

Analysis of the Policy Agenda and Outlook for the Reforms of Forest Chief Scheme Based on the “Multiple Streams Theory”

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ABSTRACT

The forest chief scheme is a major institutional innovation in the field of ecological civilization governance in China, which is of great significance and value in strengthening the protection of China's forest and grassland ecosystems, implementing the scientific governance of China's forest and grassland systems, and helping to improve the quality and efficiency of China's ecological civilization construction. This paper introduces the practice and policy agenda of China's forest chief scheme reform as the background, analyses the policy agenda of China's forest chief scheme reform by applying the problem, policy and political sources based on the theoretical framework of Multiple Streams Theory, and constructs an analytical model of the dynamics mechanism and path optimization of China's forest chief scheme reform. By these, further outlook and suggestions for the development of forest chief scheme in China are presented.

Keywords: forest chief scheme; Multiple Streams Theory; policy agenda; outlook.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China held, China has placed the construction of ecological civilization in a prominent position in the overall work. Through the governance of mountains, water, forests, fields and lakes, we will comprehensively promote the improvement of the ecological environment, strengthen the construction of ecological civilization and build a new situation of green and low-carbon development in China. The construction of ecological civilization is related to people's well-being, national future and social progress, and is a common challenge that must be faced in the development of human society and also a major question that must be answered in the modernization process of human society [1]. At present, the construction of ecological civilization in China has made significant achievements, the construction of ecological civilization system has been continuously improved, and the exploration of new mechanisms and new ways has been simultaneously strengthened. Forests and grasslands are important natural ecosystems in China, with important functions in repairing ecological problems, improving the ecological environment and maintaining ecological balance, and are of great significance in maintaining national ecological, environmental security and promoting the construction of

ecological civilization systems. This paper builds a comprehensive analysis model of the research mechanism and development path optimization of China's forest chief scheme reform based on the policy agenda with its practice and the Multiple Streams Theory model proposed by John W. Kingdon. I analyse the fundamental driving force, core promoting force and important influence of China's forest chief scheme reform from 3 aspects. On the basis of this analysis, the real-life problems and shortcomings of China's forest chief scheme reform are identified, the focus points for improvement are grasped, and corresponding suggestions are made for optimising the development path of China's forest chief scheme reform.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

PROPOSAL, APPLICATION AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK CONSTRUCTION OF MULTIPLE STREAMS THEORY

In 2004, the American scholar John W. Kingdon, first proposed "Multiple Streams Theory" to study the process analysis of public policy making, in his book "Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policy", which effectively

integrates holistic and phased research. It is a development and optimisation of the "The garbage can theory" in the area of Organization Behavioristics [2]. "Multiple Streams Theory" suggests that the creation of a policy agenda is the result of the combined action of three major streams - 'issues', 'policy' and 'politics' - and that when the three streams intersect, the policy paths open, providing a unique opportunity for the creation of a policy agenda. In this context, "issues" consists of a mismatch between what people perceive and what they observe, including changes in key indicators, the occurrence of focal and crisis events, policy feedback, budgetary constraints, etc.; "policy" refers to the policy recommendations, ideas and discussions put forward by a community of bureaucrats, academics and researchers in response to a common concern about a solution to a problem. The "politics" is the political and cultural context that significantly promotes or inhibits the establishment and implementation of policy agendas, including public sentiment, social opinion, stakeholder pressure and the ruling party's philosophy of governance [2-5]. Multiple Streams Theory has become the most widely used tool for policy process analysis, with applications in health, finance, social security and other fields [6]. In the context of the growing importance of ecological protection, many scholars have gradually applied Multiple Streams Theory to the analysis of policy agendas in ecological governance:

