Marketing Your Wetland Program to Funders

While there are many ways to seek funding for wetland programs, articulating a program message is an essential asset for marketing the value of what you do. This article is the second in a three-part series focusing on sustainable finance.

By Glenn Barnes

States and tribes have many options for funding their wetland programs, ranging from federal grants to state appropriations, bonds, and fees to partnerships with governmental agencies, nonprofits, and universities. Regardless of the source, one of the most important skills for any wetland program is the ability to articulate its work to potential funders and partners in a way that is clear, concise, persuasive, and appropriate for the intended audience.

This article explores how state and tribal wetland programs can market their work more effectively. The first step is creating a program message based on a standard template and a few simple marketing tips. One key aspect of the program message is its emphasis on the benefits of program work to society over the technical details of the work itself. This base program message can be contracted into a 60-second “elevator speech” to grab the attention of an important decisionmaker or expanded into a grant application for a federal agency. We will look at examples of both. The second step is understanding how to modify the message, depending on its intended audience. While the overall substance of the message remains unchanged, certain aspects—especially the benefits of the work to be done—should reflect the needs and interests of the audience. Part of this step involves fully understanding who your program’s partners are (or could be), and what motivates them to be involved in wetlands work. We will provide an example of how to tailor your program message to a particular audience.

The main goal of effective program marketing is, of course, more reliable and sustainable financing over time. Wetland programs can increase their likelihood of receiving funding by clearly articulating the problems to be solved, their solutions, and the benefits of those solutions.

Creating Your Program Message

No one understands the good work that your wetland program does better than you. But describing that work to funders, partners, and even the general public—groups that may not have the practical experience and technical expertise of a fellow professional—is a more difficult task, especially when that communication needs to be both informative and persuasive. How much background is necessary? Are the full names of agencies needed instead of acronyms? Does the audience understand what a wetland is, or do they think that wetlands must have cattails, open water, and ducks?

A program message is a tool designed with those outside audiences in mind. The message centers on your wetland program’s solutions to the problems it faces. The message is used to “inform, educate, and often persuade” potential funders and partners, and it is “the tool you count on to ensure that [these] target audiences know about you or your offer, believe they will experience the benefits you promise, and are inspired to act.”

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A basic program message answers the following five questions:  

- Who are you, and what do you do?
- What is the problem to be solved?
- What is your solution?
- What benefits come out of the solution?
- Why does the problem have to be solved now?

These elements are fairly straightforward. The first question, who you are and what you do, pertains to both you as an individual and your wetland program generally. This is the place to mention notable past successes of your program. Even regular funders and partners need a reminder about your program activities.

The bulk of the program message deals with how your program solves critical wetland problems, and what benefits come out of your work. Obviously, wetland program activities solve many problems, and each problem deserves its own individual program message. To the extent possible, the problems and solutions should be described in a way that would be understood by people who do not have a technical background in wetlands—in other words, put it in layman’s terms.

The piece of the program message that will likely grab the attention of potential funders and partners is the description of the benefits of your work. Take, for example, wetlands conservation and restoration. We lose tens of thousands of acres of wetlands in the United States each year, so it is important to make an effort to protect existing wetlands and restore former wetlands that have become damaged over time. Many people would agree with that statement, but will it move them to prioritize funding for wetlands over competing environmental work? Describing the benefits of preserving wetlands makes your message more compelling. Wetlands function like “natural tubs,” and “the ability of wetlands to store floodwaters reduces the risk of costly property damage and loss of life—benefits that have economic value.” Wetlands also filter out pollution and nutrients, which leads to cleaner and safer drinking water. Finally, “wetlands are some of the most biologically productive natural ecosystems in the world, comparable to tropical rain forests and coral reefs in their productivity and the diversity of species they support.” Which benefit or combination of benefits you present depends on the audience—we will discuss tailoring your message later in the article.

The final piece of the program message, why the problem has to be solved now, includes both the urgency of solving the problem and the potential cost of inaction. Funders receive many worthy applications for money. One way that funders select projects is based on the need to complete the project immediately. In the conservation and restoration example, the urgency may be that the amount of wetlands lost every year is increasing due to population growth. It could be that there is a particular area that needs protection because of an imminent threat of development. Or, in the case of flood mitigation, the urgency is that human life and property are at risk. According to a study by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, protecting wetlands in Boston saved $17 million in potential flood damage. In this example, the urgency is both the threat to individuals and property and the high potential cost of waiting to preserve the wetlands until a later date.

