Public Advisory Groups

common pitfalls to avoid.

1. Not giving science its due.

Too often we see participants in public advisory groups give input without providing scientific support for their opinions. As a result, input based on rumors or that is scientifically untrue is held on equal footing with input that is grounded in sound science. Agencies must correct misinformation as it arises while providing educational opportunities for public advisory group members.

2. Lack of transparency about value judgments, factual claims and scientifically verified facts.

Numbers set by agencies and policy makers regarding goals for wolf recovery, population objectives and management thresholds, as well as numbers established as quotas for wolf hunting and trapping, are often offered up as being science-based when in fact they have been derived from personal and organizational value judgments. This lack of transparency results in wolf management policies and actions that are not sustainable and raise significant ethics concerns.

3. Inadequate Facilitation

Without an equitable process in place, interest groups can take over meetings and force their own agenda. One topic, person or identity group should not commandeer the group's time and energy. Ideally, a facilitator will not be someone employed by the agency that convened the public advisory group, since the agency itself is a "stakeholder." Even when a facilitator is someone outside the agency but contracted by it, we have witnessed the agency co-opt the facilitator's role.

4. Inequitable and unbalanced representation.

Prior to the formation of a public advisory group, advocates should work with the agency to ensure the group fairly and proportionately reflects a diversity of viewpoints in the state. We often see "stacked" public advisory groups that favor or over-represent "traditionalist" values, such as hunting, trapping and livestock ownership. In our experience, this leads to a breakdown in communication and collaboration and results in more traditionalist views driving conversations and determining outcomes. Meanwhile, more mutualist or "pro-wolf" viewpoints and science are pushed aside.

Because hunter and trapper organizations and livestock-owner representatives tend to vote as a bloc, a greater number of wolf advocacy and genuine wildlife conservation organizations - not hunter groups which have the word "conservation" in their title - are needed to ensure that the public advisory group is balanced. If already faced with the prospect of stacked advisory committee, advocates should take care to draw the attention of the public and the media to the lack of fair and inclusive representation from the beginning. Being relentless is crucial.

5. Cutting the public out of decision-making.

Building social cohesion, encouraging honest dialogue and facilitating open collaboration within the advisory group is important. So too is ensuring that the public is considered beyond just the group members and the interests they represent. It is incumbent upon the wolf advocates selected for participation on public advisory groups that lines of communication remain open, both with other wildlife advocacy organizations and members of the general public. The public must be able to provide input and hold advisory group members accountable as their representatives.

6. Prioritizing process and internal group relationships over successful conservation outcomes for wolves.

Building trust and understanding is important, but it must not be the chief focus of public advisory groups. Consensus-oriented processes prolong decision-making processes and discount scientific facts. Meanwhile, wolves suffer while groups spend precious time focused on building relationships and making compromises based on those relationships, even when the compromises are not supported by science.

7. Lack of accountability.

Some agencies continue to kill wolves in response to livestock conflict despite contrary advice from the public advisory group. Similarly, when policies are approved by an advisory group without built-in accountability, wolves are killed without the appropriate implementation of non-lethal measures by livestock owners. Addressing accountability and enforceability in wolf planning saves wolf lives and provides legal recourse for bad actors.

8. Members do not have time to prepare.

When group members are sent important documents shortly before meetings take place, they can't adequately review and evaluate the materials. Nor do they have sufficient time to seek input from other advocacy groups or their supporters. This results in inadequate preparation for the meeting and unproductive, circular discussions that hinder progress.

9. Politics come into play.

The governor of a state typically appoints or nominates state fish and wildlife leaders. However, this task is often balanced by the state legislature. For example, in Oregon, the governor can nominate a fish and wildlife commissioner, but the commissioner must be approved by the Senate.

There are many variations of this power-sharing for leadership across the country. Development, funding and implementation of wildlife-conservation plans can be subject to the vagaries of political leadership. Wolf-plan development and implementation are only as good as who the decision-makers are that are in charge at the time. **See Perils of Politics of State Wolf Policies and Actions**.

10. Tendency of wolf advocate representatives to compromise.

In wolf-planning stakeholder processes, we frequently observe that wolf-advocate representatives strive to understand the perspectives of wolf opponents, propose options to meet concerns raised by wolf opponents, and succumb to the pressure to compromise. To reach consensus, wolf advocates may show a willingness to compromise science, equity and ethics concerns. We rarely, if ever, observe a dynamic in which wolf opponents take the same actions to reach consensus with wolf-advocate representatives.

As a preventive measure, wolf advocate representatives should be sure to meet with each other before and after each stakeholder meeting to identify principles, goals and non-negotiable lines in the sand.

As time goes on, wolf advocates may choose to reassess these principles, goals and lines. Establishing this framework, and revisiting it regularly, is a helpful way to stay on track and achieve the best results for wolves.

As a more formal alternative, wolf advocates, together with other allies appointed to the advisory group, may wish to develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU). This is an agreement that outlines the coalition's principles and objectives, public communication protocol and terms of negotiation.

11. Assumption that a consensus-based model is the only way to conduct discussions and decision-making in public advisory groups.

Consensus-based environmental policymaking gained popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s and has been applied in many contexts. However, academic studies have revealed that consensus-based models serve to legitimize the continuity and stability of the status quo, helping to maintain the power of those interests that had it to begin with.

Those of us who have been on wolf public advisory groups have witnessed this phenomenon. Consensus models also result in situations where one dissenting group, even an individual, can veto any decision.

Academics advise that in place of consensus models, public advisory groups should rely upon an argument-analysis based approach. This approach examines whether desired or presupposed conclusions are founded on valid premises, while better achieving conservation goals by facilitating reform.

12. Setting of wolf population caps, zones and compromises on distribution and recovery objectives.

In wolf-planning processes, wolf opponents or agencies often work to artificially control and suppress wolf numbers, distribution, or both. This can be in the form of setting population caps or dividing the state into wolf zones/no wolf zones.

In either case, the state then sanctions wolf killing via hunting and trapping seasons to keep wolf numbers from exceeding the cap and to prevent wolves from achieving natural distribution across the landscape. Another constraint on wolves occurs if public advisory groups make compromises on wolf numbers and distribution, such as agreeing to low recovery objectives in exchange for not having limits on distribution.

Advocates will need to argue against caps, zones and low population goals, while arguing for wolf population growth and distribution to achieve ecologically functioning populations.