Investing in Collaborative Models and Their Capacities:

AN EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE FOUNDATION'S INNOVATIVE NUTRIENT AND SEDIMENT REDUCTION GRANTS PROGRAM

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The Stewardship Network
TOGETHER FOR NATURE

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A special word of gratitude goes to Jake Reilly, all INSR grantees, and their extended networks. We applaud your sincere commitment to collaboration and your dedication to restoring the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

The Stewardship Network (TSN) is an award-winning 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with a 20-year history of caring for the natural world. In pursuit of their mission to connect, equip, and mobilize nature's caretakers, TSN facilitates countless relationships across organizations and individuals, including community groups, government entities, nonprofits, and businesses. The organization is headquartered in Ann Arbor, MI, with deep roots across the Great Lakes as well as partners, allies, and Member Communities across the country.

The Institute for Engagement & Negotiation (IEN) is a nationally recognized leader in fostering collaborative change across a broad range of environmental, social, and economic issues. Founded in 1980, IEN is staffed by a team of facilitators and mediators that assists organizations, agencies, industry, and communities in making bold, sustainable decisions. IEN's work spans four areas: sustainable environment; resilient communities; health, food systems; and building capacity through training and leadership.

National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) is the nation's largest private conservation foundation. Created by Congress in 1984, NFWF works with both the public and private sectors to protect and restore our nation's fish, wildlife, plants, and habitats for current and future generations. It supports conservation efforts across all 50 states and U.S. territories. Since its founding, NFWF has funded more than 23,300 rigorously evaluated projects, awarded to both large environmental organizations and small local initiatives.

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Dr. Amy Mickel has 30 years of experience conducting social science research using integrative mixed-methods approaches. Her strong background in both qualitative and quantitative data analyses has produced many articles. Her research is published in prestigious peer-reviewed journals, including the *Academy of Management Review*, *Human Relations, International Journal of Business Communication, and Journal of Management Inquiry*. She is a Full Professor in the College of Business at California State University, Sacramento where she has taught undergraduate and graduate students since 2000. Mickel is the Applied Research Lead for The Stewardship Network.

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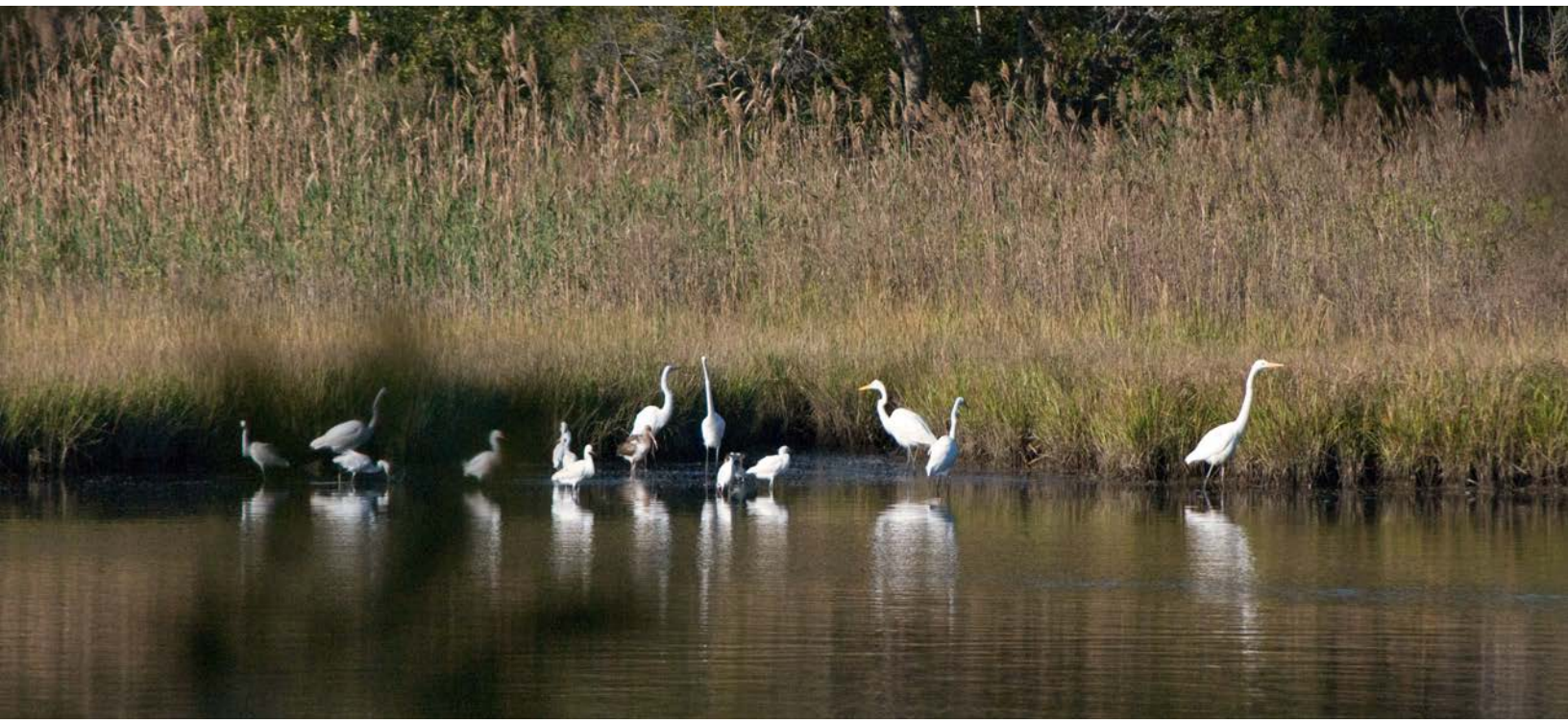


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evaluation Purpose & Approach

The Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Reduction (INSR) Grants Program, administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), was created to advance nutrient and sediment reduction efforts in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. In 2018, the program shifted focus to support collaborative models—i.e., networks, coalitions, and partnerships that coordinate across organizations and sectors—to accelerate the implementation of best management practices (BMPs) at landscape scales.

This evaluation, conducted by The Stewardship Network and the University of Virginia's Institute for Engagement & Negotiation, assesses how INSR's collaborative-capacity investments between 2018 and 2024 advanced the program's objectives and created long-term environmental and organizational impacts. It applied an integrative mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data from a range of sources:

Document review: 137 grantee documents (e.g., grant proposals, interim/final reports) and 21 supplemental documents (e.g., strategic plans).

Online surveys: 203 total respondents, including coordination leads, collaborative partners, and non-grantee stakeholders. Survey response rate was 52%.

Interviews: 53 participants representing a mix of grantees and non-grantees.

Focus groups: 70 participants in four in-person and three online sessions across the Chesapeake Bay.

NFWF and CAST data: BMP implementation metrics and geospatial data on acres and miles of BMPs and pounds of nutrient and sediment reduction from 69 grants awarded to 41 collaboratives.

Because multiple data sources and types were used, this evaluation applied statistical, content, reflexive thematic, and inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analyses. Evaluators also applied multiple conceptual models, including the Collaborative Capacity Impact Model™. These help illustrate how **collaboratives—like any other organization or business—require specific kinds of infrastructure and human capacity to achieve their goals**. In this assessment, they are further used to show how **enabling that capacity (e.g., through the INSR Grants Program) supports essential functions that make on-the-ground pollution reduction possible**.

Key Findings

Qualitative Outcomes of Increased Capacity Investments

INSR funding enabled grantees to hire dedicated coordinators and administrative staff, without which they would not have had the capacity to accelerate their collective watershed-health goals and outcomes. It supported the development of shared strategies, governance structures, and performance tracking systems that allowed partners to then work together more effectively and efficiently. It also allowed them to conduct targeted outreach, BMP planning, technical assistance, and training as well as to act as regional hubs, facilitating knowledge exchange and coordinating landscape-scale solutions.

Grantees reported that this added capacity enabled them to generate 15 distinct types of interconnected impacts, grouped into four classifications based on the Collaborative Capacity Impact Model™. These far exceeded the INSR Grants Program's three objectives of accelerating BMP implementation, sharing lessons learned, and expanding and institutionalizing pollution-reduction practices. They included:

Foundational Impacts

- **Enhanced connectivity** among partners and communities.
- **Increased trust**, enabling deeper engagement and sustained action.

Operational Impacts

- **Boosted creativity and innovation** in processes, programs, and solutions.
- **Increased resource sharing**, including ideas, experience, data, personnel, and equipment.
- **Added capacity** through leveraged funding and expertise.
- **Enhanced cultural awareness and respect**, fostering appreciation for partner and community relationships.

Outcome Impacts

- **Accelerated scale and pace** of BMP implementation and collaborative functioning.
- **Enhanced performance** at the collaborative, partner, and individual levels.
- **Developed transferable and adaptable models** and tools, applicable across organizations and geographies.
- **Broadened perspectives**, allowing for expansive thinking and more holistic views of the Chesapeake Bay watershed.
- **Expanded connectivity**, establishing regional hubs and information portals.

Integrated Impacts

- **Changed systems and adopted proven methods** and techniques, embedding new practices into standard operations.
- **Strengthened durable and flexible approaches**, adaptable to meet changing needs.
- **Catalyzed a collaborative culture and mindset** across the watershed.
- **Shifted behaviors and norms** in communities and partner organizations.

Grantees also indicated that this added capacity allowed them to accelerate processes related to collaborative development, BMP implementation and information sharing, integrating effective collaborative and BMP-related approaches, and network expansion.

Quantitative Accomplishments Enabled by Collaborative Capacity Investments

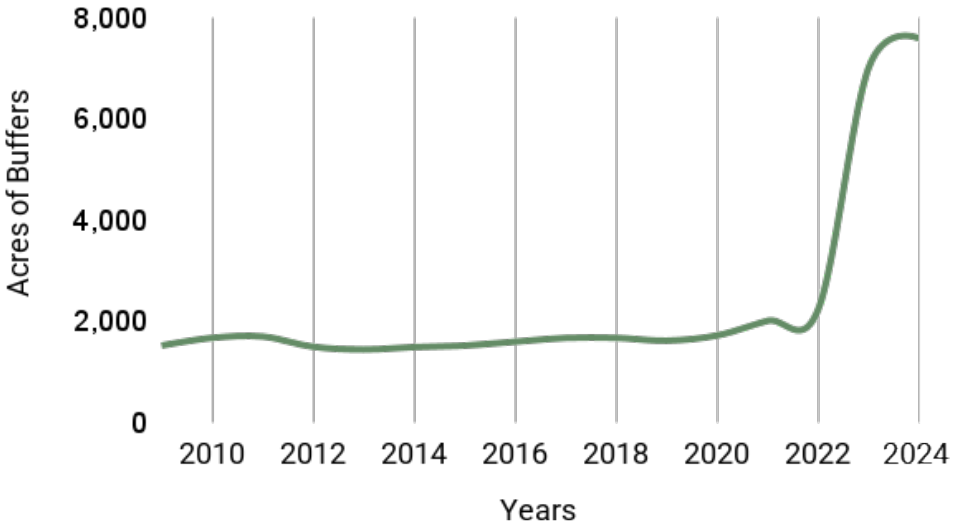
- **265,000 acres and 870 stream miles** treated through BMP implementation.
- **3.4 million lbs nitrogen, 242,000 lbs phosphorus, and 290 million lbs sediment** of estimated reductions.
- **$114 million in matching funds** which is a 155% return on NFWF's investment.

Notable increases of BMP implementation that correspond with INSR grant periods suggest that capacity investments are contributing to on-the-ground outcomes. Time-series data generated from the Chesapeake Assessment Scenario Tool (CAST) are used to illustrate these upward trends for four grantee regions included in this evaluation. Two of these representative case studies are briefly described here.

Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative (SVCC) was launched in 2017 to increase coordination to achieve shared water-quality, soil-health, and farmland-protection goals. SVCC received its first INSR grant award in 2019, enabling it to hire its first coordinator, strengthen and expand its partnerships, and strategically build its functionality.

With this expanded capacity, SVCC has been able to more quickly integrate effective collaborative approaches and work better together. As depicted in Figure ES-1, acres of forest and grass buffers with fencing (an SVCC's high-priority BMP) in this region have increased dramatically since 2022. It is highly likely that SVCC's capacity to accelerate BMP implementation has contributed to this increase.

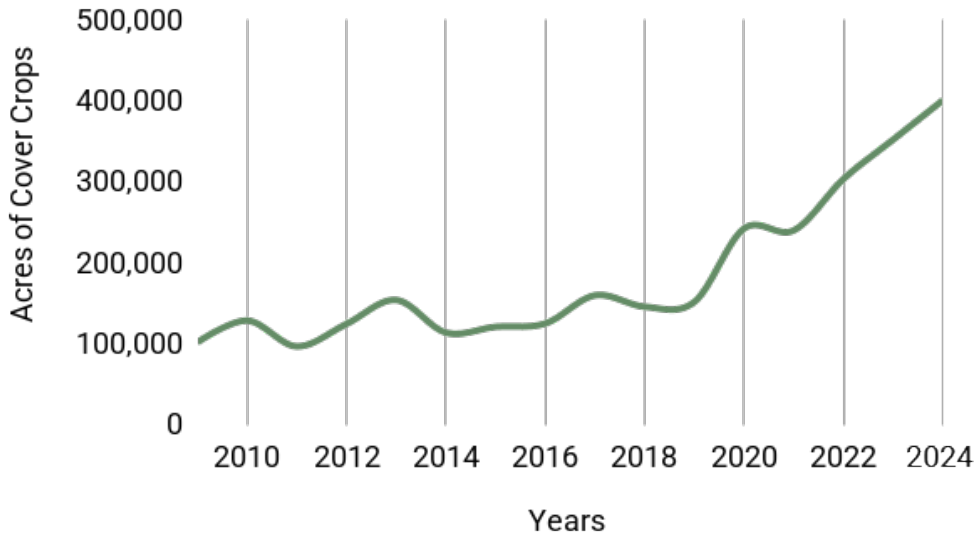
Figure ES-1. Shenandoah Valley: Buffers with Fencing



Virginia Soil Health Coalition (Coalition) formed in 2013 to expand opportunities for outreach, education, and collaboration. Prior to its first INSR grant award in 2020, the Coalition operated as a committed but relatively informal group of approximately 13 members. INSR funding enabled it to hire its first coordinator, increase its membership, and concentrate on the Coalition's priority strategies and its structure and systems.

During the first two years of the grant period, the Coalition's membership almost tripled, its governance structures improved, and quarterly meeting attendance increased. INSR-funded capacity was used to develop the Coalition's shared strategies and priorities for sustainable growth and to meet its region's goals. Improved communications systems and strategies allowed them to reach diverse audiences. A high-priority BMP for the Coalition, cover crops acreage started to rise around the time they received their first INSR grant (Figure ES-2).

Figure ES-2. Virginia (Chesapeake Bay): Cover Crops



Implications for the Field of Practice

By strategically investing in collaborative capacity, the INSR Grants Program catalyzed measurable improvements in water-quality and regional-resource stewardship as well as collaborative and individual organizational performance. This evaluation provides robust evidence that collaborative models—when properly resourced—accelerate positive impacts and build durable solutions to complex environmental challenges. Key lessons that emerged from this analysis include:

Landscape-scale restoration requires collaboration. Complex environmental challenges—particularly at watershed or regional scales—require a range of expertise, perspectives, and financial and human capacity that cross-sector, multiparty collaboratives can bring. Continued investment in coordination capacity, peer exchange, and other information-sharing forums means that these resources can be leveraged by others and on-the-ground work can be done more efficiently.

The quality and pace of collaborative development and BMP implementation are inexorably linked. Critical capacity needs must be met for collaboratives to operate well, and high-functioning groups get more work done on the ground. Capacity has a symbiotic, reciprocal, and interdependent relationship with the INSR Grants Program's goals to accelerate BMP implementation and information sharing.

> "
>
> *The funding of the collaboratives has provided many NGOs with the ability to perform the critical activities of coordinating meetings and events where important information exchange happens. Without dedicated funds to pay for a person's time, that level of coordination is almost impossible to conduct. So, the administrative and staff time covered by INSR Grants has been just as important as the funds that are dedicated to funding BMPs.*
>
> GRANTEE (SURVEY)

Invest in the right collaborative life-cycle needs. Like any other organization, collaboratives go through development stages (e.g., start-up, building, sustaining) that require different kinds of investment to optimize their performance. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, there are commonalities to each of these stages that can be targeted for strategic investments.

Flexibility is essential. The INSR Grants Program's adaptable funding model allowed collaboratives to tailor investments based on life-cycle stage, structure, and regional context.

Collaborative capacity investment works, but it can take time. Grantees with enhanced capacity were better able to implement, scale, and institutionalize practices that accelerated BMPs. While it can take time for investments in this kind of relationship- and trust-based work to yield their full potential, this evaluation found that collaborative capacity investments have positive impacts that far exceed INSR Grants Program goals.

Measure what matters. Many grantees noted that what they are asked to report on does not reflect what they have truly accomplished, such as relationship building and increased process efficiency and effectiveness. Expanded performance metrics, including social and organizational impacts, can more accurately capture collaborative effectiveness and outcomes. Funders need to think more broadly about how to measure the less quantitative benefits that collaborative capacity enables.

Proof of concept. This evaluation validates the INSR Grants Program's 2018 strategic pivot to support collaboratives. It provides a replicable framework that could be applied nationwide for the ways **collaborative models—when adequately resourced—can drive systemic, scalable, and sustained environmental change**.

Funders, agencies, and practitioners seeking landscape-scale conservation solutions can look to this approach as a compelling example of how these investments lead to innovation and on-the-ground impact.

Summary of Recommendations for the INSR Grants Program

The evaluation identifies five comprehensive recommendations to strengthen the INSR Grants Program and amplify its impact across the Chesapeake Bay watershed. These recommendations focus on sustaining collaborative capacity; scaling proven practices; improving administrative efficiency; and fostering long-term, systems-level transformation.

1. Strengthen & Expand the NFWF Chesapeake Bay Grants Program Portfolio

NFWF should continue prioritizing collaborative models as essential vehicles for achieving water-quality improvements at scale through ongoing investments in their capacity. In addition to supporting BMP acceleration, multiyear funding and collaborative life-cycle support will help sustain these investments. NFWF could further modify its current grant portfolio to increase the scale and duration of regional awards, address current gaps, and promote a grant-making approach that includes greater differentiation between each type of grant. Expanding the successful Field Liaison Program would increase its ability to provide technical guidance, strengthen relationships, and reach new areas. Improvements in the application, payment, and reporting processes would increase administrative efficiency and lessen the burden on grantees.

2. Formalize a Chesapeake Bay Practitioner Network & Community of Practice

NFWF is well positioned to work with regional collaboratives, the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network, and other organizations to co-create and support a Chesapeake Baywide Practitioners Network. This network could provide a forum that would more intentionally foster connectivity, exchange, and collective action across the region.

3. Broaden Evaluation & Reporting Metrics & Tools

Many grantees noted a need to consolidate or connect the various BMP reporting platforms to reduce duplication and accurately capture results. However, creating tools and resources to measure regional partnership performance and impact beyond acres and pounds was also identified as a high need. NFWF should further expand evaluation frameworks to include organizational, social, and co-benefit outcomes (building from the 15 impacts identified in the Collaborative Capacity Impact Model™). It could also create a social network analysis model to track connectivity, influence, and knowledge exchange among collaborative partners.

Photo Credit: Upper Susquehanna Coalition

4. Invest in Strategic Communications, Messaging & Marketing

Communicating the value of collaborative models and their impact on water quality is essential to building public and political support. The 2019 NFWF communications toolkit could be refreshed to include topics that are challenging to convey, such as watershed health and water-quality outcomes, collaborative approaches and associated impacts, or examples of ways collaboration has achieved a high return on investment. This could be part of a centralized communications hub to support storytelling, community outreach, and shared messaging for INSR grantees and partners.

5. Support Systems-Level Innovation & Solutions

Grantees identified the need for accessible and accurate regional datasets and the ability to share data across partners. NFWF could work with grantees to understand these needs and help fund solutions. It is also well positioned to support an advisory committee to improve regulatory processes as well as to expand and institutionalize BMP incentive programs that have proven beneficial in the past.

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of this evaluation is the 2018–2024 National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's (NFWF) Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Reduction (INSR) Grants Program. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) created this program in 2008 to support demonstration, technology transfer and effective dissemination, and institutionalization of innovative restoration approaches in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Historically, INSR grants were awarded to support innovations such as emerging pollution reduction technologies and practices, novel restoration financing vehicles, and new restoration efforts accelerating implementation of Best Management Practices (BMPs) in high-priority geographic regions.

In 2018, the INSR Grants Program refined its focus to more intentionally support collaborative models—an innovative multisector approach found to be effective in accelerating watershed restoration (Dantzker Consulting, LLC, 2017). Through a competitive selection process, efforts engaging multiple partners received funding to meet their collaborative capacity needs.

The overarching purpose of this evaluation is to understand how NFWF's INSR Grants Program, with its refined focus on supporting collaborative models, has generated impact in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

The overarching purpose of this evaluation is to understand how NFWF's INSR Grants Program, with its refined focus on supporting collaborative models, has generated impact in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. This evaluation also examines how collaborative-capacity funding furthered the program's three primary objectives.

1. Accelerating sub-watershed and/or regional-scale implementation of nutrient and sediment reductions with demonstrated approaches that use priority best management practices (BMPs).
2. Actively transferring and disseminating lessons learned from INSR projects to the wider Chesapeake Bay restoration community.
3. Working to institutionalize the continued and expanded implementation of nutrient and sediment reduction practices and approaches.

In this evaluation, collaboratives is used as an umbrella term to describe the range of collaborative models NFWF funded (e.g., partnerships, coalitions, alliances, networks).

Background

In 2010, the EPA established the Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL), essentially a "pollution diet" intended to restore clean water to the bay and its watershed.

Since 1999, NFWF has partnered with the EPA and the Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP) to protect and restore the Chesapeake Bay watershed through delivering competitive grant programs, directing investments in key partnerships, and providing technical assistance to watershed restoration stakeholders. These efforts are to support and build capacity for local restoration actions as well as to identify and disseminate innovative and effective watershed-management approaches across the bay's 64,000-square-mile watershed.

In 2010, the EPA established the Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL), essentially a "pollution diet" intended to restore clean water to the bay and

its watershed. Bay jurisdictions—Delaware (DE), Maryland (MD), New York (NY), Pennsylvania (PA), Virginia (VA), West Virginia (WV), and the District of Columbia DC—developed Watershed Implementation Plans (WIPs) that served as roadmaps for implementing required pollution-control measures by 2025.

To help implement the most effective pollution control measures (referenced as Best Management Practices, or BMPs, herein), the EPA established and continues to fund the INSR Grants Program. This program supports innovative strategies for developing and/or implementing nutrient- and sediment-reduction practices throughout the watershed. NFWF helps administer the INSR Grants Program by overseeing an annual competitive selection process and issuing subawards for selected grantees.

Established and funded by the EPA and administered by NFWF, the INSR Grants Program supports innovative strategies that reduce nutrient and sediment pollution throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

In 2017 CBP partners conducted a series of assessments to help determine how best to support the jurisdictions through 2025. They are summarized here.

CBP partnership completed the *Midpoint Assessment of the Chesapeake Bay TMDL* in 2018.

Purpose: To assess the collective progress made by bay watershed jurisdictions in implementing necessary water-quality improvements.

Findings: Significant gaps remained for specific jurisdictions, pollutants of concern, and source sectors (i.e., agriculture, developed/urban, natural, and septic). All jurisdictions required increases in the pace and scale of implementation to meet TMDL goals.

The University of Maryland Environmental Finance Center finished EPA-commissioned work in 2018.

Purpose: To assist the CBP partnership in assessing and improving the impact of CBP's grant-funded programs and projects, including the INSR Grants Program.

Findings: Investments that led to the greatest water-quality improvements focused on scaling up proven practices and programs across increasingly larger geographies. In many cases, this happened through collaborative models (i.e., partnerships, collaboratives, or networks).

Dantzker Consulting, LLC, finalized the *Evaluation of the Chesapeake Bay Stewardship Fund's Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Reduction (INSR) Program* in 2017.

Purpose: To conduct an independent evaluation of the INSR Grants Program.

Findings: Collaborative models were effective and innovative multisector approaches to accelerating watershed restoration. These models facilitated information sharing and the adoption of effective practices within their local regions. Among the recommendations was to continue using NFWF and EPA's grant programs to develop, leverage, and support regional collaborative models.

Institute of Engagement & Negotiation (IEN) at the University of Virginia (UVA) produced a *Summary Report of The Model Ecosystem Restoration and Conservation Collaboratives Project* in 2019.

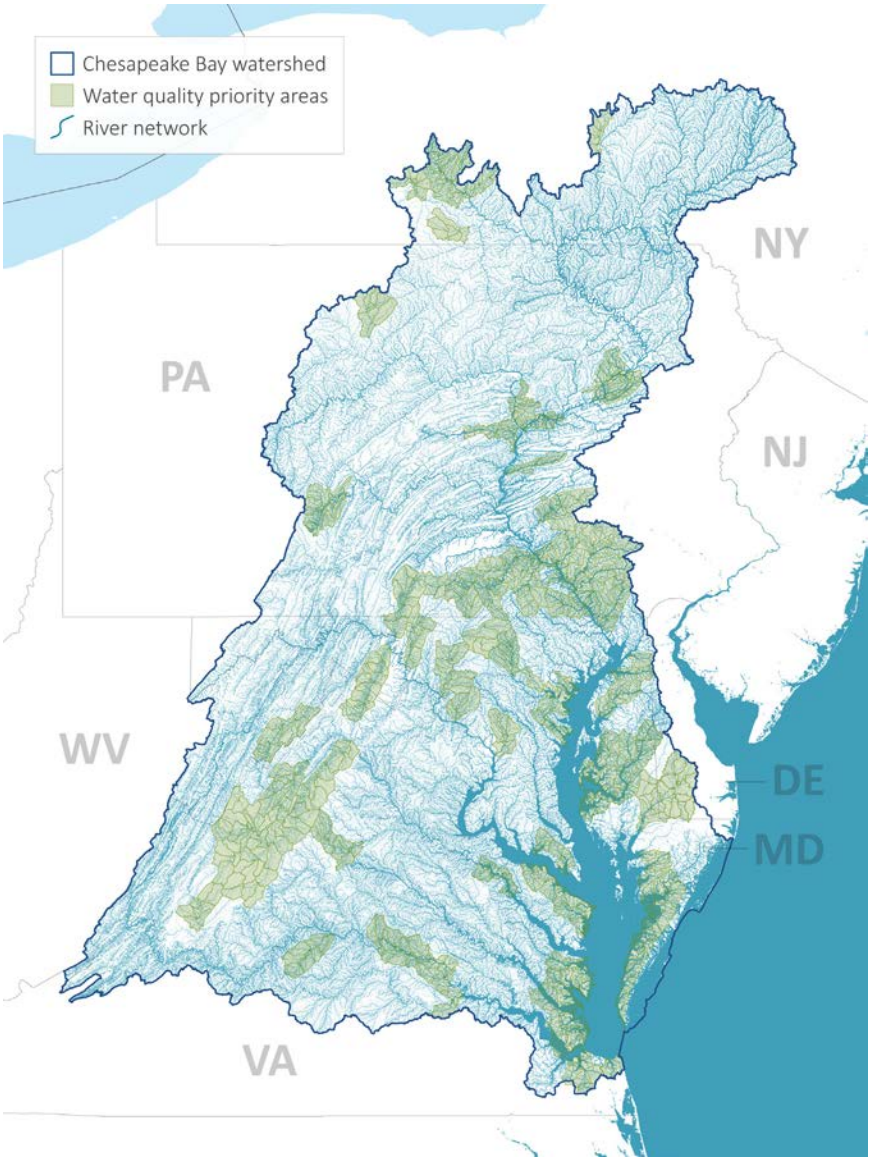
Purpose: To further explore the recommendation to develop, leverage, and support funding for collaborative models and to better understand their potential to accelerate on-the-ground activities and outcomes for watershed restoration.

Findings: NFWF should consider funding strategies within four categories: motivation, capacity, effective process, and evaluation to incentivize and strengthen collaborative models. These findings further substantiated NFWF's rationale for investing in collaboratives.

Collectively, the findings from these assessments contributed to a shift in funding priorities for NFWF, EPA, and others, as well as in their view that collaborative models are a necessary and transformative way to implement BMPs at a regional scale.[1]

Subsequently, NFWF refined the INSR Grants Program's focus in 2018 to more explicitly fund collaborative models and their associated capacity needs, with the goal of accelerating BMP implementation efforts and associated water-quality-improvement outcomes, especially in high-priority areas (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. INSR Grants Program High-Priority Areas



This multifaceted evaluation examines the extent to which NFWF's investments in collaborative capacity have generated impact and supported the INSR Grants Program's desired outcomes.It also addresses a more global question about the added value of investing in collaborative models.

1. This is consistent with trends across the nation where landscape conservation and stewardship collaboratives have emerged in the 21st century (see Appendix B for additional information).

Grantee Accomplishments, High-Level Findings, & Implications

Findings from this comprehensive evaluation show that by investing in collaborative models and their capacity needs, the INSR Grants Program has had impacts that far exceeded its primary objectives.

The INSR Grants Program's refined focus on funding collaborative capacity has proven to be successful in meeting and exceeding its objectives. Between 2018 and 2024, NFWF awarded 69 grants to 41 collaboratives.

The funds were used to fulfill grantees' collaborative-capacity needs, enabling collective activities and outcomes at regional scales. These, in turn, generated numerous impacts; institutionalized effective approaches; and accelerated BMP implementation, information dissemination, and collaborative development and functioning. The following sections summarize INSR grantees' collective accomplishments and high-level evaluation findings.

Summary of INSR Grantees' Collective Accomplishments

Table 1. Summary of INSR Grantees' Collective Accomplishments

ACTIVITIES	**Grantees engaged in many activities to enhance their collaboratives' performance**. Examples include collective planning and strategy-setting, systems and infrastructure development, fundraising and fiscal administration, and relationship building. **Grantees engaged in a wide range of BMP-related activities and outcomes.** Examples include targeted outreach, BMP mapping and planning, providing technical assistance and training, BMP implementation, and program/project innovations.
IMPACTS	**Grantees generated 15 different types of impacts (i.e., changes over time).** 1. **Enhanced connectivity** among collaborative members, partners, local communities, and their extended networks.**** 2. **Increased trust** which enables deeper engagement and sustained action.**** 3. **Boosted creativity and innovation** in developing and implementing processes, practices, programs, and solutions.**** 4. **Increased resource sharing** among partners and increased access to knowledge, data, experience, personnel, and equipment.**** 5. **Added capacity** by leveraging INSR grants with partners' funds and expertise, and hiring collaborative-dedicated employees.**** 6. **Enhanced cultural awareness and respect** that fosters appreciation for partners and community relationships. **** 7. **Accelerated pace and scale** of BMP implementation,* information sharing,** collaborative development and functioning, and partner member engagement.**** 8. **Enhanced performance** of grantees, partner organizations, and individuals participating in collaborative steering committees, leadership teams, and working groups.**** 9. **Broadened perspectives** in the way grantees understand what is going on throughout the entire Chesapeake Bay watershed, including successes and challenges.** 10. **Developed transferable and adaptable models and tools** that can be applied across organizations and geographies.****

11. **Expanded connectivity** of watershed-wide networks in which grantees are serving as centralized hubs and portals in their respective regions.**
12. **Changed systems and adopted proven methods and techniques** at system levels, producing paradigm shifts within the Chesapeake Bay watershed.***
13. **Strengthened durable and flexible approaches** across multiple scales, communities, sectors, and landscape types to meet complexity, evolving situations, and diverse contexts throughout the watershed.***
14. **Catalyzed a culture and mindset shift** by normalizing collaboration as a valued and effective approach to watershed restoration for the Chesapeake Bay.****
15. **Shifted behaviors and norms**, including emphasizing relationship building, improving perceptions of leveraged partner organizations' expertise, increasing landowners' interest in environmental stewardship, and expanding thinking across the community of practice at large.***

ACCELERATION

Grantees accelerated processes in five different dimensions.

1. **Collaborative development and functioning** by successfully moving through start-up and building phases to become high-functioning, high-performing entities.***
2. **Integration of effective collaborative approaches**, including durable and flexible processes and systems for decision making, priority setting, finance and accounting, data sharing, and others.***
3. **BMP implementation*** and **information sharing**** in agricultural, developed (urban), and natural (restoration) sectors within and across regions throughout the watershed.
4. **Integration of effective BMP-related approaches** through widespread adoption of effective practices and shifts in behaviors and norms.****
5. **Network expansion** at multiple scales—local, regional, and watershed-wide—as a result of grantees serving as centralized hubs and portals in their respective regions.****

Impact Alignment with INSR Grants Program Objectives	
*	Objective 1: Accelerating implementation of BMPs.
**	Objective 2: Transferring and disseminating lessons learned.
***	Objective 3: Working to institutionalize and expand implementation of nutrient and sediment reduction practices and approaches.
****	Exceeded Objectives: Producing impacts beyond the INSR Grants Program's goals

The INSR Grants Program plays a valuable role in the Chesapeake Bay watershed and should continue its strategy of funding collaborative models to reduce nutrient and sediment pollution (in addition to funding other stewardship, conservation, and restoration initiatives).

Summary of High-Level Evaluation Findings

Impact: The INSR Grants Program has not only met its primary objectives, but has also generated broader watershed-health and water-quality impacts, ranging from successfully scaling transferable practices to finding solutions to regional systemic barriers.

Leveraged Funds: The program's grantees collectively leveraged NFWF funding of $74,032,634 with $114,447,091 in matching contributions, for a total of $188,479,725.[2] This 155% match represents a significant return on investment.

Acceleration: INSR awards plus leveraged funds helped fulfill collaboratives' capacity needs, enabling activities required to accelerate BMP implementation and information sharing. Capacity investments also expedited collaborative development and performance, contributing to their water-quality and restoration goals and the integration of effective approaches within and between regional collaboratives.

Proof of Concept: NFWF's 2018 decision to invest in collaborative models was bold and innovative. Deliberately coupling funding for collaborative capacity with regional environmental outcomes is now emerging nationally as an effective cross-boundary and cross-sector strategy for achieving landscape-scale outcomes. The INSR Grants Program can serve as a model to demonstrate how and why integrating collaborative-capacity funding into programs can achieve these results.

Innovation: Delivering watershed stewardship, conservation, and restoration projects through collaborative models was a recommended innovative approach in the *Evaluation of the Chesapeake Bay Stewardship Fund's INSR Program* (Dantzker Consulting, LLC, 2017). Now, almost a decade later, it is striking that grantees are continuing to demonstrate high levels of innovation through creating the necessary systems, processes, and approaches to achieve and accelerate BMP implementation regionally, at more-complex and larger scales. They are also innovating new funding models, governance structures, and BMPs.

The implications of this evaluation extend beyond its immediate findings and the INSR Grants Program's geography.

Summary of Implications for the Field of Practice

The implications of this evaluation extend beyond its immediate findings and the INSR Grant program's geography. More broadly, global field of practice for collaborative landscape-scale conservation and stewardship benefits from lessons learned through the INSR Grants Program. Its approach to funding collaborative capacity will serve as an important model for others seeking to undertake work at this scale.

Collaborative Approach: Research and practice illustrate that the complexity of today's most difficult and dynamic socio-environmental challenges often requires collaboration. These multiparty approaches effectively address large-scale, cross-sector, and cross-boundary opportunities and challenges, yielding many positive outcomes. **However, it is important to note that not all conservation and stewardship**

2. These amounts reflect 69 INSR grant awards distributed across 41 collaboratives. A conservative estimate, it is based only on grantee proposals, which used EasyGrants (NFWF's grant application platform) data. However, during interviews, grantees noted that they leveraged INSR awards beyond what can be reported in EasyGrants.

efforts require or benefit from a collaborative approach. In some cases, a single organization or individual may be best suited to carry out specific, localized work. Emergency response is another example where rapid and decisive action may be necessary, and collaboration might be less feasible.