Abroad, Storch et al. (2013) analysed forest policy making in the context of climate change in three German states using a Multiple Streams Theory framework, noting that the extent to which climate change issues are integrated into forest policy depends on the overall framework of climate policy and the opportunity for the forest sector to confirm the need for such a linkage, and therefore the latter's preparations and activities are needed in order to take advantage of possible policy windows for forest climate policy measures [7]; Sotoudeh et al. focus on a major forest policy change, the forest harvesting ban proposed in Iran in 2017, and investigate how participants in policy development use the interlinkages between issue streams, political streams and policy streams to develop proposals and how this simplifies the process of change [8]. In the context of China's increasing attention to the construction of ecological civilization, the application of Multiple Streams Theory in the field of domestic environmental policy research has also tended to be enriched. Tu Chengyue et al. (2020) analyzed the main reasons for the shift from "economic priority" to "ecological priority" in China's forestry policy from the perspective of the policy process, and analyzed the main factors of the problem, political and policy streams [9]. Wei Zhimin et al. (2020) analyzed the changes, focal events and policy communities of the ecological compensation mechanism in the Xin'anjiang River Basin from the perspective of Multiple Streams Theory, and found that the ecological

compensation mechanism in the Xin'anjiang River Basin was the result of the convergence of three streams - issue, policy and political - driven by policy entrepreneurs when the policy window was opened, aided by policy diffusion [10].

3. REVIEW OF THE HISTORY AND POLICY AGENDA

3.1. Concept definition

The forest chief scheme is a new type of responsibility system in China, requiring party and government leaders at different levels to act as forest chiefs and to implement local responsibility for the protection and development of forest and grassland resources in accordance with the requirements for the integrated management of mountains, water, forests and fields and the provisions of forest and grassland laws and regulations, so as to coordinate and solve key and difficult problems in the protection and development of forest and grassland ecological resources in the area of responsibility[11].

3.2. Anhui Province Reform Process

Anhui Province is a leading area for the reform of the forest chief scheme. It is located in the eastern part of China, with national core ecological function areas such as the mountainous area in southern Anhui and the Dabie Mountain area in western Anhui, and Chaohu Lake, one of the five major freshwater lakes, with special ecological location and important geographical position. The Anhui provincial government resolutely implemented the important instructions of the central government and proposed to explore the goal of establishing the forest chief scheme based on comprehensive discussion, analysis and investigation by drawing on the experience of forestry reform and development and the idea of river chief scheme reform.

a. In June 2017, Anhui province started to carry out the tentative forest chief scheme reform in Hefei, Xuancheng and Anqing cities, and achieved initial results. Taking Anqing city as an example, in the process of the tentative forest chief scheme, Anqing actively improved the institutional mechanism of the forest chief scheme, clarified the responsibility tasks of the "five greens", refined the layout, established the assessment system and methods, and actively explored the "Internet +" forest chief scheme intelligent services.

b. In September 2017, the Anhui government issued the "Opinions on the Establishment of the Forest Chief Scheme".

c. In 2018, Anhui government promoted the forest chief scheme reform in the whole province.

d. In April 2019, the first demonstration zone of forest chief scheme reform in the country was unveiled in Anhui with the approval of the State Forestry and Grass Bureau. (Figure 1)

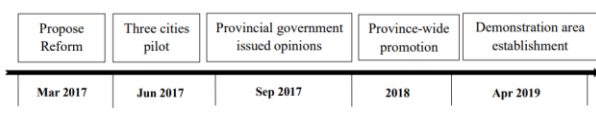


Figure 1. Time line of the Reform in Anhui Province

3.3. Status of National Reform

By the end of 2021, 31 provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) have explored the implementation of the forest chief scheme. All places actively strengthen the system design of the forest chief scheme, coordinate administrative resources, enhance the comprehensive effectiveness of the forest chief scheme reform, and explore the forest chief scheme reform methods with Chinese characteristics and regional features in the process of implementation. For example, Anhui Province actively implement "criminal punishment +public interest litigation +ecological compensation" model; Fujian Province has built a forest resources grid management responsibility system covering the whole area.

