

Communication Framework for
A Joint Strategic Plan for Management of Great Lakes Fisheries

*Includes Summary of June, 1998 Workshop and Recommendations for Implementation
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(Adopted October, 1998 by the Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies as a supporting document to
the *Joint Strategic Plan for Management of Great Lakes Fisheries*)

Summary

During the 1997 revision of *A Joint Strategic Plan for Management of Great Lakes Fisheries*, signatory agencies came to realize that the Plan does not contain a framework for communications. Although communications are the responsibility of the agencies, and although the Great Lakes Fishery Commission (the commission) coordinates some communications under the Plan, a systematic framework under which all agencies work to further common communication goals does not exist. During its first meeting, the newly created Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies called for the development of such a framework, which is contained in this document.

In June, 1998, the commission convened a workshop in Chicago to focus attention on those questions. A summary of the workshop discussions and a list of those who participated appears in Appendix 1, page 10. Workshop participants agreed that the commission secretariat should produce a framework for communication (which follows this summary) for presentation to the Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies and to the Council of Lake Committees. The framework includes recommendations for pursuing joint communication initiatives, for consideration by the Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies and by individual lake committees.

This communication framework focuses on three essential questions:

Why do we need to develop a communication framework for the Joint Strategic Plan (and what are the impediments)?

Workshop participants recognized that the Joint Strategic Plan, as it exists, does not contain a framework for communication. This led to the general conclusion that signatory agencies are not taking advantage of an opportunity to communicate joint successes. The workshop participants noted, however, that impediments to implementing a communication initiative may exist, including logistics, internal agency pressures, and internal agency procedures.

What kinds of subjects would communication initiatives address?

Workshop participants agreed that subjects for communication under the Joint Strategic Plan are virtually limitless, as agencies are highly active and successful. Issues relating to science, cooperative projects, and consensus are high priority for common communication efforts. It was noted that general information and data about the state of the fishery would be particularly useful to agency constituencies.

How do we implement such a framework?

Less conclusive from the workshop was agreement about how to implement a communication framework under the Joint Strategic Plan. While it was generally agreed that joint communication initiatives are imperative and while it was acknowledged that fishery managers will be instrumental

in identifying issues for communication, participants concluded that communications should be left up to each lake committee.

Based upon the workshop discussions and the answers to those questions, this communication framework recommends that: (1) individual lake committees commit in principle to a communication framework for the Joint Strategic Plan; (2) the Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies write to the lake committee urging them to develop communication strategies; (3) lake committees outline their goals, intentions, and methodology for communications; (4) lake committees discuss communication opportunities during annual executive meetings; (5) fish managers who serve on the lake committees provide direction to communication specialists within their agencies for implementation of joint initiatives; (6) agencies bring communication specialists to lake committee meetings and that the specialists meet formally to discuss communication opportunities; and (7) the Great Lakes Fishery Commission facilitate the implementation of common communication initiatives.

Background

The *Joint Strategic Plan for Management of Great Lakes Fisheries* is the agreement under which fishery management agencies on the Great Lakes cooperate for day-to-day and long-term strategic management of the fishery. Each of the eight Great Lakes states, the Province of Ontario, the tribes with management authority, and United States and Canadian federal agencies are signatory to the plan. The Great Lakes Fishery Commission facilitates the Plan's implementation.

Agencies first developed the Joint Strategic Plan in 1980. Since that time, the Joint Strategic Plan has been the blueprint by which fishery management agencies in both Canada and the United States work cooperatively to achieve common objectives. The Plan identifies the commission's lake committees as the major action arms for the agencies to achieve their joint objectives for sustaining and enhancing the fisheries.

The Joint Strategic Plan's implementation remains rooted in a series of strategic procedures that call for lake committees to define Fish Community Objectives, to identify environmental issues that impede achievement of Fish Community Objectives, and to develop plans for achieving Fish Community and Environmental objectives. Strategic procedures also call for fishery agencies to submit changes in practice to lake committees and to provide annual reports on agencies' progress in reaching their fishery management objectives. The Joint Strategic Plan is based on consensus, but if consensus is not achieved, parties may request independent third party mediation.

