

Thematic Elements Emerging from 2014 Regional Conversations

Background & Summary

In the summer of 2014, the Network of Oregon Watershed Councils (NOWC), Oregon Association of Conservation Districts (OACD), Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts (COLT), and Oregon Conservation Education & Assistance Network (OCEAN) hosted a series of regional meetings intended to encourage networking and discussion among councils, districts, and land trusts. Key supporting agencies, including the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB), Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA), and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), were invited to participate. The primary objectives were to create a space for open dialog among these groups, build shared understanding of the work they do, and discuss different partnership models.

Major points of conversation were recorded and later reviewed to identify common themes, which can be found on the following pages. Several important elements emerged from these themes, which are summarized below:

- Long-term staff retention is widely viewed as an important component of organizational success and an important ingredient for partnerships, but uncertain funding hampers organizations' ability to retain quality employees.
- Participants identified a lack of understanding about other conservation/restoration organizations, agencies, and programs as a barrier to strategic partnering, resource sharing, and leveraging. This lack of understanding also applies to connecting landowners with the right tools to accomplish restoration objectives.
- Participants asked agencies to provide more clarity about their expectations for certain grant programs (especially around partnerships) and sought more details about the level and types of support they can expect from agency programs.
- Participants expressed frustration about increasingly complex bureaucratic processes around project funding, permitting, and reporting, which diverts staff time from project management and organization-building activities.
- Participants asked the statewide associations to engage more directly with their organizations – including board members – to help address specific organizational needs.
- While participants recognize the role and value of the statewide associations, in some locations they identified value in creating a regional entity to help coordinate communications and working relationships between organizations at a more local level.
- Looking forward, many participants recognized the importance of increasing the scope, complexity, and reach of their restoration projects, but also identified this as a primary challenge.

Organizational Capacity – Limiting Factors

- Long-term staff retention was universally recognized as a primary factor (or inhibitor) of organizational success, and a major driver of other key issues related to capacity and partnership-building activities.
- Participants broadly recognized the importance of developing trust not just with partners, but also with landowners and other cooperators. Staff continuity is essential for maintaining relationships and trust.
- Long-term commitments – primarily of funding – were seen as a major factor in retaining staff. Budget cuts have resulted in a net loss of staff capacity, which also increases burnout – at the agency and organization levels.
- In some regions the decline of resource-based economies and other factors have encouraged skilled members of the workforce, as well as younger generations, to migrate elsewhere – a “brain drain” of sorts.

Increasing Organizational Capacity – How do we get there?

- Many participants recognized the need to share resources – especially human resources – to help with the development of grant proposals and management of specific restoration programs.
- Participants identified a need for statewide associations to engage more directly with organizations’ boards, perhaps even employing a “circuit rider” to help address specific organizational tasks or needs.
- Participants identified the value of moving away from an opportunistic funding model to more deliberate strategies that involve multiple partners to build broader projects that strategically leverage funds.
- Participants expressed a desire to better understand what support they can expect from agencies, whether that be monetary, in-kind (staff expertise), technical training, etc.

Funding

- Again, participants noted the importance of long-term, stable funding to ensure projects have greater impact.
- Some participants expressed frustration with how complex processes have become to secure funding for projects – highlighting, for example, multiple incompatible forms for budgeting and finance tracking – which increases administrative complexity and costs, making it especially difficult for lower capacity organizations to compete and grow.
- Many participants expressed frustration with a disconnect between funding cycles and landowner participation – noting that landowner participation, which can be difficult to gain, is often quickly lost when funding does not come through or is unavailable.

- Land trust participants noted that it can be difficult to incentivize easements in Oregon because of the state's land use laws; they would like to see more tax incentives connected with easement programs.

Partnerships

- Participants recognized and affirmed the importance of building trust, nurturing partnerships, and collaborating to build more robust projects with broad impacts. They also expressed the importance of allowing these relationships to grow organically, as opposed to being artificially created by funding mechanisms.
 - Participants often expressed a desire for more funder/agency clarity around their expectations for partnerships.
- Participants identified a lack of understanding about other conservation/restoration organizations as a barrier to building strategic partnerships. Especially important points included:
 - A need to focus on values rather than positions – recognize that different groups may have differing positions, but most have similar values for the resource.
 - Better understanding of programs – there exists a complex array of programs and funding mechanisms at the local, state, and federal levels; it can be difficult to understand how they complement each other.
 - Know the resources each organization brings to a partnership – participants recognize that different groups can leverage different resources, but don't necessarily understand what those resources are or how they complement each other.

Communications

- Participants recognized the need to collectively do a better job of telling the story of success statewide, but there was also consensus around a need to do this more effectively at the regional level, and to better articulate specific organizational or ecological needs at the local level.
- In at least two locations, participants identified value in creating or supporting a regional entity that could broadly help coordinate communications and working relationships between conservation/restoration organizations.
- Some participants noted that recreationists are an increasingly important audience to target for monetary, in-kind, and political support of restoration activities.

Landowner Outreach

- Participants recognized the value and importance of organization-specific one-on-one relationships with landowners, but also identified value in developing collective or regional outreach strategies to complement work by individual organizations.
- Outreach strategies are more likely to be successful if we have a clear understanding of landowners' interests and needs, and can clearly articulate to them the benefits of their participation in conservation programs, as well as their rights as individual landowners.
- Outreach, as opposed to regulation, is the best way to address landowner responsibilities (or lack of responsibility), especially if organizations can more effectively connect landowners with resources that address their concerns.

Operations

- Permitting was frequently mentioned as a stress point, with little coordination among local, state, and federal agencies. Significant staff and project time is devoted to navigating the permitting landscape.
- Monitoring and reporting are universally recognized as essential, but participants expressed frustration with incompatibilities between the systems and requirements developed by various agencies.
 - Competing databases (i.e., Confluence and Data Basin) – can we develop and use just one?
 - Preserving landowner privacy is a critical issue in monitoring and reporting.

Emerging Issues

- How do we position ourselves to meet future conservation challenges when all of the low hanging fruit is gone?
- What role should we collectively play in helping local communities with adaptation to climate change?
- How do we more effectively engage the academic community in the work we do?