In answering these questions, states and tribes should stress the ways in which the wetland programs are uniquely situated to solve the problem at hand. Business specialist Jean Hanson calls this your “unique selling proposition.” Jack Carroll puts the question a different way: “Why are you different and better than others?” Part of the answer may lie in your role as a governmental agency, including your legal obligations, especially if private firms are also competing for the same pot of money. You may also highlight your collaborations with other governmental agencies and the expertise of your employees.

How does this type of program message move a potential funder to act? The sociologist Arvin Murch has studied the nature and origins of public concern for environmental problems and has developed a model of action on those concerns. He proposes that people who act to solve environmental problems follow five stages: “(1) the simple awareness of some objective conditions; (2) the definition of these conditions as a ‘problem’; (3) beliefs about causes and solutions to the ‘problem’; (4) personal commitment to solving the ‘problem’; and (5) problem-solving action.” In other words, to get an individual to take action on an issue of environmental concern, it is not enough to present the facts about the situation or even enough to convince them that there is a problem. “Without some more-or-less crystallized plan of action [to solve the problem], awareness and optimism are unlikely to produce any significant results.”

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Tips for a Successful Message
Effective program messages should adhere to the following suggestions:

- Keep the message simple. Presenting too much information or too much detail runs the risk of confusing the audience.
- Focus on citizen benefits. Protecting wetlands for their own sake is certainly important, but potential funders and partners are more likely to be moved to action when they understand the human consequences of program work.
- Use words that create vivid images. There is no need to exaggerate or pull out a thesaurus, but make sure your program message paints a clear image of the problem. In anything longer than an elevator speech, you may want to consider actually using images to describe the problem or solution.

Effective program messages also present the problems, solutions, and benefits in language that would be understood by someone without a technical background. Consider the following example taken from the IT world. Here is one explanation for the need to upgrade communications equipment:
To facilitate the transfer of information between our West Coast and Midwest offices, I recommend that we purchase Quick Link II communications software and begin to send our communications over a modem rather than by our present methodology of facsimile machines. Quick Link allows the user to emulate a teletype (TTY), a DEC VT102, VT100, or VT52 terminal. Allowable data bit options are 5, 6, 7, or 8; parity may be odd, even, or none; and stop bit allowable settings are 1, 1.5, and 2. Special VT102/VT100 considerations are given if the user is currently operating in the proper emulation modes.

The message begins with a clear recommendation, but then includes a lot of technical information that would not be understood by a lay audience, and it does not identify a particular problem. Here is the same problem presented in the program message format:

Transmitting information between our West Coast and Midwest offices by our current fax machines is causing delays and expensive telephone bills. Just last week, we lost an important client because our competitor, Innovation Communication Consultants, found supplies for her company in three days, whereas previously, due to our communications delays, we had taken five. If we switch to the use of a modem and a program such as Quick Link II, we will retain our customer base and also increase the pace of internal communications.

New Mexico has one of the newest state wetland programs in the country, and monitoring and assessment is critical for them to develop a basic understanding of what work their program needs to take on. The paragraph above summarizes in less than one minute an aspect of their work that needs funding. This message served as the basis for a successful grant application to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that expanded on the program message framework. The sample grant is available at the sustainable finance project website (see sidebar).

The New Mexico Environment Department presented the problem and urgency in a concise 236-word section on “Environmental Issues of Concern.” The grant highlights the impact of the Solid Waste Agency of Northern Cook County (SWANCC) v. United States Army Corps of Engineers U.S. Supreme Court decision, the lack of coordination at the state level with other agencies, and the lack of long-term funding for monitoring and assessment. They outlined the solution under “Goals and Objectives,” detailing a 10-year time line for establishing the monitoring program and a process for revisiting the program goals throughout that time. Finally, the grant describes the benefits in several sections focusing on how their program work meets specific EPA criteria, effectively tailoring their message for the intended audience, by listing: strategic goals, such as contributing to EPA wetland program core elements like monitoring or coordination with other programs; deliverables, such as reports; and measurable outcomes, such as a written wetland strategy. The elements of the program message, and not an overabundance of technical details, drive the application.
Maryland Public Interest Research Group

Support of influential environmental advocacy groups.

Chesapeake Bay Foundation

Enhanced environmental review of proposed applications.

Maryland Municipal League

Support of influential stakeholder group of members with local land management authority, and whose decisions support or conflict with wetland regulations.

Maryland Permit Fee Program

Legislative support for funding and authority to charge fees.

Law Firms

More efficient, accurate, and timely review of applications, with enhanced environmental review.

Support of influential advisors to regulated community and stakeholder groups.

Maryland Association of Realtors

More efficient, accurate, and timely review of applications, with enhanced environmental review.

Support of influential trade organizations focusing on land development and property transactions.