Recently, the Plan was the subject of an intensive two-year review process (begun in 1995) in an effort to identify ways in which cooperative Great Lakes fishery management could be enhanced. Signatory agencies gathered in Ottawa, Ontario in June, 1997, to officially endorse the updated version of the Plan. Major changes to the Plan included an expanded commitment by fish managers to work together to influence all management activities which affect fish, stronger links with environmental management agencies, the establishment of a Council of Great Lakes Fisheries Agencies, and a revised mechanism to resolve interjurisdictional disputes.

During the review process, it became clear to agencies that the Plan lacked a formal mechanism for communication. (Currently, each agency communicates to its own stakeholders, media, and elected officials. Common issues—such as those emerging from lake committee meetings—are communicated on an ad hoc basis through the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, with its Communications Officer serving as an “information coordinator.”)

The new Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies, meeting in September, 1997, agreed to pursue the development of a communication framework for the Joint Strategic Plan. The framework is intended to create a structure for communicating:

- the Plan itself;
- common initiatives (either lakewide or basin-wide);
- common problems;
- breaking news and crisis situations; and
- day-to-day management issues (such as stocking, harvest, habitat, etc.).

The framework is not intended to identify specific issues for communication, specific methods for communicating, nor specific messages to communicate. Neither is it designed to replace a particular agency's public information process nor its responsibility to interact with its own stakeholders.

Considerations and Rationale for a Communication Framework

On June 1, 1998, the Great Lakes Fishery Commission convened a workshop in Chicago to discuss a communication framework for the Joint Strategic Plan. The commission's Gavin Christie facilitated the discussion. The goal of the June 1 workshop was to prepare the groundwork for the development of this framework for agencies signatory to the Joint Strategic Plan to consider. Workshop participants focused on three essential questions:

1. Why do we need to develop a communication framework for the Joint Strategic Plan (and what are the impediments)?

There is a tremendous opportunity to let the public know about the work being done for the benefit of the resource. The public should be aware that cooperation and partnerships drive successful management. With cooperation in mind, agencies can communicate the success of the Plan to build new partnerships, trust, and relationships with stakeholders. Through strategic thinking and coordinated approaches, agencies can take advantage of opportunities that will improve relationships.

Currently, there are few guidelines for communicating joint initiatives, there are few structures to nurture strategic thinking with respect to outreach, and there are few agreements about methods for communication and how they should be funded. No one is directly responsible for communication initiatives under the Plan (though the commission's communications officer plays a coordinating role when the opportunity arises). With a communication framework, agencies would commit to communications and agree to mechanisms for implementation.

Like most communication efforts, the primary goal is mutual education. Education leads to familiarity, which leads to trust. If people feel "in the loop" and if they feel there is an effort to provide factual information, the result will be more and stronger partnerships and, thereby, the fostering of better resource management. Furthermore, a communication framework under the Joint Strategic Plan would help educate communication specialists and other personnel within participating agencies about the Plan, the initiatives under the plan, and how agencies cooperate. With more knowledge about the process, communication specialists could incorporate common themes and objectives into their own news releases, press interviews, meetings with stakeholders, etc. Not only will a communication framework nurture new communication materials for the public, but it could also help to have the Joint Strategic Plan reflected in the day-to-day activities of agencies.

Joint communication efforts improve consistency and credibility. Fisheries management on the Great Lakes is complex—there are several jurisdictions on each of the lakes and many interested stakeholders. Furthermore, the Great Lakes region has an active “press corps,” with many large and small newspapers and hundreds of outdoor writers. A common communication problem for any agency—big or small—is consistency in message; communications—whether they deal with narrow or broad issues—need to be consistent. Having several management agencies involved in nearly every fishery issue makes consistency extremely difficult. A common approach to communications would help increase the impact of messages by improving consistency, timing, and multi-point delivery.

