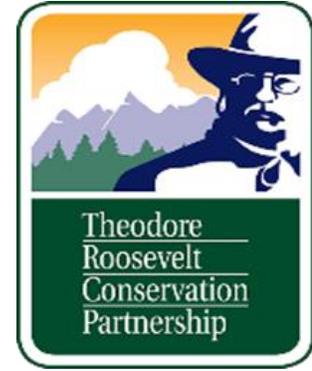


Challenges in Accessing and Utilizing Federal Funding to Support Cross-Boundary Watershed Scale Restoration



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Introduction

In Spring 2022, the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP), www.trcp.org, a policy-oriented nonprofit with the mission to guarantee all Americans quality places to hunt and fish, determined to assess barriers and bottlenecks to utilizing federal funding opportunities. Past challenges with federal funding programs often give organizations pause in the interest and/or ability to pursue these funds. The goal of this assessment is to better understand these challenges, improve opportunities to address barriers, and generally assist decision makers, agencies and funders in utilizing federal funding to support watershed-scale conservation and restoration initiatives requiring action on a relatively short time scale (i.e. a few years).

The study largely was prompted in consideration of the recently-passed Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), which presents an unprecedented funding opportunity for natural resources conservation and restoration programs. The Act will provide billions of dollars of funding for public lands, fisheries and wildlife conservation, river and forest restoration and other natural resource protection initiatives through 2026. The IIJA is an exceptional opportunity for myriad natural resource practitioners, including federal, state, local and Tribal land managers and conservation-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

This assessment involved gathering information via interactive workshops, interviews, and surveys among those working in the Upper Rio Grande, Sacramento-San Joaquin, and Upper Snake River watersheds, and are located and/or working throughout the Intermountain West and Pacific Northwest including California, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, and Oregon. 46 unique study participants include on-the-ground practitioners, intermediary resource organizations, and policy-oriented NGOs. Many respondents have self-described goals of scaling-up or improving

implementation of river and forest restoration efforts, whether by policy initiative, providing resources for planning or project implementation, or acting as a coordinator of such work in river/riparian restoration, forest restoration, and land conservation. A full list of participants is provided in Appendix A.

Also included in this report is data from previous research and studies that explored challenges and success factors for large-scale and watershed-wide restoration and conservation as related to federal funding programs, particularly as this history informs anticipated barriers to accessing IJA funding.

Historical/Current Involvement with Federal Funding Programs

The following federal funding programs are identified by respondents as those with which they've worked:

- Department of Interior (DOI)
 - Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Public Law 93-638 Indian Self-Determination Act Contracts
 - Bureau of Land Management
 - Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) WaterSMART Cooperative Watershed Management
 - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
 - Tribal Wildlife Grants
 - Section 6 (in California)
 - North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA)
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
 - Wetland Program Development
 - Indian Environmental General Assistance Program
- Land and Water Conservation Fund
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF)
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Community Based Restoration
- U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)
 - Forest Service (USFS)
 - Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program
 - Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative
 - Cohesive Strategy
 - Joint Chiefs
 - Shared Stewardship
 - Forest Legacy
 - Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) - Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program's Wetland Reserve Easements, and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

The NRCS EQIP and Wetland Reserve Easement programs are – with at least nine indicating their use – most utilized by those participating in the study.

According to study participants, U.S. Forest Service (USFS) programs are utilized less as they are most typically accessed via Cooperative Agreements or large federal initiatives like Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative, Cohesive Strategy, Joint Chiefs and Shared Stewardship. Two listed the use of Bureau of Land Management Cooperative Agreements. One cited the use of USFS Forest Legacy. These programs require longer-term alignment and commitments on behalf of the applicant organization than a typical federal grant program.

Tribes rely heavily on many of the competitive grant programs listed above (e.g., NFWF), though they also have access to specific Tribal funding programs administered by EPA, USFWS, and BIA.

Regarding forthcoming IJA funding, there are varying levels of knowledge among practitioners surveyed. Entities that already are involved with large federal initiatives (Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative or Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program), or that enjoy existing relationships with federal agencies, generally are more aware of the IJA initiative and its potential. There are numerous questions regarding how these funds will be distributed, with much gratitude expressed to TRCP and others currently tracking and distributing information.

A number of respondents indicate reliance on state, local or private funding sources with no federal funding evident in their portfolio. Among organizations that do not participate in federal funding programs, two primary reasons are cited: Organizations have not been successful in pursuing these funds (per many of the barriers outlined below), and/or have made a strategic decision to not pursue these funds (supporting rationale is provided as part of the barriers discussion, below).

Barriers to Utilizing Federal Funding Programs

Awareness and Timing

Approximately one third of study participants cite awareness and knowledge of federal funding programs as a moderate challenge to accessing these opportunities. Federal programs seem daunting to many, particularly small organizations, and opportunities are difficult to track. Often, funding announcements are provided with a 30-day notice; even if an organization is in process of preparing to meet program requirements, this timeline is challenging in securing matching funds and/or having capacity to prepare a competitive application.

“The recent announcement of America the Beautiful funding comes at the height of field season, making it nearly impossible to refocus field staff – who also serve as grant writing staff – to perform grant writing tasks.”

Project Fit and Program Focus

At least eight study participants cite challenges with alignment of federal funding programs with project needs. There is a perception that federal agencies develop funding opportunities and application guidelines without knowledge of on-the-ground needs and practicalities, leading to

siloed and unrealistic expectations by the funding entity. Four interviewees note that they often reposition their projects to fit funder goals, rather than putting forth their well-informed priorities and needs.

“The projects following the funding, rather than the funding supporting the projects.”

As a result, those conservation initiatives that have completed significant planning or other decision-making processes to solidify mission, scope and purpose can quickly be compromised in pursuit of funding.

