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When Local Solutions Aren't Enough: A Strategic Funding Partnership to Restore a Large River System

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Keywords: Collective impact, watershed restoration, funding partnership, Willamette River, Meyer Memorial Trust, Bonneville Environmental Foundation, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, watershed council, environmental restoration

Introduction

Funders collaborate in many ways to increase the impact of their grantmaking on complex societal problems. They come together as affinity groups to learn from subject-matter experts and one another. They may also pool resources to address common priorities or co-fund campaigns that are difficult for institutions acting alone to support at a meaningful level.

Until recently, however, relatively few grantmakers have entered into formal strategic partnerships with other funders and stakeholders aimed at achieving specific goals and objectives in a defined area of need. Such “collective impact” approaches to catalyzing large-scale social change, as described by Mark Kramer and John Kania in the Winter 2011 issue of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and other publications, have great potential to improve outcomes by aligning stakeholders from philanthropy, nonprofits, business, and government around common priorities, strategies, and measures of success. To date, funder experimentation with the collective impact model has focused largely on examples from human services, public health, and education, but a modified collective impact framework may also be suited to tackling complex, large-scale environmental challenges. In Oregon, a network of public and private funders, their grantees, and key partner organizations are experimenting with collective impact principles in a 10-year collaboration aimed at improving the health of the Wil-

Key Points

- Freshwater ecosystems are increasingly imperiled, and funders, nongovernmental organizations, community groups, and government agencies around the world are working to restore ecological function and resiliency to these critical resources.
- What does it take to structure, support, and implement truly effective, broad-scale watershed restoration? This article will describe the unconventional funding strategies catalyzing collective impact across multiple restoration groups working in a diverse set of watersheds and share the challenges and opportunities encountered while implementing these strategies.
- In Oregon, an experimental 10-year collaboration aimed at improving the health of the Willamette River system is being led by the Portland-based Meyer Memorial Trust with support from the Bonneville Environmental Foundation and the state-administered Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board. These groups are providing the “scaffolding” and supporting the distributed leadership needed to reverse the trajectory of change in the Willamette by aligning their grant programs around shared, science-based restoration priorities; identifying and filling key capacity needs of local watershed groups and land trusts; and facilitating more and better collaboration in restoration planning, implementation, and monitoring.

FIGURE 1 Overview of Watershed Restoration Terms and Tools

Watershed Restoration Basics

In the context of ecosystems, the term “restoration” refers to managing the physical, chemical or biological characteristics of a particular geographic area or site with the goal of returning natural/historic functions such as filtering surface water to remove pollutants, absorbing floodwaters, or providing habitat for diverse fish and wildlife species. Most often, the term is used in conjunction with specific habitat types like wetlands or riparian areas whose functions have been altered as a result of human development.

A 1992 National Research Council report defined restoration as “the return of an ecosystem to a close approximation of its condition prior to disturbance... [T]he goal is to emulate a natural, functioning, self-regulating system that is integrated with the ecological landscape in which it occurs.” In many cases, however, return to a predisturbance condition is impossible -- data documenting original conditions don't exist, or human activities have changed land and water conditions and connections so extensively that pre-disturbance conditions would no longer be compatible with surrounding ecosystems and landscapes.

The success of environmental restoration initiatives depends on many factors, including site-specific ecological conditions, social consent, legal authority, and the availability of scientific knowledge, technical expertise, and adequate funding (Caldwell 1991). Additionally, because ecological systems are complex and it may take decades to fully demonstrate the effects of restoration and other management activities, seeing or measuring results of restoration efforts may take a long time.

For more information see: <http://water.epa.gov/type/watersheds/archives/chap1.cfm>

Stream Restoration Terms Used in This Article

- **Watershed** - the land area that drains water to a particular stream, river or lake.
- **Restoration** - management of the physical, chemical, or biological characteristics of a geographic site or feature with the goal of returning natural/historic functions; often used in reference to water-related places such as streams, riparian areas, or wetlands. In reference to watersheds, restoration means improving current land and water conditions to restore degraded habitat and provide long-term protection of water resources for the benefit of aquatic life and human health and communities.
- **Watershed restoration** - a flexible framework for managing water resource and habitat quality and quantity within a specific watershed, usually including stakeholder involvement and land and water management actions supported by sound science and appropriate technology.
- **Riparian** - relating to, living on, or located on the banks of a watercourse such as a stream, river, or lake.
- **Run-off** - the part of precipitation that flows off the land and may enter streams and rivers.

Stream and River Restoration Tools

Tools used by river restoration practitioners to return ecosystems to more natural, sustainable conditions include reconfiguring streambeds to increase habitat complexity; removing or replacing man-made structures like small dams and culverts to improve connectivity and allow upstream and downstream passage for migratory fish; placing stumps, logs, boulders etc. in streams to create pools and riffle habitat and improve the structure and composition of the streambed; re-establishing vegetation in the riparian corridor with species (usually native) well-suited to current land and water conditions; and installing structures and plantings to control pollutant-bearing runoff from roads, parking lots, and farm fields.

lamette River system. In 2012, the International River Foundation awarded the Willamette River collaboration with the Thiess International River-prize for best practices in river management.

The goals of this article are to (1) describe the rationale behind the nontraditional funding initiative developed by the Oregon partners, (2) describe the actions and strategies being deployed, and (3) identify key challenges and lessons learned to date, with specific reference to the collective impact framework. In sharing our approach, we seek feedback that will help us refine and improve our own efforts. We also hope to encourage other funders to experiment with unconventional approaches to addressing complex environmental problems.

