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A case study to explore the role of trust in water resource management planning and decision making

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Numerous studies in the field of natural resource management have demonstrated that trust among parties and between government agencies and parties is a critical factor in achieving a wide variety of goals, including reaching, implementing, and complying with decisions and agreements, improving communication and collaboration, and attaining broad social goals. To explore how trust impacts water management, this research identifies the factors that led to trust development and break-down, and the implications of this, in a major stakeholder engagement project in water management in North America. We compare and contrast the effects of trust and distrust for two different categories of stakeholders, specifically those who support the publicly deliberated U.S.-Canadian International Joint Commission's (IJC) Plan 2014 for regulating water levels and flows in the Lake Ontario-St. Lawrence River (LOSL) Basin (pro-plan) and those who do not (anti-plan). We analyze transcripts of public consultation meetings that took place in 2013 about Plan 2014 to identify where trust is and is not present and what effects this has on the failure, to date, to reach a decision and implement a new plan. Provisional findings relate to interpersonal trust, trust in institutions and trust in scientific data. The analysis to date suggests that development of interpersonal trust over the course of the first five years of intensive public participation processes and over the next 10 years of sporadic involvement seemed to have had little effect on the outcome. However, with regards to trust in institutions, the anti-plan group showed distrust in the IJC concerning the agency's care and concern for their perspective, their character (honesty), and especially their scientific knowledge. Mistrust in scientific data worked in at least two directions. The IJC staff and scientists did not trust the scientific information that some of the interest group advisory members were communicating to their constituents, and those members did not trust the accuracy of the scientific data nor the individual IJC representatives and their contracted scientists who were communicating the results of their findings to them. The study demonstrates that trust is a critical factor in determining desired outcomes. This analysis shows that the two groups could be located at different points along the trust continuum: the anti-plan group closer to extreme distrust and the pro-plan group closer to the middle with a healthy level of critical trust.