Additional perceptions and frustrations voiced by interviewees include:

- New or expanded funding programs present added uncertainty regarding how to best approach an application, as data on historical grant awards – important understanding how federal grantors have interpreted and favorably responded in the past – is not available.
- There are important restoration and conservation efforts being pursued outside of the scope of federal funding opportunities. One applicant notes there is no provision for native trout in the IJA, indicating a perception that this regional priority may not be funded amidst the broader and competing priorities of fisheries in general.
- Study participants report limited federal funding available for project pre-development and design, and/or prohibitive guidelines limiting funds’ utilization (e.g. early funding only for project engineering, not stakeholder engagement). Two respondents indicate multiple attempts to secure USBR WaterSMART Cooperative Watershed Management funding due to the high level of competition for these highly-coveted pre-planning funds. As an example, all the federal funding programs list above primarily focus on “shovel-ready” projects with the exception of USBR WaterSMART Cooperative Watershed Management and the new Multi-Benefit Watershed Health Program. Both of these planning programs have received less attention and financial support when compared with more shovel-ready federal programming.
- Programs ideal to supporting large-scale restoration and conservation efforts (e.g. RCPP) have award limitations that aren’t always known.

“The given reason for our failed RCPP application was that there were two applicant projects in the state in which we applied and that NRCS’ was only able to fund one. We were not aware of this expectation/guidance. Had we known this was the situation we would have likely not applied.”

Shared Understanding and Values

Taking project fit and program focus a few steps further, it is believed important that federal and community partners have a shared vision for the landscape and clear understanding of respective values, and are working from similarly-understood definitions and terminology. Study

participants that are working within the context of a conservation-based collaborative tout a long-standing relationship with federal agency staff, a mutual respect and understanding for each other's goals, and successful implementation. However, this type of work is an investment of time, money and capacity, which, given the other barriers listed here, can be an ongoing challenge.

Applicant Capacity

There is a fundamental structural challenge in the fact that restoration and conservation efforts often are pursued by small rural, Tribal or nonprofit community-based groups without the organizational capacity or desire to manage large, administratively complex grants.

Nearly all respondents cite the time required to apply for and administer federal grants as a significant barrier. Organizations that consistently pursue and utilize federal funds have made a strategic decision to build the required administrative capacity (e.g. Mountain Studies Institute, Pacific Forest Trust). Some respondents – weary of the high and unfunded administration cost of applying for and administering federal grants – state the “better business decision” being to fund all work with state and private funds.

Onerous grant application processes and documents, and inconsistency among agency applications, are commonly cited as a challenge. Additionally, various grant software platforms utilized by the federal agencies (Grants.gov, Easygrants, GrantSolutions), which can require hours of training to use, add complexity to the application process. “Available time,” rather than “lack of knowledge” to write federal grant proposals is the primary challenge. Respondents cite NRCS EQIP applications as simple and straight forward, which may be a factor in this program being the most utilized among study respondents.

Additional capacity challenges include having the time/people to secure required matching funds, undertake pre-planning, write agreements, and manage/administer both subcontracts and funding from multiple sources. In many organizations, project managers are responsible not only for project planning, implementation and monitoring, but also for grant writing and administration, creating an unrealistic work load.

“One of our partners, a small irrigation district that uses a volunteer board to operate and maintain its system, reports having identified projects that would be a great fit for federal programs but administrative capacity has prohibited their application.”

Smaller organizations note the shock of a short-term, project-specific infusion of funds, which can derail organizational focus on other priorities and create project/organizational sustainability challenges. One organization recently awarded initial IJA funds now is struggling to back-fill staff positions as it frees up current staff to focus on implementation of the IJA-funded project. Additionally, small organizations are particularly challenged by after-the-fact payment

reimbursement systems, unable to front project costs and maintain positive cash flow while awaiting reimbursement, which can take months.

Finally, “staffing up” is a significant challenge faced by many communities where exorbitant housing costs and severe labor shortages are the new normal. Organizations serving these communities, that may typically have considered federal funding, currently lack confidence in their ability to secure the necessary personnel to put monies to use and fulfill grant expectations.

Required Cash/In-Kind Match

The matching funds and/or in-kind resources required in securing federal funds are identified by most respondents as an issue. Those with experience in raising funds and garnering federal funds express the ability to acquire the matching monies, with most successful applicants having ample lead time, sufficient capacity and expertise for grant writing other fundraising, and the ability to effectively track in-kind match resources.

Challenges cited by respondents include:

- Inadequate time to secure matching resources.
- Promised matching resources never received.
- Serving as the fiscal agent for multiple projects, which complicates how match can be used and creates challenges around funder relationships (particularly noted by mid-sized nonprofit organizations). For example, one organization serving as the backbone of multiple conservation collaboratives can be challenged in approaching a given funder for numerous well-suited projects.
- Perception issues within a stakeholder group and with the public when receiving significant funding from a federal agency.

The amount of non-federal match required is often the barrier for respondents and is of great concern as the IJJA money is on the horizon. The increased amounts of money that organizations are anticipating being available drastically increases the amounts of matching dollars they will need to raise. States with further developed conservation funding programs (e.g., CA and CO) are probably more likely to access these dollars than those with less capacity to provide state match (e.g., NM).

Equity

There are many acknowledged equity concerns regarding the current distribution of federal funding. As an example, fewer than five percent of projects funded under WaterSMART have been awarded to Tribes or Pueblos.¹ Specific barriers to this are reflective of the discussion here, and specifically point to the cost-share requirements being prohibitive.

¹ Congressman Horsford, S. (December 2021). Press Release. *Congressman Horsford Introduces WaterSMART Access for Tribes Act to Help Tribal Communities Respond to Historic Drought*. <https://horsford.house.gov/media/press-releases/congressman-horsford-introduces-watersmart-access-tribes-act-help-tribal>

The Biden Administration announced the Justice 40 initiative in direct response to concerns such as this. The goal of the Justice 40 Initiative is to ensure that Federal agencies work with states and local communities to deliver at least 40 percent of the overall benefits from Federal investments in climate and clean energy to disadvantaged communities, which includes the IJJA.²

Even with the Justice 40 provisions, there are significant equity concerns among respondents as regards forthcoming distribution of IJJA funds. There is broad belief that federal agencies will succumb to pressure to quickly distribute IJJA money and therefore prefer awarding funds to organizations with past federal program involvement. This is problematic as it perpetuates a system wherein well-resourced nonprofits receive more federal dollars, widening the gap with and/or overlooking less-resourced/sophisticated nonprofits or entities that, in many cases, are pursuing priority restoration projects and/or are best poised to lead a successful project.

