

Reason for Action

Each funding program requires similar but varied grant applications and large restoration projects can require tens of applications to state and federal programs. This repetitive, largely redundant effort to allocate funding wastes local project management capacity and delays Puget Sound ecosystem recovery.

Current State

Redundant application processes are a symptom of the current state of our state and federal planning and funding system. To secure funding through a project lifecycle, project management staff repeatedly work to describe actions to win unique competitions. Each successful application results in a unique contract with requirements, and so variation in applications results in an accumulating administrative burden.

CASE STUDY(Table to right): Over a project lifecycle, the \$6.4M Prairie Creek project required 16 grants and took over 17 years to complete from the beginning of acquisition. Each individual grant had time and scope limits, and individual matching and reporting requirements.

Written project descriptions provide diverse functions in the funding process. They enable projects to get funds necessary for completion, are the basis for transparent contractual controls, allow for evaluation of strategy, and support storytelling. Over the project lifecycle, some aspects of project description remain relatively stable, while others aspects may change radically. Redundant production and review of complex project descriptions is driven by the tension between the number of funders who each need to show transparency and fair competition, change in project scope, schedule and budget, and project developers who must build a complete funding package so we can realize ecosystem benefits.

Improvement Target

- 1. Reduce the labor necessary to complete application processes over project lifecycle
- 2. Minimize labor cost of proposal management per project
- 3. Reduce time for large project completion

Root Cause Analysis

- **No organizing authority** – there is no top-down authority for aligning programs, or even supporting and rewarding collaboration.
- **Changing complex systems is difficult** – natural tendencies toward competitive program protection weaken adaptation. Improvement efforts tend to focus on individual programs.
- **Funding is divided—evolution is additive** – different funding sources reflect different stakeholders working to secure and sustain appropriations. System evolution takes the form of adding new programs to the overall system, in response to the emerging complexity of ecosystem management.
- **Project costs are increasing** – development of larger projects, on private lands, entwined with infrastructure is resulting in larger projects, more akin to traditional infrastructure, but dependent on a network of funding.

- **Sunk costs in existing systems** – existing systems reflect substantial investments by agency programs in infrastructure, training, and operational organization.

Proposal

The Align Grant Coordination Group leads a stepwise progress to implement a shared project description structure. This structure includes a budget standard¹, identifies stable project data, accommodates evolution of scope and budget over the project lifecycle, and allows for project justification specific to funding program strategies. This system would avoid collecting information earlier than necessary in the project lifecycle, and would avoid collecting data that does not serve a specific downstream process (contracting, project implementation, or storytelling that serves the public’s representatives).

The written application is the authoritative and required description of an action, and is the precursor to contracting, reporting, and matching documentation. Shared project description data maximizes the transparency of project scope and budget, and supports robust storytelling using rolled up metrics and narrative.

The annual or biennial cycle of funding program updates can be used to implement to minimize disruption to existing project work. The collection of standard project data naturally begins with project aggregation (for example, in 4-year work plans and near term actions). Action descriptions gather additional information, only when needed for funding application. Increasing project detail uses standard formats. Individual programs provide discrete information requests to inform program decisions and that complement core program data.

The most likely candidate for data migration are PDF forms that can move data between agency databases. Existing data management systems (PRISM and EAGL) could be adjusted carefully to develop shared standards and improve interoperability. Puget Sound Info and Salmon Portal Data should be simplified and minimized, with the intent of collecting stable pre-competition data and feeding downstream selection processes. Shared standards will force simplification of data collection to serves specific shared outputs.

This proposal is a first step within a greater effort to create the trust and assurance systems that allow for more streamlined allocation of resources, among well-vetted local investment plans. Standard action descriptions, shared among diverse funding programs, allow us to pilot joint funding of large-scale strategic efforts, such as under LIOs or Floodplains by Design.

Action Plan

- Establish the Align Grant Coordination Group as the setting for coordination of project description data.
- Define direct involvement by downstream processes including Project Developers, Fund Managers, and Storytellers.
- Identify project-based staffing for Align, perhaps using a flexible interagency agreement to aggregate administrative funding among programs, perhaps complimented by external sources.

Confirmed Future State

What are you measuring; what are the results; are you on track; what is the process for future improvement?

¹ Existing work is available by SPSSEG with funding support by Align