



2023 SNEP Public Forum

Forum Summary Memo

July 10, 2023

Executive Summary

SNEP hosted a Public Forum on June 13, 2023, from 8:30-4 at Bristol Community College. The Forum was attended by 93 people (13 people attended virtually, 80 attended in person). The primary goals of this Forum were to engage with community members and program partners, share information gained collectively by SNEP and its partners, and to seek input on the work that the SNEP Program has completed, the work ongoing, and the work still to be done.

This memo summarizes the primary feedback received during the Forum. Key recommendations are summarized below and provided in more detail in the Breakout Session Summary section.

Key Recommendations:

- Simplify the grant application process wherever possible: incorporate a Letter of Interest step with federal grant applications, design optional grant application templates, reduce the amount of required supplementary materials, etc.
- Develop grant training materials such as template QAPPs or a QAPP wizard, match tracking training support, permitting, etc.
- Develop a QAPP Database for easy reference and to reduce the creation of duplicative methodologies.
- Develop Technology Transfer materials/events to better “scale up” or geographically expand projects. There is a significant opportunity in this by expanding the existing pilot watershed initiative.
- Assist with coordination between municipalities, non-profits, academic institutions, state/federal governments, consultants, and other project partners to ensure grantees have the technical resources they need to complete projects.
- Provide regional data collection maps/tools/database; and increase the availability of regional data by encouraging the use of a standardized data format.
- Increase the availability of sustainable financing and capability building opportunities.
- Provide more networking opportunities and peer-to-peer exchanges, especially between Tribes, states, and municipalities.

Breakout Session Summaries:

The primary feedback from each session is provided below:

Session 1: Regional Resources and Blind Spots

Room 1: Increasing Public-Private Partnerships | *Elizabeth Scott, Elizabeth Scott Consulting*

Session Description: To date, SNEP has had limited engagement and partnership with private organizations (individuals and for-profit companies). In this session, we will discuss how SNEP, the SNEP Network, and the SNEP Watershed Implementation Grants program currently engage with private organizations; and identify opportunities for our Program and partners to strengthen these partnerships as well as those with non-governmental and/or non-profit organizations to help build the framework for more effective approaches to address today's environmental, social, and economic challenges.

Main Points:

- SNEP does well to encourage innovative projects and increased collaboration by providing peer-to-peer grant opportunities. Both these strengths should carry through to increased collaboration with private organizations; but
- Private organizations are currently prevented from accessing SNEP funds unless they are partnered with a municipality or non-profit.
- Public-private partnerships can be difficult. There is a lack of certainty of future payback for private organizations when they partner with public entities.

Potential Solutions:

- Provide more incentivization for private organizations such as a quicker approval process or some sort of financial incentive.
- Expand grants for technical and design assistance, in addition to the current grants for planning and implementation.
- Provide more education on how/ where to get match funds; examples of what can qualify as match.
- For grant application grading, assign higher importance to in-kind match.
- One option to raise collaboration funds for demonstrating practices is establishing a stormwater utility, but technical assistance for that is lacking. SNEP could offer technical assistance or guidance for this. Once the utility is set up, there are many funding opportunities and benefits.
- Although regulations differ, many states are facing the same barriers of raising funds/ establishing a stormwater utility/ demonstrating best practices. SNEP could facilitate

communication between states on these topics to transfer lessons learned and other potential solutions.

- Support innovation through a competitive process for pre-approved contractors, then EPA can provide funding.
- Include pre-project work into grant applications to give more credit to private organizations that showed investment in the proposal.
- Develop a competitive process for pre-approved contractors.

Room 2: Improving Regional Data Cohesion | *Tim Pasakarnis, Cape Cod Commission*

Session Description: There are numerous data repositories throughout the SNEP region – each with varying metrics and units of measurement that can prevent easy regional comparison and access of long-term data. In this discussion, we will review existing data sources, introduce SNEP’s approach towards improving regional data harmonization, and identify additional opportunities for increased regional data accessibility.

Main Points:

- Every organization has different data collection and analysis procedures and processes.
- SNEP is having difficulties figuring out how to utilize the data in a more streamlined manner.
- Current SNEP efforts include a regional map for categorizing data inventory, meeting with Monitoring Subcommittee to identify barriers to uniform data and identify data formats to reflect the program’s needs/use, understanding and learning from regional databases, and evaluating existing data in a State of the Region Report.
- Monitoring to see the impacts of restoration/implementation is expensive and there are many funding opportunities presently available.

