

Last Updated: March 12, 2013

Southeastern New England Coastal Watershed Restoration Partnership

Draft Meeting Summary 4th Work Group Meeting

January 28, 2013 at EPA/ORD AED Laboratory (Narragansett, RI)

Introduction

Ken Moraff (US EPA Region 1) kicked off by reflecting on past meetings and explaining EPA's efforts since the last workgroup meeting in November, including drafting of an annotated timeline and options for a restoration framework. The intent of today's meeting was to present potential restoration frameworks based on the substance of input from previous meetings and from comments provided by the group on, working documents circulated for review. Facilitator Doug Thompson noted that preferences in approach differed among work group members, but that such differences could be seen as providing a more robust final product as the process continues.

Finalizing the Vision and Purpose Document

After review and discussion of the most recent version of the Vision and Purpose document, the group members revised the draft with the caveat that a number of clarifying elements be added to a final version (Note that a version with these elements was sent to work group members on February 5 highlighting the new additions):

- mention of EPA ecoregions and the geophysical conditions that define the region
- more emphasis on the uniqueness of combining water quality and habitat restoration (the current gap is the linkage between these objectives)
- removing "critical habitat" as a term to avoid ESA connotation
- preventing healthy watersheds from future degradation
- explicit reference to climate change adaptation in the Course of Action section
- concept of increasing efficiency and avoiding duplication
 - strategic investment in high-impact projects is consistent with partners'

During this discussion, the group also decided to call this effort a "Partnership" rather than "Council."

Restoration Framework Options

Based on previous work group input, EPA presented several restoration framework approaches, but indicated its preference for an integrated framework that focuses on three simultaneous objectives: 1.) restoring physical processes; 2.) improving water quality; and 3.) restoring key habitats to the region's coastal waters, a methodology that also relies on a foundation for regional collaboration and communication, innovative technologies, and strong watershed science. The work group highlighted the need to incorporate the concept of "enabling" policy as an element of the framework that would address issues of prioritization and how to implement projects at a scale capable of influencing the system as a whole.

Things to Consider When Selecting Priority Projects

- The group identified a number of elements (some of them inconsistent with each other) to be considered in the prioritization process: Focus on a landscape or watershed level approach rather than a broader, regional approach

Last Updated: March 12, 2013

- Leverage projects by creating awareness, providing incentives and increasing visibility to increase the scope of
- Have a separate criterion for capacity building and community projects, which cannot be measured by typical restoration project criteria
- Demonstrate successes in order to create a feedback loop, and then evaluate the successes and change the strategies as necessary
- Criteria should support projects that have applicability across the region
- Pick a few watersheds and apply a holistic approach with multiple projects that focus on multiple stressors
- Have the NEPs and CCC choose an area where a set of actions could have an impact, turn to partners to help.
- Make a template on a sub watershed of watershed basis to bring together the resources of federal, NGOs to address stressors holistically. Create the model and expand to other watersheds in the region.
- Enhance the benefits of the individual investments that any of the partners might make.
- Put resources together, get more results out and be more strategic to find where a small investment would make the most impact.
- Look at watersheds with impaired areas and current TMDLs
- Choose projects with a concrete plan for transferring knowledge, regional applicability and capacity building.
- Coordination of activities may not require prioritizing or selecting
 - Improve match and viability of projects
- Talk about different aspects at the same time; projects that make an impact on a broader scale.
- If, in the future, we have the luxury of allocating funds we could form a committee to help move projects with certain characteristics forward.
- Identify all the projects that could be out there and create a committee that would help to choose which projects to implement.
- We could come up with guidance for the administering body to be replicable, publicly understandable.
- Learn from the Cape Cod experience where the towns were empowered because they were the ones evaluating and ranking the projects that they chose. The projects that were selected but not initially chosen by the town have lost support and implementation at the local level

Restoration Framework and Selecting Project Criteria

The group generally felt that EPA's preferred conceptual framework made sense, but also noted that a critical task is to define the project selection process or ranking system. Referencing the insight about supporting policies that would enable more successful restoration, it was suggested that better regional coordination and communication conceivably could produce more impact and influence on the use of resources than any specific infusion of funding that might come to this effort. Improved ability to articulate and support projects that develop long-term capacity could similarly expand the influence of conventional restoration attempts. A specific example mentioned several times was the encouragement of stormwater utilities. In Rhode Island, there are only a handful of communities that are interested in looking at stormwater utilities. Other towns would be more interested once they see successful results. We need to be strategic in embracing and supporting those efforts that have a greater impact than the substance at hand (i.e.

Last Updated: March 12, 2013

stormwater management). This is not something that is dealt with in other state or federal approaches.

Members at the same time recognized that a broader view might sometimes appear in conflict with the usual process of developing habitat restoration projects: inventory needs, identify overlaps and gaps, look for local support and engagement; spread the wealth. While helping to guarantee a level of buy-in, that approach tends to generate a less holistic scope and is less conducive to the integration of water quality and habitat that is expected to be the hallmark of this effort. This initiative gives us an opportunity to do something that other groups cannot do on their own or do not do because of the challenges of merging the watershed with the local levels.

Nevertheless, financing, public education, outreach and information sharing are different types of leveraging strategies used in developing management approaches which could be spelled out as criteria for projects as well. There are a lot of projects that can be done, and the group can come up with a long list of good projects but the point is to get more done in a world of scarce resources. We can do this by combining workgroup member expertise and grassroots involvement, share innovations that work, share information, raise money to get things done, engage more people, and share similar practices that build capacity without a lot of money. We need to focus strategies on what is unique about the regional effort, including identifying approaches that would eventually change the dynamics of restoration regionally. There is a sequencing element to all of these suggestions which leads us to something that is sustainable in passing by taking a series of steps.

Next meeting and Updates

The next meeting will focus on the most logical option for organizational structure of this group. Even though the group has decided to move forward with calling this collaboration the “partnership” rather than the council, we may not want to lose sight of having a council as part of this effort. More successful organizations are more along the lines of a “Council” and make decisions, have authority and be a body elevate decision making authority to get funding and financing.

- Taunton River Healthy Watersheds Project (EPA)
Take what exists to create a data viewer to get a handle on what actions are specific to their community and use that to make decisions.
- Partial update to Massachusetts’ 208 plan (MassDEP/CCC)
This wastewater management plan is regionally comprehensive and will be the first time that it has been updated since the late 70’s. The plan focuses on nutrient issues in the Cape, and the Cape Cod Commission has been selected as the main entity that will accomplish the tasks in the plan.
- Clean Energy Council RFP (EPA)
The Clean Energy Council has put out an RFP for entrepreneurs to submit innovations that would address key energy and water issues in MA. EPA has added some money to the pot for proposals that address nutrients in MA and RI they’d get extra money for this innovation. Out of the 5 proposals came in, 4 dealt with septic systems and innovative approaches. If interested in seeing the RFP, contact Karen Simpson at EPA.

Last Updated: March 12, 2013

- Council webpage on EPA's website (EPA)

EPA hopes to have a test site up and running within the next few weeks. They will send around the link for Work Group members to review before launching a live site.

EPA will host a conference call for those Work Group members interested in discussing a draft version of the Restoration Framework document. The fifth Work Group meeting will be at the beginning of April and will focus on finalizing the Restoration Framework and organizational structure for the Partnership at MassDEP's facility in Lakeville, MA. The sixth Work Group meeting will likely be in June with the location to be determined.

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