



Water Information Coordination Program

Advisory Committee on Water Information

**ACWI Workgroup on USGS Monitoring Challenges in a Shrinking Budget Environment
Teleconference
20 May 2013**

Attendees:

Peter Evans, ICWP

Wendy Norton, USGS

Ben Pratt, SRBC

Tony Willardson, WSWC

Doug McLaughlin, NCASI

Mary Musick, GWPC

Robert Goldstein, EPRI

Bob Schreiber, ASCE

Robert Mace, WSWC

John Wells, ACWI-SWRR

Darrell Osterhoudt, ASDWA

Fred Bloetscher, AWWA

Chris Reimer, NGWA

Judy Campbell Bird, ACWI-NLC

Brandon Kernan, ASDWA

Sue Lowry, ICWP

Action Items:

- ACTION: If people want to provide ideas, rewrites for guiding principles, etc., please send them to Peter Evans. He will circulate them back to the group that's on today's call.
- ACTION: Wendy will send a simple funding summary table to the whole workgroup, along with the minutes from this meeting.

Introductions and Agenda Review

- Peter Evans reviewed the agenda to start the meeting, along with plans for future meetings.

Revision/Acceptance of Notes from May 13 Meeting

- Minutes from last meeting were accepted/approved.

Draft Outline for Workgroup Report & Review of Ideas Provided from the Workgroup

- Peter outlined comments that were submitted by several workgroup members during the last week. Some of these comments have been or are being incorporated into the Draft "Ideas List."
- How do we prioritize expansion of data networks versus preservation of the networks that are already in place? Some workgroup members feel that we still don't have enough information to pick and choose; recommend that rather than prioritizing these things, we should focus on "guiding principles" that people who know the programs better can use in figuring out how to apply budget cuts.
- It seems that the surface-water network is the most robust, but it's hard to tell how far behind groundwater and water-quality networks are. Is it more important to build up groundwater and

water quality, or to ensure solidity for all of the networks – surface water, groundwater, and water.

- In terms of data collection, we should perhaps treat all three data networks equally and then treat the supporting research/science as a separate issue. When we recommend prioritizing data collection above research/science, we should recommend equal treatment of the various networks.
- We cannot recommend expanding any of the networks, especially not now, when virtually all Federal programs are being reduced.
- We can give data collection a high priority and then give some general guidance about the best time and place(s) for expanding the networks, should the funding become available later.
- NSIP does a good job of laying out national priorities in terms of SW data collection; should we be recommending that something similar be done for GW and QW? There should be some kind of national matrix that our data collection priorities fit into; there are different priorities depending on what part of the country you're in (i.e., different needs for UT versus PA).
- The list of priorities that Eric and Pixie drafted is a good starting point, but we may need to add some more points to it. Also, it seems that the priorities list makes **everything** a priority, so we need to be careful.
- If we're going to recommend expanding some activities, then we need to also include a recommendation for a cut in something else, to balance the scale. For example, earlier we discussed the possibility of reducing interpretive work under the Water Census and the Cooperative Water Program; if we do recommend this, we need to recommend a reduction that is large enough to free up sufficient funds to expand activities elsewhere.
- One thing that USGS does well is synthesize data and interpret it. In many areas of the Nation there are significant problems with groundwater mining and its impacts on development, subsidence, etc. Perhaps we should target certain geographic areas where we see groundwater problems emerging or where significant groundwater problems already exist but haven't yet been addressed. No one except USGS is able to do this work (with a degree of national consistency that allows national and regional comparisons), and a lot of this work had its origin in the interpretive studies of the Cooperative Water Program.
- The way we frame the uncertainty/risk issue is critical.
- We need a volunteer to write up these ideas: preserving existing data collection efforts, targeting expansion carefully, and looking at uncertainty/risks.
- Should there be a greater role for the States in determining USGS program priorities? Does the States' role vary from State to State? Perhaps our recommendation should be more targeted: for example, "the Cooperative Water Program should ensure that it remains sensitive to the groundwater needs of the States."
- "New national USGS initiatives must take account of work done through the Cooperative Water Program" is one potential recommendation. This will help ensure that new initiatives are responsive to the needs of States and localities.
- We could use funds saved by reductions/efficiencies to develop protocols/standards that other people can use to do some of the data collection themselves. However, how much can we do to promote participation by others, at the same time we're dealing with a shrinking budget? We

need to empower others to take on some of the work that USGS will no longer be able to do (i.e., data collection that's in addition to the "backbone" that USGS will continue to maintain), but we may be limited in how much we can do in this arena.

