

Water Institute Distinguished Scholar Seminar Series

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Former Deputy Secretary of the Interior (2005-2009)
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282 J. Wayne Reitz Union

Co-Host: Florida Climate Institute and UF Office of Sustainability

Title:

“Climate Adaptation: Science, Collaboration and Communities”

Abstract

Four features characterize climate change and its effects on lands, water, wildlife, and communities. These include: 1) the multiple spatial and temporal scales of the climate change problem set; 2) the high levels of uncertainty about effects, particularly regionally and locally; 3) the interconnected complexity of the changes underway; and 4) the highly dynamic nature of climate effects changes.

What are the implications of these characteristics for decision makers? We will need institutions and decision processes that facilitate “collaborative federalism,” with joint decision making among multiple governing units. The high level of uncertainty regarding climate effects, particularly at regional and local scales makes ongoing learning imperative and highlights the significance of adaptive management. High uncertainty also underscores the central role of science and technical expertise in decision making about whether, when, and how to respond to the effects of a changing climate. This centrality of science and technical expertise raises another conundrum—what some have referred to as the “technocracy versus democracy” quandary. Climate change issues are highly technical and complex but policies and adaptation decisions may significantly affect people and involve trade offs. These differential effects on people heighten the relevance of participatory democracy and collaboration and present a fundamental question. How is it possible to increase public involvement in decision making when the scientific and technical issues associated with some climate effects challenges are so complex? The third characteristic--the interconnectedness of climate change effects--raises challenges of agency silos in which responsibilities for sectors or issues are fractured and divided. Finally, climate effects are highly dynamic, with the pace of change sometimes dramatic. Like the characteristic of uncertainty, the highly dynamic nature of climate change effects implies the need for adaptation. It may also heighten the need for policy options centered on resilience, or, more specifically, management options that provide functionality across a broad range of conditions.

Twenty-first century governance, as the Lincoln Institute in Cambridge has pointed out, may reveal a new lexicon of collaboration, shared power, networks, consensus, and iteration. All these features, for policy makers, make decisions provisional, and they diffuse responsibilities. This sort of diffuse, provisional decision making is difficult to reconcile with traditional notions of accountability. What decision processes and institutions can provide the necessary flexibility, accountability, coordination, and collaboration that will enhance policy and management outcomes?