

Sun River Watershed Collaborative Process

August 2002-June 2005

Location: Montana

Background

When representatives of the Sun River Watershed Group first contacted the U.S. Institute in July 2002, the Watershed Group had already been meeting for over 10 years to discuss how to reduce water conflicts among the river's major water users. Two irrigation districts and a large ranching operation were in conflict over water rights, while fishery interests were concerned about the declining health of the Sun River.

The Watershed Group approached the U.S. Institute seeking a facilitator who could work with all parties to resolve these issues. The project's overall goal was to explore water conservation practices or other irrigation efficiencies that would restore flows in the Sun River while meeting other demands for water. The U.S. Institute contracted with a neutral assessor to conduct a comprehensive assessment of water management issues in the Sun River Watershed.

Highlights/Innovation

- This project is a prototype for the kind of successful collaborative effort possible when start-up financial support and consultation are available to stakeholders.
- In the words of one watershed group participant:

"Without the process funded by the U.S. Institute, we would never have achieved the progress in our discourse on flows in the Sun River. The work that the Sun River Watershed group did in connection with the Institute's support moved the different parties' positions from irreconcilable and outright hostility to productive discussions about ways to collaboratively solve the problem."



Results and Accomplishments

- The recommendations that emerged from the assessment addressed pressing concerns. These concerns related to the dewatering of the Sun River and the need for meeting pollution Total Maximum Daily Load requirements. The parties agreed to most of the recommendations and are continuing to work on the remaining issues.
- The work of the Sun River Watershed Group included identifying potential areas of more effective and cost-efficient reservoir management. These improved efficiencies would maximize benefits for all water users in the basin. While no monetary value has been estimated for these outcome efficiencies, the benefits far exceed the investment of resources in the collaborative process.
- The recommendations and resolutions achieved in this case were made possible by the investment of \$20,000 in facilitation services plus the costs associated with stakeholder participation.

Credits

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Photo courtesy of Alan Rollo, Sun River Watershed Group