

USGS Role in Science with DOI Bureaus

Sponsors: Sue Haseltine, USGS and Dan Ashe, FWS

The U.S. Geological Survey has historically collaborated with the other DOI bureaus for many years in the earth sciences. With the merger of the National Biological Service and elements from the Bureau of Mines into the U.S. Geological Survey in FY1996, USGS added the capability for producing research in the biological sciences. Throughout its history, USGS has provided much science to DOI bureaus from all its disciplines and regions; the bureau has emphasized integrating science capabilities on the landscape and building closer relationships at local, regional, and national levels with DOI bureaus and with other partners and customers. It has continued its commitments to nationally significant science issues such as global climate change, availability of energy and water resources, national environmental monitoring approaches, and hazard mitigation.

The balance between continued attention to national issues, other priority customers, and DOI support has been a difficult challenge. Given current budget realities, a good case can be made that USGS cannot address all these needs adequately into the future. It therefore needs to do some strategic analysis concerning its commitment to each of these areas over the next decade. This exercise will look strategically at collaboration, information delivery, and science impact with other DOI agencies by answering the following questions:

1. What science capabilities make sense to devote to DOI bureaus? How much do DOI science needs overlap with the science needs of other customers?
2. How do we understand and prioritize the needs of DOI, and then gain consensus regarding how USGS will address those priorities and over what timeframe?
3. How do we define and measure the relevancy of our science to the mission of resource management bureaus?
4. How can we communicate and coordinate most effectively with the resource management agencies?
5. What are the most effective means of planning and delivering our science in a responsive and timely way while still assuring quality? Does the goal of “relevancy” conflict with the goal of quality?
6. Are there commitments for science support to DOI bureaus that USGS should make?

The perspectives of two top managers from FWS and NPS are attached for your information.

Attachment 1 – Comments from Mike Soukup, NPS

Brief Observations for Sue Haseltine:

USGS—the DOI Science Agency

This is a problematic phrase since it claims such a broad domain that it confuses Congress into thinking that other DOI agencies have no legitimate science needs. The management of 84 M acres of lands in all conditions while encouraging a quarter billion visits each year is a huge intellectual, hopefully scientific-based endeavor, reaching far beyond the research arena, and the research arenas that USGS has interest and capabilities in. DOI agencies need to be free to develop and pursue all kinds of science capabilities to meet their missions. USGS is an important provider of many excellent services but shouldn't claim or aspire to be the whole package. This just frustrates everyone and doesn't allow us the flexibility to tap the wide spectrum of services we need.

Commitments Implied

It would require that USGS should devote all its discretionary funding to support of and subject areas and cover all the subject areas necessary to manage public lands. This probably will never be possible, and isn't necessary if DOI agencies are free to develop a web of partnerships that are advantageous across the spectrum of needs. USGS is a valuable part of that web but doesn't need to lobby for the whole responsibility.

Collaboration

Currently it is fitful and ineffective. Can processes be improved to impact the allocation of current discretionary funding within USGS to focus them on DOI lands? Can we jointly develop new initiatives and jointly decide where reductions occur? Real time continuous dialog rather than annual or biannual large gatherings might be a better approach. Can this group design processes that improve dialog and group decision-making?

When positions that provide site fidelity within parks are lapsed, removed from parks, or lost, how do we influence those decisions?

Similarly, what does USGS see as the barriers for more work in National Parks. We are trying to make parks more science focused and receptive. What would make us a better partner?

Information delivery

We need everything from peer reviewed journal articles to impact statement analyses, interpretive brochures, testimony and depositions. There are heroic examples of USGS involvement at all these levels as well as examples of not wanting to get involved in “issues.” How can USGS be counted on to be there consistently for the full spectrum of science support?

Science and Resource Management Interaction

Parks need site specific, long-term presence and an accumulating institutional understanding of the complex systems they manage. How can USGS play an effective role beyond individual projects?

What we like and don't like

Some things no one can do as well as USGS; we endorse, encourage, support, testify on behalf of those programs. Since our science needs are broader than what USGS can provide we depend on a web of partners and inhouse science trained resource management programs as well as partnerships with academe and NGOs. Yet some in BRD and its supporters actively campaign and lobby against “undermining” USGS by our developing internal or external science support systems needed to fulfill our mission. We know this is not the official USGS policy, but it happens and is very destructive to good relationships, wastes time, and we don't like it.

We also would prefer more continuous dialog over priorities and initiatives not the large annual or less conference kinds of opportunities to share priorities. We need more close involvement kinds of processes.

Relationships between NPS and USGS

Of course they vary over time and among individuals. They are certainly not as good as they must be for long term success. How can positive relationships and processes be institutionalized? Since so much depends on personal relationships we suspect that many of the current successes will be lost when those who know NPS the best are being lost to retirement, etc. How can this loss be lessened over time?

