

An Informal Federal Response to NSGIC's "Criteria for Federal Coordination of Geographic Information Technology – A State Perspective"

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Background

At its fall conference, NSGIC presented the paper entitled "Criteria for Federal Coordination of Geographic Information Technology – A State Perspective" with the stated purpose that "this document identifies those requirements that promote effective partnerships and solid working relationships between state and Federal government agencies concerning the development and deployment of the National Spatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI)" (see http://www.nsgic.org/resources/federal_coordination_factors_may2008.pdf). Following the session, a small group of Federal representatives met and decided to develop an informal Federal response to the criteria as feedback to NSGIC. Since then, the group has also been pursuing ideas with NSGIC on how to use the mid-year conference to improve Federal-State coordination. Some of these ideas will be implemented at the upcoming Mid-year meeting February 22-24 in Annapolis, including an evening session on Federal-State coordination with the goal of generating dialog on the criteria and how to improve collaboration.

The FGDC Coordination Group (GC) was solicited for input to the NSGIC criteria. Comments were received from the Census Bureau, USGS, USDA and NOAA. This document represents a compilation of the responses to the criteria. This feedback will be presented to NSGIC and presented at the Federal-State coordination session at the Mid-year.

Overview

The Federal representatives who provided input generally believe that many of the points in NSGIC's criteria document are worthy goals and that it would be helpful to better define the best practices that lead to successful State-Federal coordination. However, the majority expressed concern that the criteria themselves do not reflect Federal perspectives and thus appear to be one-sided, not fully meaningful in the Federal context, and in some cases, unrealistic. Because of this, it is unlikely that these criteria will be universally embraced in the Federal sector.

Further, the NSGIC document does not clearly define the intended outcome of the criteria, nor describe an overall process for implementing them. In terms of ratings, it is important for participants to evaluate themselves, and also receive feedback from partners. NSGIC states evaluate themselves using the criteria they themselves developed and have not provided an opportunity for Federal or local government to provide feedback to either the criteria or the ratings. The next phase in developing and implementing coordination criteria, both for State and Federal organizations, should focus on creating mechanisms to acquire more comprehensive input to create a more realistic picture of current status and help us to understand common areas for improvement.

In summary, if the goal is to "guide states and federal agencies through their partnership-building processes", both should play a role in defining criteria for mutually beneficial partnerships. Federal partners have an interest to collaborate with NSGIC to pursue improved coordination and communication. The following are some general recommendations. Specific comments and recommendations on each of the NSGIC criteria follow.

General Recommendations

- Create a 2-way dialog on how to improve Federal-State coordination, including the use of criteria and other means. In a true dialog, all parties are expected to express, listen to, and respect all opinions and comments made. Differences of opinion should be discussed.
- Include Federal perspectives in creating/revising the criteria.

- Develop a process for Federal, State and perhaps local representatives to provide feedback to compare self-evaluations with external perspectives.
- Consider an approach that rates both sides of a partnership as a whole.
- Clearly define the intended outcome, process, and proposed use of standards against which the criteria are measured.
- Along with criteria include a Terms of Reference section: For example, “agency,” “office,” “program,” etc. are used throughout but could have different meanings depending on what NSGIC’s intent is, not to mention the reality of the Federal organizational landscape.
- Include examples as models for what works, and perhaps what doesn’t. This would help in implementing criteria as well as in devising them.
- Revise some basic terminology. For example, stating what Federal agencies “must” do and that “all” Federal agencies should conduct business certain ways is unrealistic and may be negatively received.

Criteria 1: Clear, Defined Lines of Communications

Comments:

- Many Federal agencies have assigned Points of Contacts (POCs) to each state. Roles and responsibilities held by those POCs will differ based on agency mission and make-up, but no POC will have authority to revise programs or establish special criteria for national programs. Expecting the POC to act as a *facilitator*, convey a consistent agency message, answer questions and work to solve issues is reasonable and mutually beneficial.
- For the communication factors to be successful, these activities must be a two-way street. A key to a good Federal-State coordination effort is having effective coordinators and coordination councils. This requires structured meetings with specified outcomes, and follow-through with effective communication, adherence to timelines, and implementation strategies.

Recommendations:

- Continue to work with Federal agencies, contacting the Federal agency to request the establishment of a POC or channel of communication where none currently exist, and to strengthen relationships when they do, by mutually identifying and defining criteria by which the agency and the state will interact to support an effective association.
- Recognize that Federal missions vary. For some, geospatial is a primary mission focus, for others it is a tool to support another mission. Federal regions also vary. Thus it is unlikely that a one-size-fits-all solution of a dedicated POC to the statewide council and state coordinator will work for all Federal agencies. Other options may be possible for providing communication channels, for example Federal coordinating councils.

Criteria 2: Commitment to Coordination with other Federal and National Organizations

Comments:

- Federal agencies support improved coordination with other Federal agencies and with other national organizations.