Federal Agency Capacity

Those organizations that have successfully secured federal awards often credit adequate federal agency staff capacity, as this allows for establishing and maintaining a quality relationship between the grantee and the granting agency. When there is limited federal agency capacity, there is far more difficulty applying for awards and – if successful – administering and reporting on project progress.

Those successful in securing funds through the NRCS EQIP and Wetland Reserve program, for example, attribute their award to the interest and motivation of NRCS staff, and NRCS capacity for design and engineering of projects. However, participants now are witnessing a shifting availability of NRCS staff who are increasingly overwhelmed by increased workloads (due to factors such as responding to wildfire recovery). In some cases, technical assistance money can be routed via applicants as an alternative to having NRCS staff provide that service. However, this is complex and often falls on larger organizations have the technical capacity to provide technical assistance services and that have the sophisticated tools and financial/reporting savvy to manage that type of funding.

There is a persistent challenge in contracting for awarded grants; one respondent states a six-month lag in contracting for a WaterSMART grant, while others note that bureaucracy results in a backlog at many agencies causing conservation easements to take up to three years to be processed. This phenomenon is cited as an impact of understaffed agencies, causing significant delays in project timelines and additional capacity strain on the grantee.

Scale

It is apparent that federal funding programs, particularly IJJA, increasingly want to see funding deployed for large-scale projects. This aligns well with the fact that conservation outcomes often

² Young, S., Mallory, B., and McCarthy, G. (July 2021). Office of Management and Budget, Council on Environmental Quality, National Climate Advisor Blog. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2021/07/20/the-path-to-achieving-justice40/>

require a landscape scale and cross-jurisdictional approach. At the same time, it is far easier to pursue projects at the smaller scale level (e.g. limited land ownership).

The scale at which organizations currently operate restoration projects is variable from watershed-wide or part of a watershed to select reaches or single sites. It may be challenging for organizations working at smaller scales to scale up in an appropriate timeline to meet the funding expectations. For example, the logistics of securing and utilizing temporary (skilled) labor, equipment, and materials – e.g. wood posts for post-assisted log structure (PALS) or beaver dam analogues (BDAs) – grow as the project size grows. Additionally, scaling up private lands projects can be inherently challenging depending on the number of landowners and parcels that require buy-in, communication and coordination.

Pre-planning

Respondents voice the need for pre-planning as a vital step to success in garnering federal funding. In consideration that project work often is rooted in collaborative, community-based conservation approaches, pre-planning efforts (e.g. stakeholder engagement, local prioritization) set the stage for long-term cooperation and effective project implementation. Additionally, early assessments, engineering design, etc., inform project outcomes and are critical to advancing work and qualifying for funding. However, pre-planning can be a significant challenge, as it requires both funding and time/human capacity. With the exception of limited federal pre-planning funds available through BOR WaterSMART Cooperative Watershed Management, and new resources through the Multi-Benefit Watershed Health Program and the new America the Beautiful Challenge local coalitions rely on state or local government, or private funds to pay for this early project development work. Securing additional public and private resources to support pre-planning and project development will be critical in supporting smaller watershed and forest collaboratives, disadvantaged communities, and Tribes that often have the greatest challenges in securing financial support to develop projects.

Permitting

Permitting is a consistent challenge for large-scale restoration projects, with respondents citing challenges resulting from with federal agency (lack of) capacity, bureaucracy, and/or cumbersome National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) processes.

“The USFS’s is risk adverse, which results in non-use of the often important tools – e.g., categorical exclusion - provided by NEPA.”

Another challenge is the inability for some federal agencies to utilize other agencies’ NEPA (e.g. the Water Infrastructure Financing and Innovation Act requires permitting by each agency involved in the project which can include DOI and EPA), resulting in duplication of work and significantly-delayed permitting. Others are challenged by the pace of permitting at Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE), repeatedly delaying river restoration and diversion projects.

“One community has identified that the lack of available contracted engineering capacity has delayed their project by six months. In another community a lack of federal agency staff capacity delayed their regulatory compliance process by the same amount of time.”

Evaluation and Adaptive Management

Respondents explain that the traditional approach of federal funding programs is to measure how much work has been completed (e.g. acres treated), as opposed to evaluating the quality of work (i.e. restoration success) and that it is happening in the right places. Some say there currently is a noticeable shift within agencies, such as USFS, to consider quality over quantity, but this shift is taking time.

While best practices for restoration projects include an adaptive management component – allowing practitioners to monitor progress and make adjustments to restoration practices or approaches to optimize restoration success – many federal grant programs do not accommodate this type of flexibility, and even make it difficult to change course mid-grant award.

Federal Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations have been brought forward by study participants and refined by the authors of this report. While the focus for this section is on recommendations for federal agencies, there are actions that are noted that are our could be augmented by state agencies, NGOs and private funders to be successful.

Modify/Enhance Federal Funding Program Guidelines

It is believed program guidelines could be modestly modified and reap great benefit. Specific feedback provides ideas for modifications to federal funding offerings that could be helpful to project applicants/managers without altering the intent of the federal program; these include:

Increase Agency Funding for Project Pre-planning and Collaboration

Funding programs could be created or modified to include more flexible dollars for pre-development including engineering and project design, stakeholder engagement, collaborative efforts that supporting planning, priority setting, monitoring/evaluation and project management. Federal agency support for collaborative community-based conservation allows communities to design and support the projects and scale that best address local values and goals. For example, having pre-planning funding from the BOR WaterSMART Cooperative Watershed Management Program and engaging in other stakeholder efforts with the USFS helped the Rio Grande/San Luis Valley to build trust and stakeholder buy-in, leading to more competitive grant applications. The new Multi-Benefit Watershed Health Program and America the Beautiful Challenge program provide dedicated funding to support capacity needs, but these funds will expire in 2026, and are

relatively small in terms of funding available, which means securing additional, more sustainable federal resources for capacity building should remain a priority.

