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Abstract: Exploring Barriers to Stakeholders Engagement

While agencies recognize the value of public participation, ensuring stakeholder engagement in official, public agency meetings is often a challenge. This practicum explores barriers to stakeholder's engagement with the goal of structuring public meetings and outreach to encourage participation. Our goal was to gather information from various stakeholders within the Suwannee River Water Management District, with a focus on producers' barriers to participation, as that was identified as a stakeholder group whose participation is essential in the success of future water supply planning.

The team participated in two scheduled meetings to gather data from participants. At the Suwannee River Partnership breakfast, we interviewed approximately 30 agency staff (some also producers) on their approaches to encourage stakeholder participation. We also attended the Gilchrist County Farm Bureau monthly meeting where we interacted with approximately 10 producers on their participation in public agency meetings and collected information on the most effective ways to engage with this stakeholder group. In addition to the group meetings, we also conducted one-on-one phone interviews with 4 additional producers in the region to further explore the topic.

Our findings indicate that providing an agenda and clear understanding of the meeting's impact on stakeholders or why their participation is important, is crucial in motivating stakeholder participation. Additionally, having a trusted source (for example, extension agents) personally share information about important meetings and encourage participation can also result in enhanced public engagement. We also found that there is no one perfect means of communicating with stakeholders and that a multi-method approach should be utilized, i.e. newsletter, email, text, social media, and personal invitation.

These findings will be shared with agency staff to positively influence the structure and communication about future meetings.