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## Pennsylvania Community Watershed Organizations as Seen by Key Informants

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## Pennsylvania Community Watershed Organizations as Seen by Key Informants

### Abstract

The primary objective of the project described here was to identify needed and used organizational resources for a successful CWO. This article reports key informant perceptions of Pennsylvania Community Watershed Organizations (CWO). Utilizing snowball sampling, 24 people were interviewed. The results indicate CWOs are in need of organizational development training, mentoring, and assessment. Extension has a history of providing these resources to communities. Therefore, CWOs represent a potential new market for Extension.

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## Introduction

In order to address water resource issues, people must consider water use at the geographic scales from local to international (Grumbine, 1994). Therefore, collaboration and coordination are essential to successful and efficient water resource management. Watershed and ecosystem management must reconcile the frequently competing goals of maintaining ecological integrity and sustaining human livelihood.

In several states, organizations known as "watershed councils" have formed. These organizations are community based, semi- to formally appointed associations of people with diverse interests and values. These organizations are often founded to help manage natural resources and improve/maintain watershed conditions across private and political property boundaries (Conway, Godwin, Cloughesy, & Nierenburg, 2003). However, there has been relatively little research about these Community Watershed Organizations (CWOs) (Griffin, 1999). The primary objective of the project described here was to identify needed and used organizational resources for a successful CWO.

In the study, a Pennsylvania community watershed organization was defined as a non-profit, voluntary, non-governmental organization, with or without paid staff, that works in a defined watershed at least partially in Pennsylvania with water-related issues as a theme for the organization's existence. This article summarizes essential findings from key informant (KI) interviews about Pennsylvania CWOs. These findings may or may not be applicable to other areas.

CWOs often monitor water quality, clear streams of litter, improve wildlife habitat, stock fish, and purchase land or conservation easements. However, all of the work does not have to revolve around on-the-ground accomplishments; CWOs can work for collaborative community change (Brown & Evans, 2004). Some authors contend that an ineffective collaborative group often cannot accomplish their long-term goals (Bunker & Rubin, 1995; Holman & Devane, 1999). Communities often view Extension as being most effective in providing research-based education that helps build their capacity to make practical decisions (Conway, 2003). Extension professionals can work with CWOs to improve the functional capacity of the CWOs collaborative efforts (Brown & Evans, 2004).

# Importance of CWOs

One way of addressing community issues is to import technical expertise to provide the answer(s). In this approach, the community stakeholders are essentially not involved in developing a solution. The community is a recipient of a solution that they may or may not embrace. An alternative approach, where CWOs function as an internal change agent, can alter the fundamental relationship between the external experts and the community. The community can often provide insights on the problem definition and formulation of alternative solutions (Prokopy & Castelloe, 1999).

This approach builds on the reservoir of knowledge within the community that can be used in solving community issues together (Behr, Schaffer, Lamb, Miller, & Sadowske, 1998). The community is integral to the process, from issue formulation through resolution. CWOs can foster a local-learning and decision-making environment. By working as an internal change agent, a CWO could help form local decisions that affect not only water, but also other social and biological concerns (Prokopy & Castelloe, 1999).

Land and water management practices in both urban and rural areas need to be changed if watershed functions are to be enhanced (Conway, Godwin, Cloughesy, & Nierenburg, 2003). Community groups can function to establish and maintain forums of interaction in the community (Warner, Hinrichs, Schneyer, & Joyce, 1999). These forums of interaction could be an essential component for addressing non-point source water pollution. In this context, CWOs have the potential to provide a forum of interaction about non-point source water pollution and related watershed issues.

## Methods

The interview was chosen as the data collection method because there were few studies published about CWOs and none specifically about Pennsylvania CWOs. The interview approach allowed for topic exploration as KIs raised them. Formal KI interviews were conducted during the summer of 2001. Initially, nine KIs were interviewed, and through chain referral sampling an additional 18 KIs were identified (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Welch, 1975; Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). A total of 24 KIs were interviewed including leaders of 13 CWOs.