Eliminate or Reduce Matching Resource Requirements

This action is the most recommended by study participants and would make funds more broadly accessible by organizations. While there is an added benefit of bringing non-federal dollars to projects, but this does not need to be such a predominant factor in determining projects for implementation.

- Additionally, broaden the timeframe for matching contributions. Allow for projects proponents to include contributions of time/cash from earlier phases (e.g., pre-planning or pre-design) to count as match for project implementation grants.
- Increase acceptance of in-kind matching.

Legislation was introduced by Nevada Congressman Steven Horsford to give the Secretary of the Interior the discretion to waive or reduce the cost-share requirements of Tribal nations applying for funding under the Bureau of Reclamation WaterSMART program.³ Additional match flexibility for disadvantaged and rural communities, and non-governmental organizations working with these communities, would also be helpful as many of these communities face significant hurdles in meeting federal match requirements and tend to be at the highest risk of drought and wildfire impacts.

Build on Successful Federal Authorities and Interagency Agreements

Increase and prioritize the use of authorities and agreements (e.g. Good Neighbor Authority, Cooperative Agreements). These mechanisms are often cited as preferred for implementing restoration projects as they provide more flexibility to work in adaptive management approaches, cross-boundary projects (e.g., treating private lands with federal funding), and long-term project timelines (e.g., multi-year vs one-year). These do, however, require significant federal agency capacity to successfully deploy.

Rural Voices for Conservation [Guidebooks](#) introduce and orient practitioners for collaborative land stewardship. Report titles include: *Use of Good Neighbor Authority Across the West* and *From Ideas to Action: A Guide to Funding and Authorities for Collaborative Restoration*.⁴

Grow Already-Established Programs

Invest in already-established program, regardless of the administration from which they resulted. Enhancing the amount of funding in the programs that applicants are already

³ Congressman Horsford, S. (December 2021). Press Release. *Congressman Horsford Introduces WaterSMART Access for Tribes Act to Help Tribal Communities Respond to Historic Drought*. <https://horsford.house.gov/media/press-releases/congressman-horsford-introduces-watersmart-access-tribes-act-help-tribal>

⁴ Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition. *Tools for Practitioners*. <https://www.ruralvoicescoalition.org/tools-for-practitioners>

utilizing, versus establishing new programs that take time to create, will benefit applicants and agency staff that are familiar with the existing processes.

“USFS Shared Stewardship, which began under the Trump Administration, is an example where a great deal of effort has gone into setting up the program and getting it to a place where implementation can be successful; however, challenges in transition to the Biden Administrations have the potential to slow progress or change the program altogether.”

Make Program Requirements More Flexible

More creativity and latitude built into large programs can lead to more successful outcomes in the long-run. For example, the RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangement allows for project partners to work directly with private landowners to carry out RCPP projects, as opposed to implementing projects through NRCS producer contracts and landowners easements.⁵

One specific suggestion is to modify the USFS Forest Legacy requirements to allow NGOs to hold the land. The current structure of requiring federally held easements proves to be a barrier to finding willing landowners.

Streamline Grant Application Software

Encourage all federal agencies grantmaking platforms are easy for applicants to utilize (i.e., does not require hours of training). The selection of grant systems for new funding programs may have an opportunity to be more consistent with existing tools. Easygrants, utilized by NFWF, was noted as easy to use and streamlined from an applicant perspective.

Enhance Outreach and Understanding of Federal Programs

Maximizing awareness of federal funding opportunities seems a “low-hanging fruit” opportunity, the Biden Administration has taken steps to provide clarity as to what is included in the IJA and the potential funding programs. One such resource is *A Guidebook To The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law For State, Local, Tribal, and Territorial Governments, and Other Partners*.⁶

Additionally, the IJA includes multiple provisions specifically for rural communities. Recently, the Biden Administration released the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Rural Playbook⁷ which is

⁵ Natural Resources Conservation Service. News Release. (March 2020). *Enhanced Funding Option through USDA Partnership Program to Increase Flexibility and Delivery of Conservation Innovation*. <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/newsroom/releases/?cid=nrcseprd1556838>

⁶ President Biden, J. *A Guidebook to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law for State, Local, Tribal, Territorial Governments, and Other Partners*. https://www.mtwatersheds.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/BUILDING-A-BETTER-AMERICA_FINAL.pdf

⁷ President Biden, J. (April 2022). *Building a Better American Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Rural Playbook*. Build.gov. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/BIL-Rural-Playbook-.pdf>

designed to identify the specific set-asides for rural communities and provides an overview of key flexibilities and other benefits for rural communities.

While the federal government has created multiple guidebooks, there appears to be a need for NGOs to augment information and further promote/clarify available funding opportunities, processes and timelines to better position applicants in advance of formal requests for proposals. Further awareness of the following resources could be helpful:

- Ten Strategies for Climate Resilience in the Colorado River Basin [Federal Funding Database](#) provides high-level overview of the funds available to different entities and a database of the various funding programs, the implementing agency and program focus. This is sortable by eligible entity, project timeline, cost share requirements, and alignment with the priorities outlined in the Ten Strategies Report (e.g., forest management and restoration, natural distributed storage, etc.).
- Similarly, the Montana Watershed Coordination Council [Federal Infrastructure Funding Database](#) provides a list of IJA funding that is sortable by filters such as eligible entity, infrastructure type (forestry, watershed) and amount of funding available.

[Directly Address Equity and Rural Capacity](#)

In addition to reducing cost share requirements, the following recommendations provide additional equity considerations for Tribal nations, rural communities and small, community-based nonprofits (as opposed to large regional NGOs).

[Support Tribes to Engage Early](#)

While projects requirements for Tribal consultation have positive outcomes for Tribes, they often do not go far enough to adequately engage Tribes in projects that can affect them. Early engagement of Tribes can build trust and add value to the success of a project. However, capacity issues make it challenging for Tribes to engage early. One recommendation is to provide funding for Tribes to engage early on in a stakeholder process, outside of the formal consultation period.

