



# Improving Decision-making by Incorporating Public Comment

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# Challenge: Effective Use of Public Input

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## Known to public

- Public's comments are requested
- But many comments don't seem to be valued
- This leads to public distrust of the decision-making process

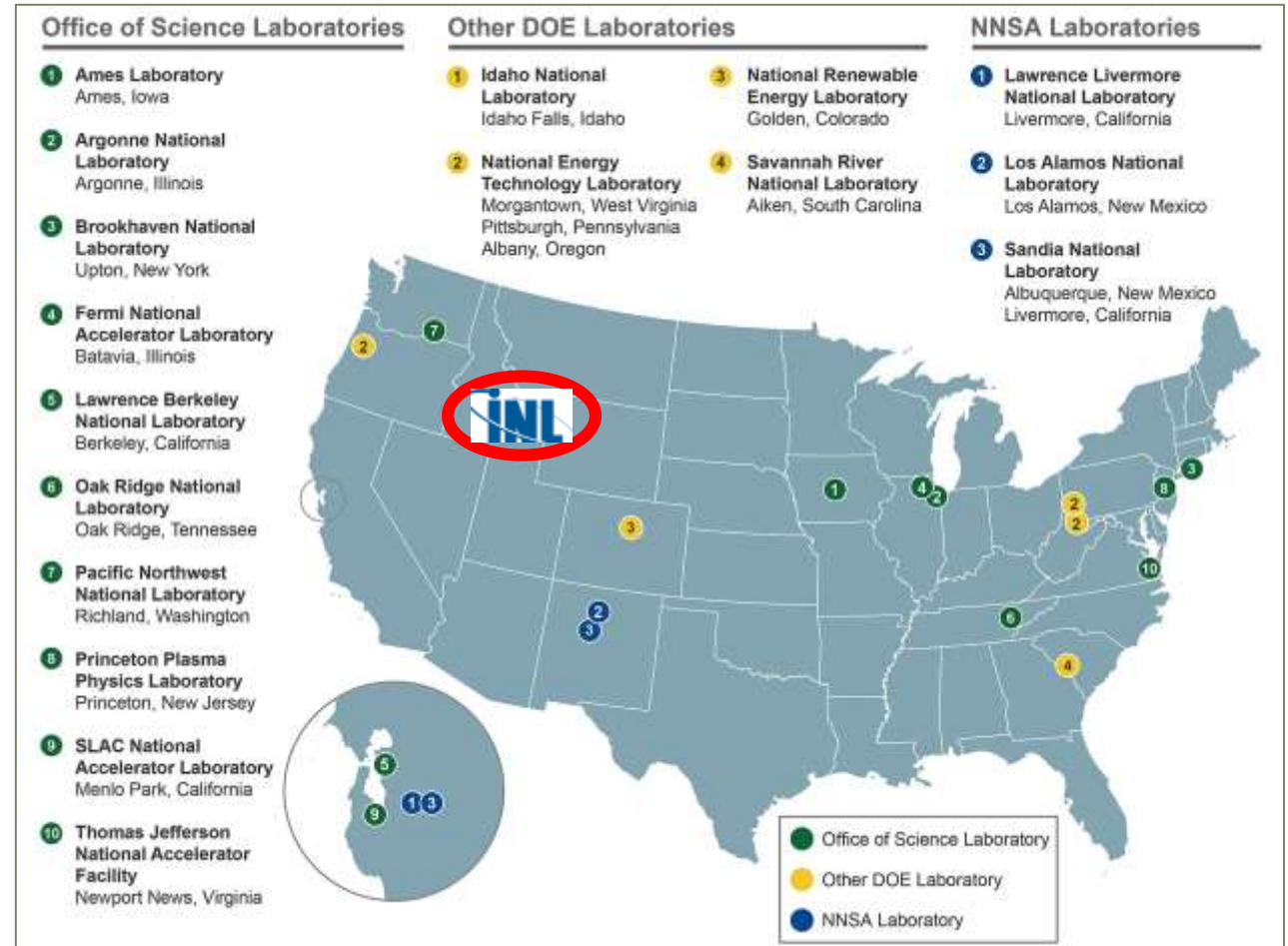


## Unknown to public

- What do decision-makers *really* consider public comment?
- If so, how?

# Setting: U.S. Department of Energy facility

- Government's lead nuclear energy laboratory
- Historic use for disposal of nuclear and hazardous mixed waste
- Contamination of soil and vadose zone above aquifer
- Risks to residents, agriculture, environment



# *Observation: Some Teams More Responsive*

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## **Less Responsive**

- More reliance on use of “out of scope”
- Less investigation of public input
- Increased potential for less robust, less sustainable solutions

## **More Responsive**

- Less reliance on “out of scope”
- More investigation of public input
- Greater potential for more robust, more sustainable solutions

# *Goal:* Identify Differences in Responsive Teams

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- Qualitative, interpretive inquiry
- Semi-structured interviews
  - Based on organizational autoethnography conducted by lead author
- 16 participants, 11 completions
  - EM professionals with > 15 years experience who participated in public participation processes
- Strategic snowball sampling
- Coded and analyzed using modified grounded theory

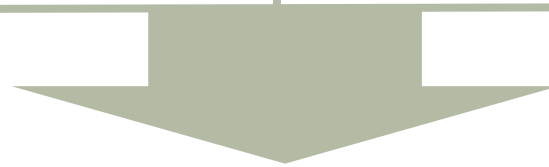


# *Basis for Decisions: Common Approaches*

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- Formal Western linear decision processes
  - “technical rationality”  
(Krimsky & Plough, 1988)

- Lived experience, story, analogy, feelings
  - “cultural rationality”  
(Duffield Hamilton, 2003)



## Research questions:

1. To what extent do experts use cultural rationality in environmental decision-making?
2. How do experts who use cultural rationality manage the tensions that arise from its use?

# Results

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- Participants evaluated alternative perspectives and dimensions of issues
  - “Dialectical complexity” (Conway et al., 2008)
- Satisfaction of widely differing values and needs created internal tensions
- Resolved by working in interdisciplinary teams
- Teams had (relatively) flat power structures, allowing them to use dialogue and deliberation to reach decisions
  - Dialogue and deliberation is aided by communication competence
- Teams relied on collective wisdom to reach integrative decisions
  - These decisions are robust and sustainable – hallmarks of integrative solutions (Suedfeld, Leighton, & Conway, 2006)

# Discussion and Conclusions

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- Dialectical complexity at a group level incorporates stakeholders' voices in a decision-making process forming an integrative solution

## Requirements:

- Communication competence
- Interdisciplinary team membership with diversity of thought and experience
  - Allows the team to use its members' collective wisdom
  - Champions for every stakeholder perspective (dialogue)
- Flat power structure
  - Allows for each perspective to be weighed fairly (deliberation)



# References and Further Reading

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# For more information:

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