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Idaho Fish & Game In-Service Training School

Confluence Café Summary

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Introduction

Two primary focuses of the 2014 Idaho Fish & Game In-Service Training School was the financial state of the Department ("Are we in Business?") and an evaluation of Department priorities ("What Business are we in?"). As part of that event, approximately 500 Department staff had the opportunity to participate in a small group discussion session entitled "Confluence Café.". The Confluence Café built on the sessions from the previous day and a half, and encouraged participants to discuss the Department's roles and responsibilities, both now and in the future, and how possible changes could affect Department employees personally and professionally.

The Café consisted of four rounds of discussion questions, each question building upon the previous question. Discussion groups included up to five participants, with one designated host (the host changed at each round).

At the conclusion of each round, participants were asked to write down key insights and discussion topics on a note card color-coded for that round before moving to join a new discussion group. The facilitation team read through each colored card and synthesized key discussion themes for each round. A summary of key themes submitted during the Café is below.

Key Themes

Round 1: *What are your thoughts about the alignment between the Department's "business" (roles, responsibilities) and its mission?*

- Alignment is poor between the Department's business and its mission -- the mission (which applies to all Idahoans) is much broader than the business (which seems to apply primarily to hunters/anglers). The current model of funding based almost exclusively on license fees disables the Department from focusing resources on those parts of the mission that lie outside of supporting hunting and fishing activities (e.g. non-game species, wildlife habitat management). The mission and business cannot be aligned without more balanced funding.
- Too many stakeholders have different ideas about the Department's mission and business. A vocal segment of the public wants employees to focus on tasks that are very visible and important to them (e.g. depredations, wildlife-human conflicts), but that aren't funded under the current business model or are inconsistent with our mission. This "unhappy public" is vocal and gets disproportionally listened to, which is demoralizing to Department employees who are struggling to redeem ***all*** the Department's responsibilities.
- The steady shift in demographics (from hunters to non-hunters) is creating increasing misalignment between the Department's mission and business. The business is skewed toward hunting and fishing, while demographics indicate a shift away from these uses.

- The Department has become over-specialized, with too many individual bureaus. This makes maintaining alignment between mission and business challenging, as it is difficult to see the "big picture" due to the over-compartmentalizing.
- While there is not total alignment, the Department is heading in the right direction and doing as good a job as it can under the current funding constraints. It is unlikely under any circumstances that the Department would allow the extirpation of any species, whether game or non-game (statutory obligation).
- The role of the Department is to implement the decisions of the Commission and elected officials, and to provide good, pertinent data that allows them to make informed decisions.
- The role of the Department is to provide wildlife opportunities (e.g. harvest, viewing) to the public. This broader view is inconsistent with the current funding model.
- Misalignment regarding the mission and business occurs between: 1) Department staff and leadership; 2) Department and the legislature and; 3) the executive and legislative branches of state government.

Round 2: *What are your thoughts and insights about the challenges of aligning the financial resources of the Department with Fish & Game's (Department + Commission) priorities?*

- Department funding and Fish & Game priorities are not aligned. The revenue that provides the sole source of funding to the Department is generated from hunting and fishing programs that do not represent the totality of priority Fish & Game programs, the diversity of priorities between regions, nor reflect services that the public has come to expect.
- Programs and services that should be a priority based on the Department's mission are underfunded or not funded at all. The Department should either focus only on the programs that generate revenue (i.e. "the core"), requiring it to revisit its mission, or actively advocate a broader funding base from the legislature.
- Funding difficulties are exacerbated by legislative mandates that are expected to be funded with existing mechanisms. These mandates are often expensive and do not bring in revenue of their own.
- The Department does not have the authority or tools needed to align funding with Fish & Game priorities. There are several options Fish & Game could pursue to resolve its funding problems, but it cannot act on them without legislative approval.
- Efforts to change the Fish & Game funding model are challenged by traditional users, who fear a new funding mechanism will cause Fish & Game's focus to shift away from hunting and fishing programs, and non-consumptive users, who currently expect programs and services with no fee.
- The Department needs to work with the Commission, legislators and the public to clearly identify priorities and a means to fund them. This will require Fish & Game to educate these parties about the cost to fund these priorities.

