

**Post-Conference Report**  
**ACES 2014 Town Hall**  
**December 10, 2014 | 7:30pm-8:30pm**

**Title: *Policy Track – Ecosystem Services in Federal Decision Making: Synthesis and Reflection***

**Background**

The Ecosystem Services in Federal Decision Making Town Hall Meeting was the culminating event of the COMPASS-organized ACES [Policy Track](#). Over two days of panels and interactive discussions, policymakers, scientists, practitioners came together to discuss the nexus of ecosystem services and federal decision-making. These discussions spanned topics such as budget, policy tools, climate resilience, water, and ecosystem restoration. The panels considered opportunities to integrate ecosystem services in federal decision-making and illuminated potential barriers to uptake, across a wide range of decision contexts. The Town Hall provided an opportunity to bring together the moderators from each of the topical sessions to discuss the major outcomes from their panels, common themes across the panels and identify next steps in integrating ecosystems services into federal decision making.

**Participants**

**Introduction:** Chad English, Director of Science Policy Outreach, COMPASS

**Moderator:** Lynn Scarlett, Managing Director of Public Policy, The Nature Conservancy

**Panelists:**

Melanie Stansbury, Program Examiner, Office of Management and Budget

Stuart Levenbach, Policy Analyst, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, OMB

Laura Petes, Senior Policy Advisor, Office of Science and Technology Policy

Emma Roach, Program Examiner, Office of Management and Budget

David Wegner, Professional Staff (retired), U.S. Congress House Committee on Transportation Infrastructure

**Discussant:** Lydia Olander, Director, Ecosystem Services Program, Duke University

**Summary**

This Town Hall Meeting and the ACES Policy Track provided a productive space for dialogue between scientists and policymakers interested in ecosystem services. All of the panelists expressed a sense of the great potential and opportunity for the use of ecosystem services as a part of decision-making within the federal government. While the concept of ecosystem services has been incorporated at a small scale in natural resource management, the science has now evolved to a point where the standardization and scalability necessary for widespread use as a policy tool appears possible. The engagement of multiple levels of policymakers in the ACES conference showed the growing interest in institutionalizing ecosystem services in federal decision-making. The discussion highlighted three of the primary remaining challenges: Standardization of methodology (including classification and valuation); clarity on what constitutes adequate rigor for a particular type of decision (i.e., a description of what constitutes “good enough” information & methodology to support a particular type of decision, and what needs to be further developed to meet that need); and the broad communication of the concept of ecosystem services to agency leadership and practitioners.

With an audience of approximately 50 people, Lynn Scarlett led off the Town Hall with a introduction, followed by a statement from each of the panelists and the discussant. A panel discussion with the

audience followed. The panelists included four staff from the White House (three from the Office of Management and Budget and one from the Office of Science and Technology Policy), former congressional staff from the House of Representatives Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, and perspective from the academic community from the discussant.

Several messages emerged through discussion during the Town Hall meeting, many of which built off of ideas raised throughout the ACES Policy Track:

- Though the policy conversations on ecosystem services go back more than a decade, the federal response to Super Storm Sandy in 2012 shifted the narrative on how government at all levels approaches resilience and restoration. This has resulted in an urgent interest in ecosystem services as a decision making tool.
- Policymaking comes in many different forms and there is a need to understand what constitutes “good enough” (ie, adequate rigor, transparency, defensibility) for particular policy decisions. There is variation, eg, in the robustness of information and methodology, needed for different decision contexts.
- Institutions are needed to bridge and facilitate the co-production of knowledge between scientists and decision makers in the context of ecosystem services. This may involve changes in the funding structure and reward systems for research.
- The use of market based solutions for valuing ecosystem services is a growing field. Agencies are more comfortable with a regulatory approach, but policy makers should be aware of and considering how/whether to support market approaches.
- Communications and framing of ecosystem services to support decision-making is one of the biggest challenges for integrating this concept more fully into decision-making. Participants noted that building support for the ecosystem services concept among middle management is particularly effective because this is the source of much institutional knowledge and continuity.
- To effectively use ecosystems services, we need to understand and manage for “problem-sheds” – where and for whom a problem is present.
- Understanding how and where to scale up the incorporation of ecosystem services concepts, and conversely, where decisions should remain local, is a key requirement for the continued codification of ecosystem services as a central tool in natural resource management.

The messages that emerged from the Town Hall meeting, and the policy track in general, exposed several opportunities for next steps toward practical integration of ecosystem services into policy and practice. We look forward to more constructive dialogue between researchers, practitioners and decision makers.

### **Town Hall Organizers**

Chad English and Heather Mannix, COMPASS

*COMPASS is a nonprofit organization that bridges the worlds of science, journalism, and policy. We are dedicated to helping scientists find their voices and science find its audience. [www.COMPASSonline.org](http://www.COMPASSonline.org)*

[cenglish@COMPASSonline.org](mailto:cenglish@COMPASSonline.org)

[heather.mannix@compassonline.org](mailto:heather.mannix@compassonline.org)