

Community Engagement in Australian Forest Management

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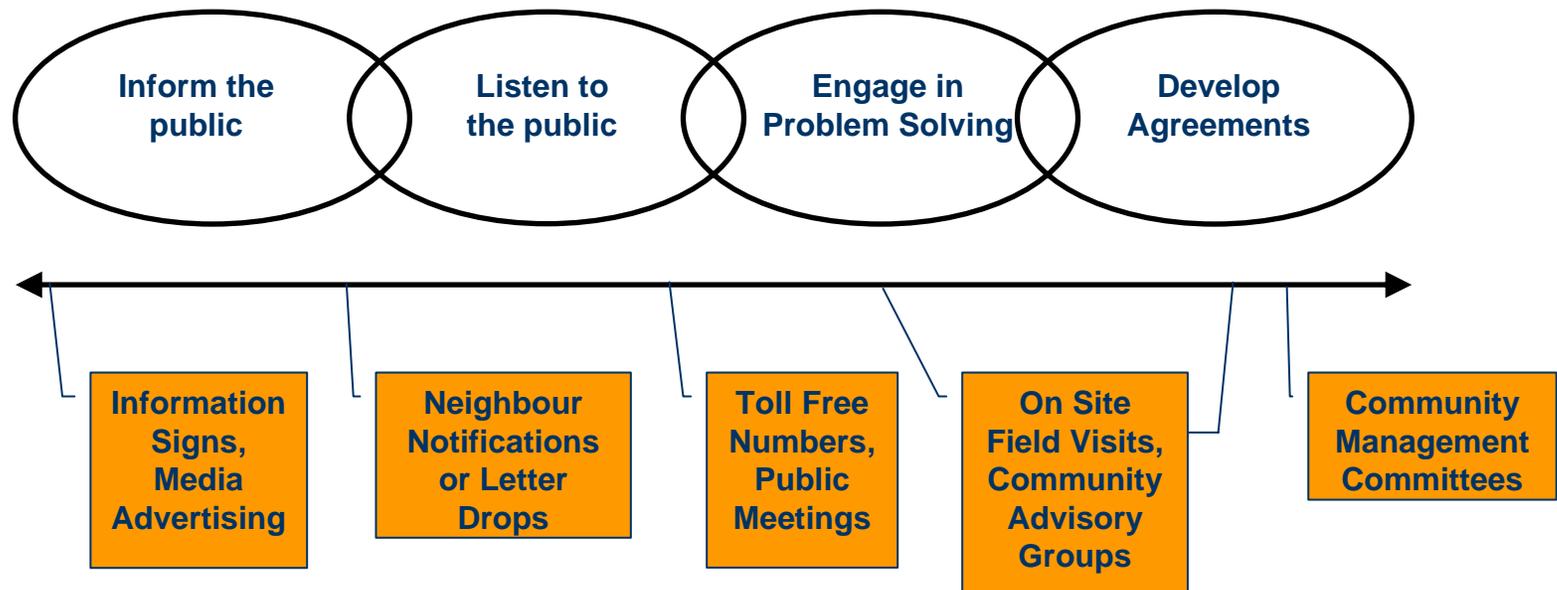


What is Community Engagement?

- Community engagement is a term used to describe the myriad of ways in which members of the community can interact with and be involved in decision-making processes.
- For many people community engagement is another term for public consultation or public involvement, whilst others believe that community engagement involves a greater depth of involvement, or engagement, in a decision-making process (see Aslin and Brown, 2004).
- Community engagement in Australian forest management has been described as anything from providing contact information regarding people to call if you have a concern, to long term community advisory groups.

What is Community Engagement?

- The following simplistic view of public participation as a continuum (Crotty, 2005:9) is an easy way to visualise the diversity of engagement 'levels'.
- Common community engagement techniques used within Australian forest management are shown to signify where they might fall on the continuum.



Why is Community Engagement important in forest management?

The following reasons for why community engagement is important for forest management are derived from interactions with forest managers across Australia:

- To **overcome historical arrogance** within forest management by developing better relationships with the wider community and removing the 'them and us' mentality.
- To **better inform** the community regarding forest management practices and thus reduce the need for crisis control and 'make our jobs smoother'.
- To satisfy both legislative and **forest certification requirements**.
- To increase the **social acceptance** of commercial forest management.
- To satisfy a **moral obligation** and simultaneously gain personal wellbeing by interacting with the community.
- To **identify potential issues** before they arise and readily negotiate suitable measures to overcome such issues.
- To engage in two way sharing of diverse information with the community, and consequently **share decision making**.

