



Legislative Coordination in Regional Environmental Governance and Pathways to Implementation

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Abstract

Amid the escalating global environmental crisis and the paradigm shift toward ecological civilization, legislative coordination in regional environmental governance has emerged as a pivotal strategy for safeguarding ecological security and advancing sustainable development. This study systematically examines and summarizes China's rich practices in regional environmental governance legislative coordination, elucidating its diversified practical forms and deepened coordination mechanisms. By critically analyzing the operational challenges—including interest coordination dilemmas, institutional fragmentation, and information-sharing barriers—this research provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in cross-jurisdictional environmental governance. Drawing on domestic and international advanced experiences and theoretical frameworks, the paper proposes actionable pathways to optimize legislative coordination. These include refining collaborative mechanisms, strengthening intergovernmental information-sharing platforms, and fostering win-win interest reconciliation strategies. The findings aim to offer robust theoretical and practical guidance for the future evolution of regional environmental governance in China, while contributing Chinese insights and solutions to the global discourse on sustainable environmental stewardship.

Keywords

Regional environmental governance; Collaborative governance; Regional collaborative legislation

1. Introduction

As the global environmental crisis deepens and ecological civilization gains prominence, regional environmental governance has emerged as a critical strategy for ensuring ecological security and sustainable development. Legislative coordination, central to this framework, measures environmental governance effectiveness and safeguards ecological integrity. China has recently achieved remarkable progress in regional environmental legislative coordination, driving measurable environmental quality improvements while offering global solutions to ecological challenges.

However, systemic barriers—entrenched interest conflicts, institutional fragmentation, and information silos—now threaten governance scalability and efficiency. Addressing these challenges requires aligning solutions with China's institutional strengths while meeting contemporary demands.

This study advances a three-pronged framework: mapping China's legislative coordination landscape, diagnosing implementation challenges through the lens of interest reconciliation, institutional coherence, and transparency, and proposing a strategic roadmap integrating global best practices (Giacalone, 2025). By advocating institutional

innovations—optimized coordination mechanisms, cross-regional data-sharing platforms, and inclusive conflict-resolution frameworks—this research aims to equip stakeholders with tools to navigate governance complexities. Ultimately, it seeks to advance China’s environmental agenda while contributing actionable insights to global collaborative ecological stewardship.

2. Practical Patterns of Legislative Coordination in Regional Environmental Governance

2.1 Diversified Manifestations of Practical Patterns

China’s regional environmental governance employs diverse legislative coordination models. Local regulations, like the jointly formulated Dulu River Wetland Protection Regulations by Jiamusi and Hegang, address specific ecological challenges through tailored measures, strengthening integrated transregional reserve management and ecological restoration. More advanced regional legislation establishes unified standards through deep intergovernmental collaboration, exemplified by the Yangtze River Delta’s coordinated environmental regulations—including the Eco-Green Integrated Development Demonstration Zone Plan—enacted by Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui (Villanueva, 2025). These initiatives enhance institutional connectivity and yield measurable environmental quality improvements, demonstrating how legislative coordination adapts to regional ecological needs while advancing collaborative governance frameworks.

2.2 Deepening Development of Coordination Mechanisms

The deepening of collaborative mechanisms defines legislative coordination in regional environmental governance. Legislative planning coordination provides strategic direction, exemplified by a framework agreement among Northeast China’s legislative bodies (Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning, and Inner Mongolia) that enabled coordinated tourism regulations and institutional safeguards for regional cooperation (Meng, 2024).

Information exchange mechanisms form another critical pillar. In the Yangtze River Delta, environmental authorities implemented joint air pollution control initiatives, leveraging the Air Quality Forecasting Center for real-time data sharing and pollution source monitoring. This enhanced governance efficiency through transparent, technology-driven collaboration (Zhao, 2025).

Interest balancing mechanisms have proven equally vital. Despite tensions between environmental controls and economic interests, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region advanced legislative coordination through frameworks reconciling competing priorities. While challenges persist, these mechanisms sustain momentum by aligning regional goals with institutional safeguards. Together, these coordinated approaches demonstrate how legislative planning, data-sharing infrastructure, and conflict-resolution frameworks enable effective regional environmental governance in China.

2.3 Systematic Construction of Institutional Safeguards

The institutionalization of systematic safeguards has provided a robust legal foundation for legislative coordination in regional environmental governance. As a critical institutional pillar, the filing and review system ensures the legitimacy and effectiveness of collaborative environmental legislation. A case in point is Heilongjiang Province, where the Standing Committee of the Provincial People’s Congress conducted approval and filing reviews of the wetland protection regulations jointly formulated by Jiamusi and Hegang municipalities. This process guaranteed the legality and procedural compliance of these legislative instruments.

