

SESSION 7B

CATCH OF THE DAY: THE POLITICS OF EVALUATION

Moderator: Sharyn Barata, Itron

PANELISTS:

Carmen Best, California Public Utilities Commission – Energy Division, Demand Side Evaluation Supervisor

Marian V. Brown, Southern California Edison, Manager – Measurement & Evaluation

Harvey Michaels, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Environmental Policy and Planning Program

Jane Peters, Research Into Action, President

Robert Wirtshafter, Wirtshafter Associates, Inc.

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION:

Over the past thirty years, across many different jurisdictions, evaluation has ranged from being either at or near the center of energy efficiency policy making, to being far off on the periphery. As evaluators, this may sometimes feel like swinging on a no win pendulum from which our work is either dismissed as vaguely academic or irrelevant “shelf-ware” or suddenly becomes caught in a maelstrom of political controversy and conflict in which studies are grabbed by stakeholders as axes to grind, uncertainties are ignored or purposefully distorted, results are misinterpreted, and draconian decisions rushed, without the authors ever having the opportunity to help provide the context and nuance needed to help set the record straight or produce better program and policy decisions. Where evaluation falls in this spectrum over time and place tends to correlate with the level of effort, expenditures, and expectations associated with energy efficiency programs and policies, as well as the extent to which policy decisions have major financial or political impacts under the focus of highly engaged and powerful stakeholders. Simply put, the higher the stakes, the greater the pressure on evaluation and higher the likelihood that results may be politicized either before or after publication.

To many evaluators, the current environment for evaluation shows all the signs of being as highly charged and political as at any time over the past few decades. Some of the key issues driving this increased political intensity around evaluation work include:

- High energy efficiency/DSM goals, pressure to attain them, consequences of not doing so
- Large financial incentives or penalties tied to measured program or portfolio performance
- Cost effectiveness expectations
- Program selection and funding level decisions (e.g., exacerbated by government budget crises)
- Program administrator/implementer selection decisions
- Complex evaluation management and use environments/divergent stakeholder perspectives
- Increased involvement of elected officials in promoting specific EE and DSM programs and goals

These factors and conditions can lead to highly charged, contentious, and challenging environments in which evaluation is carried out and communicated. Panelists will discuss their experiences and perspectives on a variety of topics related to the politics of evaluation.

Potential Questions for Panelists and Audience Members

- Political pressure. What is it? What kind of pressure should evaluators be aware of/prepared for? Where is the line between legitimate differences in point of view and pressure to bias, censure, or distort results? How pervasive is pressure to influence results, either from contracting or powerful external entities? How have experienced evaluators dealt with political pressure? What advice can be offered to those early in their evaluation careers who face such pressures?
- Sources of pressure. We mentioned some of the potential sources of political pressure on evaluation in introducing the panel. Which of these do panelists believe are most associated with political pressure? Which the least? Why?
- Evaluation ethics. What are they? Why are they important? When is it appropriate to make adjustments based on feedback or orders and when are evaluators ethically required to hold their ground? How can evaluators uphold their ethical requirements even when they feel their jobs or future work might be at stake?
- Uncertainty and Reporting/Influence Thresholds.
- Science and Evaluation.
- Potential conflicts of interest.
- Lessons learned from other intersections of science and public policy. What examples can we look to for guidance and lessons learned from other public policy issues in which science is or has been up front and center in high stakes debates? (For example, anthropogenic climate change, health, education, crime/early child development, etc.)