

Sustaining the Urban Waters Program in 2020 and Beyond: New Strategies to Support the Program

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Introduction

Since its formation in 2010, the Urban Waters (UW) Program has achieved notable successes across the U.S. to revitalize American waterways and the communities that surround them. These include urban, rural, and suburban communities in watersheds. Through 20 Urban Waters Partnerships and hundreds of community improvement projects, the program is helping revitalize waterways from the intensely urban Passaic and Los Angeles Rivers to the agricultural and mining communities around the Meramec and Big Rivers of Missouri.¹

Urban Waters projects are developed through the collaborative work of federal agencies, state and local governments, academia, foundations, and non-governmental partners. Federal support is provided through direct funding² (through contractor, small grant, and interagency award processes), management of national program operations, and extensive information sharing via the Urban Waters Learning Network (UWLN). While the Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Interior, and United States Department of Agriculture-Forest Service have provided most of this direct funding and staff support for a majority of the partnerships, many other Federal Partner agencies have supported projects in partnership locations through separately-funded programs and staff work. The UW Program has focused these efforts in a specific set of partnership locations to increase collaboration, foster innovation, and leverage resources. While the UW Program has dedicated resources to these locations, it has also developed tools and resources that can be used by any location in the country, such as the UWLN, resources on <http://www.urbanwaters.gov>, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Five Star and Urban Waters Restoration grants.

The successes of the UW Program to date have generated strong interest in expanding the program to other localities nationwide. However, there is broad recognition that federal support for new local partnerships is limited by the resource capacity of the federal partners. Given the finite and somewhat uncertain nature of federal resources available to support the UW Program in the coming years, and the parallel desire to further the UW mission and goals on a national scale, it is timely to consider innovative new strategies to sustain the program in 2020 and

¹ Successes the program has achieved are described on the individual pages of <http://www.urbanwaters.gov> and in the 2016-2018 Workplan with Accomplishments appendix.

² *"As required by the Antideficiency Act, 31 U.S.C. 1341 and 1342, all commitments made by all agencies party to this Partnership agreement are subject to the availability of appropriated funds and budget priorities. Nothing in this agreement, in and of itself, obligates any agency to expend appropriations or to enter into any contract, assistance agreement, interagency agreement, or incur other financial obligations. Any transaction involving transfers of funds between the agencies will be handled in accordance with applicable laws, regulations, and procedures under separate written agreements. Furthermore, this agreement does not create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable by law or equity, by persons who are not party to this agreement, against any party to this agreement, its officers or employees, or any other person. Finally, this agreement does not impose legally binding requirements on any Federal agency, States or the regulated community, nor does it change or substitute for any existing legally binding requirements"*

beyond. This document sets forth an approach that is intended to inform interagency dialogue and help build consensus for necessary program changes that will ensure the sustainability of the UW Program.

A key objective of this program has been to serve underserved and economically-distressed communities. All 20 partnership locations have implemented projects to help realize this part of the mission. Many examples of projects that combine urban waters and environmental justice objectives can be found at <http://www.urbanwaters.gov> and <http://www.urbanwaterslearningnetwork.org>. The UW Program Mission and Goals will continue to serve as guidance as the program defines and implements a new strategic approach:

Mission

The Urban Waters [Program] will help urban and metropolitan areas, particularly those that are under-served or economically distressed, connect with their waterways and work to improve them. This Federal partnership will put communities first. We will work to break down government program silos and to ensure that our collective efforts will reverse past neglect, energize existing programs, and engage new partners. We will listen to, engage, and serve the communities where we work, ensuring they are full partners in restoring and protecting the water that surrounds them. We will establish strong partnerships with effective community-based organizations and local government officials to make the most effective use of economic incentives and other beneficial actions. With the right set of federal, state, and local tools and commitment, the partnership will leverage existing neighborhood assets. These actions will be geared to promote early and visible victories to fuel long-term action. Success will advance the missions of our partnership, our agencies, and the federal government as a whole.

