



# Regional Federal Perspectives

## Background

The Fifty States Initiative is “a partnership between the National States Geographic Information Council [NSGIC] and the Federal Geographic Data Committee [FGDC]. It is designed to bring all public and private stakeholders together in statewide GIS [geographic information system] coordination bodies that help to form effective partnerships and lasting relationships” (NSGIC 2009). To implement the initiative, the FGDC supports States’ efforts to develop and implement statewide strategic and business plans that facilitate the coordination of programs, policies, and technologies in support of the National Spatial Data Infrastructure (FGDC 2008). For more information about the Fifty States Initiative, see the FGDC web site

<http://www.fgdc.gov/policyandplanning/50states/50states> and the NSGIC web site [http://www.nsgic.org/hottopics/fifty\\_states.cfm](http://www.nsgic.org/hottopics/fifty_states.cfm).

The FGDC started supporting State strategic and business planning activities in 2006. Including awards made in 2009, 41 States, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands have received support.

The FGDC is reviewing the Fifty States Initiative. One goal of the review is to enhance coordination efforts through better inclusion of Federal agencies and programs. The FGDC is engaging Federal personnel to gain insights about how coordination can be enhanced.

Because regional offices of Federal agencies often have responsibilities to carry out Federal programs, the FGDC sought perspectives from regional Federal personnel who have responsibilities for coordinating their agency’s geospatial activities with those of State and local government agencies in their regions. Six persons from four agencies were interviewed. These persons coordinate with fourteen States, of which eleven have completed or ongoing “Fifty States” planning activities.

They were asked questions developed for the review. The questions asked and the main points from their responses are provided below. The responses might not be consistent because the individuals interviewed, and their agencies, have different views and experiences.

For more information about the interviews, please contact Michael Domaratz by telephone at 703.317.6929 or by electronic mail to [mdomaratz@mbakercorp.com](mailto:mdomaratz@mbakercorp.com).

## Are personnel in regions aware of the National and State Fifty States activities?

- The Federal Geographic Data Committee’s (FGDC) national Fifty States Initiative
  - Limited awareness of the national initiative
  - Most knowledge is gained from meetings, such as those of National States Geographic Information Council (NSGIC) and regional groups
- Individual States’ “Fifty States” activities
  - Depends in part on how actively the State advertises its efforts

## Regional Federal Perspectives

- Some individuals actively participate; other individuals participate passively through receipt of meeting announcements, notes, and anecdotes.
- Individuals might participate in some States, but not in others, because of different levels of awareness of States' activities.

### How could Federal agencies benefit from State Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Strategic and Business Plans?

- **Increase in communication among organizations** (local, regional, state, federal, private, academic, and non-profit) that collect and use geospatial data within the State
- **Ability to identify organizations' business needs** that underpin needs for geospatial data. A better understanding of this might allow participants to suggest substitutions and trade-offs.
- **Ability to coordinate and consolidate otherwise independent geospatial data collection efforts being conducted** by entities within a State (in cases where the benefits of coordination outweigh the costs) by:
  - **Making data easier to compile and use:** A project might cover a watershed, a corridor, or an area defined by an issue. Anything (such as use of common content, accuracy, or coordinate system specifications) that reduces the cost of integrating data collected by multiple entities helps.
  - **Aligning needs and schedules** of programs that collect data
  - **Pooling available funding** to procure data at less cost, or to obtain better data (e.g. expanded content, better accuracy, larger area of coverage, or fewer restrictions on use), than organizations could procure on their own
- **Opportunity to create a focal point for geospatial activities in the State by:**
  - **Developing a stable geospatial coordination effort** in a State. Some States have a hit-and-miss record on coordination.
  - **Aligning views and adjudicating differences among organizations** within a State. In addition to helping align resources among State organizations, it can provide support for Federal program alignment with State plans.
  - **Gaining State executives' recognition that geospatial data are a critical element of infrastructure.** Avoid the waxing and waning of support caused by different priorities of new officials.
  - **Providing a central point of contact with local governments** within a State. Federal officials who need to reach out to local government staff regarding geospatial efforts would appreciate any help that State officials can provide. States might act in the role of a central certifier of data for

which the State has legal responsibilities, such as the boundaries of governmental units.

