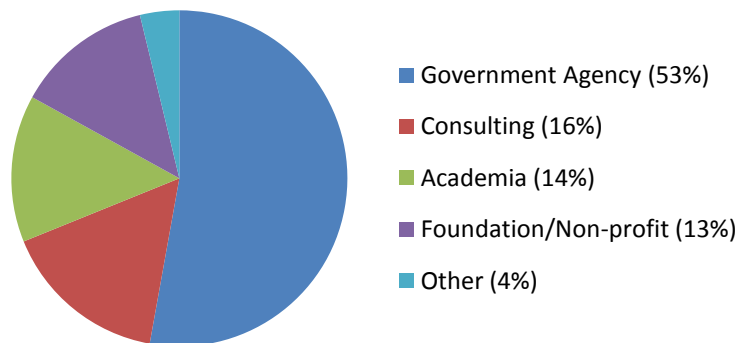# 2010 Environmental Evaluators Networking Forum Evaluation Memo

The 5th annual Environmental Evaluators Networking Forum took place June 8th-9th at George Washington University's Marvin Center. More than 260 members of the environmental evaluation community attended the Forum. 107 of these participants completed a brief questionnaire and provided feedback on the event, the results of which have been summarized below.
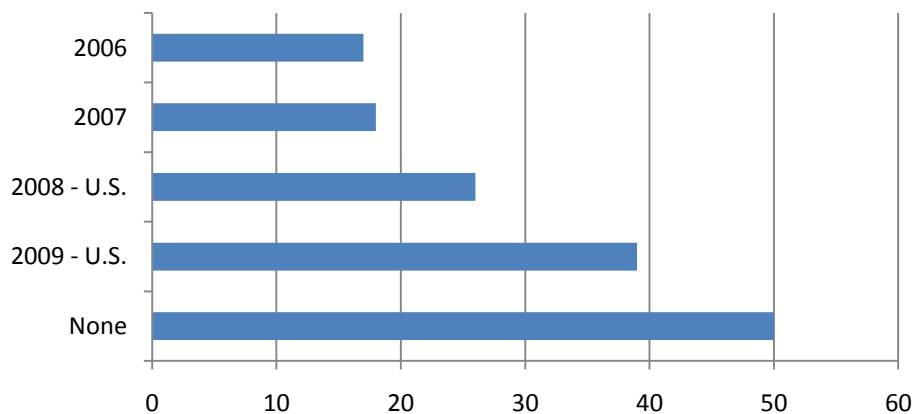
## Forum participants

While over half of the Forum's participants were affiliated with a local, state or federal government agency either domestically or abroad, representatives of foundations and non-profit organizations, consulting groups and academia also attended.

### Participants' Organizational Affiliation



- Government Agency (53%)
- Consulting (16%)
- Academia (14%)
- Foundation/Non-profit (13%)
- Other (4%)

Of 103 respondents, 49% were first-time attendees of an EEN Forum, 38% had attended last year's U.S. Forum, 25% attended the 2008 U.S. Forum, 18% attended in 2007, and 17% in 2006.

### Attendance at Previous EEN Forums

## Forum Content and Structure

Of the 105 respondents, 93% found the Forum somewhat or very valuable. Nine out of ten agreed or strongly agreed that they had sufficient opportunity to network with others at the Forum, while seven of ten agreed or strongly agreed that they had learned new evaluation methods and approaches. None of the respondents found the Marvin Center to be unsuitable.

### Favorite aspect of the Forum

When asked what they liked most about the Forum, 84 people responded. The most common response (cited by 45% of the respondents) was the networking opportunity provided by the event. Other commonly cited favorite aspects were the quality of the speakers (33%), the variety of people and topics (31%), the variety of formats used (23%), the information sharing (14%), the overall organization of the event (12%), and the venue (7%). Eleanor Chelimsky's keynote address was very popular; she was mentioned by name in 10% of the responses. A number of the presentation formats were also cited as valuable.

