

Supporting Collaborative Capacity for Watershed-Scale Climate Collaboration:

TAKEAWAYS FROM MASS ECAN WORKSHOP



Ipswich River Field Trip
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Introduction

Regional collaboration is essential to effectively address some of our most complicated challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental injustice. Collaborative spaces also provide camaraderie and connection that can bolster practitioners who are feeling overwhelmed. Here, we focus on watershed regions because they provide meaningful ecological boundaries that reflect how and where water moves, and offer an impactful scale for tackling climate impacts, such as flooding and drought, while remaining small enough to encourage community cohesion.

In Massachusetts, we are fortunate to have several existing Watershed-Scale Collaboratives that illustrate the benefits of a collaborative regional model and highlight potential impacts for climate adaptation. However, collaboratives require nurturing to succeed and dedicated funding is limited for building collaborative capacity (a collaborative's ability to perform)¹. The authors hope to increase support for collaborative capacity, including the relationship building, facilitation, and peer learning, that create the trust and knowledge necessary for successful projects. For a visual representation of collaborative capacity, see the Framework² below, where the structural elements inside the triangle and binding elements on the outside together create the scaffolding needed for successful collaborations.



COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY FRAMEWORK



MASS ECAN

The [Massachusetts Ecosystem Climate Adaptation Network \(Mass ECAN\)](#) is a community of practice for climate adaptation practitioners and researchers working in MA and interested in ecosystems and nature. Mass ECAN brings together leaders of the watershed collaboratives across the state into a Watershed-Scale Climate Collaboration Work Group to facilitate peer learning and community building. In 2023, Mass ECAN organized a series of activities around watershed-scale collaboration, including developing a [Toolkit](#), [conference](#), and [field trips](#).

In this piece, we reflect on findings from our workshop on *Funding for Watershed-Scale Collaboration*, held in December 2023. The goals of the workshop were to explore funding priorities and programs; to unearth needs, opportunities, successes, and challenges; and to identify ways to make watershed-scale collaboration more valued and mainstreamed.



Workshop Format

We hosted a 2-hour Zoom workshop with 37 participants (42 registrants) representing watershed associations, private consultants, funders, other conservation organizations, state agencies, and municipal government.

Speakers from four funding organizations presented on how they support watershed-scale collaboration through existing grant opportunities:

- [Barr Foundation](#)
- [MA Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness \(MVP\) Program](#)
- [MA Division of Ecological Restoration \(DER\) Partnerships Program](#)
- [Southeast New England Program \(SNEP\) Network](#)

Following the presentations, we divided into breakout sessions to discuss the benefits and challenges of working at the watershed-scale, resource needs for collaboration, and how funding opportunities can meet those needs. Participants recorded shared ideas in a Padlet, which allowed them to upvote and comment on others' ideas. All participants reconvened as a group for a closing discussion on strategies to mainstream watershed-scale collaboration.

What We Heard

There were repeating themes in participants' responses to each of the discussion prompts, which we summarize below. In Appendix A, we organized excerpts from responses that received a large number (>4) of "upvotes" and/or comments on the Padlet, along with ones that we determined to raise key priorities.

"When a collaborative and/or watershed plan is in place, it clarifies that a project is a priority for the watershed and not just a priority for a vocal minority."

What are the benefits of working at the watershed-scale and convening a watershed collaborative?

- Watersheds represent natural boundaries for water-based climate impacts like flooding and drought.
- Regional collaboration leverages shared resources and is attractive to funders.
- The size of a watershed allows for meaningful relationships and place-based connection.
- Working across a watershed scales up and enhances impacts.





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“The folks working at watershed scale aren’t the same folks voting on a budget or decision makers.”

What are some of the challenges to convening a watershed collaborative?

“Municipalities are used to doing projects themselves, according to their own policies and procedures.”

“It’s so hard to move resources across watersheds...a watershed organization will get up to speed but the next one over has to get up to speed separately...Is there some way we can start to institutionalize this?”

- There is a need to build a culture of collaboration and coordination among municipalities and partners with differing interests and capacity.
- Limited capacity and financial resources make it difficult to engage in collaboration, secure funding, and manage grants.
- Equitable engagement of community members and organizations is necessary, but challenging.
- Many stakeholders are not working or thinking at the watershed-scale, including the public, consultants, and decision-makers.

What resources are needed to support collaborative capacity?

"More spaces like Mass ECAN to allow practitioners to work together on specific topics! We need more like this across state lines too."

"It's not just funding and a to-do list. Collaborative capacity includes good facilitative leadership skills so that members want to stay at the table, strategic planning skills to make sure our work isn't scattershot, and community engagement and climate equity skills so that solutions are the right ones."

- Opportunities to build facilitation, planning, and community engagement skills
- Increased staff capacity
- Multi-year funding
- Collaborative mindset and convening spaces
- Groundwater data that is aggregated at the watershed-scale to improve drought resilience
- Increased public and political support for collaborative watershed-scale work

"...it takes years to build meaningful partnership and relationships."


How could these resource needs be reflected by funding opportunities?

“State agencies that offer funding opportunities can provide workshops or training about best practices for preparing applications and managing funding awards.”

“Focus on fewer specific deliverables and more on relationship building – so tough to fund, so important to support under-served communities.”

