

COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY LISTENING SESSIONS: THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

April 2022

Over the past several months, the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition, the National Forest Foundation, and Sustainable Northwest have engaged with collaborative practitioners in a number of different venues to gather input on how the Forest Service could fulfill Congressional support for collaboration through a collaborative capacity funding program. We hosted three regional listening sessions with collaborative networks in Oregon, Washington, and the Southwestern U.S., as well as a national listening session. Through these events, and other individual outreach, we gathered feedback from more than 80 people, representing tribes, non-profit organizations, collaborative facilitators, research institutes, small businesses that support collaboratives, and the Forest Service.

Practitioners affirmed the strong need for a capacity program to support key functions of collaboration, specifically convening; building and sustaining collaborative structures and processes; strategic planning; project management; internal communication and relationship-building; and external engagement with agency staff, the public, and other stakeholders. They also provided feedback on aspects of program design that would help the agency meaningfully and equitably support the range of collaborative efforts that benefit Forest Service-managed lands. A small working group reviewed and synthesized this input into five key messages, along with potential strategies for operationalizing that input. We have included potential examples and models for the agency to reference in Appendix A.

1. This funding and accompanying selection and evaluation criteria should be designed to support collaborative groups and efforts with diverse characteristics and conditions. Participants emphasized the need for built-in flexibility to allow funding to support collaboratives' self-identified needs, instead of requiring applicants to adapt their proposals to meet narrow funding criteria. Participants also cautioned against trying to prescriptively define collaboration or collaborative efforts, instead encouraging a focus on functions or outcomes.

Potential Strategies

- Create distinct pools of funding and/or additional assistance to support different stages of collaboration or different needs; allow applicants to self-select funding or support categories based on their needs or stage of work. For example, funding pools for emerging collaboratives could include mentoring and peer-learning offerings; and pools for mid-capacity collaboratives could include opportunities for assistance with strategic planning, monitoring, or governance.
- Use diverse criteria to more equitably select applicants with different strategies and local conditions. Selection criteria for funding should include factors within a collaborative's span of control (e.g. ability to convene diverse partners, engage with agency staff, and work toward agreement on issues and priorities) as well as evaluation measures related to alignment with agency goals and management priorities.
- Simplify the process for modifying funding agreements or grants to allow for adaptation to changing conditions such as staffing transitions or revised project planning timelines.
- Build in flexibility to award contracts or share award funding with subgrantees as needed.

2. The program should incorporate and center equity considerations. We heard a desire from both collaborative participants and agency leadership for the program to place particular emphasis on ensuring benefits reach emerging collaboratives, lower capacity collaboratives, and those working in underserved communities.

Potential Strategies

- Develop targeted evaluation criteria or distinct funding pools to ensure that emerging or lower capacity collaboratives and collaboratives whose work benefits underserved communities have equitable access to this funding or are prioritized for funding.
- Ensure funding can be used for activities that specifically address representation and inclusion of underrepresented communities and partners (e.g., cover travel and meeting attendance costs for underrepresented stakeholders or fund collaboratives to build relationships with and learn more about underserved groups or areas).
- Increase program accessibility for applicants with limited resources:
 - Reduce, eliminate or create exceptions for match requirements
 - Allow in-kind match and value it appropriately (i.e., more than the current volunteer rate of \$27.20/hour for most professionals).
 - Ensure funding is designed to cover applicants' true indirect costs.
 - Streamline application and reporting requirements to be commensurate with the amount of funding received.
- Develop targeted technical support, such as an incubator program, for emerging or lower capacity collaboratives.

3. Allow for locally adapted tracking, reporting and monitoring. Participants stressed the importance of flexible, adaptable monitoring approaches that better reflect and align with collaboratives' diverse activities, functions, and goals as well as the longer timescales often needed to demonstrate collaborative accomplishments or outcomes. Collaboratives can be valuable partners in developing tracking and reporting plans that are achievable and meaningful at the local level but also support important programmatic monitoring. Given that evaluating and correlating the outcomes of collaboration can be difficult, applicants saw value in technical support to help them determine how to measure and demonstrate progress.

Potential Strategies

- Develop and share a theory of change or other guiding framework that clearly links program goals, proposal selection criteria, and reporting/monitoring requirements.
- Develop a menu of potential progress indicators, targets, metrics, and deliverables associated with proposed outcomes. Encourage the use of a variety of indicators and build in the opportunity for funding recipients to propose or co-create progress indicators, metrics and outputs.
- Encourage flexible reporting requirements that can be fulfilled through documents and products the collaborative has previously developed (governance documents, comment letters, outreach materials) or that align with other reporting/monitoring being done.
- Set reporting requirements on longer intervals to enable learning and adaptation and better reflect the longer timescales of outcomes from collaborative activities.
- Enlist universities, non-profits, extension offices and other technical service providers to help recipients to develop tracking and reporting plans and strategies.