### Suggestions to improve the Forum

Fifty-seven respondents offered suggestions for how to improve future EEN Forums. Approximately 12% of these suggestions pertained to increasing interactivity within the Forum sessions. Ten percent of the respondents would like to see an increased focus on practical solutions and tools, and less of an academic focus. Seven percent suggested each of the following: adding an intro-to-evaluation session, increasing networking opportunities (both structured and unstructured), and staying more on-topic during presentations and sessions.

Smaller numbers of respondents also suggested having less repetition of material, targeting sectors other than federal/public, incorporating more material on climate change, and including additional international material. A few mentioned that the "speedy introductions" session needed adjustment: it was too crowded and unstructured to allow free circulation, groups were too large for everyone to get to meet in the time allotted, and it was difficult to get close enough to the experts to hear well. A few wanted the packets to have more information, with pictures and bios to enhance networking. Some respondents would like to see more done between forums – posting key publications on the website, hosting online discussions, and perhaps using the Forum to set an agenda for work that would be done throughout the year. Lastly, some respondents would have liked more lunch options – salads, organic options, or local foods.

### Suggestions for future Forum topics

The 61 suggestions for future Forum topics were diverse. Many respondents recommended discussing best practices in evaluation, but few other ideas were cited by multiple respondents. Recommendations below are grouped into three main ideas: specific evaluation areas to discuss, broad ideas for topics, and other specific topics for sessions.

**Areas for Evaluation:** environmental advocacy evaluation, public policy evaluation, evaluating energy production, developmental evaluation, disaster evaluation, environmental service delivery, climate response, public lands policy, and social media.

**Broad ideas:** learning from evaluation abroad (with specific examples), measurement issues, data visualization, environmental data online and transparency issues, more examples of actual projects.

**Specific Topics:** application in government agencies, use of Geographic Information Systems, engaging internal staff in program and policy evaluation, approaches at federal agencies, methods of evaluation or an overview of metrics used – and how they can be shared with other evaluators, evaluation under extreme uncertainty, evaluation terminology, developing dashboards, social performance indicators, success stories – examples of how evaluation has improved programs and policies, organizational and community change, cross-agency collaboration among evaluators, and how to become a Certified Evaluator.

### *Suggestions for Forum structure*

Only 26 respondents had suggestions to improve the Forum's structure; many others commented that they like it as-is. The suggestions included: fewer plenary sessions and more small sessions (27%), longer time for the café (19%), increased use of webinars or videoconferencing – both to increase the diversity of topics and to allow sessions for specific groups to take place at other times than during the Forum (12%). Other suggestions were to shorten the second day or do something different in the afternoon; include a "clinic" for troubleshooting real-world evaluation projects; have better-focused sessions; use less paper by distributing shorter packets; have longer technical sessions; and use a "fish-bowl" approach to plenary sessions, where panelists have a live discussion of hot topics.

# Appendix

The following citations represent sample of received comments, selected to provide examples of respondents' feedback and highlight unique suggestions or comments that were not repeated elsewhere.

## *Selected comments about what participants liked most*

- Free flowing nature allowed for an appropriate balance of learning (i.e. through formal workshops, seminars, etc.) and informal dialogue. Plenary panelists were excellent and set an appropriate tone for the forum.
- I like the variety of speakers. There was also a nice balance between sessions and opportunities for networking.
- I got the most out of the breakout sessions because of the interaction allowed through small number of participants.
- I would like to see continued opportunities for networking; broad participant perspectives; varied conference formats - plenary, breakouts, speed rounds, etc.
- I most liked the unique format of the Forum. It was a fresh approach compared to the many presentation-heavy conferences I have attended. I was involved in running an evaluators cafe which was an excellent opportunity to meet around 15 people over the 3 sessions and be able to have a constructive and meaningful discussion.
- Highlights included keynote speakers, all the plenary roundtables and speaker presentations with their emphasis on result-based performance and complexity, the Evaluator's Café, the Results Chain training session, both participant-led networking sessions, and especially Eleanor Chelimsky's presentation. Having an international presence and perspective in the panels and concurrent sessions was a positive.
- I liked the fact that nobody seemed to have a "big ego", so the sessions were carried out in a very respectful way. I also liked the format of the event that made possible to interact with colleagues. I really liked the cafe sessions!  They were informative and fun.

