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Farmer perspectives on collaborative approaches to governance for water

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ABSTRACT

Collective approaches are being used in rural areas in the western world to deal with a host of environmental problems. Agri-environmental measures designed to reduce environmental impacts at the farm scale are one common example. Also increasingly important are collaborative approaches to governance that engage diverse mixes of state and non-state actors, including farmers. Outcomes from these processes can place new costs and restrictions on farmers. At the same time, because of the extensive nature of agriculture, the success or failure of these processes can depend strongly on the extent to which farmers are willing participants. This paper explores the perspectives of farmers on collaborative processes for addressing water quality and quantity problems in Canada. Using a policy Delphi survey of 25 Canadian farmers who had experience with various kinds of collaborative processes, we reveal benefits and challenges for individual farmers, and for the agriculture sector as a whole. Study participants explicitly viewed the collaborative processes in which they had participated as a way to reduce the risk of government intervention and regulation. They also saw collaboration as an important way to educate other, non-farming participants about agriculture. Actor-specific insights such as the ones revealed through this work are needed to ensure the success of collaborative governance.

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1. Introduction

Agriculture's importance for national and regional economies, and for food security, is well understood. However, farming is also critical in most countries for a host of other reasons. Due to its extensive nature, agriculture has transformed, and often defined, rural landscapes (Primdahl et al., 2013). These landscapes can be a source of ecosystem services on which rural and urban populations rely (Raudsepp-Hearne et al., 2010). Social benefits also exist. In many parts of the world, even in developed economies, farming still provides the economic and social foundation of many rural communities (Joseph et al., 2008). Less positively, agricultural practices can negatively affect air quality, water quality and habitat (FAO, 2012). For instance, runoff from farm fields and manure storage facilities can be a major source of pathogens and nutrients that contaminate surface water and groundwater (Ongley, 1996). These pollutants pose risks not only to people living in the countryside, but also to residents of urban communities that depend on water that is sourced in rural areas.

Reflecting widespread concerns about the impacts of their practices, farmers increasingly are expected to meet more stringent requirements for environmental quality (Montpetit, 2002; Godfray et al., 2010). Some of the negative environmental impacts of agricultural production can be addressed on-farm through the use of improved practices and technologies for tillage, pest management, nutrient management and waste disposal (OECD, 2008). Thus, farm-scale agri-environmental schemes are growing in importance around the world (McKenzie et al., 2013). These kinds of measures are seen as necessary for achieving health and environmental objectives in rural areas, but they may be insufficient on their own. Agriculture often takes place alongside other rural industries, or adjacent to urban areas that also place considerable pressure on environmental resources (Primdahl et al., 2013). This means that collective action on the part of farm and non-farm actors may be required (Blackstock et al., 2010; Prager, 2015). Achieving environmental and health objectives in contexts where collective action is needed raises questions of *governance*.

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Contemporary environmental governance in many western countries involves a wide range of approaches for making decisions and taking actions to address societal environmental objectives. Traditional top-down, state-controlled regulatory approaches are being supplemented, and occasionally replaced, with market mechanisms, voluntary standards, multi-actor collaborative processes – and hybrids of all of these (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006; Newell et al., 2012). Of particular concern in this paper are multi-actor collaborative approaches to addressing environmental problems that are becoming commonplace in many countries. In these processes, which are often organized around catchments (or "watersheds" as they are known in North America), farmers engage with diverse actors such as government officials (from local to national agencies), other resource users, representatives of environmental non-government organizations, and urbanites who have moved to the countryside (Margerum, 2008).

Farming, even when conducted according to accepted practices, is often viewed as the source of many of the environmental problems that need to be addressed in rural areas (Ferreyra et al., 2008). Thus, farmers may find it extremely difficult to avoid participating in collaborative processes designed to address environmental concerns in rural areas. Potential outcomes from collaborative processes designed to resolve catchment-scale environmental problems can include additional costs for individual farmers, and even restrictions on how and where agriculture can be practiced (Fish et al., 2010). At the same time, given the environmental, social and economic significance of agriculture in rural areas (Campbell et al., 2011), willing involvement of farmers in cooperative or collaborative processes may be essential to the success of these processes. Thus, it is vital to understand farmer motivations related to collaborative approaches to governance in specific places, and, simultaneously, to be aware of the implications for collective processes of farmer participation or non-participation (Stock et al., 2014; Taylor and Van Grieken, 2015).