Goals

Working with a diverse set of partners, we seek to help communities restore and protect water quality and revitalize adjacent rural, suburban, and urban neighborhoods throughout the watershed. The program will leverage the visibility of metropolitan waterways to focus attention and resources on revitalizing whole watersheds encompassing both urban and rural communities. We therefore, through collaborative approaches across sectors, governmental levels and jurisdictions, will focus on: preventing contamination and cleaning up contaminated urban and rural waters; addressing community needs for jobs, housing and business investment; working to stem gentrification; reducing urban and rural flooding and building resilience; and addressing institutional issues such as lack of coordination and lack of funding.

We engage communities in activities that increase their connection to, understanding of, and stewardship of local waterways and their associated watersheds. The federal agency partners will work together to achieve the following outcomes:

Connection to community waters: Greater access to urban and rural waterways and greater public participation in water-related activities, such as recreation, volunteer monitoring, clean-ups, land restoration and reforestation, education, and leisure.

Understanding of community waters and their potential: Greater public involvement and awareness of waterways and their potential for improving public health, economic

development, and the quality of life.

Sense of public ownership of community waters: Greater public benefit from improvement efforts, especially in underserved communities, and consequent increased priority given to the improvement of community waters.

Protection and restoration of community waters: Acceleration of the measurable improvements to community water quality.

Community revitalization: Promote equitable community improvements that capitalize on the social and economic benefits derived from improved waterways and adjacent lands.

A Strategy for Working with Communities Developing Partnerships

The UW Program will consider local partnerships that propose to join the program and receive designation and possible support for their work. Based on interest and resource capacity, 1-2 new partnership locations will likely be considered for official designation per fiscal year. Any proposed UW partnership will be self-governing, with collaboration by federal partner agency staff. New Partnership locations will commit to pursue the mission and goals of the UW program, follow basic operating standards (including the creation of annual workplans), and provide information to the UW Program and the public on their activities, projects, and accomplishments.

The level of federal financial and technical assistance for new UW partnerships will be determined on a location-by-location basis by each agency separately and may or may not include direct funding support for Ambassadors or individual projects. As with the current partnerships, all new UW partnerships may receive the following benefits, pursuant to the authorities, constraints and procedures of individual agencies and programs:

- Access to an extensive peer-learning network of experts focused on watershed protection and restoration, and economic and community development.
- Support from federal, state, and local government agency programs for collaborative project development and implementation.
- Access to federal program resources, including: the Urban Waters Ambassador toolkit (<https://www.epa.gov/urbanwaterspartners/urban-waters-ambassador-toolkit>) and other training resources; invitations to monthly UW Program information-sharing calls; email updates on Urban Waters events, accomplishments, and tools; invitations to UW national meetings; and access to the UWLN and the Ambassadors forum on Basecamp. UW Ambassadors facilitate stakeholder dialogue, coordinate strategic planning, and assist with implementing on-the-ground projects. Experience shows that having an Ambassador play those roles leads to better coordination among all stakeholders and accelerates project success.
- Access to information about key federal funding opportunities, including the Five-Star and UW Restoration Grant Program and other federal agency grant programs, to support local community restoration and improvement projects. Federal agencies will be encouraged to give financial and staff assistance to these local partnerships, to the extent they can.

- Support to identify additional sources of funding and technical assistance for projects and program operations from public and private sector organizations.
- Connections with other federal programs that address watershed and community revitalization issues, including Environmental Justice programs, the National Estuary Program, Fish and Wildlife programs, National Park programs, Community Forestry Programs, and transportation programs.