### How do Federal agencies participate in or contribute to the planning efforts?

- **Agencies directly participate:** Regional Federal personnel are interested in the planning efforts of States within their region, but their availability to participate varies.
  - **Available resources** to support participation vary by agency.
  - **Changing workloads** affect the ability of individuals to participate. Sometimes the change in workload is predictable (e.g. tasks that are seasonal or follow a program cycle) and sometimes not (e.g. unanticipated budget, program, or staffing changes). Commitments to participate in States' planning activities might not be fulfilled.
  - **Personnel are limited in the number of States' planning activities** in which they can participate at one time. Federal regions can cover many States. At least one agency is considering the development of a State liaison structure.
  - **Regional Federal GIS organizations provide a means for States to provide outreach** to multiple Federal agencies regarding planning efforts at one time. One such group is the Regional Interagency Mapping Coordination Working Group, a collection of Federal agencies based in Denver.
  - **Transition in participation:** Many years ago there was direct participation by a Federal agency in State activities, with Federal personnel leading and guiding the direction. The agency intentionally stepped back to allow State to manage and set the direction appropriate for the State. Federal personnel now remain aware but do not actively participate.
- **Federal personnel participate because of their personal initiative and professional interests.** The perspective of an agency might be shared in such participation, but the participant has no formal authority to represent the agency.
- **Agencies indirectly participate through State agencies affiliated with a Federal program:** Some Federal agencies administer their programs, in whole or in part, through State agencies and personnel. The ability of these personnel to represent a Federal program in State planning efforts varies.
  - In cases where the affiliated State agency is the same as, or administratively close to, the State agency that carries out the planning efforts, the Federal program often is represented well in the planning efforts.
  - In cases where the affiliated State agency is administratively more "distant" from the State agency that carries out the planning effort, the

## Regional Federal Perspectives

views of the Federal program are less well represented or are not represented. This “distance” can be caused by a lack of knowledge of planning efforts among State agencies, politics among State agencies, and other factors.

- In addition to the “administrative distance” among State agencies, the short tenure of the State personnel who carry out a Federal program in an affiliated agency influences the effectiveness of their participation in planning efforts. Some positions in affiliated State agencies have high turnover, and so State personnel who carry out the Federal program lack the knowledge and relationships to participate effectively in planning efforts.
- **Agencies indirectly participate through USGS state geospatial liaisons:** USGS liaisons provide a means for Federal personnel to learn about State planning efforts. The USGS personnel often have a longer tenure and stronger relationships among organizations in their State, and have sufficient knowledge of Federal programs to alert other Federal personnel about opportunities in which their agency might be interested.
- **“One size” of Federal agency participation will not fit all Federal agencies or States.**
  - **Federal geospatial activities vary by region of the United States and sometimes by State.** An agency that has a major role in some States might have little or no relevance in other States. For example, Federal agencies manage large areas of land in the western United States. They may have extensive geospatial activities that support their management responsibilities, and these activities would have major implications to coordination activities in those States. Some Federal programs have more of an urban focus, some more of a rural focus. Some have a technology focus.
  - **States vary in their readiness to engage Federal agencies in planning activities.** Some States actively engage Federal agencies in their coordination activities; others prefer to concentrate on getting State government (or State and local government) concerns “in order” before engaging Federal agencies. **Insights from States about the stage at which they need to be before engaging Federal agencies would be helpful.**

### **Could national program managers in Federal agencies align resources with other organizations better if they considered the state plans?**

Yes, and many agencies align resources with their counterparts in State and local government today, and have done so for years.