A robust literature examining farmer motivations for participating in individual, farm-scale agri-environmental schemes exists. This body of scholarship builds on recognition that farmers cannot be treated as a "coherent attitudinal group" (Wilson, 1996, 115). Studies in this literature account for considerations such as age, tenure, education, values, local institutions and other key drivers (e.g., Defrancesco et al., 2008; Emery and Franks, 2012; Van Herzele et al., 2013; Taylor and Van Grieken, 2015). In contrast, understanding of the motivations for farmer participation in collaborative approaches to governance is less well developed. Collaboration researchers recognize that the actors who engage with each other in collaborative processes bring different perspectives, assumptions and knowledge (Van Buuren, 2009; Fish et al., 2010). However, the distinctive perspectives of farmers as a sector are not well represented in the collaboration literature (Koontz, 2003; Blackstock et al., 2010). Furthermore, while insights from the rich literature that explores individual motivations for participation in farm-scale agri-environmental schemes may well be relevant, it is not appropriate to assume that drivers from that setting translate seamlessly to the context of farmer participation in multi-actor collaborative governance processes.

This paper addresses this gap by exploring issues that arise from farmer participation in collaborative processes for addressing water problems in Canada. Using a policy Delphi survey of Canadian farmers who had participated in collaborative processes, we reveal benefits and challenges for individual producers and for the sector as a whole. Canada's experiences with collaborative approaches to governance for water – while strongly reflective of its domestic political, environmental and socio-economic contexts – are broadly consistent with international experiences in countries that have adopted a similar approach to natural resource management, such as Europe (Newig and Fritsch, 2009), Australia (Lockwood et al., 2009), and North America (Ansell and Gash, 2007). Thus, insights from the study may be broadly relevant to other places where multi-actor collaborative processes are used in rural areas to address shared environmental problems.

2. Collaborative approaches to environmental problem solving in rural areas

Environmental governance around the world is becoming increasingly diverse and polycentric (Compagnon et al., 2012). Drivers of this trend are numerous, and include perceived and real decreases in the capacity of the state, a rescaling of governance, and demands for greater levels of citizen engagement. One outcome is that multi-actor, collaborative approaches to dealing with environmental problems are becoming commonplace around the world (Holley et al., 2012). The roles these collaborative approaches play in environmental governance, and the actors involved, vary enormously depending on context and local circumstances (Ansell and Gash, 2007). In some cases collaborative organizations are established through government initiative, and are directed or guided by government agencies. For example, in England and Wales, the agendas of statutory catchment management groups such as Water Framework River Basin Liaison Panels are strongly influenced by the UK Environment Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Cook et al., 2011). In other cases collaborative groups form largely or entirely through private initiative, with little or no government involvement beyond providing technical support. To illustrate, in Oregon, in the United States, over 90 voluntary community-based councils play important roles in water management at the local scale (Parker et al., 2010). The two examples noted here are typical in that they involve diverse mixes of public and private actors, and are organized around catchments. However, quite different models also exist. For example, "collaboration" in environmental governance also occurs through strategic alliances between firms, or between firms and non-government organizations, governments and universities (Albino et al., 2012).

Despite the well-understood individualistic tendencies of farmers (Stock et al., 2014; Emery, 2015), cooperation and collaboration within the agriculture sector towards shared goals is a common and longstanding practice (Primdahl et al., 2013). In this paper, our specific concern is for collaborations that bring together farmers and other non-farming actors with the goal of making decisions and taking actions in governance processes that rely heavily on deliberation. Enormous diversity exists not only in real-world examples of these collaborative processes, but also in the theoretical lenses that are brought to bear by scholars who study them. Nonetheless, common features of real world collaborative processes can be seen that transcend disciplinary orientations (e.g., Innes and Booher, 2010; Margerum, 2011). Many of these processes share some or all of the following characteristics: involvement of multiple actors (state and non-state); collective decision making based on deliberation and consensus; long-term relationships; a commitment to sharing knowledge and resources, and a focus on joint action towards shared goals (Ansell and Gash, 2007; Fish et al., 2010; Holley et al., 2012). In the context of collaborations that focus on water issues, boundaries based on catchments, river basins or other hydrologic features (e.g., aquifers, river deltas) are often used to define the mandate or jurisdiction of these organizations (Sabatier et al., 2005; Margerum, 2008; Cook et al., 2011).

Collaborative processes bring a set of potential challenges and benefits that are different from governance approaches that rely on the traditional powers of the state, or on market mechanisms. Thus, growing use of collaborative processes for addressing environmental problems at the local scale has major implications not only

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