[Provide Education on Federal Trust Responsibility](#)

There is also a need to provide more education to federal agency staff on the federal trust responsibility. Helping federal agency personnel understand the history and ongoing realities of the Native American experience in the United States can help pave the way for understanding Tribal needs, developing working relationships, communication, and ultimately provide for positive outcomes of the Tribal-specific funding programs.

[Enhance the Rural Partners Network](#)

While increasing the visibility of playbooks and guides is helpful, it is important to recognize that navigating these resources takes dedicated capacity. One recommendation is to build out the [Rural Partners Network](#) (RPN) beyond its pilot phase to other states. The Rural Partners Network, led by USDA Rural Development, will establish local community liaisons that will assist rural communities and stakeholders in

navigating IJA resources and solicit feedback on opportunities to improve program accessibility and delivery. Early pilot areas include northern New Mexico and working with Tribal communities in Arizona. The RPN is currently an administrative program and not in statute. Codifying the program could help ensure the program remains available and receives additional resources to facilitate expansion.

Help Underrepresented Communities to Access Funding

The Biden Administration Released the Bipartisan Infrastructure Tribal Playbook to help Tribal governments access the \$13 billion set asides for infrastructure work in Indian Country.⁸

Many resources exist to help federal agencies guide deliberate investment in communities that need it the most. Two include:

- Headwaters Economics produced the [Rural Capacity Index](#)⁹, which identifies a community's capacity to access federal resources based on a variety of factors. It could prove a useful tool in advocating to state or private funders, as well, showing the need for rural community investment beyond federal dollars.
- Similarly, the [Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool](#)¹⁰ could have the potential help direct funds, technical assistance or capacity building resources.

Provide Access to Non-Competitive Funding

There is no current base funding allocation for fish and wildlife programs for Tribal nations which means that competitive grants must be sought to fund restoration or habitat enhancement projects. This is in contrast to state governments that receive annual funds through the 1950 Dingell Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Act. According to the Native American Fish and Wildlife Society (NAFWS), excise taxes collected under the Dingell Johnson Act are not distributed to Tribal nations, though their land mass and populations are considered in the state distribution formula.

While past efforts to change the Dingell Johnson Act have failed, there are alternative opportunities in the works. The Recovering America's Wildlife Act legislation would provide states, territories and tribes with \$1.39 billion annually to catalyze proactive, on-the-ground, collaborative efforts to restore essential habitat and implement key conservation strategies, as described in each state's Wildlife Action Plan.¹¹

⁸ President Biden, J. (May 2022). *Building a Better American: Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Tribal Playbook*. Build.gov. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Bipartisan-Infrastructure-Law-Tribal-Playbook-053122-.pdf>

⁹ Headwaters Economics. (January 2022). *Rural Capacity Index*. <https://headwaterseconomics.org/equity/rural-capacity-map/>

¹⁰ Executive Office of the President of the United States Council on Environmental Quality. (May 2022). *Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool*. <https://screeningtool.geoplatform.gov/en/#3/33.47/-97.5>

¹¹ National Wildlife Federation. *Recovering America's Wildlife Act*. <https://www.nwf.org/Our-Work/Wildlife-Conservation/Policy/Recovering-Americas-Wildlife-Act>

“Why use grants? The federal government has a trust responsibility for Tribes and they have authority to do a self-determination contract which allows for a separate pot of funding and indirect funding. Tribes need base funding to build sustainability and they cannot do that off of grants alone.”

Engage the Knowledge of Locals to Inform Federal Priorities (e.g., Collaboration)

“The ideal situation would be for the local groups to inform distribution of federal funds; however, the practical truth is that the local group ends up adopting whatever program comes down from the feds.”

In the context of this reality, there could be more done to encourage federal collaboration with on-the-ground practitioners and NGOs in front-end planning and prioritization, ensuring more alignment of resources with needs on the ground.

Engaging with local practitioners further positions federal agencies for project success by offering opportunity to learn and align with local values, and to more readily work adjacent to private lands (based on long-established local relationships). Collaborative approaches have proven successful in expanding the capacity and furthering the work of smaller community-based efforts, but require their own time, resources, capacity and leadership to build, so tend to represent a longer-term strategy.

The Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative – bringing together USFS, National Wild Turkey Federation, Colorado State Forest Service, and numerous local collaboratives and other stakeholders – is cited as an effective example of how these conversations lead to strategic thinking and increased effectiveness. The approach convenes a diversity of federal, state, private and local interests into a highly collaborative process that both identifies and prioritizes values, cross-boundary locations for treatments, timelines, workforce development and evaluation metrics.

Encourage Expansive, Landscape-scale Programs

In considering high-priority watersheds crossing multiple jurisdictions (counties, federal and state land agencies, Tribal lands, etc.), it is vital to determine points of collaboration in pursuit of funding for landscape scale projects.

“I would encourage a program [for river restoration] that is more expansive than RCPP but can fit within NRCS practices to focus more on innovation (e.g., massive scale BDAs), large-scale and impactful projects.”

One example of this was the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs), established in 2009 by Secretary of the Interior Jon Salazar, which facilitated discussion among representatives from state, federal and non-governmental organizations to identify common conservation goals and priorities to leverage efforts of individual partners at landscape scales. While the LCCs did not survive the presidential administration change in 2018, their approach to coordinate priorities across jurisdictions and federal agencies was a model deemed successful by a National Research Council committee tasked with evaluating LCC efforts.¹² The report goes as far as recommending that the Department of the Interior review existing landscape and habitat conservation efforts such as the Joint Ventures and other programs such as the [USGS Climate Adaptation Science Centers](#) to identify opportunities for improved coordination between these efforts, potentially maximizing the capacity of people involved in multiple efforts. The committee concluded that the nation needs to take a landscape approach to conservation.

Existing programs that could be leaned on more in this pursuit of a landscape approach to conservation include the USFWS [National Fish Habitat Partnerships](#), USFWS [Migratory Bird Joint Venture Programs](#), and [Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes](#).

Encourage Funder/Applicant Relationships

Many cite professional relationships as an enabling factor in successfully securing federal funds. Having a “go-to person” at an agency – someone who helps to ensure that programs are a fit, provides program details, etc. – has been essential to many applicants.