The Problem

As ever-greater demands are placed on freshwater resources, government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and community groups are pursuing a variety of approaches to protect and restore river systems and the landscapes they drain – usually referred to as “watersheds” or “basins” (see Figure 1 for an overview of watershed restoration terms and tools). Top-down policy or regulatory approaches, while desirable for their consistency and enforceability, can be a poor fit for physically, demographically, and jurisdictionally complex watersheds. Such solutions frequently encounter resistance at the local level. Moreover, evidence suggests that locally endorsed, collaborative initiatives may provide one of the best means for addressing restoration and management challenges at the watershed or ecosystem scale (Bonnell and Koontz, 2007; Moseley 1999; Born and Genskow 2001). As a result, governments at all levels and many communities are turning to local solutions to stream and river restoration challenges.

It has been estimated that public and private funders invest an average of \$1 billion each year on river and stream restoration (Bernhardt et al., 2005), and local efforts have produced thousands of individual restoration projects across the U.S., such as fencing to keep livestock out of streams, removal of small dams, and tree plant-

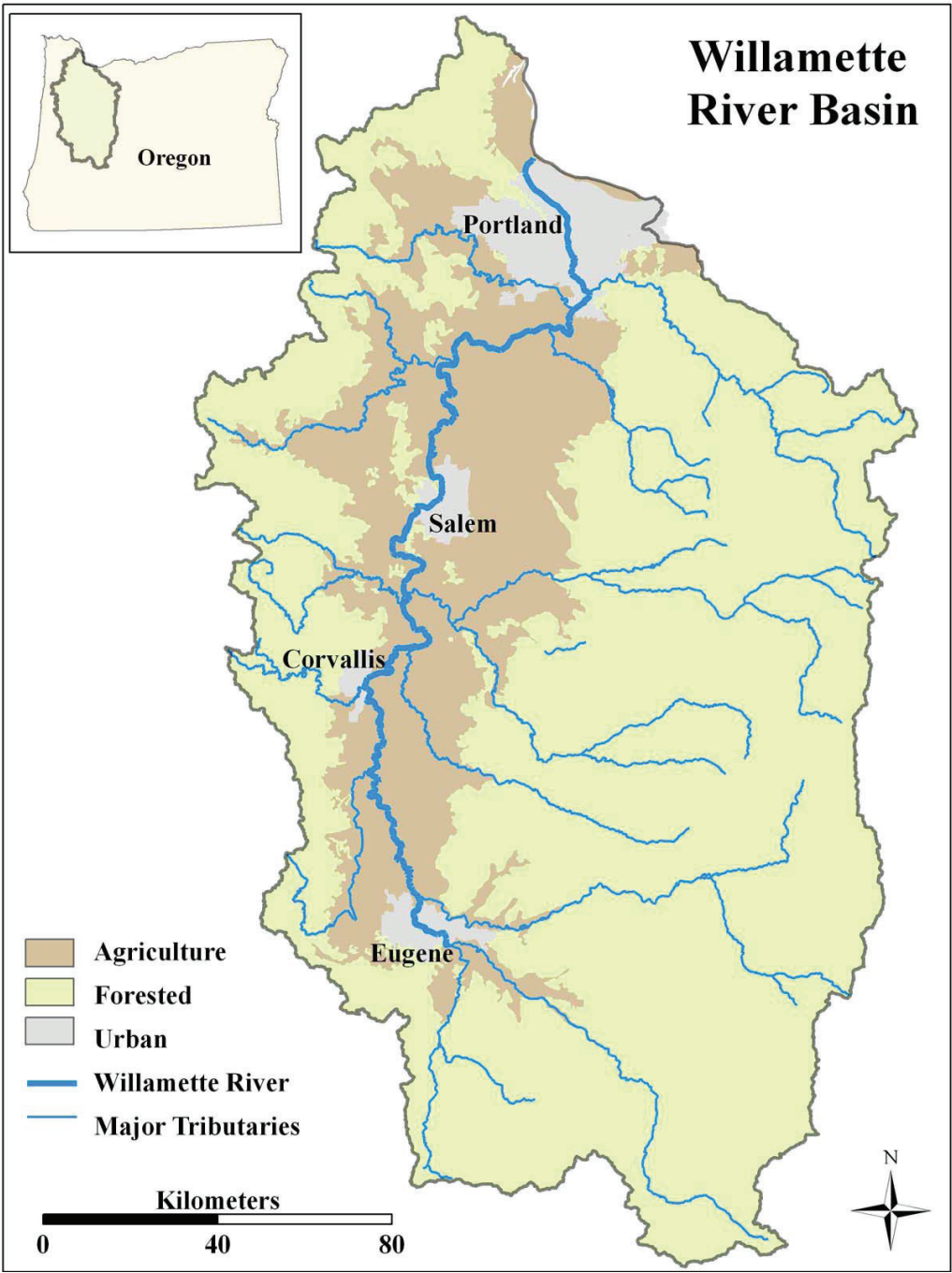
ing in streamside areas. However, as yet there is little evidence that these projects have produced outcomes on the scale needed to reverse hundreds of years of environmental damage. Water quality in many streams remains impaired, and populations of important species like Pacific and Atlantic salmon remain at risk. With such significant investment and so many projects being implemented, why haven't results demonstrated widespread ecological improvement?