Collaborative Models: Collaboratives are a special type of organizational model that differ from one another in how they are designed. Adaptability is one of their greatest qualities. Typically, they emerge in response to a perceived need or opportunity and span physical, political, sectorial, and cultural boundaries. Like any for-profit, nonprofit, or governmental entity, they progress through start-up and building phases before reaching optimal performance levels; all stages have capacity needs.

Collaborative capacity refers to a collaborative's ability to perform, and needs references its collective requirements to do so.

Collaborative Capacity: In this context, capacity refers to a collaborative's ability to perform, and needs refers to the collaborative's collective requirements to do so (Mickel, 2022). Ongoing investments in collaborative capacity, especially for coordination, are essential to generating and sustaining collective outcomes.

> *"One big benefit is access to funding for one or more administrative/coordinator positions that can be shared by the component organizations of the collaborative and be devoted solely to serving the collaborative overall.*
>
> SUBAWARDE (SURVEY)

Generating Impacts: Results take time; however, collaborative capacity enables activities that yield collective benefits. A collaborative that has its capacity needs met is more likely to function effectively and maintain high performance levels over longer periods.

High-Performing Collaboratives: Collaborative functioning and performance (e.g., accelerated scale and pace of project implementation and program delivery) are intertwined. Understanding this interdependence across multiple factors—life-cycle stage, design, capacity needs, and desired outcomes—is key to optimizing both functioning and performance.

Additional Considerations: Having feedback loops that enable continuous learning and adaptation allows collaboratives to effectively respond to the ever-changing nature of the challenges and opportunities they are addressing. Trained coordinators are also essential for building and sustaining a high-performing collaborative. Because collaboratives are susceptible to transitions or turnover among their partner members (e.g., leadership teams, working groups), having a succession plan and a way to record and disseminate institutional knowledge are key.

STUDY DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

Developed in coordination with NFWF INSR Grants Program leaders, The Stewardship Network (TSN) research team applied an integrative mixed-methods research approach, which incorporated deductive and inductive methods (see Appendix C). TSN also partnered with the Institute for Engagement & Negotiation (IEN) at UVA to administer certain aspects of this study.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- A number of definitions, assumptions, and frameworks informed this evaluation's approach.
- Collaboratives are special types of organizations that have capacity needs, experience life cycles, and differ from one other in their design.
- A simple model (Figure 3) illustrates the process of increased collaborative capacity enabling activities that generate impacts.
- Several guiding frameworks were applied to help conceptualize collaborative capacity, activities and outcomes, and impacts.

Definitions, Frameworks & Assumptions

Because the collaborative landscape conservation and stewardship field evolved somewhat organically, there is a lag between applied research and practice. Consequently, there is no definitive framework or agreed-upon nomenclature for differentiating between the many types of collaborative models.[3] This is compounded by the fact that many collaboratives' names include terms that are inconsistent with who they are and what they do.

Therefore, in this report, the term *collaboratives* is used to *represent the suite of organizations that typically start off as informal, with the intention to engage in collaborative efforts such as networks and partnerships. These collaboratives often emerge in response to a perceived need or opportunity and frequently span physical, political, sector, and cultural boundaries* (Mickel, 2022). These include partnerships, coalitions, networks, and alliances.

Collaboratives are a special type of organization; they have capacity needs and experience a life cycle just like any for-profit, nonprofit, or governmental entity.

Collaboratives as an Organizational Model

Collaboratives meet the basic textbook definition of an organization: *a consciously coordinated social unit, comprised of [sic] two or more people, that functions on a relatively coordinated basis to achieve a common goal or set of goals* (Robbins

3. There are bodies of work that clarify the structure of network types, and a growing body of work is focused on informal and more formal agreement-based collaboratives.

& Judge, 2022). A collaborative leadership-based model can be described as a multiparty organization with two or more working together to achieve a shared purpose(s) that promotes cross-organizational collaboration, project- and program-based work (Mickel & Farrell, 2025).

One of the greatest qualities of a collaborative is its adaptability, which it must maintain to optimize its potential. **Well-resourced collaboratives produce greater and more durable outcomes and impacts than a single organization can achieve on its own.**

Collaborative Design

Five collaborative-design components—purpose, structure, composition, function, and processes—are applied in this evaluation to illustrate the range of collaborative models funded by the INSR Grants Program.

Like other types of organizations, collaboratives differ in their design. Mickel and Farrell (2025) identify design components that include those linked to a collaborative's governance (Carr et al., 2021) and other factors that help illustrate their differences and similarities. Five collaborative-design components emerge as central to understanding how and why a collaborative operates, and what it must sustain (or adapt) to achieve its desired conservation and stewardship goals: purpose, structure, composition, function, and processes.

Purpose: Why the collaborative exists, typically based on a shared understanding of the opportunity, problem, and/or challenge it seeks to address.

Structure: How the partners organize, manage, and coordinate to achieve their purpose.

Composition: Who participates in the collaborative.

Function: What specific roles are performed by the collaborative to fulfill its purpose (e.g., information sharing, decision making; planning and implementation; capacity building; advisory, policy, or advocacy; and catalyzing change).

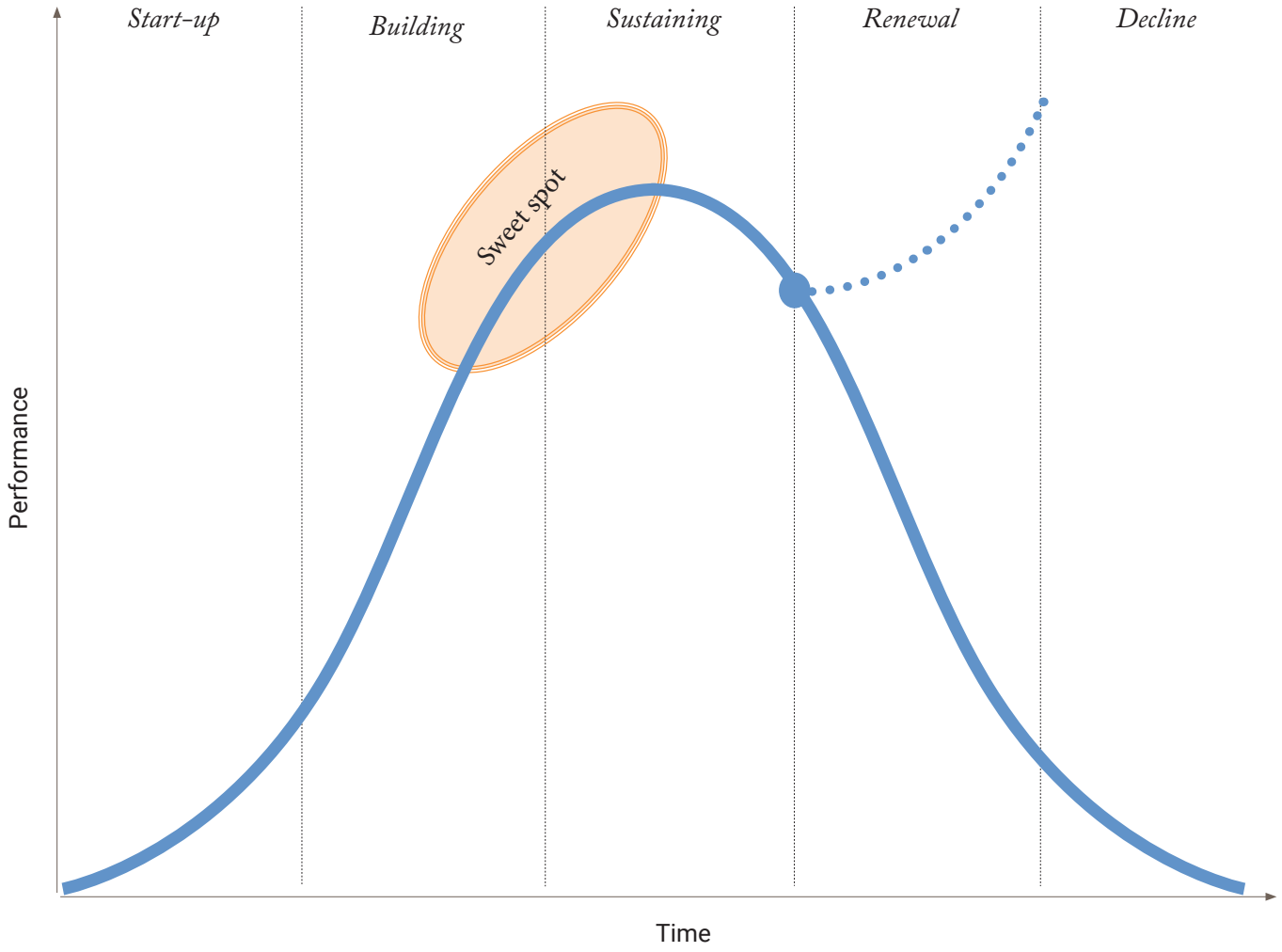
Processes: How the collaborative communicates, collaborates, and make decisions (e.g., systems, methods, strategies).

Collaborative Life Cycles & Capacity

A collaborative's life cycle sweet spot is achieved when it is performing at optimal levels.

Just like any organization, a collaborative experiences life-cycle stages, and its capacity needs shift throughout, progressing from a start-up stage to a building stage, and then to a sustaining stage (see Figure 2). Collaboratives usually perform best from the end of the building stage through the sustaining stage. This sweet spot can last for decades in a well-resourced collaborative. It is worth noting that at some point, some collaboratives move into the decline stage while others experience a renewal by reinventing themselves, as represented by the dotted line in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Collaborative Life Cycle



Collaboration & Generating Collaborative Impact Processes

Collaborative activities and outcomes are best described as the direct and more immediate results enabled by increased collaborative capacity.

Collaboration is about the process of people working together toward a shared vision, purpose, or goal. The generation of collaborative impacts also follows a process. In this evaluation, a simple model (Mickel & Farrell, 2025) is used as a guiding framework to illustrate this.

Depicted in Figure 3, collaborative capacity enables the activities and outcomes that generate collective impacts. Note, this logic assumes that collaborative capacity needs are met.

Developed and validated by conservation and stewardship practitioners across the United States, several guiding frameworks were applied to help conceptualize collaborative capacity (deSilva et al., 2022), collaborative activities and outcomes (Baxter & Land, 2023), and collaborative impacts (Mickel & Goldberg, 2018; Mickel & Farrell, 2025) (see Appendix D and Appendix E).

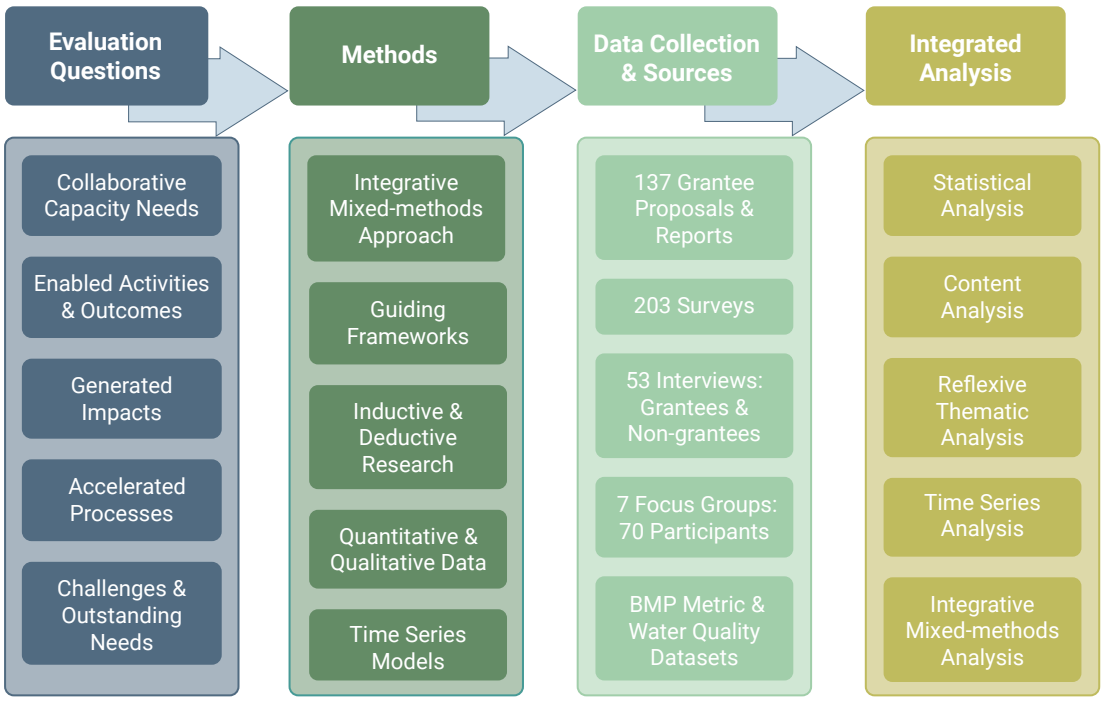
Figure 3. Generating Collaborative Impacts™

Impacts differ from activities and outcomes because they indicate changes over time.

Methodology

The TSN research team, with input from NFWF, formulated evaluation questions focused on topics related to how funding met collaborative capacity needs, what collaboratives were able to accomplish through enhanced capacity, how funding furthered INSR Grants Program objectives, and which capacity needs remain. (The complete list of evaluation questions can be found in Appendix F.) An overview of this evaluation's methodology is presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Methodology Overview



Because of its complexity, this evaluation was approached through an integrative mixed-methods research lens.

Data Sources & Collection

A wide range of data sources informed this evaluation's findings, including surveys, interviews, and focus groups that were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data.[4] IEN also played a critical role in collecting data through non-grantee interviews and focus groups.

Sixty-nine INSR Grants Program awards distributed among 41 collaboratives were part of this analysis. (See Appendix G for the list of grantees and their fiscal sponsors). A total of 137 documents (i.e., proposals, interim and final reports) provided by NFWF were included, in addition to 21 documents provided by grantees (e.g., strategic plans, work plans, annual reports, and other planning documents).

4. Each data-collection method has its benefits. Surveys afford the opportunity to expeditiously collect quantitative and qualitative data, interviews allow for a more in-depth line of inquiry, and focus groups effectively promote discussions around both individual and shared experiences.

A combination of 203 individual grantees and non-grantees completed an online survey, for a response rate of 52%. Grantees include coordination leads (i.e., coordinator, director, or equivalent) and partners (i.e., leadership team, steering committee, and/or working group members). Non-grantees include regional government leaders, funders, subawardees, consultants, contractors, recipients of collaborative services, and others. (See Appendix H for more information about survey distribution, respondents, and questions.)

55% of the survey respondents and 45% of the interviewees were non-grantees.

A total of 53 interviews were included in this evaluation. Like the survey, interviewees included both grantees and non-grantees. (See Appendix I for more information about interview processes and protocols.)

Seventy individuals participated in either an in-person or virtual focus group. The four in-person sessions were held in various locations across the Chesapeake Bay watershed: Queenstown, MD; Harrisburg, PA; Charlottesville, VA; and Annapolis, MD. Three focus groups were held online. Data were transcribed and included in this evaluation. (See Appendix J for more information about focus groups, questions, and participant worksheets. See Appendix A for the list of interviewees and focus group participants.)

NFWF provided both planned and implemented BMP metrics for the INSR Grants Program's 2018—2024 awardees. This dataset was generated through EasyGrants (NFWF's grant application platform) and used to calculate the total amount (e.g., acres and miles) of implemented BMPs implemented and estimated pounds of nutrient and sediment reduction.

Data Analyses

Because multiple data sources and types were used, data analysis techniques included statistical, content, reflexive thematic, and inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analyses (Proudfoot, 2023). (See Appendix K for more information on data analyses.)

For quantitative data originating from surveys, basic statistical analyses (e.g., frequencies and percentages) were calculated. Content analysis was used for qualitative data from sources such as interviews, open-ended survey questions, focus group summaries, and documents. Methods to analyze time series were used to illustrate BMP and water quality data trends.

Reflexive-thematic analysis techniques were employed to generate themes from the qualitative data; inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analyses were used for comprehensive analysis of the vast amounts of data collected and analyzed.

FINDINGS: GENERATING COLLABORATIVE IMPACTS

This evaluation's findings emerged from an integrated, holistic analysis of all data sources: surveys, interviews, focus groups, proposals and reports, and metric datasets. In this section, they are organized into four key themes with sub-themes. Each section starts with "key takeaways," followed by supporting quantitative and qualitative data.

Findings in this section are presented as themes that mirror the *Generating Collaborative Impacts*, which illustrates this process: Collaborative capacity enables activities and outcomes which generate impacts.

Theme 1: Collaborative Models & Capacity Needs

- 1.1: INSR Funded Collaboratives' Designs Differed
- 1.1: Grantees Were in Different Life-Cycle Stages
- 1.1: NFWF Funded a Range of Capacity Needs
- 1.1: Flexibility of Fund Use Is Important

Theme 2: Activities & Outcomes Resulting from Increased Capacity

- 2.1. Collaborative Development & Functioning
- 2.2. BMP-Related Activities & Outcomes

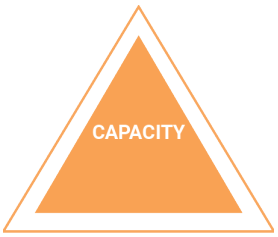
Theme 3: Positive Impacts Generated from Increased Capacity

- 3.1. Foundational Impacts—Building Relationships
- 3.2. Operational Impacts—Functioning Efficiently & Effectively
- 3.3. Outcome Impacts—Achieving Results
- 3.4. Integrated Impacts—Institutionalizing Approaches

Theme 4: Processes Accelerated by Increased Capacity

- 4.1. Collaborative Development & Functioning
- 4.2. Integration of Effective Collaborative Processes
- 4.3. BMP Implementation & Information Sharing
- 4.4. Integration of Effective BMP-Related Approaches
- 4.5. Network Expansion

Theme 1: Collaborative Models & Capacity Needs



KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- INSR-funded collaboratives vary in purpose, structure, composition, function, and processes.
- Like any organization in any sector, these collaboratives have different capacity needs throughout their life cycles.
- INSR grants and matching contributions funded collaborative capacity-building elements, BMP implementation and outreach materials, landowner incentives, partner member personnel, and consultants/contractors.
- Coordination capacity, professional development, systems and physical infrastructure, and shared strategy and priorities were the most frequently funded capacity-building elements.
- Grantees use funds in different ways to meet similar collaborative capacity needs; flexibility in how funds can be applied is essential.

Four key themes emerged from the evaluation question: "How did collaboratives use the funding to meet their capacity needs?" These included collaborative design, life cycles, capacity needs, and ways to meet needs. Each of these themes is described in more detail here.

1.1: INSR-Funded Collaboratives' Designs Differed

INSR-funded collaboratives primarily seek to improve watershed health by implementing water-quality improvements and restoration efforts, conducting research, and engaging with and educating both specific communities and the broader public across the Chesapeake Bay watershed. A key finding from this evaluation is that many operate using different collaborative designs, and they conduct this work through different approaches, governance structures, and participation models, each of which requires individualized kinds and levels of capacity. Similarly, collaboratives may evolve or transition their design and approach as circumstances change, or they may dissolve.

The five collaborative-design components described earlier include purpose (why the collaborative exists), structure (how partners coordinate), composition (who participates), function (specific roles[5] performed), and processes (how the collaborative operates). To illustrate collaborative design similarities and differences, four INSR grantees were selected: Lancaster Clean Water Partners Group, Manure Injection Partnership, Mid-Atlantic 4R Nutrient Stewardship Association, and the Upper Susquehanna Coalition (Table 1).

As illustrated in Table 2, while each of the collaboratives is committed to improving watershed health and water quality improvements, the scale of their work and their structure and composition differ. Similarly, several provide regional capacity-building functions, several directly focus on planning and implementing BMP activities, and two facilitate the adoption of new techniques and practices at a systems scale. Each collaborative has a slightly different collective purpose, a slightly different way to achieve broader watershed and water quality health benefits.

5. A collaborative can play multiple roles. The primary roles for the INSR-funded collaboratives are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Examples of INSR Grantee Collaborative Design

	Lancaster Clean Water Partners Group Established 2018	Manure Injection Partnership Established 2014
Purpose	Collaboratively achieve clean and clear water in Lancaster County by 2040.	Expand the adoption of manure injection and nutrient management.
Structure	Initially operated as a program of the 501(c)3 Lancaster County Conservation Foundation; recently reorganized as a subsidiary limited liability company (LLC) still fiscally housed by that nonprofit. Guided by a Board of Trustees and staffed with 5 people dedicated to the Partners who are employed by the Lancaster County Conservation District.	Sector-specific organizations and agencies operating in a loosely affiliated structure that varies across regions to achieve the purpose.
Composition	The network is 70+ partner organizations from businesses, municipal services, education, conservation, and nonprofits. Backbone staff runs the organization.	Nonprofit and for-profit corporations, manure applicators and farmers, universities, 4R alliances, government agencies and other regional collaboratives.
Primary Function(s)	Planning and implementation (ex. Countywide Action Plan), leadership, and capacity building.	Change agent and capacity building.
Process	Uses the collective impact approach anchored in a Common Agenda created and used by all. The backbone organization fundraises, leads collaborative processes, ensures technical training for implementing BMPs & collaborative priorities exists, coordinates and convenes partners, educates and engages diverse sectors and, ultimately, the broader community.	Outreach and education to the farming community, fundraise and administer implementation incentive programs, technical assistance and resource hub, facilitate connections.

Table 2. Examples of INSR Grantee Collaborative Design (cont.)

	Mid-Atlantic Stewardship Association Established 2017	Upper Susquehanna Coalition Established 1992
Purpose	Ensure optimal nutrient application in the Mid-Atlantic region, benefiting farmers, the environment, and society.	Collaboratively protect and improve water quality and natural resources within the Upper Susquehanna River Basin.
Structure	Fiscally structured as a nonprofit organization fiscal administrator with full-time dedicated director and governing board.	Governed by its member Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) through a Memorandum of Understanding. Tioga County SWCD serves as the dedicated administrator (administrative and backbone support, including coordinator).
Composition	Delaware-Maryland 4R Alliances, Pennsylvania 4R Alliance, agribusinesses, conservation groups, and research institutions.	18 New York SWCDs and 4 Pennsylvania SWCDs.
Primary Function(s)	Change agent and capacity building.	Planning and implementation (watershed-scale), and capacity building.
Process	Educate farmers and others about the economic and environmental benefits of 4R practices and provide guidance on how to implement them.	Develop watershed-scale plans; fundraise; provide technical assistance; implement BMP activities & priorities; educate, outreach to raise awareness about water quality and natural-resource issues.

In short, like other organizations, collaboratives form around a shared purpose and value proposition. They achieve their purpose through the roles they perform, structures they create, and processes they establish to operate. There is no one-size-fits-all design. Instead, collaboratives benefit from being adaptive and responsive to what is needed to achieve their collective purpose.

1.2: Grantees Were in Different Life-Cycle Stages

INSR-funded collaboratives experienced life-cycle stages just like any organization (see Figure 2), and their capacity needs shifted over time. Grantees in a start-up phase often focused on capacity-building elements such as forming a collective purpose as well as developing shared strategies and priorities. Those transitioning into the building phase reflected that systems, infrastructure, and governance and decision-making structures became more salient capacity-building elements. Regardless of their life-cycle stage, coordination capacity (i.e., backbone coordinator, program/project leads, and staff) remained essential for all grantees.

Start-up and building stages often take time; grantees recognized the importance of being intentional about and patient with their collaborative's development. As one grantee observed, *It takes a while to get to a place of increased efficiency. It took us about one whole year of partnership building and deciding on partnership norms and standards before we were able to start implementing BMPs*.

While it takes time to reach optimal performance, it is worth the investment. With sufficient capacity, effective operations, and healthy member relationships, grantees are maintaining high levels of performance over long periods of time.

> *Collaboratives are highly dynamic systems that can spend a good deal of time spinning in the 'messy middle.' This can feel like wasted time, but it often yields strongly supported, emergent ideas if one is patient. Gaining partnership momentum/participation takes time.*
>
> COORDINATOR LEAD (SURVEY)

1.3: NFWF Funded a Range of Capacity Needs

According to grant-proposal coding and analyses, INSR awards and matching contributions were used to fund collaborative capacity-building elements, BMP implementation and outreach materials, landowner incentives, partner organization personnel, and consultants/contractors. Of these, collaborative capacity-building elements are the focus here.

The survey was the primary data source used to determine which capacity-building elements were funded. Coordination leads were asked to identify these elements, and they were categorized using the *Collaborative Capacity Framework* (deSilva et al., 2022) (see Appendix D). The percent of capacity-building elements are shown in Figure 5, and the elements are described here.

Coordination capacity includes backbone and administrative staff or contractors who provide facilitation, meeting management, communications, progress tracking and measurement, collective administrative needs, and more.

Shared strategy and priorities include strategic plans and/or roadmaps for the collective vision, goals, work plans, actions, and activities that provide a shared understanding of partners' roles, resources, and capacities.

Collaborative practices, skills, and tools include competency-based training opportunities to build key collaborative leadership abilities and culture.

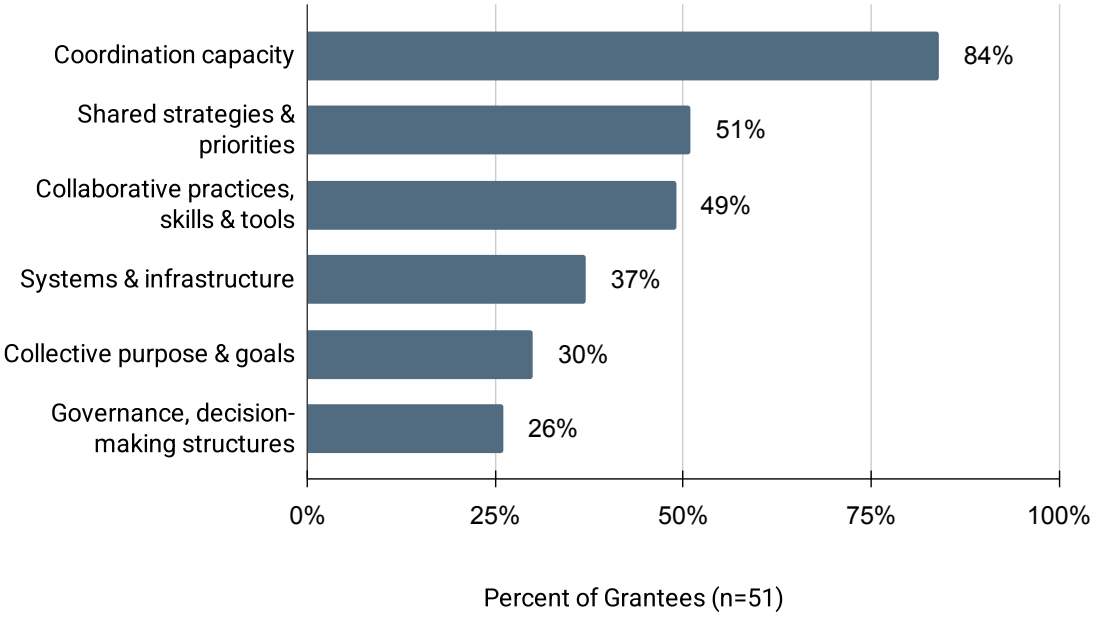
Systems and infrastructure include communications, reporting, and data-sharing systems; intracollaborative resources; facilities and equipment; and more.

Collective purpose and goals include agreements (e.g., MOUs, charters) to outline and codify a partnership's collective vision, purpose, and desired impacts, including partner roles.

Governance and decision-making structures include the collaborative's organization (e.g., leadership teams, steering committees, working groups) and associated decision-making processes that steer its vision and support accountability.

Figure 5. INSR-Funded Capacity-Building Elements

Coordination capacity, shared strategies and priorities, and collaborative practices, skills, and tools were reported as most frequently funded by 51 coordination leads.



1.4: Flexibility in Fund Use Is Important

While grantees shared similar capacity needs, how they met those needs differed. Both a collaborative's life-cycle stage and design contributed to the ways grantees actually used their funds. This finding highlights the fact that there is not a "one-size-fits-all" or formulaic approach to funding this kind of work. Table 3 includes a range of examples to show how collaboratives identified in parentheses utilized the INSR Grant program funding to meet their capacity needs and desired outcomes.

Table 3. Grantees' Capacity Needs & Use of Funds

Coordination capacity
• Coordinator position(s), to support the collaborative's development, operations, and work (Virginia Soil Health Coalition, Delmarva Wetland Partnership). • Facilitation services, to support convenings, and governance (Envision the Choptank). • Grant writing, to increase and leverage funds for collaborative BMP projects and programs (Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative, Upper Susquehanna Coalition).
Shared strategies & priorities
• Strategic plan and work plan development (Greater Baltimore Wilderness).
Collaborative practices, skills & tools
• Assessments of collaborative health and function and addressing areas that needed improvement (Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative, Lancaster Clean Water Partners).
Systems & infrastructure
• Geospatial tools and data modeling (The Nature Conservancy, 4R Partnerships). • Modified contract and procurement approaches (Rappahannock River Roundtable).
Collective purpose & goals
• Leadership body functions, structures, and decision-making processes (Mid-Atlantic 4R Nutrient Stewardship Association, Elizabeth River Project).
Governance & decision-making structures
• A steering committee structure with defined roles, to strategically guide the collaborative (Virginia Soil Health Coalition).

It is worth noting that NFWF understands that collaboratives may have different capacity needs and is flexible in allowing grantees to decide how to apply their funding. Many grantees report this flexibility as a strength.

> *"Flexible funding like that provided by NFWF INSR Grants Program has been critical to maximizing the implementation of BMPs on highest-impact projects.*
>
> GRANTEE REPORT

Theme 2: Activities & Outcomes Resulting From Increased Capacity

ACTIVITIES & OUTCOMES

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Collaborative activities and their outcomes were direct and more immediate results enabled by increased capacity.
- INSR-funded collaboratives engaged in numerous activities and produced many outcomes, which clustered into two main categories: collaborative development/functioning and BMP-related.
- Grantees reported that ongoing investments in collaborative capacity are necessary for the continuity of their activities and outcomes.

In response to the question, "What did this increase in capacity enable the collaboratives to accomplish?," grantees described numerous activities and outcomes in the interviews, focus groups, responses to open-ended survey questions, and grant reports (interim and final). They also reported the need for continued investments in collaborative capacity to ensure they can continue these activities and maintain outcomes.

Grantees' activities and outcomes clustered into two main categories: those related to collaborative development and functioning, and BMP-related activities such as outreach, planning, and implementation. Table 4 provides a summary of these activities and outcomes. Detailed descriptions of each are included in Appendix L.

Table 4. Summary of Capacity-Enabled Activities & Outcomes

Collaborative Development & Functioning	
Collaborative coordination and convening	Collaborative systems and infrastructure development
Fundraising and fiscal administration	Information and tool generation, sharing, and coordinated communication
Partner and collaborative assessments and continuous improvement practices	Partner outreach, relationship building, and collaborative expansion
Problem and barrier identification and multibenefit solutions	Strategy setting, governance, and collective planning
BMP-Related Activities & Outcomes	
Applied research	BMP barrier identification and multibenefit solutions
BMP planning, design, implementation, maintenance, and monitoring	Convening, information sharing, and exchange
Data acquisition, management, and analysis	Fundraising, and grant, contract, and budget management
Priority identification, mapping, and planning	Program/project innovations, assessments, improvements, and adaptations
Public awareness, engagement, and education	Targeted outreach, engagement, and relationship building
Technical assistance	Workforce development, training, and mentoring

Theme 3: Positive Impacts Generated From Increased Capacity

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Grantees generated many kinds of positive impacts thanks to INSR Grants Program funding for collaborative capacity.
- These impacts clustered into four main classifications: foundational, operational, outcome, and integrated.
- INSR-funded collaboratives viewed ongoing investments in collaborative capacity as essential to generating and sustaining their impacts.

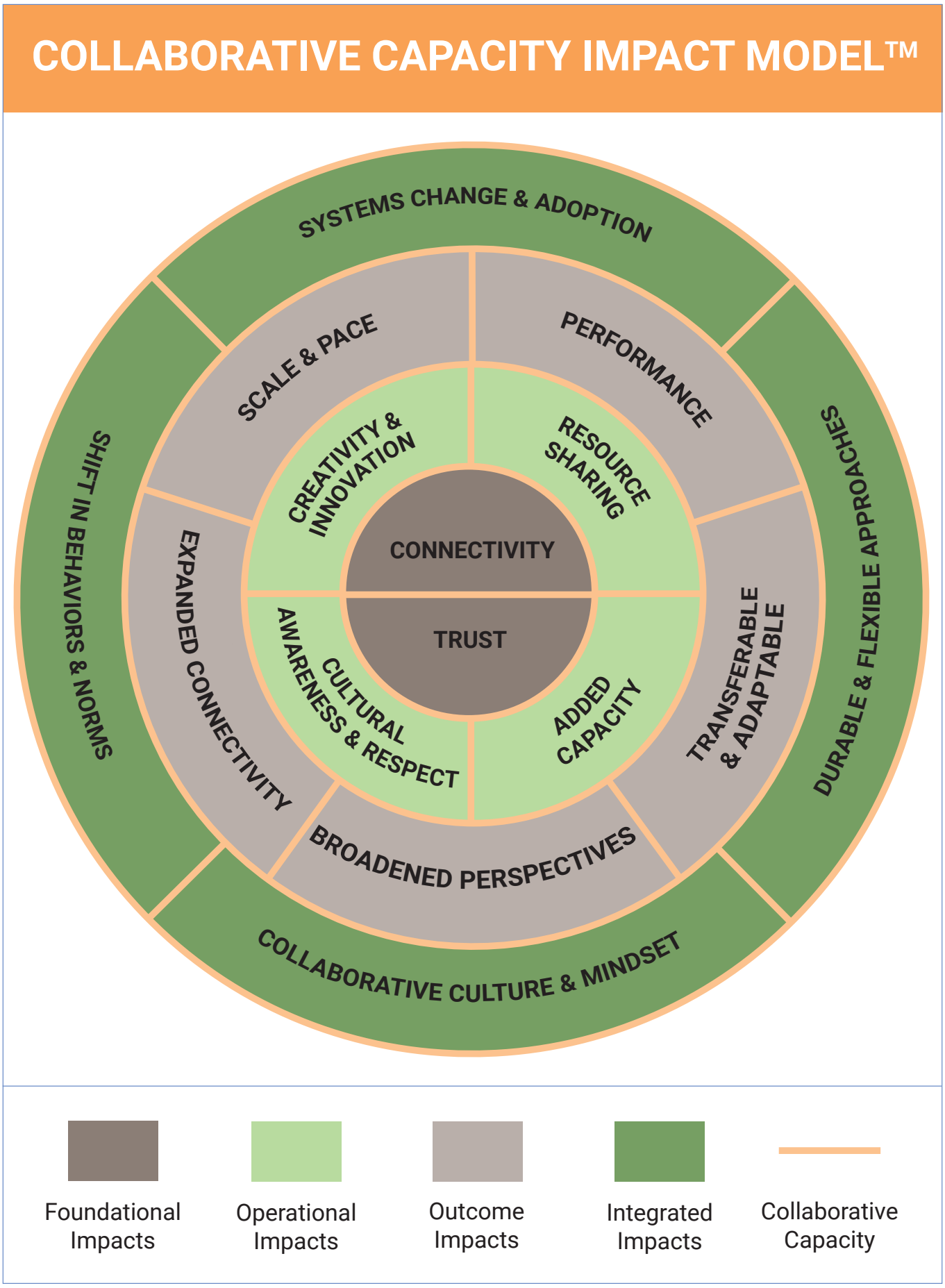
Impacts differ from activities and outcomes because they indicate change over time. Words like *increased* and *enhanced* are used to reflect positive impacts that come from activities and outcomes enabled by additional capacity.

