

2007 Environmental Evaluators Networking Forum
June 15 Roundtable – Planning for Third Party Evaluation

USEPA PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMS (Laura Pyzik - USEPA)

Four elements were identified that could provide a sound basis for the efficacy of evaluation that already seem to be in place and could be mined for common elements to form the basis of evaluation:

- Performance Measurement Guidelines
- Design Guidelines
- Social Guidelines
- Marketing Guidelines

In looking at the partnership programs, there is a need to look at the evaluation process in ways that may be quite different from the traditional regulatory programs and also to recognize that some of the value from the programs may not be immediately connected to some of the stated program objectives. The observations offered along those lines are as follows:

- Benefits offered directly to participants may not be proportional to the appreciation/recognition that is afforded through the program and there is a need to understand if not find ways to calculate the value that is derived from that appreciation/recognition.
- Value is derived from attracting the non-regulated community and engaging new parties who would not previously have been a part of the program, which can be measured in a straight forward fashion
- Learning instruments need to be developed to understand new forms of institutional behavior (both within the regulatory agency and within the regulated community) that goes beyond the traditional cost benefit analysis. The premise is that if we can define what we learned and how behavior has changed, then value can be identified.
- Within the programs is an intangible value side – to discover some of the intangibles, frame the evaluation questions broadly in the beginning and working to drive from anecdotal elements to eventually finding precisely measurable variables
- When looking at the “Evaluation Program” overall, consider evaluating the individual partnerships through a process which unpacks and separates the new lessons to be learned and separates the outcomes portion from the relationship questions. Evaluate both the environmental outcomes and the working relationships that are built.
- Package the evaluation work through mission based evaluation and accreditation that draws work of diverse initiatives together by valuing work that is done towards the mission – (example of the Miami/Dade workers) with a portfolio of mission-based initiatives

Establishing the linkages, relationships and comparisons is a matter of some direct forms of explorations. Listed below are several of the mechanisms, techniques and approaches that surfaced during the discussion:

- Everything is examined and lessons are derived from hands on analysis through such conventions as site visits.
- Assure separation of guidance and administrative documents versus the look and feel of the web sites that communicate values and those elements that will be measured/presented
- Logic models provide the beginnings of a program theory forming a way to discover and/or create links between seemingly dissimilar programs (example was given of environmental education and behavior change). This will also include taking a look at the specific program elements that are contained in the logic models.
- There is the potential that some standards may be drawn from the evaluation literature.
- There is a specific need for validation of the information that is derived from self reporting. A number of suggestions were made including sampling, triangulation of data and observations, analysis of inter-rater reliability and use of site visits for direct validation.
- Be clear on the purpose – accountability, self improvement
- There is always a question of finding a control group and looking for a gold standard for evaluation

An overall observation that seemed to flow throughout the discussion is that there is an inherent dichotomy between regulatory and voluntary programs and there is a definite difference in the validation of data that is derived from the voluntary programs and the type of data that is used to validate those programs

AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION (Neal Feeken - NFWF)

Several specific types of measures were identified which included:

- Longevity of use
- Using the last year's rudimentary data – follow an examination of outcomes versus expected outcomes
- Controls versus other interventions including an examination of whether they would have done the practices without the interventions that occurred as a result of having the program in place
- Look at the staying power of the program. One of the elements that relate to the longevity of the practices in place i.e. examining the question of the participants' propensity to withdraw i.e. to measure the loyalty to the practice/program as a result of having taken advantage of the intervention
- Don't get too hung up on the attribution, calculate/estimate the proportion of the project derived from the intervention and take the credit and move on.
- One of the options is to look at how long the practice lasts and the functioning level of the project in order to determine where there is a high return on the investment.

Examine to see where third party verification could be useful. In some cases, there may be greater value derived through an internal assessment including an assessment as to whether the project or the collection of projects is ready for evaluation. Timing can be a critical part of determining the value of the evaluation effort.

Look at measures in the context of the overall program strategy and structure the measures accordingly. Some techniques that were identified include:

- Baseline interviews with grantees
- Analysis and establishment of the evidentiary base of what success will look like and then structuring the baseline accordingly
- Provide a "before and after" picture of the conservation practices
- Including an experimental approach that would actually go into the grants
- Consider the overall goal in the context of what the critical mass will be in order to have the desired environmental impact and frame the evaluations and baselines in that context
- Assess where there are multiple benefits and look at the investment in terms of contributions to each of the multiple benefits

One source that was identified as a possible resource for some evaluation models and approaches was the World Bank which also operates on the "little bit of money – a lot of ideas" concept. One of their conventions that might be useful is the use of benchmarking that is passed in order to get to the next level or continuation of funding. There may also be value in looking to find some discrete niche that could be the NFWF part of the natural systems work.

There were several activities that were identified that might assist with the engagement of the third party evaluation. Those included:

- Re-examination of the internal thinking about the projects and relationships between them
- Brainstorming of the ways in which evaluation could be used
- American Evaluation Association – use of the third party evaluation guide
- Ad Hoc analysis done by sharing analysis information across boundaries
- Conducting a general assessment of how evaluation might be done

An overall theme that flowed through the discussion is that there would be value in assessing the timing and the overall content of the evaluation work so that it could be focused and sure to tie back into the direction that NFWF is interested in pursuing and demonstrating to contributors.