One suggestion is that agency support staff serve as a clearinghouse of conservation-focused federal programs, help to provide information on resources, and potentially even “match” organizations and coalitions with funders through events, information sessions, and similar activities. Taking this concept further, agency personnel could consult to or otherwise engage with on-the-ground practitioners to design funding applications and reporting metrics based on project-specific realities, circumstances and situations. Clear contact information, funding workshops and other opportunities could help organizations access and cultivate relationships with appropriate federal staff.

Streamline Permitting

Engaging federal agencies early and through collaborative opportunities may be one path for overcoming permitting challenges. RiversEdge West, a river restoration nonprofit, reinforced this in its review of watershed-wide riparian restoration programs¹³, noting that – in hindsight – project managers wished they’d pursued a large-scale or landscape-level National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) or Endangered Species Act (ESA) consultation as part of forming their collaborative/partnership, rather than seeking input on a case-by-case basis.

¹² National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2016). *A Review of the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/21829>

¹³ RiversEdge West. (October 2016). *Riparian Restoration Partnership Successes, Lessons Learned, and Models for Other Initiatives*.

Additional ideas offered by study participants:

- Encourage EPA and other agencies to accept permitting already in place by other agencies.
- Encourage formal agreements between agencies (e.g. BOR and NRCS), as demonstrated by the coordinated alignment between NRCS EQIP and BOR WaterSMART investments as part of the [National Drought Resilience Partnership](#).¹⁴
- Position private contractors or NGOs to conduct archeology surveys (e.g. [Lands Council](#) in the Pacific Northwest for forest health and river restoration projects).
- Establish/cultivate funding sources and training to support capacity to be proactive on permitting NEPA, Nationwide 27 or Safe Harbor Agreements.
- Facilitate completion of wilderness area plans and NEPA to expedite projects and facilitate watershed scale work.

Fill Federal Agency Staff Positions, Advocate for Shared Staff Positions

To build both agency buy-in and capacity, it is evident that a shift in incentives and/or priorities is needed to create/free up federal staff time for participation in community-led pre-planning, crafting of cooperative agreements and project implementation. Increased staff capacity is needed both at the federal and local levels to achieve conservation and restoration goals, with project success a direct result of adequate expertise and support.

There does appear to be opportunity in shared creation and hiring of biologists or similar positions within NRCS and other agencies. There has been a lot of success with shared-partnership positions, most examples come from NRCS and Partners for Fish and Wildlife, where NGOs and federal agencies cost-share private lands biologist positions. Having partner positions with knowledge of their geography, trust with local partners and strategic scientific support is what makes these partner positions effective. These positions have proven successful in garnering EQIP and other NRCS program funds. However, many of these positions have remained unfilled as a result of turnover and retirements leaving those that remain in a situation where they are unable to adequately carry the work load.

Encourage Adaptive Management Approaches

As practitioners, it is agreed that there needs to be continued commitment to deliver on and push for success metrics measured by project outcomes (i.e. quality vs quantity).

To this end, and in encouraging federal agencies to embrace adaptive management techniques in monitoring, evaluating and modifying expectations during a project, other conservation values will benefit. For example, the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration program have an adaptive management component, institutionalizing the management approach as part of the federal protocol.

¹⁴ Natural Resources Conservation Service News Release. (November 2020). *NRCS Announces 31 WaterSMART Initiative Priority Areas*.

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/ca/newsroom/releases/?cid=nrcseprd1689015>

Additionally, there is great opportunity to grow the use and acceptance of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), which is gaining acceptance among federal land managers dealing with wildfire. By building on this momentum, further advances can be made in restoration practices and adaptive management (e.g. developing large-scale controlled burn/prescribed fire capacity using TEK practices could drastically reduce costs of forest mitigation work).

State Policy Recommendations

State agencies are often cited as a primary source of matching funds for applicants, thus, play an important role in accessing federal funding sources.

Invest in Capacity and Pre-Planning

States often show greater flexibility in the ability to support capacity building and pre-planning activities of applicants. One example resulted from Colorado's 2015 Water Plan, significant effort and funding have been invested by the State and local coalitions to identify local values, conduct river health assessments and recommend projects that meet local needs. These "stream management plans" have successfully positioned many communities to apply for and receive federal funding for project implementation.

Align Policies to Support Large Scale Restoration Initiatives

States have an opportunity to ensure that their policy decisions do not cause further barriers to large-scale restoration work. One study participant cited an example in Colorado where there can be water rights/legal implications for wet-meadow restoration practices. These policies limit the ability for Colorado organizations to utilize federal funds at-scale for wet-meadow restoration projects. Policy changes aside, it could be helpful for the State of Colorado to create a publicly-accessible toolkit for what can and cannot be done on Colorado's private lands to further aquatic ecosystem restoration of this type.

Implement Cutting Green Tape Initiatives

Look to model programs such as California's Cutting Green Tape Initiative to inventory and recommend improvements to interagency coordination and partnerships to allow for ecological restoration programs to be implemented more quickly, simply and cost effectively.¹⁵ "Green tape" represents the extra money, energy and time required to implement an environmentally beneficial restoration project that results from inefficiencies in regulatory processes and policies.¹⁶ Removing policy and regulatory barriers at a state scale can greatly ease the burden of organizations utilizing federal funding programs for landscape-scale restoration.

¹⁵ California Natural Resources Agency. (2018). *Helping environmentally beneficial work happen more cost-effectively*. <https://resources.ca.gov/Initiatives/Cutting-Green-Tape>

¹⁶ California Landscape Stewardship Network. (November 2020). *Cutting Green Tape: Regulatory efficiencies for a resilient environment*. https://calandscapestewardshipnetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/CGT_FINAL_hires.pdf

NGO and Private Funding Recommendations

The following recommendations encourage investment from NGOs and private funders to bolster flexibility, capacity and innovation while helping to fill gaps left by federal agencies.