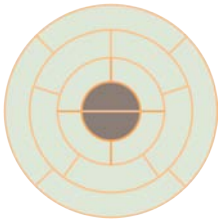
Key findings from two evaluation questions—"What are the primary benefits of investing in collaborative capacity?" and "What positive unintended consequences emerged from this type of investment?"—are presented here. Qualitative and quantitative datasets from surveys, interviews, focus groups, grant proposals, and reports as well as other quantitative datasets provided by NFWF have been analyzed to address these questions.

The *Partnership Impact Model*™ (Mickel & Goldberg, 2018) and the *Collaborative Capacity Impact Model*™ (Mickel & Farrell, 2025) were used as guiding frameworks to determine impact types generated by increased capacity (see Appendix E). Enabled by the activities and outcomes described earlier, INSR grantees generated 15 types of impacts, represented as an interdependent, scalable system (Figure 6).

Increased collaborative capacity made it possible for INSR grantees to generate 15 types of impacts.

Figure 6. Collaborative Capacity Impact Model™

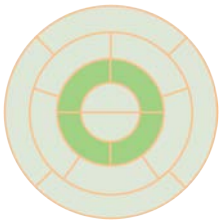




FOUNDATIONAL IMPACTS

Connectivity: Enhancing the quality and quantity of connections for collaborative members, partner organizations, local communities, and a collaborative's extended network.

Trust: Increasing trust among collaborative and its extended network members which enables deeper engagement and sustained action.



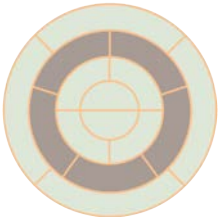
OPERATIONAL IMPACTS

Creativity & innovation: Forming and implementing inventive processes, practices, programs, and solutions.

Resource sharing: Sharing human capital, knowledge and expertise, systems and physical infrastructure, data, and funding.

Added capacity: Increasing collaborative functions; generating and leveraging funding; and amplifying partners' existing systems, relationships, and expertise.

Cultural awareness & respect: Helping collaborative and extended network members understand, respect, and leverage their differences.



OUTCOME IMPACTS

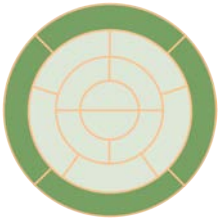
Scale & pace: Increasing collaborative development and functioning as well as project and program implementation.

Performance: Producing high-quality outputs through enhanced performance at the collaborative, partner, and individual levels.

Transferable & adaptable models: Developing, implementing, and refining models and tools that can be applied and adapted across organizations and geographies.

Broadened perspectives: Enabling collaborative and extended network members to recognize alternate possibilities, understand a broader context, and engage in expansive thinking.

Expanded connectivity: Growing and linking regional networks by serving as conveners, regional activity hubs, and centralized information portals.



INTEGRATED IMPACTS

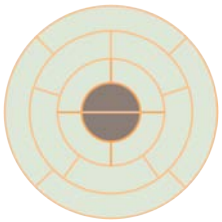
Systems change & adoption: Initiating and integrating proven methods and techniques at a systems level which can produce paradigm shifts.

Durable & flexible approaches: Integrating sustainable approaches at scale that can be adapted and refined to accommodate complexity, evolving situations, and different contexts.

Collaborative culture & mindset: Normalizing collaboration as a valued and effective way to addressing complex problems and fostering meaningful, enduring relationships.

Shift in behaviors & norms: Changing actions and expectations across local and regional communities, expanded geographies, and fields of practice.

3.1 Foundational Impacts—Building Relationships



FOUNDATIONAL IMPACTS

Connectivity: Enhancing the quality and quantity of connections for collaborative members, partner organizations, local communities, and a collaborative's extended network.

Trust: Increasing trust for collaborative members, partner organizations, local communities, and a collaborative's extended network.

Enabled by outreach and relationship-building activities, along with meetings and convenings, grantees produced two foundational impacts—enhanced connectivity and increased trust (see Figure 6). These foundational impacts increase the likelihood of realizing other positive outcomes.

Foundational: Connectivity

Grantees described enhanced connectivity as an impact generated thanks to INSR-funded capacity increases, and also recognized it as essential to meeting collective goals.

This impact was attributed to support for outreach activities, some of which were designed to find new partners and expand the collaborative to fill expertise gaps needed to meet their mission. Others targeted landowners and homeowners with a goal of BMP adoption. Yet others focused on educating local communities and heightening awareness of water-quality issues and ways to tackle them. One Water Partnership is an excellent example of enhancing connectivity.

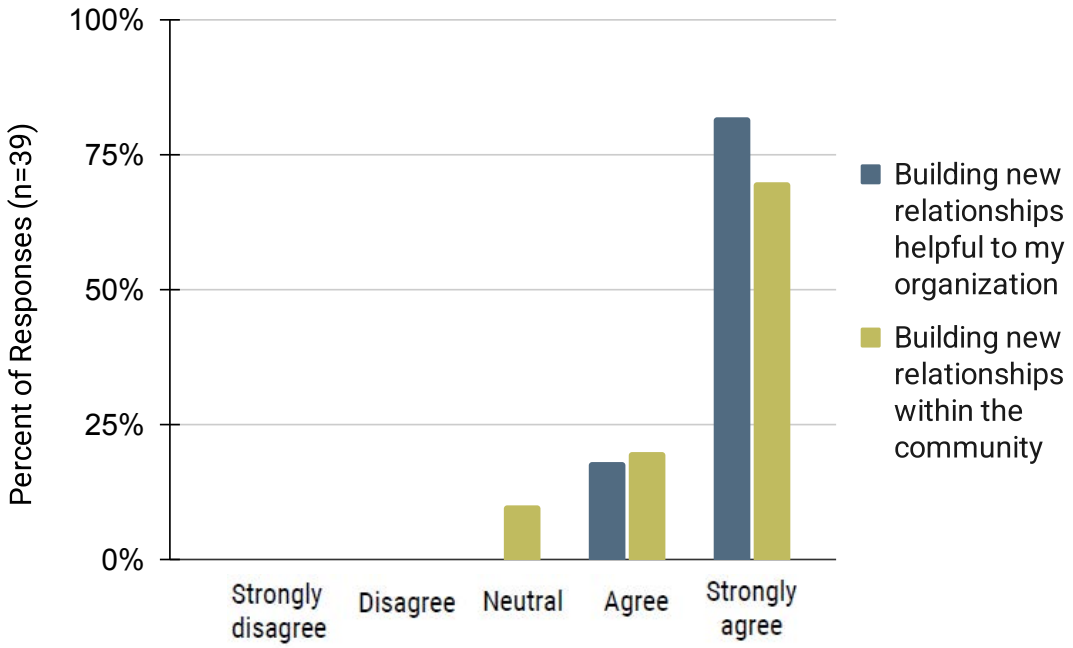
Enhanced connectivity is supported by survey data in which 30 collaborative partners[6] and nine recipients of services reported their levels of agreement (strongly disagree to strongly agree) with the prompt, "I (or my organization) have experienced the following benefits as a result of the increased collaborative capacity" (Figure 7).

Photo credit: Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley

6. Collaborative partners include leadership team and working group members.

Figure 7. Enhanced Connectivity

95% of collaborative partners and those receiving services from grantees confirmed that increased capacity enhanced connectivity through building new relationships.



In the Spotlight: One Water Partnership

Committed to growing a network of environmental stewards among faith-based communities, One Water Partnership reported that INSR funding provided *capacity to spend time on essential relationship- and trust-building activities.* These activities enabled foundational impacts—connectivity and trust—among collaborative members, partner organizations, local communities, and the partnership's extended network.

> *Interfaith Partners for Chesapeake Bay (One Water Partnership) has been instrumental in forming partnerships with Shore Rivers, Lower Shore Land Trust, Fenix Youth, Young Men of Distinction, and Future Harvest. All of these organizations have better helped our mission of 'Creating lasting wellness at the individual and community levels.'*
>
> RECIPIENT OF COLLABORATIVE SERVICES (SURVEY)

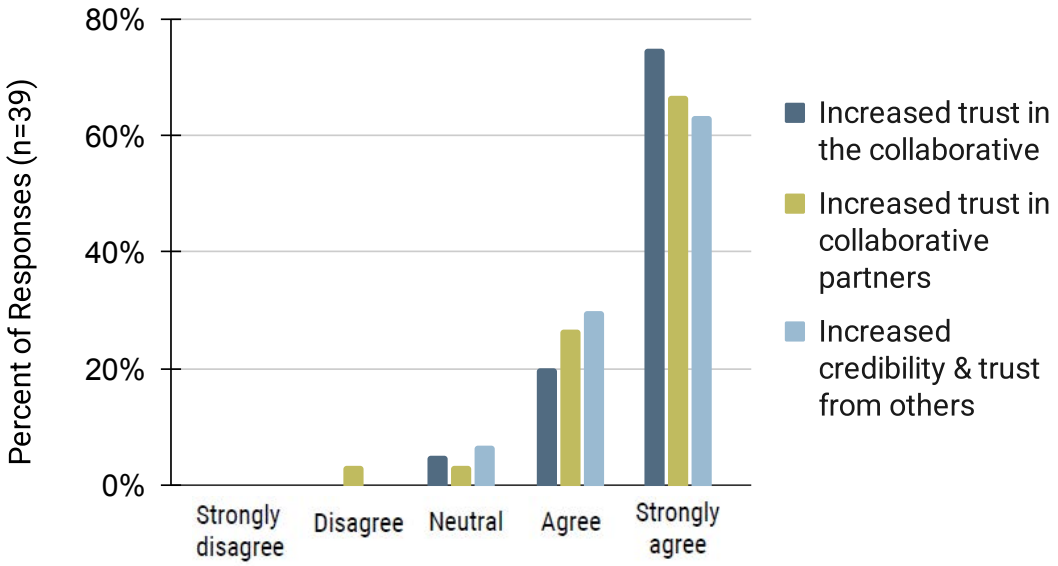
> *Working with and connecting our engaged communities has led to more of them getting involved. For example, providing to one Muslim congregation who trusts us has led to an increase of more Muslim communities seeking our help. In another region, we went from zero engagement to now having a growing network of connected congregations all looking to engage in BMP work.*
>
> COORDINATION LEAD (FOCUS GROUP WORKSHEET)

Foundational: Trust

INSR-funded relationship-building activities such as field visits, listening sessions, and convenings generated higher levels of trust. This occurred at different scales among various parties. In the survey, 30 collaborative partners and nine recipients of services indicated their levels of agreement with the prompt, "My organization has experienced the following benefits as a result of the increased collaborative capacity" (Figure 8).

More than 90% of the collaborative partners and those receiving services from grantees affirmed that increased collaborative capacity enhanced their trust and credibility with others, along with increased trust in their partners and the collaborative itself.

Figure 8. Increased Trust



Trust is central to getting landowners and homeowners to adopt BMPs. As one grantee observed, *My team is fully focused on building deep and trusted relationships with our corporate partners, farmers, and Plain sect community. It is at the core of everything.*

Grantees also understand that trust is crucial for healthy collaborative functioning, enabling them to fulfill their collective missions. The Elizabeth River (VA) Watershed Partnership embraces the importance of trust.

In the Spotlight: The Elizabeth River (VA) Watershed Partnership

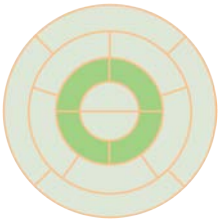
The Elizabeth River (VA) Watershed Partnership understands that it must first build trust with the communities it serves. INSR funding provided the capacity for this collaborative to engage in thoughtful and intentional relationship-building activities such as listening sessions.

"

Engaging communities in the planning process from the beginning became the focal point of our program. Because of that, we were successful in building trust and community engagement. A small project that we began (a community garden) got the attention of the civic league who was not interested in working with us. They are delighted with what we did with some of their residents and their recreational center (where the garden is located), and they now trust us and are willing to work with the garden, expand it, and work with us on future projects.

PARTNER (SURVEY)

3.2: Operational Impacts—Functioning Efficiently & Effectively



OPERATIONAL IMPACTS

Creativity & innovation: Forming and implementing inventive processes, practices, programs, and solutions.

Resource sharing: Sharing human capital, knowledge and expertise, systems and physical infrastructure, data, and funding.

Added capacity: Increasing collaborative functions; generating and leveraging funding; and amplifying partners' existing systems, relationships, and expertise.

Cultural awareness & respect: Helping collaborative and extended network members understand, respect, and leverage their differences.

Operational impacts (see Figure 6) are those that help a collaborative and its partners function more effectively. Using a range of activities, INSR grantees produced four operational impacts: higher levels of creativity and innovation, increased resource sharing, added capacity, and enhanced cultural awareness and respect.

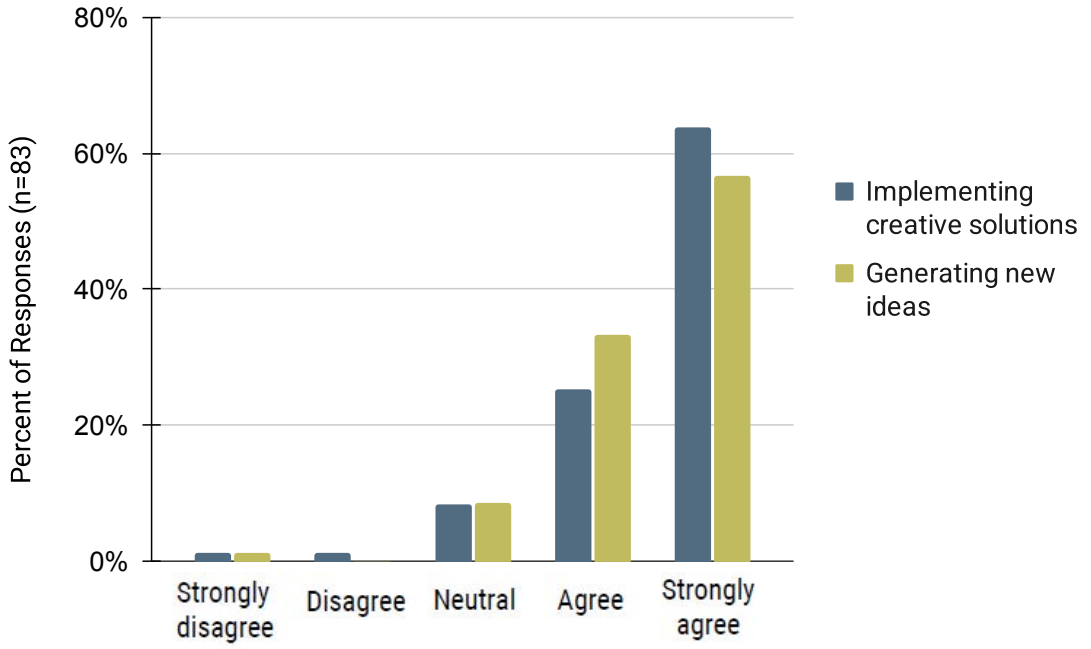
Operational: Creativity & Innovation

INSR grantees reported increased creativity and innovation in generating fresh ideas, solving problems, developing new tools, and promoting innovative BMPs. They attributed this impact to added collaborative capacity that allowed for the time and space to brainstorm innovative solutions together. According to one grantee, *the magic of NFWF grants is that we can be creative.*

In the survey, 53 coordination leads and 30 partners reported their levels of agreement with statements about creativity and innovation through the prompt, "Because of the INSR grant funding collaborative capacity, we are more effective in…" (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Boosted Creativity & Innovation

90% of coordination leads and collaborative partners indicated that their collaborative more effectively generates new ideas and implements creative solutions because of capacity funding.



In the Spotlight: Scaling Up Biochar Partnership

Scaling Up Biochar Partnership embodies innovation. With INSR funding, the Scaling Up Biochar Partnership is making progress toward its primary goal of accelerating the implementation of an innovative practice—the application of biochar amendments—in urban landscapes across the Chesapeake Bay watershed. This practice is designed to accelerate runoff reduction and improve water quality by enhancing existing BMPs.

> *"New technology that enhances the efficacy of BMPs is hard to get moving, and having the support from this grant project was essential for getting the word out about biochar and having questions answered by technical experts. Local governments would not have had the capacity to further promote this product. Because of this grant, I see an opportunity to further codify the use of biochar in BMP installs in the District through sister agencies, designers, project managers, etc.*
>
> COORDINATION LEAD (SURVEY)

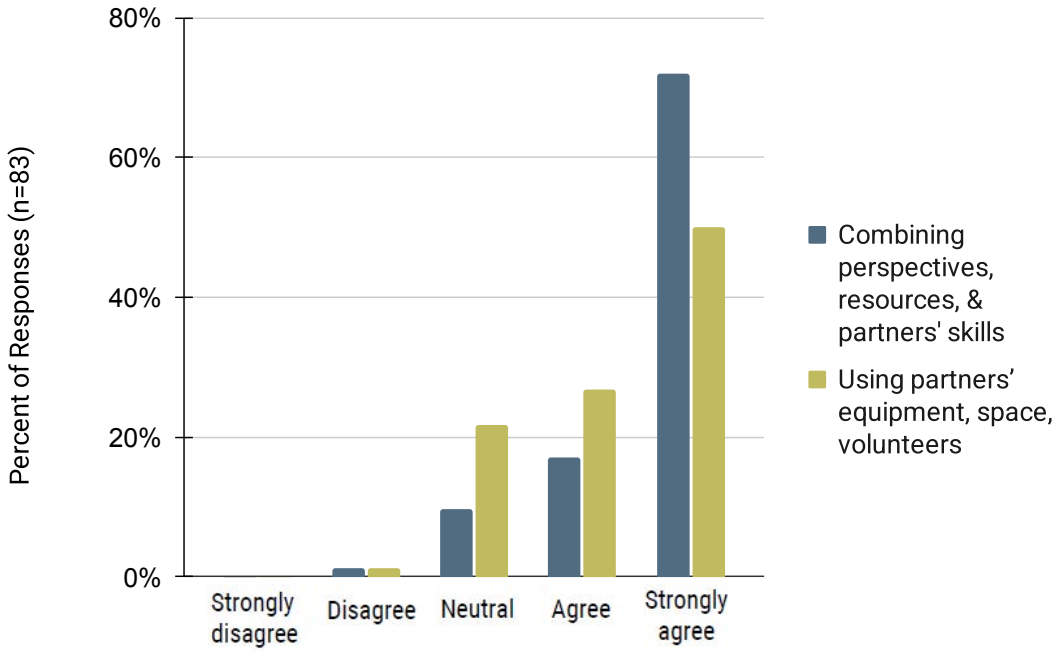
Operational: Resource Sharing

Increased capacity enabled collaboratives to share specialized expertise and knowledge among partners, exchange data and information, make use of one another's equipment and space, and share staff and volunteers. For example, Lancaster County Agricultural Preservation Partnership's partners now share access to datasets.

In the survey, 53 coordination leads and 30 partners indicated their levels of agreement about sharing resources based on the prompt, "Because of the INSR grant funding collaborative capacity, we are more effective in…" (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Increased Resource Sharing

A large majority of coordination leads and collaborative partners acknowledged that increased capacity has made their organizations more effective at combining perspectives and partners' skills (90%) and using partners' equipment, space, and volunteers (76%).

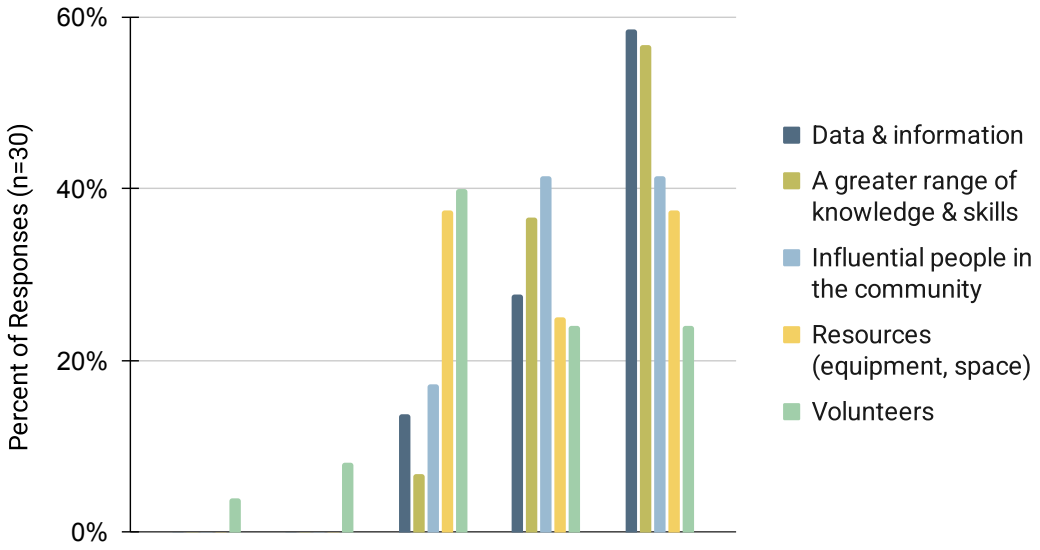


> *"Discussions among our collaborative members now include, 'Hey, are you able to make this map? Can we borrow this trailer full of tools?'*
>
> FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Partners also indicated their levels of agreement with increased access through the prompt, "My partner organization has experienced the following benefits as a result of the increased collaborative capacity" (Figure 11).

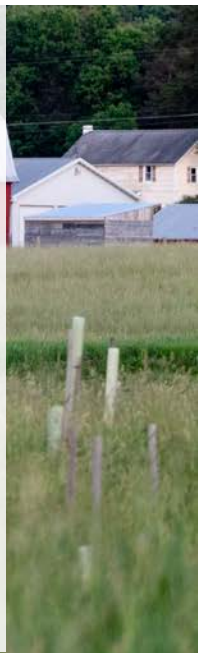
More than 80% reported that their partner organization's access to a greater range of knowledge, data, information, and influential people in the community has increased.

Figure 11. Access to Resources



In the Spotlight: Lancaster County Agricultural Preservation Partnership

The Lancaster Farmland Trust (LFT) and the Lancaster County Agricultural Preserve Board (APB) are committed to preserving farms and protecting farmland forever. INSR funding helped them join forces and create the Lancaster County Agricultural Preservation Partnership, which has been sharing datasets.



> *"The NFWF funding provided the opportunity to gain access to datasets from our collaborative partners that will help us both increase outreach to targeted farmers for the most effective BMP projects. It allows LFT's expertise to transcend the portfolio of farms preserved by APB.... We anticipate utilizing this data to make a priority list of farms to preserve and complete BMP projects on. In addition, our partners are allowing us to perform conservation outreach visits on their preserved farms, giving their farmers an opportunity to complete conservation plans, which would not happen without this funding.*
>
> COORDINATION LEAD (SURVEY)

Operational: Added Capacity

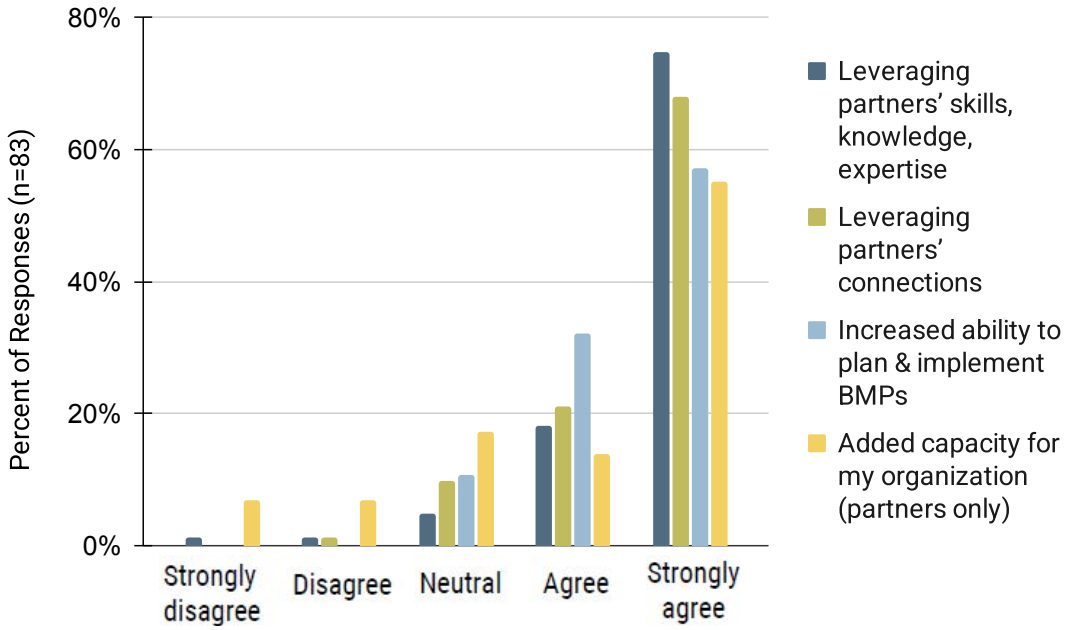
Grantees added capacity to their respective collaboratives and partner organizations in different ways: hiring collaborative employees, including coordination leads; pooling resources; and leveraging partners' existing funds or specialized expertise, knowledge, and skills. As mentioned previously, 2018–2024 grantees matched INSR program awards by 155%.

The Central PA Stream Delisting Partnership is one example. According to the grantee report, *we were able to apply $18+ million dollars in matching funding toward stream delisting, creating a partnership infrastructure that coordinated a data-driven strategy to align over 40 partners, establish goals and evaluation metrics, and hire support staff to administer the work and partners where there were gaps.*

In the survey, 53 coordination leads and 30 partners indicated their levels of agreement about added capacity and leveraging resources in their responses to the prompt, "Because of the INSR grant funding collaborative capacity, we are more effective in…." Partners also indicated their levels of agreement about added capacity through the prompt, "My partner organization has experienced the following benefits as a result of the increased collaborative capacity" (Figure 12).

90% of coordination leads and partners affirmed that they are more effective in leveraging partners' skills, knowledge, expertise, and connections. 70% of partners indicated that their organization experienced some form of added capacity.

Figure 12. Added Capacity



> *One big benefit is access to funding for one or more administrative/coordinator positions that can be shared by the component organizations of the collaborative and be devoted solely to serving the collaborative overall.*
>
> SUBAWARDEE (SURVEY)

In the Spotlight: Upper Susquehanna Coalition

Comprising 22 Soil and Water Conservation Districts (18 in NY and four in PA), the Upper Susquehanna Coalition (USC) has a solid track record of planning and implementing restoration projects throughout the Upper Susquehanna River Basin. INSR funding enabled USC to add capacity and fill technical assistance and funding gaps.

> *"Without the INSR funding, the USC would not be able to create programs that provide critical components for our wetland and riparian restoration efforts. For example, the USC has a stewardship program that was initially funded through NFWF for piloting. Due to its success, we were able to receive funds from other sources which were used to sustain major components of that program and our Water Quality Program which fills gaps with technical assistance and funding.*
>
> COORDINATION LEAD (SURVEY)

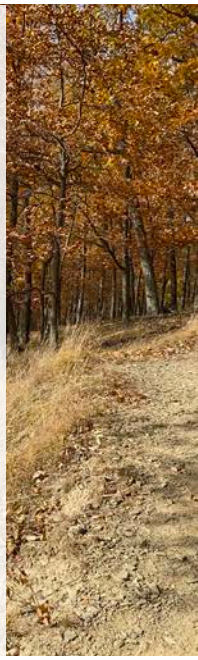


Photo Credit: Upper Susquehanna Coalition

Operational: Cultural Awareness & Respect

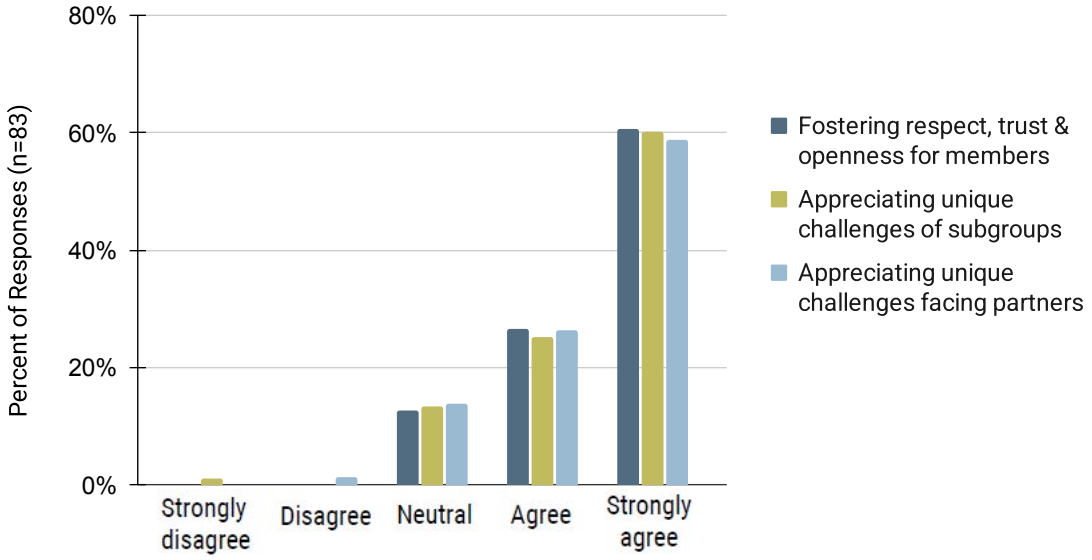
This emergent operational impact applies both to partners in INSR-funded collaboratives and the communities they serve. For partners, this is important because it helps foster a sense of belonging that enhances engagement and participation.

Enhanced cultural awareness and respect are essential to convincing land- and homeowners to voluntarily implement BMPs on their properties. Increased capacity allows collaboratives, such as Envision the Choptank, to take the necessary time to build trust and relationships with members of these communities.

In the survey, 53 coordination leads and 30 partners reported their levels of agreement with statements about cultural awareness and respect through the prompt, "Because of the INSR grant funding collaborative capacity, we are more effective in…" (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Enhanced Cultural Awareness & Respect

More than 85% of coordination leads and collaborative partners confirmed that increased capacity has enhanced cultural awareness and respect.



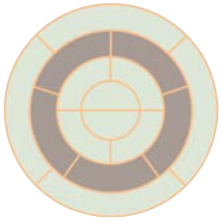
In the Spotlight: Envision the Choptank

Envision the Choptank (Envision)—a partnership of conservation organizations, government agencies, and local citizens—has leveraged INSR funding to enhance cultural awareness and create collaborative, supportive relationships between its partners and the wider community. It brings these groups together to promote a more thorough understanding of one another's perspectives and builds relationships with audiences not often engaged in conservation and restoration efforts.

> *"The INSR funding allowed Envision to work with more communities and implement a partner-first mentality of trying to meet constituents where they are, listen to the issues, and work together to achieve common goals.*
>
> COORDINATION LEAD (SURVEY)

Photo Credit: NFWF/ShoreRivers

3.3: Outcome Impacts—Achieving Results



OUTCOME IMPACTS

Scale & pace: Increasing collaborative development and functioning as well as project and program implementation.

Performance: Producing high-quality outputs through enhanced performance at the collaborative, partner, and individual levels.

Transferable & adaptable models: Developing, implementing, and refining models and tools that can be applied and adapted across organizations and geographies.

Broadened perspectives: Enabling collaborative and extended network members to recognize alternate possibilities, understand a broader context, and engage in expansive thinking.

Expanded connectivity: Growing and linking regional networks by serving as conveners, regional activity hubs, and centralized information portals.

Outcome impacts (see Figure 6) include those envisioned by collaborative partners in their start-up and building stages as well as a few that were unanticipated. A range of activities enabled INSR grantees to generate five outcome impacts. Two of the five—increased scale and pace and enhanced performance—were desired, and three— strengthened transferable and adaptable approaches, broadened perspectives, and expanded connectivity—were unanticipated.

Funding capacity needs allowed INSR grantees to increase scale and pace and enhance performance in two areas: BMP implementation and information sharing and collaborative development and functioning. Scale, pace, and performance are presented together for both of these areas.

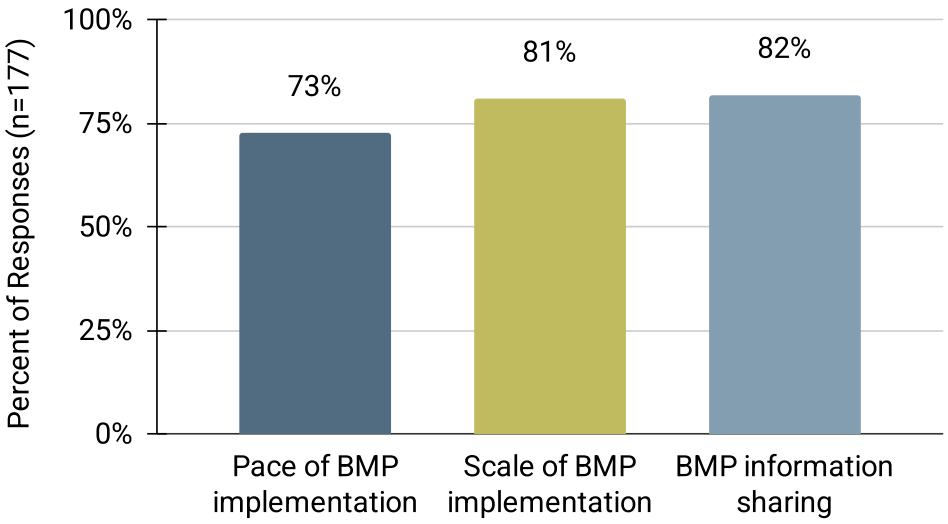
Outcome: Scale/Pace/Performance (BMP Implementation & Information Sharing)

INSR grantees increased the outcome impacts of scale and pace for BMP implementation and information sharing. This finding is supported by a large majority of survey participants. **As a reminder, approximately 55% of the survey participants answering these questions were non-grantees: government leaders, funders, academics, consultants, contractors, and recipients of services**.

Figure 14[7] represents the percent of survey participants indicating they have observed increases based on the following question: "Since NFWF shifted its INSR grant program to funding collaborative capacity, what changes have you observed related to the following collaborative activities?: scale (i.e., miles, acres) of BMP implementation; pace (i.e., faster) of BMP implementation; and information sharing and dissemination about relevant BMPs to targeted audiences." A total of 177 survey participants responded to these questions; they include: 53 coordination leads, 30 partners, 9 recipients of services, and 85 non-grantees.

Figure 14. Observed Changes: BMP Implementation & Information Sharing

81% of survey respondents reported increases in scale and 73% in pace of BMP implementation. 82% reported increases in information sharing.



