Designing a Grant-Driven Socioeconomic System for Ecosystem Restoration

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The Estuary and Salmon Restoration Program (ESRP) is an “early action” program for Puget Sound ecosystem restoration. ESRP is designed as a prototype for how a grant management system can actively contribute to the network and knowledge management necessary for sustained ecosystem restoration. Our challenge has been to analyze grant-making interactions and procedures as an open-ended opportunity to affect the outcomes of a holistic restoration system. We seek efficiency by creating beneficial relationships between proponents, policy managers, and appropriators, leveraging the position of the grant program as a mediator of capital and information, and a steward of knowledge. Three strategies and three challenges have emerged.

**Grant-based Restoration Systems**

Appropriators, policy managers, and proponents collaborate in a occasionally elegant dance to restore ecosystems. Grant management systems have the potential to organize these interactions by regulating the flow of capital (green) and information (orange), and retaining and distributing knowledge.

Proponents—want to complete and promote projects that solve problems while surviving in an industry entirely dependent on gov’t subsidies.

Policy Managers—want to build effective, viable programs while competing for patronage and budget within a shifting hierarchical arena.

Appropriators—want to see funds well spent and solve important problems while accumulating political capital.

**Design Principles**

Link outputs to inputs—nascent project outputs are refined and linked to the inputs of future projects creating positive feedback loops.

Leverage naturally occurring behavior—Restoration projects have intrinsic behaviors. Programs should seek to reinforce the best qualities of project behavior rather than creating extraneous work.

Stack functions—each task completed as part of a program or project lifecycle can support multiple functions if the system is well designed such that outputs are developed for known end uses.

**Feasibility**

**Design**

**Implementation**

**Evaluation**

**Streamlined Re-application**

**Project Documentation**

**Rapid Assessment**

**Enhancements**

**Workshops**

**Streamlined application**

**Conceptual design Assessment Property access**

**Selection and Contracting**

**Project Documentation**

**Rapid Assessment**

**Enhancements**

**Workshops**

**1. Maintaining local and regional prioritization**

Within the Puget Sound landscape, ESRP is one of several grant making systems. Overlap between systems could be seen as an inefficiency, however ecosystem restoration requires resolution of complex problems that defy management within a single framework. While some actions may be supported by multiple systems of prioritization (C), the complexity of ecosystem restoration is better served by multiple complementary prioritization systems (A & B) that more fully address complex problems (D). Multiple complementary programs can engage broader stakeholder communities.

**2. Flexible contracting systems**

Phased Project Delivery—ESRP funds a specific scope of work within pre-defined phases of project development. In this way we encourage rapid use of funds, support the whole project lifecycle, while tracking and documenting outputs of funding.

Streamlined Re-application—Once a project has defined scope, costs, and benefits through development of a conceptual design and resolution of land access issues, they may qualify to become part of the “ESRP Portfolio” where we consider funding of additional tasks on an annual basis until a project has been completed.

**3. Integrated learning systems**

Four elements combine to generate knowledge from project activity:

- **Project Documentation**—Where conceptual models and treatments are memorialized through contract deliverables
- **Rapid Assessment**—Where conceptual model assumptions are tested through rapid assessment of suites of projects
- **Enhancements**—Where we test important uncertainties by varying treatments among projects and evaluating outcomes
- **Workshops**—Where project outputs are discussed and incorporated into the next round of project development

**Challenges**

**Staffing Integrative Functions**

Core functions of selecting projects and cutting contracts compete with all other functions. Benefits of managing information and networks are difficult to measure and may be undervalued by appropriators or difficult to deliver.

**Long Term Stewardship**

Grant contracts lasting 2-4 years cannot solve long term risks to habitat. Grants give a stewardship opportunity dependent on the mechanisms, organizations, and resources necessary to implement stewardship in perpetuity.

**Budget Instability**

As a subsidized market, irregular and episodic funding of ecosystem restoration produce high staff turnover, under staffed implementation, or hoarding behavior which undermines the generational task of ecosystem restoration.

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