

The Poudre Runs Through It:

Northern Colorado's Water Future



Poudre Runs Through It: Public Dialogue Report

Martín Carcasson and Leah Sprain
Colorado State University
Center for Public Deliberation

Summer 2012

Questions and comments concerning this report
should be addressed to Martín Carcasson at mcarcas@colostate.edu

Introduction

The CSU Water Institute, UniverCity Connections, the Community Foundation of Northern Colorado, and the CSU Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) hosted two public dialogues as part of *The Poudre Runs Through It: Northern Colorado's Water Future* project during the spring of 2011. This series was designed to develop a better-informed and more engaged community on the complex topic of water in Northern Colorado. An initial kickoff event on February 3rd at the Larimer County Courthouse included a series of speakers discussing why the river was important to them, followed by a public comment period. At this kickoff event, open-ended surveys asked attendees to answer prompts about their concerns, values, questions, and comments about the river. These perspectives informed the design of the rest of the series. Three nights of public lectures followed, featuring speakers from a wide variety of organizations speaking on the political, economic, ecological, and agricultural issues related to water in Northern Colorado.¹ The project culminated in two public dialogue sessions on April 11th and 16th facilitated by CPD student associates. During those dialogues, participants were seated at round tables of 8, with a facilitator and a notetaker present. Experts were also available in the room to answer technical questions during one of the sessions.

This report analyzes the data collected during the public dialogues, including notes of the table discussions taken by CPD students, worksheets completed by participants during the process and surveys taken at the end, and quantitative data captured through wireless keypads. The raw data collected at the event has already been made available to the public on The Poudre Runs Through It web page (hosted on www.univercityconnections.org). We posted this information so that the public has full access to all of the information and perspectives recorded at the event. This report interprets this information to suggest ways that the community conversation can be strengthened moving forward.

This report does not represent the public opinion of citizens of Fort Collins. The people who participated in these forums are not representative of Northern Colorado citizens nor do they necessarily represent all of the key stakeholders of this issue. As a result, this report does not aim to suggest which approach to meeting our future water needs is the best one—in fact, many participants acknowledged that a range of approaches will need to be combined in the future.

Instead, this report provides insights into how a particular group of community members discussed this difficult issue when placed into a specific deliberative environment that included background material framed to be unbiased, ground

¹ A website has been established on the Northern Colorado Community Foundation webpage to house all the documents from the series, as well as links to videos of all the presenters: <http://www.univercityconnections.org/page/46/title/The%20Poudre%20Runs%20Through%20It/>

rules to spark productive conversation, and trained facilitators to guide the process.

The report describes these discussions and makes suggestions for how these public dialogues might inform future community conversations on water. The next section explains the public dialogue process, including how the dialogue was framed during the event itself. The methods section briefly explains the procedures used to analyze and interpret the data collected at the public events. The following descriptive analysis section describes the findings from each section of the event with particular focus on direct quotes from participants to illustrate how they talked and wrote during the event. Finally, the discussion makes suggestions for how to improve future community conversations about water. This section builds on the descriptive analysis to identify (1) potential areas of common ground, (2) value tensions that deserve future conversation, (3) barriers that need to be addressed in able to move forward, and (4) lessons learned from this project.

Explanation of the process

The two public dialogue sessions followed the same format, and this report combines the data from the two events. The sessions started with a short overview of the goals of the event by CPD Director Martín Carcasson. There were three primary goals for the discussions: (1) to increase public understanding of the issue by working through it together, (2) to spark individual action, and (3) to increase our shared understanding of how the public engages this issue.

Meeting future water needs in Northern Colorado was presented as a wicked problem, a problem that defies technical solutions due to uncertainty, value dilemmas, and a dynamic system with multiple impacts. Thus, it is unlikely that there will ever be a single solution for meeting future water needs. Instead, wicked problems require adaptive management that can work through the value dilemmas and make tough choices.² This event was designed to help build capacity for the public to engage in this adaptive management since experts alone cannot determine a technical solution to wicked problems.