Based on our collective years of experience providing grants to watershed restoration projects across the Pacific Northwest, we believe a substantial part of the problem stems from the mismatch between the capacity of many local organizations and the scale of the restoration challenge. This mismatch is especially pronounced in large, heavily altered watersheds where the legacy of land-use impacts presents local groups with a daunting suite of restoration challenges. These challenges come from historic and ongoing economic uses (logging, grazing, water extraction, mining, urbanization, pollution, and agriculture); public infrastructure (dams, roadways, irrigation facilities); and new challenges (climate change, invasive nonnative species). They occur across watersheds that may span thousands of square miles.

Many of the groups that seek to address these challenges, meanwhile, have no regulatory authority and often possess just a handful of staff and volunteers. A majority depends on relatively small, project-specific grants from local or regional agencies and grantmakers. They struggle to maintain the experienced staff needed to deliver projects at the scale required for detectable ecosystem improvements over the long term. To use the terms of Kramer and Kania, many efforts to improve freshwater resources across large geographies appear to rely on an “isolated impact model” – with the hope that a single organization or a set of isolated organizations may one day grow to expand their impact on a broader scale.

Could a different approach to funding increase the capacity and effectiveness of locally based watershed restoration initiatives? This question is

FIGURE 2 The Willamette River Basin



Map by Connie Burdick.

of great importance; with ever-mounting environmental pressures and the declining ecological health of many large river systems across North America and beyond, there is a critical need for effective restoration at a scale large enough to produce real improvements in water quality, the status of at-risk fish and wildlife populations, and other indicators of watershed health. If voluntary, ground-up approaches are to be part of the solution (and we believe they must), new methods of supporting these groups need to be developed and tested, and funding strategies must be continuously adapted based on measured results.

The Willamette River

In Oregon, a partnership of three grantmaking organizations has developed an integrated strategy to test whether a fundamental change in funding practices can narrow the gap between need and capacity and strengthen the impact of locally led ecosystem-restoration efforts. The focus of this strategy is Oregon's Willamette River Basin. (See Figure 2.)

The Willamette River drains a large watershed (11,500 square miles; a bit larger than Massachusetts) lying between the Coast and Cascade mountain ranges in western Oregon. Diverse indigenous peoples inhabited the watershed for thousands of years prior to European-American settlement, and fur traders exploited the river and its tributaries from the 18th to mid-19th centuries. Drawn by plentiful water, fertile soils, and a mild climate, thousands of pioneers traversed the Oregon Trail to settle in the Willamette Valley. Their impact – and the impact of those who came later – can be seen across the modern landscape in the form of agriculture, urban and industrial development, and transportation and other public works. (See Figure 3.) Today, the valley contains some of Oregon's most productive farm and forestland, and 20 of Oregon's 25 largest cities.

Numerous studies and reports have documented the changes in the health of the Willamette River as a result of this population growth and development (Hulse, Gregory, & Baker, 2002; Morlan, Blok, Miner, & Kirchner, 2010; Oregon Progress Board, 2000). The habitats that covered the Willamette Valley prior to settlement have been

dramatically altered, and many of the river's natural features have been compromised by human efforts to confine its channel, stabilize its banks, control flooding, and cultivate and develop valley bottomlands.

Studies since the 1990s have confirmed that a variety of pollutants (heavy metals, PCBs, agricultural pesticides, bacteria, nutrients) are still present in the river and its tributaries (Anderson, Rinella, & Rounds, 1996), despite significant progress in reducing pollution from industrial and municipal sources. In 2000, the Environmental Protection Agency identified excessive levels of hazardous industrial contamination in the Portland Harbor and mandated a cleanup effort (with a Superfund designation).

These impacts occur throughout the river system – on the main channel of the Willamette, along its major tributaries, and in smaller streams that feed larger river arteries. The chronic impacts of stream degradation have led to the listing of many Willamette Valley fish and wildlife species, including Chinook salmon, as threatened or endangered under state and federal law.

Addressing these problems is a complicated, expensive, and long-term undertaking, yet there is no basinwide river authority overseeing management and protection of the Willamette. Instead, dozens of organizations operating at varying scales and governance levels are involved in activities that affect the river system.

A number of the groups working to improve environmental conditions in the Willamette Basin are community based. A few are long-established private land trusts, but most are so-called “watershed councils” created as a result of the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds. The Oregon Plan, adopted by the state in 1997, was developed to avoid listing of coastal salmon runs under the Endangered Species Act by demonstrating that Oregon could reverse fishery declines through voluntary, collaborative restoration efforts. Coupled with approval of a 1998 ballot measure aimed in part at providing reliable funding for improving fish habitat, the plan led to the formation of nearly 100 watershed councils across the state.

FIGURE 3 A Community Along the Willamette River. Surrounding agricultural lands are protected under the state's land use laws.



Photo: Eric Vance, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

More than 20 such groups operate in the Willamette's watershed, serving a wide range of rural, urban, and suburban sub-watersheds drained by waterways flowing into the river.

The watershed councils in the Willamette Basin vary in size and capacity, but in general are similar to many other local ecosystem restoration groups operating across the U.S. They understand their communities, geographies, and economies, and possess the local connections and credibility to constructively engage landowners and other stakeholders in restoration efforts. However, most funding programs traditionally available to these groups focus on individual projects that address particular habitat types or species, which can lead to widely dispersed restoration activities with dilute impacts. Few funders provide support for comprehensive, long-term watershed restoration planning, or for the crucial up-front work

actually needed to develop high-impact projects (e.g. landowner outreach, environmental and real estate appraisals and surveys, project designs). Local groups also commonly lack the technical expertise necessary to manage the large, complex projects needed to address major obstacles to improved ecosystem health.