Invest in Pre-Planning and Project Development

State and federal funding programs only go so far. Additionally, the amount and types of funding can vary greatly between states based on their available resources. It is for these reasons that continuous investment in pre-planning and project development from large NGOs, corporations, foundations and individuals is critical to help organization's access federal funding. As an example, the 2-3-2 Partnership, a forest health collaborative in Southern CO and Northwest NM, used private funds to conduct a value mapping exercise, which resulted in local buy-in and demonstrated strategic thinking in managing their vast landscape, ultimately leading to receipt of USDA Joint Chiefs' funding.

There are several model efforts in that could be utilized as models in other western states. For example, the Colorado General Assembly, recently passed legislation (HB22-1379) which sets aside \$2.5 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds to issue grants to political subdivisions and other entities to invest in additional capacity to assist in applying for IJA funding and other federal resources. The Colorado River District, a regional water management entity, recent established an Accelerator Grant Program, using local tax revenue, to provide funds to support grant-writing, feasibility evaluation, design, and other pre-project needs to support applications for federal funding. The California Department of Conservation, through its Watershed Coordinator Grant Program, provides funding to establish watershed coordinator positions which then work with community partners to develop plans and projects to improve watershed health. These programs provide models for other states in developing additional resources to expand capacity.

Advance Innovative Ideas

NGOs, private funders and local governments are increasingly exploring innovative ideas that will spur market-based approaches to large-scale restoration on rivers and forests. It is vital to continue to invest in these programs, as they have the potential to scale with support from non-federal partners.

- The Nature Conservancy partnered with an insurance broker to show how controlled burning, thinning and other forest treatments can reduce fire risk and quantify insurance premium savings. Those savings are then applied to debt service bonds which are issued to pay for forest treatment.¹⁷
- CK Blueshift is developing a pilot-scale [Blue Bank](#) to provide for large-scale investment in natural storage infrastructure among other project focuses. The model builds off of previous work to determine how to encourage sustainable market-driven investment

¹⁷ The Nature Conservancy and Willis Towers Watson (2021). *Wildfire Resilience Insurance: Quantifying the Risk Reduction of Ecological Forestry with Insurance*.

<https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/FINALwildfireresilienceinsurance6.27.21.pdf>

(and significant return on investment) in large-scale restoration and is based off of a revolving loan structure to specifically benefit pre-planning and project development.

Build Nonprofit and Rural Capacity

There are ongoing investments and examples of community and private foundations strengthening capacity of rural nonprofits. There is great opportunity to enhance these efforts with the idea of accessing IJJA funds in mind. For example, the Ford Family Foundation identified barriers to rural nonprofits working in California and Oregon¹⁸ as similar to those identified through this study. The Foundation reportedly is moving forward to create a fund for pre-planning and coalition building. It could be useful to compare notes and identify opportunities for collaboration or sharing of lessons learned.

In other areas of nonprofit mission focus, NGOs have been incredibly successful at hiring subcontractors to apply for federal funding programs. This model essentially grows capacity on an as-needed basis and could be more widely deployed among small community-based organizations and/or via a cost-share approach among multiple organizations.

In some cases, organizational capacity can be enhanced through federal AmeriCorps-compensated personnel.

Grow Intermediary Support

Specific to securing IJJA funding, there may be a natural role for more established NGOs to help support smaller community-based organizations. For example, big NGOs and/or funding collaboratives can help apply for, distribute and administer grant funds to benefit the work of smaller, less resourced organizations. Efforts to pool diverse funding resources under one funding program, such as efforts by Colorado's RESTORE, Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative, or by private organizations (The Nature Conservancy, Conservation Lands Foundation) can have similar impact. For example, in Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative, leverages funding from numerous federal and state agencies (e.g., Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Utah Department of Natural Resources) to fund restoration activities that are joint-priority of the partner agencies such as riparian and native grassland restoration, and wildfire mitigation. Applicants that have projects that fit these funding priorities then are only dealing with one entity for grant application and reporting.

The value of centralized leadership and organization is primary takeaway from the experience of the Colorado Flood Recovery Program, where the State of Colorado was able to maximize the impact of federal funding by managing a NRCS Emergency Watershed Protection program and providing significant matching dollars to establish local watershed groups for on-the-ground planning, design and implementation of flood recovery projects. The project illustrated that the scale of a project may dictate the best entity to play the central role (e.g. multiple jurisdictional

¹⁸ Sequoia Consulting for The Ford Family Foundation. (January 2022). *Pathways to Securing Rural Federal Funding*. <https://www.tfff.org/sites/default/files/PathwayToSecuring-041222.pdf>

projects may require a state-level agency or regional-scope NGO). With disaster recovery and IJA funds having in common the need for quick distribution of large sums of money, applicable recommendations from the Flood Recovery Program include pre-qualifying one local entity to receive funding, streamlining federal program rules to prevent conflicts, and increasing available funding for design and oversight.¹⁹ All of these recommendations could be applied to implementing IJA funds for watershed-scale restoration.

In securing the necessary funds for project support, several organizations in the region (Conservation Lands Foundation, Thornburg Foundation, Colorado River Sustainability Campaign, Conservation Alliance, Bonneville Environmental Foundation (BEF)) are filling an intermediary role between project proponents and funders by requesting financial support from corporations and private donors on behalf of small nonprofits and community groups. These smaller organizations further benefit from alignment/involvement with large-scale restoration initiatives, which tend to be less taxing to existing capacity. However, the ever-present challenge of advocating for funds for planning and pre-development remains, as Business for Water Stewardship (a program of BEF) shares that, like federal agencies, corporations tend to be most attracted to shovel-ready projects.

Strengthen Networks

Investing in cross-collaborative support organizations – and encouraging on-the-ground practitioners to participate in these groups – is important to success within large scale watershed restoration, particularly as this involvement promotes continued learning about and advancement of restoration approaches, and provides both the feeling and reality of support for practitioners.

Many practitioners express the importance of engagement with networks and partnerships beyond their local collaborations; peer learning, understanding projects in the context of a larger landscape, sharing capacity and leveraging resources are specific benefits of this networking. Additional benefits more recently have included gained understanding of funding resources and trends, work on outcomes-based evaluation, help with preparing agreements, and sharing of ideas and resources (e.g. research opportunities, storytelling approaches).