- Fund staff positions for collaboratives and communities at competitive salary levels.
- Provide multi-year funding.
- Update grant requirements to emphasize relationships and community engagement.
- Structure funding and technical support to increase institutional capacity and grant success.






"Have more funding that's focused specifically on watershed, or extra points...for watershed-scale so we're not competing with all implementation or site-scale projects."

How can we make watershed-scale collaboration more valued and mainstreamed?

- Improve communication about the benefits of working at the watershed-scale.
- Use storytelling to increase awareness and support for watershed-scale collaboration, while also showing what is possible together.
- Organize activities that connect people to their local watershed.
- Collaborate and share lessons learned among watershed groups.
- Incentivize watershed collaboration through grant requirements and selection criteria.
- Institutionalize watershed scale collaboration in state processes and priorities.



"We need to clearly identify the benefits - why should stakeholders participate?"

"Work together to share what we're capable of, not do it at each watershed group again and again."



Martapoisett River Valley Field Trip © Carolyn Narkiewicz

Recommendations

Our workshop revealed many commonalities in the resources needed and challenges faced by Watershed-Scale Collaboratives. These overlapping experiences illustrate how increased support and cultivation in key areas can mainstream this important work. Here, we offer recommendations for potential paths forward to advance watershed-scale collaboration.

Intentionally support collaborative capacity

Certain critical areas could greatly increase collaborative capacity.

- Support dedicated, fairly-paid staff and facilitators for collaboratives.
- Support spaces and activities that build trust and relationships within and across regions. This includes fostering peer learning across collaboratives, nonprofits (especially CBOs), and municipalities.

Equip collaborative leaders with the skills they need

Targeted training and capacity building would fill gaps in key practice areas identified by the collaborative leaders.

- Hone communications skills, emphasizing storytelling to communicate the benefits of watershed-scale work.
- Build skills in facilitation, strategic planning, centering equity, community engagement, and grant writing and management.



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Align funding opportunities with identified priorities for watershed collaboration

Funders can support collaboratives by ensuring that grant opportunities match the realities of the work.

- Provide multi-year funding that reflects the time it takes to build trust and meaningful relationships.
- Offer funding opportunities specifically for collaborative capacity, including the skill building outlined above.
- Encourage regional, cross-municipal watershed partnerships.
- Streamline applications and set appropriate expectations for outcomes and flexible deliverables around collaboration, including recognizing the value of relationship building and community engagement. For ideas on what storytelling deliverables might look like, see Appendix B.

Institutionalize a culture of collaboration

Stakeholders at all levels need to prioritize watershed-scale collaboration in their work for it to be adopted into the mainstream.

- Connect municipalities who are otherwise used to “home rule”.
- Encourage buy-in from nonprofit leadership to dedicate staff time and funding towards collaborative efforts at the watershed-scale.
- Update priorities and funding mechanisms at the state level to integrate incentives for watershed-scale collaboration.

Increase public support and awareness of watersheds

Many people are not connected to their local rivers/streams, or do not even know that they are part of a watershed. We should create opportunities to make the watershed-scale more visible and reference watersheds explicitly.

- Offer activities that connect people to their watershed.
- Use the watershed scale more frequently in our work across sectors, including how we define regions and share aggregated data.

Create convening spaces for funders and practitioners to build community

Facing climate change with limited resources is challenging and some participants expressed anxiety around current funding realities:

“I think that as non-profits we do our best to be as effective and efficient as possible. So to ask us to do more for less is stressful... Why can't we do more with more?”

Workshop participants noted the value of conveners like Mass ECAN continuing to bring funders and practitioners together to develop cross-sectoral relationships and co-design what the funding landscape could look like for collaborative climate adaptation.

Takeaways

When we collaborate, we are able to do more together than we could ever do alone. Collaboration at the watershed-scale creates opportunities to address water-based climate impacts on a meaningful scale, where place-based connections are strong and resources can be leveraged efficiently. Watershed-Scale Collaboratives build the trust and social capital needed to address the overwhelming challenges presented by climate change. Cultivating these authentic relationships is especially important given historical and emergent racial inequity and power imbalances. Funders have a particularly important role in elevating and supporting this work.



Mass ECAN Conference © Stefanie Covino

Together as a community, we can:

- Mainstream watershed thinking at all levels to increase public support and awareness, from the individual and personal, to the state-wide and political.
- Collaborate and share knowledge across watershed groups to scale up impact.
- Support the staff capacity that enables collaboratives to engage in long-term work.
- Align funding programs to incentivize collaboration and enable relationship-building.
- Create spaces for dialogue between funders and practitioners to develop funding opportunities that build collaborative capacity and foster impactful on-the-ground collaborative work.

To further explore the importance of watershed-scale collaboration for climate adaptation, please visit our [Watershed-Scale Climate Collaboration Toolkit](#).

APPENDICES

[Appendix A. Categorized responses to the workshop discussion questions](#)

[Appendix B. Ideas for storytelling deliverables](#)

REFERENCES

1. Baxter, J. & Land, S. (2023). [What does collaborative capacity make possible? Prevailing perspectives on the relationship between collaborative capacity and landscape stewardship outcomes.](#) California Landscape Stewardship Network.
2. deSilva, S., Farrell, S., & Knoblock, G. (2022). [Increasing collaborative capacity and infrastructure for landscape stewardship.](#) California Landscape Stewardship Network.

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