



**MWCC 2022 Annual Meeting:
Summary of Group Discussions Related to Federal and State Funding Barriers**

During the Montana Watershed Coordination Council Annual Meeting on February 24, 2022, participants divided into small groups to discuss challenges related to accessing federal and state funding programs that support natural watershed infrastructure improvements. In addition to identifying these barriers, participants also discussed opportunities for new resources and services that MWCC might provide to conservation partners that will improve their ability to access federal and state funding and improve their ability to manage and administer these funds. Below is a summary of the main points from these small group discussions:

What barriers or challenges exist that prevent watershed organizations from applying for, and receiving, funds through federal or state programs, such as programs available through forthcoming Federal Infrastructure spending?

The following are the top ten most cited challenges watershed groups face when pursuing federal/state funding programs:

1. Lack of time and familiarity to navigate federal/state funding processes and work on funding administration, reporting, as well as project management
 - a. Confusion about the registration and maintenance of federally required organizational information, online grant application and reporting portals, etc.
 - b. Lack of awareness of state/federal procurement requirements
2. Lack of time and capacity to support meaningful collaboration, build partnerships, and create buy-in with stakeholders and landowners
3. Difficulty understanding which funding programs are available for various project-types and their individual requirements and timelines.
4. Difficulty meeting minimum funding match requirements
5. Inadequate capacity to maintain programming and operations while taking on additional workload of administering and implementing large project grants
6. Limited time and funding for project planning, as well as for comprehensive holistic watershed-scale planning
 - a. Need updated and relevant plans to guide work (e.g., WRPs, drought plans, pre-disaster mitigation plans, etc.)
 - b. Need to have a project portfolio in-hand for when funding comes available
7. Limited relationships with entities who may be eligible for different programs, and who have aligning interests and goals (e.g., watershed groups partnering with irrigation districts, counties, municipalities)
8. Lack of alignment with local priority projects and federal/state funding programs
9. Timing of funding not aligning with project planning and implementation timeframes.
10. Lack of capacity and funding to support early stages of planning and project development (e.g., stakeholder engagement and early stage feasibility assessment)

Additional barriers also included:

- Limited time/capacity of government agencies who are in a position to offer support/guidance

- Difficult to balance project budgets to cover expenses for implementation, project management, and administration
 - Availability and cost of materials and contractors are continuing to rise
- Changes in local demographic impacting the ability for groups to operate sustainably
 - Cost of living makes expansion of staffing difficult
- Inadequate cashflow to cover initial project costs (contracting, materials, etc.) while waiting for reimbursement
- Project monitoring requirements can be challenging to meet.

What resources, support, or services do watershed organizations need in order to apply and successfully receive federal or state funding, and what can MWCC and our state, regional, and federal partners to help?

Funding Information – Improving the availability of information about funding programs

- Providing succinct guidance on the most relevant funding opportunities, including: basic understanding of requirements, explanation of terminology, expected time and capacity needed to apply/administer, etc.
- Providing opportunities for prospective applicants to connect with funding entities to discuss ideas, issues, and concerns (e.g., MWCC webinars that are recorded and housed in MWCC resource library)
- Providing direct point of contact to grant administrators or liaisons who are knowledgeable about funding programs, and ensuring agency staff are supported and have time/capacity to talk with potential applicants
- Use MWCC Watershed News to highlight infrastructure funding programs as they roll out, and continue improving functionality of MWCC Infrastructure Funding webpage to include helpful resources
- Develop a flow chart for funding sources, including planning and implementation for various project types
- Ability for people to see funding opportunities from a 10,000 ft. view and how they complement each other.

Project Development, Planning, and Management – Ensuring conservation organizations have the tools and support to develop watershed infrastructure projects suitable for public funding.

- Provide project management (and project development) training for conservation organizations
- Identifying sources of planning and capacity funding to support for the early stages of project development (e.g., stakeholder/landowner outreach, developing project alternatives, etc.)
- Identifying past successes or existing projects that can be scaled up with additional funding
- Provide examples of appropriate and successful projects funded through specific funding programs
- Identify partners (e.g., agencies, universities, consultants, nonprofit experts, etc.) who may provide technical expertise and assistance in project planning. Are there any entities who could provide pro bono support?
- Guidance on project implementation techniques and required permitting and how the timing of permitting falls into the steps of project planning and funding applications.
- State level support and assistance to update relevant watershed scale plans (e.g., watershed restoration/management plans, drought plans, pre-disaster mitigation plans, etc.)
 - Develop a template for a “watershed projects portfolio” that can be adopted by conservation organizations – including a summary of priority projects, permits needed, cost estimates, etc. This suite of “shovel ready” projects can be used as future funding becomes available
- Directory of technical experts who conservation organizations can connect with to ask questions and seek support
- Provide example cost estimates to assist with bidding processes (e.g., how much does it cost to hire an excavator for X number of days to do X linear feet of work; provide a range of costs of what might be expected for time and materials if a project goes to bid)

- Publicize and share existing resources available through MWCC and partners (e.g., MWCC resource library, water monitoring resources, MT Conservation Menu, etc.)

Grant Writing and Administration – Provide assistance, resources, and direct support to help conservation organizations develop successful proposals and responsibly administer public funding

- Provide grant writing workshops and draw on expertise of contracted grant writers
 - Look into bringing ‘Grant Writing for Conservation’ (BLM service) back into the state
- MWCC provides fee for service to help conservation organizations apply for grant application, administration, and reporting (e.g., MWCC employs a grant writing professional to work on behalf of watershed groups)
- Provide procurement training
- Utilize MWCC Resource Library and/or Coordination Forum as a clearinghouse to find existing procurement policies, other organization governance documents, sharing resources, etc.
- Directory of partners available to provide assistance with technical components of grant application requirements, as well as review and comment on proposals
- Provide tools for budget development to assist with grant applications, as well as budget tracking for grant administration
- Provide guidance and documentation on tasks and steps associated with grant management

Partnerships & Connections – Building connections and relationships across MWCC’s network to support conservation organizations working on watershed infrastructure projects

- Use MWCC’s Watershed Coordination Forum to identify opportunities where groups can partner with other organizations at a larger scale
 - Additionally, use this forum for discussion about progress/challenges within a grant period; what problems are groups having and what are the solutions other people are coming up with; use this to provide feedback to grand managers
- A platform for discussion about projects that allows groups to refine their ideas; what project approaches work well and what does not work; this could be done in the context of field tours or workshops (e.g., MWCC’s fall tour)
- Create opportunities for groups to connect with others who have navigated particular funding programs and learn about their experiences
- Continue organizing meetings and events with MWCC’s network and funders
- Identify more technical leaders that groups can connect with as a resource (e.g., university affiliates)
- Encourage coordination within communities to ensure conservation groups aren’t duplicating efforts and each group is focused on specific/unique issues.
- Use MWCC to connect with other statewide networks who may be partners in implementation funding (e.g., MACO, MACD, statewide irrigation groups, etc.) to coordinate funding needs
- Develop a comprehensive list of the local sponsors (e.g., irrigation districts, water and sewer districts, municipalities, etc.) who are eligible for particular funding programs

Watershed Organization Capacity – Ensuring local conservation groups have adequate capacity and staffing to implement watershed conservation improvement projects

- Continue working with public and private partners to identify base level funding for local groups to sustain and bolster capacity to plan, administer, and implement projects
- Building long-term relationships with partners and landowners by ensuring staff retention and ability to remain competitive with compensation, benefits, etc. Identify opportunities for individual groups to improve their fundraising
- Identify potential university or other resources for facilitation, training, etc.