- The Department should leverage existing funding sources by increasing the number of consumptive users through marketing investments or explore aggressive cost-efficiency measures to bring existing funding in alignment with Fish & Game priorities.

Round 3: *Given the challenges ahead, how can you contribute to the future success of the "business" of the Department?*

- Department employees can advocate for additional funding through improved communication of the Fish & Game's mission and successes during public interactions. The legislature is more likely to approve broader funding measures when the public understands and trusts the Department's priorities. Public perceptions may change through an improved outreach strategy that engages traditional and non-traditional users, non-governmental organizations and legislators.
- Department employees can support changes in public perception by focusing on customer service experiences, soliciting feedback from people on a personal level and encouraging them to contact their legislators about Fish & Game programs they believe are important. Employees can also engage in discussions with non-consumptive users and advocate the need to create a non-consumptive user fee to support the services they enjoy.
- Department employees can play a role as active citizens outside of their professional lives to engage their communities in support of funding Fish & Game priorities. Employees can write their legislators to increase understanding of how they contribute to Fish & Game's mission individually and repercussions of decreased funding.
- Employees can work efficiently and optimize current funds by consolidating resources and improving inter-division collaboration. Improved internal communication may reduce effort duplication, create opportunities to share funds and assets and take advantage of expertise in different offices.
- Department managers can focus on improving employee recruitment and retention by supporting the needs of their staff and helping employees voice their ideas to Department leadership.

Round 4: *What most needs our collective focused attention and what will this require?*

- Fish & Game needs to clearly identify its priorities and create a plan to align priorities with funding. Priorities should be determined with involvement from Department employees and the public. If Fish & Game priorities cannot be achieved with current funding and cost saving measures, the Department should pursue additional funds.
- Use of Fish & Game services has changed over time. Fish & Game priorities and funding mechanisms should be adjusted to reflect the priorities of people served by the Department.

- An informed public is more likely to support legislative measures that broaden Department funding. The Department needs to develop a communication/marketing plan to improve transparency, gain trust and help the public understand Department services and funding requirements.
- The communication plan needs to engage traditional and non-traditional users of Fish & Game services and leverage appropriate media for these audiences including websites, mobile apps, social media and videos. Communication should focus on human-interest stories instead of regulatory notices.
- The Department needs to demonstrate how the public will be affected by funding decisions including a list of programs and services that may be cut if funding is not approved.
- The scope of Fish & Game services goes beyond sport activities. The Department's name and brand should reflect the breadth of its services.
- Fish & Game will be further weakened if it is not able to recruit and retain high quality employees. Fish & Game needs to be able to provide competitive wages and provide reimbursement for expenses including vehicle mileage. Department employees need to be valued and given the opportunity to share their ideas with Department leadership in a meaningful way.

Suggested Actions

The following are specific actions suggested during the four rounds of the Café, thematically grouped:

Communications/marketing

- Find a new name for the Department that better reflects its mission.
- Follow up on results from Idaho Wildlife Summit.
- Invest in public education programs.
- Leverage electronic media as communication tools such as Fish & Game website, social media, mobile apps and videos.
- Reinvest in Idaho Wildlife Summit discussions and summer regional work groups.
- Revive the IDFG magazine to communicate programs and services.
- Solicit public input through surveys and feedback forms, and ensure positive comments (as well as critical ones) are passed along to commissioners and legislators, so that they don't just hear criticisms.

Funding

- Auction fish and wildlife "experiences" (e.g. hunting, viewing)
- Charge a fee from non-consumptive users.

- Create a mail-in donation program.
- Expand license sales to include recreational vehicles.
- Include an extra donation option on license sales.
- Partner with sponsors to provide tangible support to Department operational expenses (e.g. vehicles, gasoline)
- Pursue lottery funds for Fish & Game.
- Pursue state tax funds for Fish & Game.
- Remove "spend it or lose it" funding model.
- Sell conservation postage stamps.
- Sell licenses on Saturdays.
- Set IDFG product prices according to market prices.
- Require payment for service calls (removal of dead deer, trapping bears, etc.)
- Use cost/benefit analysis to examine how much stocking (e.g. fish and pheasants) costs compared to fishing/hunting licenses.