How do you do Community Engagement?

The following lists three typical techniques currently used for community engagement within Australian forest management:

- **Neighbour Notifications / Letter Drops.** Contacting affected people through formal letters indicating what forest operations are about to occur and whom to contact if they have any concerns. Efficient form of community engagement yet does not allow for two-way communication initially.
- **Face to Face Meetings.** Well recognised and accepted technique for community engagement that is overwhelmingly effective. In-person meetings help build relationships and trust, and allow for easy two-way communication once a relationship is formed.
- **PR / Media.** The line between public relations and community engagement is blurred. Many companies use the internet, newspapers and radio to share information with the wider community. Information may be regarded as 'spin' by industry sceptics, although this form of information sharing can be very beneficial in terms of providing access to contact numbers, or wide-scale notifications in terms of fires etc.

Who should participate in Community Engagement processes?

It is critical to actively reflect on who becomes involved in any given community engagement process. The following points should be considered in recruiting participants/stakeholders:

- **Affected people** should be invited to participate first and foremost.
- A diversity of **interested people** is essential to ensure that a wide range of views and beliefs are identified. Diversity of stakeholders present helps to improve the credibility and legitimacy of the process. People to consider include environmental groups, business groups, community groups etc.
- People in the **position to make decisions** should be involved where possible. These may include local government representatives, company managers, etc.
- The **context** of the community engagement process determines the participants. Different processes have different desired outcomes and thus require different stakeholders.

The drawbacks of Community Engagement

Although many consider community engagement to be a mandatory process in modern forest management, the negative side of conducting community engagement also needs to be considered. The following are some of the potential drawbacks:

- **Up-front Costs.** Community engagement may increase the costs associated with forest management. However, many believe that the improved efficiencies of forest management due to reduced conflict and faster implementation of decisions outweighs any initial associated costs.
- **Not (often) a quick fix.** Good community engagement takes time. It may take several years to form effective relationships and see the benefits of improved decision-making within forest management.
- **Limited Effectiveness.** Many concerns surrounding forest management are based on entrenched personal values. Such values may limit the perceived effectiveness of community engagement processes due to a reduction in the acceptance of both the process and the management decisions made. Such values need to be respected and hopefully practitioners will learn from others' perspectives during the process.
- **Unrealistic Expectations.** Many processes are undermined by unrealistic expectations from both the community and industry practitioners. Process outcomes should be discussed and agreed upon early in the process to ensure that everyone is aiming for the same goals.
- **Representation is Difficult.** True representation is very difficult to obtain due to limited resources and extensive time commitments of prospective participants.

Requirements for successful Community Engagement processes

The following lists several of the characteristics important for the implementation of successful community engagement processes:

- Openness, fairness and inclusiveness in the selection of participants.
- Clear mandate and purpose from the onset.
- Professional design and implementation.
- Informal but structured process.
- Variety of techniques for eliciting input.
- Clear influence on decision-making.
- Sufficient time and supporting technical resources.
- Keeping decision-makers informed throughout process.
- Reasonable and realistic expectations from all parties involved.

Community Engagement in practice in Australian forest management

Methods currently being used include:

- **Neighbour Notifications / Letter Drops.** Often mandatory due to legislation or codes of practice.
- **Telephone Notifications.** Used in time limited situations where it is important that affected people are notified of upcoming operations.
- **Face to Face Meetings.** Used either by request from concerned community member or as a cold-call doorknock to ensure all members of community are informed and able to express their concerns.
- **Field visits.** Typically on site of concern or as a pre-organised field day.
- **Public meetings.** Becoming less prevalent due to perceived poor quality of interactions and lack of effective two-way information sharing.
- **Personal Interactions.** Staff embedding themselves in the community through both day to day life and joining sporting, business or community service groups. An often overlooked form of community engagement where relationships and trust are readily built in a non-confrontational environment.
- **PR oriented sponsorships, newsletters and media advertisements.** Efficient form of communication yet often lacks the capacity to build long term relationships.
- **Advisory Committees.** Not used widely as yet, however there are a couple of good examples of long term committees that are seen to be active and effective in sharing decision-making and knowledge within the community.

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