In short, the situation in the Willamette Basin exemplifies the mismatch between the magnitude of the restoration challenge and the local organizational capacity needed to achieve collective environmental impact at a large scale. If funders hope to reverse the trajectory of change in ecosystem health, whether at the local, regional, or national level, we have to change our approach to grantmaking.

The Willamette Funding Partnership

The institutions involved in the Willamette funding partnership are a private foundation, a state lottery-funded public agency, and a nonprofit

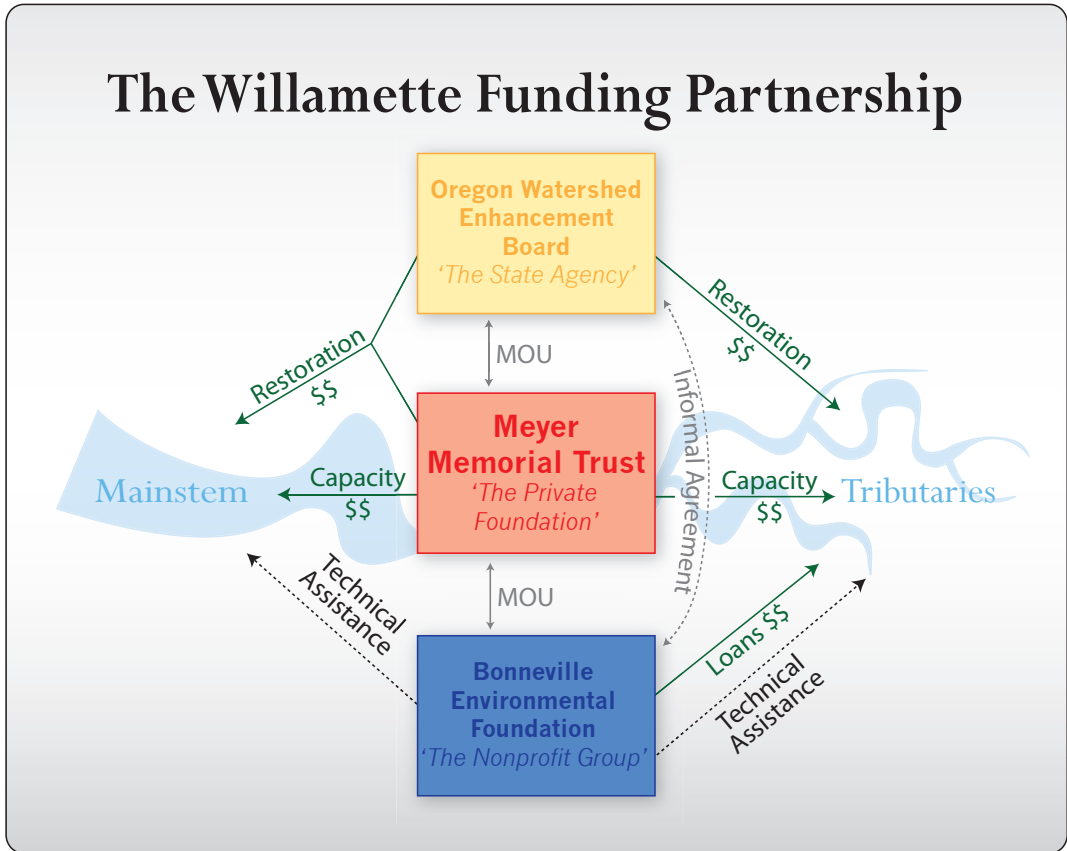
organization with a modest grantmaking program targeting watershed groups. These institutions have differing mandates, grantmaking assets, and organizational capacities.

- The Meyer Memorial Trust (MMT), one of the largest private foundations in the Pacific Northwest, is leading the Willamette funding partnership. Since it began operating in 1982, MMT has awarded more than \$600 million in grants and program-related investments to nonprofits based in Oregon and southwest Washington state. In recent years, MMT has supplemented its responsive grantmaking programs with several long-term, strategic funding initiatives designed to tackle some of the most challenging issues facing Oregon, including improving the health of the Willamette River. The foundation awards about \$1.5 million annually through its Willamette River Initiative and has invested close to \$7 million to date. The initiative is administered in partnership with the Tides Center, with program operations managed as a Tides project and grant funds administered directly by MMT. Mark Kramer's and John Kania's consulting firm, FSG, identified the Willamette River as a key funding opportunity for MMT during a 2007 strategic planning process.
- The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) is the state agency most closely involved in the Willamette funding partnership. It provides grants to local watershed groups in support of restoring local streams, rivers, wetlands, and natural areas. OWEB's grant funds originate from constitutionally dedicated Oregon Lottery proceeds, federal grants, and salmon license plate revenue. The agency has a biennial grants budget of \$50 million to \$70 million. A 17-member citizen board, drawn from the public at large, tribes, federal agencies and state government boards and commissions, leads the agency. OWEB grants, most of which are awarded on a competitive basis, support technical assistance, organizational capacity outreach, on-the-ground restoration, and monitoring and evaluation. In 2008, the agency began experimenting with geographically targeted funding programs in selected areas of the state, including the Willamette River drainage basin. OWEB allocated \$6 million to the Willamette "Special Investment Partnership" between 2008 and 2010, and an additional \$3 million for 2011-2013.
- The Bonneville Environmental Foundation (BEF) is an entrepreneurial nonprofit that develops innovative solutions to pressing freshwater and energy challenges. Through its Model Watershed Program, BEF builds partnerships with local watershed groups and supports the development of long-term, integrated restoration and monitoring strategies. BEF pledges 10 years of funding to each Model Watershed partner, averaging \$30,000 annually, along with sustained technical and scientific support to guide the implementation of these comprehensive, results-based watershed-restoration efforts. Funding for the program is provided by the Bonneville Power Administration (a regional power marketing agency), foundation grants, and revenue derived from BEF's sale of energy, water, and carbon sustainability products and services to private sector business and corporations. BEF also receives an annual grant from MMT to provide technical and operational support to a number of the Willamette partnership's local grantees.

