

PROJECT TITLE

Blackstone River Watershed Needs Assessment: A Path to Restoration and Resilience.

AMOUNT NEWLY BUDGETED FROM FY18 SNEP AWARD

\$165,000 estimated

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Building on the outcomes of the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program’s (“NBEP”) State of the Blackstone River Watershed Workshop held in April 2019, NBEP will develop a comprehensive watershed needs assessment for the ecologically and economically vital Blackstone River Watershed in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. NBEP will use community engagement and capacity-building support to bring together diverse stakeholders from across the Blackstone River Watershed (“watershed”) over a series of six (6) meetings to enable local interests to identify and prioritize needs which, once addressed, can help accelerate recovery of the watershed. The desired outcome is a consensus needs assessment that sets the stage for actions that improve the water quality, native habitat, and resilience of the watershed. This project will greatly inform NBEP’s upcoming Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) revision and can serve as a template for development of community-driven needs assessments across the southeast New England region.

PROJECT NEED

The Blackstone River Valley is the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, with resulting development bringing dammed waterways, commercial buildings, and significant urbanization. Development has continued with urban lands increasing 3-fold since 1990. The Blackstone River is the tributary of the Narragansett Bay Estuary (“estuary”) that is most impacted by nutrient enrichment and oxygen depletion. The river is vitally important to the ecological health of the region, providing most of the freshwater to the estuary downstream, hosting a high percentage of intact forests in its lower reaches, and nurturing the highest relative abundance of cold-water fish. Local efforts to date have been successful in achieving nutrient reductions from wastewater treatment plants, reducing nonpoint pollution (NPS) and habitat loss in targeted areas, and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders. However, discussions with local partners and the outcome of our recent SNEP request for proposals indicate a notable gap is the lack of a holistic list of prioritized needs that can inform future funding priorities and projects. The needs assessment proposed here will build on past planning efforts, including the 2004 *Blackstone River Watershed Action Plan*, to fill this gap and result in actionable information for those seeking to pursue new plans, projects, policies for restoring and protecting the watershed and sustaining those that work, live, and recreate in its waters.

SNEP MISSION AND GOALS SUPPORTED

| Elements of Mission | Long-term Goals |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Collaboration across regional partners. ✓ Sharing knowledge and resources. ✓ Promoting innovative approaches. ✓ Leverage environmental and economic investments. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Restore water quality and habitat that support ecosystem function and resilience. ✓ Enable innovative approaches and solutions. ✓ Build on existing work and create solutions to regional environmental issues. |

CONNECTION TO NBEP COMPREHENSIVE CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT PLAN

- Protect and restore clean water.
- Manage land for conservation and community.
- Protect and restore fish, wildlife, and habitats.
- Manage climate change impacts to natural systems.

DELIVERABLES

1. Written process for development of the needs assessment.
2. Written process for qualifying recipients and delivering capacity funding subawards to NGOs.

3. Conduct at least six (6) meetings geographically distributed across the watershed.
4. List of stakeholders engaged.
5. Presentation materials and notes from each meeting.
6. Specific contributions from subawardees, including community outreach, meeting presentations, white paper and other document drafting and review, and other tasks as assigned in their subaward scope of work.
7. Written internal and external review comments on assessment.
8. Draft and final needs assessment, including appropriate next steps.
9. Distribute final needs assessment to local partners.

OUTCOMES

1. A diversity of people that span interests, geographies, and socioeconomic status have the capacity to meaningfully participate in the development of the needs assessment.
2. Internal and external engagement that expands the number and expertise of people that participate during the assessment development process.
3. Comprehensive and consensus list of needs (e.g., research, planning, management, financial) developed at meetings.
4. Final assessment with a detailed description of prioritized needs that provides actionable information for pursuing future plans, projects, and policies that can improve water quality, native habitat, and community resiliency.

POTENTIAL PROJECT PARTNERS

| Partner | Potential Role* | Partner | Potential Role* |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Blackstone River Coalition | Convener | Holy Cross University | Participant |
| Blackstone River Watershed Assoc | Participant | Narragansett Bay Commission | Participant |
| Blackstone River Watershed Council | Participant | Upper Blackstone Clean Water | Participant |
| Blackstone Headwaters Coalition | Participant | Conservation Commissions | Convener |
| Blackstone Heritage Corridor | Convener | Town Representatives | Participant |
| Blackstone Valley Tourism Council | Participant | Mass DEP | Convener |
| Mass Audubon | Participant | Mass DER | Participant |
| Save The Bay | Participant | RI DEM | Convener |
| Rhode Island River Council | Convener | National Park Service | Convener |
| Clark University | Participant | Corps of Engineers | Participant |
| University of Massachusetts | Participant | USEPA | Funder, Participant |

*A much longer list of potential participants and final roles will arise from the needs assessment development process.

HOW FUNDS WILL BE USED

Funding will be used to (a) support NBEP staff time, travel, and direct costs to design and conduct all meetings and compose the needs assessment over an 18-month period, (b) seek peer review of the draft assessment by other National Estuary Programs and related experts, and (c) provide capacity-building subawards to qualifying small NGOs.

STAFF ENGAGEMENT

Implementing this project will take roughly 8% of NBEP staff time per year over the course of the project period. The Program director (20% of time per year) will provide most of the oversight for this project. This time investment is appropriate based on the project's ability to inform our upcoming CCMP revision, to serve as a template for bottom-up planning efforts in other watersheds, and to put into action the mission of the NBEP and the National Estuary Program.

TIMELINE

10/1/2019-3/31/2021

CONTACT

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