Similarly, approval-based review mechanisms serve as another essential institutional safeguard for regional environmental legislative coordination. Collaborative legislative projects among cities with districts, such as those implemented in the Yangtze River Delta region, require formal review and approval by the corresponding legislative authorities before implementation. This procedural requirement not only ensures the legitimacy and standardization of legislative processes but also facilitates the effective enforcement of regional environmental governance initiatives. The Yangtze River Delta’s experience demonstrates how such review mechanisms function as both quality control mechanisms and implementation catalysts for cross-jurisdictional environmental cooperation.

3. Practical Dilemmas of Legislative Coordination in Regional Environmental Governance

Current academic discourse on regional environmental collaborative legislation remains largely normative,

neglecting root-cause analysis of implementation challenges. While systemic issues are occasionally acknowledged, analyses lack theoretical depth, resulting in superficial solutions. Key practical obstacles include: 1) ambiguous legislative definitions and scope; 2) weak legal bases for collaborative authority; 3) unresolved interjurisdictional interest conflicts; and 4) absent post-legislative evaluation frameworks. Case studies from the Yangtze River Delta and North-east China collaborations reveal how these structural deficiencies hinder coordinated governance objectives. Addressing these gaps requires institutional reforms and theoretical innovations to move beyond symptomatic fixes and achieve substantive progress.

3.1 Ambiguity in the Definition of Regional Environmental Collaborative Legislation

Regional collaborative legislation lacks definition in official legal documents, with enduring academic disputes over its scope and application. Scholars distinguish two forms: inter-local people's congress collaboration and inter-governmental agreements, though the latter's legislative status remains contested. Absent statutory regulation and facing expansive administrative authority, the principle of "no action without explicit legal authorization" necessitates cautious boundary-setting to curb executive overreach. This ambiguity persists in practice, where regional legislatures struggle to define collaborative parameters. Theoretical and operational clarity is critical for both scholarship and governance innovation. Current debates fragment across administrative, constitutional, and legislative law perspectives, leaving unresolved questions about collaborative domains, institutions, procedures, and safeguards. While 2023 legislative amendments endorse regional coordination in principle, they omit operational guidance on substantive parameters or institutional protections. Identifying environmental governance contexts warranting legislative collaboration, such as transboundary pollution or ecosystem conservation, requires further empirical and theoretical inquiry to establish evidence-based criteria for intervention.

3.2 Insufficient Legislative Basis for Regional Environmental Collaborative Legislation

Pre-2022 regional collaborative legislation lacked explicit statutory authorization, relying on policy frameworks that raised constitutional legitimacy questions. The 2023 Local Organization Law amendment provided formal legal authority but retained procedural ambiguities concerning participating entities, coordination mechanisms, and jurisdictional boundaries. While resolving the legal basis issue, the reform introduced no substantive innovations regarding collaborative scope or safeguards. Current initiatives must operate within preexisting local legislative competencies, restricting inter-municipal collaboration to three domains: urban-rural governance, environmental protection, and heritage conservation. County-level cities, lacking independent legislative authority, remain excluded despite urgent needs. Provincial-municipal collaboration legitimacy remains contested, with attempts to circumvent restrictions through higher-level appeals yielding uncertain outcomes.

Systemic procedural deficiencies persist, limiting collaboration to informal information-sharing and consultative frameworks rather than institutionalized legislative integration. True coordination requires alignment across the entire legislative lifecycle—from project inception to synchronized enforcement—but existing agreements lack operational specificity, accountability mechanisms, and enforceability. Fragmented implementation and recurring governance failures in transboundary contexts expose the weakness of non-binding instruments. Absent statutory dispute resolution, performance assessment, and liability mechanisms, collaborative arrangements struggle to evolve beyond procedural formalism. Urgent institutional reforms are needed to transform regional environmental legislation from ad hoc coordination to substantive governance innovation (Zhang, 2024).

3.3 The Emergence of Interest Conflicts in Regional Environmental Collaborative Legislation

Regional collaborative legislation inherently involves multiple jurisdictions, making interest conflicts inevitable and significantly impeding legislative progress and outcomes. These conflicts primarily manifest in two dimensions: inter-legislative body disputes and misalignment between legislative objectives of people's congresses and developmental goals of local governments (An, 2024).

First, structural tensions arise among legislative entities due to pressure-type governance systems and interregional disparities. On one hand, officials operating under performance evaluation frameworks and regional competition dynamics may prioritize short-term gains or local advantages during collaborative processes, creating friction points. On the other hand, interregional disparities in political status, economic scale, development stages, and resource distribution exacerbate divergent interests among participating jurisdictions (Xu, Li, & Zheng, 2022). The Chengdu-

Chongqing Economic Circle exemplifies this dynamic, where asymmetric economic relations and administrative hierarchy differences generate persistent coordination challenges despite shared ecological objectives.