> *I feel that accountability and sheer volume of work getting accomplished are better because of the collaboration.*
>
> FUNDER SURVEY

As previously mentioned, 69 INSR Grants Program awards distributed among 41 collaboratives between 2018 and 2024 are included in this evaluation. Grantees have implemented BMPs that have led to significant nutrient- and sediment-load reductions (see Table 5).[8]

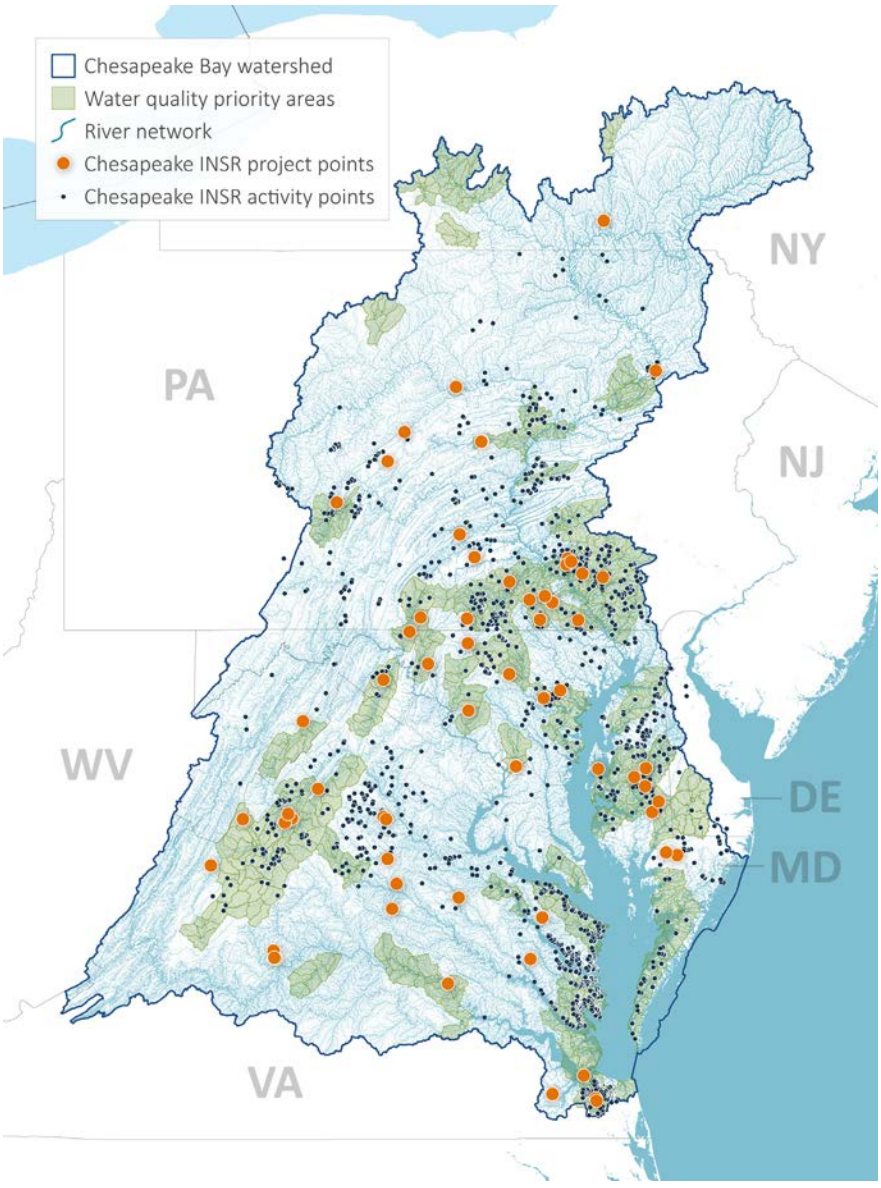
7. Graphs showing a more detailed breakdown of the responses can be found in Appendix M.
8. Data used in this analysis originated from NFWF's EasyGrants platform and was compiled into a dataset referred to as the "Master Tracker." For projects that had been closed out, the planned metric was used. Grantees underestimated acres of BMP implementation by 17%. Therefore, these numbers are conservative.

Table 5. BMPs Implemented & Estimated Pollutants Reduction

BMPs Implemented
• 258,685 acres of agricultural BMPs • 4,210 acres of riparian restoration BMPs • 2,582 acres treated with urban stormwater BMPs • 870 miles of riparian BMPs (riparian buffer restoration, livestock exclusion)
Estimated Nutrient and Sediment Reduction
• 289,783,011 pounds ofsediment reduced • 3,381,162 pounds of nitrogen reduced • 242,650 pounds of phosphorus reduced

The small black dots in Figure 15 show the thousands of BMPs that have been implemented by INSR grantees since 2018.

Figure 15. 2018–2024 INSR Project & Activity Points



Quantitative data further support the finding that BMP implementation has increased since NFWF refined its INSR Grants Program in 2018. BMP implementation metrics for the 69 awards made between 2018 and 2024 were compared to metrics from 65 awards in previous years (2013–2017). Differences, along with percent changes, are presented in Table 6. **BMP implementation has increased across all sectors, most notably in those related to restoration (e.g., riparian and wetland).**

Table 6. Comparison of BMPs Implemented by INSR Grantees

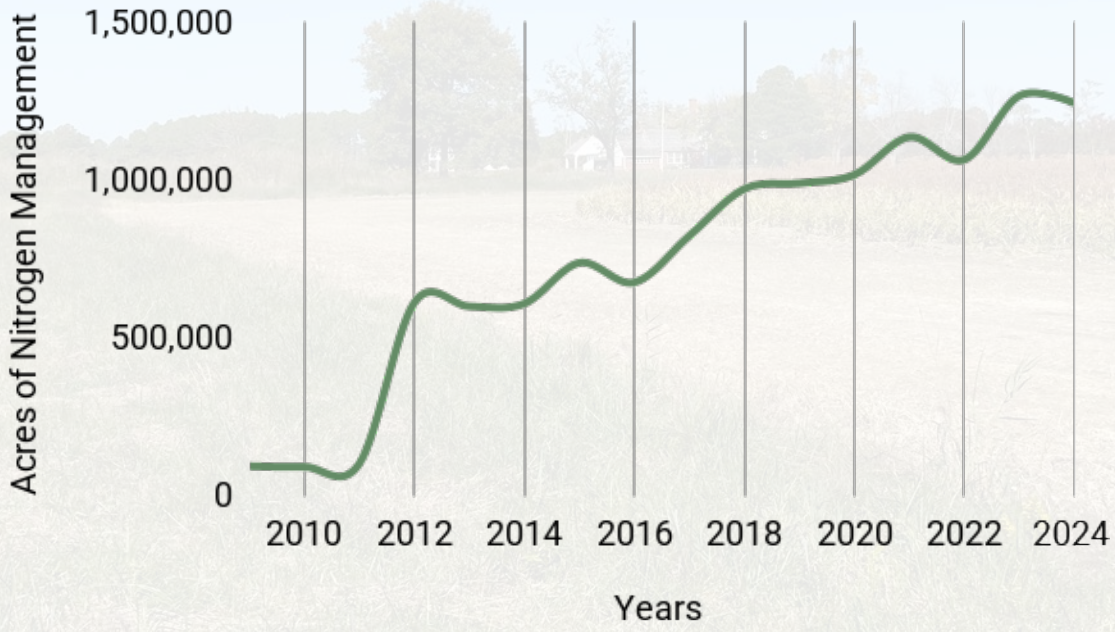
	Acres with Agriculture BMPs	Acres of Natural (Restoration) BMPs	Miles of Natural (Restoration) BMPs	Acres of Developed (Stormwater) BMPs
2018–24 INSR Grants (69 awards)	258,685	4210	870	2,582
2013–17 INSR Grants (65 awards)	222,521	2029	484	2547
Difference	**36,164**	**2181**	**387**	**35**
Percent Change	**+ 16%**	**+ 108%**	**+ 80%**	**+ 1%**

In the Spotlight: The Mid-Atlantic 4R Nutrient Stewardship Association

The Mid-Atlantic 4R Nutrient Stewardship Association is an excellent example of increasing the pace and scale of BMP implementation. It is an umbrella organization that includes the Delaware-Maryland and the Pennsylvania 4R alliances, adheres to four core principles: using the right nutrient source, at the right rate, at the right time, and in the right place. Since receiving its first INSR grant and associated matching funds, the Mid-Atlantic 4R Nutrient Stewardship Association has implemented BMPs on 31,151 acres through its cost-share program. This impressive accomplishment reflects how INSR funding is directly translating to an increased pace and scale of BMP implementation.

Using a second INSR grant, an Executive Director has been hired and a new voucher program has been put into place. It is anticipated that this program will achieve at least 20,000 acres of BMP implementation. The collaborative has also been focusing on accelerating BMP implementation on the Delmarva Peninsula. As illustrated in Figure 16, these practices continue to increase throughout the region. With a new Executive Director and the association's successful track record, these programs have a high likelihood of success.

Figure 16. Delmarva Peninsula: Nutrient Management Practices[9]



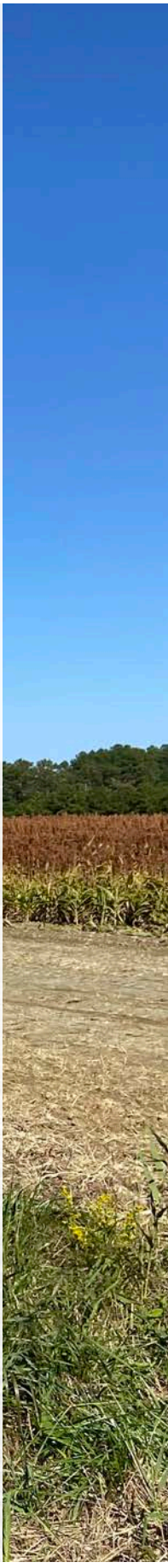


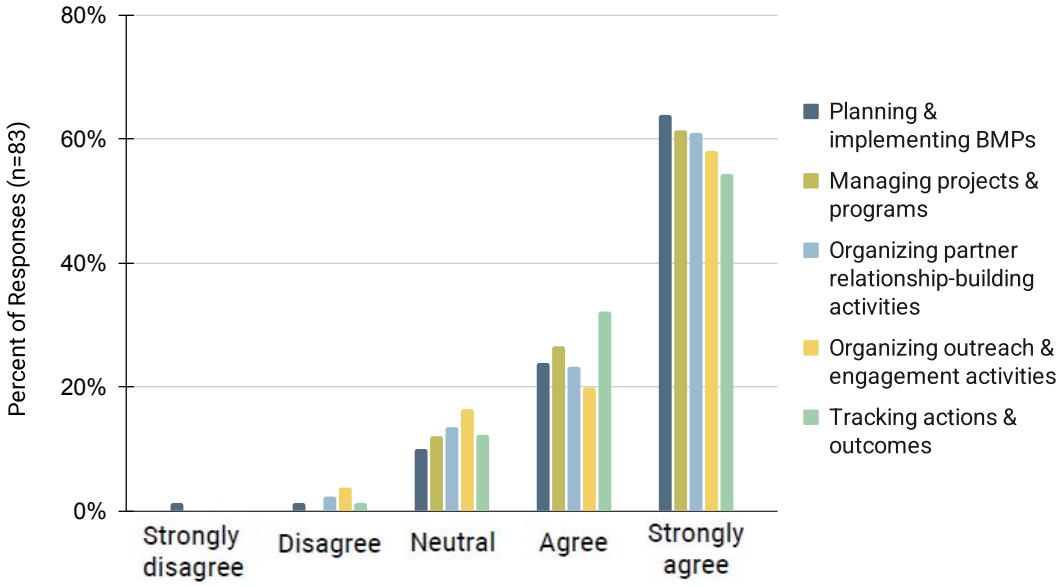
Photo Credit: NFWF/ShoreRivers

9. These data were generated from the Chesapeake Assessment Scenario Tool (CAST). CAST is an environmental planning resource designed for those protecting and restoring water quality throughout the Chesapeake Bay. The BMPs in this figure include the following practices: nutrient application management core, rate, placement, and timing for nitrogen and phosphorus. Regions include the Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay (Chesapeake Bay Watershed Portion Only (CBWS) for DE, MD, PA, and VA).

Observed increases in BMP implementation and information sharing are likely related to the enhanced effectiveness of BMP-related activities. Fifty-three coordination leads and 30 partners indicated their levels of agreement with increased effectiveness of BMP-related activities through the prompt, "Because of the INSR grant funding collaborative capacity, we are more effective in…" (Figure 17).

Planning and implementing BMPs (88%), managing projects and programs (88%), and tracking actions and outcomes (87%) were the most frequently reported areas of increased effectiveness, followed by organizing partner relationship-building activities (84%) and public outreach and engagement activities (78%).

Figure 17. Enhanced Performance: BMP Implementation & Associated Activities



Outcome: Scale/Pace/Performance (Collaborative Development & Functioning)

Collaboratives' scale, pace, and performance have increased after NFWF refined its INSR Grants Program to fund their capacity. Enhanced performance was experienced by collaboratives such as the Upper and Middle James Riparian Consortium, in addition to partner organizations and individuals (e.g., leadership team and working group members) levels.

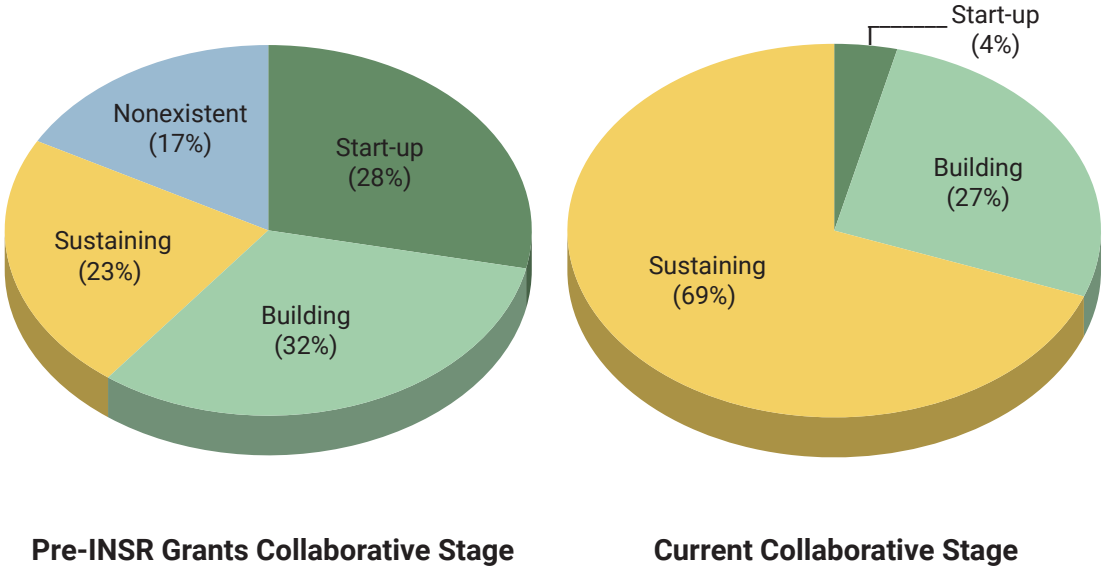
Scale is reflected in the expansion of a collaborative (e.g., increase in number of partners, geographic range), and pace is illustrated in reported shifts in development stages from pre-INSR funding to the present.

Based on survey data from coordination leads, 77% indicated expanding the number of partners participating in their collaboratives since receiving INSR grants. Of those reporting increased membership, 55% report adding two to 10 new partners, 27% report adding 15 to 50 partners, and 18% report adding 60 to 85 partners. One collaborative reported adding 493 partners.

In the survey, coordination leads were asked the following questions: "Prior to applying for the INSR grant, how would you describe the phase of this collaborative/partnership?" and "From your perspective, has the phase of your collaborative/partnership changed?" As illustrated in Figure 18, the pace of collaborative development and functioning has increased.

Figure 18. Increased Pace of Development: Comparison of Collaborative Stages

Prior to receiving INSR funding, 23% of the grantees noted being in the sustaining stage. Now, 69% identify as being in the sustaining stage.



In the Spotlight: Upper and Middle James Riparian Consortium

Prior to receiving its first INSR grant, the Upper and Middle James Riparian Consortium (Consortium) was simply an informal group working together. Supported by INSR funding, the Consortium was formalized in 2019; since then, it has grown to more than 500 members. A second INSR grant was used to install 1,233 acres of riparian buffers. INSR investments in its collaborative capacity have increased the scale and pace of the Consortium's development, and its functioning has also improved. Moving quickly through the start-up and building stages, it is now lauded as a high-performing collaborative.

> *"Without this funding, not only would on-the-ground work be stunted, but the make-up of the Consortium would not be as strong. These grants have allowed for the true investment in the operations of this program, which are crucial for its continued success. The James River Buffer Program and the James River Stewardship Program (which includes summer interns) are incredibly successful programs that are set up to be replicated in other areas. The Consortium also supports landowners in being connected to this work, and various workshops and other landowner education efforts are crucial for looping them in and strengthening their investment and care for this work and their communities."*
>
> COORDINATION LEAD (SURVEY)

Riparian buffers are a particularly high-priority BMP for the Consortium and the region. Depicted in Figure 19, the implementation of forest and grass buffers accelerated in 2022. It is highly likely that this acceleration is directly related to the Consortium's success. Additionally, enhanced performance was experienced at the collaborative, partner organization, and individual (e.g., leadership team and working group members) levels.

Figure 19. Upper and Middle James River: Buffers [1]

1. These data were generated from CAST. BMPs include the following practices: grass and forest buffers; narrow grass and forest; grass and forest buffers on fenced pasture corridor; narrow grass and forest buffers on fenced pasture corridor. Regions include: VA-02080201-Upper James; WV-02080201-Upper James; VA-02080203-Middle James-Buffalo; and VA-0208020 -Middle James-Willis.

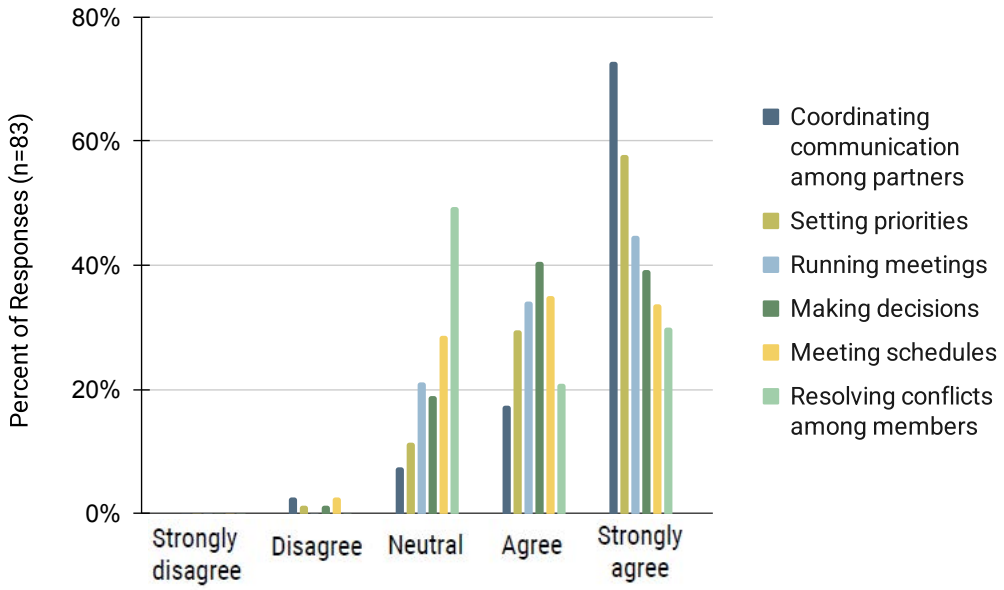
Photo Credit: Green Fin Studio

INSR-Funded Collaboratives

Grantees attributed their enhanced performance to increased effectiveness in operations and overall collaborative functioning, greater partner member engagement, and learning from other INSR grantees and their partners. In the survey, those familiar with their respective collaboratives' functioning (i.e., 53 coordination leads and 30 partners) reported their levels of agreement with the prompt, "Because of the INSR grant funding collaborative capacity, we are more effective in…" (Figure 20).

Figure 20. Enhanced Performance: Collaborative Functioning

Coordinating communication among partners (90%), setting priorities (87%), making decisions (80%) and running meetings (79%) were the most frequently reported areas of increased effectiveness, followed by meeting schedules (69%) and resolving member conflicts (51%).



Facilitated by the INSR program, grantees and their partners have increased interactions with other collaboratives throughout the Chesapeake Bay region. As a result, grantees are learning from each other, which is enhancing collaborative performance. The Delmarva Restoration and Conservation Network provides a good example.

In the Spotlight: Delmarva Restoration and Conservation Network

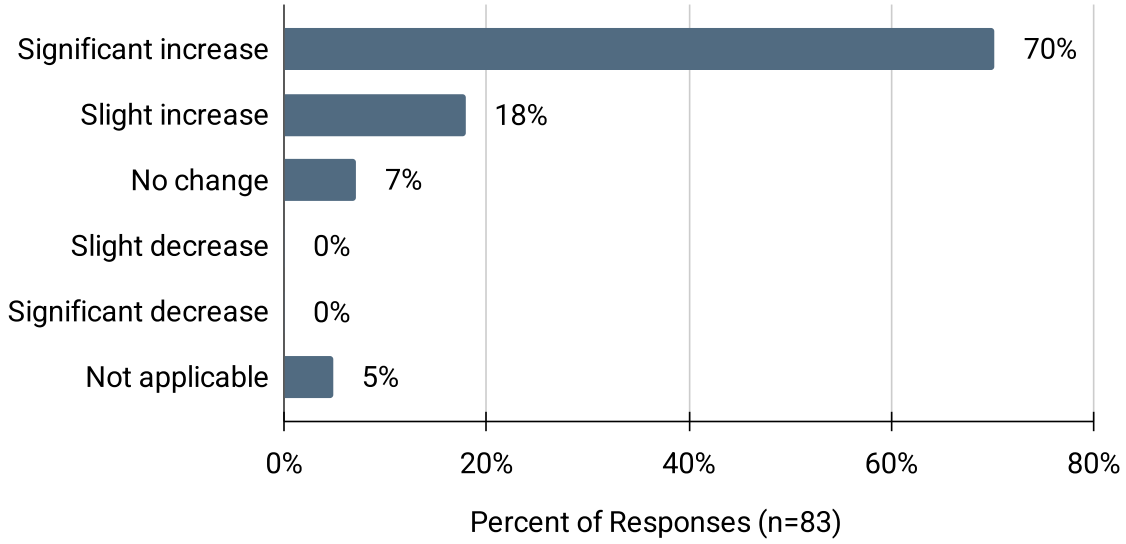
This network is committed to restoring and conserving Delmarva's landscapes, waterways, and shorelines. They are more effective in their work through INSR funding and their connections to other INSR grantees.

> *"INSR funding has enabled our organization to learn from organizations with greater restoration project implementation and management experience. By working collaboratively with these partners, we've been able to greatly grow and enhance our restoration programming, both in capacity and in professionalism. This has led to greater efficiency in restoration project installation, as well as fostering more demand for projects."*
>
> PARTNER (FOCUS GROUP)

Enhanced performance through increased partner member engagement is demonstrated by collaboratives such as the Lancaster Clean Water Partners. As one study participant stated, *widespread participation* is an outcome of funding collaborative capacity. Fifty-three coordination leads and 30 partners responded to the following question, "Since receiving the INSR funding, what changes have you observed related to partner member engagement?" (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Observed Changes: Partner Member Engagement

88% of coordination leads and collaborative partners observed increases in partner member engagement thanks to INSR-funded collaborative capacity.



In the Spotlight: Lancaster Clean Water Partners

Lancaster Clean Water Partners supports an amazing group of organizations working to restore clean water in Lancaster County (PA). INSR funding helped increase partner engagement in a range of ways, such as internal assessments and training opportunities. Embracing a continuous-improvement mentality, this collaborative consistently sought input from their partner members, and engaged them and others by offering opportunities to hone their leadership skills through its Lancaster Watershed Leadership Academy (in partnership with Penn State's Agriculture and Environment Center). All of these activities have contributed to BMP implementation at an increased pace and scale.

> *Having INSR resources and a large-scale, collaborative project has allowed us to work with a small leadership team of partners for specific opportunities as well as keep the broader partnership informed about overall network progress. A Project Coordinator, supported by INSR, leads our municipal engagement, specifically working with two partners who are trusted locals for peer-to-peer outreach to ensure larger partner events happen for better communication and collaborative feedback.*
>
> COORDINATION LEAD (SURVEY)

> *I look at Lancaster Clean Water Partners, and the progress that Lancaster has made is phenomenal. Like it's changed the color on the map with respect to nutrient and sediment loading. I mean, they have seen huge impacts, not only in model load reduction, but in water-quality improvements measured in streams.*
>
> FIELD LIAISON (FOCUS GROUP)

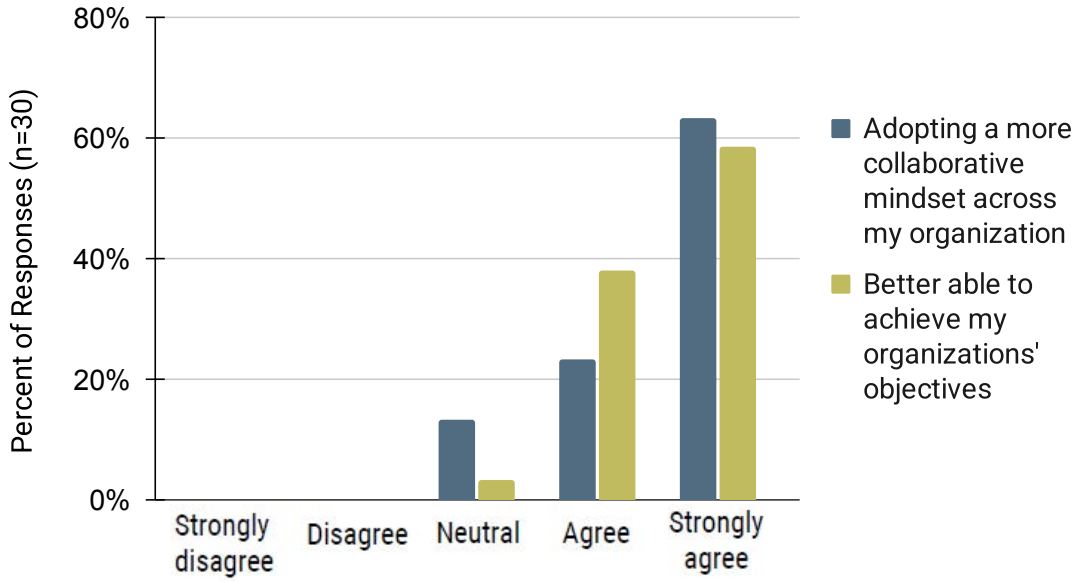
Partner Organizations & Individuals

Partner organizations and individuals participating in collaborative steering committees, leadership teams, and working groups also saw enhanced performance. This suggests that the INSR Grants Program has a ripple effect beyond collaboratives to the partner organization and individual levels.

Thirty individuals representing their partner organizations on steering committees, leadership teams, and working groups indicated their levels of agreement with the following prompt, "The partner organization I represent has experienced the following benefits as a result of the increased collaborative capacity…." (Figure 22).

Figure 22. Enhanced Performance: Partner Organizations

The overwhelming majority of partner representatives affirmed that their respective organizations are better able to achieve their objectives (97%) and are adopting a more collaborative mindset (87%).

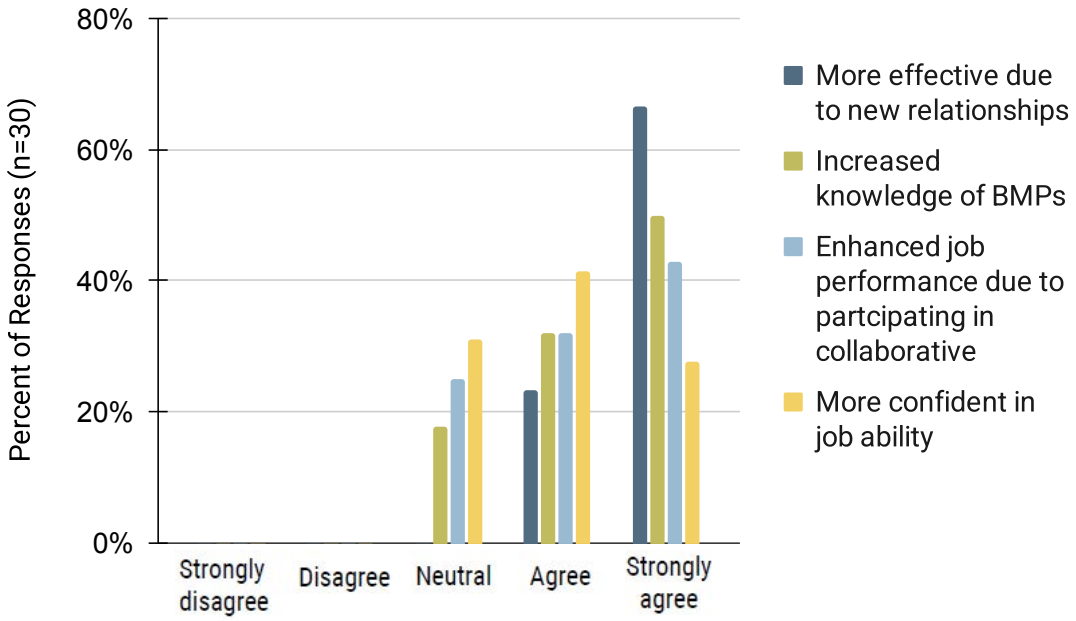


There has been a ripple effect—enhanced performance extending beyond collaborative performance to partner organizations and individuals engaged with the collaboratives.

Individuals participating in collaborative steering committees, leadership teams, and working groups and recipients of services indicated their levels of agreement with the following prompt, "I have personally experienced the following benefits as a result of participating in this collaborative effort and the INSR grant(s)…" (Figure 23).

Figure 23. Enhanced Performance: Individuals

90% of those actively engaged with a collaborative confirmed they are more effective in their work due to new relationships; 82% experienced increased knowledge of BMPs; 75% indicated enhanced job performance; and 69% felt more confident in their job abilities.



Outcome: Transferable & Adaptable

Transferable and adaptable approaches are essential to scale up stewardship work within and across regions. Based on data collected from open-ended survey questions, interviews, and focus group sessions, these qualities manifest in various ways. Lower Susquehanna Regional Partnership's "muddy boots" outreach program, One Water Partnership hubs, and the refined Dirt and Gravel Road BMP protocol for farm lanes are just three among many examples of transferable and adaptable outcome impacts resulting from INSR funding collaborative capacity.

In the Spotlight: Lower Susquehanna Regional Partnership

Facilitated by Penn State's Agriculture and Environment Center, the Lower Susquehanna Regional Partnership is an example of a collaborative that has developed an innovative landowner outreach model that is transferable and adaptable.

Their "muddy boots" outreach team engages directly with farmers to educate them about pollutant-reduction BMPs such as riparian buffers and other conservation opportunities. This program has been adopted across Lancaster, Dauphin, and Lebanon counties, providing outreach in places such as the Conewago, Chiques, Conway, Little Conestoga, and Spring Creek watersheds.

> *Our innovative outreach model of the 'muddy boots' team continues its success.*
>
> GRANTEE PROPOSAL

Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake has assembled a network of hubs under the One Water Partnership to create a replicable model designed to educate, equip, and empower local congregations to become environmental stewards of their lands. Congregations who sign a Partner Congregation Pledge are provided training, guidance, and materials on practices such as forming green teams and engaging congregation members. Their hub model has been adopted and expanded throughout the Baltimore region; Harford, Howard, Anne Arundel Counties; and the Lower Shore Region (MD). It was also recently adopted in Lancaster County (PA).

In the Spotlight: Blair County Intergovernmental Stormwater Committee

With INSR funding, the Blair County Intergovernmental Stormwater Committee (Blair County Conservation District) developed a transferable and adaptable approach designed to reduce sediment erosion on private farm lanes—an area previously overlooked by traditional funding

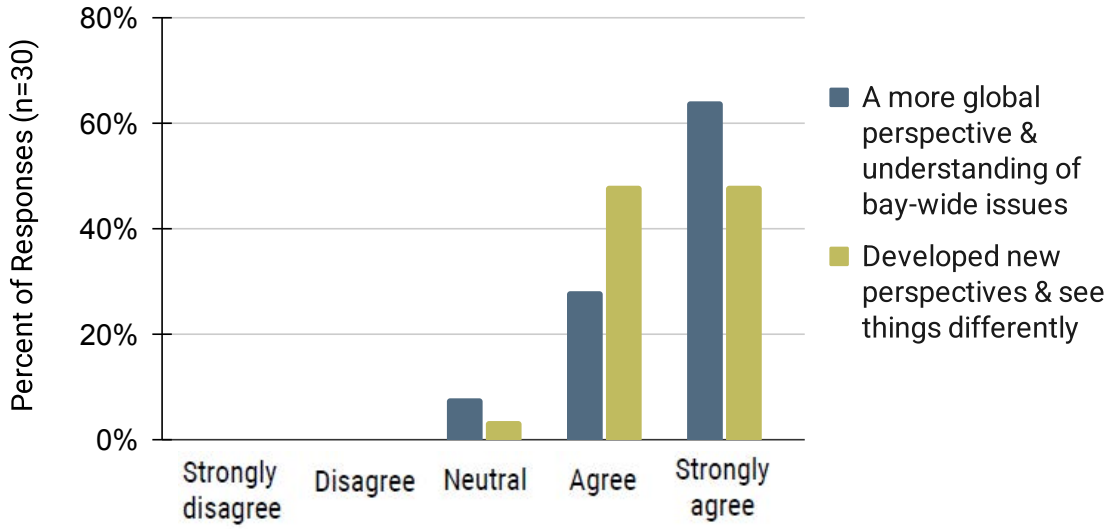
> *INSR funding allowed us to refine and modify the Dirt and Gravel Road BMP protocol to suit farm lane conditions, resolving key challenges and creating a replicable framework. The processes and protocols we developed will be carried forward to sustain the farm-lane repair program. We plan to continue this outreach and cost-share initiative, using lessons learned to support sediment control efforts on farms throughout Blair County.*
>
> COORDINATION LEAD (SURVEY)

Outcome: Broadened Perspectives

Through dialogue generated in the focus group sessions, INSR grantees shared that they have a much broader perspective of the entire Chesapeake Bay watershed, beyond their regions—a finding that is further supported by survey data. Thirty partners indicated their levels of agreement with the following prompt, "I have personally experienced the following benefits as a result of participating in this collaborative effort and the INSR grant(s)…" (Figure 24).

Figure 24. Broadened Perspectives

More than 90% of partners indicated that they have developed new perspectives and see things differently, in addition to having a more global perspective and understanding of the issues throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed.



> *"The funding has enabled more of a bird's-eye view; easy to see who is working on what and what still needs to be worked on across the bay.*
>
> FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Outcome: Expanded Connectivity

Expanded connectivity emerged as the final outcome impact, represented by increased contacts and expanded networks within and across communities throughout the Chesapeake Bay, and by INSR grantees serving as centralized hubs and conveners in their respective regions. As one coordinator leader explained, *This funding has helped introduce my team to new contacts, whether they were city officials, nonprofits, or other key stakeholders. This has strengthened relationships and projects moving forward*.

In the Spotlight: Pasa Sustainable Agriculture

Pasa Sustainable Agriculture is a prime example of an INSR-funded collaborative that has generated impact through expanded connectivity, which has itself produced other benefits.