Framing issues as a wicked problem is also a way to move away from more polarized views of the issue that assume one perspective has noble values and others are flawed or corrupt. Such polarized viewpoints unfortunately often dominate discussions of political issues. Recognizing an issue as a wicked problem helps place more focus on negotiating the difficult middle ground between opposing values rather than relying on a zero-sum

² Wicked problems was first introduced in Horst Rittel & Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a general theory of planning," *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973), 155-169. Additional sources include Valerie A. Brown, John A. Harris and Jacqueline Y. Russell, eds. *Tackling wicked problems through the transdisciplinary imagination* (London ; Earthscan, 2010) and Jeff Conklin, *Dialogue mapping: Building shared understanding of wicked problems* (Chichester, England: Wiley, 2006).

negotiation. The dialogues were designed to facilitate discussions that recognized the complexity of the issue and maintained multiple legitimate points of view.

For the public to engage in decision-making about water as a wicked problem, they must work toward public judgment. Carcasson briefly introduced Daniel Yankelovich's work on coming to public judgment that shows a three part model for public judgment: consciousness raising, working through, and resolution.³ The first stage occurs when people are exposed to a new topic and begin to form initial opinions. Early in the second stage people tend to rely on simplistic views such as wishful thinking, devil figures, or placing blame, but, ideally, they eventually realize the tough choices involved in most difficult issues and begin to weigh their options more carefully. The third stage is where they become advocates for particular points of view and seek to convince others to share that perspective. Currently, there are many resources available to support the consciousness raising and resolution stages (the internet works very well for both), but many communities do not have adequate resources for working through tough issues—for moving beyond wishful thinking and demonizing the opposition to really weigh choices. Working through requires productive interaction with people from multiple perspectives, which simply doesn't occur naturally very often. As a result, too often advocates reach stage three without properly working through the issue and the quality of public discourse suffers. Again, this session was designed as a unique opportunity for the Fort Collins community to come together to work through how we might meet future water needs.

The process started by using the wireless keypads to collect demographic data and key values related to water. (The raw results of this process are on the series web site). In particular, participants were asked to share their values about the river and then rank one value as most important. This demonstrated both common values shared by many participants and the difficulty of making decisions when people may rank the most important value quite differently, especially when the values under consideration inherently compete with each other.

The forum used a National Issues Forum format,⁴ which uses an impartial document (a placemat) that lays out common arguments for and against different approaches. This placemat was developed by the CSU Water Institute and Center for Public Deliberation. A rough draft was proposed as part of a graduate course on Water Conflict at CSU during the fall 2010 semester. This draft was revised and piloted. Before the public events, comments on the placemat were solicited from community partners (Save the Poudre, NISP, and the

³ Yankelovich and Friedman, *Toward Wiser Public Judgment* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2010).

⁴ For more information on the National Issues Forum model, visit www.nifi.org.

City of Fort Collins) to help ensure that this framing was not biased⁵ toward a particular view or presented bad information. Further revisions were made based on comments from community partners. This placemat was made publically available before the dialogues and remains on the project web site (see footnote 1).

The placemat outlined four approaches to how we might meet future water needs in Northern Colorado:

- (A) Focus on Addressing Growth
- (B) Focus on Urban Conservation
- (C) Focus on Storage Projects
- (D) Focus on Agriculture Conservation and Transfers

These approaches were not necessarily mutually exclusive. But in order to have a full conversation, the facilitator had the group discuss each approach separately. The discussion of each approach focused on what people liked and did not like about that approach, focusing on appreciations, concerns, and tradeoffs. During the facilitated conversation, participants were encouraged to raise questions, disagree with each other, and suggest alternative ways of thinking. At the end of each discussion about a particular approach, individuals wrote down what they felt was the strongest argument in favor of the approach and the strongest argument against it (these written comments were subsequently typed up and are available on the series web site). By identifying an argument for and against an approach, participants were encouraged to really work through the issues, acknowledging the strengths of approaches they might not have liked before and the weaknesses of approaches that they would endorse. After discussing all four approaches separately, the group completed reflections that considered the issue as a whole by answering broad discussion questions and completing individual surveys. A final survey completed at the end of the process asked participants to reflect on their values, identify common ground, pose questions, ask for information, identify tradeoffs, and suggest additional information that should be considered. Participants were also asked to evaluate the discussion and facilitators, and suggest next steps for the series on water.

Methods

Since the raw data from the event was posted publically after the event, the purpose of this document is to synthesize this data and suggest how it can be used to inform future events and improve future conversations about water in Northern Colorado. With these goals in

⁵ We realize that it is impossible to have a completely unbiased framing. The goal of the project was to provide a clear, fair framing that allowed people from multiple perspectives to engage the issue in a more productive way.

mind, we started with descriptive analysis that highlights key themes during the discussion. Since we are interested in improving the conversation not simply identifying which approach was most popular, our analysis focuses on *how* people made arguments about water more than which approach they supported or questioned.