## Regional Federal Perspectives

There are constraints on the extent to which such alignments can occur. Regional Federal personnel work through such constraints every day as they interact with their State and local government colleagues to coordinate geospatial data activities.

Some constraints are listed below. The list is provided so that future plans to better align programs consider relevant factors. These factors are items to be managed, and probably are not items that can be “solved.”

- **Ensuring that the performance goals of Federal programs, which might not be geospatial, are met:** In many agencies, geospatial activities occur within the context of a larger program or project (e.g. administering flood insurance, taking a Census, planning and building public works). As agencies recognize the strategic value of geospatial data, they carefully schedule and budget to ensure that (1) the geospatial activities are successful and (2) the geospatial activities occur within a budget and schedule that ensures the success of follow-up program activities.

Agencies are evaluated on the success of these larger program goals, for which the geospatial activities might have only a supporting role. The need to ensure the success of the overall program, on which the agency and managers are evaluated, can result in managers being less concerned about State or local geospatial plans and goals. This is especially true for cases in which geospatial data have a supporting role in the Federal program, and State and local plans conflict with or cannot be accommodated to the national program goals, budgets, and schedules.

- **Creating projects sensible within the model in which the Federal program operates:** Some agencies have long-term, enduring programs that occur in the same place (at a local, regional, or national scale); such programs lend themselves to developing a long-term relationship with States in which plans to align resources can be developed and honored.

Other programs tend to operate on (1) a topical (e.g. a study of fauna in an area) or event (e.g. a security event or disaster) basis, in which the scope, location, timing, and endurance of a project can vary greatly; or (2) a cyclical basis, where an area is infrequently revisited to undertake geospatial data collection activities. It is more difficult to understand how the resources for such programs can be aligned with long-term plans.

Variations among these models exist, and agencies might simultaneously operate programs that use different models. (A useful exercise would be to map the duration of planned geospatial activities so that they match the duration of the projects and programs from which support is sought.)

- **Recognizing that people can be more important than the agency:** Participation often happens because personnel desire and act on it, and less because of the agency per se.
- **Allowing the flexibility required to manage a Federal program:** The continuing emphasis on Federal program performance effectiveness requires personnel to manage the programs actively, and not just let them “happen.” Management actions can include adjustments to the scope, location, schedule, and budget for program activities, including the geospatial components of an activity.

## Regional Federal Perspectives

In aligning Federal resources to take advantage of a State plan, a Federal manager needs to decide if the benefits gained from participating in a plan outweigh the reduction in management flexibility incurred by committing to a plan.

Commitment to a plan can reduce the flexibility needed to make program adjustments; but renegeing on a plan can hinder the ability to achieve program goals.

There are examples in which a Federal agency published a long-term plan, a State subsequently aligned its geospatial activities to support the plan, and the Federal agency later amended the plan in a way that precluded its use of the new State data. (There also are examples of a Federal agency amending its plans to take advantage of new State data.)

When the geospatial activities occur wholly within a program, program executives can mitigate the effects of changes. When such activities involve external parties, when they are available; and improve the ability of a manager to mitigate the effects, is limited.

- **Recognizing that “resource alignment” can occur in different ways.** Some ways might be more effective than others.
  - **Aligning resources by pooling them before the fact:** In this approach, Federal agencies share resources (funds, services, etc.) with others to acquire desired products, services, or other outcomes. The benefits of such alignments accrue directly to the project and participating organizations. Examples include the pooling of funds to collect imagery (e.g. National Agricultural Imagery Program and urban imagery) and elevation (various efforts) data, and the sharing of work to develop hydrography data (i.e. National Hydrography Dataset).
  - **Aligning resources by providing them after the fact:** In this approach, Federal agencies provide credits to organizations that contribute geospatial products and services to a Federal project. This approach provides financial benefits to the contributor. Unless they contributed the products and service to the project, organizations(s) that financed the products and services would not receive benefits. The project that developed the products and services probably would not benefit, because it likely would have been completed. FEMA’s credits to communities that provide geospatial data to support a flood hazard mapping project is an example of this approach.
  - **Aligning resources by avoiding duplication:** In this approach, Federal agencies use a plan to anticipate products and services that will be used for a project, and allocate project resources to avoid expenditures that would duplicate such products and services. The financial benefits accrue to the Federal project (and, more generally, the taxpayer), but not to the projects(s) or organization(s) that developed the geospatial products and services.
- **Crafting plans in a way that provides Federal programs flexibility in participation, so that they can align resources to the extent to which it is**