Potential Solutions:

- Partner with existing organizations that already collect data, and those preparing to do so; and work to make that data more available.
- Identify data gaps throughout the SNEP region.
- Identify hotspots on which multiple organizations are focusing and determine why.
- Develop a comprehensive comparison tool and map of all data shared with SNEP.
 - Create a map that shows the presence/absence of impairments and other information such as length of data series.

- Incentivize data sharing or the use of standard data collection processes – perhaps by supplementing data collection to increase the value of data for all organizations.
- More quality control and oversight from SNEP/WQX to track progress of all data sharers if budget allows or funding available.
- Prioritize projects that will address data gaps and will meet SNEP's goals.

Room 3: Keeping Track of Funding Opportunities | Tom Ardito, Restore America's Estuaries

Session Description: In this session, we will identify major funding sources offered throughout the region, discuss how applicants can access these funding sources; and ask if these regionally available resources provide enough opportunity to address the environmental challenges that SNEP has identified as a priority.

Main Point 1: Applying for grants through Grants.gov is challenging and may discourage some groups (including the EJ community) from applying.

Potential Solutions:

- Including a letters of interest review at the outset of a funding opportunity's release is helpful to prevent prospective applicants from allocating too many resources on submitting a proposal that is not well-aligned with the RFP/RFA.
- Consider competing more funding opportunities through a pass-through entity. For instance, SWIG Grants are easier to apply for as they use Google Docs which allow the applicant to save and return to the application later.
- Where possible, reduce the amount of supplementary material requested for submission to applications.
- Reduce the amount of technical data questions in the initial application.
- Reduce the amount of background research requested in applications. Instead, focus on the proposed project narrative. The background research/technical questions can be submitted later in the process.
- Develop a template/clear instruction for applicants to follow.
- Develop a list of what previous grantees used as matching funds.
- Develop a list of applicable/potential project metrics.

Main Point 2: Many aspects of the grant process including tracking match and developing QAPPs is difficult, particularly for municipalities.

Potential Solutions:

- It is difficult for towns to put line items in their budget for match as they don't always know if they will receive the grant.
- Tracking staff time is often a capacity issue for municipalities.
- Develop a QAPP Database of previously used QAPPs for SNEP grantees to use as a

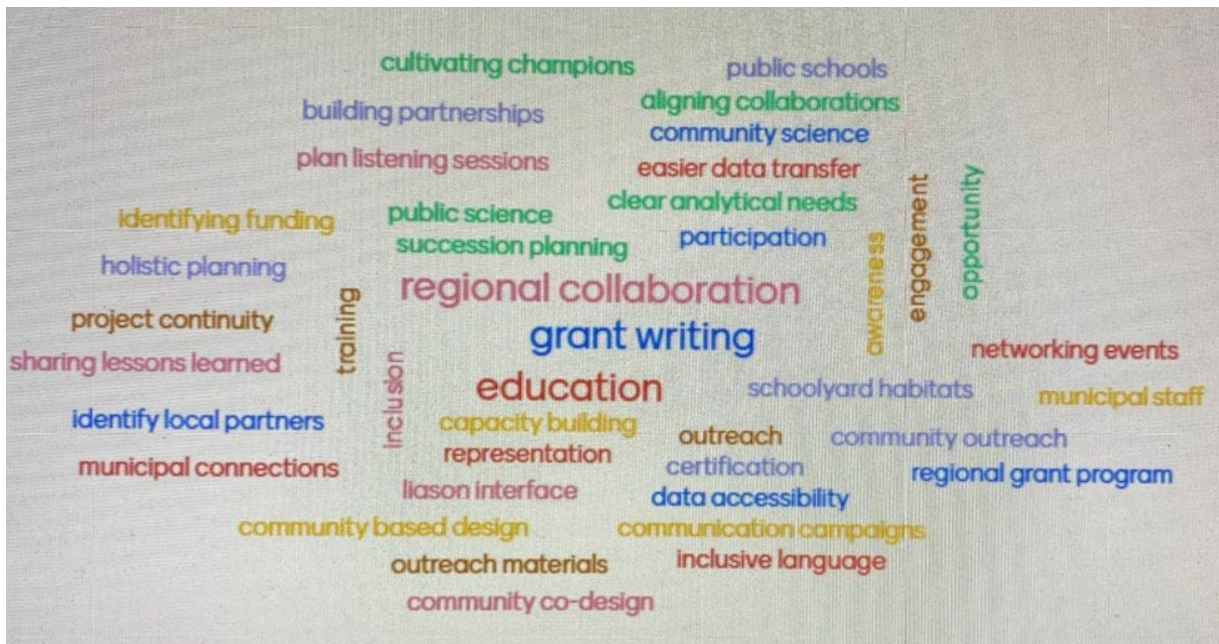
template.

