



NFWF

**Answers to Questions from
House Natural Resources Committee Members**

**House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife**

**ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOR COASTAL COMMUNITIES:
EXAMINING INEQUITIES IN FEDERAL GRANTMAKING
OCTOBER 15TH, 2020 (2PM)**

Questions for the Record from Democrat Members

Questions from Rep. TJ Cox of California

Thank you for sharing with us the efforts of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF). You mention in your testimony that there will be an increase in demand for funding as stressors on coastal communities and habitats increase. In this same vein, you indicate that in FY 2020, NFWF could have funded 46 additional high-quality proposals if there were more federal funding available. How has COVID affected your organization's private investments, and to what degree might we need to leverage federal funds to bridge this deficit?

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted NFWF's private investments and we expect further impacts in 2021 in a couple of areas. First, NFWF develops partnerships with private foundations and corporations that contribute private funds to leverage federal funding. The pandemic's impacts on the economy have affected corporations' business lines to varying degrees which has strained their philanthropic capabilities. In 2020, NFWF did not see a significant decrease in our corporate partnerships but many of these were already in place before the pandemic's onset. In 2021, as corporations continue grappling with the pandemic, we expect some corporate partners to potentially pull back their contributions during this time of fiscal uncertainty. This could affect NFWF's ability to provide matching funds for some of our conservation programs.

Second, as discussed at the hearing, many of NFWF's grantees are local governments and nonprofits that must provide matching funds to qualify for federal funding. While most of these applicants can meet the match requirements, with the pandemic's onset, local governments' and nonprofits' revenues are more strained, creating new difficulties for some entities to meet match requirements. To date, this has not been a prevalent trend for NFWF grantees but as we enter 2021, we are planning for the possibility of our grantees facing increasing fiscal challenges.

Third, I would note that even prior to COVID -19 a funding shortage existed. Across NFWF's funding programs we cannot consistently fund all the qualified proposals we receive. For example, the number of qualified proposals submitted to the National Coastal Resilience Fund doubled from 2018 to 2019. As stressors on wildlife, habitat, and communities increase (and in some cases further exacerbated by COVID-19) additional federal funds will be necessary to fully meet the increasing demand for conservation and resilience efforts.

Questions from Rep. Debbie Dingell of Michigan

Dr. Bamford, what flexibilities does NFWF provide to grantees who are unable to meet the full match funding, and how does this allow it to better serve at-risk communities most in need of conservation funding?

NFWF uses an open and competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) process to ensure all applicants are treated equally and fairly throughout the process. The competitive RFP process ensures that each proposal is judged by the priorities and requirements specific to each RFP. These requirements do not rely on matching funds alone but include geographic focus, program priorities and strategies, project metrics, grant guidelines, cost effectiveness, community engagement, and project timelines. NFWF project reviewers look for proposals that will achieve the most sustainable conservation impact using sound science while proposing innovative solutions to pressing conservation challenges.

NFWF makes every effort to work with applicants that have strong proposals but struggle to provide required matching funds. NFWF staff talk with applicants about various options they can use to meet match requirements including in-kind contributions such as using volunteers to accomplish components of the project versus hiring contractors. NFWF may also use private funding or excess matching funds to help applicants meet match requirements. However, the private funds NFWF has available are limited and may not allow us to fund every qualified proposal that does not fulfill a match requirement.

For some NFWF programs that focus on geographic areas in which underserved communities reside, NFWF also stresses community engagement as a factor in funding applications. For example, NFWF's Southeast Michigan Resilience Fund is a public-private partnership that increases the resilience of communities and natural resources in Southeast Michigan by reducing the impact of stormwater, improving water quality, enhancing habitat, and increasing the accessibility and usability of public green space and natural areas. NFWF's RFP for the

program specifically states, *“The Fund desires to support projects that meaningfully engage and benefit communities throughout Southeast Michigan that have historically been underrepresented and underserved. Priority will be given to projects that were developed through community input and co-design processes. Additionally, projects should engage community-level partners to help design, implement, and maintain projects to secure maximum benefits for communities and ensure public use of project sites, maintenance, and sustainability post-grant award.”* Incorporating these priorities into RFPs conveys to applicants that authentic engagement of community members and stakeholders is key for securing grant funding.

Questions for the Record from Republican Members

Questions from Rep. Jenniffer González-Colón of Puerto Rico

I believe one of the biggest challenges we face in Puerto Rico when it comes to accessing federal grants is that often individuals, communities, and organizations on the Island simply do not apply for the program, either because they are not aware about its existence or the availability of funds, or because they lack the necessary capacity and knowhow to compete and go through the application process.

In your testimony, you discuss how the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) supported Protectores de Cuenca—a nonprofit that works on coral conservation efforts in Puerto Rico—to help increase the organization’s capacity, enabling them to successfully compete for other federal grants. You stated that now Protectores de Cuencas competes for larger grants, so much so that the NFWF is no longer their most significant funder.