Another reason for a communication framework is that it helps signatory agencies become more proactive. Too often in resource management, agencies are reactive and “on the defensive.” Messages sometimes are not communicated fully, audiences are not always targeted, and methods for communication are not always considered. By creating a structure for communications, agencies become proactive; they are better at communicating their programs and efforts.

Controversy and crisis situations pose their own challenges. Indeed, it is most frustrating when an issue is or becomes controversial to some—especially when controversy does not exist. Controversial issues could be dealt with head-on if fishery managers agree the time is right to address the issue. Joint initiatives to address controversial issues could increase credibility because they reflect agreement within a particular community. Knowing how to operate in a crisis is also important. If there is a crisis common to all agencies, the ability to respond effectively depends on consistency and preparedness. Having pre-determined strategies to deal with the crisis (including the existence of a communication network and the production of proper materials) is vital.

There are, however, impediments to achieving common communication goals. Rules and practices governing the day-to-day operations of individual signatory agencies may hinder or even prohibit participation in joint initiatives. Differences in laws relating to public access to information could jeopardize joint initiatives. Agencies may not have the authority nor the comfort level to be a part of joint communication initiatives. Internal agency pressures may be inconsistent with a particular initiative. Agencies might have unreasonable review times and procedures for review.

Cost, extra workload, and logistics are also considerations. Agencies may not have the resources to contribute to joint communication initiatives (whether costs relate to travel for personnel, printing, production time, etc). Communication specialists may not have the time to focus on issues relating to the Joint Strategic Plan. It might be logistically difficult for communication specialists to meet or to talk to formulate joint initiatives.

The advantages to a common approach to communications seem to outweigh the impediments, especially if lake committees have the will to commit themselves and their communication specialists to joint communication initiatives.

2. What kinds of subjects would communication initiatives address?

Obviously, communication initiatives under the Joint Strategic Plan would focus on issues relating to a particular lake as a whole or to the Great Lakes as a whole. Local issues, or issues relating to one particular agency, would be the responsibility of the agency. The communication framework for the Joint Strategic Plan is not intended to be a substitute for an agency’s public outreach or consultation obligations.

Many issues do in fact relate to a lake or to the Great Lakes ecosystem as a whole. Issues such as the status of the fishery, the state of the lakes, joint endeavors, and general facts can and should be communicated with a combined approach. These are the kinds of subjects where consensus among agencies exist. Indeed, the goal would be to focus on areas where agencies agree. If consensus does not exist, and if agencies agree to disagree, a communication effort could help frame and, perhaps help to resolve the debate.

Agencies may wish to embark on joint communications when they wish to make strong statements on key issues, even controversial issues. At times, it is beneficial to take a stand and to make a statement. The best approach in this situation may be to communicate to publics in a unified manner. This approach can assist in advising governments and exerting leadership.

Finally, agencies may wish to communicate issues relating to the implementation of the Joint Strategic Plan itself. Lake committee schedules, lake committee reports, plan revisions, etc. are all types of issues that could be addressed under a common framework.

3. How do we implement such a framework?

Participants of the June 1 workshop agreed that communications under the Joint Strategic Plan need to be left up to the individual lake committees. How a particular lake committee chooses to communicate should be decided by its members. Thus, implementation of a communication framework may differ from lake to lake. It is important, however, that the individual lake committees produce guidelines for their communications.

Fishery managers (who sit on the lake committees) need to drive the implementation process. Ideas for initiatives, spin, audiences, etc. should come from the managers. Communication specialists can and should be an integral part of the process by suggesting areas for communication, by strategizing about message, and by producing and disseminating methods of communication.

