

Soft Planning

How to create a water soft path

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THESE STEPS serve as a basic guideline for creating a water soft path plan. This process can be undertaken at the community, regional, watershed and even provincial level.

1 Identify water services

List all services provided by water (e.g. grass watering, flushing, clothes washing, etc.) and determine (using estimates where necessary) how much water is used by each service. Start thinking about the quality of water that is really needed to obtain a particular service. For example, do we need to use freshwater on our lawns? Or better yet, do we need to water our lawns at all?

2 Adopt a projection for your community, region or watershed

Create a business-as-usual scenario in, for example, 2030 or 2050 by applying expected population increases to current rates of water use, and adjusting for predicted economic growth or loss.

3 Establish a desired future scenario

Create a desired future scenario for sources and uses of water in the year of your projection. The scenario should be sustainable or moving toward sustainability.

4 Analyze water quantity and quality

Establish the quantity of water required to provide the services identified in step 3 by applying as many of the water-conserving options that can be adopted by your target year. Determine which uses require high-quality water (e.g. drinking, cooking and bathing) and which uses can proceed with lower quality water (e.g. flushing, gardening, industrial applications).

5 Review water supply options

Identify all current sources of water and determine whether any are being overused or degraded. Be sure to include both surface water and groundwater, and both public and private supplies. Reduce withdrawals of freshwater or releases of wastewater that threaten long-term renewable use, and reject any new sources of supply that cross major watershed boundaries or that threaten ecological, cultural or social values. Adjust future supply for likely effects of climate change.

6 Backcast

Create various soft paths by designing incremental policies and

programs to get from “there to here.” In Step 3 you identified a desired future scenario. In Step 4 you found ways to make that future scenario work, and in Step 5 you defined supply constraints. What do you need to do to get to that future scenario, ensuring all options are economically feasible, socially acceptable and politically achievable? This iterative process is backcasting. It connects “there” to “here.”

Almost all soft path backcasting includes at least two scenarios:

- In one scenario, adjustments are explored to the fullest extent possible within the limits of what is, or what is expected to be, cost-effective. Suppose that a region has set a goal of no new water supply projects until 2050. Soft path analysis might suggest a policy mix including volume-based pricing, education and social marketing, rebates for low-flow toilets, and recycled water for parks and golf courses.
- In a second scenario, demand management is supplemented by changes in personal habits, growth rates and economic structure. If the same region wanted to preserve as much land as possible in a natural state, farmers could be urged to return to rain-fed agriculture, urban planning could be adjusted to reduce runoff, and water-intensive industries could be discouraged or prohibited.

How much backcasting is enough? It's enough when your water-use projections are at least reasonably persuasive – not to you, the analyst, but to the officials, planners, journalists and others who will read your report without having gone through all the previous steps.

7 Write, talk and promote

Now that you have developed a workable scenario, the next and very important step in soft path planning is to improve upon your conclusions by going to the public for their input. Then, after revision, you are ready to take your scenario to the public again and to people who influence and make key decisions about freshwater. Only your imagination and your energy should limit the effort put into promoting water soft path results. 🗣️

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