To analyze the key themes from the approaches, we read the table notes and listened to audio recordings of the discussions to inductively create thematic coding, and then coded the written responses to the strongest argument in favor of an approach and the greatest concern about it. Between the two events we collected 100 written comments sheets with arguments about the approaches.⁶ We rarely use specific numbers to describe how often people made comments; instead, we focus on comparison to overall trends. Most of the sections discuss the most frequent themes, with supporting sub-themes, and work down to less frequent but still significant topics.

Descriptive analysis

Keypad polling. At the beginning of both meetings, participants were asked about their demographic information, level of participation in the series, and key values related to this issue. The full results of the keypad polling are posted online. For this report, the questions about values are most relevant. The results of four related questions are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2.

When participants were allowed to pick all of the values and impacts that concern them when making decisions about the Poudre River, there was widespread interest in multiple factors. Notably, **close to half of all participants selected all available values**. Over 80% of people value how the Poudre River contributes to the **sense of place, provides recreational opportunities, supports local agriculture, and supplies water**. As a wicked problem, we understand that sometimes people will have to choose between multiple values. Nonetheless, this quick survey suggests that there is **robust common ground** among the participants in this conversation. Many people share similar values.

When asked to pick only their most important value of the river, healthy ecosystems received the most votes. Notably, this is a value that received strong but not overwhelming support from the group overall, which suggests that valuing a **“wild river”** may be a **polarizing** value in this conversation.

When asked about potential impacts of decisions about water in Northern Colorado, over 80% of participants were concerned about **future generations, local agriculture, and**

⁶ There are more written comments than electronic keypad votes because some invited experts may have filled out written comments, and several people joined groups after the keypad votes, including CSU students who were not needed as facilitators and notetakers.

river and riparian ecology. These same impacts also received the most votes when participants were asked to select the impact of most importance. Notably, these impacts seem to align with different approaches to addressing future water needs, particularly concerns for agriculture and ecology. Yet this poll suggests that the majority of people are concerned about both. This means that potential approaches may need to find solutions that **protect both ecology and agriculture** to transcend this value conflict instead of choosing between them.

Table 1. What do you value about the Poudre River? (N = 90 for number, 87 for most important value)

Value	Number who hold value	%	Most important value	%
It contributes to the sense of place in Fort Collins	73	81%	15	17%
It enhances local businesses	44	49%	0	0%
It should be a wild river with healthy ecosystems	63	70%	35	40%
It provides recreational opportunities	74	82%	2	2%
It supports local agriculture	76	84%	12	14%
It supplies water needs	79	88%	23	26%

Table 2. In making decisions about the Poudre River, I'm concerned with how decisions will impact: (N = 90 for number, 85 for most important impact)

Impacts	Number concerned about impact	%	Most important impact	%
Future generations	77	86%	28	33%
Future growth	51	57%	2	2%
Instream flows	65	72%	5	6%
Local agriculture	73	81%	10	12%
Local economy	51	57%	0	0%
Neighboring communities	36	40%	0	0%
Recreational opportunities	60	67%	1	1%
River and riparian ecology	73	81%	31	36%
Water rights holders	43	48%	8	9%

We now shift our analysis from the initial keypad data to the information the participants directly provided concerning what they viewed as the primary arguments for and concerns

about each approach. Again, the raw data from all these comments are available on the website.⁷ The analysis is arranged by the four approaches the participants worked through.

Approach 1: Address Growth. After the table discussions about approach one, the most frequent written comments were about the importance of **“smart” or “managed” growth**. Participants commented that, “management of growth is fundamental to assure quality of life,” and expressed the need for “more efficient” and “higher density” growth, even “limiting growth.” The importance of management was reinforced in the written concerns about this approach, in particular that there are not sufficient plans in place currently.

For many participants, successful growth management will require **taking a regional perspective**. Planning for growth requires considering population growth, quality of life, availability of water, and land-use planning across the region, coordinating efforts by considering regional threats and solutions. Quite a few participants also specifically supported the need to **increase density** or **build “up”** in order to manage growth better. Yet more participants mentioned the importance of regional planning as a *concern* about the approach. Citing a “lack of regional cooperation leading to poor outcomes” and “political influences at a regional level,” participants noted the **difficulties of achieving regional management**, even though this sort of planning is key to addressing growth. Without regional planning, however, growth may simply occur at boundaries in nearby towns, which doesn’t help reduce overall water demands.