Second, misalignment exists between the legislative priorities of people's congresses, focused on power regulation and cross-jurisdictional interest balancing, and the developmental agendas of local governments, which emphasize administrative discretion and resource acquisition for economic stimulation. While national environmental legislation provides foundational frameworks, its uniformity struggles to accommodate localized ecological complexities, necessitating supplementary roles for flexible, targeted local legislation. However, the territorial fragmentation inherent in decentralized environmental governance undermines holistic ecological protection efforts, particularly in transboundary contexts. Moreover, intergovernmental cooperation agreements, though useful for temporary conflict mediation and benefit allocation, lack enforceable mechanisms, rendering them susceptible to administrative overreach and market distortion risks.

4. Pathways to Legislative Coordination in Regional Environmental Governance

To resolve the systemic dilemmas in regional environmental legislative coordination, it is essential to establish a four-tiered institutional framework: first, by clarifying the conceptual boundaries of regional collaborative legislation through statutory definition; second, by reconciling conflicting interests among legislative entities and between legislative/administrative objectives through structured conflict-resolution mechanisms; third, by developing innovative governance tools including ecological compensation regimes, adaptive legislative models, and cross-jurisdictional benefit-sharing arrangements; and fourth, by institutionalizing binding post-legislative evaluation systems with standardized assessment protocols and enforcement mechanisms. This integrated approach would facilitate the transformation of fragmented governance practices into a cohesive regulatory system capable of balancing ecological integrity, administrative efficiency, and sustainable development objectives across transboundary jurisdictions (Chen-Hong, 2021).

4.1 Clarification of the Concept of Regional Environmental Collaborative Legislation by the National People's Congress and Its Standing Committee

The definition of regional environmental collaborative legislation remains contested among legislative entities, yet only the National People's Congress (NPC) and its Standing Committee hold constitutional authority to delineate this concept. As an exercise of legislative power at the subnational level—a domain constitutionally reserved for people's congresses in China—regional collaborative legislation cannot be authoritatively defined by administrative agencies, whose inherent regulatory expansion tendencies risk distorting the legislative framework. The NPC, as the supreme organ of state power and the most legitimate representative of popular sovereignty, bears the constitutional duty to provide normative guidance on collaborative legislative matters, particularly given the cross-jurisdictional complexity involving provincial-municipal, inter-municipal, and inter-provincial collaborations (Anastassia, 2022).

Two critical issues demand legislative clarification: First, the scope of participating entities and hierarchical relations must be explicitly defined. Controversies persist regarding whether provincial legislative bodies may engage in collaborative lawmaking with municipal counterparts, such as potential collaboration between Hunan Province and Zhuzhou City, and the resultant legal hierarchy of such instruments. While some scholars posit that regional collaborative legislation constitutes a new legal form beyond conventional local regulations, this interpretation challenges China's existing legislative hierarchy. Given current practices where collaborative outputs require separate ratification by participating local people's congresses rather than joint issuance, treating these instruments as a distinct legal category risks disrupting the established hierarchy of laws and regulations.

Second, procedural mechanisms for regional collaborative legislation require statutory codification. Unlike the well-defined processes for enacting local regulations, including filing requirements with higher-level authorities, current practices lack integrated procedural frameworks for collaborative initiatives. Key gaps include: 1) the absence of protocols for initiating and managing collaboration; 2) undefined roles and responsibilities of participating entities; 3) insufficient safeguards for ensuring successful coordination; and 4) the exclusion of public participation mechanisms at critical decision-making stages. To address these deficiencies, scholars have proposed the enactment of a Regional Collaboration Law by the NPC, which would systemically regulate the entire collaborative legislative process, from agenda-setting and draft formulation to public consultation and enforcement mechanisms—thereby institutionalizing cross-jurisdictional governance practices within the constitutional framework.

4.2 Effective Coordination of Interest Conflicts Among Diverse Stakeholders

The essence of interest conflicts in regional environmental collaborative legislation lies in interjurisdictional power struggles, necessitating solutions through interest balancing and ideological transformation. Two complementary mechanisms emerge as critical:

4.2.1 Interest Compensation Mechanism

Effective conflict resolution requires balancing divergent interests through structured compensation. When legislative collaboration demands regional sacrifices for collective gains, a compensation framework becomes essential to offset losses and maintain cooperation. This mechanism operates on two principles: first, ensuring net interest equilibrium through equivalent exchanges, such as central fiscal transfers or intergovernmental ecological compensation, thereby eliminating conflict triggers. Second, compensation serves as an incentive mechanism, transforming perceived sacrifices into future-oriented investments guided by clear standards. Implementation requires: a) differentiated compensation methods tailored to interest types; b) designated operational agencies with enforceable rules; and c) quantifiable balancing indicators, including ecological value assessments and cost-sharing ratios.

