



Fact Sheet 4.9

Reducing Conflict



It is not easy to be in the middle of a conflict. Misunderstandings abound, feelings are hurt, and in some cases there might be no right answer to untangle the mess. One solution to avoiding conflict is to build partnerships with the community, and particularly with those who have different opinions. A National Forest supervisor in Alabama regularly meets with a community advisory council, which keeps open an avenue for residents to express concerns and get information. Such community networking is even a good strategy after a conflict has occurred in order to help repair the damage and prevent future misunderstanding. The book *Making Collaboration Work* by Julia Wondolleck and Steve Yaffee is an excellent source of ideas and strategies from resource agencies across the United States.

If you find yourself in the midst of a conflict, however, here are some tips for working toward a resolution.

Work to understand the underlying causes of different opinions. People may react to a statement or plan for many reasons: they do not like the plan, they were not involved in creating the plan, or the proposal represents something they oppose. If it is difficult to affect the real problem (e.g., unplanned development), residents may rally against one small outgrowth of the problem (e.g., logging this forest). If you can help identify the real problem, you may be able to open up more alternatives for solutions. Do not be afraid to ask residents what they think; some resource professionals have gone door-to-door to listen to community members.

Identify the common ground. Many groups in conflict mention that they are interested in working on the problem because they recognize a common goal—to make their community a better place, to improve the quality of life, or to protect a valuable resource. Keep this common goal at the fore as people begin to organize to work on the challenge. It may help folks remember what is really important.

Recognizing that they all want the same thing may allow the opposing parties to get to know each other, to listen to each others' concerns, and to begin to trust each others' intentions. They may even come up with a solution to the problem. If they generate the solution, it will be easier for them to bring goodwill and enthusiasm to its implementation than if the solution is imposed by the agency.



Photo by: Larry Kothmak

Community workshops can enable residents to understand issues and participate in designing solutions.

Keep lines of communication open. Meet with the community leaders regularly, if possible. Use all the tips presented here for addressing the values people care about and their needs. Develop a team approach to

understanding the problem and developing solutions. Consider educational activities for each group (such as teaching deer hunters to diffuse tension when approaching animal-rights protesters) or use education to engage the community, perhaps by enlisting the help of a high school debate team or current issues course.

Develop good listening skills. Communication is a two-way street. Listening and understanding concerns will help you alter your message to be more readily heard. Good communication engages the audience, and a good communicator knows how to read and listen to the audience. Watch for nonverbal cues like wandering eyes, shuffling feet, and folded arms, and listen carefully to questions to make sure the concerns are being addressed.

Conduct joint fact-finding missions. At the root of many conflicts is a problem with data. There may be two different versions of the facts. There may be uncertainty and missing data. Help the group identify what is known that they agree on, what is known that they disagree on, and what is unknown. Then jointly develop a procedure to find more data that can be trusted by all sides.

Figure out where you can compromise. A real negotiation involves give and take from both sides. Resource agencies may be limited by federal or state regulations, which can make negotiation difficult. If an agency knows where it can bend and where it must be firm, resource professionals will be able to enter into agreements with more confidence.

Work carefully with the media. Develop a good relationship with reporters and editors and encourage them to present all perspectives of an issue. Some newspapers prefer to report on extreme views and forget the more reasoned compromise positions. Find out if the local newspaper has a citizen's advisory board or if the news editors meet regularly with residents looking for ideas and input on local issues. Try

to establish your resource agency as a trusted source for environmentally related issues. This may help you convey facts and perspectives that may mitigate conflicts.



Photo by: Martha Monroe

Inviting TV news reporters to a prescribed fire can allow a large audience to learn more about the value of this management tool.

Get help. In the midst of a conflict that involves a resource management agency, it may be most prudent to obtain an outside negotiator or mediator to help manage the process of finding a solution. In contentious situations, the opposing forces may distrust each other so much that an outside opinion may be necessary for the parties to reach a decision. Getting help is not a sign of failure and may be the best move for developing a lasting solution.

Suggested Readings

Making Collaboration Work: Lessons from Innovation in Natural Resource Management by Julia M. Wondolleck and Steven L. Yaffee, 2000. Washington, DC: Island Press.

Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In by R. Fisher and W. Ury, 1981/1991. New York: Penguin Books.