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Governance Network Design: A Case Study Analysis of Vermont

This paper presents a case study of the groundwater governance network in the state of Vermont, providing a unique analysis of the changes in network structure associated with Act 199, the 2008 legislation that changed property rights designations and placed groundwater in the public trust to be managed by the state. Property rights assignments are critical in economic valuation and natural resource management, and their shift affects the entire suite of regulatory, economic, and voluntary/advisory policy instruments in use by the governance network. Advances in the field of public administration and natural resource management have shown that analysis of policy in isolation of the other suite of policy instruments currently in force can lead to perverse outcomes. Researchers have stressed that the complex challenges of governance require further investigation to identify different network appropriate procedural policy tools. This paper responds to that call, providing an empirical case study of the network structural responses to specific policy tools. Through the triangulation of data, using primary interviews, document review, participant observation, and a Delphi Survey, I provide a deep description of the governance network, its main action arenas, and the opportunities for and barriers to adoption of economic policy tools. I identify several distinct loci of power operating in the network whose level of influence on network outcomes depends highly on the stage of the policy stream. Act 199 continues to affect the very structure of the governance network itself, as the judicial interpretations of the original legislation have necessitated changes in the executive regulations that govern groundwater use.