Despite the difficulties of addressing growth, fourteen participants noted that growth is the **“root cause”** or “ultimate cause” of increasing demands on the river. One person wrote, “this is the core issue and the hardest to address. It deserves special emphasis to highlight how important it is.” This approach “begins the conversation about growth and that’s good,” and the **discussion about growth needs to continue**. Yet several people cautioned the difficulty of sustaining conversations about growth. One person noted that it “degenerates rapidly to growth/no growth; population growth vs. economic growth.”

In their comments, participants reinforced that there are **limits to growth**. “Current growth is **not sustainable**,” and “this area does have a limit on how many people it can support at reasonable living standards.” **Natural limits** were discussed, sometimes starkly: “water will limit growth—we are in a desert.” The paradox is that the same number of people argued that **growth is inevitable** and cannot be stopped. “Growth cannot be controlled”; “people are going to move here regardless.” Only one person suggested an endpoint: “growth is inevitable until resource depletion renders FoCo unattractive.”

⁷ The direct link to this specific data is http://www.universitycityconnections.org/assets/File/raw_information-from-4-11-and-4-16-forums.pdf.

At the core of the tension between the natural limits of growth and the inevitability of growth is a question of **whether growth can be curbed before the negative impacts**. Several people stated that limiting growth is not feasible due to **unintended consequences** and desires for continued **economic development**. Potential management will require some tough choices, particularly the potential of increasing the cost of living. Several people suggested integrating the costs of growth into new development, which would put an economic limit on development.

Approach 2: Focus on urban conservation. Educating consumers about conservation was consistently reinforced in the comments about approach two. **Education** was called “vital” and “the best way to properly use this approach” because education can increase public awareness without regulation. Specifically, people wanted to educate people about their role in the water system not just specific conservation measures so that people understand how their habits impact the situation overall. There were two main concerns that mentioned education. Several comments simply suggested that more education would be needed since “there is a **lack of widespread knowledge** in the public of the need for conservation.” Others went a step further and questioned “whether education can be useful or not.” They raised questions of how to get information to the public and what campaign strategies would work to get changes in behavior. These comments recognized the importance of education but questioned whether educating the public would be sufficient to actually change engrained habits.

Beyond educating the public, some people called for **stricter codes** to regulate water use, such as tiered rates, building codes for new development, or restrictions on daily use. Some people specifically mentioned that they would prefer education to regulation. Part of the concern is that conservation efforts will **limit individual freedom**, become “dictatorial,” and “unpopular.” More simply, conservation legislation could be difficult to enforce, and “people will not follow and argue it as ‘their right’ to use as much” water as they want. People also expressed discomfort with laws and mandates, believing “incentives are more effective than regulations.” Rather than policy mandates, **incentive programs** for changing toilets or repairing leaks were seen as productive alternatives that would help “change values and lifestyles.”

A fundamental concern about this approach is that conservation is important, but this approach can **only be part of a solution** since it is insufficient on its own. Listed as an appreciation and a concern for this approach is the notion that “conservation can’t meet all of our future water needs.” This comment reveals a paradox. People generally supported conservation. One person wrote, “**conservation = good.**” It was called an “essential approach,” “the first action,” and “the most effective and important method of meeting our future water needs.” Yet despite this support, some of the same people acknowledged that

it was “**a very small piece to a very big puzzle,**” suggesting that urban conversation alone will not be able to meet future water demands. Conservation should still be encouraged—but it should not be expected to address this problem by itself. Said differently, participants realized that conservation, while critical, was not a magic bullet to address this issue.

Participants worried that conservation might end up, paradoxically, making future water scarcity worse. One specific concern about conservation efforts is that they might have a paradoxical impact of actually **encouraging growth**. The concern is that “any water conserved would be used to promote growth and/or profit for someone else.” The ecological impact of conservation could be “**drought hardening,**” where saved water is used to support new growth, leaving less flexibility in the system to withstand future droughts that could otherwise be addressed through temporary conservation measures.

Finally, a few people admitted that conservation efforts might negatively impact their quality of life. There seemed to be a fine distinction between reasonable conservation measures and “misguided conservation measures which lead to **compromising our lifestyles.**” Strategies like xeriscaping were offered as potential solutions and potential problems, as people questioned whether it is really possible to maintain attractive landscapes that are also cost effective and water efficient.

