



USING A SITUATION ASSESSMENT TO INITIATE A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

Solving complex challenges and addressing conflicts related to environmental, natural resources, and public lands management often requires bringing a variety of people from different backgrounds together to collaborate on a solution. In these circumstances, the John S. McCain III National Center for Environmental Conflict Resolution (National Center) typically suggests starting with a situation assessment, which is an analysis, often conducted by an outside party such as a facilitator or mediator, to develop an understanding of the history and dynamics of your project and to identify key parties and their needs.

A primary goal in most situation assessments is to determine if the interested and impacted parties can benefit from and will join a collaborative problem-solving process. If the parties are willing to engage in a collaborative process, the situation assessment provides the foundation for the affected parties to jointly design a process that best addresses the concerns surfaced during the assessment. The situation assessment also enables the facilitator or mediator to frame the proposed purpose and goals of the negotiation process in a way that is responsive to the needs of all key parties and to recommend process approaches that might maximize the likelihood of success. A situation assessment can be used to:

- Develop a composite picture of the parties' interests and perspectives.
- Determine the levels of trust and willingness of parties to work together collaboratively to address a common challenge.
- Evaluate the feasibility of establishing a collaborative process including, among other elements, the adequacy of resources, time, and funding.
- Build relationships and trust between stakeholders and the facilitator or mediator.
- Identify critical elements for the design of an effective collaborative process that meets the needs and interests of the key parties.



Situation assessments often include several methods of information collection and analysis. Confidential one-to-one interviews between the facilitator or mediator and a representative set of the key parties are a primary form of information collection used in a situation assessment. These interviews typically cover topics such as existing relationship dynamics, substantive concerns, and process needs.

Based on the information collected from the assessment interviews, along with the data from existing project information and other information resources, the facilitator or mediator will summarize:

- Background: The context for the assessment and the issue or challenge at hand.
- Parties and Relationships: The primary affected parties, their historical and current relationships, and the ways they are impacted by the issues.
- Concerns: The issues and underlying interests that must be addressed for the collaborative process to be successful.
- Process Recommendations: An overview of the need, appropriateness, and support for a collaborative process and a proposal for how best to move forward.

The assessment outcomes are shared with the project sponsors and are commonly circulated among the key stakeholders or shared at a meeting of the key parties with an invitation for feedback and consensus-building on suggested refinements. The assessment outcomes are often used by the parties to support informed decisions about the benefits of convening or engaging in a collaborative process, and if they wish to do so, the general path forward.

About Us

The John S. McCain III National Center for Environmental Conflict Resolution (National Center) is a program of the Morris K. Udall and Stewart L. Udall Foundation (www.udall.gov), an independent executive branch agency. The National Center provides impartial collaboration, consensus-building, training, and conflict resolution services on a wide range of environmental, natural and cultural resources, Tribal, and public lands issues, conflicts, and disputes involving the Federal Government. The National Center's range of services includes consultations, assessments, process design, convening, mediation, facilitation, stakeholder engagement, Tribal Consultation support, and other related collaborative support.