Maryland Association of Conservation Districts

Support of influential government professional organization that provides technical and financial assistance to agricultural community and reviews erosion and sediment control plans.

Members of Environment Matters Committee, Maryland House of Delegates

Confirmation that agricultural interests will not face additional requirements.

Ability to provide improved service to stakeholders and constituents.

Above, the sample asset map of Maryland’s Wetland Permit Fee Program highlights some of the important relationships that are needed when tailoring program messages to particular stakeholders. The complete asset map on Maryland’s program is available at www.efc.unc.edu/projects/wetlands/index.htm.

WHAT IS the Sustainable Finance for State and Tribal Wetlands Project?

The Project is a joint effort of the Environmental Finance Center based at the University of North Carolina School of Government and the U.S. EPA’s Office of Wetlands, Oceans and Watersheds, Wetlands Division. The project leaders are Glenn Barnes of the University of North Carolina and Romell Nandi of EPA.

The purpose of this multi-year project is to provide information, training, and direct technical assistance to state and tribal wetland programs on finance strategies as well as on skills to more effectively promote wetland programs to funders. Program marketing skill sessions include developing a program message and “elevator speech,” better grantwriting, identifying potential partners, using the media, and developing finance plans. All of the skill sessions are based on input from state and tribal wetland program officials across the country.

The project has held introductory webinars and in-person sessions at national and regional wetland meetings over the past year, including the National Wetland Monitoring and Assessment Workgroup national meeting, the EPA Region 5 Surface Water Monitoring and Standards meeting, and the Association of State Wetland Managers’ State/Tribal/Federal Coordination meeting, amongst others. Starting in June 2009, we are conducting in-depth, day to day-and-a-half trainings across the country. All states and tribes who participate in the full workshops will be given the opportunity to have a phone consultation with Glenn Barnes to help develop their wetland program finance plans.
Tailoring the Program Message

Once you feel comfortable with your basic program message, the next step in the process is to think about how to tailor that message for greatest effect. Each potential funder or partner has his or her own needs and interests, and your program message should reflect how your wetland program can meet those interests. When it comes to funders, one size does not fit all.

The public health and medical communities have conducted extensive research into the benefits of tailoring program messages. Tailored messages “are intended to reach one specific person, are based on characteristics that are unique to that person, are related to the outcome of interest, and have been derived from an individual assessment” of that particular person’s needs and interests.14 This last point is key—it is up to you to determine what is important to the potential funder or partner. “In general, as the level of assessment increases, so does the degree of individualization possible in the communication.”15 By tailoring the program message, “superfluous information is eliminated, [and] the information that remains is more personally relevant to the recipient. People pay more attention to information they perceive to be personally relevant,”16 which in turn motivates them to action. Tailored communication has demonstrated “an enhanced ability to attract notice and readership” and was “found to be better remembered, read, and/or perceived as relevant than non-tailored communications.”17 And there is evidence that tailored messages are “more effective than non-tailored communications for influencing ... behavior change.”18

One tool to help you determine the interests of potential funders and partners is an asset map.19 An asset map looks at all of the current and potential collaborators for a project, what each collaborator offers the wetland program, and what the wetland program offers each collaborator. This is a true partnership, with both sides benefitting. Asset maps can be displayed with fancy graphics and layouts, but they can be as simple as a list. Start by writing down all of the potential funders and partners for an aspect of your work. Then write down what those collaborators have to offer your program. Is it money? Physical resources? Staff? Political clout? Then write down how the collaborator would benefit from that aspect of your work. These assets are useful hints in determining how to tailor your program message.

Let us look at an example. In 2008, Maryland’s Legislature approved a comprehensive wetland permit fee program. A fee program had failed to pass the legislature on five previous occasions dating back to 1993. One of the key differences in 2008 that allowed the bill to finally pass was the broad support it enjoyed from the wetland program, leading environmental groups, and the regulated community. “The problem was that, over time, the size of Maryland’s permitting staff had shrunk, causing permitting delays and a decrease in services. The program’s solution was to implement a fee structure that would bring in additional revenue for more staff. The tailoring in the program message focused on the benefits of the permit fees. For realtors and homebuilders, the benefit was a more efficient, accurate, and timely review of applications. For environmental groups, the benefit was enhanced environmental review of proposed applications, including more pre-application meetings. For the legislature, the benefit was the ability to provide improved service to constituents and other stakeholders. Each group had something different to gain from the same solution and was motivated to act based on their individualized interests. Maryland’s asset map is available on the sustainable finance project website (see the Resources section). An abbreviated version is included on the previous page.