The UW Program will use a flexible approach to consider new partnership locations. The UW Federal Workgroup, with members from the 15 federal agency partners and using their own decision-making processes, will work with interested communities to assist in building local partnerships. A local partnership can submit a proposal to urbanwaters@epa.gov that addresses all factors noted below to be considered for designation by the national UW Program (this opportunity to submit a proposal will be described online). Interested communities should reach out to Regional and Headquarters contacts to gauge federal interest and capacity before submitting a proposal. The Federal Workgroup will periodically review the submitted proposals to determine which, if any, new locations will be accepted into the UW Program. The first criterion will be federal agency headquarters and regional/local office capacity to support the location. Then decisions will be made on an on-going and case-by-case basis by the Federal Workgroup based on the following factors:

- How the local partnership will advance the Mission and Goals of the UW Federal Partnership;
- The geographic area and watershed to be addressed;
- High priority projects and, if available, performance metrics to monitor project progress;
- Plan for engaging stakeholders to form a sustainable partnership;
- How underserved communities will be included;
- Plans for working with state government agencies and regionally-based non-governmental organizations;
- Existing and intended sources of funding for projects and operations;
- How Ambassador functions will be implemented and a plan for financial support;
- Inclusion of letters of support, if available;
- The location's ability to form a sustainable partnership.

Sustaining Current and Future UW Partnerships

The future success of the UW Program depends on the effective operation and progress of the 20 current UW partnership locations. The UW Federal Workgroup is committed to providing ongoing support to the existing local partnerships to the greatest extent possible, given available resources. Ongoing technical support will be provided through the UWLN and the other program benefits listed previously.

The Federal Workgroup agencies separately review funding requests and approve requests based on agency available resources, agency missions and goals, and local needs. That is, Federal agencies will continue to have complete discretion to allocate resources to Partnership locations per their respective policies. Going forward, as new locations are considered, the Federal Workgroup agencies will also evaluate and consider funding the needs of those new locations. In addition, to strengthen the program and diversify the funding stream supporting locations, the Federal Workgroup agencies will support current and potential future locations as they determine how to obtain federal and non-federal funding for partnership work, such as Ambassador and operational funding, project support, and communications. All UW partnership locations are expected to actively address the issue of self-sufficiency in the coming year with the goal of expanding and diversifying their funding sources over time. The Federal Workgroup agencies will support these efforts in various ways, including providing information on funding techniques and potential funding sources.

Federal partners will take actions to support and strengthen the activities of local partnerships to the greatest extent possible. UW partnerships support the mission and goals of the Federal partners in a variety of ways, summarized here:

<https://www.epa.gov/urbanwaterspartners/mission-alignments-urban-waters-agency-partners>.

The federal partners plan to work together in accordance with the authorities, constraints, and procedures of individual agencies and programs, including:

- Pursue sustainable funding: Develop a national strategy to pursue public and private sector funding sources for all active partnerships, thereby supporting Ambassadors, project development, and program operations at all UW partnership locations.
- Expand Federal technical assistance: Make the UWLN and other valuable resources and tools available to all UW partnership locations.
- Ensure program oversight: Establish a systematic national process for tracking progress of the existing UW Program national partnership and local UW partnerships, evaluating issues and opportunities, and taking appropriate action. The UW Program federal agencies will determine a process that shares responsibility among the agencies in order for agencies to understand outcomes and account for accomplishments.
- Strengthen the UW Federal Workgroup: Serve as a steering committee to provide planning and other assistance to current and future partnerships and undertake activities to support and strengthen federal participation, such as possibly committing to fund an Ambassador at an UW partnership. While the EPA will continue to facilitate the Federal Workgroup, it may consider developing a process for rotating facilitation. The Workgroup may also consider the addition of new federal agencies (e.g., the General Services Administration, the Department of Labor, the Department of Justice).
- Maintain program standards: Ensure that all UW partnership locations have a central coordinator (i.e., Ambassador), utilize a diverse range of funding sources to support essential Ambassador functions, develop annual stakeholder-endorsed workplans, and provide program performance metrics annually.

- Transition existing UW partnerships to a diversified funding model: Support current Ambassadors and/or stakeholder organizations to develop the capability to procure funding support from non-federal sources.

(Federal agency partners will retain the right to independently fund Ambassadors and activities of individual UW partnership locations directly, for time periods and amounts of their choosing.)