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FRAME YOUR QUESTION

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FAST

Expert Panel Process for Decision Making

The needs of natural resource managers and policy makers often outstrip existing science and data. FAST is a process to help National Estuarine Research Reserves and other groups working at the interface of science and management to collaborate with experts to develop timely, science-based solutions to coastal environmental problems.

What is FAST?

- Way to synthesize expert opinion on a subject or question around which there is uncertainty due to insufficient or unattainable science or data
- Iterative, weight-of-evidence approach to reaching general agreement, though not necessarily unanimity, around science-based recommendations for resource management
- Adaptable process that can be approached with different levels of rigor depending on the situation at hand

About FAST

FAST was modeled after *Protocol for the Development, Review, and Approval of Loading and Effectiveness Estimates for Nutrient and Sediment Controls in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Model*, a process based on independent peer reviews at the National Academy of Sciences. It was refined as part of the *Credit for Going Green*, a project that developed consensus-based recommendations to help New Hampshire stakeholders use restored or constructed buffers to meet pollution reduction targets in development, restoration, and other projects involving land use change.

When to go FAST

- When science-based solutions are needed, but available data and science is vague or insufficient
- When a question could be addressed with intensive, site-specific, original research, but you lack the time and other resources
- When there are differences in expert opinion around the most appropriate solutions
- When you have access to professionals with the right expertise and enough time to help
- When you have sufficient resources (time, funding, and expertise) to make it all work



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How to go FAST

The FAST process involves the following integrated steps. For more information, including tools and lessons learned from a New Hampshire case study, download the FAST guide.

Frame your question

It is critical to design your FAST process around a well-defined management need or question. Here are some tips to help you get oriented:

- 1) Review previous work that has been done in your area related to the management need or question you would like experts to address. Check in with stakeholders to make sure you are working on a solution to a question for which local resource managers and others really need an answer.
- 2) Look for case studies that exemplify what you are trying to do.
- 3) Find a mentor with experience in running a panel process who can help you get organized.
- 4) Secure the resources you need to support your process. The cost will vary, depending on staff and skills you have in house: whether you have a well defined need: and the level of rigor you need to employ.

Assemble the team

FAST involves three groups with mutually supporting responsibilities. It is anchored by a small **core team** that is ultimately responsible for getting the work done. The core should include individuals knowledgeable about the subject matter, group process best practices, communications, and local management needs. A larger **advisory committee** provides input on panel makeup, the literature review, and how best to communicate results. It should include intended users of panel decisions and important stakeholders. The six-to-eight-person **expert panel** assesses existing science and data and makes science-based recommendations to address the management need at hand.

Sustain momentum

Here are some tips to launching the panel and helping it maintain momentum toward the goal:

- 1) During recruitment, clarify expectations and anticipated time investments for the advisory committee and panel.
- 2) Draft working charters for both groups. Be sure to outline their roles, responsibilities, and the processes they will use for decision making and communicating files, ideas, and work products.
- 3) Establish a shared foundation of knowledge by synthesizing existing relevant literature and building on it throughout the process.
- 4) Give the panel real work to do and decisions to make.
- 5) Hold directional meetings by teeing up assumptions and decision points for panelists to discuss in real time.
- 6) Advance decision making between meetings through notes review and survey.

Take it on the road

Getting to a draft set of panel recommendations is the beginning of your outreach. Ask your advisory committee to vet the recommendations and consider how they can be used to address the management need. Collect input on an outreach plan, messages, and communications products that will be needed for your outreach. Brainstorm how everyone can integrate this outreach with already planned meetings and diffuse it throughout their professional networks.

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