Could you elaborate on this work and how it can serve as a model to increase coastal communities’ access and capacity to compete for federal grants? That is, how can your successful work with Protectores de Cuenca be replicated across the United States?

Many of NFWF’s programs focus on building capacity of local organizations and communities to enable them to take on and sustain conservation work. In Puerto Rico, as in many other parts of the United States, residents want to care for the natural environment around them but have lacked access to opportunities that enable them to do so effectively. Over many years of conservation funding NFWF has found that funding local organizations can sustain conservation efforts much longer than using outside organizations to manage the work. However, accomplishing this may require providing funding to help local organizations develop the experience and expertise needed to manage such projects.

As I shared in my written testimony, NFWF has awarded Protectores de Cuenca funding for planning and community engagement work. These funds have provided the organization resources needed to engage community stakeholders and develop experience for designing conservation projects that can protect the surrounding communities and habitat. Building an organization’s staff capacity and experience, as we did with Portectores de Cuenca can take on many forms depending on the needs and current capacity of the community. When local capacity does not match the need to address a significant threat, NFWF may fund outside entities, but require that they incorporate local leaders and organizations on project teams so local stakeholders are actively involved in the work. This mentorship approach fosters the development of local stakeholders, so they gain the experience necessary to not only be local stewards for the current project’s success but also preparing them to lead similar projects on their own in the future. Grants may support increased training, infrastructure and even 501c3 incorporation as these local stakeholder organizations begin to learn how to apply for and

manage funding and move beyond grass-roots community engagement projects into more complex restoration projects.

To replicate this type of work on a broader scale across the United States will require patience and long-term funding commitments. This is one reason NFWF develops long-term conservation plans that are geographically focused to provide a source of sustainable funding opportunities to help build experience among local stakeholders. Many coastal communities are just beginning to explore using nature-based infrastructure to protect their communities; of these, many more lack the necessary resources to take on the resource intensive projects that can protect their communities. Funding will be needed now to help these communities begin the planning and engagement process so that 2-5 years from now they are able to implement coastal restoration projects that will endure future natural threats. This approach helps build much more sustainable conservation outcomes because the local communities have been engaged from the start, can see the fruits of their labor, and are more committed to the project.

In your opinion, should federal agencies invest more in raising awareness about funding opportunities, building capacity among potential applicants, and simplifying the grant application processes? Would such actions help increase coastal communities' access to federal grants?

Communities across the country are at various states of preparedness and so NFWF and our federal partners are focused on developing a pipeline of projects to move communities from planning phases to implementation. For many conservation projects, especially coastal restoration and resilience work, communities need time to ensure they are undertaking the most cost effective and sustainable projects and that they make the most impactful implementation decisions given the limited federal resources available. NFWF and our federal partners are always working to raise more awareness about grant opportunities in order to build this pipeline of coastal resilience work.

In addition to raising awareness and building capacity, federal agencies also encourage public-private partnerships that provide coastal communities additional avenues for accessing federal funding. Congressionally chartered organizations like NFWF have the authority to leverage private funding with federal funding to increase the overall amount available for applicants. The public-private partnerships that NOAA facilitates with its federal, private, and philanthropic partners often provide the best opportunities for coastal communities to move projects forward that might not be possible. Encouraging more federal agencies to participate in these partnerships and increasing funding for these partnerships could increase communities' access to federal grants.

Based on your experience, what are some of the biggest hurdles coastal communities face when it comes to accessing, applying for, or competing for federal awards? What specific actions can Congress take to address these challenges?

Based on the first three years of managing the NCRF and other resilience focused programs, the most significant hurdles we have had to tackle are 1) communities' lack of capacity, 2) building awareness of funding opportunities, and 3) communities' access to financial resources. Federal funding awards are highly competitive, and many coastal communities have not developed the experience and expertise to compete successfully for federal funds. Matching funds may also present barriers for coastal communities when a community lacks significant financial resources for potentially costly restoration implementation projects. Based on NFWF's experience, additional funding for capacity building and planning projects would boost communities' efforts to plan for and develop coastal restoration projects. Over time as more communities developed coastal resilience projects, we would have a pipeline of projects ready for full implementation.

Increasing awareness about federal funding opportunities is also important. NFWF recognizes that certain communities that have not sought out funding opportunities may not even be aware that they qualify for funds. To address this, NFWF has conducted in-person workshops with local governments and nonprofit organizations on several occasions to educate them about our programs and discuss the steps an organization needs to take to apply. Workshops that we hosted in the aftermath of Hurricanes Sandy, Michael, and Florence and Typhoon Yutu enabled us to reach new potential applicants eligible for funding that have led to promising projects.