Any communication initiative starts by focusing on three main questions:

- a) Who are the **audiences**? Traditional audiences include: users, members of sport clubs, environmental groups, media, elected officials, NGOs, commercial fishers, management agency personnel (fishery and environmental), boaters and other non-traditional users, and the general public. Audience, of course, is highly dependent on the issue to be communicated.
- b) What is the **message**? Messages to communicate might include information about: the Plan itself, common initiatives (either lakewide or basin-wide), common problems, breaking news and crisis situations, and day-to-day management issues (such as stocking, harvest, habitat, etc.). Messages will generally highlight cooperation and science-based management. The specific message is dependent on the issue to be communicated.
- c) What are the **methods**? Traditional methods for communicating include (but are certainly not limited to): op-ed articles, news releases, press conferences, letters, stakeholder forums, newsletters, websites, fact sheets, brochures, videos, computer software/CD ROM, a publication containing common information/regulations about a particular lake, and campaigns to market fishing on a lake. Communication tools are indeed limitless.

(Appendix 2, page 13, outlines detailed questions to consider prior to any communication endeavor based on the “audience, message, methods” principle.)

Recommendations and Rationale

Based on discussions from the June 1998 workshop and based on the above considerations, this framework makes seven recommendations for consideration by lake committees and the Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies.

Recommendation 1: Lake committees and the Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies should commit in principle to undertake joint communication initiatives.

Lake committees and the Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies need to express their commitment to joint communications. The Council should consider making this communication framework an appendix to the Joint Strategic Plan for Management of Great Lakes Fisheries.

Recommendation 2: The Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies should write to the lake committees urging them to develop communication strategies.

A formal letter from the Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies to the individual lake committees would start the process for implementation of recommendation #3.

Recommendation 3: Individual lake committees should outline their goals, intentions, and methodology for communications.

This recommendation calls for “mini” communication plans for each lake committee. These plans may be no more than a statement about how the lake committee intends to approach communications. The purpose is to gather some commitment from the members and to have a guide to follow.

Recommendation 4: Lake committees should discuss specific communication initiatives during annual executive meetings.

Workshop participants agreed that individual lake committees will drive their own communication processes. By making communications a regular part of annual lake committee executive meetings, fishery managers would strategize and commit to implementation of communication initiatives. This also ensures consensus to communicate. By agreeing to discuss communication initiatives at least annually, lake committees would elevate communications to the same level as their other duties.

Recommendation 5: Fishery managers should provide direction and goals for communication initiatives. Communication specialists should assist in identifying issues, audiences, and methods, as well as implementing the initiative.

Communication specialists are adept at identifying audiences, message, and methods, as well as implementing communication initiatives. The fishery managers themselves, however, must play a key role in identifying key messages, issues, needs for communication, and audiences.

Recommendation 6: Agencies should bring communication specialists to lake committee meetings. These communication specialists should attend plenary sessions as well as observe the executive

sessions. Lake committees should consider creating a committee of communication specialists for their lake.

Having communication specialists attend lake committee meetings would encourage face-to-face interaction with peers and would facilitate strategizing. Communication specialists themselves would benefit from observing the lake committees in action; they would learn more about how the Great Lakes fishery is managed cooperatively. Such knowledge would be reflected in future communication initiatives. Communication specialists could also provide key input during lake committee executive sessions.

One option to facilitate communication specialists' involvement would be to have them function like a "technical committee," reporting to the lake committee members and operating based on advice from the lake committee members. The communication specialists on this "subcommittee" would take direction from the lake managers. The committee of communication specialists for each lake could choose a "chair" for a fixed period of time to serve as the coordinator for combined communication initiatives. This chair would receive support from the Great Lakes Fishery Commission staff (similar to the support that the Secretariat staff provides to the lake committee members) and would be the point person for communications including the handling of media inquiries, news release drafting, prodding lake managers for input, proofreading/quality control, etc.

Another option, instead of creating a committee of communication specialists, would be to have communication specialists attend lake committee meetings only when the need is apparent. This, however, ignores the benefits of regular interaction among communication specialists and it ignores the value communication specialists can add to lake committee discussions.

Recommendation 7: The Great Lakes Fishery Commission shall facilitate the implementation of common communication initiatives, including providing staff time, contributing to costs, and facilitating discussions when appropriate.