- Recommend grantees reserve money for subcontractor assistance with QAPP development.
- Train grantees to develop their own QAPP and/or develop a “QAPP Wizard.”

Room 4: Better Addressing the Unique Needs of Tribes, Community Groups, and Municipalities | *Kim Groff, Kimberly Groff Consulting & Phaeng Southisombath, SNEP Network*

Session Description: This discussion will provide an overview of how SNEP works to engage and address the needs of Tribes, Community groups, and Municipalities in the SNEP region; and identify areas where our Program can better improve or reorient this engagement to better meet the needs of southeast New England.

Activity 1: This discussion was opened by asking participants to participate in a word cloud activity answering the following question: “In what areas do you wish there were more support?”



Activity 2: The room was broken into four groups and was given a hypothetical funding scenario where the Federal Agency was giving \$1 million to a community to address funding and climate resilience while advancing environmental justice. The activity is uploaded under “Session 1, Room 4 Breakout Activity.”

“What is SNEP doing well?”

- Providing technical assistance at the beginning, facilitating stakeholders, implementing SWIG , acting as conveyor to alleviate administrative process, providing technical assistance to organize teams, pilot projects, asset inventory, and the networking events that take place.

Activity 3: The same word cloud question from Activity 1 was put back on the screen after the activity. New ideas that were added included:

- Financing models, liaison interface, community co-design, legal support, clear analytical support, regional grant program, project continuity, community-based design, shared lessons learned (successes/failures), education/training, technical assistance, involving stakeholders, facilitating relationships with key stakeholders.

Session 2: Opportunities for Improvement

Room 1: Improving/Tweaking the Existing Structure of SNEP | *Ian Dombroski, U.S. EPA Region 1*

Session Description: SNEP currently consists of two main affiliate programs: The SNEP Network, administered by the New England Environmental Finance Center, which offers no-cost technical assistance to Tribes and municipalities; and the SNEP Watershed Implementation Grants program, administered by Restore America’s Estuaries, which funds implementation projects throughout the region. EPA-SNEP also provides grants and technical assistance directly. This discussion will focus on perceived strengths and weaknesses of the current program structure. We encourage attendees to provide their input and feedback based on previous experiences with these programs; and to additionally provide insight on other programmatic areas SNEP could consider focusing on the next 3-5 years (e.g., research, monitoring, technology incubation etc.).

Main Point 1: Organizations are struggling to develop projects in a way that is requested for grants (i.e., making the water quality benefit clear). Communities need more support for developing grant applications, especially underserved communities that do not have the people available/ are lacking training for project management and technical assistance.

Potential Solutions:

- Green Infrastructure Certifications could help communities get a grant, but underserved communities, such as tribes and EJ, may not have the technical training available to pass the tests.
- Keep project requests simple so more communities can engage. Communities that attempt to apply but have incomplete applications should still be considered and should be offered assistance.

- Provide a different path for applying for grants for underserved communities that are less taxing/ complex for the community.
- As part of the grant applications, include checkboxes where SNEP could help (i.e., checkboxes for the applicants to indicate if they specifically need help with funding, research, reporting, etc.).
- Expand the SNEP Network Municipal Training Program to duplicate the Rutgers program to get projects moving and provide more opportunities to train people to be trainers.

Main Point 2: There are 5 existing pilot watershed groups. Will SNEP consider adding more groups?

Potential Solutions:

- Open the pilot watershed groups to include groups from the northern watersheds, such as the Blackstone Watershed Collaborative, which did not exist at the time that the pilot groups were created.
- Funding these local collaboratives will promote the relationships and trust they have with locals.

Main Point 3: People are interested in dam removal and ecological restoration projects but do not know what to do. Permitting for these restoration projects require a lot more than development projects, and permitting varies from state and local levels. It is unclear if there is a reasonable pathway to streamline permitting.

