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River Basin Scale Management and Governance: Competing Interests for Western Water

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One of the most significant issues in regard to how social scientists understand environmental and resource management is the question of scale: what is the appropriate scale at which to consider environmental problems, and associated stakeholders (including hydrologists) and their interests, in order to "govern" them? Issues of scale touch on the reality of political boundaries, from the international to the local, and their overlap and conflict across jurisdictions. This presentation will consider the questions of environmental management and governance at the river basin scale through the case of the Boise River Basin (BRB), in southwest Idaho. The river basin scale provides a viable, and generalizable, unit of analysis with which to consider theoretical and empirical questions associated with governance and the role of hydrological science in decision making.

As a unit of analysis, the "river basin" is common among engineers and hydrologists. Indeed, hydrological data is often collected and assessed at the basin level, not at an institutional or jurisdictional level. In the case of the BRB much is known from the technical perspective, such as infrastructure and engineering factors, who manages the river and how, and economic perspectives, in regard to benefits in support of major agricultural interests in the region. The same level of knowledge cannot be said about the political and societal factors, and related concepts of institutions and power. Compounding the situation is the increasing probability of climate change impacts in the American West.

The geographic focus on the Boise River Basin provides a compelling example of what the future might hold in the American West, and how resource managers and other vested interests make or influence river basin policy in the region. The BRB represents a complex and dynamic environment covering approximately 4,100 square miles of land. The BRB is a highly managed basin, with multiple dams and diversions, and is regarded as a highly desirable amenity and ecosystem service provider for the region. It is also a very polarizing construct as diverse interests engaged in basin decision making do not share the same values, perceptions, and constituents. Although regulatory and jurisdictional decision making is in the hands of a few agencies (US Army Corps of Engineers and US Bureau of Reclamation, for example), it is estimated that up to 300 different interests and groups are engaged in using, supporting, and attempting to influence the decisions associated with the Boise River and its myriad uses. Building on previous river basin governance research in the US and Europe, the work presented here is framed on a policy network approach, and focuses on four main factors of the BRB: the type of stakeholder and their perceptions of the BRB as a resource or amenity, role(s) of the stakeholder in the network, interactions between network members and the public, and the role of science, uncertainty and the impact of climate change. This contribution addresses many of the question raised in the HS5.7 call for abstracts and will be of interest to a wide audience.