## *Selected comments from participants about how to improve the Forum*

- "Speed dating" didn't work very well as a pre-lunch activity this time, because groups were too large and bunched up.
- Increase the time allocated for and the number of Evaluators Café sessions.
- Increase the information exchange from EEN partners from abroad.
- I would suggest an activity that will give opportunity for strangers to get to know each other, like an orientation activity at the beginning of university programs. For example, you can have 8 people in a table and have 10 tables and give each individual in the table 3 minutes to introduce themselves and their interest to the other folks in the table. After all of them have completed their introduction, 4 members of the table will go to the next table while another 4 folks from another table will join them. This will be an hour-long event. This can be done in both days of the event.

- Case studies could have gone into more detail on methodology. They are a bit too much of an overview to really learn anything technical. I would have liked a bit more time to dive into the methodology.
- Some people/organizations got a bit too much air time, and some people not enough. Try to create more of a balance.
- Too many plenaries – I got a lot more out of the smaller sessions
- Evaluators Cafe was awkward. It was difficult to 'browse' tables in order to decide which discussions to focus on; 10 minutes into the exercise, tables seemed 'closed' to new members. It was also difficult physically to navigate the space in order to check out other tables. It would have been easier for me if the topical discussions had been around the outside of the room, with room to roam in the middle, or as more of a traditional poster session (even if the 'posters' were computer screens).
- I appreciated the effort made to make room for interaction. I'd be great if the sessions were more interactive as well. Maybe through more well-prepared moderators?
- I would not make people to stand against a wall and then start talking about what they do. That was a little bit chaotic (good intention though), and it lacked a better structure. I don't think it brought a lot of interactions with people, even though everyone seemed to be moving from one place to another (or from one person to another).
- Just as we encouraged online discussion prior to the forum, we should make an effort to engage people in similar online discussion afterward. There was stimulating conversation during several sessions that was cut short because time ran out.
- Maybe offering a concurrent session that is more basic than the other advanced topics. Some of the conference participants are new to the evaluation arena and are not as familiar with the advanced topics and issues.
- More session time, as it seems many sessions still did not have adequate discussion time on specific topics
- More specifics on evaluation methods, although this may not be helpful to all, i.e. to those who are evaluators by profession. Maybe you could have a separate track for those of us trying to learn more about methods etc. and there more advanced tracks for experienced evaluation professionals?
- Create more time for networking. Also, it seems like every year, the same people dominate the question periods after plenary presentation. Would be good to either not call on these 2-3 individuals, talk to them to ask them not to dominate, or otherwise ask them to give others in the audience the opportunity to ask questions.
- The emphasis on government/public sector was overwhelming. More balance with other sectors would be great, and could create a great forum to help government, non-profit and private sector evaluators get on the same page. Even if balance is difficult, the participants could use a gentle reminder to check their acronyms at the door. The constant use of acronyms to refer to offices/departments, processes and relationships was a significant barrier to discussion. I know these folks had a lot of valuable information to share, and I'm sorry that I missed a lot because of the acronym-peppered language.

- The moderators of the plenaries did so much talking – I would like to see the panel members do more of the talking and the moderators less.

