

Nicole and the woodchips: linking good science and public policy decision making

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The public expects the decisions that its governments make to be wise – that is based on good judgement, discernment, and characterised by scholarly knowledge and learning (Dictionary.com 2007). When government gets it wrong the pressure from the media and public are intense and ongoing, often continuing until there is metaphorical ‘blood on the carpet’ in terms of the scalp of the accountable Minister. In this pressured and reactive environment there are increasing calls for public policy decisions to be ‘evidence based’ and driven by good science (Mulgan 2006). So how can this nexus between science and policy be made to work better?

This presentation explores the nature of good public policy decisions, and some of the hard questions facing policy makers in natural resource management, land management and agriculture at present. It then examines case studies of when and how the science/policy interface works well, introducing the concept of the cogs and flywheels of science and policy. The challenges to scientists of simplifying messages and managing discussion of uncertainty are then explored.

Conclusions are then presented from recent work studying how R&D strategy can provide policy makers with what they need, how policy makers access scientific outputs, and how scientists can best design policy ‘next users’ into their project work to optimise the likelihood of influencing public policy.