Throughout the rest of this article, MMT is referred to as the private foundation or foundation, OWEB as the public agency or agency, and BEF as the nonprofit.

Five years ago, the private foundation and the public agency were proceeding on separate tracks to develop Willamette-focused funding initiatives. The agency hoped a special focus on the Willamette, based on clearly defined ecological objectives, would trigger funding proposals more closely linked to factors limiting river health than it had received through its regular grants program. The foundation saw an opportunity for private philanthropy to play a catalytic role in the future health of an important feature of Oregon's

FIGURE 4 The Willamette Funding Partnership



Graphic by Cristina Watson, Meyer Memorial Trust/Tides Center.

natural, cultural, and economic landscape. Both groups were already making responsive grants to groups working in the Willamette Basin. Upon learning that they shared an interest in the river, the foundation and the public agency decided to explore whether they might have more impact by working together.

The foundation and the public agency also convened an advisory group of watershed councils and other restoration-focused nongovernmental organizations to explore what it would take to significantly improve the scale and effectiveness of local restoration efforts. The advisory-group process allowed key stakeholders to play a role in setting the goals and laying the groundwork for a new approach.

After reviewing and discussing various approach-

es to river and watershed restoration in practice in the region, the advisory group recommended that the funders foster and support a “big picture” approach to restoration, including adherence to detailed, long-range restoration plans and rigorous, sustained monitoring of results. They also suggested that the funders set high expectations for grantee performance toward desired outcomes while encouraging adaptation based on results of monitoring and changing conditions, working in close partnership with local groups to supplement and build the organizational capacity needed to succeed. The group recommended that the funders support the initiative for at least seven years, and that they allow flexibility in the use of grant money.

Through the advisory group process, the foundation learned that the non-profit was already practicing many of these principles through its “model watershed” grant and technical assistance program. The foundation began working with the nonprofit to adapt the program to the Willamette, bringing a third collaborator into the funding partnership. (Figure 4 illustrates the relationships among the funding partners and the investments made in the Willamette and its tributaries.)

The three partners formally launched their Willamette River initiative in 2008 with two primary funding strategies, one focused on supporting projects designed to restore important river functions and habitats along the main (or “mainstem”) Willamette River, and one aimed at a more holistic, long-term approach to achieving improved watershed conditions at a smaller scale in selected Willamette tributaries.

As the program has evolved over the past four years, so have our strategies and principles. Our current thinking about how grantmakers interested in watershed and other large ecosystem restoration efforts might improve their impact is described below.

Grantmaking Principles

The grantmakers involved in the Willamette funding partnership have come to believe that many traditional approaches to funding environmental restoration – approaches characterized by awarding competitive, short-term grants for site-specific projects – may in fact limit the broader efficacy of watershed restoration programs. Below we describe the seven funding principles that have shaped our experimental approach to improving the scale and effectiveness of restoration in the Willamette, and how we are putting these principles into practice.

Encourage geographic focus at a “meaningful, manageable” scale. Many environmentally focused funding initiatives, both private and government-driven, are attracted by the prospect of conserving large, compelling landscapes and ecosystems. At the same time, grantmakers (especially government funders) feel pressure to

distribute grants across many political jurisdictions. As a result, restoration investments are broadly spread across vast states, ecoregions, and watersheds. We agree with Roni et al. (2002) that a more focused approach, where investments and projects are clustered over time – and in places where, for social or ecological reasons, investments are likely to yield improved conditions – offers greater potential benefit for depressed fish and wildlife species. A more focused approach also increases the likelihood that restoration actions will produce detectable results that can be used to assess the effectiveness of past actions and help inform future strategies. Accordingly, in the Willamette, the partners have focused their restoration grants on a discrete set of “anchor habitat” areas along the main channel of the Willamette River and a subset of smaller streams within tributary watersheds. Within these areas, funding priorities address specific ecological objectives based on an array of science-based plans and reports. (The foundation narrowed its target area further by excluding the Portland metropolitan area, where restoration challenges are greater, costs are higher, and multiple other sources of funding exist.)

Recognize and incorporate social and institutional factors. Responding to criticism that their investments lack focus and strategy, some environmental grantmakers have developed species- or geography-specific funding initiatives based largely on ecological criteria. While this is a step in the right direction, we believe that social and institutional factors are also critical to attaining success. Achieving sustainable watershed improvement takes years of community and landowner outreach and engagement, and changes in behavior by both individuals and organizations. Prospective grantees that carry strong science credentials but lack representative and engaged leadership, strong and authentic ties to local institutions and landowners, and deep-rooted community support will be hard-pressed to deliver lasting environmental gains. In the Willamette funding partnership, social and community factors like those enumerated above are carefully reviewed during due diligence and tracked throughout the project. When selecting grant partners, we pay special at-

tention to board representation and engagement, relationships between grantees and key community partners, and the “fit” between the work needed and the proposing organization.

