

Case Study: Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency

Watershed: Lower American River Watershed

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Year	Grant Program	Project Title	Watershed	Award Amount
2003-2006	CALFED Watershed Program	Lower American River Environmental Enhancement	Lower American River	\$1,733,860
2004-2007	Department of Conservation-Watershed Coordination Grant	Watershed Coordination for Dry Creek (sub-watershed of the Lower American River Watershed)	Dry Creek	\$278,036

This case study assesses two grants received by the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency (SAFCA) for work in the Lower American River Watershed. The findings of this research are based on interviews with stakeholders involved in processes covered by the grants, as well as a review of documents produced for the grants.

Lower American River Watershed

The upper end of the Lower American River Watershed lies 30 miles east of Sacramento at Folsom Lake. From the Folsom Lake Dam, the American River flows west converging with the Sacramento River in downtown Sacramento. The Folsom Dam provides numerous functions, including: hydropower, water supplies for agriculture and domestic consumption, recreational activities, maintenance of water flows for fish and wildlife, and flood control. A levee system extends along the banks of the Lower American River from the confluence of the American and Sacramento Rivers upstream 13 miles to Carmichael, a suburb of Sacramento. One of the many cherished features of the Lower American River is the American River Parkway (Parkway). The Parkway is a floodplain predominately owned by Sacramento County and the City of Sacramento with a few private inholdings. Not only does the Parkway serve as a natural flood conveyance and wildlife corridor, it also hosts a multi-use trail system paralleling the Lower American River. The American River makes up approximately 15% of the Sacramento River flow to the Bay-Delta ecosystem.

Organizations & Grants

The Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency (SAFCA) is a Joint Exercise of Powers Agency created in 1989 through an agreement with the City of Sacramento, the County of Sacramento, the County of Sutter, the American River Flood Control District and Reclamation District 1000. The mission of the organization focuses on the reduction of flood risk and related impacts, and consistent with these goals, the enhancement of environmental and aesthetic values of floodplains. SAFCA received two grants to support work towards the CALFED Bay-Delta plan. SAFCA received one project grant entitled “Lower American River Environmental Enhancement” (2003-2004) and a coordinator grant for Dry Creek Watershed (2004-2007).

While both grants involved working in the Lower American River Watershed, these grants had few overlapping components. Though Dry Creek is hydrologically connected to the American River during high flow, these grants are discussed independently.

Project grant (2003-2004)

SAFCA was awarded \$1,733,860 for the “Lower American River Environmental Enhancement Project” with the following objectives: 1) develop a plan for the lower five miles of the American River Parkway, 2) purchase a private landholding previously utilized for mining activities, and 3) engage interested citizens and stakeholders in both planning and restoration activities. Inclusion of lower-income and politically underserved communities in the integrated planning exercise was also mentioned in the proposed project.

Project grant process and outcomes

The original American River Parkway Plan (1976) was a policy document created to develop an open space greenbelt along the American River in Sacramento County and provide guidelines for preservation, use, development and administration of this area. The latest update, prior to the 2008 revisions, was a year-long process in 1985 with participants from various Parkway interest groups. In 2002 Sacramento County initiated a collaborative planning process to update the 1985 Parkway Plan. The process began with a stakeholder assessment followed by a collaborative process to develop objectives for the update. The previous American River Parkway Plan (1985) did not include much detail on the lower five miles of the river because much of it was in private ownership at the time. Several informants credited one vociferous local stakeholder concerned with the inclusion of the lower five miles in the updated plan in helping to shape the objectives for the American River Parkway Plan. In particular, this individual promoted the inclusion of an integrated area planning process for the lower five miles of the Lower American River with three public workshops, as well as outreach efforts to engage adjacent communities. A second objective, relevant to the scope of the CALFED project grant, involved representatives from a group of Parkway stakeholders in the Update Citizens Advisory Committee (UCAC) working collaboratively to develop recommendations for the updated Parkway Plan. The CALFED project grant funded the integrated area planning process for the development of the “American River Parkway Plan- Integrated Area Plan Concept (IAP) for the reaches of Discovery Park, Woodlake, Cal Expo.”