Conclusion

Developing a program message that is concise, results-focused, and easily understood by a lay audience will help state and tribal wetland programs attract more support from potential funders and partners. The messages should focus on how the wetland program is solving problems and what benefits come out of that work. For maximum effect, the benefits should be tailored to meet the interests of the audience. Wetland programs should also communicate why the problem needs to be solved now, including the cost of inaction. This basic message can stand alone as an elevator speech or be expanded into program materials, grant applications, and internal funding justifications.

Whether justified or not, wetland protection is often seen as a “non-threatening” environmental issue, lacking the urgent threat to human health that is attached to other environmental issues. For that reason, states and tribes should take extra care to explain their programs to potential funders and partners, especially if the grant is not specific to wetlands work. A strong program message is never a guarantee of funding, but states and tribes seeking a sustainable finance path with never find one unless they can effectively articulate the good work they do to others.

Endnotes

1. A 2008 poll conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison showed that “three-quarters of respondents said that cattails were required for wetlands, and more than 50 percent said that both ducks and open water were required for a wetland.” Available at http://www.news.wisc.edu/releases/14941.
3. I first encountered this type of program message being used successfully in fundraising when I worked in a development capacity with the nonprofit Fund for the Public Interest. The Fund runs membership and fundraising campaigns on behalf of other nonprofits and operates the largest door-to-door canvass network in the country.

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pump supply elements for the Yazoo Backwater Pumping Plant. Congress appropriated another $5 million for construction of the Yazoo Pumps in the FY 2009 Omnibus Appropriations Act after the veto was issued. Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Cal.), Chair of the Environment and Public Works Committee, included a statement in the legislative history of that Act clarifying that neither the appropriation nor any language in the Act was intended to override or otherwise affect the Clean Water Act veto of the Yazoo Pumps. 155 Cong. Rec. S2818 (daily ed. Mar. 5, 2009) (statement of Sen. Boxer).

16. The Bush Administration had four different EPA Administrators (Christine Todd Whitman, Mariam Lannom Horinko (acting), Michael Leavitt, and Stephen Johnson).

17. Under EPA’s impact assessment, the Yazoo Pumps would damage more than 25 times the combined wetland impacts of all other vetoed projects. Even under the Corps’ incomplete impact assessment, the project would damage more than 8.5 times the combined wetland impacts of all other vetoed projects.

18. One veto was issued under the Carter Administration, seven under the Reagan Administration, and three under the George H.W. Bush Administration.

19. Under Clean Water Act §404(c), the Administrator of EPA can veto a project that would have an “unacceptable adverse effect on municipal water supplies, shellfish beds and fishery areas (including spawning and breeding areas), wildlife, or recreational areas.”

20. For example, from 1996 to 2001, the federal government distributed at least $15.3 million in federal farm subsidies to just 51 landowners in the two-year floodplain of the Yazoo Pumps project area.

21. During the 24-year period from 1979 to 2002, only 62 properties within the Yazoo Pumps project area filed flood insurance claims under the National Flood Insurance Program. Collectively, these properties filed 209 claims for damages totaling $1.7 million.

22. For example, the Corps did not evaluate impacts to short-hydroperiod wetlands or to wetlands that were not sustained by backwater flooding.

23. As noted above, EPA opted not to fight the Corps’ impact assessment during the veto process, instead finding that 67,000 acres was more than enough to warrant a veto. We commissioned the hydrology assessment to further bolster a final veto decision by providing clear evidence in the §404(c) record that the impacts would in fact be far greater than acknowledged by the Corps.

24. The annual per child cost of this coverage is $288.93, of which 80 percent is paid by the federal government and 20 percent by the Mississippi State Department of Health. CHIP Expenditures Report, available at http://www.msdh.state.ms.us/msdh-site/index.cfm/130,163.html.

25. EPA has documented needed upgrades of $198 million for these facilities. This constitutes a significant portion of the $300 million total wastewater treatment needs documented for small communities (defined as communities with populations of 10,000 or fewer) in Mississippi. A documented need is “a water quality or public health problem and an associated abatement cost that is eligible for funding under the [Clean Water State Revolving Fund].” U.S. EPA, CLEAN WATERSHEDS NEEDS SURVEY, REPORT TO CONGRESS, EPA-832-R-03-001, Aug. 2003.


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5. Id. at 2.

6. Id. at 2.


10. Id. at 12.


12. My colleague Lynn Setter of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Kenan-Flagler School of Business used to consult with companies on communication questions. This is an actual example of her work, taken from the early 1990s.


15. Id. at 277.

16. Id. at 278.


18. Id. at 296.

19. The asset map tool was created by John Kretzmann & John McKnight, BUILDING COMMUNITIES FROM THE INSIDE OUT (Northwestern Univ. Press 1993).