Approach 3: Storage projects. Unlike previous approaches, concerns about approach three made the strongest pattern: participants questioned the **environmental impacts of storage projects**. Concerns about this approach included cautions about in-stream flows, construction impacts, and habitat protection. Since participants were asked to note the strongest argument in favor and against each approach, this theme doesn’t demonstrate that participants were necessarily against approach three. Instead, it reflects a general concern about **sustaining the Poudre River** if more storage projects are built.

Despite concerns about environmental impacts of potential storage projects, several participants noted that expansion of storage “is necessary” and “needed.” “Storage projects make it possible for water management in our growing area,” wrote one participant; “**creative solutions can be found through engineering and innovation.**” This is particularly true for drought years when storage provides a “**safety net** for water demands.” People appreciated that storage projects are able to keep water that would otherwise flow downstream during runoff. Several people noted that existing storage projects have “enabled those living here to do so with adequate water,” and we should continue to work with neighboring communities to ensure strong management of this resource.

Participants also suggested that there might be **alternative engineered solutions** beyond current proposals and conventional ways of thinking about water storage. For example, one person suggested “downstream reservoirs in aquifers could protect flows and help meet water needs.” Others mentioned, “gravel pits” and expanding existing reservoirs.

Nonetheless some of these proposals also had detractors as people questioned assumptions (“untapped ground water tables in foothills?”) and called for “more science based information about comparing other and all alternatives.”

Comments in this approach raised multiple questions about what possible storage projects might look like. Several people noted that there are alternatives beyond Glade, which would have different impacts on the Poudre River and Fort Collins. Some people noted that it is possible to “engineer creative solutions that mitigate environmental structures” while others questioned, “what are **mitigation strategies** for impacts of NISP.” Others were concerned about the projected cost of storage projects.

More fundamentally, participants wrote that they still **needed more information** to really evaluate storage as an approach. “I feel like the education session did not provide the info I feel is necessary to understand this. I think we need some expert factual study of tradeoffs with other solutions.” Others noted their frustration with “misinformation” and “factual uncertainties” that make decision-making difficult, particularly about complex proposals for water storage.

Approach 4: Agricultural Conversation and Transfer. After discussing this approach, many people commented that they wanted to support a **local food economy** and **local agriculture**. Valuing local farms and their products cut across appreciations and concerns for this approach. Some people saw this as an appreciation for this approach to water: “want ag to provide ‘local’ goods” and “local food supply discussion as part of this approach is helpful.” Other people expressed the same value as a concern if agricultural transfers result in negative impacts on production with comments about “loss with local food supply,” questions about “food supplies in the future,” and loss of “economic benefits of food production.”

Similarly, **general support of agriculture** was expressed in arguments for and against this approach. Some people saw this as a “good way to support agricultural economy” while others were “concerned that the farmer won’t be able to make enough to survive if he trades his water.” In particular, there were concerns about drying up farmland. The underlying question is **whether it is possible to transfer “in a manner which does not dry up farms and agriculture” completely** or if this approach will lead to the return of the “dust bowl.” Agriculture was called “vital to our economy, way of life”; this led to concerns about “complicated” economics of agricultural transfers, in particular.

At the same time, there was support for **municipalities and farmers** to “work together” in “partnerships” to work out “compromises.” Participants appreciated the potential for **“creative,” “flexible,” and “innovative”** sharing ideas that “could be beneficial for both ag and cities. Some people suggested that current compromises “are working,” and this strategy “has promise” for the future. “Temporary leases” and “temporary transfers” could be used to creation a flexible, regional system that would “help optimize the use of water.”

Beyond agricultural transfers, participants called for **more agricultural conservation**. Just as municipalities should conserve, agricultural efficiencies “can always be improved.” This

is particularly important since a higher percentage of overall water usage does go to agriculture. Despite general support for pursuing agricultural conservation, a few people questioned whether there are significant conservation opportunities and seemed to need more information. Some pointed out that conserving water in agriculture through irrigation efficiencies is complex and often misunderstood because of legal requirements related to return flows, runoffs, and downstream water rights holders.

Underscoring this approach were requests for **more information and education**. There were concerns about “way too much misinformation” and assertions that people “don’t understand ag.” Since “too few people understand farmers’ water use,” “urbanities/environmentalists” don’t understand the benefits of current practices either. The need for education goes both ways: one person mentioned that “getting producers to agree on the details of sharing agreements will require some careful educating and negotiating.”