Representatives in this process included appointments from the Board of Supervisors, Sacramento City, Rancho Cordova City Council, four environmental organizations, three community organizations, and eight recreational groups including representatives for fly-fishing, boating, cycling, mountain biking, equestrian, dog owners, and running. The Project Management Team included representatives from Sacramento County, the City of Rancho Cordova, the City of Sacramento, California Exposition and State Fair, the Cordova Recreation and Park District, SAFCA, and the Water Forum.

Objective 1: Develop a plan for the lower five miles of the American River Parkway

The IAP process included three broad-based public workshops and ten UCAC meetings to gain insight from Sacramento area residents. One principal reason for the visioning exercise associated with the American Parkway Plan process was the inclusion of stakeholders not previously included in the Plan. In addition to considering the lower five miles of the river that had been previously lightly treated in the plan, many new forms of recreation had emerged since the 1985 American River Parkway Plan (e.g., mountain biking). The process resulted in the IAP Concept, a planning document, not formally adopted, but produced in an attempt to inform the Discovery Park, Woodlake, and Cal Expo regions of the American River Parkway Plan update. The visioning exercise assisted in land use designation updates for the American Parkway Plan for the portions of public land and private land within these regions.

The County of Sacramento received an award from the American Planning Association in 2007 for the IAP update process, and in 2015 the American River Parkway received a “Great Places” award from the APA. Several stakeholders who participated in the visioning exercise questioned the utility of the process and inquired about how the process informed the American Parkway Plan. A few stakeholders viewed the process as semi-successful owing to the level of inclusivity and breadth of stakeholder involvement in this part of the process, regardless of the outcome, and even though other objectives were not met due to the lack of inclusion of key stakeholders as discussed below.

Objective 2: Purchase a private inholding previously utilized for mining activities

The project failed to acquire and restore the property previously used for mining activities. One informant noted the proactive approach SAFCA took in suggesting theories of land valuation that would benefit the seller, though the landowner and SAFCA could never agree on a value nor get an appraisal that met the landowner’s expectations. Another informant who was directly involved in this aspect of planning acknowledged the lack of engagement efforts with the landowner at the start of the process as a contributor to the failure to acquire the land. As this informant points out, “The effort was never taken to involve them in the planning [process].” This underscores the need to include all relevant stakeholders early on, as well as throughout the process. Timing and funding were also noted as factors affecting land acquisition. Several participants pointed to the limited time and financial constraints that did not allow for as much inclusion or discussion and negotiation with the property owners as needed. Though these steps will not guarantee success, their absence can guarantee failure. The money intended for the purchase of the property was returned to the grantor (\$1,480,336.12) as the property remains under private ownership over a decade following this process.

Objective 3: Engage interested citizens and stakeholders in both planning and restoration activities

Informants made clear that engagement of interested citizens and stakeholders was not only implemented, but praised throughout the IAP process. Informants, however, also discussed one of the greatest challenges with watershed planning along the lower five miles of the American River Parkway: the large homeless population that inhabits the area and the negative impacts this has on the river and access to the river, such as elevated levels of trash and sediment, riparian zone alterations, and safety concerns. Members of underserved communities, as well as the

aforementioned mining property owner, did not participate in engagement efforts. When questioned about who was included and excluded in these processes, responding interview participants agreed that outreach to disadvantaged communities was limited to nonexistent. Numerous interview participants cited the difficulties of including disadvantaged communities in watershed planning. Difficulties included inadequate grant resources to address the larger socio-economic challenges, such as homelessness, which many informants saw as the responsibility of the City of Sacramento and not the collaborative effort. However, this remains a pressing issue in the watershed, as a recent study party attributes water quality violations in the American River to the homeless populations.¹ Interview participants expressed the importance of inclusion of disadvantaged communities in theory, but viewed these challenges as insurmountable in practice without the city providing relief to homelessness. An assumption was made by many participants that disadvantaged communities, particularly the homeless population, would not be interested in participating in the watershed planning process due to more pressing basic needs.

