Managing Water through Innovative Collaboration

An Interview with Lynn Scarlett

RESOURCES: Lynn, can you talk a little bit about some of the water challenges we’re facing in the United States and how that translates into governance challenges?

SCARLETT: We’ve always had water challenges. There’s an old saying in the West that whiskey’s for drinking, and water’s for war. But these challenges are accelerating and expanding. For example, think of the Gulf of Mexico, where we have big hypoxia problems. Contaminants come down through the Mississippi River watershed system and are offloaded into the Gulf, essentially creating a dead zone.

Or think about the Colorado River and the challenges of figuring out how to make sure that water stretches to meet the agricultural and community needs of that area. These are problems of big systems. They’re no longer local problems of a single stream. They are interconnected problems that cross jurisdictional boundaries and involve the public sector, private sector, and many different participants. They demand a different kind of thinking about how to manage water issues and challenges.

RESOURCES: How do we address some of these challenges? Do you believe that high-level institutional overhauls are the answer?

SCARLETT: On the one hand, large institutions are important. The law for the Colorado River dates back 100 years and sets the stage for seven states to work together with the secretary of the interior to manage that system. But many of the challenges we face with water vary in their scope and scale.

That means we need different institutional structures. Many of them are what I call “organically emergent”—that is, starting from the ground up and fitted to the circumstance. For example, addressing the challenges of hypoxia along the Gulf Coast is very different from addressing storm water issues in a city or large metropolitan area. We need different institutional structures and network governance—networks of public and private entities sharing authority and working together to address these challenges.
RESOURCES: Can you give a few examples of successful network governance?

SCARLETT: I always like to say that conservation and resource management is a journey, not a destination. One is never at a final point. But let me give you a couple examples. The Platte River system that runs across three states (Colorado, Wyoming, and Nebraska) has endangered species problems. There’s a lot of agricultural use of water, power production that utilizes water, and the potential introduction of new crops for biofuel and other forms of energy.

The Fish and Wildlife Service, pursuant to requirements under the Endangered Species Act, began working in the area with the three states and the local entities to try to address endangered species problems. There was a lot of tension, as you can imagine. Everybody wants to hold tight to their water. But what the Fish and Wildlife Service did, rather than just simply put itself in charge, was to work with those communities to develop a network governance model.

They have formed a separate entity that serves as the convener and provides a neutral space for these three states, local entities, and the private sector to come together and work to allocate the water to meet species’ needs, agricultural needs, and so forth. So it’s a network governance model that is shared governance.

There’s also the Klamath River basin. California has been very much a participant in discussions over Klamath. A decade or so ago, drought brought major challenges. There was an opinion to require withholding of some of the water from the agricultural sector. A huge conflict surfaced. However, out of that came an agreement among 50-plus participants to conserve some land that could store water, but also to reexamine the dams in the area to improve fish passage. It’s a prelude to what could be a network governance model. But, again, the proof of the pudding is in the tasting. We’re not there yet.