

Investing in Collaborative Models and Their Capacities:

AN EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL FISH
AND WILDLIFE FOUNDATION'S INNOVATIVE
NUTRIENT AND SEDIMENT REDUCTION
GRANTS PROGRAM

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The
Stewardship
Network

TOGETHER FOR NATURE

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[The Stewardship Network \(TSN\)](#) is an award-winning 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with a 20-year history of caring for the natural world. In pursuit of their mission to connect, equip, and mobilize nature's caretakers, TSN facilitates countless relationships across organizations and individuals, including community groups, government entities, nonprofits, and businesses. The organization is headquartered in Ann Arbor, MI, with deep roots across the Great Lakes as well as partners, allies, and Member Communities across the country.

[The Institute for Engagement & Negotiation \(IEN\)](#) is a nationally recognized leader in fostering collaborative change across a broad range of environmental, social, and economic issues. Founded in 1980, IEN is staffed by a team of facilitators and mediators that assists organizations, agencies, industry, and communities in making bold, sustainable decisions. IEN's work spans four areas: sustainable environment; resilient communities; health, food systems; and building capacity through training and leadership.

[National Fish and Wildlife Foundation \(NFWF\)](#) is the nation's largest private conservation foundation. Created by Congress in 1984, NFWF works with both the public and private sectors to protect and restore our nation's fish, wildlife, plants, and habitats for current and future generations. It supports conservation efforts across all 50 states and U.S. territories. Since its founding, NFWF has funded more than 23,300 rigorously evaluated projects, awarded to both large environmental organizations and small local initiatives.

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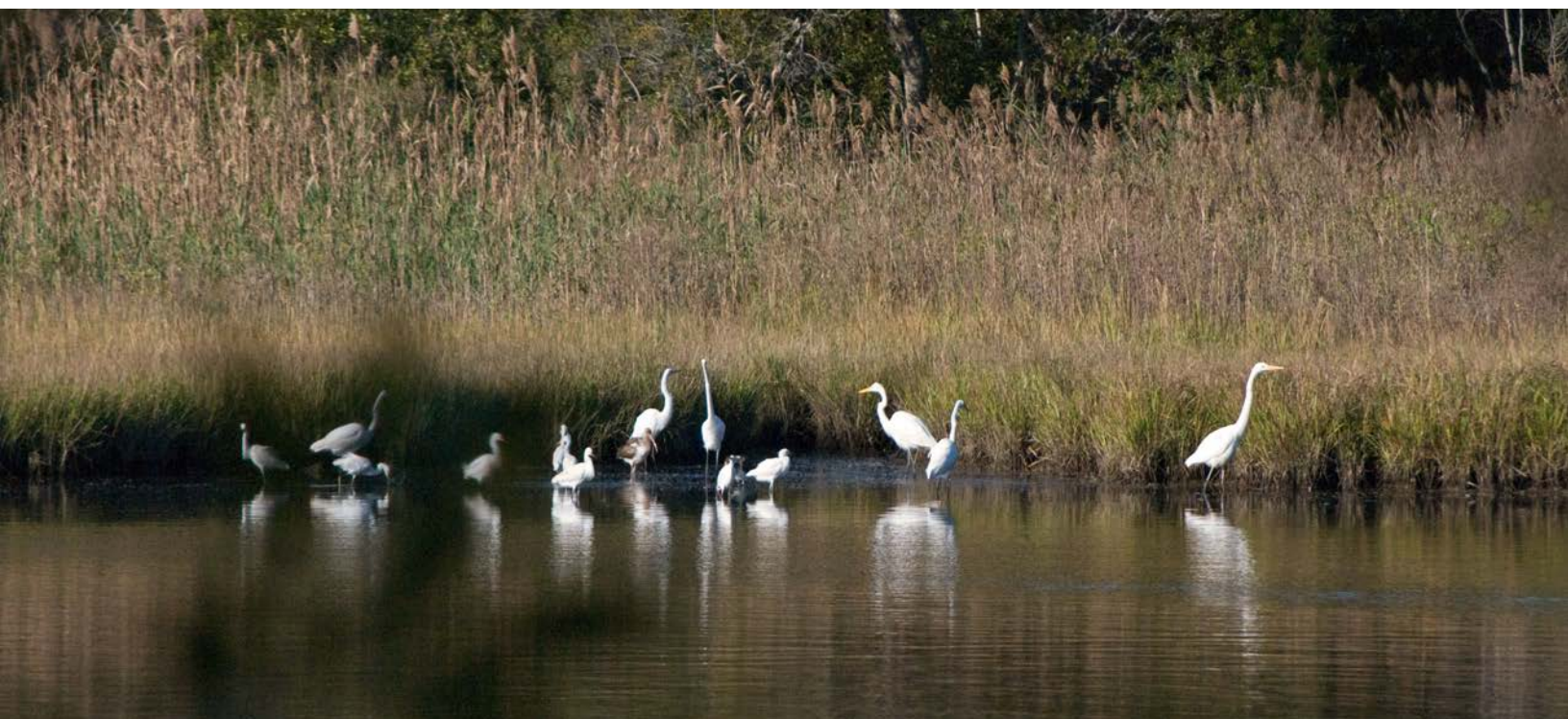
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Amy Mickel has 30 years of experience conducting social science research using integrative mixed-methods approaches. Her strong background in both qualitative and quantitative data analyses has produced many articles. Her research is published in prestigious peer-reviewed journals, including the *Academy of Management Review*, *Human Relations*, *International Journal of Business Communication*, and *Journal of Management Inquiry*. She is a Full Professor in the College of Business at California State University, Sacramento where she has taught undergraduate and graduate students since 2000. Mickel is the Applied Research Lead for [The Stewardship Network](#).