Finally, comments in favor and against this approach suggested the importance of **protecting open space**. Currently, agricultural lands are seen as a good way to provide open space. “Open lands via ag are desirable—it brings us back to our roots emotionally because most of us were never farmers.” The concern is that ag transfer would result in a decrease in agricultural lands and end up in a “loss of aesthetics of farmland” and “our landscape.”

Reflections and closing survey. In the final written survey, participants mentioned a few values that did not appear in the initial keypad vote. Stemming from this specific conversation, participants noted that they valued “community input” and “discussion,” “hearing others’ opinions,” “listening,” and “learning more about viewpoints and ideas.” Using some of the language used to frame the event, one participant wrote: “this program has been a wonderful opportunity to explore all sides of this ‘wicked problem.’” In particular, people valued talking to those who are “not liked minded” and “connect these difficult issues to the real people who are/will be affected.”

Yet participants **still needed more information on several issues**. During the discussions, several participants remarked that they didn’t have enough specifics on tradeoffs and possible solutions; instead, this discussion seemed too general without enough specific facts. When asked to write down what they still need more information about, participants mentioned NISP and Glade, asking who will own the water, the benefits and impacts, possible mitigation strategies, costs, and even more information about the options themselves. Participants also wanted more information about agricultural transfers, including the laws and process. More broadly, several participants wanted to know about agricultural conservation options and how to promote efficiency. When asked what additional information was needed, one person just wrote “everything!” This represents a general sense that participants wanted more information on most of the approaches, and sometimes felt that they were not prepared to weigh the different alternatives.

Participants were invited to pose a lingering question. Looking across the responses there are no clear patterns. Instead, many people posed important, challenging questions. People asked questions about public processes for making decisions about water: “how to best educate public of big picture impact,” “how do we foster meaningful conversation”, and “how can we turn the dialogue in to a regional consultation/planning/action.” Some people asked about new solutions: “what possibilities exist for agricultural crop substitution,” “why not do more diversions from the western slope,” and “how can farmers and ranchers receive payments for watershed conservation practices.” Other people asked about additional factual issues: “why was army corps redoing final draft,” “how much local food is produced per capita,” and “what is the regulatory regime for managing water in the state.” Other people posed rhetorical questions without clear answers: “how will population growth ever be solved,” “where do myths come from,” and “why are water rights in CO so difficult.” Together these questions suggest that people are still in the working through stage of coming to public judgment—a lot of questions remain.

When asked to identify tensions or tradeoffs that they were still struggling with, some people mentioned deeply personal tensions and others identified fundamental tensions of the wicked problem. Some people mentioned struggling with understanding ideas that they don’t support or negative impacts that they don’t want to see (e.g. “I don’t want the repercussions of growth restrictions to fall on the backs of poor people.”) Some people expressed a new willingness to “sacrifice” and take more “radical changes,” but only if other people will follow suit. Other people identified fundamental tensions in the issue itself: “environment/economics,” “how can we sustain agriculture while providing supplies for municipal growth demand,” “growth vs. regulation,” “storage vs. conservation,” and “storage vs. impacts on the river.” Overall, these tensions suggest that aspects of this issue are still seen in tension with each other. Additional work needs to be done to begin to envision how some of these tensions might be transcended.

Nonetheless, when people were asked to identify potential common ground only two people couldn’t see any common ground. Most of the participants suggested values that seemed to unite participants, including “love for this area,” “concern for the Poudre,” and “desire for efficient water use.” People noted that there was a “desire to work together to learn, plan, and make decisions,” wanting to really work through issues together. Even some approaches were offered as potential common ground, including “addressing growth” and “conservation.” A few people noted that people recognized that “multiple approaches are needed” yet others questioned whether this was true of “extreme environmentalists.”

The final written survey question asked participants what they would most want people to know about the issue. The most prominent theme focused on the importance and urgency of the issue. Many participants also urged for others to seek balance and look at all sides of the issue and warned against polarization. Others noted the complexity of the issue and a corresponding need for more awareness and education. Many urged others to get involved and have their voices heard.

Interestingly, very few of these final comments could be interpreted as supporting one particular position or approach. A few highlighted growth as the key issue, but very few

comments specifically focused on a position such as protecting the river, supporting new storage, or protecting agriculture. Overall, participants seemed to understand that the issue was complex, even wicked.

