



SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY
ECONOMICS – POLITICAL SCIENCE - SOCIOLOGY

“Climate Adaptation by Any Other Name: Social Learning in Colorado Water Governance - Building Adaptive Capacity for Climate Uncertainty?”

by

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Abstract: It is somewhat implicit in the global science and policy arena that wealthy, “developed” countries such as the United States have the financial and institutional capacity to adapt to climate change. However, the complexity and heterogeneity of both physical and policy landscapes across the U.S. tell a very different story. The highly uncertain projections of the hydrological impacts of climate change combined with the triple threat of increased population, development, and energy needs necessitate an examination of policy and social innovations, flexibility, and institutional and cultural learning, which are vital for sustainable adaptation planning. Yet, while humans organize and adapt through the cultural unit of the institution, at the same time cultural and institutional rigidity and inertia can constrain the capacity for anticipatory adaptation. This research combines interdisciplinary insights on cultural and institutional change with those from the scholarly literature on adaptive water governance through a bottom-up, ethnographic, systems analysis of water-resource governance in Colorado with a focus on the Yampa/White River Basins region. The water-resource managers and decision makers in the region are participating in a statewide “adaptation in process” through the state-sponsored Basin Round Table (BRT) initiative created by the Colorado Water for the 21st Century Act (HB 05-1177). We investigate how, through the BRT process, local and regional stakeholders respond to the experienced and/or projected impacts of climate variability and change (including drought), and how they socially learn about climate change via community and institutional relationships. The work provides insights on how the cultural and institutional underpinnings of water governance can create or constrain necessary capacity to cope with and plan for anticipated climate change impacts.

Monday, February 6, 2012

4:00 – 5:30 pm

Bexell Hall Rom 102

