

# Case Study: Achieving measurable public understanding of difficult choices in the production of electric power

**Problem:** As Texas moved toward a competitive electric generation market in the late 1990s, regulators and consumer interests continued to demand public involvement in electric resource choices -- whether utilities should invest in coal, gas, nuclear, wind or conservation. While the Lower Colorado River Authority, a wholesale utility, had won national awards for its integrated resource planning process, there was no public understanding of the scientific methods behind its decision-making. The utility could neither tell nor sell; it had to prove that it listened carefully to an educated public.



Lost Pines 2 was permitted in record time with public and environmental support.

**Solution:** In 1996, Robert Cullick designed a three-part plan for major stakeholders: retail utilities that purchased the power LCRA produced, the public and internal interests within the LCRA. The public plan was grassroots. Every subscriber (175,000) of more than 72 newspapers received an 12-page, informative insert about electric production. Each was invited to one of three night-time public meetings designed by a steering committee of environmental, consumer, production and conservation experts that Mr. Cullick convened. More than 500 attended these meetings. They listened carefully to experts who advocated their own plan for energy production or conservation. Facilitators took small groups through a set of questions. Attendees were surveyed and their results were compared to the results of a scientifically accurate telephone survey of the same region to see what effects expert opinion and peer conversations had on public opinion.

## Results of the Integrated Resource Planning Process

**A high degree of public understanding of utility issues** -- The utility received strong feedback that it should move forward with building natural-gas fired plants and windpower. Polling showed that the demand for conservation to take the place of energy production dropped as the public became educated about costs and potentials.

**Regulators accepted the results of the process** -- While staff members of the Texas Public Utility Commission originally expressed hesitation about a grass-roots process (some thought the public would not care or would find the information too technical) they attended the public meetings and considered the detailed polling information. They endorsed the results, allowing the utility to fulfill its regulatory requirements.

**Public input was cited in the construction of a major new facility** -- Soon after the process, the utility constructed a major new combined-cycle natural gas plant, achieving a permit from the state for Lost Pines in record time. The utility was able to cite public and environmental advocate support for the plant as it went through the regulatory process.