Key Overall Conclusions and Next Steps

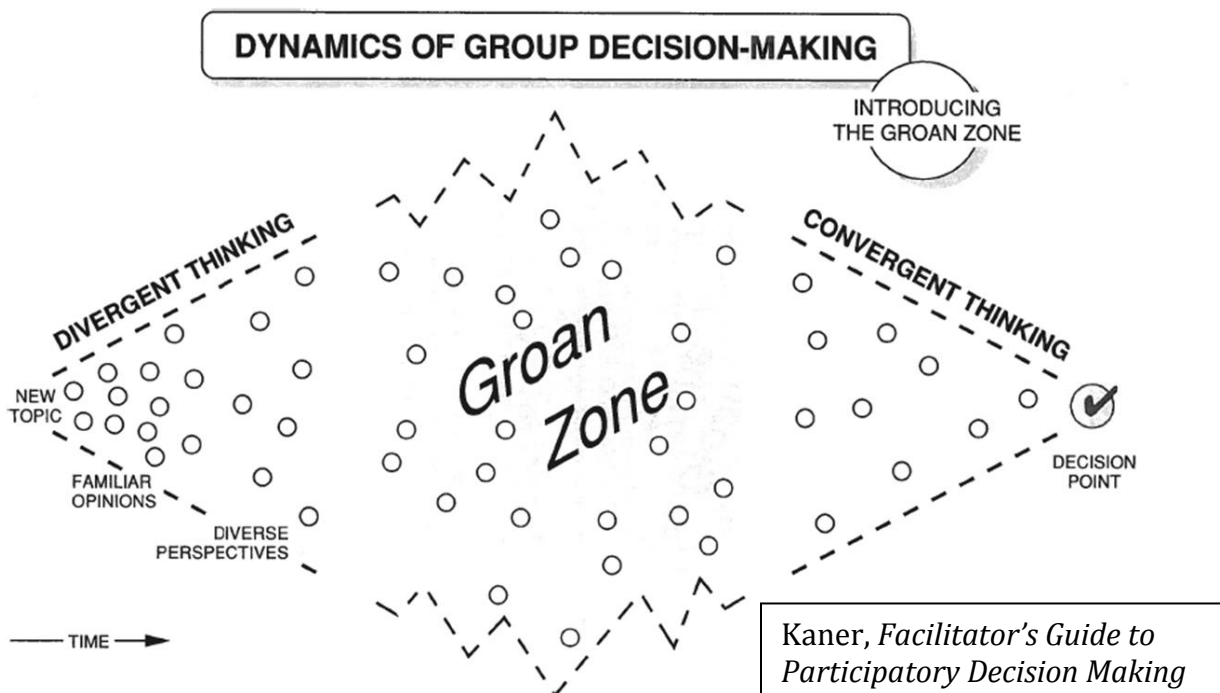
In this section, we consider all the data and the themes discussed thus far, and highlight key overall conclusions and attempt to make suggestions for next steps for this project. Some of our overall conclusions are:

The dialogues did provide an opportunity for the participants to begin to work through this complex “wicked” issue. The framing of the issue as a wicked problem with competing underlying values that multiple perspectives could support seemed to be accepted by the participants. While a number of strong comments for or against each approach were certainly shared, people frequently focused on the importance of balance, collaboration, and the inherent complexity of the issue. This could, of course, be a product of the process design that began with those assumptions, but nonetheless there was not that much push back on those assumptions. Considering much of the data collected involved participants writing anonymously on surveys and worksheets, there were ample opportunities for participants to question the framing. Some people choose to not write arguments for or against a particular approach; most participants, however, could acknowledge an argument in appreciation of each approach and a related concern. Indeed, during the final survey question which asked what they would most want others to know about the issue, very few comments could be interpreted as adversarial, polarizing, or focused on one particular solution. Instead, participants focused on the urgency of the issue, its complexity, the need for more education and engagement, and the importance of taking multiple approaches.