Potential Solutions:

- Create a support group for communities who have/ want to complete dam removal projects.
- A dam removal pilot program is starting in MA this fall. SNEP should leverage existing tools for these projects, such as MVP grants in MA, between MA and RI.
- Compile scientific knowledge to accelerate permitting process. SNEP could be a neutral body between states/ regulatory programs and applicants.

Room 2: Communicating Project Successes in The SNEP Region | Bryce DuBois, College of the Holy Cross

Session Description: In this session we will focus on the narrative success of our region and ask specific questions: who is telling good stories about environmental challenges and restoration? What data is used to support those narratives; and how can SNEP do a better job of capturing, emulating, and amplifying those narratives? Whose stories should we be telling?

Main Point 1 (Safe and Healthy Waters): It's not often clear which habitats and ecosystems are struggling by simply looking at them, which can make communicating warning or limiting

certain uses difficult. It's difficult to limit activities and public access to conservation/preservation lands (i.e., ATV use where restricted, dog-walking where restricted)

Potential Solutions:

- Increase the amount of open space and public lands for proper recreational use.
- Public outreach via multiple platforms and in multiple languages
- Create self-sustaining wildlife habitats.

Main Point 2 (Thriving Watersheds and Natural Lands): Communicating project successes is equally difficult, though it is important to allow for cross-pollination of ideas between organizations. We should work to increase public perception and access of in-progress restoration projects by connecting projects to community values.

Potential Solutions:

- Enhance visitor interaction (i.e., wheelchair accessible trails)
- Community buy-in, establishing trusts.
- Tie in projects with economic development as done with Blackstone River (economic, sociocultural, and ecological outcomes)
- Enhance scenic views to encourage the public to want to preserve the natural beauty and ultimately the local ecosystems.
- Use multiple types of metrics to describe project successes that may not be visible.

Main Point 3 (Sustainable Communities): The seasonality of many coastal populations in the region can prove challenging for outreach. We need to use uniform and consistent language, making sure the right people are being informed in the most beneficial ways; and finding the proper balance of what to focus on (i.e., overfishing, public access). Additionally, long-term monitoring and maintenance is an ongoing issue, especially with respect to affordability.

Potential Solutions:

- Educating specific individuals and future generations
- Use pictures to see before and after effects of both positive and negative scenarios.
- Community garden access for low-income populations
- Identifying specific monitoring metrics
- Mutually reinforcing activities, opening previously closed areas for recreation/fishing/etc. which can benefit the local economy.

Room 3: Scaling Up from Pilot to Progress | Marcel Belaval, USGS & Adam Reilly, U.S. EPA Region 1

Session Description: SNEP is an innovative program that funds original, pilot-scale approaches. In this session, we will provide a review of some of those approaches and discuss how our Program might better amplify the successes and lessons-learned from those

projects. How should our Program share information? How do we better support a sustained regional impact?

Main Points:

- What defines a “pilot project” and what do we mean by “scaling up?”
- Technology transfer is often lost in a project. For instance, is it more important to scale up technology/projects for a specific community or to make that technology available to other communities. For example, “pilot project” may include the installation of PRBs or other similar technology. The “scaling up” part could include developing a guidance manual/document for others to install similar technology in different settings.

Potential Solutions:

- Develop videos/design sharing and provide to other communities for free (on SNEP webpage/newsletter).
- Include technology transfer task in grant. This task could include a variety of forms including videos, participation in field trips, participation in SNEP conferences, the development of manuals, cut sheets describing the projects, etc.
- Identify other communities that could benefit from this technology.
 - It is often difficult to determine which communities to approach. This is often spearheaded by consultants as part of their typical business development.
 - Would need to identify potential funding sources that could pay for other communities.
- Change requirements for grant final reports to ensure that information is useful and transferable.
- Host Technology Transfer events.
 - Annual case study forums.
 - Monthly regional meetings.
 - Quarterly round robin tech transfer events.
 - Make these events more accessible.
 - Provide participant support costs (i.e., offer childcare or additional incentives).
 - Offer meetings at more times of day (days/evenings)
 - Offer a mix of virtual and in-person events.

Room 4: Coordinating Among Technical Assistance Entities | *Phaeng Southisombath & Martha Sheils, SNEP Network & Matthew Stamas, U.S. EPA, Region 1*

Session Description: The Mission of the SNEP Network is to empower communities within the region to achieve healthy watersheds, sustainable financing, and long-term climate resilience through management of stormwater and restoration projects. This discussion will provide an overview of the existing resources offered by the SNEP Network and regional partners, such as leadership exchanges and peer-to-peer learning opportunities; as well as new opportunities coming online such as the EJ Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Center, which was recently awarded for Region 1. This session will encourage discussion on identifying opportunities for increased collaboration of regional technical assistance entities and increased access to these resources.