> *Peer communities and cohorts that have been built will continue to exist well beyond this project's period of performance. Lasting and resilient relationships between small farmers have immeasurable economic, social, and environmental impact.*
>
> COORDINATION LEAD (SURVEY)

> *The networks, relationships, and organization connections that are being created through this collaborative work [funded by INSR] cannot be overstated. The knowledge gained from working on these projects does not end with the completion of a project, but rather, continues to grow and evolve with each individual and organization involved. This allows for quicker, greater opportunities to meet the goals of any grant or project.*
>
> COORDINATION LEAD (SURVEY)

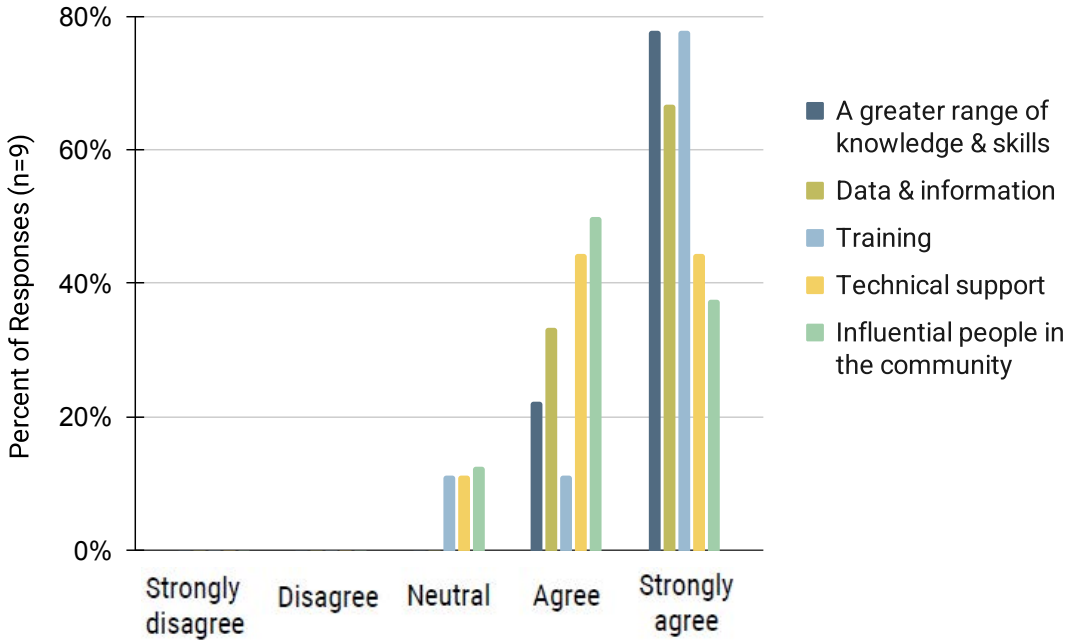
> *Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake (One Water Partnership) is a connector! They work to foster collaborations with faith-based groups, nonprofits, and government agencies to work together to advance stewardship activities, whether tree planting, implementing BMPs, or building awareness and engagement.*
>
> MEMBER OF A COLLABORATIVE'S EXTERNAL NETWORK (SURVEY)

Often described as one-stop shops, INSR-funded collaboratives have also become trusted resources for questions about BMP practices, public awareness/education, and funding opportunities, among others. This becomes particularly important for community groups (e.g., Plain sect) who are reluctant to work with government agencies.

In the survey, recipients of services indicated their levels of agreement with the prompt, "I have personally experienced the following benefits as a result of participating in this collaborative effort and the INSR grant(s)" (Figure 25).

Figure 25. Centralized Access for Recipients of Services

100% of those receiving services from INSR grantees confirmed that access to a greater range of knowledge and skills, as well as to data and information, has increased. 89% reported that access to training, technical support, and influential people in the community has also increased.



> *"The Living Shoreline Collaborative enables or facilitates a 'one-stop shop' for sharing experiences with living shoreline design, construction, funding, etc.*
>
> RECIPIENT OF SERVICES (SURVEY)

3.4: Integrated Impacts—Institutionalizing Approaches

INTEGRATED IMPACTS

Systems change & adoption: Initiating and integrating proven methods and techniques at a systems level which can produce paradigm shifts.

Durable & flexible approaches: Integrating sustainable approaches at scale that can be adapted and refined to accommodate complexity, evolving situations, and different contexts.

Collaborative culture & mindset: Normalizing collaboration as a valued and effective way to addressing complex problems and fostering meaningful, enduring relationships.

Shift in behaviors & norms: Changing actions and expectations across local and regional communities, expanded geographies, and fields of practice.

Integrated impacts (see Figure 6) happen after foundational, operational, and outcome impacts have increased, and they also have most significant long-term consequences (Mickel & Farrell, 2025). An example would be collaborative approaches that have become operationalized or institutionalized within a partnership or at different geographic scales. INSR-funded collaboratives generated four integrated impacts: systems change and adoption, durable and flexible approaches, collaborative culture and mindset, and shift in behaviors and norms.

Integrated: Systems Change & Adoption

Changing systems is one of the most significant impacts generated by the INSR Grants Program. Corporate Clean Water Partnerships is an example of an INSR-funded collaborative generating a paradigm shift, where the Manure Injection Partnership is at the early stages of initiating a systems-level change.

In the Spotlight: Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay's Corporate Sustainability Initiative

Coordinated by the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, their Corporate Sustainability Initiative and its inaugural partnership, the Turkey Hill Clean Water Partnership, has generated systems-level impacts by tackling nutrient and sediment pollution through the agriculture supply chain.

Supported by INSR funding, Turkey Hill, Maola Local Dairies (formerly Maryland and Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative Association), and the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay joined forces to improve water quality in the Lancaster, PA, area by providing incentives for local dairy farmers to implement BMPs on their lands. The Turkey Hill Clean Water Partnership's goal was to create a dairy-product supply chain that prioritizes the environment by providing direct support to farms to meet sustainability goals. In Turkey Hill's case, the supply chain involves local dairy farmers belonging to the Maola Local Dairies milk cooperative, which supplies milk to Turkey Hill Dairy to create their dairy products.

Today, this approach has not only expanded to provide support to dairy farms throughout the bay watershed in partnership with multiple dairy cooperatives and companies in VA, NY, and MD, but has also extended to poultry producers such as those that supply Perdue Farms. This durable and flexible model can be adopted across the country and world.

> *"This partnership represents a paradigm shift in attaining voluntary conservation action. One decision by the CEO of Turkey Hill Dairy resulted in 130 farmers beginning the process of meeting conservation standards. This market-driven approach is applicable to many other agricultural sectors, and it has proven to be a technique that dramatically accelerates the rate of conservation practice adoption. Further funding for farms involved in the Turkey Hill Clean Water Partnership will allow the full delivery of practices that will result in large pollutant reductions, but perhaps more significantly, will function as a model for this approach to be disseminated across the state and watershed by other organizations and businesses."*
>
> GRANTEE PROPOSAL

> *"We have developed relationships with the corporate sector who are part of the supply chain. We are building a culture of conservation within companies, dairy cooperatives, etc. This is creating peer pressure among companies to embrace and enhance sustainability efforts. As a result, there is an increased percent of farmers who are supported, have a conservation plan, and are now engaged with a supply chain."*
>
> FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

In the Spotlight: The Manure Injection Partnership

Under the leadership of Pennsylvania 4R Alliance and coordinated by Sustainable Chesapeake, The Manure Injection Partnership is in the early stages of creating systems-level change. As a result of innovative implementation incentives and outreach/education activities, this BMP practice has already been adopted by many farmers across the Chesapeake Bay watershed. With the goal of making manure injection the new norm, the partnership has made great progress, thanks to INSR.

> *We are working to make manure injection with improved nitrogen management the 'new normal' for manure application in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. We have been working on this since 2015 and have been growing the Manure Injection Partnership since that time. We started with only a handful of units in operation (a few on farms, one owned by a manure applicator). Now, there are tens of thousands of manure injection acres throughout the watershed and at least 15 manure applicators (that we know of) that are owned by farmers.*
>
> COORDINATOR LEAD (SURVEY)

Integrated: Durable & Flexible Approaches

With INSR funding, grantees were able to develop, test, implement, and refine new approaches to their work across multiple scales, communities, sectors, and landscape types. INSR grantees, including the Pennsylvania Soil Health Coalition and the Riparian Forest Buffer and Lawn Conversion Advisory Committees, reported adopting more durable and flexible approaches to their work.

In the Spotlight: Pennsylvania Soil Health Coalition

The PA Soil Health Coalition (Coalition) formed in 2020 under the direction of the Stroud Water Research Center and was supported by INSR funding. Since then, the Coalition and its partners have generated new approaches to BMP implementation, education, and outreach.

Penn State, a Coalition partner, used INSR funds to develop a tool that recommends nitrogen application amounts based on site-specific soil and cover crop data. Working with USGS, Penn State also created a way to use remote sensing to verify cover crop plantings. INSR funding supported a Soil Health Benchmark Study by a Coalition partner, Pasa Sustainable Agriculture. In addition, funding was used for innovations in farmer-to-farmer networking and educational opportunities for farming communities about these tools and ways to use them.

PA No-Till Alliance, another Coalition partner, used INSR funds for programs in which skilled no-till farmers provided free mentorship to new farmers. The INSR Grants Program also funded regional soil health hubs, peer-to-peer networks in which small farmers learn from extension educators, field demonstrations, and one another. The hubs cover topics such as new BMP innovation and adoption, farmer-support networks for ongoing BMP use, and outreach to non-early BMP adopters.

> *The growth of the farmer-to-farmer mentoring programs has resulted in more than 20,000 acres of no-till cover crop and rotational grazing.*
>
> FUNDER (SURVEY)

In the Spotlight: Riparian Forest Buffer and Lawn Conversion Advisory Committees

The Riparian Forest Buffer and Lawn Conversion Advisory Committees (PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR)) established a direct contracting mechanism that is accelerating BMP implementation and reducing bottlenecks. It is also improving relationships between DCNR, its partners, and landscape professionals.

> *The Direct Contracting mechanism is already proving valuable in supporting the planting of watershed forestry BMPs: riparian forest buffer, conservation landscaping, and urban forest plantings. Using Commonwealth procurement procedures, DCNR can now establish contracts with both private companies and nonprofit organizations. This enables DCNR to work directly with highly-skilled professionals to complete all of the necessary steps of BMP implementation, from planning to planting and beyond.*
>
> LEADERSHIP TEAM (SURVEY)

Integrated: Collaborative Culture & Mindset

As a way of approaching stewardship and restoration work at scale, collaboration has become normalized. Focus group participants noted that the INSR Grants Program initiated a mindset shift from working in silos to what they described as a *web of work*. Several field liaisons remarked that NFWF has cultivated a collaborative culture, with another focus group participant saying that *coopetition* has replaced competition when seeking grant funding.

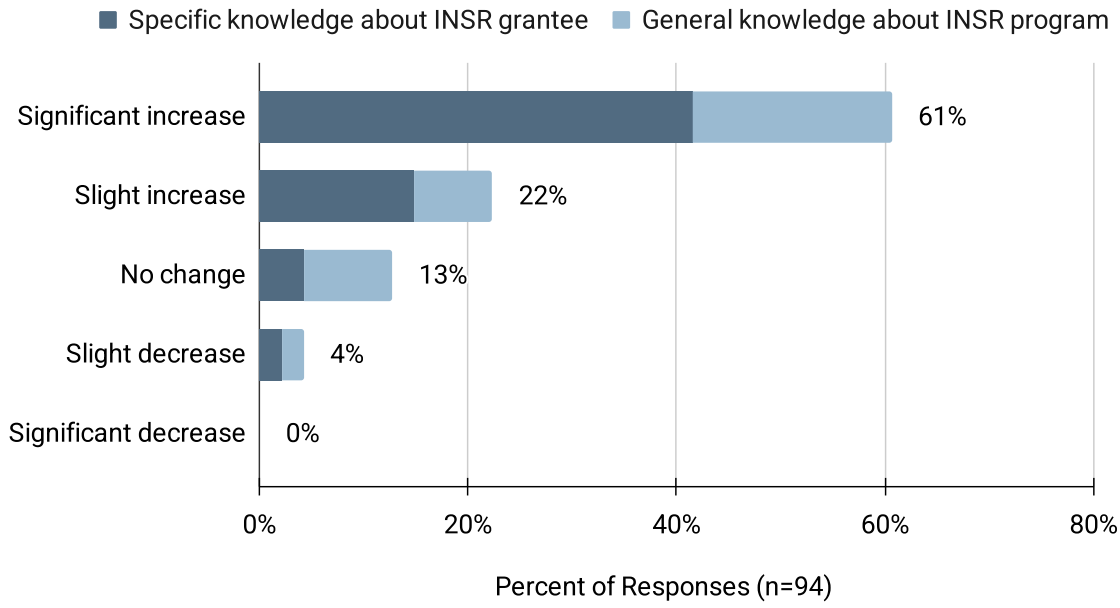
The INSR Grants Program has helped catalyze and infuse collaborative cultures and mindsets throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Organizations across sectors are joining forces to establish new collaboratives and apply for grants together, such as RVAH20 and other INSR grantees.

> *"A paradigm shift has occurred. A number of entities that previously pursued projects independently are now collaborating for joint projects. These projects would provide improvements that would reverberate throughout the entire watershed.*
>
> CONSULTANT (SURVEY)

The term *collaborative approach* is used repeatedly by INSR grantees, partners, and external entities such as consultants, contractors, and funders. According to a contractor who works with grantees, "*The **collaborative approach** has allowed us to work with landowners to try to wrangle multiple projects together, get the funding, and then implement them all, one after the other. Before the **collaborative approach**, we could generally only get one landowner on board at a time, which draws out the process.*"

Integration of a collaborative culture and mindset is further supported by 94 non-grantee responses to the survey prompt, "Since NFWF shifted its INSR grant program to funding collaborative capacity, what changes have you observed related to collaborative approaches to BMP implementation?" (Figure 26).

Figure 26. Observed Changes: Collaborative Approaches to BMP Implementation



83% of non-grantees surveyed confirmed observing increases in collaborative approaches to BMP implementation since INSR's shift to funding this kind of work.

In the Spotlight: RVAH2O

In the City of Richmond, VA, RVAH2O has emerged as an innovative partnership between city government, water-quality organizations, and community members that has brought all city departments together to discuss collaboration and barriers.

This collaborative mindset is further illustrated by the fact that RVAH2O has joined forces with two other INSR grantees, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay and the James River Association, to implement green infrastructure at public schools and libraries in Richmond.

> *This has resulted in breaking down silos and creating cross-departmental projects, in addition to working with nonprofit partners and community-based organizations.*
>
> PARTNER (SURVEY)

Integrated: Shift in Behaviors & Norms

Shifts have occurred in a variety of ways from multiple perspectives, such as INSR-funded collaboratives' emphasis on relationship building, perceptions about leveraging partner organizations' expertise, landowners' interest in environmental stewardship, and expansive thinking across the community of practice at large. One focus group participant described these impacts as *changing hearts and minds*.

Building Relationships: INSR-Funded Collaboratives

One example of a shift in behaviors and norms among INSR grantees is the important role of relationship building. As one noted, *We now recognize the importance of the human dimensions of our work, and another said, People ask about each other's families.* Study participants frequently highlighted the significance of investing in relationships with collaborative partners, community members, and specific landowners.

There is also increased acknowledgement that fostering or building those relationships needs to occur to instill the trust that is crucial for BMP implementation on private lands.

> *The thing that has really struck me about the most successful collaboratives is this whole context of community trust-building, something that the collaboratives who seem to rise to the top have really been attentive to.*
>
> RECIPIENT OF SERVICES (SURVEY)

Leveraging Expertise: Partner Organization

Collaborative partner organizations described leveraging expertise as another example of shifting behaviors and norms. **Instead of being responsible for all aspects of BMPs (e.g., education and outreach, fundraising and fund distribution, implementation), it has become routine to rely on partner organizations' expertise through clearly defined roles.**

In the Spotlight: Trout Unlimited

Trout Unlimited is an excellent example of a partner with specialized expertise in stream stabilization and habitat enhancement. INSR funding has allowed this group to do what it does best within a collaborative context at an accelerated pace.

> *"The collaborative approach/model has allowed Trout Unlimited to focus on technical assistance and implementation. Managing a collaborative can be a heavy lift, and other organizations more uniquely positioned to do that allowed my organization to do what it does best. For example, in one collaborative, we identified each organization's skill set/focus. This allowed Trout Unlimited to focus on steam stabilization and habitat enhancement on a particular project, while another organization like Chesapeake Bay Foundation concentrated on riparian buffer establishment. Our previous baseline had three to six projects annually in some form of design or implementation in VA. Now it's six to 12 annually.*
>
> PARTNER (SURVEY)

Interest in Environmental Stewardship: Landowners

In interviews and surveys, grantees reported increased demands for BMP implementation by land- and homeowners—a theme that also emerged in all four of the in-person focus group sessions. Reports of implementing BMPs beyond what is required have also increased.

> *"Some of our farmers are now independently increasing acreage/practices beyond requirements due to increased efficiencies and carbon benefits.*
>
> CONTRACTOR/CONSULTANT (SURVEY)

Moreover, survey participants who received services from grantees (i.e., landowners) described how they now see this work as part of their mission: *Our overall mission is to create lasting wellness at the individual and community level, which relies on a network. Being able to access such wellsprings of professional and personal support has been life-changing.*

Expansive Thinking: Approach to Water-Quality Improvement

The INSR Grants Program's contribution to expanded thinking about ways to approach water-quality improvements is reflected in a wider acceptance of diverse BMP types, target audiences, ways to think about innovation, and/or approach this work.

From outreach practices to specific types of BMPs, it is now generally accepted that there are multiple ways to approach sediment and nutrient reduction in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Different types of BMPs and landowners (e.g., farmers, homeowners, churches, schools/libraries) are now seen as key to making progress toward improved watershed health.

> "
>
> *More opportunities have developed for BMP implementation. I've been in this field for 20 years. The growth in funding different types of BMPs has significantly increased over the past five to seven. It's not just stream work—fencing/crossings/buffers. It's the lawn-to-habitat conversions and other green and conservation landscape techniques that are now being funded. This diversity in projects funded is very helpful in marketing to all landowners, not just farmers.*
>
> CONTRACTOR/CONSULTANT (SURVEY)

The INSR Grants Program also broadened individuals' perspectives about what innovation can look like. *One of the big benefits of this program, quite simply, is for people to step back from what they thought was innovative and kind of reframe it. Reframe their understanding of what innovations are, such as how we work together.*

In the Spotlight: Greater Baltimore Wilderness Coalition

The Greater Baltimore Wilderness Coalition (GBWC) is a perfect example of a collaborative that has embraced an expansive-thinking mentality in its bold approach to connecting people to green spaces. When GBWC had to make a slight pivot in their tree-planting initiative in order to join forces with state partners overseeing Maryland's Trees Solutions Now Act of 2021, they credited NFWF and its funding for expanding their thinking.

> "
>
> *This funding gave us the confidence and the time to create new ways of thinking about 'impact'…. It has instilled courage to think in a transformational way and to invite others to do the same. It expands capacity to do transformational work.*
>
> COORDINATOR LEAD (SURVEY, FOCUS GROUP)

Theme 4: Processes Accelerated by Increased Capacity

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

» Grantees observed that the process of acceleration takes time and capacity, and is more likely to occur once a collaborative has moved into its life cycle's sweet spot and is performing at optimal levels (see Figure 2).

» Grantees accelerated multiple processes that cluster into five emergent dimensions: collaborative development and functioning, integration of effective collaborative approaches, information sharing and BMP implementation, integration of effective BMP-related approaches, and network expansion.

» Ongoing investments in collaborative capacity—especially for coordination—were vital to sustaining optimal performance levels, which intertwine with accelerating information sharing and BMP implementation.

Acceleration is different than impact: it focuses on the process of impact generation, or *how* impacts are realized.

One of the key evaluation questions for determining if the INSR Grants Program is meeting its goals was, "In what ways did this increase in capacity further the INSR program's primary objectives of accelerated BMP implementation (rate and scale), information sharing and dissemination, and institutionalization of effective approaches?"

Comprehensive analyses of qualitative and quantitative datasets from surveys, interviews, focus groups, grant proposals, reports, and other quantitative datasets provided by NFWF revealed that INSR grantees generated five main types of acceleration:

- Collaborative development and functioning.
- Integration of effective collaborative approaches.
- BMP implementation and information sharing.
- Integration of effective BMP-related approaches.
- Network expansion.

More than 80% of grantee interviewees shared that it takes time and capacity for a collaborative to establish, build momentum, move into its sweet spot, and perform at optimal levels.

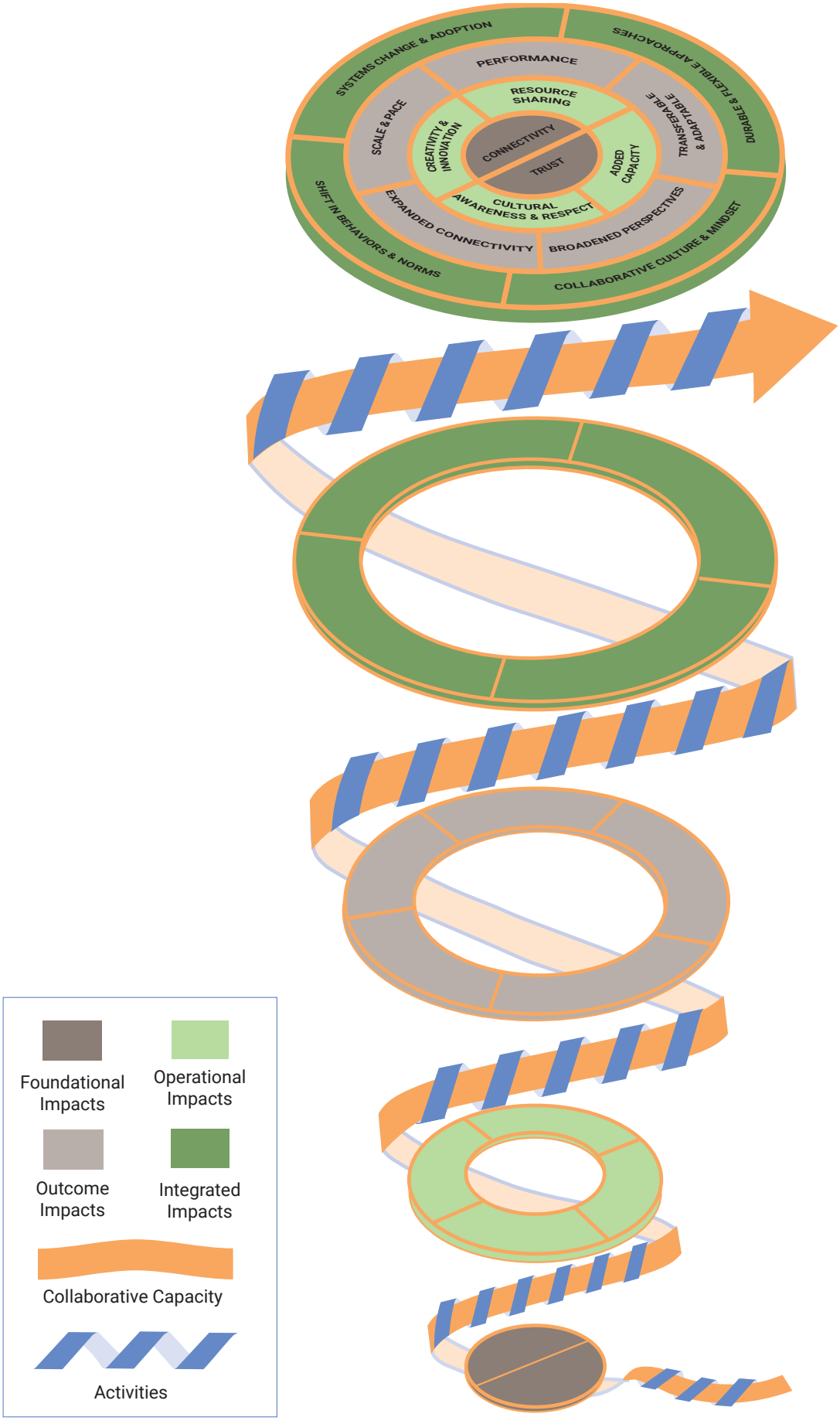
> *The funding of the collaboratives has provided many NGOs with the ability to perform the critical activities of coordinating meetings and events where important information exchange happens. Without dedicated funds to pay for a person's time, that level of coordination is almost impossible to conduct. So, the administrative and staff time covered by INSR Grants has been just as important as the funds that are dedicated to funding BMPs.*
>
> FOUNDING MEMBER (SURVEY)

The Collaborative Capacity Impact Model™ (see Figure 6), which includes the Process of Accelerating Collaborative Impacts,™ (Mickel & Farrell, 2025) illustrates the dynamic nature of generating, scaling up, accelerating, and sustaining collaborative impact over time. It also illustrates the interconnection of these impacts with collaborative capacity and is applied here to illustrate how processes of acceleration unfold.

It is important to note that acceleration of collaborative development and functioning is intertwined with the acceleration of BMP implementation and information sharing. It is symbiotic, reciprocal, and interdependent.

Collaborative capacity (represented in orange in Figure 27, next page) serves an ongoing and vital role in scaling up and accelerating impacts over time. It enables activities and outcomes (represented in blue) that generate foundational, operational, outcome, and integrated impacts.

Figure 27. The Process of Accelerating Collaborative Impacts™



4.1: Collaborative Development & Functioning

Increased collaborative capacity funded by INSR grants enabled activities that accelerated its development and function. As collaboratives generated and scaled up foundational and operational impacts (see Theme 2 and Theme 3.3), their scale, pace, and performance also increased. The Virginia Soil Health Coalition is an excellent example of how this process unfolds.

As mentioned earlier, collaboratives have different capacity needs, which are shaped by their life-cycle stage and design. **Therefore, it is important to underscore that a formulaic or uniform approach to accelerating development and functioning does not exist.**

Nevertheless, lessons can be learned and shared within each collaborative's context. For example, in their start-up stages, some INSR grantees focused on partner coordination; initial strategy-setting, governance, planning, and systems; and infrastructure needs. Other, more established grantees, accelerated their development and performance by expanding staff capacity or broadening their governance structure to increase their outcomes and/or address critical needs.

INSR-funded capacity was essential for collaboratives to become high-performing more quickly.

In the Spotlight: Virginia Soil Health Coalition

In 2013, Virginia Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) launched the Virginia Soil Health Coalition (Coalition) to expand opportunities for outreach, education, and collaboration. Until its first INSR grant award in 2020, the Coalition operated as a committed but relatively informal group of approximately 13 members that focused on research, outreach and education, and technical and financial assistance. INSR funding enabled the Coalition to hire its first coordinator (Director), increase its membership, and concentrate on priority coalition strategies and its structure and systems.

During the first two years, the Director focused on partner outreach and relationship building, collaborative convening, information sharing, and collaborative systems and infrastructure development. During that time, the Coalition's membership almost tripled, its governance structures improved, and quarterly meeting attendance increased to an average of more than 75 participants. With that expansion, INSR-funded capacity was used to develop the Coalition's shared strategies and priorities for sustainable growth and to meet VA's Phase III WIP goals. This resulted in an updated comprehensive and inclusive vision, mission, and adaptive strategic plan.

Similarly, INSR funding resulted in added capacity to improve Coalition communications systems, including the addition of up-to-date calendars, resource lists, blog entries, and meeting information to its website. It also supported new strategies and outreach methods to access diverse audiences—from farmers, landscape professionals, and urban farmers to homeowners and youth.

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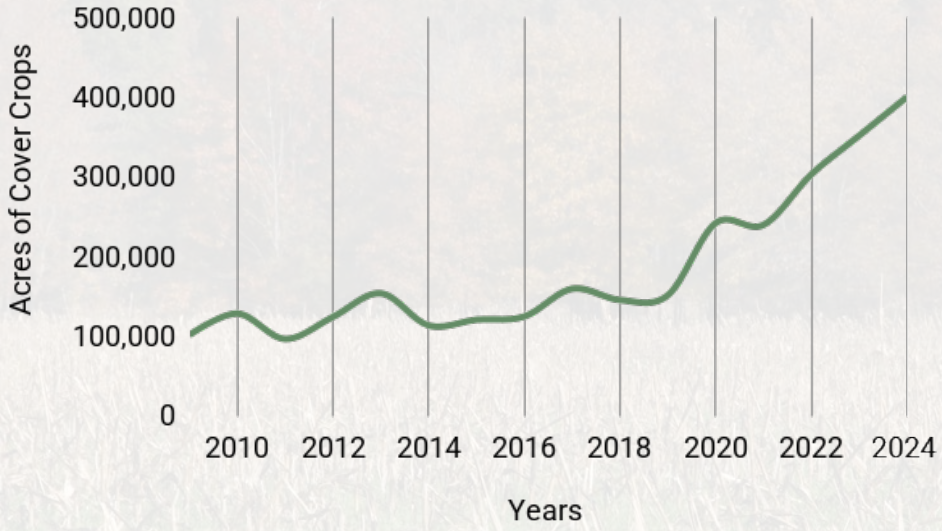
> *We have seen four-fold growth in coalition membership and significant growth in meeting participation. Producer trainings and podcasts are reaching hundreds of participants. And more than 20,000 acres of BMPs—including no-till, cover crop, and rotational grazing—have been implemented through our farmer-to-farmer mentoring program.*
>
> GRANTEE (SURVEY)

A high-priority BMP for the Coalition and the region, cover crop acreage started to rise in 2019, the year the Coalition received its first INSR grant. It is highly likely that the Coalition has contributed to sustained increases in cover crop implementation (Figure 28).

Figure 28. Virginia (Chesapeake Bay Watershed only): Cover Crops[1]



With its second INSR grant, the Coalition is focusing on strengthening its governance structure and expanding the impact and reach of its network. It is also exploring long-term, permanent funding mechanisms for backbone staff.

> *This is hard work and requires patient, year-over-year funding, but the payoff is significant. It builds enduring policy and public support for advancing sustainable agricultural practices that benefit the State's ag economy, natural ecosystems, water quality, and community health.*
>
> GRANTEE (SURVEY)

Within four years, INSR funding had accelerated the Coalition's development and functioning, increased outreach and information dissemination, and improved credibility and trust with partners. Recognizing the significant value of coordination capacity, the Coalition's leadership is working with a member, the Virginia Cooperative Extension, to permanently fund the Director role.

1. These data were generated from CAST. Commodity + Cover Crop represents the BMP. Region includes VA (CBWS Portion Only).

4.2: Integration of Effective Collaborative Processes

INSR grantees accelerated the integration of effective collaborative processes, including decision making, priority setting, hiring, and performance management for collaborative staff, as well as systems for tasks such as finance and accounting, internal communications, and data sharing.

Findings suggest that INSR grantees' collaborative development and function were linked to their ability to create and adapt requisite organizational processes and systems to achieve desired outcomes. Therefore, integration was more likely to occur when grantees were in their building and sustaining stages.

The likelihood that collaborative processes would be integrated or institutionalized increased when

- approaches had been successfully tested and adapted to different contexts;
- durable and flexible processes that could cope with unexpected challenges or be reinvented were in place;
- pace, scale, and performance were coupled with other outcome impacts (e.g., transferable and adaptable approaches, broadened perspectives, and expanded connectivity); and
- collaborative capacity needs had been met and sustained.

The Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative (SVCC) provides an excellent example of this accelerated process. Through INSR-funded collaborative capacity, SVCC generated foundational, operational, and outcome impacts, leading to integration of effective collaborative approaches. According to a funder, *The SVCC draws its strength from having a full-time paid coordinator. It's a night-and-day difference with other Regional Conservation Partnerships that do not*.

In the Spotlight: Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative

In 2017, the Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley (Alliance) and partners launched SVCC to increase coordination and teamwork to achieve shared water-quality, soil-health, and farmland-protection goals. The Alliance serves as SVCC's convener and fiscal sponsor. At the time of its first INSR grant award in 2019, SVCC had six engaged partner organizations, all of which understood the importance of process; however, poor communication, lack of time for relationship building, and lack of a clear shared vision (per grantee proposal) had caused each to experience setbacks.

INSR funding enabled SVCC to significantly increase its capacity and hire its first coordinator (Manager), strengthen and expand its partnerships, and strategically build its functionality. This included developing, testing, and adapting the collaborative infrastructure necessary to pursue and leverage funding like NRCS's Resource Conservation and Partnership Program and similar state and federal cost-share programs. SVCC partners have adapted their processes and infrastructure based on self-assessments. SVCC has also been able to establish other essential collaborative processes to accelerate the pace and scale of BMP implementation.

> *"We have standard procedures for requesting grant funding by partner organizations and determining which BMP projects get supplemental financial assistance from INSR Grants. We have developed shared geographical priorities, outreach materials, and SOPs for outreach events. We have even helped fund outreach staff at smaller nonprofits so they can better engage their communities in BMP-related outreach and follow-up efforts.*
>
> LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBER (SURVEY)

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Added capacity has also increased foundational (trust and connectivity) and operational (creativity, shared resources, and added capacity) impacts. SVCC has strengthened its performance and moved into the sweet spot of its life cycle.

> *We work with each others' partner offices to encourage the practice of 'piggybacking' conservation programs (federal, state, and private) to help maximize funding utilization and sharing of technical resources.*
>
> LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBER (SURVEY)

Similarly, INSR funding resulted in SVCC's increased capacity to focus on broadening outreach, partnership development and third-party assessments, and peer-to-peer learning activities.

> *Regular partnership meetings (multiple meetings per year) have brought partners together to help them engage in conversations on pertinent conservation topics. Field days and conservation speed dating events have brought partners together to help get the word out to farmers and landowners.*
>
> LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBER (SURVEY)

Increased funding has enabled them to engage more participants, facilitate enrollment in cost-share programs, build partner capacity, and maximize water-quality outcomes. These strategic fundraising and grant-making approaches are both scalable and transferable.

> *It takes multiple visits and discussions from various sources (e.g., a natural resource professional, a member of a nonprofit, a neighbor) before landowners decide to take the next step of implementing BMPs on their farms. The collaborative helped develop a common language where we now can all speak to our shared goals, even if the organizations we represent have differing missions. This results in landowners hearing the same message from multiple places, partners, and cooperators within the collaborative, thereby increasing the likelihood of implementing BMPs on their farms.*
>
> LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBER (SURVEY)

These examples reveal that SVCC has also increased outcome impacts—primarily, transferable and adaptable practices, broadened perspectives, and expanded connectivity.

> *What is much less tangible, but sometimes even more important, is the creation of new 'ties' between organizations—particularly those who are not 'usual partners.' This forms a denser network of relationships between organizations and agencies involved with the water-quality assessment, producer consulting, and BMP implementation spaces. This vastly improves resiliency of this work against changing external forces in the economic, ecological, and political/policy systems. I truly believe that the BMP implementation work in the Shenandoah Valley is vastly more resilient to these changes than prior to the INSR funding. Time will tell, but I am confident.*
>
> LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBER (SURVEY)

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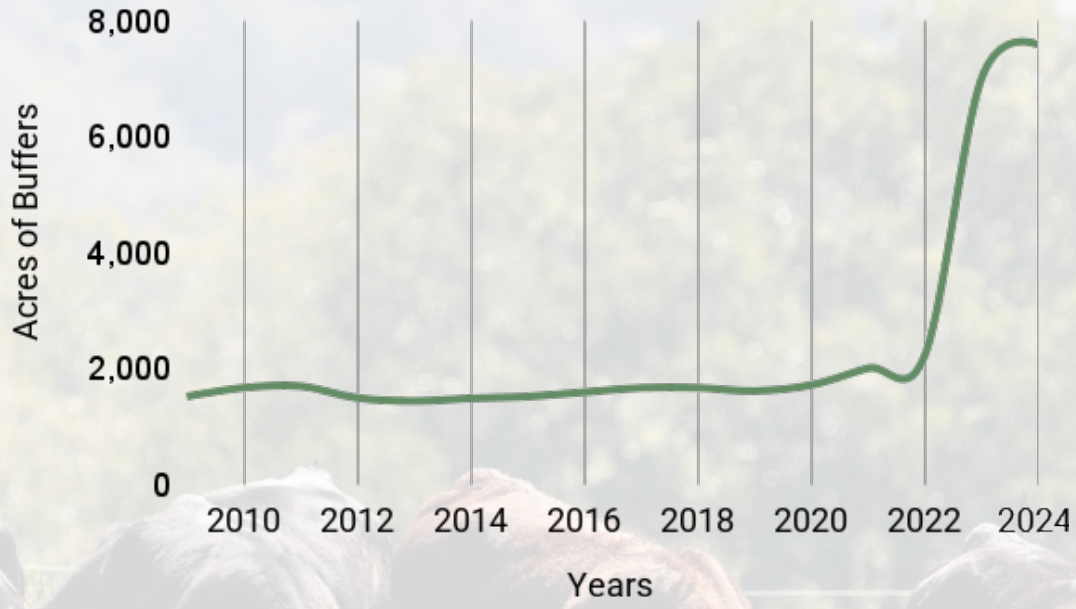
With this increased capacity, SVCC has been able to accelerate the integration of effective approaches that help strengthen and sustain its collaborative functionality, leading to increased pace and scale of BMP implementation.

