Assessing Conservation Partnerships & Finding Opportunities for Collaboration

What Makes for Good Working Relationships between Extension & Federal Partners?

The University of Wisconsin-Madison/UW-Extension Environmental Resources Center designed and completed a web-based survey focused on facets of water-quality partnerships. The survey attempted to:

- **Document existing water quality partnerships between CSREES state water quality coordinators and federal conservation agencies;**
- **Identify what barriers exist to strengthening and expanding those partnerships.**

The CSREES Committee for Shared Leadership for Water Quality initiated the study to enhance knowledge for strengthening collaboration and partnerships in water quality conservation programming with federal conservation agencies. The survey included all 118 individuals listed as water quality coordinators in the 2005 CSREES National Water Quality Program Directory of Water Quality Coordinators. The web-based survey occurred during March and July 2005. By the time the survey closed, 67 individuals had responded; 41 of the respondents represented the 50 state 1862 institutions that were the main focus of the survey.

Next steps will include:

- Conducting a comparable survey with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service assistant state conservationists nationally.
- Combining results in a formal report on opportunities for collaboration.

Survey Design

The survey consisted of a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions organized into two general categories focused on different aspects of water-quality partnerships:

Regional Water Quality Programs

- Effect on partnership creation
- Effect on institutional/personal water-quality goals and objectives
- Efficiency of program structure

Federal Partnerships

- Nature, extent and frequency of water quality partnerships with NRCS, EPA, and other federal agencies
- Barriers to partnership creation
- Potential future partnerships

Survey participants were contacted initially and provided reminders via e-mail. All survey invitees were provided the opportunity to opt out of the survey. Results were analyzed using Excel and SPSS for multiple-choice questions. Open-ended questions were analyzed and coded using basic content review.

State Water Quality Coordinators	Survey Pool	Responses
Total	118	67 (57%)
1862 institutions	50	41 (82%)
1890 institutions	19	11 (58%)
1994 institutions	42	8 (19%)
1862 Territory institutions	7	7 (100%)

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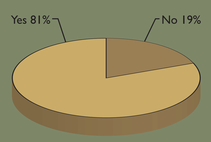
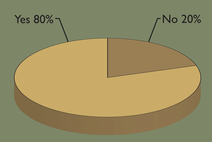
The survey data led to the following conclusions:

Over four-fifths of state water quality coordinators surveyed work in partnership with the NRCS and/or EPA on water quality issues.

Have you worked with the NRCS on a water-quality issue or project?



Have you worked with the EPA on a water-quality issue or project?



Partnerships are based on specific issues rather than being an overall strategy for bridging and coordinating efforts at an inter-organization level.

✔ The most common type of partnership with NRCS involved training or education efforts.

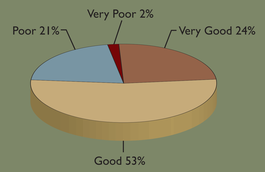
✔ Partnerships with EPA appear to be more place specific, and do not involve training or education as much as partnerships with NRCS.

✔ Over 80% of respondents indicated that institutional support both within the land grant institutions and the federal agencies help foster partnerships.

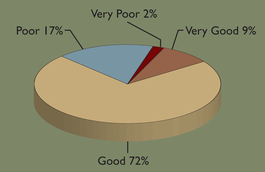
✔ Over 90% of respondents indicated that personal relationships with agency personnel at the NRCS or EPA support partnerships.

State water quality coordinators report positively on their experiences working with federal agencies.

Quality of water quality partnerships at state level



Quality of water quality partnerships at regional level

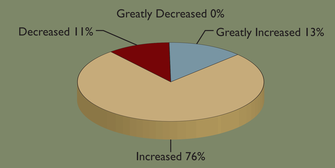


Partnerships tended to be formed around or react to specific place-based priorities. Common issues addressed include:

- Nutrient management plans
- Training or educational efforts
- Concentrated Animal Feedlot Operations
- Habitat restoration
- Watershed management
- Stormwater management

Regional water quality programs increase communication between state water quality coordinators and federal agency personnel.

How has your Program affected your time working independently with federal agencies?



✔ Respondents overwhelmingly felt that the regional water quality programs positively affect their ability to achieve their water quality goals.

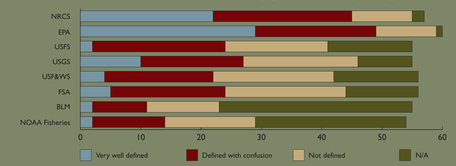
✔ Nearly 6 out of 10 water quality coordinators indicated that their regional programs emphasize building partnerships.

✔ Most regional water quality programs employ a variety of strategies to promote water quality partnerships, including:

- Providing training
- Providing contact information for federal agencies
- Holding meetings promoting partnerships
- Establishing formal communication links

Regional water quality programs may not adequately define the roles and duties of the program participants; thus some ambiguity may characterize current partnerships.

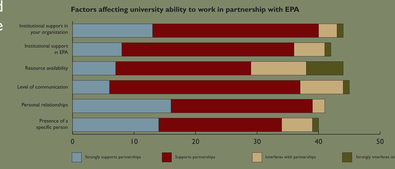
How well are the duties and roles of the following agencies defined in your Program?



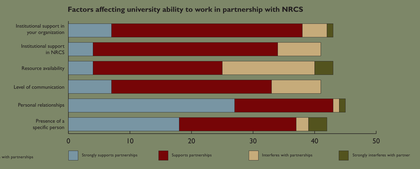
✔ How well the duties and roles are defined varies across regions. In some regions most respondents indicated that the duties and roles are "very well defined;" in other regions very few provided that response.

✔ How well the duties and roles are defined for the EPA and NRCS often varies within a specific region.

Factors affecting university ability to work in partnership with EPA



Factors affecting university ability to work in partnership with NRCS



There is unrealized potential for greater collaboration with federal agencies.

Most water quality coordinators perceive that the federal agencies do not fully understand or appreciate the outreach, education, and research expertise of Extension; related federal agencies generally perform those functions on their own in cases where Extension could collaborate or provide the service.

✔ Most respondents – despite their general satisfaction with the water-quality partnerships – indicated that their work with the federal agencies does not take full advantage of their talents and expertise as Extension professionals or educators. For example:

- "Other agencies need to know that Extension is the official education outreach arm for USDA programs."
- "Extension should be utilized as the educational agency by NRCS."

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