Criteria 3: Coordinated Federal Program Development

Comments:

- Federal funding is often tied to specific line items and it may not be possible for an agency to repurpose funding to provide a “common program” or common solution that a state may deem more generally beneficial.
- Data provided through WFS/WMS and Web 2.0 is highly desirable. However, interconnectivity and real time access to data holdings are not always realistic. In many cases, much processing,

editing, application of rules and calculations takes place behind the scenes. Products may require benchmarking, locking data, edge matching, etc., and these requirements will determine how data are made available.

- Some Federal agencies currently work to the extent possible across government to coordinate activities and unify direction. However, Federal agencies must work with multiple State voices (not just one or even 50) and thousands of local voices. The goal of having the Federal government speak with one voice is unrealistic and ultimately doomed to fail. A more beneficial approach would be to gain an improved understanding of Federal drivers and constraints in order to focus efforts on the areas that can be changed.

Criteria 4: Interaction with Statewide Coordination Councils

- Many Federal agencies would like to support and use the state business plans. One issue is a lack of consistency in the plans that make them difficult to use systematically.
- In general, Federal agencies would like to work through state coordination councils, however there are many cases where councils can not enter into agreements or state agencies cannot allow the council to speak for them. Not all stakeholders of interest to Federal agencies are necessarily linked to statewide councils.
- Varying Federal agency missions, regions and practices mean it is unlikely that a one-size-fits-all solution of a dedicated POC to the statewide council will work for all Federal agencies. Other options may be possible for providing communication channels, for example Federal coordinating councils.
- Not all Federal agencies' missions include grants programs. This should not be included in the criteria.

Recommendations

- Seek ways to improve consistency between state plans. This is beginning to be addressed in the current 50 States Initiative contract.
- Recognize the limitations of statewide councils to speak for state agencies and other stakeholders, develop joint State-Federal strategies and document best practices for addressing this as appropriate.
- NSGIC could provide Federal agencies insights or preferred methods of coordination for States that do not have councils.

Criteria 5: Program Development in Partnership with States

- Many Federal agencies do try to consult with states and accommodate their needs and incorporate their available resources whenever possible when developing data or programs.
- Geospatial data standards should not be modified to ensure effective partnership opportunities, unless an official amendment is undertaken.

Recommendations

- Federal agencies should consult with states for their input when developing programs, or planning data acquisition. Where that has not occurred, criteria for the data or program may be modified if the impact on the Federal agency is not prohibitive in terms of cost or resource expenditure. We recognize that state and local governments many times work at a higher resolution than is necessary for Federal work, and where it is affordable and feasible, Federal agencies do try to accommodate the needs of its non-Federal partners. However, if it comes down to paying extra for unneeded criteria or expanded spatial coverage further across the nation for programmatic needs, non-Federal requirements may be sacrificed to stretch the resources as planned and to meet the mission. Cost-sharing may not always be the answer if agency resources prohibit ingesting, processing, storing, or distributing non mission-critical information.
- States should participate in standards development with the FGDC. Standards, once adopted, cannot be expected to change state-by-state.

- This section covers several levels of Federal activities including “programs”, “initiatives”, GIT, enterprise architecture, Ex-Gov applications. Interpretations of it will vary, so clarification of terms and some examples would be helpful.

Criteria 6: Development and Deployment of Business Plans for Federal Programs

- Existing Federal reporting requirements are extensive and it is not likely that agencies will develop additional documentation to meet NSGIC criteria.
- Federal agencies are not always able or in control of resources to fulfill business needs, and cannot lobby for additional resources.
- Many Federal agencies have one-year funding and cannot commit to funded partnerships on a longer-term basis.
- It is not clear how a determination can be made on many of these criteria, for example, by what criteria will it be judged whether an agency’s GeoLOB reporting is consistent, accurate and aligned? Who is qualified to make the determination?

Recommendations

- Clearly define what kind of information is needed by states, and consider how to use existing reporting to meet these needs. For example, is there potential to revise or enhance annual agency reporting to the FGDC?
- This is a topic to take up with GeoLOB, there may be opportunity to leverage the planning being done to address geospatial concerns at an enterprise level.

Criteria 7: Participation in data and system development programs

- To the extent possible, most federal agencies try to adhere to the best practices listed in this section.
- Some agencies do not have the ability to fund or grant local governments for data development but are willing to get creative to try and work out a satisfactory partnership agreement for all parties concerned.
- Statute driven situations exist with data that are unclassified, but where use is sensitive or restricted. We recognize “partnerships” presume a mutually beneficial solution.

Recommendations

- Partnership benefits and “in-kind” types of resources ought to be discussed between Federal agencies and state partners to create a jumping-off point for exploring how Federal and state governments may work in tandem bringing equal value to the table. In the states’ view, is money always the least common denominator? What else could Federal partners bring to the table that state partners would value?