



What steps are needed to make conservation incentives programs more strategic?

The discussion of improving conservation incentives programs starts with whether there is a need for improvement, and what the benefits of working for change would be for both the environment and the landowners involved. At some point, however, it may be helpful to look at just what might be involved in this process. In some cases, the changes may be relatively easy. In others, major structural and statutory change may be called for.

We need not start with a blank slate. Already, a number of researchers, organizations, and local watersheds here and elsewhere in the country have investigated ways to improve the situation. They have highlighted essentially three ways in which to improve effectiveness:

- Directing conservation incentive programs towards high priority lands or issues;
- Increasing landowner participation in incentive programs; and
- Improving coordination within and between incentive program providers (both public and private).

For each of these, suggested recommendations gleaned from previous research have emerged. We have provided these here, followed by possible actions steps that could be undertaken to advance the work. These steps are not intended to be definitive. Rather, it is part of the aim of this project to enlist the knowledge of those who fund, implement, and use conservation incentives programs to identify additional steps needed to improve them or to identify those that would work in Washington and those that might not be appropriate for our needs.

Issue: Directing conservation incentive programs towards high priority lands and issues.

At the core of the effort to make conservation incentive programs work better for the environment is to direct them in a more strategic way towards high priority lands and issues.

Recommendations:

- Direct incentive program resources towards priority geographical areas. For example, conservation priorities such as wildlife corridors, riparian lands, wetlands, and rare habitats may be identified in watershed, river management, salmon recovery, biodiversity, eco-regional assessment, and other plans (OR, DW, Noah and Zhang 2001, AFT/EFC 2006.)
- Identify pilot areas where Geographical Information System (GIS) technology can be used to catalogue and organize resource data and overlay it with land ownership information to identify priority areas in private ownership (AFT/EFC 2006.)
- Use knowledge and technology to implement actions that improve ecosystems considering environmental, economic, and social benefits. Consider longer-term time scales, broader geographical expanse (e.g. may cross ownership and political boundaries), and relationship between biotic and abiotic ecosystem factors (Rural Technology Initiative 2002.)

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- Take on place-based projects that directly engage communities and landowners. For example, a priority watershed or landowners who are actively implementing wildlife habitat conservation plans (Noah and Zhang 2001.)
- Include incentives programs in ongoing state critical habitat and gap analyses (Noah and Zhang 2001.)

Potential next steps:

Mapping geographic priorities:

A next step that could help with choosing priorities towards which to direct programs could be the creation of maps and geographic priorities. Mapping technology exists that could help decision-makers identify the various geographic and biodiversity priorities possible, such as:

- Areas of biodiversity that provide opportunities to address multiple species issues with the same project money;
- Areas where particular geographic opportunities exist (e.g. migration corridors, special vulnerabilities, etc.);
- Areas where significant project or watershed work is underway; and
- Areas currently covered by different programs and program priorities.

Issue: Increasing landowner participation in incentive programs

Encouraging landowners to participate in the programs is another vital step to increasing the effectiveness of incentives programs. Researchers have identified a number of factors that are likely to increase landowner participation in incentive programs, as well as factors that are barriers to landowner participation. For example, landowners may have conservation, stewardship, financial, regulatory, and management/decision-making needs, as well as time and labor constraints. In addition, landowners may lack sufficient information to be able to assess the costs and benefits of incentive programs, and their enrollment eligibility. Barriers to landowner involvement include lack of trust in government agencies, fear of regulations, and concern over loss of property rights.

Recommendations:

- Reduce the time and effort required by landowners to learn about programs and determine their enrollment eligibility (Fischer 2005, McCord 2005, Gan 2005.)
- Reduce complexity and time-burden of paper work (Kirk Hanson, Defenders of Wildlife, Fischer 2005, Fischer and Bliss 2004.)
- Provide streamlined or one-stop shopping opportunities for obtaining the permits necessary to implement conservation improvements.
- Provide cost share and other payment assistance at levels sufficient to engage landowners. Programs should protect and enhance landowner earnings-or at least not compromise earnings (Huntsinger and Fortman 1990, Gan 2005, Haines 1995, McCord 2005.)
- Provide labor assistance (e.g. restoration volunteers) (McCord 2005.)
- Provide technical assistance at all stages of project planning and implementation. Assistance can be in the form of workshops, personal contacts, in-field demonstrations, and follow-up assistance to landowners enrolled in program(s) (Fischer 2005, McCord 2005, Haines 1995, McCord 2005.)
- Consider that many landowners want to be active managers of their own resources, and that this will influence the type of commitments they are willing to make. For example, they may

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be more interested in smaller scale conservation projects than in bigger preservation projects (Fischer and Bliss, 2004.)