Coordinator grant (2004-2007)

SAFCA was awarded \$278,036 from the Department of Conservation for watershed coordination. The grant presented two main objectives: 1) to strengthen the organizational capacity of the Dry Creek Watershed Council, and 2) to provide information to stakeholders about the impact of impervious cover on watershed health.

Coordinator grant process and outcomes

The watershed coordinator hired under the grant received by SAFCA was the executive director for the Dry Creek Watershed and maintained his/her position of executive director, as well as full-time watershed coordinator throughout the grant. The coordinator maintained a strong interest in advancing the work of the Dry Creek Conservancy in the watershed and worked with the grant recipient on a proposal that fit within the organization's scope of work. According to the grant recipient, SAFCA, and the watershed coordinator for Dry Creek, the original intention for applying for the grant was to create more opportunities for direct interactions with local government and state agencies in an attempt to bring technical expertise into local government planning focused on impervious cover and guide local land use jurisdiction on better management practices. However, SAFCA representatives mentioned having less influence on local government than desired regarding impervious cover policy. The watershed coordinator confirmed SAFCA's statement explaining how he deemphasized the policy pursuits and focused on continuing the work he was already performing as executive director of the Dry Creek Conservancy. This included an emphasis on watershed assessment work, such as monitoring water quality, aquatic macro-invertebrates (as an indicator of water health), and salmon species.

The watershed coordinator underscored how the coordinator grant money acted as core organizational support for the Dry Creek Conservancy, consistent with the capacity-building intent of the grant. Funding allowed the organization to focus on several endeavors that were underway prior to the coordinator grant with the objective of minimizing human impacts on water bodies. To mitigate human impacts on the watershed, the coordinator actively participated

¹ <http://www.sacbee.com/news/investigations/the-public-eye/article169515922.html>

in collaborative efforts throughout the watershed, including: providing planning and oversight for water quality monitoring activities, coordinating a “Creek Week” committee for public education and outreach activities, coordinating a habitat survey project, and working with various stakeholders (e.g., the American Motorcycle Association, Placer County Audubon, Cities of Roseville and Rocklin, and the state ORV Recreation Commission) to create an ORV facility in West Placer, which also included a large tract of open space. While many of these pursuits entailed coordinating among various stakeholders, the coordinator emphasized that much of the time spent during the grant was geared towards more technical elements including measuring and monitoring water quality and habitat, with particular attention to impervious cover.

As explicitly stated by the watershed coordinator, watershed activities pursued during the coordinator grant aligned with the vision of the Dry Creek Conservancy, and the grant was used to support these activities and to expand to a wider watershed, the “American Basin Council of Watersheds.” During the grant, the coordinator was able to secure an additional \$691,000 from federal, local and private sources. This provided an additional 249% of matching funds for projects in the watershed. The financial boost from the grant also assisted the Conservancy in continuing monthly meetings, providing an opportunity to include and share watershed project updates and information with interested community members and stakeholders. The Conservancy meetings had existed prior to grant funding and continued following the end of the coordinator grant. While the funding mostly assisted the Dry Creek Conservancy in advancing their organizational agenda, another outcome from the coordinator grant was the development and coordination of a bi-annual conference that focused on the integration of low impact development strategies into planning, design, and construction. This conference is on-going.

SAFCA received the coordinator grant, but the watershed coordinator, as a representative from Dry Creek Conservancy had much autonomy in activities pursued. With or without coordination funding, Dry Creek Conservancy would “keep doing what we are doing,” but stressed the utility of the general coordination grant funding in supporting small watershed conservancies, consistent with the grant capacity-building objectives. Much work in the watershed is accomplished via watershed conservancies, but these groups rely heavily on grants and volunteers to accomplish tasks, which may come in ebbs and flows, whereas the coordinator grant maintained a consistent funding base for the Dry Creek Conservancy for a three-year period.