- Is staffing appropriate for the work that we need to do? If we reduce staff in the area of interpretive studies and research, we will be losing our core science capability because the people who do this type of work are higher-graded research scientists. But we still need to have a conversation around the question "Are we right-sizing our workforce?"
- Our report should separate short-term from long-term recommendations.
- We haven't talked much about water quality monitoring and don't have any ideas about this in our recommendations list yet. Does anyone have any ideas? Groundwater quality testing could be done/paid through collaborative efforts between USGS and EPA, which would at least save USGS some funds. Ensure we're not conducting redundant activities (USGS and EPA).
- Especially in the area of water quality, USGS needs to leverage the States' data and expertise – EPA doesn't always have the full story when they say that a State's waters don't meet designated uses. Perhaps more State data should automatically be available through web portals etc, so that it's available to EPA? Some of this is already being done through WQX and the water-quality portal, but there are limitations now (funding, data formats, lack of staffing or expertise at State agencies). USGS needs to invest in developing clear guidance/standards for data, and in training for States, to ensure that the suite of data available through portals can be expanded.
- EPA and USGS should make sure they are avoiding redundancy in their analytical capabilities.
- Under "Related Science" do we want our recommendations to address each of the topical items individually, or do we want to lump them all together? Perhaps we want to make a specific recommendation for the Major Aquifer Studies, or make a general recommendation for the whole "Related Science" category (i.e., a recommendation like "don't start any new interpretive efforts unless they're tied specifically to resource management decisions that need to be made in the short term")?
- Is it possible for non-government organizations to be cooperators in the Cooperative Water Program? Not directly. Some organizations of this type simply work through their State agency to accomplish this. If we wanted people not currently authorized to be able to participate in the Cooperative Program, it would probably require a language change in the annual Appropriations Bill and Report, where the cost-share provision is included. (Note: Eric Evenson may have mentioned that this has become a lot less restrictive recently, so that non-government orgs can contribute funding; we should check this out.)
- Can we put a "Donate" button on the data site web pages? (Not sure if we have authority to collect private donations for the purpose of funding data collection activities. The funds might have to be turned over to the Treasury.) Some people would need some assurance that their money was really going to the streamgage they want to support, but many might be willing to donate to the state, tribal, interstate or local agency that is entering the Cooperative Water Program cost-share agreement with USGS (limiting the impact to USGS overhead).
- We can recommend a change to the cooperative program so that the private sector can participate. This might need to be limited to data collection, since USGS has strict prohibitions against competing with the private sector.

Next step: Redraft/revise Eric's guiding principles, then walk through them as a group to "make them our own."

- Guiding Principle (e) sounds like it doesn't mesh with the emphasis on QA that is needed. Perhaps this just needs some wordsmithing? We need to work this out, along with the issue of USGS not accepting data collected by others. How much uncertainty can we tolerate?
- Perhaps we need to add "risk" to "uncertainty" to make it clear that there are consequences to uncertainty.
- **ACTION:** If people want to provide ideas, rewrites for guiding principles, etc., please send them to Peter Evans. He will circulate them back to the group that's on today's call.
- **ACTION:** Wendy will send a simple funding summary table to the whole workgroup, along with the minutes from this meeting.

Plans for Next Meetings

Due to the Memorial Day holiday, the next meeting is planned for **Tuesday, May 28**, for 2 hours beginning at 1:00 p.m. Eastern Time. Once again, this meeting will take place **WITHOUT** participation by USGS staff.