

## The “Collaborative” Delphi

There have been various permutations of Delphi since it was first established as a forecasting technique in the 1950s. The Classical Delphi technique has been used as a forecasting technique as well as a way to establish study results using expert opinion in areas where conventional research techniques are unavailable. Policy Delphi was established in the late 60s for application in the social sciences to aid in policy decision-making. Decision Delphi was proposed in 1979 as a way of consciously developing a field of interest rather than allowing small, unrelated decisions to guide its development. In the early 90s at least two papers introduced the use of Policy Delphi for environmental dispute resolution. Here I would like to introduce a new variant of Delphi used by the Sustainable Rangelands Roundtable that, for the purposes of this paper, I will call “collaborative”.

The Delphi approaches have in common several attributes. It is an iterative process whereby an expert panel is carefully selected, questionnaires are sent out, responses are collated, group responses are returned to participants in the form of analysis and comments, and individuals are given the opportunity to revise their original responses in response to group feedback. In the Classical form, the Delphi process continues until a pre-determined level of consensus is achieved. In reality, the Delphi process tends to continue for about three rounds. Though it is important to let the group know that they are working with peers, individual anonymity is guaranteed. Delphi benefits include: allowing respondents to participate who dislike speaking up in group situations; removing a fear of publicly disagreeing with superiors or saying something “stupid”; and disallowing the process to be domineered by the few. It allows one to more freely change an opinion in response to group feedback. It is critical for the legitimacy of the survey that the design team remains unbiased and report the group summary as closely as possible to reflect individual opinions.

The Sustainable Rangelands Roundtable (SRR) has been using the Delphi process in conjunction with group meetings to accomplish its mission. The SRR can meet only 4-5 times a year but stretches this limited time by using the “collaborative” Delphi in between meetings. The SRR has used Delphi to: work towards vision and mission statements and guiding principles; illicit feedback on a document produced at a meeting; and to get feedback and develop a proposed classification system. Rather than doing as many Delphi rounds as needed to reach a pre-determined level of consensus, as in the Classical Delphi, the SRR simply does as many Delphi iterations as time allows between meetings.

The advantages for using the collaborative approach on a consensus-building project are great. In addition to the overall benefits of Delphi stated above, it saves valuable time in meetings for other work to be accomplished. The Delphi process may not resolve an issue fully, but it will bring the group closer to being able to make a decision during a meeting. Overall, it may reduce the number of meetings needed. It also allows the planners to involve more people in the process. That is, busy schedules may restrict meeting attendance for some critical players. These people may still participate through Delphi. Including Delphi in the process lends continuity and keeps participants engaged in the process.

Topics for Delphi can be chosen on the basis of what will best continue the work of the previous meeting or what will help prepare for a future meeting or other need. Some uses of Collaborative Delphi could be to make progress on a single contentious issue, brainstorm and prioritize issues, review and revise a document, or develop common goals. While Delphi might not be able to bring the group into consensus, it can clarify the spread of opinion so that when the group re-assembles, compromise is more easily reached.