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Effective Interagency Collaboration: A Case Study of the California Sustainable Freight Action Plan

(L-R) Chris Schmidt, Caltrans Division Chief, Division of Transportation Planning; Heather Arias, Branch Chief, Freight Transport Branch, Air Resources Board; Larry Rillera, Air Pollution Specialist, California Energy Commission; and Frank Ramirez, Senior Permit Assistance Specialist, California Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development, discuss the California Sustainable Freight Action Plan during the "Learning from the California Experience: Alternative Fuels, Vehicles, and Infrastructure" workshop on March 22, 2017 in Sacramento, CA.

The Challenge

State agencies often seek to break down silos and work in partnership with each other. Achieving state initiatives and outcomes can reveal or create challenges and opportunities that must be addressed within the statutory authorities of the respective agencies. These challenges include divergent mission statements, restricted funding, lack of support from leadership, differing governance structures, staff turnover, lack of regular communication, and institutional inertia. Examples of effective interagency collaboration can therefore serve as case studies to demonstrate successful strategies that other states can adopt.

The Context: California's Freight System

Freight accounts for a substantial portion of California's economy, and affects a wide range of stakeholders. California's freight transportation system makes up one-third of the state's economy and jobs, with freight-dependent industries accounting for $740 billion in gross domestic product and over 5 million jobs in 2014.[1] The impact of the freight system goes beyond California, as the state's ports, railroads, highways, and roads facilitate freight movement across the nation and around the world. Freight transportation is also a source of increasing levels of greenhouse gas emissions and produces high amounts of local pollution, thus deteriorating air quality.

California has set aggressive climate and alternative fuels goals, including decreasing greenhouse gas emissions 40% below 1990 levels by 2030 and cutting petroleum use in cars and trucks by up to half from current (2015) levels by 2030. Given the freight industry's role in the state's economy and its contribution to emissions, exploring the intersection of freight, emissions, and economic competitiveness is a natural fit for the state.

Existing plans and strategies related to California's freight system include the California Freight Mobility Plan, the Sustainable Freight Pathways to Zero and Near-Zero Emissions discussion document, and the Integrated Energy Policy Report.

The Solution: Governor Brown's Executive Order

In July 2015, California's Governor Brown signed Executive Order B-32-15, which provided a vision for California's transition to a more efficient, more economically competitive, and less polluting freight transport system. The Executive Order also explicitly listed the agencies and departments that needed to collaborate in order to put together an action plan to improve freight efficiency, transition to zero-emission technologies, and increase competitiveness of California's freight system. These interagency partners are:

- California State Transportation Agency
- California Environmental Protection Agency
- Natural Resources Agency
- California Air Resources Board
- California Department of Transportation
- California Energy Commission

[1] http://www.casustainablefreight.org/documents/Main%20Document_FINAL_07272016.pdf

- Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development

Faced with the tight timeframe of producing an action plan within one year, the interagency partners spurred to action to establish the relationships, public involvement process, milestones, and timeline to develop what would eventually become the California Sustainable Freight Action Plan. The interagency partners, and even staff within each agency, worked to align their actions and policies with the Executive Order. Below is the timeline of the plan's development, highlighting major milestones along the way.

The Results

After being drawn together to implement the Executive Order, the staff within the agencies formed stronger, and sometimes new, relationships. They established a vision statement to guide the action plan, so that there was a cohesive understanding, including at the highest levels of each agency, as to what the freight system in California should look like by 2050.

As a departure from the existing plans and strategies related to California's freight system mentioned above, the California Sustainable Freight Action Plan created a new lens for analyzing freight, sustainability, and economic competitiveness together, while fostering conversations that otherwise would not have happened. Agency staff met every other week during the plan development process, and agency directors met on a quarterly basis. These in-person conversations moved the plan forward in a deliberative and substantive manner. Agencies also co-hosted several webinars and public workshops in various parts of the state to discuss proposed targets, potential actions, initial pilot project concepts, and local and regional perspectives and priorities. Native American tribes were also engaged in the development of the plan through listening sessions.

In addition to a vision and guiding principles for California's freight system, the agencies developed two quantitative and one qualitative target for the plan, related to freight system efficiency, zero emission freight technology, and increased competitiveness and economic growth. The agencies also identified three pilot projects intended to serve as demonstrations of on-the-ground progress toward a sustainable freight transport system.

To establish the state agency actions necessary to meet the targets in the plan, the agencies took a comprehensive look across the state's policies, programs, and investments looking for opportunities that worked in synergy with other existing state goals and objectives. Nine actions were eventually selected, with one agency identified for each as being responsible for implementing the action.

The interagency partners did not only collaborate with each other to make the plan. Since freight touches so many stakeholders throughout the state and beyond, they also engaged the California Freight Advisory Committee; other freight industry leaders (cargo and fleet owners, logistics industry, labor, etc.); environmental groups; academia; general public; other regional, local, state and federal agencies; modal industries (ports, rail, trucking, etc.); utilities; fuel providers; and intermodal users.

What's Next?

Currently the agencies are continuing to meet and host public workshops on the implementation of the plan and following through on the nine state agency actions. The Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development (GO-Biz) is leading the effort to define economic competitiveness in such a way that it encompasses the diverse strategies freight industry sectors use to measure competitiveness for themselves. Eventually a target for increasing economic competitiveness and future economic growth within the freight and goods movement industry will be established. In addition to establishing a target for increasing the economic competitiveness of the state freight industry, GO-Biz will lead the effort to create quantitative metrics to measure progress towards achieving the target as well as develop a model to measure the impact of state actions on the economic competitiveness of the freight industry

Meanwhile, progress is being tracked on the system efficiency target and transition to zero emission technology target, both of which will be revisited for evaluation in 2019. Building upon the collaboration work that has already taken place, new state agencies are being called on to collaborate with the interagency partners and expand their authorities to help with plan implementation. For example, the California Department of Food and Agriculture is helping with the dairy biomethane for freight vehicles pilot project listed in the plan. Within the summer of 2017, the agencies will be posting their work plans for the pilot projects.

Decisions from one agency affect the work of other agencies, which is why maintaining silos is impractical. For instance, it's not feasible to think of "air quality" as a standalone issue to be tackled solely by one agency when infrastructure or energy decisions made by other agencies also impact air quality. Through the collaboration fostered by the development of the California Sustainable Freight Action Plan, the interagency partners can continue to break down silos and ensure that work done in one agency enhances, and not hinders, the work done in other agencies.