Please accept my compliments for holding such sessions considering these important questions. My apologies also for the “quick before catching a plane” response. Furthermore, as one of our more colorful Regional Director's used to say “please don't confuse my candor with disaffection...” I do appreciate USGS efforts and the many USGS scientists that have supported or adopted the National Park Service in its huge scientific challenge in managing national parks in the modern landscape. Thanks for the opportunity to comment. MAS

The DOI Science Agency

This term presents some challenges. First, it creates at least the impression that USGS is responsible for science within the entire Department of the Interior. I think that is inaccurate and unrealistic. I think all other agencies within DOI currently have some capacity to do science. At least one of them, the FWS, still considers itself a scientific, or at least a scientifically-based, organization. I also do not think that USGS is equipped or funded to live up to that expectation. USGS cannot fulfill all of the science needs for all of the DOI bureaus. Maybe the correct concept is DOI's Science Support Agency. If you can provide effective scientific support to all of the bureaus -- and that is a big bite to chew -- then you will have accomplished much. That concept, however, allows for the necessary conclusion that the DOI bureaus must each have some independent capacity to understand, develop, analyze, apply and communicate scientific information. That capacity needs to be developed to fit the needs and structure of each bureau, and to reflect the abilities of the USGS to provide support. It cannot duplicate or supplant USGS science support. It must be complementary and additive. That will require a process of cooperative design and planning that does not currently exist.

Implied Commitments

Continuing on the discussion above, I think the term "DOI Science Agency" implies a level of financial commitment that does not exist and is not likely to develop in the absence of some large political shift. I think by pursuing a commonly defined scientific agenda, the DOI bureaus can work together to achieve a larger level of support overall. Again, that requires a level of communication and cooperation that does not currently exist.

It also implies a culture of "customer service" that I do not think is currently pervasive within the USGS.

Types of Collaboration

If I could tell you what types of collaboration would be effective, I'd earn my salary for several years. I know what has been done in the past has been inconsistent and ineffective. I think the most important thing is for the DOI bureaus to express clear and realistic priorities, and I'm not sure that has happened in the past. For the FWS, I'm certain it has not. USGS needs to be serious about addressing those priorities (i.e., being responsive). I think the challenge is for us to find ways to clearly identify and communicate priorities, and for the USGS to show how it is addressing those priorities.

Delivery Modes

The most consistent need I hear from Service employees is for "technical assistance". I'm not sure that everyone means the same thing when they use that term, and we need to clarify what the expectations are for technical assistance. Many people seem to be looking for relatively quick gratification. They want to be able to call or email someone with a question and get a quick response; they want verification or validation of their scientific assessment. Oftentimes our biologists are "out there" relatively isolated at a field station, and they are looking for help that is fairly simple. This also reinforces the notion of a scientific support agency.

Interaction

We need to strengthen and build relationships at all levels. There need to be direct lines of communication from FWS field stations (refuges, ecological services offices, hatcheries, etc) to USGS Centers and offices. It is at this level that you will get the clearest and most direct expression of need. However, that need will be overwhelming and you will not be able to accommodate all of it. Therefore, there must be better interaction and understanding at the executive level, so that you have a clearer sense of overall Service priorities. I think the key executive officials in both our organizations are the Regional Directors and they

must engage in greater dialogue and understanding. They are in position to articulate and address priorities.

Likes and Dislikes

We dislike not having our own research program; but we're getting over that, and we're willing to build a new relationship with the USGS. We like technical assistance, but we don't get enough of it. We like the SSP and rapid response funds, but there aren't enough of them. We like people like Mike Runge, but we need more them. We don't like to pay overhead costs, but we like to charge them, so we can't really criticize you too much for that.

Relationships

There are many examples of excellent relationships and incredible work between our agencies. However, those relationships and that work have been overshadowed by the political tension that has dominated the relationship at management and executive levels of the organizations over the past 10 years. We must get past that, and I think we are well on our way. We need to identify and celebrate successful and cooperative work between the agencies, and we need to find ways to do that at the Director, Assistant Director and Regional Director levels.

We must support each other, and work together to build an external constituency for science in support of natural resource management. Our Directors should visit Capitol Hill together. Our Regional Directors should host congressional delegations together. Assistant Directors should do joint briefings to the Department, OMB and Congress.

The FWS must develop a fuller understanding of the entire USGS and the scientific capability it represents. We cannot always lean on the Biological Discipline, although that will likely always be "home base" for the FWS within USGS. We need ways to learn more about the tools and information that we can access through the other USGS disciplines. I guess that gets back to that communication thing.

USGS must embrace, more fully and consistently, a culture of customer service.