However, while the regions have achieved important results in the practice of the forest chief scheme, there are still many problems in the process of forest chief scheme reform. For example, the current monitoring mechanism of the forest chief scheme does not have a set of systematic laws to endorse it, and the monitoring process is not closed-loop; problems such as vague objectives, unclear responsibilities, unrealistic tasks and lack of characteristics still exist and need to be improved. The development and improvement of the forest chief scheme in China still has a long way to go.

4. THE DRIVING FORCE OF DEVELOPMENT

4.1. The central party and national strategy

In 2012, 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China first proposed to strengthen the construction of ecological civilization system, raising it to the height of the "five-in-one" overall layout of the socialist cause with Chinese characteristics, after which China's ecological civilization construction decisions were significantly accelerated, and China entered a new phase of ecological civilization construction, providing an opportunity for ecological governance innovation in various places in China. It can be said that the Party Central Committee and the national strategy for the construction of ecological civilization is a unprecedented high degree of guidance. It is the important historical

background for the innovative development of the forest chief scheme, with a strong tendency to guide.

4.2. Public Awareness Promotion

The public can often form common or similar ideas and thoughts about a social issue. It is highly susceptible to be influenced and then gets transformation. In the early days, as China focused its social development on economic growth and neglected environmental protection, the public paid less attention to resource conservation and environmental protection. With the shift of national policy focus and the continuous improvement of governance capacity, coupled with the development of national education and social opinion propaganda, the national awareness of environmental protection has generally increased. Hazy weather, forest fires and other disasters, as well as the gradual scarcity of forest resources have made the public deeply aware of the urgent need to strengthen the protection of China's forests and grasslands. This public awareness has become a powerful driving force for the reforms of the forest chief scheme in China.

5. FORWARD-LOOKING POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

BASED ON THE "MULTIPLE STREAMS THEORY"

5.1. Analysis from issue perspective: site-specific

The full implementation of China's forest chief scheme reform is not the end of the issue but the beginning of the issue, and more problems are bound to be exposed in the process of implementing forest chief scheme. At present, there are still problems such as insufficient attention, vague departmental authority and responsibility, and low public participation, etc. The assessment of responsible persons and the issue of accountability, as well as the division of responsibility areas also need further consideration. In the process of implementation, each place should take the issues that arise as the basic guide to solve problems, according to local conditions and avoid the phenomenon of "internalization" and "homogenization".

5.2. Analysis from policy perspective: depth-study

At present, there are few scientific researches related to the forest chief scheme in China, and most of them are limited to the elaboration of the practical process and practical results of the forest chief scheme, as well as the summary of practical problems and targeted suggestions, but lack of empirical researches, resulting in insufficient

scientific and theoretical basis for the development of the forest chief scheme in China. Therefore, scientific research in this fields should be strengthened to develop new hot spots, new issues and new methods, and to play a more important role in promoting scientific theories. At the same time, the government departments should focus on the democratization of the decision-making process, so as to be well prepared for the next policy window opening.

5.3. Analysis from political perspective: nice-system

Although China's current ecological civilization legislation is relatively complete, but China still lacks specific legal protection and support for the implementation of forest chief scheme, the regions also lack relevant rules and regulations. The legal system of the forest chief scheme needs to be improved. Furthermore, we need to take into account the instability of public opinion and national sentiment, and should not neglect the guidance of public opinion and the promotion of national awareness at any time, so that the people can become a strong support force for the reform of our forestry system.

6. CONCLUSION

The reform and policy formulation of the forest chief scheme is a continuous process, in which the issue stream raises difficult issues of conservation and development in China's forest and grass ecological regions and elevates them to the national level; the policy stream promotes the preparation of China's forest chief scheme; and the political stream plays an important role in strengthening the survival, development and consolidation of the forest chief scheme in this process. When the three streams intersect, the policy paths open, providing a unique opportunity for the creation of a policy agenda.

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