Move from responsive to proactive grantmaking. Much of the funding available for ecosystem-restoration projects is awarded through responsive grantmaking programs. Such grant programs are usually competitive; proposals submitted in a particular grantmaking cycle are compared against each other, ranked, and funded in order until that cycle’s budget is exhausted. Our experience suggests that such heavy reliance on responsive, competitive grantmaking to address large-scale restoration challenges is unlikely to fully leverage the collective capacity of funders or their grantees. In addition, “best among submitted proposals” approaches may discourage collaboration because over time they contribute to a culture of competition among applicants. The Willamette River partnership is decidedly more proactive in its approach to grantmaking. Partnership staff is actively involved with grantees, scientists, and other restoration professionals in identifying critical funding gaps. In some cases, we work with organizations as proposals are crafted to ensure the project both achieves the goals of the applicant and contributes to the larger, collaborative Willamette restoration effort. We stay in touch with grantees through multiple means during the grant period, so we are aware of changing conditions and needs.

Provide flexible funding. It can take years for an organization to develop community understanding and support, conduct baseline surveys of local land and water conditions, and obtain the regulatory permissions needed to advance effective watershed restoration. Providing local watershed groups with a modest amount of consistent, flexible funding can greatly improve their ability to develop long-range plans, leverage existing relationships, identify and cultivate projects in critical areas, and generate sought-after ecological improvements. By law, the agency has historically been driven to direct the bulk of its grants to on-the-ground restoration activities. The private foundation, with much greater grantmaking

latitude, has focused on the “noncapital” needs described above. The nonprofit, meanwhile, has employed its strong knowledge of the science and practice of watershed restoration, along with periodic small grants and bridge funding, to provide technical assistance and operational support to the watershed councils and other local implementing groups involved in the initiative.

Adopt an experimental mindset. The field of environmental restoration is relatively young, and there remain many questions about the nature and scale of actions required to succeed. Unfortunately, among both grantmakers and grant recipients restoration funding and implementation proceed as if there were certainty regarding what results will accrue from on-the-ground actions and investments – funding many tree-planting projects, for example, without knowing whether, individually, such projects actually lead to improved outcomes for fish, wildlife, or water quality. We believe that successful restoration of large ecosystems is unlikely unless both the funding and restoration communities adopt an “experimental mindset” – one in which the investigational nature of each project or restoration initiative is embraced with an eye toward learning, adapting, and sharing lessons with a broader community. The Willamette funding partners work together on projects aimed at improving understanding, joint learning, shared metrics, and monitoring. The latter is a key advantage of the long-term nature of the partnership, as monitoring over time can detect trends that inform program modifications.

Encourage candor. In order to advance ecosystem-restoration work to a meaningful scale, greater candor is needed among grantees and funders regarding the uncertainty inherent in this work. Unfortunately, there is a disincentive for grantees to critically evaluate and honestly report project outcomes because, traditionally, future funding has been tied to a track record of “successful” projects. This pressure to report only success contributes to a widespread lack of learning, as restoration results are infrequently documented, publicized, or effectively shared to improve restoration practice (Kondolf, 1995; Palmer, Allan,

Meyer, & Bernhardt, 2007; Bash & Ryan, 2002). Though it is hard to gauge, our sense is that we still have a ways to go to achieve truly open and candid relationships with our grantees. We receive mostly positive grant reports, yet based on measured outputs we know that some grantees have made greater progress in landowner recruitment and project implementation than others. On the plus side, with a 10-year program grantees are able to set long-term goals, and we can work together to check regularly for progress and place problems in context. Frequent personal contact improves a sense of accessibility, and practicing candor in those interactions in some cases encourages greater openness from grantees. In the long run, we may learn more from quantitative monitoring data and formal program evaluations (one is currently under way) than annual grant reports.

Make a long-term commitment. It took centuries of Euro-American habitation, significant public investment, and private resource use and extraction to degrade North America's river and stream systems, and it is widely acknowledged that efforts to improve these systems will take decades. In many cases, the ecological outcomes of today's investments may not be detectable until many years from now. Still, few funders – public or private – dedicate funding to support restoration and monitoring activities in one place over the time frames necessary to achieve ecological recovery (Reeve, Lichatowich, Towey, & Duncan, 2006; Kondolf, 1995; Katz, Barnas, Hicks, Cowen, & Jenkinson, 2007). Partly as a result, few watershed-restoration initiatives possess the sustained and flexible resources necessary to carry out science-based, watershed-scale restoration programs (Huntington & Sommarstrom, 2000), much less learn from their successes and failures. We believe at least a decade of funding is needed to develop the organizational capacity and critical mass of restoration projects needed to reverse the trajectory of change in many watersheds. Accordingly, all three funders have committed to a long-term investment – the foundation for 10 years, the nonprofit for 10 years, and the agency through at least 2015 with the intention to continue (as a state agency, OWEB is not able to

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commit future funds without legislative approval). The combined investment to date is approximately \$15 million.

Beyond Grantmaking: Collective Impact in the Willamette

Historically, river restoration efforts in the Willamette Basin have lacked a common agenda, shared measurement systems, continuous communication, mutually reinforcing activities, or “backbone” support – the five conditions that Kramer and Kania (2011) have identified as necessary to achieving collective impact. The basin may simply be too big and diverse, and its environmental challenges too complex, to be a good fit for collective impact in its purest form. On the other hand, with dozens of agencies, jurisdictions, and nonprofits involved in trying to improve the Willamette's health – and no overarching, government-sanctioned plan or program to guide restoration efforts – the principles of collective impact provide a reasonable framework for fostering better alignment of some of the basin's disparate players and programs. Our experience confirms that at least some collective-impact

principles can help large-scale environmental restoration projects achieve better results.

