

PUBLIC RELATIONS ASPECTS OF WATER MANAGEMENT DURING EXTREME DROUGHT

Edmund B. Burkett

AUTHORS: Chief, Water Management Section, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District, P.O. Box 2288, Mobile, AL 36628-0001.
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THE PROBLEM

Natural phenomena such as major floods or droughts can affect the economy of a region and the lives of many people. While a flood will only affect facilities and people along a watercourse and for a relatively short time span, a drought is more pervasive -- affecting many diverse interests, and for a much longer period of time. The pervasive and indefinite nature of drought results in its arousing more media and political attention. Another distinction of drought that produces controversy is that a decision can be made affecting one or more groups positively while affecting other groups adversely. Consequently, intense media and political interest and the fact that decisions may adversely affect some groups make public relations an essential element in the decision process for water management.

Both flood and drought events require experienced, trained personnel to analyze the situation, assess risks, and make appropriate decisions. These decisions are made within a management organizational structure. The media interest and public relations pressures bring on stress to this decision structure and influence the decision process.

THE NATURE OF MEDIA INTEREST

Media--newspapers, radio, and television--and the general public become interested in a hydrologic event when it falls outside the range of recent experience. Whereas water managers and hydrologists recognize a drought as a normal and expectable event, it is treated by the news media as a catastrophic occurrence justifying unprecedented water management actions. Reluctance to take extreme action may be viewed by media and the public as inaction, complacency, or negligence. It is in the water management agency's interest to appear to act whether the actions taken are contrived or ineffective.

As an event becomes more extreme the media's need for information becomes voracious and outstrips any substantive additional information that the management

agency may have to provide. One area where information is requested is in the arena of forecasts. The media are often intensely interested in forecasts of streamflow and reservoir levels. Stream or reservoir level and flow quantity forecasts are often a matter of media interest. Providing forecasts can be a dilemma for a management agency for two reasons. First, the media does not well accommodate probabilistic information--the usual form of forecast information. Second, any forecast assumes operational decisions and a forecast can tend to be construed by the public as a commitment to those decisions. Thus an agency may be unwittingly constrained by forecasts even when additional information may invalidate the assumptions upon which the forecasts were made.

Television has a unique way of covering a drought which impacts the management agency. First, all information, no matter how complex or lengthy, must be compressed to fit into a 15 to 30 second time space. Second, television coverage dwells on what is graphic. Often a situation does not provide a "viewable" backdrop. Television coverage tends to use pictures of lakes in drawdown condition, boats or floating docks that are grounded, boatramps that are unusable. The need for and use of graphical displays probably affects the decision process.

IMPACT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AND MEDIA ON MANAGEMENT AND THE DECISION PROCESS

When a drought has developed to the severe [level] it affects the management and decision structure of agencies responsible for dealing with it. First, the media interest intensifies the concern of upper management levels with decisions that are often made at fairly low levels in the organization. The concern of upper management and the intensity of media coverage tends to compress both the organizational structure and the time span of decision-making. Water managers have to explain decisions not just to the next level of management but also to an entire

hierarchy-- often in an unrealistically short time frame. With the involvement of management levels not usually involved, decision options need to be presented in the most concise and simple terms.

Another area in which public relations play a part in the decision process is in which groups of interests are impacted by water management decisions. It is, at least initially, beneficial to appear to affect all water user groups equally. This strategy seems successful even though projects may have authorized purposes at variance with equitable distribution of benefits. The vocal public and, to some extent, the media seem to place the greatest emphasis on water supply, water-based recreation, and water quality. Water use for navigation and hydropower, at least in the southeast, seems not to be publically acceptable despite the fact that these were major original authorized purposes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COPING WITH PUBLIC RELATIONS ASPECTS OF DROUGHT MANAGEMENT

The media and the general public will undoubtedly affect an agency's decision process during an extreme drought. It is the agency's challenge to be prepared so that it does not lose control of the decision process to political or public relations influences. A major help in dealing with droughts is a drought contingency plan. The plan should describe some of the actions to be taken during a drought event. A major element in drought plans should be the establishment of an advisory committee of the various state and local agencies involved with drought management. Also, the plan should include mechanisms for informing various interest groups affected by management decisions. Through careful planning an agency should be able to control the public relations aspects of drought management during a drought rather than having public relations control the decision process.