Main Points:

- The roles of municipal/state/federal players if often unclear.
- Municipalities often do not have the capacity to coordinate with other stakeholders.

Potential Solutions:

- SNEP can improve coordination by providing more networking opportunities and face-to-face interactions. Relationship-building opportunities, especially between states, Tribes, and municipalities, would be of specific help.
- Assist with administration/reporting specifically with grant review/solicitations. Smaller municipalities commonly do not have an engineering department. With little experience writing grants, being offered resources on how to navigate the federal application process would be beneficial.
- Provide peer review resources to reality check scopes and budgets.
- Facilitate relationships with grantmaking entities/meet grant makers face to face
- Provide tech assistance to community groups to guide their capacity to engage.

Session 3: Looking Towards the Future

Room 1: Increased Engagement with Academic Institutions | *Adam Reilly, U.S. EPA & Tim Pasakarnis, Cape Cod Commission & Bryce DuBois, College of the Holy Cross*

Session Description: Southeast New England is an immense hub of technical experience and academic resources, however SNEP to date has not fully engaged with these institutions. In this discussion, we will review SNEP's existing relationships with regional academic institutions, discuss SNEP's research goals and approaches; and ask how SNEP might better support a sustained level of partnership with academic institutions in support of those regional goals.

Main Points:

- Developing solid relationships between SNEP and academic institutions is difficult even

if the general interests are similar.

- There is often a disconnect between SNEP and academic institutions. For instance, once a grant ends, the relationship generally ends.
- Administrative barriers at academic institutions are often limiting.

Potential Solutions:

- Offer internship or fellowship opportunities/ offer to fund these positions for students working on projects that align with SNEP goals (MVP grant did something similar).
- Help match students with SNEP partners for grad school/ senior project requirements. SNEP could keep a list of projects that partners want completed, provide it to the institution by project topic, and students can work on the projects.
- Hold an academic event with thesis project presentations- could encourage projects to move forward and is a good way to share data.
- Develop a formal designation to be a partner with SNEP (i.e., create SNEP Affiliation, students get research opportunities), creating a third party to address cap/ overhead issues.

Room 2: Community-led Project Design, Learning, and Engagement | Tom Ardito, Restore America's Estuaries

Session Description: In this session, we will engage in an open discussion on how SNEP can better incorporate community-based design practices throughout its Program. Where are these opportunities for our Program to grow and better address community needs? Are there opportunities for our Program to become better accessible at the community level? Where are these opportunities for improvement and how can we become a more equitable program?

Main Points/Potential Solutions: The structure of this session allowed current and prior grant recipients to engage with one another and share different aspects of their project outcomes and designs. Throughout the session, the discussion further underlined the importance of understanding community-specific needs to ensure a project's success.

Room 3: How can SNEP better meet its habitat goals? | Mary Schoell, Narragansett Bay NERRS & Haley Miller and Margherita Pryor, U.S. EPA, Region 1

Session Description: The SNEP Strategic Plan has identified several priority actions in support of Thriving Watersheds and Natural Lands. This session will provide a review of some of those supporting priority actions; a review of actions that SNEP has taken to date in support of these goals; and will include a focused discussion of ways that SNEP can better work towards meeting these priority actions.

Main Points:

- The biggest threats to priority habitats are climate change, land use change, dredging, sea level rise, planning boards/Town councils, watershed connectivity including dams and undersized infrastructure (culverts, bridges, etc), invasive species/loss of species and genetic diversity, nutrients/contaminants, population growth, poor water management.
- To mitigate threats – the region needs to prioritize zoning regulation updates (addition of green infrastructure/low impact development, cluster development, etc.), technical support, training and public education at all levels (children/adults), land acquisition wastewater/stormwater management, invasive species management, comprehensive watershed planning, compliance, and enforcement.

Potential Solutions:

- Train staff and public in community and environmental education.
- Increase incentives and support for grantees (match, permitting, long-term monitoring for restoration progress etc.).
- Increase the availability of sustainable funding sources and assist communities with accessing funding sources (financing)
- Increase opportunities for capacity building, especially for increased municipal staff.
- Increase regional consistency across the SNEP subregions.