The Great Lakes Fishery Commission can continue to assist with postage and staff time for the production and mailing of common communication items such as news releases, letters, etc. Funding for major joint initiatives—such as brochures, press conferences, etc—would have to be arranged on an ad hoc basis. A general principle should be that agencies agreeing to major communication initiatives should contribute a commensurate amount of resources.

Process for Developing and Implementing a Communication Framework

Workshop participants agreed that it is appropriate for lake committees to consider and implement communication initiatives pursuant to their particular needs, goals, vision, etc. It is also appropriate for the Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies to provide recommendations to the lake committees in developing their approaches to communications.

The following calendar for considering this communication framework is suggested:

Date	Action
Aug. 1998	Draft communication framework distributed workshop participants.

Oct. 7-8 1998	Draft communication framework presented to the Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies for its consideration.
Dec. 1998	Revised communication framework discussed during Great Lakes Fishery Commission's Interim Meeting
Jan. 1998	Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies writes to Council of Lake Committees/lake committees, transmitting communication framework, for their consideration.
March 1999	Individual lake committees discuss communication framework during executive meetings. (Lake committees should discuss level of interest, commitment to the framework, and ways in which they can ensure its implementation.)
April 1999	Council of Lake Committees considers revised communication framework; summary of individual lake committee reaction, commitment, intentions, etc. presented.
June 1999	Great Lakes Fishery Commission considers/endorsees communication framework.

Conclusion

The strong commitment that agencies have to the Joint Strategic Plan should extend to communications. By working together, agencies can take advantage of the tremendous communication opportunities and the stakeholder desire for quality information. By committing to a structure, agencies take a big step toward ensuring that the media, the public, politicians, and stakeholders are aware of and appreciate the exceptional management of the Great Lakes fishery.

Appendix 1

Summary of Workshop Discussion

On June 1, 1998, the Great Lakes Fishery Commission convened a workshop in Chicago to discuss a communication framework for *A Joint Strategic Plan for Management of Great Lakes Fisheries*. This workshop was the result of a directive by the Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies, to have a framework developed. The commission's Gavin Christie facilitated the workshop. The following people participated:

Susan Adkinson, Ohio DNR
Tom Behlen, International Joint Commission
Dale Burkett, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Mike Cavanaugh, NY State Dept. of Env. Con.
John Cooley, Department of Fisheries and Oceans
John Cooper, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources
Jennifer Day, International Joint Commission
Tony Frank, U.S. Geological Survey
Marc Gaden, Great Lakes Fishery Commission
Vic Gillman, Department of Fisheries and Oceans
Chris Goddard, Great Lakes Fishery Commission
Joan Guilfoyle, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Paul Horvatin, Environmental Protection Agency
Gary Isbell, Ohio DNR
Bob Lange, NY State Dept. of Env. Con.
David Lonsdale, U.S. Committee of Advisors
Bill Mattes, G.L. Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission

Colleen O'Meara, Department of Fisheries and Oceans
Sandra Orsatti, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources
Jon Rittgers, National Marine Fisheries Service
Tom Trudeau, Illinois Department of Natural Resources
Gavin Christie, Great Lakes Fishery Comm., Facilitator

The goal of the June 1 workshop was to prepare the groundwork for the development of a communication framework for agencies signatory to the Joint Strategic Plan to consider.

The following section lists comments—in bullet form—put forward by workshop participants. The comments are in no particular order, though some consolidation and editing has occurred.

Why do we need to develop a communication framework for the Joint Strategic Plan?

