

**Collaboration Assessment: Water Projects  
in the Texas Rio Grande Valley**

USDA/Sul Ross Facilitating Sustainable Water Grant

via

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## **Introduction and Purpose**

Collaboration is a process of people, groups, or organizations working together to reach agreed upon goals. It is a concept about which public and private organizations with a wide diversity of objectives wish to aspire to, undertake, or write about. Many research studies have searched for the essential techniques, characteristics, or keys of successful collaborations. Such specific keys to rewarding collaborations in water resources, however, are difficult to discern (Nielsen 2006; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000; Borden and Perkins 1999, 2007; Gray 1989).

Typing these keywords—collaboration, Texas, Rio Grande, water—into the Google search engine produces 208,000 entries at this time. A variety of other keyword online searches also indicate that there have been and continue to be many collaborative efforts in confronting the critical water resources challenges of the Texas Rio Grande Valley, that is, the part of the valley on the Texas side of the border that stretches nearly one thousand miles from El Paso in the west to Brownsville in the east. However, the indications of the success of these collaborative efforts are only anecdotal, almost all from public relations spokespersons of the organizations engaged in the collaborations. An essential need, therefore, is to use hard data, both qualitative and quantitative, to assess the success of collaborations of governmental agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) regarding water resources projects in the Texas Rio Grande Valley.

## **Method**

### *Research Questions*

We addressed the fundamental research question: To what degree have various government agencies—international, federal, state, and local—and NGOs been successful with their collaborative efforts in addressing water resources issues, especially those central to agriculture and Latino communities, in the Texas Rio Grande Valley from 1995 to the present? We examined three sets of subsumed diagnostic questions that focused on 1) the collaborating organizations, 2) the collaborative projects, and 3) specific collaborations.

### *Database Construction, Internet Search, and Survey*

Through extensive Internet searches and in collaboration with Lauren Bilbe of the River Systems Institute in 2005 and 2006, we created a database of 231 of Websites of government agencies—international, federal, state, and local—and NGOs that may undertake water resources projects in the Texas Rio Grande Valley (this database, a grant deliverable, was forwarded in 2006). Throughout 2006 and into 2007, we conducted an analysis of these 231 Websites that narrowed the sampling pool of government agencies and NGOs that conduct water resources collaboration in the Texas Rio Grande Valley to 77. We also constructed a survey of 16 specific questions to operationalize the three sets of diagnostic queries in an effort to determine the success of the collaborations (Table 1). Via e-mail, we surveyed the 77 government agencies and NGOs. After learning that an e-mail survey receives a poor response rate, we telephoned the government agencies and NGOs to gain their responses and to ensure a diverse set of entities in the response pool. We followed-up

with e-mail and telephone conversations to clarify the responses to particular questions in the survey.

Table 1

Survey about Water Resources Projects an the Texas Rio Grande Valley

About Collaborative Organizations:

- 1) What is the name and address of your organization?
- 2) What in your organizational mission is directed to conducting work on water resources in the Texas Rio Grande Valley?
- 3) What are your organizational structure and the size of your staff that is focused on water resources work in the Texas Rio Grande Valley?
- 4) What is your funding source(s) and current annual budget for work on water resources in the Texas Rio Grande Valley?

About Collaborative Projects:

- 5) What type of work do you focus on regarding water resources in the Texas Rio Grande Valley?
- 6) What have been your major water resources projects in the region since 1995?
- 7) Did you collaborate with any other entities in conducting any of these projects? If so, who were your collaborators?
- 8) Were your projects successfully completed? Specifically, what criteria do you use to characterize each of the projects as successful?

About Collaborations:

- 9) Were the collaborative efforts with other organizations successful in each of the projects? If so, what specific criteria lead you to conclude the collaborations were successful in each case?
- 10) What were specific weaknesses in each of these collaborative efforts?
- 11) Would you enter into collaborative agreements again with the organizations you have worked with in the past? If not, why?
- 12) Which organizations were the easiest to collaborate with? Why?
- 13) Which were the most difficult? Why?
- 14) In sum, what are the keys for you to successful collaborative efforts regarding water resources projects in the Texas Rio Grande Valley?
- 15) Who were the audiences for your water resources project reports?
- 16) Do you think that collaborative efforts make policymaking processes easier? If so, why?

## **Analysis and Findings**

From our e-mail survey and follow-up telephone calls, we received 23 (30% response rate) completed surveys: 19 from government agencies—1 international, 3 federal, 11 state, and 4 local (cities)—and 4 from NGOs—2 national, 1 state, and 1 local. After telephoning

several NGOs, however, it was obvious that their directors did not want to complete the survey, perhaps because of political or funding considerations. Surprisingly, one important Texas Rio Grande city, Del Rio—after several telephone calls and sending the survey to a handful of different administrators—responded "not applicable" to each of the 15 survey substantive questions, thereby indicating that the city did not engage in water resources collaborations or its officials did not wish to take time out to complete the survey (Del Rio's survey response was discarded).

Questions about the 23 sampled collaborative organizations found substantial diversity in the missions, sizes, funding, and water resources projects for the group. Each of the 23 organizations had traditions of collaboration. The group's most energetic collaborators in the Texas Rio Grande Valley were the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the Texas Water Development Board, while the two smallest sampled cities—Harlingen and McAllen—had the fewest water resources collaborations and the least experience.