Mickel's research expertise has contributed to landscape-scale stewardship and conservation efforts. Examples of some of her work include [Partnership Impact Model](#), [Partnership Impact Evaluation Guide](#), [Cutting Green Tape Case Study](#), [Collaborative Capacity Research Brief](#), [Guide for Systems Thinking and Change](#), and [Four Cornerstones to Effective Collaboration](#).

Sharon Farrell has more than 35 years of successfully incubating innovative environmental stewardship programs; building and supervising strong and diverse multi-disciplinary teams; facilitating cross-boundary landscape-scale partnerships; teaching collaborative leadership; and managing projects and programs of significant scope, scale, complexity and public profile in national parks and public open space. She directed the [One Tam Partnership](#), founded the [California Landscape Stewardship Network](#) and [Global Landscape Stewards](#), and currently provides strategic coordination capacity to five California-based cross boundary collaboratives. Farrell is the Special Projects and Strategic Advisor for [The Stewardship Network](#).

Farrell's ecological and partnership expertise has contributed to landscape-scale stewardship and conservation efforts from regional to global scales. Examples of some of her work include: [Increasing collaborative capacity and infrastructure for landscape stewardship](#), [Measuring the Health of a Mountain: A Report on Mount Tamalpais' Natural Resources](#), and [Ecological Health Assessments Process Guide](#).



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evaluation Purpose & Approach

The Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Reduction (INSR) Grants Program, administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), was created to advance nutrient and sediment reduction efforts in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. In 2018, the program shifted focus to support collaborative models—i.e., networks, coalitions, and partnerships that coordinate across organizations and sectors—to accelerate the implementation of best management practices (BMPs) at landscape scales.

This evaluation, conducted by The Stewardship Network and the University of Virginia’s Institute for Engagement & Negotiation, assesses how INSR’s collaborative-capacity investments between 2018 and 2024 advanced the program’s objectives and created long-term environmental and organizational impacts. It applied an integrative mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data from a range of sources:

Document review: 137 grantee documents (e.g., grant proposals, interim/final reports) and 21 supplemental documents (e.g., strategic plans).

Online surveys: 203 total respondents, including coordination leads, collaborative partners, and non-grantee stakeholders. Survey response rate was 52%.

Interviews: 53 participants representing a mix of grantees and non-grantees.

Focus groups: 70 participants in four in-person and three online sessions across the Chesapeake Bay.

NFWF and CAST data: BMP implementation metrics and geospatial data on acres and miles of BMPs and pounds of nutrient and sediment reduction from 69 grants awarded to 41 collaboratives.

Because multiple data sources and types were used, this evaluation applied statistical, content, reflexive thematic, and inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analyses. Evaluators also applied multiple conceptual models, including the Collaborative Capacity Impact Model™. These help illustrate how **collaboratives—like any other organization or business—require specific kinds of infrastructure and human capacity to achieve their goals**. In this assessment, they are further used to show how **enabling that capacity (e.g., through the INSR Grants Program) supports essential functions that make on-the-ground pollution reduction possible**.