A common agenda or shared vision is a cornerstone of the collective-impact model, and our grantees and other partners do operate from a set of commonly recognized restoration priorities distilled from several well-respected and relatively recent studies and reports on the Willamette. However, there is no formal, written vision guiding the current enterprise, and we suspect that if we had sought agreement at the outset regarding a specific vision, goals, and strategies, we might still be engaged in a prickly planning exercise. For the Willamette funding partnership, it has been more productive to begin with a lot of listening – along with some strategic grants aimed at building knowledge and relationships – than to ask myriad disparate groups to come to agreement around a common vision and priorities right out of the gate. Though progress has been slow, in recent months stakeholders have expressed interest in collaborating in the development of a shared vision. Rather than beginning our initiative with a plan, we may do better to end with one, provided it is broadly designed and embraced.

We also are making progress toward defining shared metrics of river health for the Willamette. The agency and the foundation have made several grants to university researchers to fill important gaps in information regarding key indicators of mainstem health, and the nonprofit and watershed council grantees have developed a core set of health indicators for the smaller watersheds. This year the foundation will convene a task force to work on shared metrics, with the goal of releasing a Willamette River “report card” in 2014.

The size of the Willamette’s watershed presents a challenge to achieving a high level of continuous communication. The many groups with an interest in the river have different priorities, distances across the watershed are great, and time is precious. Nevertheless, we have witnessed growing interest in regular communication, peer-exchange events, and gatherings as our partners recognize how these activities can serve both local priorities and a larger restoration vision. Our experience

indicates that it is worth striving to continually facilitate and enhance communication among partners, though achieving a single continuous communication network may not be achievable.

River stakeholders and others have long bemoaned the overlaps and bottlenecks hindering effective, strategic implementation of watershed restoration programs in the Willamette, so the collective-impact principle of mutually reinforcing strategies – where the individual actions of several groups fit into and reinforce an overarching plan for watershed restoration – is very appealing. And, though once again complicated by the scale and complexity of the basin, achieving a more rational institutional landscape is not completely out of reach. Models exist in other, albeit smaller, watersheds. In the Willamette, scaling up may be greatly assisted by some strategic scaling down, and we are witnessing a natural evolution of many local partners into cohorts focused on geographic sub-areas where they are able to discuss mutually reinforcing strategies in a very pragmatic and place-specific way. At the basin scale, major funders are making progress in defining common priorities and discussing how different pots of money can be aligned for greater impact.

To varying degrees, all three funding partners provide “backbone organization” services to the Willamette restoration effort, and we are convinced these services could help advance many large ecosystem-restoration efforts where the lack of coordination, planning, and support services hinders the ability of community-based restoration groups to take their work to scale. The funder and the nonprofit have retained staff with experience in natural resource policy, watershed science, and community restoration to work directly with grantees to develop restoration and monitoring strategies and provide technical and program management support. Every other year, the foundation and the agency host a large Willamette River conference to facilitate joint learning and information sharing and connect local implementers to broader restoration concerns. A grantee-only meeting is held in the interim years, and periodic tours and peer-to-peer exchanges

are organized to foster communication, learning, and exploration of mutually reinforcing strategies. The funding partners also commission independent research to expand knowledge and improve planning and evaluation tools available to the restoration community.

The nonprofit, geared more to providing technical assistance than funding, has developed its own unique approach to providing backbone services. It has worked closely with watershed council grantees to create a database to track project locations, workflow, contracts, landowner contacts, outreach activities, and monitoring data. Data are housed locally and on servers at the nonprofit, ensuring that core program information will be continuously accessible. With technical and financial support from the partners, watershed council grantees are testing the use of shared protocols for core monitoring of project results, and sharing contractors and expensive monitoring equipment. For the past two years, they have developed a combined order for plant material used in restoration projects, producing significant cost savings and providing greater market certainty for local nurseries.

Progress

Two floodplain restoration projects were under way on the mainstem Willamette River when the partnership began in 2008. As of January 2013 – four and a half years after the funding partnership was launched – restoration projects are planned or in progress at 15 different sites on both public and private land. The projects involve 12 organizations, more than 20 landowners, and over 2,500 acres of land. To date, most projects have focused on invasive species removal, restoration of native forests on river floodplains, and the reconnection of former side channels to the main channel to provide winter refuge for juvenile salmon. A few are aimed at improving environmental conditions at inactive gravel pits. Others are exploring opportunities to modify or remove engineered rock embankments so the river can interact more naturally with its floodplain, allowing for better absorption of floodwaters and providing critical habitat for native fish.

Monitoring is occurring on more than 300 miles of stream. In just two years, local watershed groups involved in the program have planted more than 1 million native trees, shrubs, and grasses along targeted streams. Data from the public agency's grantmaking records verify that the partnership is catalyzing restoration work at a pace and scale far exceeding that which has occurred through the traditional approach to restoration grantmaking in the Willamette.

In the smaller tributary watersheds, 800 landowners have agreed to participate in some kind of stream-restoration work on their properties. Projects have been implemented or are planned on more than 1,300 acres of land, much along contiguous streamside areas. Monitoring is occurring on more than 300 miles of stream. In just two years, local watershed groups involved in the program have planted more than 1 million native trees, shrubs, and grasses along targeted streams. Data from the public agency's grantmaking records verify that the partnership is catalyzing restoration work at a pace and scale far exceeding that which has occurred through the traditional approach to restoration grantmaking in the Willamette.

