

Responding to Changes with Creativity: Using Video-Conferencing for America's Great Outdoors

Under Secretary of Agriculture Harris Sherman recently told recreation leaders that the Forest Service and other key federal agencies providing recreation opportunities could not continue to pursue the same recreation program strategies in an era of declining federal resources and changing – and hopefully again *growing* – demand for safe fun in the Great Outdoors. He and others have called for new partnerships and new creativity – and stronger than ever communications.

Yet communications will be complicated by new restrictions on federal travel and meetings, restrictions prompted by both general budgetary restraint and by reaction to highly publicized meeting mismanagement by the General Services Administration. While policies are still evolving, indications are that traditional participation by federal agency staff in many recreation community meetings will not continue. Most federal agencies are now requiring approval of travel at very senior levels; agency-sponsored and -cosponsored meetings generally must occur at federal facilities.

One consequence is that many agencies are actively moving toward use of video-conferencing. And this is a good thing, overall. Yet there are clear indications that initial steps in this direction may have unintended consequences.

An initial survey of federal agency video-conferencing efforts suggests that there is inconsistency in selection of technology, agency to agency. The risk is that agencies may create good silos – video solutions that work well for individual agencies but which complicate efforts which reflect the spirit of America's Great Outdoors – “landscape-wide” and cross-agency efforts. And virtually no attention is being paid to facilitation of interaction via video-conferencing with non-federal partners in the recreation community.

The time is ripe for agency leadership to examine 21st century communications issues and to take efforts which empower the kinds of partnerships and creativity called for by Under Secretary Sherman.

For twenty years, Partners Outdoors has been a mechanism for looking at key, broad issues like participation in outdoor activities by youth, in the importance of corridors like greenways and rivers and byways to meeting recreation needs, to boosting non-appropriated funding for federal recreation programs, to the connection between the Great Outdoors and human health and more. It is appropriate and important that the 2013 Partners Outdoors session be a forum for sharing on what is now being done in video-conferencing, what technologies are available and how the evolution of video-conferencing solutions can avoid creating new barriers to effective communications at a critical point in time.

Partners Outdoors 2013 is planned for early February in the Washington, DC, area – perhaps with physical sessions occurring both at NCTC and at a Washington, DC,

location. But remote participation might also be a planned and important component of the forum. In addition to presentations on internal agency video-conferencing efforts, Partners Outdoors would highlight low-cost video-conferencing options that would facilitate cross-agency and agency-public interaction. With options like Skype, ooVoo now available and the promise of cloud-based video conference solution that they can easily scale up or down depending on the number of people who need to use it – and eliminating the need for very expensive hardware – it is time to focus on how to harness this communications option to advance recreation on federal lands.

We invite FICOR to join leading non-federal partners in using Partners Outdoors 2013 to identify goals and avoid the kind of costly incompatibilities that accompanied the adoption of GIS technology a generation ago.

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