- Simply because no framework for the Joint Strategic Plan exists.
- Agencies are not taking advantage of the success of the Plan nor the initiatives conducted under the Plan.
- A communication framework would provide a clear reference, to help guide the process.
- It would help educate the communications people within agencies about joint efforts with other agencies.
- It would help alert the public and the media when consensus is achieved.
- Agencies do a lot of work that could be communicated within the context of the Joint Strategic Plan. A framework would allow us to share information among fishery managers; it would help us communicate among ourselves.
- It would help deal with conflicting public perspectives.
- Common communication initiatives would help increase the impact of messages by improving consistency, timing, and multi-point delivery.
- It would help improve success of joint initiatives (education leads to increased support).
- It would allow agencies to be proactive.
- It would increase our profile and would help provide better coverage of lake committee meetings and the initiatives that grow out of them.
- It would help agencies justify issues as priority.
- It would allow agencies to be proactive with the media instead of “reacting” to just the hot issues. It would allow to develop better relationships with the media; to share contacts.
- It would allow to share resources and expertise vis-à-vis communications. It would provide a combined approach.
- It could help approach public participation in a more unified manner.
- It would help establish credibility with the public, with politicians, with the media, and with cooperators because it demonstrates we are working together.
- It could help deal with a crisis in a unified, timely, credible manner.

What are the impediments to developing a communication framework for the Joint Strategic Plan?

- Particular agencies may not have the authority nor the comfort level to be a part of a joint communication initiative.
- Internal agency pressures and policies may be inconsistent with a particular communication initiative.
- Agencies might have unreasonable review times and procedures for review.
- Extra workload/competitive uses of information officers' time could limit the amount of time available for issues relating to the Joint Strategic Plan.

- Differences in laws relating to public access to information, consultation processes, etc. could hinder the process.
- Costs of joint initiatives could be prohibitive.
- Logistics in trying to deliver a consistent message. (I.E. how do we get people together to do this?)
- Media sometimes do not see how information is interesting locally. (I.E. common initiatives often lack a local spin.)
- Good news is not news. May have trouble getting the attention of the media.

What kinds of subjects would communication initiatives address?

- Strong statements on key issues (phosphorus in Lake Erie, for example).
- Science issues. Put science first.
- Things agencies commonly agree on. Consensus issues.
- Issues where the commission can exert leadership.
- Issues that will advise the governments.
- If the agencies agree to disagree, a communication effort could help frame the debate.
- Issues relating to the Joint Strategic Plan process.
- Specific communication initiatives depend on audiences. Products would tend to include statements about the status of the fishery, reports about the state of the lakes, etc. Also, general information is useful. Facts and issues.

How do we implement such a framework?

- [Answers to this question tended to be less conclusive.]
- Fishery managers need to drive the process. That is, ideas for initiatives, spin, etc. should come from the managers. Communication specialists can and should be an integral component of identifying issues as well.
- Lake committees need to accept the framework, understand the need for communications, and commit to implementing joint initiatives. Implementation must be left to each lake committee. The Council of Great Lakes Fishery Agencies can evaluate how lake committees are doing with joint communication initiatives.
- Individual agencies must be committed.
- A strategy might be to have a PR profile only when there is a need for one.

Appendix 2

A Communication Strategy Considers Three Things: Audience, Message and Methods

I. Issues

- ‘ What is the subject of our communication?
- ‘ Who have we consulted to identify the issues?
- ‘ What is the level of public interest?
- ‘ Who are the key people involved?

II. Initial Planning

- ‘ What is the message we want to convey? What is the spin?
- ‘ Who are the audiences we want to reach?
- ‘ How is the information relevant to the audiences’ lives?
- ‘ How much detail do we need to include?
- ‘ How could the message be (mis)interpreted?
- ‘ What is newsworthy about this message?
- ‘ Who will convey the message?
- ‘ When will the message be conveyed?
- ‘ How will the message be conveyed?
- ‘ What are potential roadblocks?
- ‘ How will we know the message has been conveyed?

III. Communication Requirements

- ‘ What degree of involvement is required of the audience?
- ‘ How will the audience be involved?

IV. Implementation

- ‘ Have the communication goals been implemented?
- ‘ Have we seen a response from the audience?
- ‘ What is the nature of the audience’s response?
- ‘ What did you learn from the audience’s response?
- ‘ What is the impact on our image with the audience?

V. Feedback and Action

- ‘ How has the audience’s feedback changed our actions?
- ‘ How have we let the public know that the input was considered?
- ‘ Has the feedback review process worked?