- When implementing ecosystem level management programs that cross ownership and administrative boundaries, consider that landowners may be more willing to participate if they are active participants and decision makers in these larger scale programs (Rural Technology Initiative 2002.)
- Provide regulatory certainty (e.g. with the Endangered Species Act) (Haines 1995, Oregon Conservation Incentives Workgroup.)

Potential next steps:

Improved information about the market for conservation services:

If funders are to predict and then act upon projected improvements in cost effectiveness that might be produced through strategic targeting, they must know how changes in their programs will be received by the landowner community – by the marketplace for conservation services. Our initial review suggests that there is only limited material now available to help funders target their efforts. We may need a more thorough literature review, landowner survey, and market research to help funders make these critical decisions.

Stronger current catalogues, publications, and shared information about available programs

Landowners and technical advisors who implement programs on the ground have only limited and disorganized systems for becoming aware of the opportunities presented by the myriad of programs available. If these programs are to be more strategic, those who use them must know about them. This requires that the information be published in a way that is useful for landowners. This can be accomplished with better cataloguing of existing, changing, and emerging incentives programs. A regularly-updated landowner-friendly publication or a coordinated website with comprehensive information about programs, problems, and landowner needs could be useful.

Issue: Improving coordination within and between incentive program providers (both public and private)

There are a number of actions taken by incentive program providers that are likely to increase both landowner participation and program effectiveness and efficiency. These include actions within a specific incentive program, and interactions between incentive program providers.

Recommendations:

- Provide adequate funding and staff capacity within agencies, and leverage the resources (staff, financial, and political) of multiple agencies and programs [Defenders of Wildlife (DW) 2002, Noah and Zhang 2001.]
- Develop a program niche for individual incentive programs. This niche should complement, rather than duplicate, existing state or federal programs (EDF 2003.)
- Implement practices that increase trust level with landowners (Fischer 2005, Huntsinger and Fortman 1990, Fischer and Bliss 2004.) More face-to-face meetings with landowners at workshops or during site visits can increase trust levels (Ted Sullivan.)
- Track changing landowner composition, needs, attitudes, and/or interests, and adjust outreach accordingly (Huntsinger and Fortman 1990.)

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- Provide for broad outreach and fund distribution (e.g. beyond traditional partners) using diversity of media (e.g. websites, public presentations, and newspaper articles.) (EDF 2003)
- Conduct maintenance and monitoring. Establish a quantifiable method of measuring tangible program effects, including baseline conditions and ecological improvements (e.g. acreage and species protected, habitat value protected.) Evaluate program achievements; show they work or change them. (DW 2002, Noah and Zhang 2001)
- Calibrate fairness and effectiveness of financial incentives. For example, consider public and private gains associated with incentive program work, and price payment programs accordingly. Also consider both capital substitution (i.e. public dollars used where private dollars would have been) and amount of financial incentives required to tip priority landowners into program. (Wilcove and Lee 2004, Zhang 2004)

Potential next steps:

Process for agreeing and sharing information on conservation goals, priorities, and projects:

To be more strategic in our collective application of incentives programs, it would be necessary that they be better coordinated. Improvements in organized coordinating and information sharing processes, at the statewide and/or regional level, among those agencies that fund and administer incentives programs might help. Such improvements might facilitate or encourage:

- Information sharing about shared goals, projects, and opportunities;
- Agreements on goals and priorities that can be implemented locally;
- Discussions of current issues that are affecting landowner participation in the programs and ways to make programs more landowner-friendly; and
- Agreements among funders, brokers, and others on advocating for goals and priorities that might require State or Federal policy action.

Shared monitoring protocols and performance measures:

Agreements might be reached on basic monitoring protocols that would allow collective impacts to be compared and combined. This would allow shared performance measures to be presented to policy makers in a cohesive, logical way. In addition, stronger performance measures could be agreed upon among the funders and implementers of programs so they might, together, better measure desired outcomes like habitat quantity, quality, and functionality. Finally, there could be increased sharing of information about costs and investments and agreements as to how those investments would be made. This could help make realistic and accurate cost effectiveness decisions and assessments possible before the policy community.

Find ways to encourage funders to coordinate their efforts:

There may be ways to motivate funding agencies to strengthen their coordination with other agencies on funding efforts. If, for example, agreement could be reached on priority goals and/or projects, the existence of State matching funds for those prioritized projects might stimulate both technical assistance providers and other funders to fund them as well. There may be a place for separate State funding to, in this way, provide the impetus for current incentives programs to focus together on agreed high priority goals.

Ongoing professional training for technical assistance providers and implementers:

Those professionals with agencies and organizations that work directly with landowners to implement projects on the ground are the first line of information for landowners on what

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programs might be available to them. These are, in effect, the “brokers” of program information for landowners. But the information they have may, at times, be limited. One helpful tool could be consistent, continuing education for on-the-ground technical assistance providers to keep them constantly up-to-speed on the current programs available, how they work, and what landowner circumstances might justify their use.

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