## Selected suggestions for future Forum topics

- Environmental advocacy work in addition to the environmental and conservation program/project work.
- Hear more from the foundations (e.g. Packard, Hewlett, Moore) that are active in the field about their strategies.
- Engaging 'internal' staff in participatory program and policy evaluation.
- Further dialogue and exploring tools for dealing with complexity.
- Evaluating environmental policy and governance.
- Evaluation for environmental outcomes or for accountability: a good mix or is separation desirable?
- Evaluating equity in environmental conditions and equity in environmental service delivery -- climate response, hazardous material and toxic compound exposure reduction, water quality.
- Metrics-sharing. What are all the different metric folks uses to monitor success of environmental programs?
- More discussion about quantitative methods and how impact could be gleaned from advanced statistical techniques.
- More on environmental economics, equitable community development and organizational culture change to support good evaluation.
- Online survey tools.
- Strategies to increase utilization of evaluation findings by program staff and policy makers.
- Organizational and community change – big steps that need to be taken to make environmental evaluation more influential.

## Selected comments for improving the structure of future Forums

- Explore the potential for videoconferencing so that some international participants can join us "from the field."  Take digital video during some of the sessions and stream this on EEN website/YouTube.
- I like the "speed dating" sessions and would encourage more of that; I thought some of the concurrent session topics were forced together and didn't really make sense.
- I like the idea of webinars. Knowing which ones would have webinars would help me choose which ones to attend in person and which ones I could catch later.
- I would like to have the inclusion of an "Evaluation Clinic." By this I mean an exercise (or several contrasting case studies) where some case study (e.g. conservation intervention) is addressed by hands-on methods (complementary; more than one to look at the different angles), to understand the possibilities and limitations determining outcomes and ways to improve implementation. Why not having a forum focused on building skills?
- I would save some resources in burning CDs with the agenda and materials (including their PowerPoint presentations) instead of publishing the whole agenda and bio sketches (it might save some trees). I would encourage participants to check the monitors outside of the Grand

Ballroom where the concurrent sessions are announced. A brief agenda (2-4 pages long) can be printed so it may provide participants with a fast idea of the day's schedule.

- Kick off the session with a Environmental Policy perspective NOAA, EPA, etc. Middle GAO/ OMB/ OSTP perspective, then long-term infrastructure needs. Build follow on discussions to mitigate opposing policy tensions to produce balanced persuasive evaluations that are actionable to agency and sub agency resource investment decision makers.

- Offer small group problem solving sessions. For example, ask non-evaluation oriented regulators or non-profit managers to submit 1-pager with evaluation/adaptive management questions and problems to EEN organizers. EEN organizers can then petition EEN members to prepare some ideas in advance and then participate in live round table discussion of how to approach the evaluation issue with that regulator/mngr. The objective would be less about debate, and more about collaborating to develop a high-level plan to address the issue. Other EEN members could choose among, perhaps 4, working sessions like this and chime in with questions and suggestions. Sessions could be done post-lunch – that time of day when people need to keep talking in order to stay alert.

- Perhaps some longer technical sessions? Some sessions seemed a bit squeezed and it would have been great to dig a bit deeper than the time allowed. Also, perhaps some guidance to speakers might be helpful. E.g. some speakers tended to be overambitious – trying to cover 20+ slides in 10 minutes – so perhaps some guidance about what can easily be covered while still allowing time for discussion might be helpful.

- Suggest pre-review of proposed presenter presentations to ensure they are well prepared, clear, and have valuable take away suggestions, solutions, references, or some memorable advice. Consider webinars for specific communities of practice such as Feds only.

- The existing structure and format really works well. Not much to tinker with. I somewhat hesitate to suggest the following because it is so specific and involves a lot of work to set up, but I will offer it anyway since it has proved to be successful. One consideration to increase networking is to have pre-determined topic tables as participants enter the forum space where they can sit at a table with a displayed topic they are interested in (some tables could be 'open space' as well). Experienced this approach at a dialogue conference. Participants can return to the same table during the conference to share experiences or move to another table of interest. At the dialogue conference, a table topics board (http://avrilorloff.com/uploaded_images/Tabletopics-small-779043.jpg) was displayed at the entrance to assist in table selection. On the topic of visual recordings, a graphic recorder could also be used to record the main plenaries and keynote speakers for a visual record of the forum.