4. Provide local contacts and context for program administration. Participants liked the idea of a collaborative capacity funding program set in the context of their regions to ensure program design and priorities are informed by local collaborative characteristics and needs. They also stated a desire for clear communication and accessible points of contact who could ensure collaboratives are informed of funding opportunities and help them navigate program requirements and deadlines.

Potential Strategies

- Establish a multi-stakeholder advisory committee in each region/sub-region to evaluate proposals based on the nature of collaborative efforts and needs in that area. Working with partner entities to administer the program may also help address Federal Advisory Committee Act requirements.
- Develop national program guidance and standards that include some allowance for regional/sub-regional administrators to tailor proposal evaluation criteria and/or monitoring strategies based on regional conditions, as long as they remain within national parameters and fulfill programmatic monitoring goals and accountability requirements.
- Establish collaborative outreach as a key role of any program administrator.

5. Support for collaborative support services. Participants supported some of this funding going toward entities that undertake collaborative support functions such as peer learning, regional network-building, and technical service provision as long as those entities can demonstrate collaborative support for their work and unmet need.

Potential Strategies

- Allow for a small portion of overall funding to be allocated directly to collaborative capacity support services.
- Explicitly allow funding awarded to collaboratives to be used for support services.
- Enlist technical support providers to develop learning resources and opportunities available to all or multiple funding recipients such as funding orientation workshops, economic impact calculators or monitoring tools.

Other Recommendations:

- We encourage the agency to include or consult external partners during the development of this program to ensure that perspectives of potential users and beneficiaries are represented.
- We urge the Forest Service to develop this program with the goal of extending it beyond the five-year timeline of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) or using it as a model for a permanently funded collaborative capacity program.
- We strongly support the agency finding a way to establish one integrated collaborative capacity support program, rather than two parallel programs, to meet the intent of the IIJA and the Fiscal Year 2022 Omnibus Law.
- We would like to emphasize that building collaborative capacity in new places and with underserved communities via this funding is an important facet of effectively implementing the IIJA. If targeted correctly, this funding can help lay the groundwork for under-resourced, lower-capacity places and entities to be able to effectively utilize infrastructure investments in the latter years of its availability.
- We received feedback from three tribal representatives over the course of our listening sessions and follow-up outreach. Based on feedback from these tribal participants, we encourage the agency to ensure

its program design supports the varying levels of capacity and unique ways that tribes engage with collaborative efforts or work cooperatively with the Forest Service and other agencies, which often isn't as a formal member of a collaborative group. Additionally, accepting collaborative capacity funding – and undertaking activities associated with it – should in no way diminish a tribe's sovereign status nor affect its government-to-government relationship with the agency. The Forest Service should engage directly with tribes – possibly via Regional Offices – as it begins developing this program in order to share information, answer questions, and allow for additional input.

Appendix A: Potential Collaborative Capacity Program Models & Examples

Capacity Programs

- The National Forest Foundation offered a variety of privately supported grant programs from the early 2000's to 2010 that exemplify more targeted collaborative support. They included a Community Assistance Program for start-up collaboratives, a Mid-Capacity Assistance Program for collaboratives and community-based organizations that were working to build sustainable systems and funding streams, and a Collaboration Innovation Fund to spur new directions and best practices. Each program had different evaluation criteria and requirements that were responsive to the varying needs of the applicants. In addition, the NFF offered technical assistance and training.
- [The Community Capacity and Land Stewardship program](#), offered by some Forest Service Regional Offices, was an example of an agency-supported collaborative capacity program. The program was administered by the National Forest Foundation and applicants were selected by a steering committee using outcomes-based criteria. Funding could be used for a broad range of eligible activities and funded work could take place off National Forests and Grasslands if there was a clear benefit to those lands.
- The Network for Landscape Conservation's [Landscape Conservation Catalyst Fund](#) provides another collaborative capacity program model. The program uses diverse criteria to select participants, including evidence of partner commitment and impact of proposed activities during and beyond the grant period timeline. A peer-learning component is included for all grantees and a portion of the fund is dedicated to partnerships led by Indigenous peoples, organizations, and communities.
- The [California Landscape Stewardship Network](#) is compiling several recommendations for increasing collaborative capacity and is developing a set of model grant guidelines for collaborative capacity and infrastructure funding. Those resources were developed from more than 30 interviews with state leaders and regional network practitioners. The documents are still in draft form but should be available later in 2022.

Monitoring Approaches

- The National Forest Foundation used an [Outcome Based Monitoring Tool](#) to help collaboratives in its Mid-Capacity Assistance Program develop a monitoring plan with measurable targets and indicators.
- The [Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program](#) provides another example of indicators developed to monitor the program's ecological, economic, and social outcomes. The National Forest Foundation developed a [reference on how initial indicators were developed](#).