Key areas of common ground include supporting modest conservation efforts, local agriculture, and the ecology of the river, as well as the need for “smart” growth. On the other hand, within each of these broad areas of support are more detailed issues that require more nuanced discussion. Most participants supported conservation, but that support focused more on education efforts and incentives rather than stricter regulations. Even when supporting conservation, participants suggested that conservation efforts alone were insufficient. There was broad support for local agriculture and the open space it provides, but that value was often seen as secondary to other values. As mentioned at the opening of the project, no one is “anti-river,” but many significant differences remain concerning the potential impact of new projects on the river. Some were strongly opposed to new storage projects due to the impact on the river; others expressed concern about the river but believe that impacts can be balanced or mitigated. Again, the updated EIS on the NISP project is highly anticipated and will hopefully answer some of the factual questions that complicate this issue. Finally, many supported “smart” or “managed” growth, but it is unclear if people would define such growth similarly or if it is more of a comfortable middle ground for people to retreat to from the polarized ends of “unlimited growth” or “stopping growth.” Similarly, participants broadly supported urban and rural cooperation on water rights, but did not clearly define what such cooperation may entail. Future conversations should be focused on providing more opportunities for participants to discuss these issues to build on the common ground while better identifying and working through the tensions.

Information needs were clarified but remain significant. As noted throughout this report, the issue was seen as a complex one, and while participants appreciated the background material and lecture series that preceded the dialogues, they also realized they needed additional information to properly weigh the tradeoffs. Information needs about potential storage projects and agricultural transfer and conservation were particularly prevalent. Several concerns were also expressed concerning the amount of misinformation on these issues, accusations that were aimed both at “extreme environmentalists” and “developers” and “moneyed interests.” A clearinghouse of information that all parties feel is legitimate would be a critical step for helping the community address this issue moving forward.

Overall, participants made progress working through the issue but have much further to go. In his book on facilitating participatory decision-making, Sam Kaner provides readers with the graphic below, explaining that complex issues require participants to move through the “groan zone” in order to ultimately arrive at and support better decisions. Kaner’s theory fits well with Yankelovich’s ideas about the importance of working through and essentially provides more specific ideas about how groups can work through difficult issues more productively. Kaner argues that initially groups need processes and techniques that insure divergent thinking. He warns that too often discussion is closed down or decisions are made before enough voices are heard, which negatively impacts the decision due to quality, legitimacy, and support. A paradox arises because when processes have sufficient diversity of opinion, they inherently become less manageable, resulting in Kaner’s “groan zone.” This is when processes that help participants work through are critical. The dialogues were designed to help provide an ample range of opinions (as framed on the “placemat”) and to provide dedicated time to discuss each approach and the positive and negative consequences tied to each to insure mutual understanding.



Based on our analysis of the information from the two public dialogues, we would argue that most of those involved with the project have successfully moved past the early pitfalls associated with the poor participatory decision-making, such as wishful thinking and blaming devil's figures. Again, most participants understand the complexity of the issue and the need to consider multiple actions to better protect and balance the things we care about. The participants, however, are likely not yet able to begin to prioritize and move to action, labeled as "convergent thinking" on Kaner's graphic. Due to the significant information needs, it seems prudent to continue the conversation and dig deeper on certain key issues such as those highlighted in the common ground paragraph above.

Another complicated aspect of this project is that many different private and public actors get to make decisions about water in Northern Colorado, and the role of the public is unclear. Moving forward, it will be important to provide participants in any additional dialogues with clear expectations to what power they have, if any, to influence decisions. This process was framed as educational, based on the assumption that since water is such a critical, complex issue in northern Colorado, the more educated and engaged the public is on the issue, the better. That remains our hope.

Next Steps

The most clear takeaway from the 2011 series, *The Poudre Runs Through It: Northern Colorado's Water Future*, is that our community values the Poudre River for the work it does for us, but we also want it to be healthy. One of the series presenters offered a challenge. He said:

"Though the Poudre River will always be a working river, (providing water for agriculture and urban needs) we have the know-how to better manage it in order to restore and enhance its health. But do we have the collective will to do that?"

Stepping up to that challenge, the Colorado Water Institute, one of the sponsors of the 2011 series, will launch a Poudre River Study/Action Work Group starting in the fall of 2012 and running through 2013. A steering committee of agricultural, environmental and urban water leaders will invite citizens with expertise in the river's human uses and those with expertise in its ecology, to meet monthly to learn from one another. This shared learning will lead to a suite of options—tangible actions the community can get behind—actions that can unite all sectors of the community in a common goal. That goal is to make the Poudre River the world's best example of an ecologically healthy "working river"—one that's called on to provide for agricultural, urban, and recreational needs.

For more information about this effort, contact MaryLou Smith, Colorado Water Institute, MaryLou.Smith@colostate.edu. 970-491-5899.