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A history of Collaboration, Innovation and Inquiry

The Multi-State Working Group on Environmental Performance (MSWG) has its roots in the growing realization in many states beginning in the early 1990s that new approaches to environmental management were needed to successfully deal with a wide range of environmental problems. Organized in 1996, MSWG has contributed to next generation environmental policy thinking in the United States and internationally, often bridging the gap between theory and practice, bringing together governments at all levels with businesses, non-government groups and the academic community.

This collaborative approach to environmental problem solving was apparent beginning with MSWG's first project. It helped enlist 100 facilities from 12 states in gathering data to evaluate the performance of environmental management systems (EMS). It recommended protocols for the national EMS database housed at the University of North Carolina. It also conducted roundtables involving 38 colleges and universities and identified 150 research topics related to innovative approaches to environmental management. Two research summits followed, one at the Brookings Institution and one with Harvard at Resources for the Future that resulted in two books: "Regulating from the Inside" and "Leveraging the Private Sector: Management-Based Strategies for Improving Environmental Performance."

In addition to larger scale theoretical work, MSWG has been involved in projects directed at improving environmental practices, including augmenting EMSs with information on compliance and improved public reporting. MSWG calls this the "external value EMS." It also placed an intern in the London financial district to make a point about the link between "Adam Smith and Rachel Carson," in other words, how *environmental* governance can inform the evaluation of *corporate* governance. The London work an example of MSWG's effort to internationalize the policy innovation agenda that has grown stale in the United States as well as learn from those outside of the United States. MSWG's annual workshops often attracted international presenters. The 2001 MSWG workshop at the University of Pennsylvania was linked to a follow-up conference on reforming environmental regulation through innovative resource and land management that included international speakers.

MSWG worked with advocates for next generation efforts such as those from the National Academy of Public Administration, President's Council on Sustainable Development, Progressive Policy Institute and The Reason Foundation. And it suggested that Congress and Executive Branch do fact-finding throughout the country to develop next generation policies based on innovative thinking in the states. In addition to its challenge to Washington, MSWG issued two policy-relevant statements: In San Antonio in 1998 it commented on ISO 14001 and the importance of addressing compliance, pollution prevention and public reporting in the standard; and in Austin in 2005 it commented to EPA on the need for performance based systems, eco-system approaches and the recognizing the limits of a facility-centric permit system.

Through its Policy Academy on Environmental Management Tools, MSWG held dialogues in New York and California on the need for new tools to achieve ecological results. A session at Pace University Law School discussed ways to identify the appropriate tools to address specific problems. Another at the JFK School at Harvard looked at legal, political and cultural barriers to innovation and the use of new tools.

This combined work over a decade led to the MSWG national ecological policy development project called The Path to Washington which began in 2005 in Georgia with the challenge to better align the legal system with the natural system to foster greater environmental performance through innovation and stewardship. The 2006 MSWG workshop in Utah highlighted the need to differentiate good performers, protect Good Samaritans and reward necessary risk taking to achieve greater environmental outcomes. The 2007 workshop in Wisconsin used international examples to produce an ecological federalism concept that will leverage players to meet ecological needs that cannot and or will not be met through conventional means.

MSWG is a network of about 1,000 persons in the business, government, non-government and academic sectors in about 30 states and 20 countries and “a voice for ecological innovation and integration.”

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