Key Findings

Qualitative Outcomes of Increased Capacity Investments

INSR funding enabled grantees to hire dedicated coordinators and administrative staff, without which they would not have had the capacity to accelerate their collective watershed-health goals and outcomes. It supported the development of shared strategies, governance structures, and performance tracking systems that allowed partners to then work together more effectively and efficiently. It also allowed them to conduct targeted outreach, BMP planning, technical assistance, and training as well as to act as regional hubs, facilitating knowledge exchange and coordinating landscape-scale solutions.

Grantees reported that this added capacity enabled them to generate 15 distinct types of interconnected impacts, grouped into four classifications based on the Collaborative Capacity Impact Model™. These far exceeded the INSR Grants Program’s three objectives of accelerating BMP implementation, sharing lessons learned, and expanding and institutionalizing pollution-reduction practices. They included:

Foundational Impacts

- **Enhanced connectivity** among partners and communities.
- **Increased trust**, enabling deeper engagement and sustained action.

Operational Impacts

- **Boosted creativity and innovation** in processes, programs, and solutions.
- **Increased resource sharing**, including ideas, experience, data, personnel, and equipment.
- **Added capacity** through leveraged funding and expertise.
- **Enhanced cultural awareness and respect**, fostering appreciation for partner and community relationships.

Outcome Impacts

- **Accelerated scale and pace** of BMP implementation and collaborative functioning.
- **Enhanced performance** at the collaborative, partner, and individual levels.
- **Developed transferable and adaptable models** and tools, applicable across organizations and geographies.
- **Broadened perspectives**, allowing for expansive thinking and more holistic views of the Chesapeake Bay watershed.
- **Expanded connectivity**, establishing regional hubs and information portals.

Integrated Impacts

- **Changed systems and adopted proven methods** and techniques, embedding new practices into standard operations.
- **Strengthened durable and flexible approaches**, adaptable to meet changing needs.
- **Catalyzed a collaborative culture and mindset** across the watershed.
- **Shifted behaviors and norms** in communities and partner organizations.

Grantees also indicated that this added capacity allowed them to accelerate processes related to collaborative development, BMP implementation and information sharing, integrating effective collaborative and BMP-related approaches, and network expansion.

Quantitative Accomplishments Enabled by Collaborative Capacity Investments

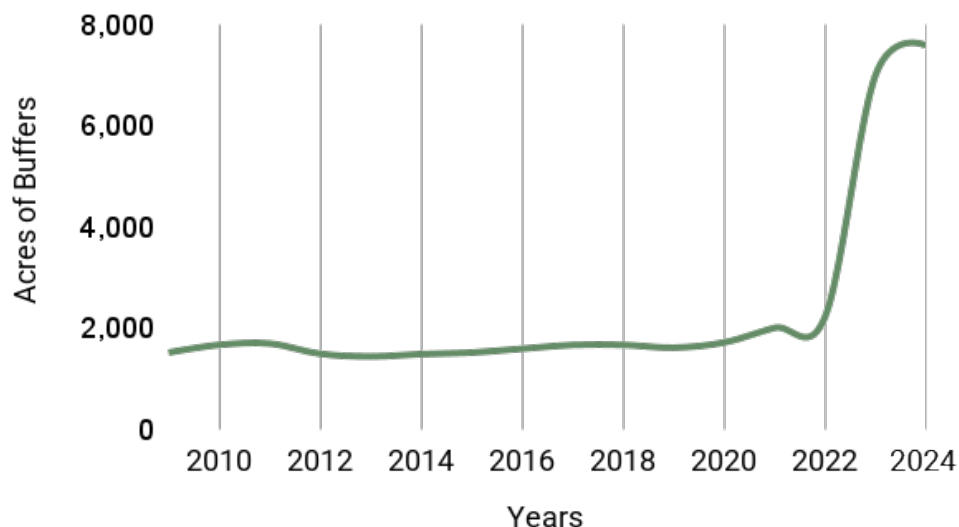
- **265,000 acres and 870 stream miles** treated through BMP implementation.
- **3.4 million lbs nitrogen, 242,000 lbs phosphorus, and 290 million lbs sediment** of estimated reductions.
- **\$114 million in matching funds** which is a 155% return on NFWF's investment.

Notable increases of BMP implementation that correspond with INSR grant periods suggest that capacity investments are contributing to on-the-ground outcomes. Time-series data generated from the Chesapeake Assessment Scenario Tool (CAST) are used to illustrate these upward trends for four grantee regions included in this evaluation. Two of these representative case studies are briefly described here.

Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative (SVCC) was launched in 2017 to increase coordination to achieve shared water-quality, soil-health, and farmland-protection goals. SVCC received its first INSR grant award in 2019, enabling it to hire its first coordinator, strengthen and expand its partnerships, and strategically build its functionality.

With this expanded capacity, SVCC has been able to more quickly integrate effective collaborative approaches and work better together. As depicted in Figure ES-1, acres of forest and grass buffers with fencing (an SVCC's high-priority BMP) in this region have increased dramatically since 2022. It is highly likely that SVCC's capacity to accelerate BMP implementation has contributed to this increase.

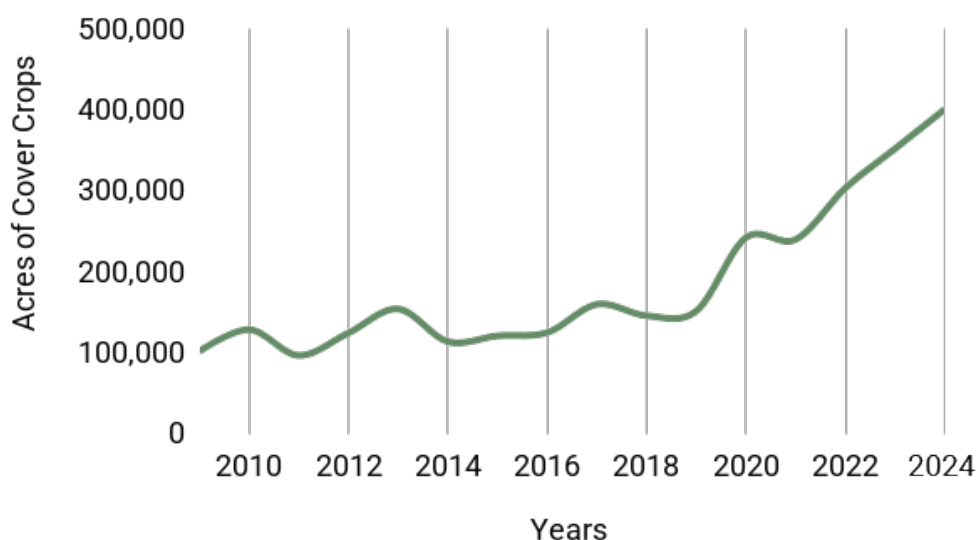
Figure ES-1. Shenandoah Valley: Buffers with Fencing



Virginia Soil Health Coalition (Coalition) formed in 2013 to expand opportunities for outreach, education, and collaboration. Prior to its first INSR grant award in 2020, the Coalition operated as a committed but relatively informal group of approximately 13 members. INSR funding enabled it to hire its first coordinator, increase its membership, and concentrate on the Coalition's priority strategies and its structure and systems.

During the first two years of the grant period, the Coalition's membership almost tripled, its governance structures improved, and quarterly meeting attendance increased. INSR-funded capacity was used to develop the Coalition's shared strategies and priorities for sustainable growth and to meet its region's goals. Improved communications systems and strategies allowed them to reach diverse audiences. A high-priority BMP for the Coalition, cover crops acreage started to rise around the time they received their first INSR grant (Figure ES-2).

Figure ES-2. Virginia (Chesapeake Bay): Cover Crops



Implications for the Field of Practice

By strategically investing in collaborative capacity, the INSR Grants Program catalyzed measurable improvements in water-quality and regional-resource stewardship as well as collaborative and individual organizational performance. This evaluation provides robust evidence that collaborative models—when properly resourced—accelerate positive impacts and build durable solutions to complex environmental challenges. Key lessons that emerged from this analysis include:

Landscape-scale restoration requires collaboration. Complex environmental challenges—particularly at watershed or regional scales—require a range of expertise, perspectives, and financial and human capacity that cross-sector, multiparty collaboratives can bring. Continued investment in coordination capacity, peer exchange, and other information-sharing forums means that these resources can be leveraged by others and on-the-ground work can be done more efficiently.

The quality and pace of collaborative development and BMP implementation are inexorably linked. Critical capacity needs must be met for collaboratives to operate well, and high-functioning groups get more work done on the ground. Capacity has a symbiotic, reciprocal, and interdependent relationship with the INSR Grants Program’s goals to accelerate BMP implementation and information sharing.