All KIs were asked open-ended questions concerning their perceptions about Pennsylvania CWOs (Krannich & Humphrey, 1986). The interviews were semi-structured and followed a funneling strategy from easy to harder questions. The initial KI interviews were conducted face-to-face, while the remaining were telephone interviews. Six of the nine original KIs were identified by the other original KIs at least once and as many as three times as people to interview.

## Findings

To simplify the KI interview findings, this article addresses approximately the top 20% of response types for the nine questions asked. In cases where the quintile would split the number of response types that were reported an equal number of times, all responses were included. The top quintile was selected because it provides a more concise way of reporting the key findings. KIs were allowed to provide multiple responses to the questions.

### Typical Pennsylvania CWO

The KIs were asked to describe the characteristics of the typical CWO that they were familiar with in Pennsylvania. The KIs gave 17 characteristics in total. The median number of responses by each KI was three. The number of KIs responding is reported in parentheses. The typical Pennsylvania CWO consists of:

1. A core group of people (12),
2. Volunteer-based (11),
3. Relatively young (6),
4. Need of money (6).

These characteristics are fairly typical of almost any volunteer organization. In contrast, 11 KIs said that there is not a typical organization and that they are all very different. This is potentially important for Extension. It suggests that a one-sized approach for programming may not fit the needs of all CWOs, although there may be commonality amongst other volunteer organizations.

### Organizational Milestones

The KIs were asked to identify organizational development milestones. These were not considered must-do milestones. These milestones appeared to be common for the CWOs to work towards achieving. Twenty milestones were identified by the KIs. The median number of responses by the KIs was five. The milestones were:

1. Establishing an organizational mission (14),
2. Completion of the first on-the-ground project (14),
3. Establishing an organizational vision and goals (13),
4. First grant received (12),
5. Transition of the board to a purely advisory role (9),
6. Hiring the first paid staff person (9).

The above milestones are not especially unique for community-based organizational development. Therefore, using milestones could help Extension personnel gauge the state of organizational development compared with similar those of organizations. This would then help Extension professionals when facilitating organizational development. A part of this role could be serving as a community-group communication and information conduit. Building intra- and inter-organization processes, collaboration, and facilitation are things that Extension professionals are skilled in providing.

## **The Resources Needed**

The KIs were asked to identify the resources that they thought were needed by the CWOs. Eighteen types of resources needed were provided. The median number of responses by the KIs was three. The most commonly reported resources needed included:

1. Funding (14),
2. Technical expertise (12),
3. A personal organizational mentor (7),
4. General training (6),
5. Consensus building or conflict resolution (4).

The Extension professional could potentially link CWOs to sources of the various resources needed. This could be accomplished through individualized attention but it could also be facilitated through local resource fairs organized by the local Extension office.

## **The Resources Used**

In contrast to what the CWOs need, the KIs were asked to identify what resources the CWOs use. Thirty-six resources used were provided. The median number of responses by KIs was four. The KIs indicated the following resources were used:

1. Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PA DEP) (14),
2. Bureau of Abandoned Mine Reclamation (PA DEP-BAMR) (6),
3. PA DEP Watershed Managers (6),
4. Natural Resource Conservation Service Districts (6),
5. Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (PA DCNR) (6),
6. Federal grants in general (6),
7. Private foundations (6),
8. The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (5),
9. Canaan Valley Institute (5).

It is important to note that during the interviews none of the KIs mentioned Extension as a resource used by Pennsylvania CWOs. It is not clear why this is the case given that the KIs had many responses for this question.

## **Description of a Successful CWO**

The KIs were asked how they would describe a successful CWO. There is a wide variety of opinion about describing a successful CWO. Twenty-seven total attributes were given. The median number of responses by the KIs was two. A successful CWO was described as the following:

1. Community supported (7),
2. Stable (renewals) or expanding membership base (6),
3. Organizational goals are met (6),
4. Completing on-the-ground projects (6),
5. Fund-raising ability (5),
6. Positive name recognition in the watershed (5).