Center for Collaborative Conservation, Western Collaborative Conservation Network (WCCN), Native American Fish and Wildlife Society, New Mexico Forest and Water Restoration Institute, Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, Land Trust Alliance, Southwest Collaborative Support Network, RiversEdge West and Rural Voices Conservation Coalition (RVCC) all are recognized as important networks within which practitioners can engage. Multiple projects and networks are being undertaken by various collaborative entities that can benefit practitioners. These include:

- Southwest Collaborative Support Network (SWCSN) [Collaborative Mapping Project](#)

¹⁹ Colorado Water Conservation Board. (January 2020). *Colorado Disaster Recovery: Lessons Learned*. <https://www.coloradoewp.com/lessons-learned>

- New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute (NMFWRI) was awarded IJA funding to map forest treatment areas across the nation. This is in its early stages and will scale up work already completed in [New Mexico](#).

Another beneficial connection is to policy-involved organizations. Smaller and project-based organizations with limited capacity do not have the time to follow, make sense of or inform policy, and mention the challenge of communicating Western issues to lawmakers in Washington D.C. (e.g. flood-irrigated landscapes or natural infrastructure typically does not have context or meaning to a federal policymaker). Organizations like TRCP and RVCC communicate a shared message, bring additional context and perspective, provide information to on-the-ground efforts and help them to be involved when necessary and beneficial. Further, while some organizations do have the capacity for and are engaging policy work in addition to project efforts, they can benefit from support and partnerships to advance federal policy initiatives (e.g., Pacific Forest Trust who focuses their capacity on state-level policy initiatives). As such, policy organizations (e.g. TRCP, RVCC) are encouraged to continue catalyzing networks to bring on-the-ground practitioners together to help inform policy making and decision-making at regional and national levels.

Conclusion

From the most discrete local project to a broad effort of landscape-scale impact, restoration and conservation require a long-game of community collaboration, multi-stakeholder networking, sustained financial and leadership resources, and learning. Unfortunately, the cadence and flavor of federal funding programs often encourage the short-game, encouraging a quick scramble for organizations and coalitions to propose and pursue less-than optimal projects. The federal process and priorities compromise the values, direction and outcomes of organizations that need to be steadfast and strategic to accomplish and maximize restoration goals.

The observations, suggestions and ideas captured and recommended herein provide various and numerous federal policy actions and administrative changes. These changes are not likely to be realized without significant investment of collective advocacy and effort by non-federal partners, which are called to encourage and support federal modifications, grow their own internal capacity, and otherwise work to shift the culture and realities of natural resource conservation as supported by federal agency-provided funding programs.

Appendix A – Study Participants/Respondents

Study Participants/Respondents

21 Attendees: IJA Workshop at the RiversEdge West Annual Conference, February 24, 2022

- Alex Funk, TRCP (presenter)
- Ann Johnston, Forever Our Rivers Foundation
- Ashely Guiles, Wright Water Engineers
- Carrie Parris, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish
- Chris Yuan-Farrell, Great Outdoors Colorado
- Clint Harz, Alta Science and Engineering
- Curt Deuser, National Park Service
- David Varner, Colorado West Land Trust
- Genevieve Johnson, Bureau of Reclamation
- Jake Kurzwell, Mountain Studies Institute
- Jessica Dzara, Alta Science and Engineering
- Julie Knudson, Purgatoire Watershed Partnership
- Karen Kwon, Colorado River Campaign (presenter)
- Katie McGrath Novak, Center for Collaborative Conservation
- Kelly Wolff, Arizona Game and Fish Department
- Linnea Spears-Lebrun, SWCA Environmental Consultants
- Nicole Reese, Center for Collaborative Conservation
- Season Martin, Virga Labs (presenter)
- Sensa Wolcott, Mancos Conservation District
- Tarita Harju, Alta Science and Engineering
- Tracy Stephens, Friends of the Verde River

15 Respondents: Online Survey, February 17-March 15, 2022

- Abby Burke, Audubon Rockies
- Alan Barton, New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute
- Buffy Lenth, Central Colorado Conservancy
- Brett Golden, FCA Solutions
- Cary Aloia, Wetland Dynamics, LLC
- Erin Olsen, National Forest Foundation J. Fair, American Rivers
- Jackie Corday, Corday Natural Resources Consulting
- Jess Helsley, Wild Salmon Center
- Julie Fair, American Rivers
- Katie McGrath, Colorado State University
- Kevin Terry, Trout Unlimited
- Kristen Jespersen, RiversEdge West
- Luke Javernick, River Science
- Melinda Booth, North Yuba Forest Partnership
- Sarah Marshall, Colorado Natural Heritage Program

12 Interviewees: Zoom and/or Telephone Discussions in February and March, 2022

- Aaron Kimple, Mountain Studies Institute
- Alan Barton, New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute
- Emery Cowen and Tyson Bertone-Riggs, Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition
- Emma Reesor and Daniel Boyes, Rio Grande Restoration Partnership
- Garret Hanks, Trout Unlimited
- Joy Morris, Intermountain West Joint Venture
- Julie Thorstenson, Native American Fish and Wildlife Society
- Laurie Wayburn, The Pacific Forest Trust
- Shelton Douthit, Feather River Land Trust
- Therese Thompson, Western Native Trout Initiative

Recommended for Additional Interviews

The following individuals and organizations were recommended by study participants as potentially useful to further develop ideas state in this report. In addition, these resources may be useful as recommendations are implemented.

- Collin Hathy, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish
- Heather Johnson, Partners for Fish and Wildlife
- Jordan Reeves, The Wilderness Society
- JR Logan, Shared Stewardship Contractor for Taos County, NM
- Kate Lacey or Alex Clack, New Mexico Environment Department
- Lesli Allison, Western Landowners Alliance
- Martha Cooper or Melissa McLamb, The Nature Conservancy, New Mexico Chapter
- Max Gimbel, Rural Community Building, The Ford Family Foundation
- Michael Hall, Feather River Resource Conservation District
- Nick Goulette or Michelle Medley, Watershed Resources and Training Center
- Zander Evans, Forest Stewards Guild
- Toni Chang or Bret Wolk, Colorado Forest Restoration Initiative