Buffers with exclusion fencing are a high-priority BMP for SVCC and the region. As depicted in Figure 29, acres of forest and grass buffers on fenced pasture corridors have increased dramatically since 2022. It is highly likely that SVCC's capacity to accelerate the integration of these effective approaches has contributed to this increase.

Figure 29. Shenandoah Valley: Buffers with Exclusion Fencing[1]



1.These data were generated from CAST. BMPs include the following practices: narrow grass and forest buffers on fenced pasture corridor; grass and forest buffers on fenced pasture corridor. Regions include: VA-02070007-Shenandoah; VA-02070006-North Fork Shenandoah; and VA-02070005-South Fork Shenandoah.

4.3: BMP Implementation & Information Sharing

One of the primary questions this evaluation seeks to answer concerns the acceleration of BMP implementation and information sharing. **Findings suggest that for many grantees, INSR awards and matching funds have indeed contributed to the acceleration of both** (see 3.3 Outcome Impact section).

> *"BMP outcomes have been more accelerated, quicker. This is because there is a higher degree of trust, authentic collaboration, and desire for real outcomes. When a challenge arises, people take the time to come up with real solutions rather than band-aid solutions that won't really address the problem.*
>
> GRANTEE (INTERVIEW)

As with collaborative development and functioning, these processes occurred as the groups generated and scaled up foundational impacts (e.g., connectivity and trust with farmers, faith-based organizations, schools, homeowners) and operational impacts (e.g., resource sharing, added capacity, creativity and innovation, cultural awareness/respect).

> *"We [Lower Susquehanna Regional Partnership] have trusted partners who are as candid and as driven as we are. Each partner has more staff capacity and more money for projects. We share critical insights and solutions to shared challenges. We have increased leads to interested landowners via outreach and improved reforestation methods. Result: increased output (i.e., more acres of forest buffers).*
>
> COLLABORATIVE PARTNER (FOCUS GROUP)

To speed up BMP implementation and information sharing, capacity needs must be met. The likelihood of accelerated BMP implementation increases when collaboratives are functioning and performing at optimal levels. **The acceleration processes of BMP implementation and information sharing are closely aligned with collaborative development and functioning**.

> *"We [Lancaster Clean Water Partners] are entering a third INSR grant. In the first grant, our collaborative mapping tool, Watershed Leadership Academy action teams, and Clean Water Fund were established. We developed a delisting strategy and chose the catchments. Through the second INSR grant, we've been able to rally partners around delisting strategies in addition to engaging municipalities. Acceleration means more BMPs in the same amount of time and/or shorter timelines for implementation.*
>
> COLLABORATIVE PARTNER (FOCUS GROUP)

As the pace of BMP implementation picked up, so did the need to sustain these investments; grantees reported ongoing capacity needs to maintain implemented BMPs. (This is further discussed in the upcoming emerging challenges and outstanding collaborative capacity needs section.)

4.4: Accelerating Integration of Effective BMP-Related Approaches

Across all geographic levels, BMPs were more likely to be integrated by INSR-funded collaboratives when the scale, pace, and performance of BMP implementation and information sharing were combined with other outcome impacts (i.e., transferable and adaptable approaches, broadened perspectives, expanded connectivity).

Furthermore, shifts in behaviors and norms indicated that effective BMPs and information-sharing practices had been adopted and integrated. Findings suggest that expanded connectivity facilitated adoption across a range of INSR-funded collaboratives, geographic regions, and sectors. Systems-level changes showed that practices or approaches had been widely integrated, which was more likely to happen when they had proven to be durable and flexible.

The James River Living Shoreline Collaborative (LSC) exemplifies two acceleration processes related to BMP implementation and information sharing. Through INSR-funded collaborative capacity, LSC fast-tracked foundational, operational, and outcome impacts, leading to the integration of effective BMP implementation approaches. Without collaborative capacity, these acceleration processes would not have occurred.

In the Spotlight: James River Living Shoreline Collaborative

The James River LSC was initiated in early 2019 with support from its backbone organization, the James River Association (JRA). During its formation and early building stages, partners strengthened relationships, identified areas of collective opportunity, and pinpointed key barriers to successful implementation of living shoreline BMPs. Subsequently, JRA identified the need for more resources to refine LSC's partner roles, develop its systems and structures, and support engagement.

After two years in operation, LSC received its first INSR grant. The collaborative capacity and BMP funding the grant added translated to significant progress in formalizing the LSC steering committee; creating Action Teams to collaborate on training, monitoring, implementation, and outreach project deliverables (specifically, the launch of the Chesapeake Bay Landscape Professional Living Shoreline [CBLP-Shorelines] training program); and advancing monitoring protocols. LSC's engagement with homeowners, businesses, and the public also increased steadily over the grant period

> *"With the advertising and outreach efforts undertaken by the Collaborative, there have been many more opportunities to increase awareness and participation in BMP cost-share programs, which have increased the rate of implementation.*
>
> LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBER (SURVEY)

The second INSR grant enabled JRA to further strengthen LSC's governance structure and identify suitable areas for living shorelines with high vulnerability, which could inform future BMP implementation. Following the assessment, added technical capacities provided through the INSR funding enabled JRA and LSC partners to conduct site visits to further confirm project viability, develop designs, and help landowners with the permitting process. INSR funding also provided incentives to substantially reduce shoreline construction costs. This, plus the increased outreach

previously described, resulted in a viable project pipeline, a proven workflow, and resources necessary to accomplish living shoreline construction.

> *The Living Shoreline Collaborative has successfully supported the design, permitting, and installation of multiple living-shoreline projects through several partners working together. Examples include sharing and loaning materials in limited supply, providing volunteer labor for each other's projects, and assisting each other with site evaluations and design questions. We also developed a new participatory monitoring program to increase the quality and quantity of living-shoreline monitoring data to make comparisons across projects.*
>
> LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBER (SURVEY)

INSR funding supported the development of priorities; project assessments; targeted outreach; BMP planning, design, and implementation; data sharing; technical assistance; and incentivized implementation funding. Assistance from other INSR-funded collaboratives also increased LSC's operational impacts.

> *Collaboration among regional partners with living shoreline cost-share programs supported more residential living shorelines that would likely not happen without technical and financial support from the collaborating partners. For example, the Elizabeth River Project trained technical support staff at the James River Association to conduct the same type of cost-share program support.*
>
> LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBER (SURVEY)

Within four years, INSR collaborative-capacity funding has accelerated the pace and scale of living shoreline restoration (BMPs) as well as information sharing and distribution. It has also increased trained professionals through the CBLP-Shorelines training and expanded relationships and connectivity with other regional collaboratives and organizations to share practices.

LSC has also accelerated the integration of effective approaches for BMP implementation at multiple scales: within the James River watershed, within the larger Chesapeake Bay, and across different sectors. These include workforce training and development, living shoreline cost-share, technical assistance and incentive programs, and BMP demonstration projects. LSC's added convening and coordination capacity has facilitated the sharing of these approaches within the James River region and beyond. It has also worked with other regional collaboratives to transfer and adapt approaches that best meet region-specific goals.

> *Larger-scale living shoreline projects are now happening on agricultural lands because of the example and cooperative process model developed for the Berkeley Plantation living shoreline project. Another example are trainees in the INSR-supported CBLP-Shorelines program who are now implementing larger-scale living shorelines that likely would not have happened without this collaborative training program. Additionally, we learned through collaboration with other organizations that monitoring and maintaining these projects is just as important as the initial implementation. We have adopted a maintenance SOP based on the lessons learned from other collaborative members.*
>
> LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBER (SURVEY)

4.5: Network Expansion

The INSR Grants Program and its grantees are also accelerating the expansion of networks at local, regional, and Chesapeake Baywide scales. As described in 3.3 Outcome Impacts section, the added capacities funded through the INSR program have resulted in increased relationships, including broader networks and INSR grantees serving as regional hubs. These affects are typically achieved by more mature, higher-performing collaboratives operating in their life-cycle sweet spot (see Figure 2).

Network expansion is more likely when increased connectivity is combined with other outcome and integrated impacts, such as increased scale and pace, broadened perspectives, the use of transferable and adaptable approaches, and shifts in collaborative culture and mindset. Some INSR grantees (e.g., the Rappahannock River Roundtable, supported by its backbone organization, Friends of the Rappahannock) are accelerating network building within their regions by facilitating meetings, forums and convenings (e.g., the Rappahannock River Symposium) in addition to serving as regional hubs and capacity builders.

In the Spotlight: Rappahannock River Roundtable

Dedicated to land and water conservation, community outreach and education, and capacity building throughout the entire Rappahannock River Watershed, the Rappahannock River Roundtable is accelerating network building within its region through INSR-funded collaborative capacity.

The annual Rappahannock River Symposium provides opportunities for roundtable partners to collaborate and share research, successes, program highlights, new projects, management tools, and more. Symposium participation continues to grow, with 150 attendees in 2024. This and other events are helping accelerate expanded connectivity and network building.

> *"This [INSR] funding enabled us to expand to include multiple co-coordinators, develop a formal advisory board, and hire a part-time staff person. I don't think any of us had any idea how valuable and successful the Rappahannock River Roundtable could be, given the opportunity to 'spread its wings.' The Rappahannock River Symposium is an excellent example of the success of the Roundtable."*
>
> GRANTEE REPORT

> *"Additionally, the funding being secured across the region by a diversity of organizations is a testament to the collective impact we can have as a collaborative. We are excited to continue to build capacity for the Roundtable and expand its leadership and participation."*
>
> GRANTEE REPORT

Accelerated network expansion is even happening at the Chesapeake Bay watershed scale. Findings from this evaluation show that collaboratives are forging and expanding relationships with other collaboratives across geographies, topic areas, and sectors.

This expansion is being catalyzed by opportunities to participate in forums such as the Chesapeake Bay Agriculture Network Forum (hosted by NFWF), the Chesapeake Watershed Forum (hosted by the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay), and others. It is also being driven by efforts to increase efficiency (e.g., coordinate on grant applications) and effectiveness (e.g., share templates and best practices), as well as to reduce barriers to large-scale watershed and water-quality improvements (e.g., share technical expertise, solutions, and approaches).

The development of this expanded network has been cultivated and accelerated by connections being made by NFWF INSR program managers and field liaisons, as well as other partners region-wide (e.g., Alliance for Chesapeake Bay). **In many ways, NFWF could be described as serving as the backbone for an emerging practitioner network of regional collaboratives**. It supplies added coordination and convening capacity, facilitates the sharing of resources and information, and provides a repository for data sharing.

Some grantees spoke to the added value and increased efficiency they saw from working with other regional collaboratives to develop the necessary capacities, systems, and infrastructure for implementing and scaling regional BMP activities.

The emergence of a network mindset in and among grantees is an unanticipated impact of NFWF's INSR Grants Program. NFWF and its grantees are serving as network connectors.

Photo credit: Institute for Engagement & Negotiation

FINDINGS: EMERGENT CHALLENGES & OUTSTANDING COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY NEEDS

Strategically addressing emergent challenges can increase the effectiveness and efficiency of collaborative approaches in achieving regional watershed action plan goals.

Evaluation findings also include emergent challenges and outstanding collaborative capacity needs. Those presented here address two evaluation questions: "What are additional collaborative capacity needs that would further the INSR Program's primary objectives and/or other desired outcomes?" and "What negative unintended consequences emerged from this type of investment?"

Holistic analyses of relevant data from all sources (i.e., surveys, interviews, focus groups, and grant reports) revealed 217 mentions of challenges and drawbacks; these translated into eleven themes[10] (see Appendix N, Figure 36) and five challenge categories.

Themes related to sustaining BMP investments and collaborative functioning were mentioned most frequently; followed by measuring, reporting, and communicating impacts; and finally, regional gaps and inefficiencies. The challenge categories are listed according to the frequency with which they were mentioned.

Challenge 1: Meeting Growing BMP Demands & Sustaining Investments

- 1.1: Activating Project Pipelines & Scaling Projects
- 1.2: Sustaining BMP Investments

Challenge 2: Fostering & Sustaining Collaborative Functioning

- 2.1. Sustaining Collaborative Capacity Investments
- 2.2. Supporting Effective Collaborative Governance
- 2.3. Fostering Collaborative Health
- 2.4. Maintaining Institutional Knowledge & Qualified Staff

Challenge 3: Measuring & Reporting Co-Benefit Impacts

- 3.1. Measuring Collaborative Capacity & Other Co-Benefits
- 3.2. Tracking Outcomes

Challenge 4: Communicating Impact & Return on Investment

- 4.1. Understanding the Importance of Collaborative Capacity

Challenge 5: Regional Gaps & Inefficiencies

10. While some of these categories are consistent with drawbacks and challenges that other organizational models typically experience, others are specific to collaborative models, given their differences in structures, governance, compositions, and processes.

Challenge 1: Meeting Growing BMP Demands & Sustaining Investments

Success is often accompanied by unintended consequences and new types of challenges. In this case, a high percentage of grantees who are accelerating BMP projects—especially those in the building and sustaining life-cycle phases—reported increasing demands for new or expanded capacities, innovation, and scaled approaches, as well as resources to maintain existing BMP investments. These additional capacity needs and associated challenges are described here.

1.1: Activating Project Pipelines & Scaling Projects

More than 25% of the grantees who were interviewed or attended a focus group reported that the added collaborative capacity received through the INSR Grants Program enabled their collaboratives to create a pipeline of interested landowners or organizations seeking to implement BMP projects. In some cases, this included grantees developing a regional work plan that prioritized project design and implementation actions.

While project pipelines and workplans are measures of successful engagement and strategy-setting, grantees identified factors that affected their ability to quickly activate projects within those pipelines and workplans. Specifically, they reported challenges with grant and agreements administration, a lack of trained professionals and qualified staff, and project-management complexity.

Complex Grant & Agreements Administration

Grantees noted that accessing requisite project design and implementation funding often requires administering multiple grants and agreements, each with its own individual procurement, matching, and reporting requirements. Additionally, various kinds of funding often have different agreement periods or limitations on allowable expenditures. One subawardee shared: *Procurement is a challenge!!! Each funding source has specific procurement requirements, which can cause confusion and misunderstandings among partners.*

> *“Matching grant funds continue to be challenging because of the number of grants needed to fund single restoration projects. The varying complexity of associated paperwork and reimbursement timelines can strain cash flow on extensive portfolios of projects for extended periods of time.*
>
> GRANTEE (INTERVIEW)

Challenges inherent in overseeing complex contracting requirements mirrored those encountered when administering grants. As one grantee observed, *Contracting at this scale and across this many organizations' projects presents several challenges that the partnership is collectively addressing, including procurement; scope of work and timing of maintenance activities; contracting; and communication between our partners, local liaisons, hired contractors, and landowners.* Additional complexities included integrating state and federal contracting requirements across large-scale projects or multiple landownerships, which also typically come with increased liability and insurance demands.

> *“The administrative burden on grantees has increased significantly over the past four years. This burden not only affects awardees, but it also affects subawardees and contractors. The time it takes to convey content ichanges to contracting and procurement is significant and adds delays to the planning and implementation process.*
>
> GRANTEE (INTERVIEW)

Lack of Trained Professionals & Qualified Staff

Grantees also reported a lack of trained professionals and technical assistance, specifically engineers, project managers, landscape architects, hydrologists, and contractors needed to support BMP planning, design, and implementation. The pool of knowledgeable individuals is small and those in it typically have ample employment opportunities, which can foster high turnover. This is especially true for nonprofits, which may not be able to offer competitive salaries. As one grantee stressed, this can limit project success. *The Technical Service Provider staff turnover rate is so high that a different person delivers messages each time. This turnstile of providers makes it hard for farmers to develop any level of trust and sours their feelings towards conservation*.

Large-Scale Project Management Complexities

A final limiting factor is the complexity of large-scale project management, which requires a great deal of time to meet permits and compliance, quality assurance project plans, and other regulatory requirements. As described by a grantee, *The time and technical skills needed to prepare QAPPs and compliance requirements are huge, especially at a regional scale. Centralized technical assistance is needed, especially for partnerships that do not have technical capacities.*

In addition, several grantees noted the compounding challenge of effectively meeting these demands under short grant periods, as well as the lack of flexible funding for financial-incentive programs to catalyze landowner participation and fill gaps in state and federal programs. This includes challenges associated with having to continually manage multiple grant sources into larger grants with longer terms in the absence of aggregated federal, state, regional, and philanthropic funding.

1.2: Sustaining BMP Investments

Sustained funding and capacity for BMP maintenance was the second most commonly mentioned drawback to achieving long-term watershed health and water quality improvements. Many grantees recognized the importance of maintenance activities. According to a field liaison, *I think a downside of successfully getting projects on the ground quickly is quality control. It would be good to go back and look at some of these projects and say, are they being maintained? Is the investment being protected?*

> *"The biggest challenge is finding funding for human capacity and for maintenance. It is easy to find funding for innovative and new-project implementation, but more challenging to find funding for maintaining the projects and systems that we know work.*
>
> COORDINATIOR LEAD (SURVEY)

Grantees described encountering a range of challenges related to sustaining and maintaining BMP investments. Among them: limited funding for protecting, monitoring, and maintaining BMP projects; a lack of centralized access to information about and qualified people for BMP maintenance; and finding funding that is not innovation-focused (or interpreting what constitutes an *innovative* approach).

> *"Funding and training for maintenance remains a barrier, and maintenance is often the holdup with permitting. How can we train more city staff, retain these staff, and have the equipment necessary to properly maintain BMPs so that they function and continue to be aesthetically pleasing?*
>
> GRANTEE (INTERVIEW)

In addition, most of the interviewees acknowledged that while funding BMP maintenance and monitoring is allowable under the NFWF INSR and SWG programs, many grant programs (including the INSR program) put emphasis on *accelerating innovative and effective* BMP implementation, thereby limiting the scale of maintenance funding available.

> *"To be competitive, it's got to be new and shiny. We're hesitant to apply for money to sustain an existing, established, and successful program because funders have not been as interested in those proposals. It's hard to find funding for refining and improving established programs, often because the program has been established for so long.*
>
> GRANTEE (INTERVIEW)

Several study participants suggested the need for a systemic shift in the funding community toward sustaining work as well as catalyzing or accelerating it. Some grants might provide three years (occasionally, up to five years) for BMP maintenance activities; however, this is rarely based on landscape characteristics, relevant environmental stressors, or interventions needed to maximize BMP benefits and outcomes. Focus group participants shared that needing to continually represent their work as *new and innovative* versus *maintaining and sustaining* is both time-consuming and challenging.

Challenge 2: Fostering & Sustaining Collaborative Functioning

Challenges related to collaborative functioning were frequently mentioned. These are grouped into four subcategories: sustained collaborative capacity funding, collaborative governance, collaborative health, and institutional knowledge and qualified staff.

2.1: Sustaining Collaborative Capacity Investments

Drawbacks associated with the ability to identify and secure sustained funding for collaborative capacity were cited as the primary limitation under this thematic challenge area. Even when funding is available for collaborative capacity, several interviewees shared that it is often disproportionally lower than what is necessary to successfully implement the collaborative's BMP activities, or to support its ability to function and meet its collective needs.

> *"It all comes back to longevity and keeping the collaborative going. There needs to be more than just a collaborative structure in place; it needs consistent funding to have individuals uniquely focused on just the collaborative.*
>
> LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBER (SURVEY)

Some also observed that an unintended consequence of the INSR Grants Program's focus on accelerating BMP implementation is a reduced focus on capacities needed to increase and sustain their collaborative's performance. As explained by one grantee, *When faced with having to prioritize between them—funds for either collaborative capacity or BMP projects—we are often forced to reduce the essential capacities needed for running the collaborative, which affects our shared work.*

2.2: Supporting Effective Collaborative Governance

INSR grantees also reported inefficiencies in their collaboratives' governance structure and functions. They explained that the greatest drawbacks occurred when partner and collaborative roles, expectations, and limitations were undefined. Other governance challenges mentioned included partner fatigue, reduced participation, loss of momentum, and wavering commitment resulting from vague decision-making structures and accountability measures.

> *"As with any group effort, there can be differing drivers and expectations that can impact overall functioning and performance. This is exacerbated when there is unclear leadership structure within the overall partnership.*
>
> FISCAL SPONSOR (SURVEY)

Ill-defined pathways for partner participation were also noted as a challenge. This was attributed to unclear leadership structures, the absence of coordination capacity, and limited time for effective decision-making.

2.3: Fostering Collaborative Health

More than 80% of grantee interviewees shared that it takes time and capacity (especially related to coordination) for a collaborative to establish, build momentum, and reach its optimal performance (AKA, sweet spot) life-cycle phase. And just as it does with any organizational model, it also takes time and resources to track and maintain collaborative health.

> *"Collaboratives develop at the speed of trust and relationship building. It takes intention, capacity, and partner commitment to build momentum, demonstrate collective success, and maintain continuity.*
>
> GRANTEE (INTERVIEW)

INSR grantees noted that successes in fostering collaborative health and maintaining a collaborative's performance are reduced when coordination inconsistencies or limitations exist. Ineffective facilitation and internal communications, or limited time for strategy setting and relationship building (given other demands) were also discussed.

Grantees shared that these drawbacks particularly affect the ability of smaller NGOs and agencies to fully participate in collaborative work. Several interviewees noted that smaller organizations' reduced capacity affects their ability to access INSR Program grants. Finally, focus group participants described challenges associated with adapting and improving their backbone organization's systems and infrastructure (e.g., data sharing, fundraising), which are essential to supporting their collaboratives.

2.4: Maintaining Institutional Knowledge & Qualified Staff

INSR grantees reported challenges with turnover among coordination leads and partner representatives, resulting in the loss of institutional knowledge and skills. They also described a lack of trained collaborative coordinators and facilitators, limited professional and collaborative leadership-development programs, and insufficient preparedness for partner turnover and succession planning.

> *Often funders have difficulty being patient with the time it takes to see measurable environmental quality outcomes of collaborative capacity work. Collaboration moves at the speed of relationships! When there is employment churn and turnover, this may slow this process down further. However, staying committed to investing in organizations to help them have the capacity (both competency-based as well skill-based) to effectively scale up measurable outcomes makes them more resilient to otherwise disruptive contextual changes.*
>
> COORDINATOR LEAD (SURVEY)

Challenge 3: Measuring & Reporting Co-Benefit Impacts

As previously discussed, one of the goals of the INSR program is to measurably increase and accelerate the rate and scale of BMPs (as identified through the Chesapeake Bay TMDL and associated WIPs) in a defined regional project-focus area. More specifically, NFWF supports efforts that accelerate these improvements to address nonpoint source agricultural pollution from small and medium operations, and stormwater runoff from small and/or unregulated communities.

As such, grantee progress and outcomes are primarily gauged by physical and chemical conditions, and by habitat protection and restoration metrics directly tied to sediment and pollution reduction and stormwater runoff. Grantees input data under these metrics into the FieldDoc data platform[11] as a part of their INSR reporting requirements.

An unintended consequence of having to report under these metrics is that the broader benefits to the bay's biological or other physical resources (e.g., restoring wetlands, living shorelines) tend to be expressed primarily in terms of nutrient reductions (Stephenson & Wardrop, 2023). Similarly, measuring the social and economic benefits of collaborative regional approaches—such as accelerating pollution reduction and restoration practices, or increased behavior change and adoption of BMPs—were often overlooked and are not captured in terms of nutrient reduction metrics.

> *The criticism I've heard is funders being too focused on things that we can estimate—pounds or percents for—and not actually promoting innovation. And I think the real innovation we've been seeing is related to the collaborative capacity-building side of things.*
>
> NON-GRANTEE (INTERVIEW)

> *Since the models still depend on input related to BMP practices, it can be hard for agencies and organizations to step outside that paradigm, to see what still needs to be improved, critiqued, bolstered, and refined for greater efficacy of the farming system and regional ecosystem as a whole.*
>
> COORDINATOR LEAD (SURVEY)

11. In 2018, The Commons launched FieldDoc, a software platform built to assist NFWF and other funders in standardizing how applicants reported their projects; it uses BMP definitions from the EPA's Chesapeake Bay Program and integrates the CAST model to automatically calculate local nutrient and sediment load reductions. This platform is unique because it allows grantees to map their nature-based work and gives them a way to share detailed, location-specific data with funders.

This lack of a broader suite of comprehensive metrics and reporting was cited as a limiting factor. Specific drawbacks grouped under this theme fell into two subcategories: a lack of tools and metrics to measure collaborative capacity and other co-benefit impacts, and tracking and reporting inefficiencies.

3.1: Measuring Collaborative Capacity & Other Co-Benefits

The INSR Grants Program does not provide performance measures for, nor require that grantees report on the health and functioning of the collaborative itself. That said, more than 80% of interviewees reflected on NFWF's commitment to collaborative conservation and stewardship approaches as a mechanism for successful BMP implementation.

Challenges qualifying and quantifying the impacts of funding collaborative capacity were most frequently referenced under this theme, followed by difficulty measuring overall INSR Grants Program and grantee progress and impacts. Most of the interviewees noted that in the absence of performance measures, consistent reporting on the impacts, benefits, and accomplishments associated with working under a collaborative model is difficult to achieve.

> *"A challenge of funding collaborative capacity is that it can be difficult to quantify the benefits. We feel the benefits, but the language of mathematics sometimes can't be used to describe them—at least, in the short term. Other language and metrics must be used.*
>
> COORDINATOR LEAD (SURVEY)

INSR grantees also relayed that other social and environmental co-benefit outcomes and impacts associated with collaborative projects (e.g., economic value, carbon sequestration, biodiversity improvements) are often overlooked, thereby reducing opportunities for highlighting multibenefit approaches and pursuing other co-benefit fund sources. Similarly, some of these co-benefits could potentially be used as additional indicators for improved water quality and watershed health.

Grantees offered other reflections related to needs for:

- ways to effectively address perceptions that investing in regional collaboratives reduces funding for, and acceleration of, BMP implementation;
- more substantive economic impact analyses to illustrate to landowners the potential benefits of adopting BMPs;
- more comprehensive and meaningful measures of impacts associated with information dissemination and behavior change; and
- a repository of more "story-based" ways (e.g., case studies, videos, survey data,) to capture broader benefits beyond sediment and pollution reduction.

> *"We need better social science understanding among agency folks and decision-makers around indirect benefits of networks, increased understanding and focus on co-benefits to allow for innovation in WIP, need for bringing in more holistic partners, etc.*
>
> COORDINATOR LEAD (SURVEY)

3.2: Tracking Outcomes

Fifty-five percent of the grantees interviewed felt that the FieldDoc reporting system does not capture the full scale of activities and outcomes their collaboratives and partners have achieved through INSR funding. Most indicated that it also does not allow collaboratives to holistically report all of the additional (leveraged) BMP and other socio-environmental outcomes generated through the addition of collaborative capacity under the INSR Grants Program.

The most commonly shared drawbacks under this theme included having to enter the same data into multiple databases, usually as required by a government or philanthropic funding program; entering data into a system other than FieldDoc, thereby not capturing it under INSR; and not being able to enter BMP activity outcomes unless these data are geospatially linked, which generates concern for landowners who do not want their information recorded.

Overall, respondents indicated that using many water-quality-monitoring data repositories can hinder their ability to comprehensively track progress and meaningfully report results on investments to grantors, elected officials, and the public. In one situation, a grantee grappled with how to prevent double-counting outcomes, given that their project scope had multiple fund sources, each of which required them to use the same reporting metrics.

Challenge 4: Communicating Impact & Return on Investment

It is challenging to effectively communicate why and how collaborative approaches can accelerate and scale up BMP improvements as well as foster long-term watershed health. Recognizing that this is an essential "force multiplier" for conservation, NFWF created *Tell Your Story: Communications Tool Kit* for grantees in 2019. However, several grantees noted that this tool needs updating and does not convey the impact and return on investment (ROI) of sustained regional water quality improvements.

> "
> *There is a need for communication materials or simplified messaging on social, ecological, and financial values. This should include cost savings, real costs, and how the work benefits everyday people and communities—in addition to distilling the costs of not supporting water quality, soil health, and habitat restoration.*
>
> GRANTEE (FOCUS GROUP)

Challenges with communications and marketing emerged as drawbacks and came up in multiple focus group discussions. Grantees observed that communicating the ROI of this work is limited by the difficulty of quantifying long-term, direct, and indirect benefits (as noted in Challenge 3). The lack of clear, scalable, and relevant messaging and communication strategies for diverse audiences (e.g., decision-makers, elected officials, funders) was also an issue for them.

Several grantees engaged marketing consultants to develop and popularize relevant and catchy language, and many have developed materials (e.g., annual reports, briefing sheets) to build support, understanding, and recognition. Despite having these resources, several participants expressed an inability to effectively communicate the compelling nature of their work in the absence of baywide messaging that can be tiered, scaled, or adapted by each region. Access to document templates (e.g., annual reports) and media training was also identified as a need.

> *"There is a large need for Chesapeake Baywide messaging and strategy-setting that places emphasis on the potential for ecosystem services provided by farmers to all communities, including the economic and community-health benefits to even smaller farms and systems, including risk mitigation through conservation.*
>
> GRANTEE (FOCUS GROUP)

4.1: Understanding the Importance of Collaborative Capacity

Non-grantee interviewees acknowledged the need for collaborative capacity. However, some were clear about the value of refining the INSR's focus to funding collaborative capacity, while others were not. Several non-grantees raised concerns that this refined focus had led to fewer innovative approaches or BMPs being implemented.[12]

Those expressing concerns also said they lacked sufficient information to determine if funding collaborative capacity has led to improved water quality and so could not make an accurate judgment. One non-grantee expressed this concern during an interview: *I believe that it costs more to have these collaborative projects. So, that means that fewer projects get funded. Which means that it may not be hitting the geography in the same way*.

It is worth noting that similar concerns exist in other regions across the country. They are often rooted in (mis)perceptions about collaboratives and their capacity needs. For example, some believe that collaborative capacity is *separate from and not interconnected with* impacts generated by regionally-led collaboratives; others perceive collaboratives as temporary efforts with limited capacity needs, or believe that organizational partners will fulfill those needs.

On the other hand, many grantee interviewees believe that the importance and benefits of funding collaborative capacity are clear, and that future grants could further emphasize this by strategically connecting capacity-building needs with desired grant outcomes. One subawardee suggested that future INSR grants could more explicitly link collaborative capacity needs to increased BMP activities.

> *"Whether the funding goes toward an incentive payment for new adoption or toward individual farmers receiving technical assistance for new adoption, it would be good to pair capacity-building with actual new implementation. That way, new implementation is being informed by capacity-building approaches, and the capacity-building projects always have in mind their ultimate end (more BMP implementation).*
>
> SUBAWARDEE (SURVEY)

12. These concerns are not surprising, as the relationship between a collaborative's performance and its ability to achieve and accelerate project outcomes and institutional impacts is not well researched or documented. This is especially true given the time it takes to start and build a collaborative to reach the maturity/success stage. However, recent and emerging research indicates that traditional funding models focused only on discrete projects severely limit the diversity of funding recipients and the scale of collaborative initiatives' successes, and that collaborative performance and project performance are relational (Baxter & Land, 2023).

Challenge 5: Regional Gaps & Inefficiencies

Some INSR grantees shared that the growing adoption of collaborative approaches comes with emerging needs, process inefficiencies, and unanticipated drawbacks. Limited access to effective strategies, approaches, and innovations being used by other regional collaboratives was the most commonly identified drawback. This was coupled with a lack of technical support and expertise to address complexities associated with modifying and scaling organizational systems and infrastructure to work for collaboratives. *Administering these collaboratives is hugely complicated and expensive, including allocating budgets to many other organizations.* According to field liaison, *There are only so many organizations that can carry that administrative burden.*

Some grantees described grappling with whether work should be performed through the collaborative or by individual partner organizations (i.e., uncertainty about which would be more efficient). Others identified inefficiencies and landowner confusion stemming from the duplication of outreach and fundraising efforts across a region as a result of one collaborative (or partner) being unaware of the other's work, or lack of clarity regarding regional roles. Grantees indicated that these issues were compounded by the large influx of project funding and the emphasis on accelerating BMP activities.

A number of grantees highlighted the need for more baywide and subregional communication and coordination between and across collaboratives to address the above challenges. Many noted that existing forums helped with this, but more focused convenings are necessary.

> "
>
> *Expanding beyond the geography of a watershed-specific lead organization is problematic. While other regions want to join and benefit from the collaborative, there is no statewide or coast-wide organization to convene groups across multiple watersheds.*
>
> SUBAWARDEE (SURVEY)
>
> *What's missing is a regional conference so all grantees could reach partners they might not know about in order to see what other tools and knowledge are in this region.*
>
> GRANTEE (INTERVIEW)

Other regional gaps include the challenges smaller organizations face in successfully securing INSR Program grants, given their reduced capacity to both apply for funding and actively participate in regional collaboratives. This issue was noted by several interviewees, who expressed concerns about how this negatively affects the program's geographical reach and impact. As one grantee asked, *What are the opportunity costs of leaving smaller organizations out?*

Some interviewees and focus group participants expressed similar concerns about the lower number of collaboratives focused on BMP implementation in urban environments. Several pointed out that, given the increased permitting and project implementation complexity as well as the need to coordinate with regional and municipal agencies, costs to implement those BMPs can also be much higher.

> "
>
> *Having funders understand the co-benefits of urban BMPs is a challenge. Typically, these projects are costly, with less pollution reduction, but they provide quality-of-life improvements for communities.*
>
> GRANTEE (INTERVIEW)

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations address the previously described challenges. Based on this report's findings, insights from study participants and researchers, and the broader field of practice, they fall into five main categories. Each is designed to strengthen the effectiveness and reach of NFWF's INSR Grants Program's primary objectives as well as further accelerate, innovate, and sustain local and regional BMP implementation through collaborative models.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen & Expand the NFWF Chesapeake Bay Grant Program Portfolio

1.1: Fully Invest in Collaborative Capacity
1.2: Sustain Project Investments
1.3: Scale & Connect the NFWF Chesapeake Bay Grant Programs
1.4: Expand the Field Liaison Program
1.5: Increase Efficiencies with Grant Application & Administration Processes

These recommendations address Challenge 1 (Meeting Growing BMP Demands & Sustaining Investments) and Challenge 2 (Sustaining Collaborative Health).

Recommendation 2: Formalize the Emerging Chesapeake Bay Practitioner Network

2.1. Assess & Affirm the Purpose/Value of Establishing a Practitioner Network
2.2. Provide a Centralized Hub to Access Essential Resources
2.3. Continue & Expand Support for Regional Forums
2.4. Establish a Grantee Peer Learning Cohort

These recommendations address Challenge 1 (Meeting Growing BMP Demands & Sustaining Investments) and Challenge 5 (Regional Gaps & Inefficiencies).

Recommendation 3: Broaden Evaluation & Reporting Metrics & Tools

3.1. Develop Core Collaborative Capacity & Impact Performance Measures
3.2. Initiate the Development of a Social Network Model for NFWF Grant Programs
3.3. Measure & Report Co-Benefit Impacts
3.4. Centralize & Standardize Core Reporting Metrics Currently Captured in Multiple Platforms

These recommendations address Challenge 2 (Sustaining Collaborative Health) and Challenge 3 (Measuring & Reporting Co-Benefit Impacts).

Recommendation 4: Invest in Strategic Communications, Messaging, & Marketing

4.1. Refresh the 2019 NFWF Toolkit & Centralized Communications Resources
4.2. Create a Centralized Communications Hub

These recommendations address Challenge 4 (Communicating Impact & Return on Investment).

Recommendation 5: Support Systems-Level Innovation & Solutions

5.1. Share Accurate Regional Data Across Partners
5.2. Increase Regulatory Efficiencies
5.3. Broaden & Institutionalize Funding for Incentive Programs

These recommendations address Challenge 1 (Meeting Growing BMP Demands & Sustaining Investments) and Challenge 3 (Measuring & Reporting Co-Benefit Impacts).