## Regional Federal Perspectives

- sensible to the program.** Contribution from a Federal program to a project should be commensurate with the outcomes needed by a program. For example, FEMA's flood hazard mapping studies often need detailed elevation data in flat areas, but not for everywhere covered by a study.
- **Allowing for the realities and vagaries of the Federal budget calendar, schedules and cycles.** A new initiative can take years to develop, and sometimes funds must be obligated quickly. Projects might be developed to allow for participants who arrive late (or suddenly), or can add value to an initial project later (e.g. add deeper content to an initial data collection effort).
  - **Recognizing that Federal agencies have different authorities for obligating resources which might limit their ability to participate.** Some agencies, for example, do not have the authority to make grants.
  - **Occurring in a way sensible to other partners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of the Federal program.** Federal programs provide resources, products, services, and other benefits to a number of stakeholders. Stakeholders are mindful of the number of resources available in a program and how they are allocated. There is seldom sufficient funding to meet all program needs. In cases where non-Federal organizations (State agencies, local governments, private or non-profit organizations) are funded to carry out a program, these organizations desire the "cleanest" administration of resources possible (e.g. maximum discretion, fewest mandates, and lowest overhead).

To the extent that resource alignment between a Federal program and a State plan seems sensible to other program stakeholders, they will be a valuable ally to both. To the extent to which an alignment dilutes a program by reducing program benefits or increasing program costs, stakeholders will object to the alignment, especially if the benefits of an alignment do not accrue to them.

Consider this example: In meetings hosted by the FGDC in the past, participants have remarked about the desirability of tapping Federal transportation funds to develop a national road data layer. For the purpose of the example, assume that the members of NSGIC would be in favor of such an initiative. If the members of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials were also interested, the alignment of these interests would be powerful. If not, the State plans could foster agreement needed at the State and local level (e.g. better coordination within State government, etc.) to develop such an alignment of interests.

- **Recognizing the influence of other organizations on what can be done, and how things should be done.** Organizations such as the Management Association for Private Photogrammetric and Surveyors and the American Society for Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing influence how Federal agencies pursue geospatial activities.

### How might the Fifty States Initiative dovetail with other Federal Initiatives (nationally or within the region)?

- It would be remarkable if FGDC-funded State plans did not dovetail (or at least support or anticipate) with FGDC-supported national initiatives and programs for imagery, elevation, etc.
- Provide a focal point for needs and relationships within a State, so the State is ready to participate as initiatives are developed.
- Encourage the understanding that geospatial data are an asset in the State. Some geospatial data have this status (e.g. plat maps in local government).
- Provide success stories (e.g. cost-benefit analyses, etc) for coordination.
- Dovetailing of objectives is too optimistic. There is an interest in the programs being compatible.
- Federal agencies with overlapping responsibilities tend to make it harder for them to cooperate with each other and with the States.
- We will need to learn the bureaucracy and work within its constraints, likely at a slower pace.

### References

Federal Geographic Data Committee, 2008, Policy & planning:

<http://www.fgdc.gov/policyandplanning>. (Accessed February 13, 2009)

National States Geographic Information Council, 2009, Fifty States initiative:

[http://www.nsgic.org/hottopics/fifty\\_states.cfm](http://www.nsgic.org/hottopics/fifty_states.cfm). (Accessed February 13, 2009)