### **The Measurement of a Successful CWO**

Following the KIs' description of a successful CWO, each KI was asked how they would measure a successful CWO. None of the KIs indicated they were involved with measuring CWOs for successfulness. However, the KIs provided 44 measures that might be used for this purpose. The median number of responses by the KIs was four. The ideas suggested to measure a successful CWO were as follows:

1. Project participants (13),
2. Number of people at general meetings (12),
3. External and internal money raised (9),
4. CWO leadership opinion about completion of their organizational objectives (8),
5. Abundance of activities (7),
6. Abundance of accomplishments (7),
7. Size of membership (6).

Measuring the effectiveness of a CWO is a complicated endeavor (Gruidl & Hustedde, 2003). A change in water quality and/or quantity could be one way to measure the effectiveness of CWOs. However, those changes may take years to occur and may not be solely attributable to a CWO. In addition, water change only measures outcomes and not the process of change. Extension can help CWOs measure organizational progress as a partner in developing holistic monitoring programs.

### **The Constraints and Opportunities to Growth for CWOs**

The KIs were asked about the limits explaining why CWOs are not able to do more. The question was asked to identify constraints for the social movement. Twenty-seven types of constraints were reported. The median number of responses by KIs was two. Five KIs could not think of any constraints. The other KIs indicated the following constraints:

1. Funding (12),
2. Active members (9),
3. Staffing resources (5),
4. Public support (5),
5. Access to resources (4),
6. Lack of local leadership (4).

As part of the limits to growth question, the KIs were asked to identify opportunities available for the CWOs. Thirty types of opportunities were reported. The median number of responses by KIs was one and one half. It is important to note that 10 KIs could not think of any opportunities for the CWOs. Probing questions were asked, but no opportunities were suggested by the KIs. The question may have not been clear, or the interviewer may have inadvertently biased the KIs. Conceivably, maybe the KIs did not feel there were many opportunities for the CWOs. The opportunities included the following:

1. Growing Greener Program (6),
2. Good projects will get money (3),
3. Urban growth pressure (3),

4. Conservation districts (3),
5. Growing public consciousness about water (3),
6. PA DEP watershed specialists and managers (2),
7. Loss of family farms (2),
8. Loss of open space (2),
9. Delegation of responsibilities (2),
10. More funding (2),
11. Informal mentoring (2),
12. Learning of resources (2),
13. Working relationships with minor civil divisions (2).

The losses of farms and open space were cited because the KIs felt they represented an opportunity to bring focus to the larger issues in the community. The Growing Greener Program is a state-funded program addressing environmental stewardship (Act 68). In 5 years, the program has awarded \$148 million in grant money for 1,290 water resource projects in every county (PA DEP, 2003). Dozens of CWOs have received organizational start-up money.

### **Organizational Issues**

The KIs were asked to identify the major organizational issues facing the CWOs that they were familiar with. A total of 22 organizational issues were reported by the KIs. The median number of responses by KIs was three. The issues included:

1. Burnout of people (9),
2. Receiving and administering monies (7),
3. Finding people willing to be officers (6),
4. Organizational strategic planning (5).

These issues are common to volunteer organizations. The Extension professional, by combining technical expertise, an understanding of local needs, and skills in community organizing, can be a catalyst for the development of local organizations (Parrott & Engelen-Eigles, 1992).

### **Implications for Extension**

Locally tailored watershed education is needed in many parts of the country (Conway, Godwin, Cloughesy, & Nierenburg, 2003). This research can be used to begin development of Extension programming in Pennsylvania and possibly other states for CWOs. In general, the KIs indicated that CWOs needed organizational development assistance.

Some Extension programs are already designed to enhance the capacity of community organizations to define and reach their objectives. Experienced Extension professionals might not find the need for organizational development assistance as a surprise because they have provided this type of training for years to other community organizations. What should be surprising is that none of the 24 KIs had mentioned any aspect of Extension as a resource for CWOs. Bull, Cote, Warner, & McKinnie, (2004) wrote, "Extension is a living, evolving, market-driven organization that responds to society's changing needs." Pennsylvania CWOs need help with organizational development while Extension is not seen as a source of assistance. Pennsylvania CWOs represent a possible evolving organizational development market for Extension.

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