

Building bridges, fording streams, reaching agreement in the Lake Champlain basin: Alternatives to legislation and regulation rooted in citizen and science-based approaches to inspire watershed protection[#]

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Abstract

Challenges and opportunities arise when jointly managing international waters shared by two countries and two states with different political and governmental systems. Lake Champlain's vast watershed is shared by the states of Vermont and New York in the United States of America and the Province of Québec in Canada. Transboundary relations are characterised by consensus reached through a continuous sequence of non-binding, non-regulatory environmental agreements. Since the historic 1988 Memorandum of Understanding on Environmental Cooperation on the Management of Lake Champlain, 16 additional agreements have been signed – averaging nearly one per year. They range from joint declarations and watershed plans to phosphorus standards and toxic spill responses. They are renewable agreements bearing the support and participation of state, provincial and federal agencies; local government; and businesses with a very strong citizen component. This progression of cooperative agreements falls under the auspices of the Lake Champlain Basin Program, a quasi-governmental partnership among Vermont, New York and Québec that coordinates Lake Champlain's long-term management plan, *Opportunities for Action: An Evolving Plan for the Future of the Lake Champlain Basin*. The Lake Champlain Basin Program achieves significant watershed improvements through its consensus-based, decision-making policies bolstered by state-to-state, state-to-province agreements. This incremental approach, steeped in multi-level partnerships and institutions, epitomises the theory of natural resource regimes which emphasise roles of intermediate institutions in environmental management. Use of non-binding, renewable agreements more easily bridges differences among jurisdictions, whether interstate, intrastate or international. Additionally, such agreements can be updated more immediately as new information and technologies emerge. Voluntary, renewable agreements can be assembled more quickly than pursuing a traditional regulatory or legislative response. It is precisely the voluntary nature of these agreements and their successes that has captured the attention of other basins worldwide as a model for replication and reaching agreement on difficult issues.

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