4.2.2 Social Participation-based Legislative Model

Beyond material compensation, ideological transformation is achieved through participatory governance that re-frames collaboration as mutual benefit. China's traditional "big government, small society" model prioritizes short-term economic gains, often at environmental and social costs. A participatory approach introduces market-oriented mechanisms and public oversight to complement administrative efforts, fostering win-win outcomes through repeated game-theoretic interactions. Three dimensions strengthen this model: a) public engagement expands policy perspectives, helping authorities prioritize long-term collective interests over short-term gains; b) grassroots input redirects focus to livelihood issues often overlooked in government-centric planning; and c) social oversight mechanisms—including information disclosure requirements and public complaint channels—enhance accountability and prevent administrative arbitrariness.

Practical implementation demands legislative paradigm shifts, strengthened transparency measures, and institutionalized participation channels. Key steps include establishing tripartite dialogue platforms (government-enterprise-public), creating environmental reward systems, and mandating feedback mechanisms for public submissions. Such reforms would transform passive conflict resolution into proactive collaboration, aligning legislative outcomes with both ecological imperatives and popular sovereignty principles.

4.3 Establishment of a Post-legislative Evaluation Mechanism for Regional Environmental Collaborative Legislation

Regional collaborative legislation faces unique challenges in post-legislative evaluation compared to traditional local legislation, necessitating tailored assessment mechanisms to enhance legislative quality, promote coordinated development, and ensure effective governance outcomes. Four key components constitute this evaluation framework:

4.3.1 Assessment Object Selection

Drawing on policy evaluation theories, three principles guide object selection: effectiveness (actual value realization through impact assessment on environmental protection, governance efficiency, and legal compliance); necessity (prioritizing laws with significant public interest impact, urgency for revision, or concentrated administrative powers); and feasibility (ensuring adequate assessment timing, resources, and institutional support).

4.3.2 Evaluation Subjects

Two assessment models operate concurrently: legislative self-assessment conducted by specialized committees through public consultations, expert hearings, and data analysis; and external evaluation by judicial bodies (through environmental courts), audit authorities (examining fiscal efficiency), and social oversight entities (via public participation platforms).

4.3.3 Evaluation Criteria

Two standards are pivotal: collaborative effectiveness examines dynamic legislative processes, from planning coordination with upper-level laws to implementation consistency across regions, as demonstrated in transboundary cases like the Yangtze Finless Porpoise Protection Agreement among Nanjing, Zhenjiang, and Ma'anshan. "Small, Swift, Flexible" criteria evaluate targeted problem-solving efficiency, legislative simplicity, and practical adaptability.

4.3.4 Result Application

Assessment outcomes inform three pathways: legislative refinement through problem identification and inter-regional feedback loops; enforcement improvements via judicial recommendations and administrative accountability mechanisms; and knowledge diffusion through best practice dissemination and institutional learning.

This framework transforms fragmented evaluation practices into a cohesive governance tool, balancing ecological protection with administrative efficiency while maintaining constitutional compliance. By institutionalizing cross-jurisdictional accountability and public participation, it addresses systemic weaknesses in China's decentralized environmental governance structure, providing a replicable model for transboundary legislative coordination.

5. Conclusion

Regional environmental legislative coordination stands as a critical strategy for addressing complex transboundary ecological challenges and advancing ecological civilization. This study has examined China's experimental landscape in this domain, revealing the strategic value of collaborative legislative models, institutional frameworks, and enforcement mechanisms in improving regional environmental governance. However, persistent obstacles—including fragmented interest reconciliation, jurisdictional coordination barriers, and implementation weaknesses—demand systematic solutions.

To advance this agenda, this paper proposes three pathways: enhancing intergovernmental communication, establishing robust interest compensation mechanisms, and strengthening regulatory enforcement. These measures aim to create a coherent legal architecture capable of sustaining long-term ecological progress.

Looking forward, regional environmental legislative coordination requires continuous institutional innovation. As global environmental crises deepen and regional cooperation intensifies, China must adopt more open and adaptive governance approaches. Key priorities include refining collaborative legislative models, developing dynamic evaluation frameworks, and ensuring legislative responsiveness to emerging ecological challenges. Through such efforts, regional legislative coordination can become a cornerstone of harmonious human-nature coexistence and sustainable development.

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