Key Findings

Stakeholder Inclusion

The project grant funds for land acquisition were not used because agreement from a private landowner was never secured. Implementation was not possible without land acquisition. This result emphasizes the importance of including stakeholders in the process from the outset in order to ensure project success. This is not to say that more outreach efforts from the start would have led to the acquisition of the land, but the inclusion of local stakeholders who are directly affected by a planning process is an important and necessary step in the process. Without stakeholder “buy-in,” or agreement to move forward in support of a project, planning processes could face major barriers to implementation. Furthermore, different demographics require

diverse approaches to inclusion in a planning process along with a willingness to learn and utilize these approaches. This was not considered in America River Parkway planning. To engage disadvantaged and underserved populations, additional steps that go beyond the traditional mechanisms and consider unique challenges of these populations need to be explored.

Role of the Coordinator

For the watershed coordinator grant, the coordinator emphasized their role as providing much more technical and scientific support and continuing the work that the organization was already pursuing. While some coordinators act as a voice of the community in the watershed, not all coordinators fill this role. As demonstrated by the manner in which this grant was executed, supplemented by a review of the grant material, the structure of the 2004-2007 Department of Conservation Coordinator Grant Program provided some flexibility in how coordinators could meet the grant objectives and explicitly sought to expand capacity for community-based watershed management. The organization, or in this case, the watershed coordinator due to his/her autonomy, was able to determine the role of the watershed coordinator in the watershed, rather than the grant determining that role, due to the flexible grant structure. In this case, the executive director of a small watershed conservancy was able to maintain both roles through shaping the grant to fit their on-going work.

Funding a Watershed Coordinator

The importance of consistent funding for a coordinator, rather than reliance on a dedicated volunteer, was discussed as a benefit of the watershed coordinator grant. A key informant commended the financial stability that three-year coordinator support provided for the work being done in the watershed, but also expressed concern about what follows at the end of the grant cycle. The funded position over a three-year period allowed for more consistent work in the watershed. A coordinator with fundraising capacity can dedicate time to securing more funds to bring to the watershed for development and implementation of project ideas. The watershed coordinator discussed how much of the on-the-ground work in watersheds is done by small watershed groups. A watershed coordinator plays an important role in not only seeking out funding sources, but organizing groups to implement their on-the-ground projects. In order to maintain structural continuity and maintain momentum with work in the watershed, a hired position is preferred over a volunteer position.

Nevertheless, the Dry Creek Conservancy executive director would have continued the work either way. The structure of the grant was flexible and allowed for the organization and the watershed coordinator to determine the role the coordinator would fill in the watershed. The Dry Creek Conservancy is still active today under the leadership of the same individual who was funded as a watershed coordinator through the Department of Conservation 2004-2007 coordinator grant. This individual expressed concern regarding the challenges that will emerge with his/her departure. Not all watersheds can permanently maintain a flow of ambitious individuals willing to volunteer to fulfill the role of watershed coordination. A paid watershed coordinator is often needed to address the emerging challenges we face in promoting watershed health. Without financial support or structural continuity to maintain a coordinator beyond the three-year grant cycle, some watershed issues will likely be neglected.

Appendix A: Methods

Eight interviews were conducted involving five in-person interviews and three phone interviews. Interview participants included representatives that participated in the planning process for the American River Parkway- Integrated Area Plan (project grant) from the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency, Sacramento County Regional Parks, Recreation and Open Space, City of Sacramento Planning Department, various stakeholders representing diverse organizations, such as the Sacramento Area Bicycle Advocates and the American River Parkway Volunteer Equestrian Patrol. A representative from the Dry Creek Watershed Council discussed the coordinator grant. Researchers reviewed all available documents related to the grants (see Appendix C). Respondents are not identified for the purpose of confidentiality.

Appendix B: Participants

Representation from the following agencies, groups, or committees:

SAFCA

Dry Creek Watershed Conservancy

Save the American River

Sacramento Area River Association

Sacramento Area Bicycle Advocates

Member of the Integrated Lower American River Committee

Sacramento County Parks

Appendix C. Available Grant Documents

Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency	Individual Grant Proposal	Catalogued Description	Annual Update(s)	Individual Final Report	Catalogued Final Reports	Other	
Project (2003-2004)		x				x	Integrated Area Plan; American River Parkway Plan
Coordinator (2004-2007)			x	x	x		