Members of the partnership also have worked, with some success, to align other Willamette funders around the same set of scientifically determined priorities. For example, the Bonneville

Power Administration (BPA), a regional power-marketing agency, is required to invest \$800,000 annually over the next decade in habitat-restoration projects that will benefit threatened Chinook salmon and other species of concern. The state agency worked with BPA to focus those funds on the Willamette funding partnership's priorities and now administers the funds on behalf of BPA.

Reflections

It remains to be seen whether the progress achieved thus far will translate into detectable improvements in the health of the Willamette system. There is clearly much more restoration activity taking place than there was before the funding partnership existed, along with a greater sense of possibility and more productive collaboration among stakeholders. Being awarded the 2012 Thiess International Riverprize is a strong and well-informed endorsement of our efforts.

Here are some important lessons from the past four years:

- Partnerships are critical to success but quite challenging to sustain, especially over the course of a ten-year initiative. In the most effective partnerships, different players bring different assets to the table and work to apply them to shared priorities in complementary ways. For funders, effective partnerships are often hindered by differing priorities, the desire to maintain control of individual grant reviews, and the sometimes-lengthy process for making strategic decisions. Among grantees, a strong loyalty to place and organizational independence, and a history of competition for funds, make it difficult to establish and maintain support for a common agenda. Overcoming these obstacles takes real time and effort, and requires partners to learn about and respect each other's limitations.
- There are many important benefits to public-private funding partnerships – leverage, opportunities to achieve institutional alignment around important issues, and access to deep technical knowledge and critical partner networks. But public agencies must reckon with

forces and circumstances unfamiliar to private foundations. They face different constraints and answer to different constituencies than foundations and non-profits. (In the Willamette, for example, the agency funder has had to address the perception among some long-time grantees that a focused funding partnership detracts from the opportunities of grantees outside the focus area.) As a result, public agencies work at a different – and typically slower – pace to get things done. In our partnership, the foundation and nonprofit invest significant time and energy participating in agency budget and planning processes that march to their own schedules and have unpredictable outcomes.

- The larger and more ambitious the collaborative effort, the more important it is to manage expectations, both internal and external. It took some time to settle on specific funding strategies for the Willamette initiative, but once the strategies were in place, we hurried to disburse allotted funding. Grant budgets were quickly approved, application forms readied, and deadlines announced. In reality, while some prospective grantees were ready to respond quickly to the new program, others needed more time. Weeks and then months passed while we worked to answer questions and guide applicants through new, Willamette-specific application and review procedures. We have realized that the lag time between program announcement and grantee response was due to more than the proverbial learning curve. In our zeal to accomplish something significant, quickly, we may have overwhelmed key organizations in the delivery infrastructure. Ultimately, both the agency and the foundation underspent their initial allocations for the program. It is better, we now believe, to spread the overall funding commitment over a longer period, allowing some years to ramp both up and down, and to work with grantee partners to slowly and carefully integrate the new initiative into ongoing programs and priorities.
- Achieving better alignment among stakeholders is a long, slow process, but seems to be aided by frequent (and preferably face-to-

face) contact between and among the funding entities, grantees, and other partners. Fragmentation, duplication, and the “silo” effect are well-recognized obstacles to collaboration and collective impact. Acting with intention to improve organizational alignment is a first step toward overcoming these obstacles. The Willamette funding partnership uses a variety of tools and processes to improve coordination and communication, but in the first several years convening has been most important. We have convened conferences, grantee retreats, community meetings, and task forces to make and refresh connections and reinforce common objectives. Recently, grantees have begun to initiate coordination meetings, sometimes including the funding partners and sometimes not. We view this as a positive indicator, and will watch with interest to see whether the practice continues over the life of (and beyond) the funding initiative.

Summary and Conclusion

The organizations participating in the Willamette funding partnership acknowledge that we are experimenting with a new approach and recognize that there are risks and uncertainties associated with many of the strategies being tested. However, we believe that without the application of new approaches (and the assumption of some risk on our part) it is more likely that status quo funding methods will generate limited ecological benefit in this large and complex river system.

Writing this article has helped clarify the keys to making progress for our partnership. Our grantmaking practices and principles – focused, attentive to social and institutional issues, proactive, flexible, and experimental – balance the importance of being responsive to implementers’ needs with accountability to our trustees and the public. Geographic focus and attention (if not strict adherence) to the tenets of collective impact provide boundaries and operating coherence for what could be an impossibly sprawling and fragmented effort. The steadfast commitment of our organizations to an unusually long-term grant program has attracted loyalty to the cause, made

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room for both experimentation and relationship building, and allowed for a more strategic and robust approach to monitoring and evaluation.

The importance of making a long-term commitment when trying to address large-scale ecosystem restoration cannot be overstated. Moving the needle in these systems requires change, whether in agency behavior, funding practices, or farming methods; such changes require cultural shifts, and cultural shifts take time. Small improvements in land and water conditions aggregate and interact slowly and may not be detectable for many years. Connecting the dots between funder investments and positive outcomes is not always easy, and tracking progress in some important areas (alignment, for example) is tricky. Needless to say, making a long-term commitment to initiatives with such uncertain outcomes is not for every funder.

The Willamette funding partners know we cannot “fix” the river system in 10 years. We can, however, contribute to the development of a portfolio of restoration approaches and outcomes that serve as a guide to future efforts. We can create the models, capacity, alignment, and momentum that will enable groups to keep pushing the trajectory of change in the right direction, even if at a slower pace. We can test and adapt the principles of collective impact. Finally, we can share our experience, and hope that in so doing we contrib-

ute practicable knowledge and insight to other funders seeking to increase their effectiveness in tackling large, complex social and environmental problems.

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