The 23 organizations engaged in a variety of water resources projects, for example: flood control, regional water plans, storm water drainage, leak detection, shrimp farms, desalination plants, invasive vegetation removal, recreation, land protection, watershed education, and Clean Water Act enforcement. Fifteen organizations characterized their collaborative water resources projects as successful in the Texas Rio Grande Valley; six entities reported that their projects were long-term and still ongoing; and one stated that the success of its projects was mixed because of problems with follow-up monitoring.

The focal question of whether the collaborations of the 23 organizations with other entities have been successful produced 18 responses of success, 3 mixed reviews, and 1 negative reply. Although 78 percent of the organizations characterized their collaborations as

successful, weaknesses in the collaborative efforts were highlighted, some in evocative language. The lack of adequate funding was the most notable weakness, followed by communication problems, conflict of perspectives, and pursuit of political agendas. Other collaborative difficulties included complexity of projects, ineffective coordination, personnel changes, time constraints, loss of identity, and redundancy.

One state organization revealed that it would not collaborate in the future with another particular state agency because of the onerous regulatory constraints of the latter that affect stakeholder facilitation. A state agency reported that it is careful about entering into project collaborations because some entities were only interested in the "prospect of receiving funding (i.e. local COG and some academics) or some other selfish benefit such as promotion of their individual agenda(s)." The other 21 organizations would enter into future water resources collaborations in the Texas Rio Grande Valley; in fact, the general sentiment was encapsulated as: "It is a must. We strive to increase collaboration to reduce duplication. We don't want to reinvent the wheel . . . . Agencies have complementary roles and responsibilities which must be brought together to fully implement water programs."

The survey responses show that some collaborators are easier to work with than others. One state agency indicated that, although some citizens take intense outreach to get them involved, "most people want to do the right thing." Federal and state regulatory agencies were seen as the most difficult to collaborate with because of the strict, "sticky" legal constraints that are not productive in fluid, "messy" stakeholder facilitation. According to one organization, some of the relations between NGOs and regulatory agencies can become "adversarial and downright confrontational." One important state agency complimented the USGS as "always being there when needed," but a sister federal agency

complained that ". . . it is hard to understand its [USGS] organizational structure. I am never sure whom to call." Some cities in the Texas Rio Grande Valley grumbled about the recalcitrance of nearby irrigation districts and that "each community wants to be in control."

The audiences for the 23 sampled organizations varied from project stakeholders, local citizens, and government agencies to the state legislature and the U.S. Congress. Although the projects and audiences were eclectic, the keys to successful collaboration, according to the emphasis and frequency of the 23 respondents, were a handful of principal themes in this order: 1) *Effective Communications*, including "listening," "understanding needs," and "taking time out to discuss issues." One state agency began its reply with: "Communications, Communications, Communications." 2) *Shared Goals* that are clearly presented. "Successful collaborative efforts have always been sharing the same goals . . ." summarized, for instance, an official from a city on the river. 3) *Competent Leadership and Execution*. A vital state agency stressed that "a project needs to be cooperative with a strong leader to keep a large group on track." 4) *Open, Transparent, and Respectful Working Relations* with no "hidden agendas." "Establishing close working relations with stakeholders and agency (local, state, federal, bi-national) counterparts . . ." was important to a state agency office in West Texas. 5) *Dedication and Perseverance* were specifically emphasized as collaborative keys by both a federal agency and a national NGO. Interestingly, although inadequate funding or particular funding disputes regarding water resources projects were central topics that permeated responses to several survey questions, only one respondent mentioned adequate funding as essential to a successful collaboration.

Eighteen of the sampled organizations agreed that collaborations make formulating policy regarding water resources projects easier. Two of the organizations, however, had

reservations: One underscored that collaborations were not easy as they may seem, but they are "what's right to do." The other felt that collaborations facilitate successful water projects if there are "no hidden agendas." On the other hand, four entities reported that collaborations were not easy at all but are necessary for successful outcomes that are "more fair, inclusive, and transparent."

Because the funding agency decreased our budget at the outset of the project, we were unable to complete some of the goals of our grant proposal, particularly the construction of a normative model of assessment practices based on fieldwork to communities in the Texas Rio Grande Valley.

## **Conclusions**

Seventy-eight percent of the 23 organizational respondents to our survey reported successful water resources collaborations in the Texas Rio Grande Valley. *Effective Communications; Shared Goals; Competent Leadership and Execution; Open, Transparent, and Respectful Working Relations; and Dedication and Perseverance* have been the keys to this success. Perhaps these ideals can be generally extrapolated to any entity that is planning future collaborative efforts, thereby adding another set of fundamental characteristics to those in the literature on collaboration.

Collaborative efforts may or may not make water resources policymaking a less difficult process, but without collaborations reasonable, workable long-term solutions may be unattainable. Raquel Olivia, executive director of the NGO Avance-Rio Grande Valley, condenses the challenges of collaborations: "Collaboration is difficult. There are a lot of

roadblocks to initiating change in the way organizations and systems operate . . . . Building an effective partnership takes time and resources.”

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