The funding of the collaboratives has provided many NGOs with the ability to perform the critical activities of coordinating meetings and events where important information exchange happens. Without dedicated funds to pay for a person’s time, that level of coordination is almost impossible to conduct. So, the administrative and staff time covered by INSR Grants has been just as important as the funds that are dedicated to funding BMPs.

GRANTEE (SURVEY)

Invest in the right collaborative life-cycle needs. Like any other organization, collaboratives go through development stages (e.g., start-up, building, sustaining) that require different kinds of investment to optimize their performance. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, there are commonalities to each of these stages that can be targeted for strategic investments.

Flexibility is essential. The INSR Grants Program’s adaptable funding model allowed collaboratives to tailor investments based on life-cycle stage, structure, and regional context.

Collaborative capacity investment works, but it can take time. Grantees with enhanced capacity were better able to implement, scale, and institutionalize practices that accelerated BMPs. While it can take time for investments in this kind of relationship- and trust-based work to yield their full potential, this evaluation found that collaborative capacity investments have positive impacts that far exceed INSR Grants Program goals.

Measure what matters. Many grantees noted that what they are asked to report on does not reflect what they have truly accomplished, such as relationship building and increased process efficiency and effectiveness. Expanded performance metrics, including social and organizational impacts, can more accurately capture collaborative effectiveness and outcomes. Funders need to think more broadly about how to measure the less quantitative benefits that collaborative capacity enables.

Proof of concept. This evaluation validates the INSR Grants Program’s 2018 strategic pivot to support collaboratives. It provides a replicable framework that could be applied nationwide for the ways **collaborative models—when adequately resourced—can drive systemic, scalable, and sustained environmental change.**

Funders, agencies, and practitioners seeking landscape-scale conservation solutions can look to this approach as a compelling example of how these investments lead to innovation and on-the-ground impact.

Summary of Recommendations for the INSR Grants Program

The evaluation identifies five comprehensive recommendations to strengthen the INSR Grants Program and amplify its impact across the Chesapeake Bay watershed. These recommendations focus on sustaining collaborative capacity; scaling proven practices; improving administrative efficiency; and fostering long-term, systems-level transformation.

1. Strengthen & Expand the NFWF Chesapeake Bay Grants Program Portfolio

NFWF should continue prioritizing collaborative models as essential vehicles for achieving water-quality improvements at scale through ongoing investments in their capacity. In addition to supporting BMP acceleration, multiyear funding and collaborative life-cycle support will help sustain these investments. NFWF could further modify its current grant portfolio to increase the scale and duration of regional awards, address current gaps, and promote a grant-making approach that includes greater differentiation between each type of grant. Expanding the successful Field Liaison Program would increase its ability to provide technical guidance, strengthen relationships, and reach new areas. Improvements in the application, payment, and reporting processes would increase administrative efficiency and lessen the burden on grantees.

2. Formalize a Chesapeake Bay Practitioner Network & Community of Practice

NFWF is well positioned to work with regional collaboratives, the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network, and other organizations to co-create and support a Chesapeake Baywide Practitioners Network. This network could provide a forum that would more intentionally foster connectivity, exchange, and collective action across the region.

3. Broaden Evaluation & Reporting Metrics & Tools

Many grantees noted a need to consolidate or connect the various BMP reporting platforms to reduce duplication and accurately capture results. However, creating tools and resources to measure regional partnership performance and impact beyond acres and pounds was also identified as a high need. NFWF should further expand evaluation frameworks to include organizational, social, and co-benefit outcomes (building from the 15 impacts identified in the Collaborative Capacity Impact Model™). It could also create a social network analysis model to track connectivity, influence, and knowledge exchange among collaborative partners.



Photo Credit: Upper Susquehanna Coalition

4. Invest in Strategic Communications, Messaging & Marketing

Communicating the value of collaborative models and their impact on water quality is essential to building public and political support. The 2019 NFWF communications toolkit could be refreshed to include topics that are challenging to convey, such as watershed health and water-quality outcomes, collaborative approaches and associated impacts, or examples of ways collaboration has achieved a high return on investment. This could be part of a centralized communications hub to support storytelling, community outreach, and shared messaging for INSR grantees and partners.

5. Support Systems-Level Innovation & Solutions

Grantees identified the need for accessible and accurate regional datasets and the ability to share data across partners. NFWF could work with grantees to understand these needs and help fund solutions. It is also well positioned to support an advisory committee to improve regulatory processes as well as to expand and institutionalize BMP incentive programs that have proven beneficial in the past.

