

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Evaluation of the Chesapeake Bay Small Watershed Grants Program

Blue Earth Consultants, a Division of Eastern Research Group, Inc. (ERG) conducted an evaluation of the Small Watershed Grants Program. The final report is available as of July 2019.

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Background and Purpose

Building Capacity for Water Quality Restoration in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed

As the largest estuary in North America, the Chesapeake Bay and its associated watershed support more than 3,600 species of plants and animals. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) has managed the Small Watershed Grants (SWG) Program since 2000 to promote restoration and protection of the Bay watershed. The purpose of the SWG program is to promote community-based efforts to develop conservation strategies to protect and restore the diverse natural resources of the Chesapeake Bay and its watershed. In doing so, the SWG Program helps further the established goals and outcomes of the Chesapeake Bay Program partnership. To fulfill its purpose, the SWG Program offers grants and technical assistance to local and municipal governments, nonprofit organizations, tribes, educational institutions, and for-profit entities implementing water quality improvement strategies and other locally-based natural resource protection and restoration programs.

SWG Program Highlights (2005–2017)

- \$50.9 million to 533 restoration grants
- Nearly \$4.9 million to 89 technical assistance grants
- \$79.2 million leveraged in local matching funds

Purpose of the 2019 Evaluation

NFWF contracted the first independent evaluation of the SWG Program in 2007, which made recommendations to improve program performance. In 2018, NFWF hired an independent entity—Blue Earth Consultants, a Division of ERG—to evaluate SWG Program outcomes and grantee capacity changes over time. Using an integrated, mixed-methods approach, the evaluation focused on how SWG program performance and grantee capacity have changed since the 2007 recommendations and assessed the outcomes of on-the-ground-restoration projects over time. The evaluation questions addressed: 1) the types of projects implemented by grantees, outcomes achieved, and maintenance over time; 2) changes in grantee capacity over time as a result of the SWG Program; 3) changes in capacity of organizations with whom grantees partnered; 4) regional partnerships formed as a result of the SWG Program; and 5) NFWF's role in contributing to capacity building among grantees and partners and in implementing the 2007 SWG evaluation recommendations.

Summary of Evaluation Findings

Projects Contributed to Water Quality Improvements and Habitat Restoration

This evaluation demonstrated that the SWG Program funded a diversity of restoration and protection projects, including water quality improvements, capacity building, and planning/assessment projects. Based on analysis of available metrics data and outcomes reported by grantees, SWG grants:



Cattle fencing to keep livestock out of streams and protect water quality in Lancaster County, PA. (CBP Flickr)

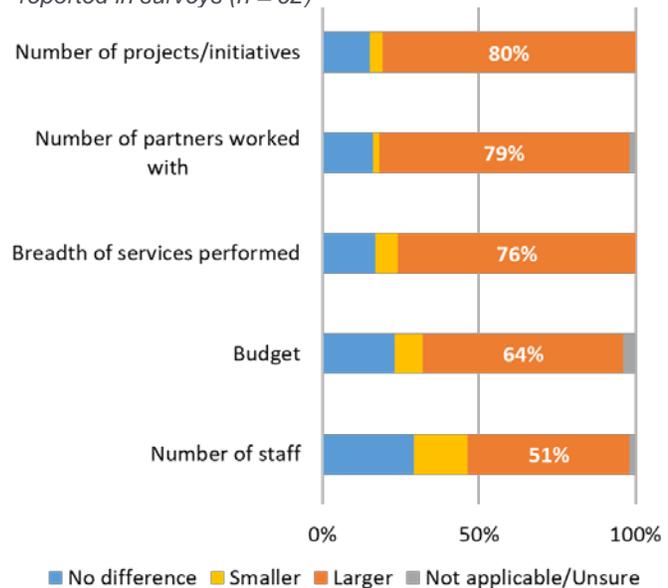
- Contributed to an estimated cumulative reduction of annual loads of at least at least 574,416 pounds of nitrogen, 38,159 pounds of phosphorus, and 61,448,825 pounds of sediment per year in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.
- Contributed to the restoration of at least 2,714 acres of wildlife habitat and 524 miles of stream and riparian habitat.
- Protected and restored oyster habitat through at least 16 grants.
- Created or restored fish passage for Eastern brook trout through at least eight grants.
- Helped manage and control invasive vegetation and non-native aquatic species.

In interviews and surveys, grantees and partners emphasized the importance of ongoing site maintenance to preserve site conditions and project outcomes.

