



Penning a New Name: JFFI or Joint Fact Finding Institutions

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April 03, 2018

In this era of divisive politics, polarized facts, and “fake news,” the need for mediating institutions around facts and science has become increasingly important. The traditional ways of generating information in stovepipes – via the academy, industry, government, or NGOs – are not meeting the three-pronged test of useable science and technical studies: credible, legitimate, and salient.

Recently, we have been working to figure out how institutions that create and translate science can be more effective and enduring by design. For example, across the state of Pennsylvania, industry, government, NGOs, communities, and academics are trying to come to terms with the cumulative impacts of the Marcellus shale gas development. Yet, there is little state-wide coordinated data gathering, management, analysis, and dissemination among universities, let alone among agencies and industry. In another example, the Forest Service has supported a regional research cooperative for over 15 years: the Northeastern States Research Cooperative (NSRC), which provides grants to study such issues ranging from value-added wood products to invasive species. But with federal funds dwindling and stakeholders demanding more useable research, the cooperative is searching for a new way of generating data to inform the economic and environmental future of the region. More and more, we are seeing the need for formal structures to effectively advance what we call joint fact finding or JFF.

JFF is a process of engaging multiple stakeholders in gathering and interpreting data to inform decision-making. JFF offers decision-makers and stakeholders an opportunity to participate in determining how uncertainty, data gaps, and judgment calls will be handled. Typically, JFF is done on a case-by-case basis when it fits a specific project; for example, an environmental assessment or a joint study around a problem such as riparian buffers and water quality in coastal plains. When the project has a clear focus, a discrete timeframe, and localized geographic context, JFF works well.

But many circumstances, like the Marcellus Shale and the Northern Forest cases, raise multiple questions, have broad geographic scopes, and have needs that span years or even decades. In these cases, just one entity, one company, or one project cannot answer (nor fully fund) the scope or cumulative scale of questions raised across sites, projects, and regions. In these situations, JFF has to be “institutionalized” to be effective. Some circumstances and complex problems need not just singular processes, but ongoing organizations or “mediating” institutions that can generate extensive information over time that is *salient* to the issues at hand, *credible* in the eyes of peer review and good science, and *legitimate* in the eyes of diverse and often conflicting stakeholder groups. These platforms can offer a means to build relationships, establish and connect networks, think more holistically and systemically, and bridge the science and society divide.

We’ve had the opportunity to work on a number of complex projects where a more formalized joint fact finding entity – that we will dub JFFI for short – has been formed to advance JFF over an extended time period with numerous research questions and studies. One example is the Bats and Wind Energy Cooperative (BWEC). BWEC is an entity comprised of experts from government agencies, private industry, academic institutions, and NGOs who cooperate to develop and disseminate solutions to reduce, to the greatest extent practicable, mortality of bats at wind energy facilities. Its primary members include representatives from a federal laboratory (National Energy Resource Laboratory); several federal agencies including the Department of Energy, the U.S. Geological Survey, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; a bat conservation nonprofit (Bats Conservation International); state wildlife agencies (Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies); and a wind energy industry association (American Wind Energy Association). They set a research agenda in three- to five- year increments, let RFPs, select proposals, and receive and review the numerous studies that are conducted.

BWEC and institutions like it share some key design principles. These design principles include:

- Some kind of multi-stakeholder approach that includes government agencies, business interests, and public interest groups such as environmental or public health nonprofits;
- A trusted coordinating entity, be that an existing organization or a new nonprofit;
- An oversight group of some kind across stakeholders that determines strategy, guides the coordinator, and helps set the overall research agenda;
- A scientific or technical committee that provides important peer review of proposals and products;
- A conflict of interest policy that ensures integrity;
- A process for setting research agendas, issuing RFPs, evaluating, selecting and overseeing projects, and reviewing final products;
- An outreach and dissemination effort to ensure the work is widely shared and used; and
- A business plan that ensures ongoing financial support for both the research and the structure of the institution or JFFI.

As we have witnessed the effectiveness of entities like BWEC, we have become interested in deepening our understanding of how to stand up, fund, and maintain JFFIs. We want to learn about efforts in the U.S. and abroad that have been successful over time to generate best practices that will help these efforts succeed. We invite you to tell us your stories about JFFIs and share entities that play this role, at least to some degree, across a host of issues and problems. Reach out and connect with us -- it’s the future of facts at stake!

SHARE



Get in Touch

We are interested in hearing about your work and consensus building challenges. Send us a message and we will be in touch.