

The Middle Rio Grande Futures Project

15th Annual Water Assembly, November 5, 2011

Background Remarks – John Brown

Purpose

The Futures Project was born in the fall of 2009, five years after the MRGWP had been accepted by the ISC and “endorsed” by all the MRCOG local governments. It was conceived in frustration felt by many members of the Assembly’s board, that the work that had gone into producing the Plan was going unused.

Sources of that frustration:

- The Plan contained important info about current conditions (including critical supply and demand imbalance) and likely future impacts, and spelled out concrete recommendations for addressing these issues, but many of the recommendations were either ignored or only paid lip service by water management agencies.
- Despite existence of WRB, there was little region-wide work among these agencies to develop implementation strategies, or even to set regional targets that water managers and citizens could use to monitor and measure how adequately our imbalance was being addressed.
- The state lacks water management institutions capable of turning the Plan into a set of policy designs that encourage region-wide coordination of efforts to implement the Plan.
- Finally, the physical circumstances under which the Plan was developed (or at least our understanding of those realities) had changed, and there are scant resources available for updating the Plan to take account of those changes.

Jack will speak about what scenario planning is and isn’t. But I want to say at the outset that the Futures Project is not about updating or redoing the MRG Water Plan. Nor is it about imagining an ideal state of affairs that we ought to work toward. It’s about something more fundamental: taking account of critical uncertainties in the complex social-ecological system that sustains us, to be more ready as individuals and a society to meet the challenges we know are ahead.

At the risk of seeming grandiose, this exercise is not about planning, but about cognitive training: enlarging our thinking to prepare ourselves for “the great task remaining before us.” “Us” is not simply the few participants in the Water Assembly, but, the community at- large – including political and business leaders, students and teachers, and citizens – who, we hope, will engage in conversations about the scenarios begun here, and both deepen and make more salient the discourse affecting not just water policy, but as Kevin has said, how we live our lives.

Status

So where has The Futures Project been, and where are we now?

The project has evolved as both limits and opportunities for resources and partnerships have presented themselves. Though we had in mind from the start the Mont Fleur scenario process used in South Africa – Jack may discuss that(?) – we lacked the resources to develop alternative narratives. So, in Phase I we focused on just one “story” – what “Business as Usual” might look like in 15 years. That baseline (*status quo*) scenario – was completed with its presentation last year at the 14th AWA. The scenario-building team for this phase was an interdisciplinary “expert panel” that met several times during the first six months of 2010, and whose findings were woven into a compelling narrative (The Story) by Lisa Robert.

So now we find ourselves in Phase II, thanks to some folks Kevin has introduced to you. Here we are continuing the scenario work begun in phase I, through a facilitated process of brainstorming, in four groups, alternative futures in counterpoint to that envisioned in the “Business as Usual” story. Kevin has done a good job of recruiting a broad range of participants for this Assembly, including sectors that have not recently been well represented, and Lucy and Jack have put a lot of effort in thinking through how the process can best be facilitated to produce at least outline summaries of four scenarios about alternative futures.

Plans

Depending on how much we’re able to accomplish today – whether we end up with skeletal outlines or fully fleshed-out “stories” – there may be a little or a lot more work to be done before they’re “ready for prime time” – that is, to begin using them in public dialogue. In addition to each one telling a compelling story, a critical component is that each of them be plausible; that is, logically consistent and supported by the antecedent facts (e.g., given A and B, C is one likely outcome.)

One possible direction for Phase III is to present the scenarios for discussion at a “New Mexico Town Hall.” We have been exploring this idea with officials of New Mexico First, who have used scenario planning in an earlier Town Hall, and who first pointed us to Jack Jekowski, who has given us valuable help in thinking through how a scenario process actually works. A Town Hall might involve extending our area of concern (though not the scenarios themselves) to the state as a whole, and perhaps enlisting the NM Water Dialogue and the Utton Center as partners. A research committee (like the expert team we brought together in Phase I) could be formed to assemble the Background Report for a Town Hall, which would consist of the baseline story (together with the experts’ reports that provided an evidentiary basis for that scenario) and fully developed stories based on the work you do today

In Phase IV the project could move from shared understandings about possible futures to action. Town Hall-style “implementation teams” might be set up on a Water Planning Region scale to consider what actions might be needed or desirable (at that level or on a watershed or even statewide basis) to secure a better future.

These are all possibilities – like scenario thinking itself – and not a blueprint for what we must do. I’m not making any predictions! Thank you.