Grantee Capacity Increased Over Time

Since receiving their first SWG Program grants, grantees experienced increases in their organizations' budgets, number of staff, breadth of services, number of projects, and number of partners (Figure 1). Grantees highlighted growth in technical capacity resulting from SWG Program grants, citing increased knowledge of conservation and restoration methods. The evaluation also analyzed whether the SWG Program contributed to increases in project complexity¹ to determine whether the changes in grantee capacity extended beyond the program's core purpose of promoting community-based restoration. While many grantees and partners interviewed and surveyed perceived increases in complexity over time, the integrated quantitative and qualitative data

Figure 1. Perceived grantee changes in operational capacity reported in surveys (n = 92)



analysis did not show consistent or clear trends in changes at the program level. While the evaluation identified individual examples of changes in complexity, it was difficult to detect trends due to changes in grantee reporting requirements over time and a lack of consistent grantee data related to organizational capacity outcomes and impacts to fish and wildlife.

Both grantees and partners stressed that obtaining funds to support the ongoing development of organizational capacity is still a major challenge but is critical to help them achieve long-term sustained growth and outcomes. Though SWG-Planning and Technical Assistance grants helped grantees build useful capacity related to knowledge, skills, and techniques for planning and implementing restoration activities, they did not focus on strengthening organizational capacity. Grantees can seek organizational capacity support through other regional efforts; however, only about one-third of grantees received some form of assistance from such sources.

¹The analysis of project complexity considered the following factors: acreage of project work, project scale, project impact (i.e., habitat or water quality, awareness, or behavior changes) and level of difficulty associated with best management practices (BMP) in subsequent grants.

Partners Built Capacity through Collaboration with Grantees

Non-grantee partners experienced increases in their technical (e.g., knowledge of restoration methods) and operational (e.g., human and financial resources) capacities by collaborating with grantees. Partners highlighted increases over time in the number of projects and initiatives they undertook, the number of other partners with whom they worked, and breadth of services they offered. Grantees supported partners through activities such as on-the-ground training and offering access to contractors and volunteers.

The SWG Program is Beginning to Contribute to Development of Regional Partnerships

The SWG Program is beginning to help grantees and partners engage in regional collaborations with others in the watershed. Through these efforts, grantees and partners are building productive working relationships and identifying shared regional goals, in addition to initiating partnerships on new projects. Results demonstrated, however, that the number of projects, outcomes, and sustained partnerships at the multi-city and multi-county level thus far is limited. To help achieve outcomes and impacts at a larger scale, experts interviewed highlighted the need for strengthened multi-city and multi-county level planning and capacity building to build political will for restoration and conservation activities; identify shared regional goals and strategies; develop projects with linkages between restoration, climate, and ecosystem services; and implement pilot projects.

NFWF Played a Critical Role in Increasing Capacity in the Chesapeake Region

SWG-funded activities resulted in moderate to large levels of improvement in grantees' technical capacity for implementing watershed restoration projects. Activities NFWF has undertaken in response to recommendations of the 2007 evaluation of the SWG Program—such as supporting direct technical assistance grants, contracting field liaisons, and coordinating cross-watershed learning forums and events—contributed to strengthening grantee organizations' capacity and improving grant-making. Grantees, however, said that there were still opportunities for NFWF to further strengthen the impact of the SWG Program through actions such as increasing the visibility and accessibility of funded events and the field liaisons.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the SWG Program is achieving its goals of protecting and restoring the Chesapeake Bay watershed and enhancing the capacity of organizations in the region. To further improve and strengthen the SWG Program, Blue Earth identified six recommendations that NFWF and the SWG Program could consider following to increase the positive impacts of their work:

1. Encourage and help grantees plan for development of long-term site maintenance financing mechanisms.
2. Leverage technical assistance funding and training to strengthen and maximize grantees' organizational capacity.
3. Invest in strengthening and implementing regional (multi-city/county) partnerships, planning, and projects—e.g., through coordinating smaller-scale events in key geographies, assessing opportunities for new partnerships and projects, and funding regional pilot projects.
4. Continue to adaptively manage NFWF-funded events and determine strategies to increase their effectiveness and accessibility.
5. Increase visibility and strategic deployment of field liaisons to more effectively link grantees with key partners and technical resources.
6. Strengthen monitoring and metrics reporting from grantees on organizational capacity, water quality, and impacts to fish and wildlife to allow for a deeper assessment of changes to grantee organizational capacity and the linkages between organizational capacity and conservation, protection, and restoration outcomes.