Operations

- Ask for Department employee input on decisions.
- Provide a clear channel for Department employees to send ideas to leadership.
- Create a flowchart that shows alignment between mission and business to identify opportunities and issues
- Increase the volunteer base to help with more projects. Use the general fund to pay volunteer coordinators.
- Add persons with business degrees to Department management.
- Eliminate free campgrounds (e.g. Horse Thief Lake), as they are a drain on already stretched Department resources

Legislative/Commission

- Change the name of the Department to better reflect its mission (the mission is beyond "fish and game").
- Modify the mission statement to explicitly include management of wildlife ***habitat*** (not just wildlife), and recognition of the intrinsic values and non-consumptive uses of fish and wildlife.
- Specifically ask for Commission support to keep the Department politically neutral.

Harvest

At the conclusion of the four rounds, the facilitator engaged the full group in a brief discussion of reflections from each round. A synthesis of key insights shared by participants during the harvest is below:

Harvest - Round 1 Question

- Our business is aligned with our mission to the extent that our funding allows.
- I don't see our business well aligned because I think our mission needs to be truly considering all of the beneficiaries. Currently I don't see that they're aligned.
- Our business needs to align with our customers' expectations; t hat is, we need to be who our customers want us to be.
- Our business needs to align with our current demographics, not what they used to be.

Harvest - Round 2 Question

- Our traditional funding base is declining with the population, but our state's expectations on us are expanding. In the 40s and 50s, our funding model worked well because there were lots of hunters and fishers. Now we're asked to provide more services, but there are less hunters and fishers.
- Bring back the IDFG magazine and TV show. Let the public know what we're doing. We do a lot of neat things. We need to get the NGOs and public to bring issues to legislators, because the legislators won't take issues from us.
- Balancing unfunded legislated mandates with existing funding will take away from existing problems.
- Biggest problem is IDFG priorities are not established by research, but legislated or mission-reactive actions.
- Is our mission still the right mission?
- Services provided by the business of IDFG need to be prioritized. Services need to be cut down for funding. Public needs to be informed when services are cut, and legislators need to stand behind decisions to cut funding.

Harvest - Round 3 Question

- We need to be adaptive and efficient, and repair and reuse equipment and supplies whenever possible. We need to be thoughtful on where the money is coming from and how to spend it.
- We need to promote communication between specialist divisions.
- Put out classified ads to show what we can do for projects. We need to know what each other can do to be more efficient.
- Share resources between groups. Some projects might be under funded while others have surpluses.
- Our contributions should be all about efficiencies. We don't need to spend all of the money we're given. Share excess money with different projects.

- We need to build relationships with our customers, particularly nonresident customers. If we take extra steps with them they are pretty supportive of us.
- We need to work on building constituency with non-consumptive users of fish and wildlife. We need to refocus on helping people experience wildlife in different ways. Flower walks, eco tours, etc.

Harvest - Round 4 Question

- Get general funding or sales tax for non-game and plant habitat work.
- Get support from people who enjoy non- consumptive uses.
- Get political allies.
- Get politically savvy internally.
- Educate legislators.
- Nothing needs our action. That's the problem. There's an amazing amount of things we already do, but we don't communicate what we do.
- We should seek partnerships/sponsorships with companies (e.g. advertising on department trucks).
- We haven't learned how to effectively communicate and develop relationships with the public. We need to understand what they expect of us.
- Increase communication on an individual level between the bureaus. Have headquarters explain why policies change. Ensure consistency in understanding among employees.
- Have enough respect for nay-sayers so that it's not an antagonistic relationship. Develop relationships with them.
- Contact county commissioners and legislators.

At the beginning of ISTS and, again, at the beginning of the Confluence Café, Director Virgil Moore and Deputy Director Sharon Kiefer stated their commitment to listen carefully to employee feedback noted during the Café, and to use this feedback to inform Department proposals presented to the Idaho Fish & Game Commission in July 2014. Demonstrating how employee feedback from the Café was used in proposal development, and in ongoing Department work, will reinforce and encourage continued constructive employee feedback during the challenging times ahead.

Respectfully submitted,

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