Recommendation 1: Strengthen & Expand the NFWF Chesapeake Bay Grant Program Portfolio

NFWF's INSR Grants Program is accelerating BMP implementation, information sharing, and regional collaborative development to achieve water quality and watershed health improvements within the Chesapeake Bay region. The following five subrecommendations are provided for consideration to expand and sustain that impact.

1.1: Fully Invest in Collaborative Capacity

NFWF could strategically integrate collaborative capacity funding into grants that support collaborative approaches to improving regional watershed-health outcomes (e.g., BMP planning, design, and implementation; information sharing; innovation). Flexible, grantee-directed collaborative-capacity funding would enable existing and emerging regional collaboratives to strategically identify specific capacity elements needed to accelerate and/or sustain their performance, based on their life-cycle stage and collaborative design.

1.2: Sustain Project Investments

NFWF could broaden grant objectives and outcome language to include "sustaining" (or other appropriate language) beyond just "accelerating" BMP activities and outcomes. Sustaining funding would focus on the successful establishment and life-cycle maintenance needs of priority BMP projects and activities. NFWF could also provide and promote successful BMP maintenance strategies, funding approaches, and other mechanisms to ensure that BMP investments are sustained over time to yield maximum impact.

1.3: Scale & Connect the NFWF Chesapeake Bay Grant Programs

NFWF could modify its current grant portfolio to increase the scale and duration of regional awards, address current gaps, and promote a grant-making approach that includes greater differentiation between each type of grant (e.g., INSR, SWG). This would include clear guidance on which type best aligns with grantees' capacities and desired environmental and social outcomes. Modifications for consideration are described here.

Large Land & Waterscape Block Grants

Consider the creation of larger ($5M+, five- to eight-year) regional block grants that scale and sustain projects and programs focused on increasing land and waterscape health through a collaborative model. These would be delivered through regional collaboratives. Where feasible, they would be designed to align federal, state, and philanthropic priorities and funding sources; implement regionally prioritized BMP activities with requisite collaborative capacities; and create efficiencies for both funders and grantees.

INSR Grants Program

NFWF should continue to administer its successful INSR Grants Program at the current scale, and consider increasing the grant duration period to up to five years, with a possible two- or three-year extension (tapered funding) for maintaining BMP/collaborative outcomes and/or addressing critical funding gaps. In recognition of the program's broader social and environmental co-benefits and impacts, NFWF could also consider renaming it Regional Watershed Health and Capacity Grants. Similarly, NFWF could further evaluate if and how to increase grantee representation from the urban sector, given some of the unique limitations that exist when working in these environments. This could include exploring alternative models for funding urban water quality improvements.

Collaborative Assessment & Accelerator Grant Program

NFWF could initiate and catalyze a grant program that targets both priority regions (those with limited or no collaboratives supporting priority watershed health and water quality outcomes) and regions with emerging and smaller collaboratives in the forming and early building life-cycle stages. The program could support collaborative assessments, foster regional relationships, help build trust, and explore governance structures and other foundational enabling conditions for successful regional BMP/collaborative outcomes. NFWF can play a vital role in ensuring that resources and funding flow to those who most need it.

Planning and Technical Assistance Grant Program for Regional Collaboratives

NFWF could broaden its Planning and Technical Assistance Grant program to include the types of technical assistance listed below. It could also consider having consulting-services agreements in place to provide approved collaboratives with direct technical assistance in meeting these needs.

- Collaborative leadership skill development.
- Financial sustainability and business plan and model development.
- Multiorganizational agreement administration, contracting, and risk management.
- Environmental compliance and permitting.
- Data management, monitoring, and Quality Assurance Performance Plan development.
- Workforce development (e.g., program establishment, accreditation, research).

Small Watershed Grant Program

NFWF should continue the successful delivery of this grant program and could modify its focus to meet specific planning, design, and implementation needs not addressed by other grant types. This program could also support testing new techniques, practices, and tools that could be further implemented by or transferred to larger-scale activities. NFWF should also consider extending the grant period to three years.

1.4: Expand the Field Liaison Program

Many interviewees and focus group members spoke about the value of the Field Liaison Program, specifically the "connection" roles and technical expertise the liaisons provide. Most also shared a strong desire for NFWF to consider expanding the scope and geographic scale of the program's services. These could include:

- **Facilitating grantee peer exchange and learning** in a more structured manner (e.g., through webinars, convening sessions, field visits). The exchanges could be based on specific management practices, relevant topics, shared issues, needs, and others.
- **Providing collaborative-capacity assessment and mentoring** to newly forming collaboratives in early life-cycle stages, with an emphasis on underrepresented/high-need regions.
- **Increasing outreach to urban and natural resource–focused potential grantees** to further expand BMP implementation in those areas.
- **Sharing and distributing transferable practices and effective approaches**. This would be coupled with technical services and coaching to help collaboratives determine if or how they might adopt them to support successful grant outcomes.

1.5: Increase Efficiencies with Grant Application & Administration Processes

The INSR Grants Program could benefit from assessing how to improve internal application and reporting processes, reduce barriers, and increase efficiency, to include:

- **Facilitating structured input from current and previous INSR grantees** on a biannual basis to identify barriers and areas for improvement, and implementing recommendations as feasible.
- **Considering an alternative, simplified, invitation-only application process** for regional block grants based on meeting internally developed criteria (e.g., high performance, high impact [ROI], structured prioritization and decision-making processes).
- **Considering increasing indirect administration costs** commensurate with the size, scale, and complexity of proposed project outcomes as well as corollary capacity and coordination requirements. Similarly, assessing the efficacy of creating an indirect cost specific for collaborative capacity (akin to indirect costs for organizational capacity).
- **Providing direct awards to subgrantees** for large grants.
- **Considering a streamlined payment process** based upon grantee milestones (e.g., 25% of award provided once grant agreement is signed).
- **Pursuing discussions with other funders to explore the creation of a single state- or region-wide portal** for watershed-health and water-quality-improvements grant applications and reporting.

Recommendation 2: Formalize the Emerging Chesapeake Bay Practitioner Network

As described in this report's findings, NFWF has served as both a funder and collaborator in increasing the connectivity and capacities of its grantees and their partners. In part, this has been accomplished through conferences, forums, peer learning, exchanges, and other convenings that enabled innovations, BMPs, and collaborative practices to be shared regionally. They also created relationships across collaboratives and geographic regions, some of which have gone on to forge partnerships that further accelerate BMP delivery or develop innovative solutions to common challenges. Study participants spoke of the value and need to continue and formalize what has been described as an emerging network of networks.

NFWF is well positioned to work with regional collaboratives, the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network, and other organizations to further co-create and support a Chesapeake Baywide Practitioners Network (Practitioners Network). The Practitioners Network could provide a forum that would more intentionally foster connectivity, exchange, and collective action across the Chesapeake Bay region. Four subrecommendations to accomplish this follow.

2.1: Assess & Affirm the Purpose/Value of Establishing a Practitioner Network

NFWF could work with a subset of regional collaborative representatives and field liaisons to explore the need for a baywide Practitioners Network and the value it could add. Provided there is agreement, NFWF could serve as the Practitioners Network Coordinator and facilitate both its formation and operations, including exploring its purpose, role, structure, and participation.

2.2: Provide a Centralized Hub to Access Essential Resources

The majority of study participants identified a need for access to resources, tools, protocols, templates, and case studies to reduce duplication of efforts and to capitalize on other collaboratives' innovative approaches. NFWF is well positioned to host and manage this hub, given its familiarity with grantee's projects and products as well as its broader work through the Funders Network and with other partners. The hub could initially include:

- A directory of current BMP techniques, permitting tools, incentive programs, template agreements, case studies, applied research, and relevant publications.
- A map of existing regional collaboratives.
- A "who's who" directory of regional collaboratives and their designated coordinators, leads, geography, and focal topic areas.
- Applicable regional datasets and maps not available through the Chesapeake Bay Data Hub.

2.3: Continue & Expand Support for Regional Forums

NFWF plays an instrumental role in supporting and, in some cases, leading regional forums (e.g., the Chesapeake Bay Agriculture Network Forum, etc.). NFWF and its partners should continue to support these forums and consider hosting others focused on urban and natural BMP implementation to help galvanize regional connectivity, share resources, and foster collective action.

2.4: Establish a Grantee Peer-Learning Cohort

Numerous funders and regional networks promote cohort-based learning models as tools to encourage relationship building, collaboration, problem-solving, and shared learnings. The NFWF INSR Grants Program lends itself to cohort-based learning, given that many grantees are seeking peers with whom to exchange lessons, challenges, and opportunities. They are also seeking to develop new skills, practices, and relationships that can benefit their collaborative and help achieve grant outcomes. NFWF could support the development, pilot, and assessment of a two-year grantee peer-learning cohort; if successful, it could be incorporated into NFWF's grant program.

Recommendation 3: Broaden Evaluation & Reporting Metrics & Tools

Creating tools and resources to measure regional partnership performance and impact was identified as a high need, as was consolidating or connecting the various BMP reporting platforms to reduce duplication and accurately capture outcomes. Effective metrics can help demonstrate how collaborative models achieve these outcomes, enable accountability for grant funds, mark key areas for improvement, and illustrate replicable successes. Additionally, reporting unexpected beneficial collaborative outcomes, innovation, and adaptation is important for capturing emergent ideas and lessons. The following four subrecommendations are actions that NFWF could lead to help address these needs.

3.1: Develop Core Collaborative Capacity & Impact Performance Measures

As described in this report's findings, ongoing investments in collaborative capacity are essential to generating and sustaining collective outcomes and impacts. Similarly, the outcomes and impacts of investments in collaborative capacity and BMP implementation are interdependent. While many metrics exist to measure BMPs, few are available for measuring collaborative-capacity impacts, and even fewer for the broader, intertwined impacts of implementing regional watershed-health activities through a collaborative model. Qualifying and quantifying these impacts was a key challenge shared by many grantees.

NFWF is well positioned to develop an agreed-upon set of indicators and metrics for the broader and interdependent impacts achieved through collaborative models under its INSR Grants Program, building from the 15 impacts identified in the *Collaborative Capacity Impact Model™* (see Figure 6; Mickel & Farrell, 2025). These metrics, which could be developed in collaboration with the Chesapeake Bay's Funder Network and other funders at the forefront of collaborative stewardship and conservation work, could include alternative reporting mechanisms (e.g., case studies, storytelling, videos). Furthermore, the efficacy of these indicators and metrics could be piloted and assessed through a subset of NFWF's grantees prior to being incorporated in the grant-reporting process.

3.2: Initiate the Development of a Social Network Model for NFWF Grant Programs

Social network models can help funders, researchers, and practitioners understand the structure of relationships within a collaborative, a region, and broader geographies that make up the "network." Models are often used to visualize and analyze connections; identify who is a part of, or influenced by, the network's work; identify influential members/organizations; and understand how information and resources flow. This knowledge can inform decision making, improve communication across the network, identify key gaps and activity nodes, support strategic planning, and facilitate change management. Similarly, a social-network analysis can be used to further understand connectivity and extended connectivity impacts achieved through the INSR and broader NFWF programs.

3.3: Measure & Report Co-Benefit Impacts

Study respondents expressed concern that other social and environmental co-benefit outcomes and impacts associated with collaborative projects (e.g., economic value, carbon sequestration, biodiversity improvements) are often overlooked, thereby reducing opportunities for highlighting multibenefit approaches and pursuing other co-benefit fund sources. Similarly, some of these co-benefits could potentially be used as additional indicators for improved water quality and watershed health. NFWF could work with grantees, funders, and representatives from the Chesapeake Bay Program's Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee to explore the inclusion of other measurable co-benefit indicators and metrics that could be reported as outcomes for the INSR grant program, particularly natural area restoration projects.

3.4: Centralize & Standardize Core Reporting Metrics Currently Captured in Multiple Platforms

Grantees described processes for reporting metrics as duplicative and time-consuming. Many grantees use internal tracking software to record their progress on outreach and BMP implementation metrics. These platforms are different than those used by the NFWF Grants Programs (i.e., EasyGrants and FieldDoc). Moreover, grantees described inconsistencies in the ways metrics were collected across NFWF platforms. NFWF could form a working group comprising grantee coordination leads and field liaisons to explore the best ways to compile recorded metrics in one central location. This group also could survey grantees to determine how they track their work internally and seek their input on how to most efficiently and accurately report metrics to NFWF. Given that grantees found the metric-reporting processes to be cumbersome and onerous—taking away from valuable capacity that could be redirected to BMP implementation and other work—a grantee-informed solution to centralized metric reporting is strongly encouraged.

Recommendation 4: Invest in Strategic Communications, Messaging & Marketing

Study participants noted that effectively communicating ROI and impacts of collaborative stewardship and conservation is primarily limited by two things: difficulty in quantifying long-term, direct and indirect benefits and impacts, and not having clear, scalable, and relevant messaging and communication strategies for diverse audiences, including decision-makers, elected officials, and funders.

Focus group participants identified the need for an overarching baywide communications and messaging strategy that could serve as a roadmap and provide tools for regional collaboratives and local partners. The following two recommendations would support locally and regionally relevant communications.

4.1: Refresh 2019 NFWF Toolkit & Centralized Communications Resources

NFWF could refresh and expand the content in their 2019 *Tell Your Story: Communications Toolkit,* to include tiered and consistent messaging that could be adapted by grantees, regional collaboratives, and local partners. It could include, for example, core watershed health and water quality outcomes and themes; collaborative approaches and associated impacts; specific examples of how collaborative models have achieved a high ROI; plus other broad topics that would benefit from consistent, proactive, and scalable messaging. This information could be provided at various levels of technical detail to support multiple audiences. Similarly, NFWF could fund the development of case studies and core messaging to characterize how the INSR grantees, and NFWF programs overall, demonstrate their ROI.

4.2: Create a Centralized Communications Hub

Similar to the second point under Recommendation 2 (Formalize a Chesapeake Bay Practitioner Network & Community of Practice), NFWF is well positioned to support and potentially host a centralized communications hub. The hub could include:

- Effective existing grantee (or other organization) communications and marketing strategies and materials.
- Condensed, visually appealing fact sheets and short science summaries.
- Simple, clear frequently asked questions.
- One-pagers with talking points on complex or challenging topics.
- Presentation materials.
- A directory of ambassadors or experts who can effectively deliver key messages.

Recommendation 5: Support Systems-Level Innovation & Solutions

Systems-level solutions address the root causes of challenges by considering component interconnectedness. Study participants identified several systemic obstacles that limit the ability of regional collaboratives and organizations to achieve water quality and watershed-health goals. **The recommendations that follow are beyond NFWF's scope and are therefore directed to the Chesapeake Bay Program for consideration**. However, pursuing these could benefit the majority of, if not all, grantees.

5.1: Share Accurate Regional Data Across Partners

Coordinating data and analyses from multiple state, federal, nonprofit, Tribal, and private organizations is a complex undertaking. Focus group attendees, specifically grantees who coordinate larger regional collaboratives, identified the need for accessible and accurate regional datasets, including being able to share

data across partners. Few grantees, however, had the capacity to fund or host ArcGIS enterprise platforms or project-tracking databases.

NFWF could work with grantees and data-management experts to understand specific data-sharing needs and obstacles, including hosting requirements. Through this assessment, NFWF could identify workable solutions and strategies that it could support through its grant programs. Barriers that require resources, solutions, and coordination capacity beyond that which NFWF can provide could be shared with the Chesapeake Bay Program for further evaluation and possible action.

5.2: Increase Regulatory Efficiencies

Permitting and compliance for regional multibenefit projects that cross geographic, landownership, and regulatory boundaries are challenging, costly, and require increased time and capacity. These challenges (and others) were identified by study participants when pursuing regional outcomes through collaborative models. The following actions are recommended.

- **Support the development of an Advisory Committee** under the Chesapeake Bay Program designed to improve regulatory processes, coordination, and policies so that beneficial water-quality and watershed-health projects can occur more quickly, simply, and cost-effectively at both regional and local scales.
- **Prepare case studies illustrating projects** that effectively utilize a variety of permitting tools and innovative approaches to scale BMP projects.

5.3: Broaden & Institutionalize Funding for Incentive Programs

Most grantees described the significant benefits of incentive-based programs such as the Buffer Bonus Program, including how they can leverage the flexibility of NFWF INSR funds to fill critical gaps in federal and state incentive programs. Institutionalizing funding for incentives that yield long-term BMP adoption, implementation, and behavior change was a commonly shared study-participant priority. Based upon this and the current limitations of state and federal incentive programs, the following action is recommended.

- **Support the development of a baywide working group** to identify incentive programs with the greatest impacts, and to determine how to either institutionalize them or integrate them into federal and state programs through policy or legislative changes as appropriate.
- **Prepare case studies illustrating projects** that effectively utilize a variety of permitting tools and innovative approaches to scale BMP projects.

CLOSING REMARKS

> Their adaptability makes collaborative models well-equipped to meet the dynamic nature of today's most complex challenges. However, they need to remain durable to optimize their performance and maximize their potential.

The INSR Grants Program plays a valuable role in the Chesapeake Bay watershed and should continue its strategy of funding collaborative models to reduce sediment and nutrient pollution. It has contributed to growing the number of regionally led collaboratives, as well as to significant increases in the size, sophistication, and performance of many existing collaboratives. **These collaborative models have proven to be effective in scaling up BMP implementation and information dissemination across their respective regions and in generating many other impacts**. Moreover, collaborative models help advance a number of recommendations outlined in a recent article, *Restoration of the Chesapeake Bay: Lessons for other ecosystems* (Batiuk, 2025). These include actively engaging different parties through dialogue, integrating community-based efforts, and providing the public with frequent and transparent updates about the bay's water quality.

Collaborative models adaptability makes them well-equipped to meet the dynamic nature of today's most complex challenges. However, they need to remain durable to optimize their performance and maximize their potential. This requires sustained investments in collaborative capacity. Collaboratives and funders within and well beyond the Chesapeake Bay area are encouraged to explore innovative ways to generate support and diversify funding sources. As citizens and community members who benefit from the work of those stewarding, conserving, and restoring our lands and waters, everyone is encouraged to contribute to these collaboratives in any way that they can.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interviewees & Focus Group Participants

- Aaron Wendt, Virginia Shoreline Erosion Advisory Service / Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (focus group)
- Abby McQueen, Trout Unlimited, Inc. (focus group)
- Adam Herges, Mosaic Company (focus group)
- Adrienne Hobbins, Central Pennsylvania Stream Delisting Partnership / Chesapeake Conservancy (focus group)
- Adrienne Kotula, Chesapeake Bay Commission (interview)
- Alex Echols, Campbell Foundation (focus group)
- Alex Metcalf, Prime Prospects Behavior Change Partnership / University of Montana (focus group)
- Alisha Mulkey, Maryland Healthy Soils Program / Maryland Department of Agriculture (focus group)
- Allyson Gibson, Lancaster Clean Water Partners / Conservation Foundation of Lancaster County (interview, focus group)
- Amber Ellis, Upper and Middle James Riparian Consortium / James River Association (interview, focus group)
- Amy Baumann, Lancaster County Agricultural Preservation Partnership / Lancaster Farmland Trust (focus group)
- Amy Handen, Environmental Protection Agency Chesapeake Bay Program Office (interview)
- Amy Jacobs, Delmarva Wetlands Partnership / The Nature Conservancy (interview, focus group)
- Ann Mills, Agua Fund (focus group)
- Ann Steensland, Mosaic Foundation (focus group)
- Ashley Traut, Greater Baltimore Wilderness Coalition / The Stewardship Network (interview, focus group)
- Beth Futrick, Blair County Intergovernmental Stormwater Committee / Blair County Conservation District (focus group)
- Bonnie Sorak, One Water Partnership / Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake (focus group)
- Bryan Hofmann, Rappahannock River Roundtable / Friends of the Rappahannock (interview, focus group)
- Carin Bisland, Environmental Protection Agency Chesapeake Bay Program Office [former employee] (interview)
- Carol Wong, Scaling Up Biochar Partnership / Center for Watershed Protection, Inc. (focus group)
- Cassandra Davis, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (interview)
- Chris Eberly, One Water Partnership / Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake (interview, focus group)
- Chris Guy, United States Fish and Wildlife Service / Chesapeake Bay Program (interview)
- Christina Bonini, RVAH20 / Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay (interview, focus group)
- Christine Gyovai, Dialogue and Design Associates (interview)
- Craig Highfield, Healthy Streams Farm Stewardship Program / Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, Inc. (interview, focus group)
- David J. Hirschman, NFWF Field Liaison (focus group)
- David Wise, Pennsylvania Soil Health Coalition / Stroud Water Research Center (focus group)
- David Wood, Chesapeake Stormwater Network / Chesapeake Bay Program (interview)
- Dianne Russell, NFWF Field Liaison (focus group)
- Edward Gonzalez, NPS Chesapeake Bay Office (focus group)
- Elizabeth Grant, Clean Water Cumberland / County of Cumberland (focus group)
- Emily Thorpe, JBO Conservation LLC (interview)
- Eric Bendfeldt, Virginia Soil Health Coalition / Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (focus group)
- Eric Hughes, Environmental Protection Agency Chesapeake Bay Program Office / Chesapeake Bay Program (interview)
- Faren Wolter, USFWS (focus group)
- Gail Berrigan, Berkeley County Green Infrastructure Implementation and Workforce Development Partnership / Canaan Valley Institute (focus group)

- Holly Walker, Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (interview)
- Jake Reilly, NFWF (focus group)
- James E. Martin, Virginia Shoreline Erosion Advisory Service / Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (interview)
- Jamie Baxter, Prince Charitable Trusts (focus group)
- Jamie Brunkow, James River Association (focus group)
- Jason Fellon, Central Pennsylvania Stream Delisting Partnership / Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (focus group)
- Jeb Musser, Lancaster County Agricultural Preservation Partnership / Lancaster Farmland Trust (focus group)
- Jenell McHenry, The Mid-Atlantic 4R Nutrient Stewardship Association (focus group)
- Jenna Mitchell Beckett, Corporate Clean Water Partnerships / Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, Inc. (interview, focus group)
- Jeremy Hanson, Chesapeake Research Consortium / Chesapeake Bay Program (interview)
- Jess Blackburn, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay / Chesapeake Bay Program (interview)
- Jill Whitcomb, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (interview)
- Joanna Ogburn, JBO Conservation LLC (interview)
- Josh Walker, Shenandoah Valley Soil and Water Conservation District
- Kacey Wetzel, Chesapeake Bay Trust (interview, focus group)
- Kate Bartling, Lower Susquehanna Regional Partnership / Pennsylvania State University (focus group)
- Kate Wofford, Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative & Smith Creek Watershed Partnership / Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley (interview, focus group)
- Katie Brownson, United States Forest Service / Chesapeake Bay Program (interview)
- Katie Ombalski, NFWF Field Liaison (focus group)
- Kelly Shenk, Environmental Protection Agency, Region 3 (interview)
- Kelsey Mummert, Pennsylvania Riparian Forest Buffer and Lawn Conversion Advisory Committees / Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (focus group)
- Kevin McLean, Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (interview)
- Kevin Tate, Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative / Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley (interview, focus group)
- Kristen Heberlig, Mountains to Bay Grazing Alliance & Keyston 10 Million Trees Partnership / Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Inc. (focus group)
- Kristen Hughes Evans, The Manure Injection Partnership / Sustainable Chesapeake / NFWF Field Liaison (interview, focus group)
- Kristin Junkin, Envision the Choptank / Shorerivers, Inc. (interview)
- Kristen Saacke Blunk, NFWF Field Liaison (interview, focus group)
- Laura Cattell Noll, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay / Chesapeake Bay Program (interview)
- Lindsay Thompson, The Mid-Atlantic 4R Nutrient Stewardship Association (interview)
- Lisa Blazure, Pennsylvania Soil Health Coalition / Stroud Water Research Center (interview)
- Lisa Garfield, Million Acre Challenge / Future Harvest, Inc. (focus group)
- Liz Feinberg, NFWF Field Liaison (focus group)
- Lucas Waybright, Pasa Sustainable Agriculture (focus group)
- Lucinda Power, Environmental Protection Agency Chesapeake Bay Program Office (interview)
- Marel King, Chesapeake Bay Commission (interview)
- Mary Sketch, Virginia Soil Health Coalition / Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (interview, focus group)
- Matt Ehrhart, Pennsylvania Soil Health Coalition / Stroud Water Research Center (interview)
- Matt Pluta, Envision the Choptank / Shorerivers, Inc. (interview)
- Matt Royer, Lower Susquehanna Regional Partnership / Pennsylvania State University (focus group)

- Matthew Heim, Delmarva Restoration and Conservation Network / Lower Shore Land Trust (interview, focus group)
- Mauricio Rosales, Turkey Hill Clean Water Partnership / Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, Inc. (interview)
- Mckenzie Arrington, The Elizabeth River (VA) Watershed Partnership / The Elizabeth River Project
- Meenal Harankhedkar, One Water Partnership / Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake (focus group)
- Megan Blackmon, Lancaster Clean Water Partners / Conservation Foundation of Lancaster County (focus group)
- Megan Gallagher, Hillsdale Fund (focus group)
- Morgan Maloney, Conservation Innovation Fund (interview)
- Nick Miller, Maryland Healthy Soils Program / Maryland Department of Agriculture (focus group)
- Phoebe Murrell, The Elizabeth River (VA) Watershed Partnership / The Elizabeth River Project
- Pri Ekanayake, NFWF Field Liaison (focus group)
- Rory Maguire, Virginia Soil Health Coalition / Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (interview, focus group)
- Roy Hoagland, Virginia Environmental Endowment (interview)
- Ryan Davis, Healthy Streams Farm Stewardship Program / Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, Inc. (focus group)
- Samuel Vest, Trout Unlimited, Inc. (focus group)
- Sarah Cayton, Mountains to Bay Grazing Alliance & Keystone 10 Million Trees Partnership / Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Inc. (focus group)
- Sarah Clark, NFWF Field Liaison (focus group)
- Savannah Rhodes, Central Pennsylvania Stream Delisting Partnership / Union County Conservation District (focus group)
- Seth Coffman, Trout Unlimited, Inc. (focus group)
- Shannon Gaffey, Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative / Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, Inc. (focus group)
- Shawn Ralston, James River Living Shoreline Collaborative / James River Association (interview)
- Steve Saari, District of Columbia Department of Energy and Environment (interview)
- Su Fanok, Cocalico Creek Watershed Association / The Nature Conservancy (focus group)
- Teddi Stark, Pennsylvania Riparian Forest Buffer and Lawn Conversion Advisory Committees / Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (focus group)
- Tim Rosen, Envision the Choptank / Shorerivers, Inc. (interview)
- Wendy Walsh, Upper Susquehanna Coalition / Tioga County Soil and Water Conservation District of New York (interview, focus group)
- Whitley Gray, Envision the Choptank / Shorerivers, Inc. (interview)

Appendix B: Collaborative Models in Landscape Conservation & Stewardship

The field of landscape conservation and stewardship has emerged as a distinct approach to managing social-ecological systems at the scale most relevant to ecological processes and the flows of resources, species, and cultures (Baldwin et al., 2018; McKinney et al., 2010). Due to the scale and complexity that exists when looking across landscapes, collaborative approaches have emerged as one of the most common ways for people and organizations to come together and take collective action. They are increasingly being employed to fill governance gaps, resolve conflicts, build trust, and co-create inclusive processes that deliver multibenefit solutions (Baxter & Land, 2023).

A recent national survey of approximately 250 landscape conservation and stewardship collaboratives found that "the vast majority of collaborative initiatives have been formed in the past 20 years. The trend grew from 2000 to 2010 and then peaked in the past decade" (McDevitt, 2024). Part of the rationale for collaborative models is that when collaboration (i.e., the process of people working together toward a shared purpose) is done well, almost anything is possible by invoking the *collaborative advantage*, or synergies that come from working in this way (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Vangen & Huxham, 2013).

However, not all collaborative efforts are fruitful, and some can fall into collaborative inertia, with frustratingly slow or conflict-ridden processes (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Vangen & Huxham, 2013). Similarly, not every activity is suited to a collaborative approach. Understanding and assessing what can best be done through collaboration, and what can benefit from individual efforts is essential.

Appendix C: Integrative Mixed-Methods Approach

An integrative mixed-methods research approach (Proudfoot, 2023), which incorporates deductive and inductive methods, was applied in this evaluation. A deductive approach is best described as "top-down," beginning with a pre-existing theory or framework about a topic and collecting data to confirm or deny assumptions or hypotheses. An inductive approach works from the "bottom-up," beginning with collecting data, looking for patterns and regularities, sometimes collecting more data, and then generating conclusions. In short, a deductive approach is narrower and more concerned with confirming hypotheses, and an inductive approach is more open-ended and exploratory. A deductive/inductive hybrid thematic analysis combines the two.

Guided by existing frameworks described earlier, the researchers developed survey and interview questions to evaluate the INSR program and its impact via a deductive approach. Because funding collaborative capacity is a non-traditional approach to conservation and stewardship work, the research team also applied an inductive approach by remaining open to unanticipated themes that might emerge through interviews, focus groups, open-ended survey questions, and grantee proposals and reports.

Appendix D: Collaborative Capacity Frameworks

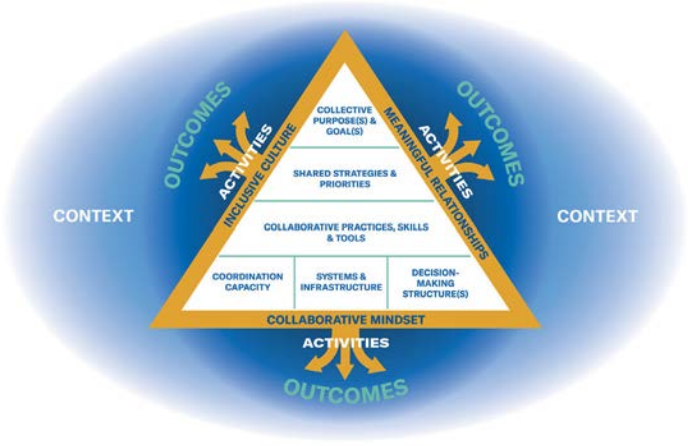
The Collaborative Capacity Framework (deSilva et al., 2022) and findings from a follow-up study (Baxter & Land, 2023) were applied in this evaluation; they were used to conceptualize capacity-building elements and collaborative activities and outcomes. The framework outlines key collaborative-capacity-building elements and identifies which of these are fundable. Research and practice have demonstrated that when appropriate structural elements of collaborative capacity are resourced—and the quality and performance of the binding elements are strong—collaboratives can produce greater, more durable environmental and social outcomes than any individual organization can achieve on its own.

The framework was the outcome of more than 25 interviews with state leaders, surveys with regional network practitioners in California, analyses of recent publications (including peer-reviewed research), and multiple forums held with national organizations. It builds on the Nonprofit Capacity Framework, which illustrates the capacities needed for an organization to perform and endure (McKinsey & Company, 2001). It describes the six fundable, structural elements of collaborative capacity (often referred to as collaborative infrastructure) represented inside the triangle depicted on the left of Figure 30, with the three binding elements of inclusive culture, collaborative mindset, and meaningful relationships on its perimeter. It is also being used by funders, including the Network for Landscape Conservation, and by practitioners nationwide to evaluate and fund capacity needs.

The study *What Does Collaborative Capacity Make Possible?* (Baxter & Land, 2023) further analyzes what collaborative capacity is and how it leads to improved conservation and stewardship outcomes. Based on expert perspectives gathered from in-depth interviews and focus groups with practitioners, leaders, and funders across the United States, it affirms the *Collaborative Capacity Framework* as well as a list of activities they enable. The study articulates why consistent, long-term investment in these elements is needed, and emphasizes contextual factors that affect collaboration.

Figure 30. Collaborative Capacity Frameworks

deSilva et al., 2022



Baxter & Land, 2023

Appendix E: Collaborative Impact Frameworks

The *Partnership Impact Model™* (Mickel & Goldberg, 2018) and the *Collaborative Capacity Impact Model™* (Mickel & Farrell, 2025) are used as guiding frameworks for classifying the impacts generated by INSR grantees (see Figure 31).

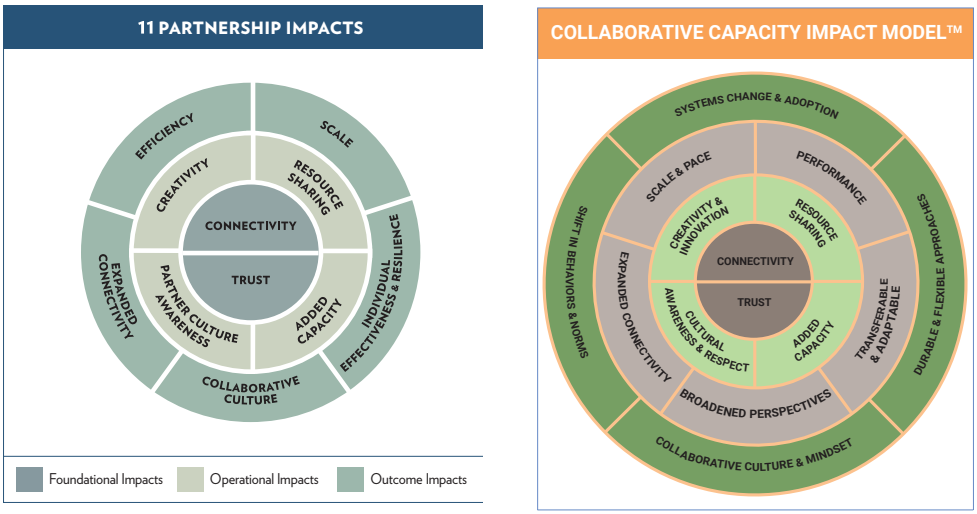
The *Partnership Impact Model™* is the outcome of a four-year study designed to identify the complex elements of partnership impact. A multimethod approach was employed; surveys, interviews, and field observations were used to collect data; statistical, content, and social network analyses were used to analyze these data.

The focus of the research was One Tam, a landscape-scale, multistakeholder partnership committed to stewarding the lands on and adjacent to Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, north of San Francisco. This model has already proven useful for a number of landscape stewardship partnerships and networks seeking to more accurately capture, assess, and communicate their value, including The Stewardship Network, and the Roundtable on the Crown of the Continent (Mickel & Farrell, 2021).

The *Partnership Impact Model™* includes a suite of concepts and processes that partnerships might consider when it comes to delivering, measuring, evaluating, and communicating the value of their collaboration. The *Partnership Impact Model™* includes three impact classifications: foundational, operational, and outcome.[1] These encompass a system of 11 interdependent, scalable impacts essential to starting, building, and sustaining partnerships. The model has practical implications for collaboratives and funders seeking to understand, describe, and optimize partnership impact.

The *Collaborative Capacity Impact Model™* adapts[2] and expands the *Partnership Impact Model™* by adding a fourth impact classification: integrated. In addition, the *Collaborative Capacity Impact Model™* increases the number of interdependent impacts to 15 and highlights the vital role of collaborative capacity. This model has additional practical implications for collaboratives and funders seeking to understand how investments in collaborative capacity can generate, accelerate, and sustain collaborative impacts and optimize collaborative performance.

Figure 31. Impact Models



1.The Partnership Impact Model™ was created by Amy Mickel, PhD, and Leigh Goldberg based on the work and impact of the One Tam partnership and findings from a four-year partnership study. The project was funded by the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, commissioned by the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, guided by One Tam Director Sharon Farrell, and supported by One Tam agency partners. This model was first published in the study's final report, Generating, Scaling Up, and Sustaining

2.The original Partnership Impact Model™ outcome impacts and the operational impact of awareness are recharacterized.

Appendix F: Evaluation Questions

- How did collaboratives use the funding to meet their capacity needs?
- What did this increase in capacity enable the collaboratives to accomplish?
- What are the primary benefits of investing in collaborative capacity (compared to other types of grants)? What unintended consequences (positive or negative) emerged from this type of investment?
- In what ways did this increase in capacity further the INSR Program's primary objectives of accelerated BMP implementation (rate and scale), information sharing and dissemination, and institutionalization of effective approaches?
- Have these investments in collaborative capacity improved modeled water quality outcomes?
- What are additional collaborative capacity needs that would further INSR Program's primary objectives and/or other desired outcomes?

