement was not appropriate either. Over 64% feel that the level of influence that commissioners have over natural resources issues is too little (Table 2).

Table 2.

Commissioner Perceptions of Their Influence and Involvement, and of the Public's Involvement Relative to State and Federal Agencies in Natural Resource Issues Policy Development.

Perception of Degree of Involvement or Influence	Commissioner Involvement (%)	Federal Involvement (%)	Public Involvement (%)	Commissioner Influence (%)
Too little	26.7	n/a*	28.3	64.6
Inconsistent	55.6	n/a*	52.2	n/a*
About right	17.8	36.0	15.2	35.4
Too much	-0-	64.0	4.3	-0-
* Response/choice was not offered as a response to these questions.				

Commissioners were asked about their level of frustration with each agency on a list of those with whom they have regular contact. This question was designed such that the respondent could self-define what the index meant. Their response was expected to be an integration of attitudes based on previous interactions, historical policy positions of the agency in question, and personal relationships with agency personnel.

Commissioners rated federal agencies the highest on the 1-7 Likert scale "frustration index" (Table 3). Though it lacks specificity, the frustration index rating illustrates that certain agencies are viewed as more credible, are more often used in decision-making, and are preferred as consultants over others. Credibility, level of use, preferred choice, and how the agencies are used are all tightly related and probably provide feedback to one another. For example, a high level of frustration may be caused by a high level of use and vice versa.

There is a tendency for commissioners who utilize the federal agencies for decision-making assistance to also accept some professional latitude on the part of those agencies. Overall, the majority supports federal managers' professional judgement, as long as public opinion appears to be sufficiently considered. Commissioners preferred to not allow federal agencies to make professional judgements in the absence of public input, however.

Table 3.

Commissioners Perceptions and Utilization of Various Agencies.*
Frequency response in percent, except for column #1, frustration index (7-point Likert scale).

Agency or Group	Frustration Index (1 = lowest, 7 = highest)	Credibility: low- middle-high (%)	Use Levels: low- middle-high (%)	Use 1st, 2nd, or 3rd preferred choice (%)	Basis for Decision-making: not likely-likely-very likely (%)
Federal agencies	5.4	47.9 / 41.7 / 10.4	29.4 / 70.6 / -0-	55.6	34.0 / 55.3 / 10.6
State agencies	4.7	18.8 / 72.9 / 8.3	2.9 / 85.7 / 11.4	75.0	8.5 / 72.3 / 19.1
County officials	2.8	-0- / 44.7 / 55.3	3.0 / 24.2 / 72.7	89.2	4.4 / 37.8 / 57.8
Interest groups	4.0	41.3 / 41.3 / 17.4	28.1 / 65.6 / 6.3	34.4	28.3 / 58.7 / 13.0
Trade / business	3.1	17.8 / 68.9 / 17.3	23.5 / 73.5 / 2.9	38.9	28.3 / 60.9 / 10.9

Media	4.7	32.0 / 54.0 / 6.0	38.2 / 52.9 / 8.8	29.4	42.2 / 44.4 / 13.3
CES Educators / Specialists**	2.7	5.4 / 54.8 / 39.7	22.4 / 73.0 / 4.6	53.8	15.1 / 62.8 / 22.2
Legal / technical consultants	3.2	11.1 / 55.6 / 33.3	9.1 / 63.6 / 27.3	66.7	20.0 / 53.3 / 26.7
<p>* Category leaders indicated in bold type ** Mean of combined scores and percent response for two categories of CES workers.</p>					

Over 70% of the Wyoming commissioners utilize county government officials for assistance in decision-making at the highest level (5-8 times per month), considerably higher than any other agency or group. The media, federal agencies, and special interest groups/non- governmental organizations were not utilized whatsoever by commissioners for forming the basis of natural resources decision-making. If the commissioners chose to use county government officials (and ninety seven percent of them did), they are the first choice. If they use state agencies (again, nearly 95% do), they are used most popularly as the second choice.

Less than half of the contacts with federal agencies were for the purposes of serving as a basis for decision-making. In contrast to federal agencies, contacts with all other agencies were for forming the basis of decision-making. Contacts with county government officials, for example, were exclusively (100%) for this purpose--clearly the agency of choice. They are viewed as the most credible, the most-used, and the first choice referent on natural resources issues for the purposes of technical and background help as well as general assistance in decision-making.

Conclusions

County commissioners in Wyoming are regularly engaged in natural resources issues and policy, but are frustrated about their relationships with federal agencies. This frustration may be partly responsible for an often-polarized political environment. Commissioners often feel somewhat powerless in policy development environments. Nonetheless, commissioners consistently involve themselves in natural resources policy questions and continue to develop and define their roles and relationships with federal agencies.

By virtue of having a poorly developed role in natural resources policy and because they are, at best, part-time and meagerly staffed elected officials, Wyoming county commissioners are somewhat vulnerable to other policy players with better developed information resources. Commissioners clearly prefer to do their learning about natural resources issues "close to home."

Overwhelmingly, they utilize county government officials as principal sources of information, and they are comfortable with experts, but mostly at structured, agenda-driven public meetings. They do not generally consider information from special interest groups as particularly credible or useful.

County commissioners are not only funding partners in the land-grant university's Cooperative Extension Services, they are policy makers in their own right. Their recent ascent to cooperating agency status on key public natural resource issues serves to remind Cooperative Extension that they are legitimate and deserving clientele as well.

It is suggested that natural resources-based public policy education programs should be developed for county commissioners that promote their institutional growth. These programs should take advantage of what we know about their preferred learning styles, their relationships with peer institutions, and specific technical subject matter.

References

Brick, P.D., & Cawley, R.M. (1996). *A wolf in the garden*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Budd-Falen, K. (1996). Protecting community Stability and local economies: Opportunities for local government influence in federal decision- and policy-making processes. In P.D. Brick and R.M. Cawley, (Eds.). *A wolf in the garden* (pp. 73-86). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Cawley, R.M. (1993). *Federal land, western anger: The sagebrush rebellion and environmental politics*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

Cigler, B.A. (1993). The special problems of rural county governments. In D.R. Berman (Ed.), *County governments in an era of change* (pp. 89-106). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Hardin, G. (1968). The tragedy of the commons. *Science*. 162, 1243-1248.

Hiller, J.G. (2000). The natural resources-based decision-making environment of Wyoming's county commissioners. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Wyoming). *Dissertation Abstracts International B 61/06*, p. 2839, December, 2000).

Reed, S.W. 1994. The County Supremacy Movement: Mendacious Myth Marketing. *Idaho Law Review*. 30: 525-53.

Witt, S.L., & Alm, L.R. (1997). County government and the public lands: A review of the county supremacy movement in four western states. In B.R. Steel (Ed.), *Public lands management in the west: Citizens, interest groups and values* (pp. 95-110). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Wyoming Division of Economic Analysis. (1999). *Equality state almanac 1998*. Cheyenne, WY: Wyoming Department of Administration and Information.

[Copyright](#) © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the [Journal Editorial Office](#), joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)