Appendix G: 2018–2024 Grantees / Fiscal Sponsors

- Berkeley County Green Infrastructure Implementation and Workforce Development Partnership / Canaan Valley Institute
- Blair County Intergovernmental Stormwater Committee / Blair County Conservation District
- Central Pennsylvania Stream Delisting Partnership (2 grants)
- Clean Water Cumberland / County of Cumberland
- Cocalico Creek Watershed Association / The Nature Conservancy
- Corporate Clean Water Partnerships / Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, Inc. (3 grants)
- DC Stormwater Retention Credit Program / Department of Energy and Environment
- Delmarva Restoration and Conservation Network / Lower Shore Land Trust
- Delmarva Wetland Partnership / The Nature Conservancy
- Envision the Choptank / Shorerivers, Inc.
- Got Clean Water? / Sustainable Chesapeake
- Greater Baltimore Wilderness Coalition / The Stewardship Network
- Healthy Streams Farm Stewardship Program / Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, Inc. (3 grants)
- James River Living Shoreline Collaborative / James River Association (2 grants)
- Keystone 10 Million Trees Partnership / Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Inc.
- Lancaster Clean Water Partners / Conservation Foundation of Lancaster County (2 grants)
- Lancaster County Agricultural Preservation Partnership / Lancaster Farmland Trust
- Lower Susquehanna Regional Partnership / Pennsylvania State University (2 grants)
- Maryland Healthy Soils Program / Maryland Department of Agriculture
- Million Acre Challenge (2 grants)
- Mountains to Bay Grazing Alliance / Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Inc.
- One Water Partnership / Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake (3 grants)
- Pasa Sustainable Agriculture
- Pennsylvania Riparian Forest Buffer and Lawn Conversion Advisory Committees / Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (2 grants)
- Pennsylvania Soil Health Coalition / Stroud Water Research Center (3 grants)
- Prime Prospects Behavior Change Partnership / University of Montana
- Rappahannock River Roundtable / Friends of the Rappahannock (3 grants)
- RVAH2O (2 grants)
- Scaling Up Biochar Partnership / Center for Watershed Protection, Inc.
- Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative / Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley (2 grants)
- Smith Creek Watershed Partnership / Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley
- The Elizabeth River Project (2 grants)
- The Manure Injection Partnership / Sustainable Chesapeake
- The Mid-Atlantic 4R Nutrient Stewardship Association (2 grants)
- Trout Unlimited, Inc. (3 grants)
- Turkey Hill Clean Water Partnership / Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, Inc.
- Upper and Middle James Riparian Consortium / James River Association (3 grants)
- Upper Susquehanna Coalition / Tioga County Soil and Water Conservation District of New York (4 grants)
- Virginia Shoreline Erosion Advisory Service / Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation
- Virginia Soil Health Coalition / Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (2 grants)
- Wyoming Valley Sanitary Authority

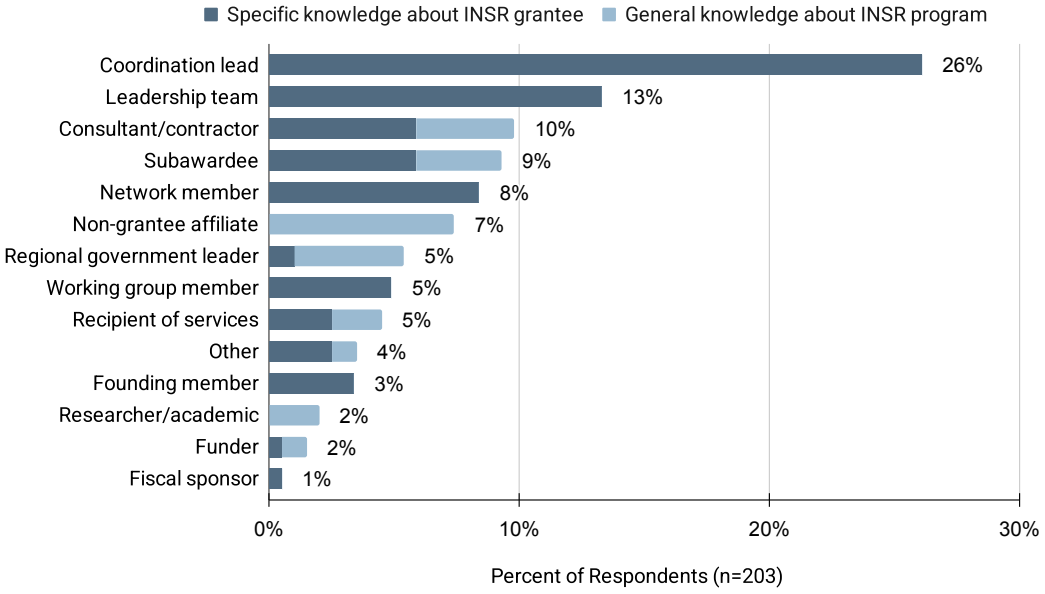
Appendix H: Surveys

Survey Background

The list of potential participants was generated by asking coordination leads to provide names of individuals familiar with either their collaborative work or the INSR program more generally. Three hundred ninety individuals were identified and sent a request to complete the online survey.

A total of 203 people completed the survey for a response rate of 52%. Participants were asked to indicate their roles and whether their knowledge was specific to a collaborative or the INSR program more generally (see Figure 32). For those indicating specific knowledge, they were also asked how many years they had been affiliated with the collaborative. The average was five years, with a range from .5 to 25 years.

Figure 32. Survey Respondents



Survey Questions

The online survey used a branch approach; depending on participants' roles, they received different subsets of questions.

ROLES: Question for everyone
What is your relationship to collaborative efforts in the Chesapeake Bay? • Coordinator, director, partnership lead, grant lead, or equivalent • Member of steering committee, leadership team, or equivalent • Local/regional government leader • Recipient of services, incentives from collaborative efforts • Consultant, contractor • Subawardee of INSR Grants • Researcher/academic • Funder • Affiliated with collaborative efforts (not funded by INSR Grants) • Other (explain)

KNOWLEDGE BASE: Question for everyone

What type of knowledge do you have?
- About a specific INSR grantee
- About the INSR program in general

CAPACITY FUNDED: Questions for coordination leads only

Which capacity needs were funded (in part or in full) through the INSR grant? (check all that apply)
- Coordination capacity (i.e., paying people such as coordinator, program director, committee members, staff)
- Collective purpose & goals (i.e., purpose statements, MOU, charter development)
- Governance structure and/or decision-making processes
- Shared strategy & priorities (i.e., strategic plans, roadmaps, priority-setting processes, work or action plans)
- Systems infrastructure (i.e., websites, data sharing tools, fiscal management, BMP tracking)
- Physical infrastructure (i.e., computers, facilities, materials)
- Collaborative skills or professional development (i.e., trainings, workshops, peer mentoring)
- BMP project implementation or actions (i.e., equipment, technical services, materials such as trees/fencing, etc.)
- Incentive programs (i.e., BMP implementation, engagement in collaborative activities)
- Other

* Similar questions for alternative sources based upon leveraging INSR funding

COLLABORATIVE PHASE/SIZE: Questions for coordination leads only

- *Prior to applying for the INSR grant, how would you describe the phase of this collaborative/partnership?* Nonexistent, start-up, building, sustaining
- *From your perspective, has the phase of your collaborative/partnership changed?*
- *Since receiving INSR funding, how has the number of partners participating in the collaborative effort changed?* Increase/decrease, by how many

COLLABORATIVE IMPACT: Questions for coordination leads and partners (Leadership team, working group members) only

Likert-scale question (strongly disagree-strongly agree)—Because of the INSR grant funding collaborative capacity, we are more effective in:
- Running meetings
- Setting priorities
- Tracking actions and outcomes
- Making decisions
- Meeting schedules
- Coordinating communication among collaborative partners
- Organizing relationship-building activities within the collaborative
- Fundraising
- Managing grants and funds
- Managing projects and programs
- Planning and implementing BMPs
- Resolving conflicts among members
- Creating an environment where differences of opinion can be voiced
- Fostering respect, trust, inclusiveness, and openness among collaborative members
- Combining the perspectives, resources, and skills of partners

- Using collaborative partners' equipment, space, volunteers
- Leveraging partners' different skill sets, knowledge, and/or expertise
- Leveraging partners' connections and influence
- Appreciating the unique challenges facing partners
- Appreciating the unique challenges of subgroups (e.g., different landowners, etc)
- Generating new ideas
- Implementing creative solutions
- Organizing outreach and engagement activities with people and organizations outside of this effort
- Planning ways to sustain/maintain this effort post-INSR grant
- Implementing practices to help ensure this effort endures over time

INDIVIDUAL IMPACT: Questions for partners (leadership team, working group members) only

Likert-scale question (strongly disagree-strongly agree)—I have personally experienced the following benefits as a result of participating in this collaborative effort and the INSR grant(s):

- Improved relationships with the outside community
- More effective in my work due to increased relationships/connections
- Increased credibility with people from other organizations as a result of participating in this collaborative
- Developed new perspectives and see things differently
- More confident in my ability to do my job
- Enhanced job performance as a result of participating in this collaborative
- Increased knowledge of BMPs and tools to implement them

PARTNER ORGANIZATION IMPACT: Questions for partners (leadership team, working group members) only:

Likert-scale question (strongly disagree-strongly agree)—The partner organization I represent has experienced the following benefits as a result of the increased collaborative capacity:

- Better able to achieve the objectives of my organization
- Building new relationships helpful to my organization
- A more global perspective/understanding of Chesapeake Bay Watershed issues
- Increased trust in the collaborative itself
- Increased trust in collaborative partners
- Adopting a more collaborative mindset across my organization
- Added capacity for my organization (i.e., funding, staffing)
- Increased understanding of challenges faced by collaborative partners
- Increased access to influential people in the community
- Increased access to a greater range of knowledge and skills
- Increased access to volunteers
- Increased access to resources (equipment, space)
- Increased access to data and information
- Increased ability to plan and implement BMPs

RECIPIENTS OF SERVICES IMPACT: Questions for recipients of services only:

Likert-scale question (strongly disagree-strongly agree)—As a recipient of incentives and/or services, I have experienced the following benefits resulting as a result of the increased collaborative capacity:

- Increased ability to expand outreach and education programs
- Building new relationships helpful to my work
- Increased trust in those organizations providing services or incentives
- Increased access to training
- Increased access to a greater range of knowledge and skills

- Better able to accomplish my work
- Increased access to data and information
- A more global perspective/understanding of Chesapeake Bay Watershed issues
- Increased access to technical support
- Increased access to influential people in the community
- Increased ability to reach new audiences
- Increased ability to plan and implement BMPs
- Increased opportunities to test new ideas and BMPs
- Increased trust in local and state government agencies
- Increased ability to maintain BMPs

BMP IMPLEMENTATION: Question for everyone

Likert-scale question (significant decrease-significant increase): Since NFWF shifted its INSR grant program to funding collaborative capacity, what changes have you observed related to the following activities?

- Pace of BMP implementation (faster, more efficiently)
- Scale of BMP implementation (increase in acres, miles, feet, number, etc.)
- Information sharing and dissemination about relevant BMPs to targeted audiences
- Partner member engagement in collaborative and its activities (collaborative leads and partners only)
- Collaborative approaches to BMP implementation (everyone except coordination leads and partners)

* When an increase was chosen, participants were asked to explain or provide an example of the changes you have observed.

BENEFITS/DRAWBACKS: Questions for everyone

- *Please describe additional benefits of funding collaborative capacity.*
- *Please describe any drawbacks or challenges with funding collaborative capacity.*

INSTITUTIONALIZATION: Questions for everyone

- *How have BMP implementation activities been institutionalized or operationalized?*
- *How have BMP information sharing and dissemination practices been institutionalized or operationalized?*
- *In your opinion, which of the practices described above are transferable to other collaborative efforts?*

Appendix I: Interviews

Working with INSR Program leaders and their field liaison team, TSN and IEN research teams generated lists of potential grantee and non-grantee interviewees. Interviews with 33 study participants were conducted by TSN, starting in November 2024 through March 2025. Interviewees included INSR grantees, funders within the Chesapeake Bay and NFWF INSR Program staff, and field liaisons. Twenty non-grantee interviews with stakeholders in the Chesapeake Bay watershed were conducted in January and February 2025 by the IEN research team.

The following are examples of the protocols and associated questions asked during the various interviews.

Grantee Interview Protocol

Background and Context [8–10 mins]

1. You were selected as an interviewee because of the role you play with the [insert collaborative's name], and your involvement with the [insert the project name]. Can you please share more about the role you play within both your organization and the collaborative, plus a brief history of the collaborative itself, including your perspective on why it was formed and what its geographic focus includes.
   Follow-up: Would you describe this collaborative as being in a startup, building, or maintaining phase?
2. Approximately how many partners does the collaborative include? How many would you say are active in your collaborative's work?
   Follow-up: Did the INSR grant enable you to expand the number of partners, and/or strengthen relationships? If so, how?
3. How would you describe the structure of your collaborative? Does it have a leadership team, committees, etc.? Does it have dedicated staff, such as a coordinator?
   Follow-up: How does the collaborative make decisions?

Collaborative Capacity [8–10 mins]

4. Prior to receiving this grant, what were the primary capacity building needs of your collaborative to coordinate its work among partners, share information, data or materials?
   Follow-up: Does the collaborative have a fiscal sponsor or NGO to facilitate the fulfillment of these needs?
5. How did (or is) your collaborative use the INSR grant funding to meet your capacity needs?
6. What this funding allowed your collaborative to do that it could not do previously?
   Follow-up: How did this increased capacity enable you to achieve and/or accelerate your collaborative's BMP implementation? Increase information sharing and dissemination?
   Follow-up: Do you have additional capacity needs; what are they?
   Follow-up: Did you ask for funding for these through the INSR program or other funds?
   Follow-up: what capacities need sustained resources to achieve the desired goals and outcomes of your collaboration over the long-term?
7. How does your collaborative plan to sustain the capacities needed for supporting your partnership?

Collaborative Activities & Outcomes [5 mins]

[Collaborative activities that individuals or collaborative partners take to achieve their collaborative goals; in this case those being supported by the INSR grant. Outcomes are the measurable result or the intended effects of that activity].

We are using Field Docs as the primary source of understanding the primary outcomes of the projects. If you have not completed your entries, would it be possible to do this prior to the end of the year. [*Note their response*]

8. Are there any specific activities or grant outcomes that the collaborative has achieved that are not included in Field Docs? If so, could you share what those are?
9. Were there any surprising outcomes or unintended consequences related to the implementation/ administration of the INSR grant?

INSR Program Impact:[12–15 mins]

[The impact generated by the collective of the collaboratives and the INSR funding. Impacts resulting from the INSR grant program and its shift to funding collaborative capacity.]

10. What do you see as the greatest impacts resulting from this grant (such as increased connectivity across your region, larger scale of work, etc.)?
    Follow-up: Has this funding helped increase the durability of your partnership? If so, how - stronger relationships, increased trust through working together, etc.?
    Follow-up: How has this funding changed the effectiveness or efficiency of your collaborative's operations?
    Follow-up: How have or might you anticipate institutionalizing/operationalizing the collaborative capacity elements needed to sustain your partnership?

Lessons Learned [5–8 mins]

11. In your opinion what are the most important capacity needs that funders can support to achieve collaborative work?
    Follow-up (if time): What insights or advice would you share with collaboratives in general (future INSR grantees) as they develop and implement their collaborative projects given what you have learned about the capacities needed to both sustain a healthy partnership and achieve collaborative outcomes?

NFWF INSR Program Benefits [5–8 mins]

12. In your words, what does the NFWF INSR grant program provide compared to other grant programs, specifically around capacity building?
13. Do you think that the INSR grant is worthy of replication? Why or why not?
    Follow-up: What do you feel is transferable to other grant/funding programs?
14. Have you met other organizations or collaboratives through this grant program that you are sharing information with or working directly with?
15. Have you worked directly with the NFWF Field Liaisons? What added capacity or support have they provided for your collaborative/project?

Concluding thoughts [5 mins]

16. Is there anything else you want to share that we didn't ask?
17. Are there any documents/resources that you could share that describe the collaborative and its history and focus? For example, case studies, etc.?
18. Do you have any suggestions on who else to speak with?
19. We will also be administering a survey more broadly to collaborative partners and beneficiaries of the collaborative's work. Can we work with you this month to identify individuals for receiving the survey in January?

PI: Thank you for your time and contributions to today's interview. May we contact you in the future if we have specific questions or would like additional information about your collaborative's work?

End Interview

Non-Grantee Interview Protocol

1. We wonder if you might begin by describing the role you play within your organization and your role (if any) in supporting the health of Chesapeake Bay? (these roles could be through influencing policy, funding, directly working with communities, etc.).

2. Are you familiar with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF)'s Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Reduction (INSR) grant program? If so, how are you familiar with the program? (if they need more specifics, this could include familiarity with projects, collaboratives, or organizations receiving funding, or participation in forums supported by the program)

3. As I shared earlier, NFWF's INSR program shifted its focus to include funding collaborative capacity with 3 primary objectives of accelerated implementation of water quality best management practices, information sharing and dissemination to support water quality improvements, and institutionalizing of successful approaches to improving/accelerating implementation.
    3a. Have you observed any successful examples of accelerating the pace or scale of BMP implementation (specifically work on the ground, policy changes, reaching new audiences) based upon the shift in the NFWF INSR program's increased funding for collaborative capacity? If so, could you share any specific examples?

    3b. Have you observed any successful examples of increased information sharing or dissemination focused on best practices, broadening awareness, and pathways for engagement based upon the shift in the NFWF INSR program's increased funding for collaborative capacity? If so, could you share any specific examples?

    3c. Have you observed changes in the institutionalization of accelerated BMP implementation or awareness and engagement activities based upon the shift in the NFWF INSR program's increased funding for collaborative capacity? If so, could you share any specific examples? [if helpful: For example, are you seeing the work of collaboratives being integrated into regional plans? Have you observed changes in the pace or scale of work completed, or the increase of consistency or momentum in how the BMPs are being accomplished in regions?

4. Are there other benefits or impacts from the INSR Program's greater investment in collaborative capacity that you have experienced or seen? Can you share specific examples?

5. Have you been a part of conversations or observed any trends regarding increased funding or broader recognition of the need for investing in collaborative capacity?

6. [Only if appropriate] What is your familiarity with the larger Bay Program goals? or, what observations do you have over the past 3-5 years re: the scale of funding coming into the region, the growth of regional partnerships, the broadening of general awareness about water quality protection?

7. Is there anything else you want to share that we didn't ask?

8. [For first set of interviewees] Is there anyone else you might recommend that we speak to who you think would have insights on the questions that we are discussing today?

Appendix J: Focus Groups

In March 2025, TSN and IEN research teams co-created and co-led four in-person focus groups at various locations across the Chesapeake Bay watershed: Queenstown, MD; Harrisburg, PA; Charlottesville, VA; and Annapolis, MD. Fifty-one coordinators and representatives from collaboratives funded by the INSR program participated, with another two representatives joining a fifth virtual focus group conducted by IEN. Two additional virtual focus groups were conducted in April. A sixth focus group for 10 funders was conducted by TSN, and a seventh for eight field liaison program staff associated with the NFWF INSR Program was conducted by IEN.

In the focus group sessions, participants discussed a range of topics led by the TSN and IEN research teams. Participants also provided input by completing some or all of the following four worksheets.

WORKSHEET A: Acceleration of Activities & Outcomes
BMPs or Information Sharing & Dissemination

INSTRUCTIONS: Reflect on ways in which the INSR grant has contributed to the acceleration of BMPs or information distribution or sharing.

1. Please share a **specific example** of how this increase in your collaborative's capacity has enabled you to accelerate either the planning and/or implementation of BMPs/projects, or sharing and distribution of information/learnings (linked to watershed health). [Note: if you do not have a specific example, how has the added collaborative capacity enabled you to accelerate BMPs or information sharing and dissemination in the future? What has changed?]
2. What did you use—or **consider as a baseline**—to gauge acceleration from for the example above? [Note: if you do not have a specific example, what do you feel will be important (and measurable) to consider as a baseline?]
3. How did you **account (*conceptualize, consider*) for the increased rate and/or scale** of the BMP or information sharing example above? What did you observe or find that enabled you to document the accelerated outcomes? [Note: if you do not have a specific example, how do (might) you anticipate tracking/measuring the increased rate and/or scale of the outcomes and activities?]
4. What barriers have you encountered, and/or do you foresee in the future in **documenting** the acceleration of BMP or information sharing and dissemination activities? How have you taken steps to address these barriers (or how might you attempt to address these)?

WORKSHEET B: Sustaining Collaborative Capacity & Functions

INSTRUCTIONS: Reflect on ways that your collaborative and its partners can sustain/operationalize their increased capacity (coordination, facilitation, fundraising, etc.) and their ability to achieve collective impact.

1. What do you believe is needed for your collaborative to **sustain or operationalize the necessary capacities** to perform and/or accelerate its work (projects, programs, BMPS, etc.)?
2. What **strategies or tactics has your collaborative pursued**, or is considering in order to sustain the above capacities?
3. What do you believe is **needed Chesapeake Baywide** (systems, policy needs, funding mechanisms, messaging, focused workshops on business planning, etc.) to institutionalize the necessary capacities and resources for collaboratives to perform and/or accelerate their work?
4. What role could collaboratives/partners and NFWF play in addressing these at a state or Chesapeake Bay scale?

WORKSHEET C: Sustaining & Operationalizing
BMPs or Information Sharing & Dissemination

INSTRUCTIONS: Reflect on ways that collaboratives and partners can sustain/operationalize BMP investments or approaches for sharing and disseminating information and learnings.

1. What do you believe is needed for your collaborative or partners to **sustain or operationalize its BMP investments or information dissemination approaches** (systems, infrastructure, tools, etc.)?
2. What **strategies or tactics has your collaborative pursued**, or is considering in order to sustain the above investments and approaches?
3. What do you believe is needed **Chesapeake Baywide** (systems, policy needs, funding mechanisms, messaging, focused workshops on business planning, etc.) to institutionalize BMPs, outcomes and associated tools (such as incentive programs), or approaches for information dissemination?
4. What role could collaboratives/partners and NFWF play in addressing these at a state or Chesapeake Bay scale?

WORKSHEET D: Accelerating Collaborative Development
Capacity and Functions

INSTRUCTIONS: Reflect on ways in which the INSR grant has contributed to the acceleration of the development of your collaborative (its ability to function effectively, its ability to undertake collective action, the strength of its relationships, etc.):

1. How has the increase in collaborative capacity resulted in accelerating (or enabling the accelerating of) your partnership's development?
2. Can you provide a specific example of how this capacity has resulted in the increased acceleration (increasing the pace or scale) of your collaborative's development?
3. What barriers have you encountered, and/or do you foresee in the future to strengthen or accelerate your collaborative's effectiveness, functionality (operations), life cycle or impact? How have you addressed these (or are attempting to address these barriers)?

Appendix K: Data Analyses

Written content was the focus of the analyses of the qualitative data associated with interviews, open-ended survey questions, focus groups summaries and worksheets, and grant proposals and reports.

Information that could identify participants was removed prior to analysis. The data were then exported into spreadsheets and NVivo (a qualitative data analysis software tool). Well-established methods were used to analyze this collection of qualitative data. The researchers started with the familiarization stage through a holistic reading of all data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). A method for generating, identifying, and analyzing themes within qualitative data, thematic analysis was applied (Braun & Clarke, 2006). More specifically, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was used by the research team, which has decades of experience analyzing qualitative data.

Using this iterative process, themes were generated based on their recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). The researchers subsequently developed a coding scheme for the emergent themes from the reflexive thematic analysis. The coding scheme was put into a codebook. It was shared with IEN for their coding of interviews.

The scheme was then applied by open-coding the data (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The “thought” units (i.e., main ideas contained in a phrase, sentence, or paragraph) were the basic analysis unit. A sentence or paragraph was given two or three codes if it included more than one theme.

The lengthy and detailed grantee proposals and reports were thoroughly read and coded by the two principal investigators. The interviews, open-ended surveys, and worksheets were coded by one or both of the principal investigators and their team.

Appendix L: Descriptions of Activities & Outcomes

Collaborative Development & Functioning

Collaborative Coordination & Convening
Facilitating meeting management, agenda, and materials development; event planning; activity tracking; and communication. Coordinating and supporting the collaborative's governance needs, systems, and infrastructure management as well as collaborative activities. (Typically supported through staff or consultants [e.g., professional facilitators, partnership coordinators, development directors, communications staff, and natural resource specialists]).

Collaborative Systems & Infrastructure Development
Providing and maintaining communications, data sharing, financial, and other internal platforms needed to sustain the collaborative's effectiveness and efficiencies. Supporting hiring processes, staff supervision, performance management, and training. Providing physical objects (e.g., hardware and software, meeting spaces, supplies) needed for collaborative performance.

Fundraising & Fiscal Administration
Establishing funder relationships. Tracking, applying for, administering, and managing grants to support collaborative and BMP outcomes. Creating and administering restricted financial accounts, grant agreements (with recipients), and tracking deliverables. Leveraging and amplifying funding to accelerate, transfer, and operationalize collaborative goals.

Information & Tool Generation & Sharing; Coordinated Communication
Developing, pooling, and distributing resources (e.g., contract templates, participant directories, weed-management techniques, equipment) among the various partners within a collaborative. Facilitating effective internal and external communication pathways (e.g., intranets, list servs, website calendars) commensurate the collaborative's needs, purpose and goals.

Partner & Collaborative Assessments; Continuous Improvement Practices
Conducting assessments through research, surveys, interviews, or other evaluative tools to examine both collaborative and partner health and performance. Broadening partner perspectives, and fostering innovation, improvements, and adaptations through sharing new approaches. Building collaborative skills, abilities, and practices.

Partner Outreach, Relationship Building & Collaborative Expansion
Performing outreach and engagement activities to build new and/or deepen ongoing interpersonal relationships. Exchanging information and developing cohesive group identity and trusted relationships through shared learning, power, leadership, and action.

Problem & Barrier Identification & Multibenefit Solutions
Identifying, researching, and distilling problems that limit collaborative progress and performance in implementing BMPs and reaching shared goals. Developing, testing, adapting, and implementing solutions, often with multiple benefits.

Strategy-Setting, Governance & Collective Planning
Creating clear and overarching goals, collective strategy-setting, and prioritization to guide the collaborative's direction, investments, commitment, and accountability, including implementing BMPs. Administering plans, processes, protocols, and agreements that shape and guide a collaborative's governance (e.g., steering committees, working groups).

BMP-Related Activities & Outcomes

Applied Research
Conducting research, analyzing data, synthesizing other research, and preparing reports that inform BMP planning, design, implementation, maintenance, and monitoring strategies.

BMP Barrier Identification & Multibenefit Solutions
Identifying shared obstacles that impede or limit effective BMP implementation. Researching and testing alternative approaches, adaptive management strategies, or new techniques, often with multiple benefits.

BMP Planning, Design, Implementation, Maintenance & Monitoring
Managing some or all of a project from initiation to closure, including planning, design, compliance, contractor and construction management, and restoration implementation, among other activities.

Convening, Information Sharing & Exchange
Connecting and convening BMP practitioners, landowners, and peers to share best practices and applicable resources; discuss BMP benefits and challenges; learn new techniques; and identify strategies for designing, delivering, maintaining, accelerating, and transferring BMPs.

Data Acquisition, Management & Analysis
Generating, acquiring, analyzing, and managing data to support effective BMP implementation. Providing a data repository, prioritization process, maps, and infographics. Running queries and reports, as well as providing quality assurance and quality control, including preparing and administering Quality Assurance Performance Plans.

Fundraising and Grant, Contract & and Budget Management
Constructing and implementing BMP project funding strategies and budget requirements. Developing and administrating grants and contracts compliant with federal, state, and regional compliance guidelines. Overseeing BMP project budgets and tracking deliverables.

Priority Identification, Mapping & Planning
Generating prioritization processes and decision-making approaches to help guide collective strategy development, inform BMP project sequencing, generate maps and tools for partners and interested stakeholders, and support local and regional planning.

Public Awareness, Engagement & Education
Performing outreach, engagement, and education to build public awareness, generate support, and foster action toward improving water quality, watershed health, and community well-being.

Program/Project Innovations, Assessments Improvements & Adaptations
Fostering creativity, generative thinking, and failing forward. Assessing BMP effectiveness and durability, adapting techniques and practices, promoting new approaches, and celebrating and marketing novel ideas.

Targeted Outreach, Engagement & Relationship Building
Conducting audience-specific outreach and engagement to foster relationship building, increase trust and credibility, and encourage the support and implementation of mutually beneficial BMP projects.

Technical Assistance
Providing technical services and resources to fill critical gaps in BMP project delivery, primarily in the fields of engineering, landscape architecture, data management, geospatial analysis, facilitation, environmental compliance, and permitting.

Workforce Development, Training & Mentoring

Assessing workforce needs and gaps and developing programs to address those gaps. Supporting professional development and training through internships, early career mentoring, accredited BMP implementation certification, and peer learning and exchange.

Appendix M: Impact-Related Graphs

Figure 33. Observed Changes: Scale of BMP Implementation

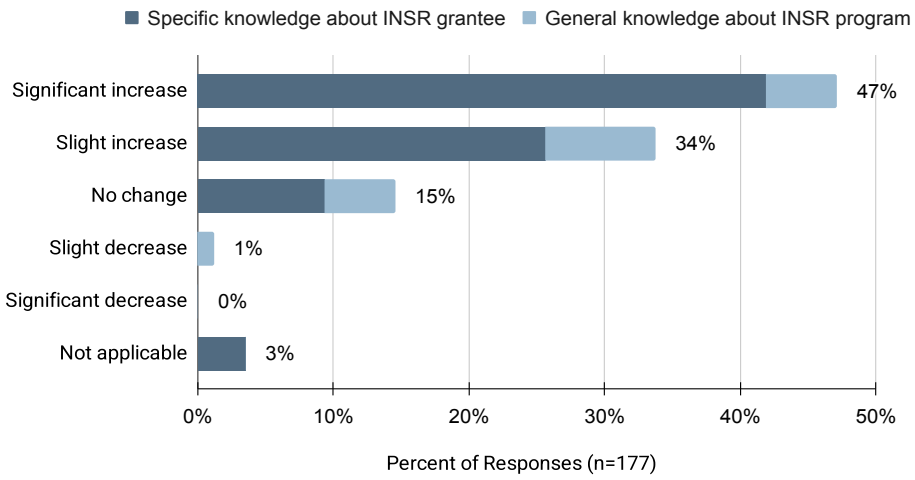


Figure 34. Observed Changes: Pace of BMP Implementation

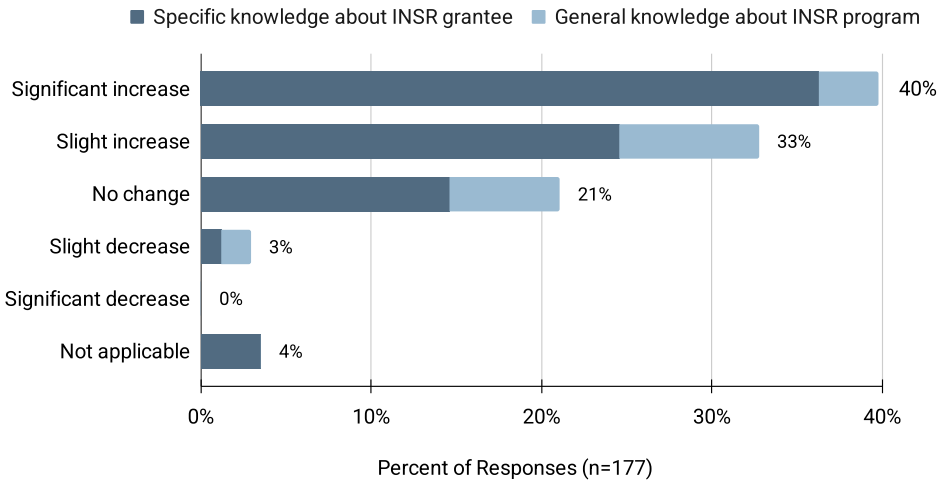
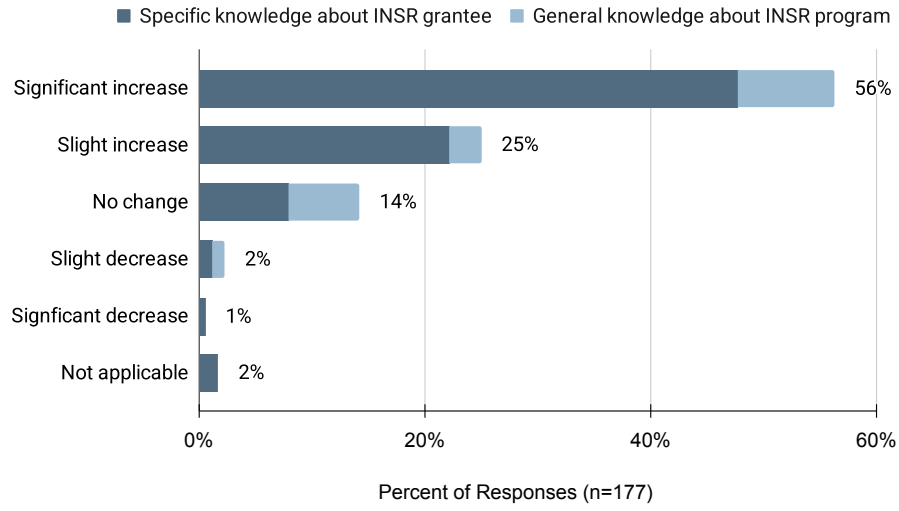
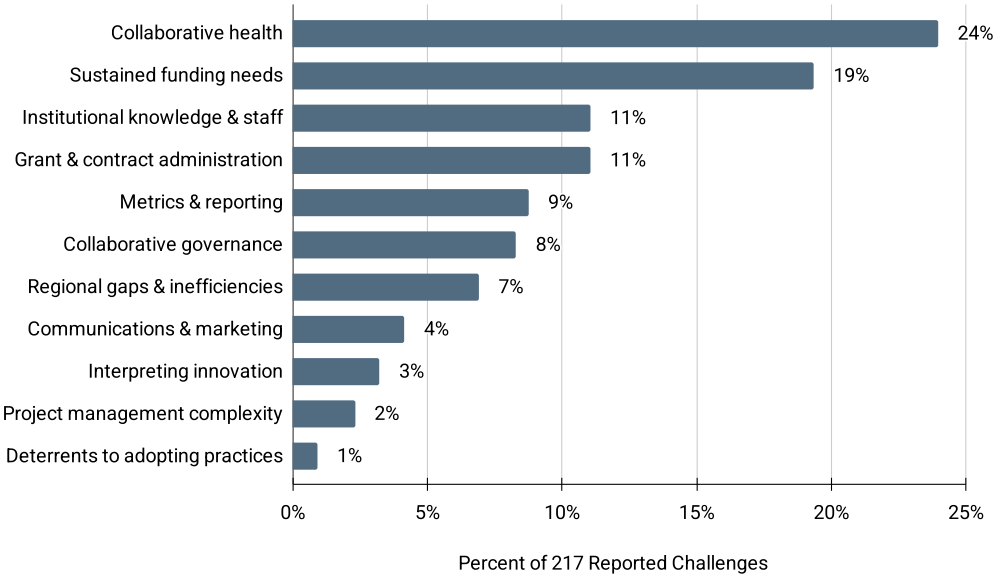


Figure 35. Observed Changes: BMP Information Sharing & Dissemination



Appendix N: Challenges & Drawbacks

Figure 36. Reported Challenges & Drawbacks



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