



# Association of State Wetland Managers Wetland Regulatory Capacity Building Series

## Pursuing Integration to Increase Wetland Regulatory Program Capacity

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The way wetland managers approach wetland protection and restoration has changed over the last 25-30 years to incorporate a more systems-based approach. This change recognizes that wetlands are a component of watersheds (and can therefore be elements both within and external to a watershed). As such, in many cases the integration of wetland work should be considered during the planning and implementation of watershed restoration projects. Healthy wetlands are an integral component of healthy watersheds and provide many essential ecosystem services. Increasingly, efforts to protect, restore, enhance, and create wetlands are being employed to improve overall watershed health and to support climate change adaptation and resiliency.

To efficiently develop these projects, however, the various programs that manage elements of wetlands, water quality, flood protection, habitat, etc. need to integrate their efforts on administrative, programmatic, and project levels. The benefits of integrating these programs provide strategic opportunities that can maximize multiple ecological benefits and simultaneously increase program efficiencies. Integration can provide effective ways for state and tribal wetland programs to work more effectively with other federal, state, and local programs that manage water, habitat, and floodplains. Integration at this level allows programs to leverage the benefits of wetland protection and restoration jointly to improve overall watershed health.

### **Integration: Who is Joining Up?**

State aquatic resource regulatory programs have opportunities to partner or integrate with many different entities. The most common partners that wetland programs “join up” with include other state agencies, regional government entities, nonprofit organizations, federal agencies, and local government. Other partners include academic institutions, tribes, land trusts, and specific stakeholder groups. The focus of integration should be on building and

sustaining collaborative relationships that are able to create outcomes that are greater than any of the partners can create independently.

### **Why Integrate? The Benefits of Integration Activities**

There are many highly valued benefits that commonly emerge from collaboration. These include both improved environmental outcomes and non-environmental benefits. Many of the non-environmental benefits have been found in the areas of increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of processes and the quantity and diversity of resources available to state agencies. Identifying these benefits is an important part of making the case for integration. The following is a list of the most commonly cited benefits:

#### **Environmental benefits:**

- Improved habitat, water quality, abundance of species, size of species, and biodiversity;
- Increased water quality and reduced impairment;
- Better flood and drought control and improved hydrologic conditions;
- Improved restoration potential and ability to more accurately identify high need areas for protection or restoration; and
- Increased use of natural areas and recreational activity.

#### **Non-environmental benefits:**

- Increased ability to achieve agency/watershed goals;
- More efficient and effective shared permitting processes;
- Greater resource sharing, resulting in more projects, higher quality projects, wider reach, and greater impact of projects;
- Increased access to expertise across integration partners;
- Greater efficiency in use of field staff;
- Shared learning leading to professional development and career opportunities;
- Increased public/stakeholder awareness and appreciation for watershed issues; and
- The development of more innovative solutions through shared expertise and ideas.

For a more thorough discussion of measuring value of integration activities, check out ASWM's [\*Capturing the Value of Integration\*](#) document, which identifies ways that integration can be captured for documentation and event benefit-cost analyses.

### **Common Costs Associated with Undertaking Integration Activities**

While the benefits of integration are well-documented, they do not come without investment of staff time and resources. The most commonly cited costs are listed below:

**The costs of integration usually include:**

- Start-up and meeting costs;
- Necessary staff time reallocation; and
- Creation of shared or complementary systems.

**Other expenses that may be incurred include (if provided):**

- Expenses associated with necessary cross-training among partners; and
- The cost of paying into shared funds for integrated activities or providing any program incentives (e.g., provided grants, contracts, awards).

**When is Integration Most Useful?**

ASWM has found that wetland integration is often a key component of addressing an issue where there is a highly social element to the project. This social element can manifest when there are diverse or potentially competing reasons for entities to jointly work on issues, particularly with issues that have the potential to be contentious. Examples of these contentious issues include addressing water conflicts, identifying high runoff areas and pollutant contributors, addressing flooding or drought conditions, analyzing trends, unpacking inequality, community building, etc. They often involve transboundary considerations and coordination and therefore require multiple levels of access to achieve their goals. However, integration efforts do not always focus on conflictual issues; some are built around opportunities for economies of scale from joint hiring or joint purchasing and others are focused on creating efficiencies through shared processes and resource-sharing.

**What Barriers Commonly Challenge Integration Efforts?**

Integration is becoming more common as watershed-based approaches are increasingly becoming the norm. However, there remain significant barriers that may need to be overcome:

- Working across boundaries (administrative, jurisdictional and/or geographic) can be difficult due to coordination requirements, competing agendas, and siloed programs and funding.
- For these same reasons, coordination among the “joining up” entities can be difficult and time consuming.
- The understanding of how systems work requires a watershed mindset that is often not recognized by administrative and regulatory systems.
- Building collaboration and integration requires significant investments in time, resources and political will.
- Starting with too large an objective may prevent gaining momentum for parties to work together, as large projects may take a long time to achieve target outcomes and partners seek earlier returns on investment for their time and resource commitments.

- Programmatic accommodation of integration (i.e., organizational frameworks to facilitate integration) is often absent and unsupported.
- Challenges conducting cost-benefit analyses for integration and nature-based solutions due to limited examples, access to non-market estimates of costs and benefits, and lack of data and expertise to complete these analyses.
- Because integration an emerging approach, there remains limited research to support its efficacy and there remains scientific uncertainty about integration outcomes; however, research is increasingly becoming available and is demonstrating the value of these integration efforts.

### **Advice for States and Tribes Seeking to Conduct Integrated Activities:**

ASWM has been working with states over the last several years to better understand lessons learned about integration. The following is a list of advice for those considering whether or not to explore integration options:

- Adopt an integration mindset, incorporating integration goals and shared decision making frameworks into planning processes and priorities.
- Invest in partnership building.
- Create shared goals and priorities with integration partners.
- Manage expectations around what will be accomplished, in what timeframe, with what resources, outputs and outcomes.
- Start small and build on successes (begin with low-hanging fruit and win-win activities).
- Take the time to conduct careful, strategic planning (short - and long-term) with documentation.
- Build in strong evaluation, including integration metrics to measure value of collaborative work.
- Develop necessary legislative and administrative supports to make your integration effort successful, including crafting and getting these supports approved. Examples include: legislation to approve plans and/or funding; legislative bills; joint powers agreements; resource management rules; executive orders; administrative-level agreements; etc.
- Maintain regular and coordinated communications.
- Provide formalization and structure to fit the scope of the project.
- Develop a formalized but flexible structure for collaborative activities, including project management, tracking, reporting, and evaluation.
- Engage stakeholders early and often through well-structured, transparent best practices for public engagement and compliance with public involvement requirements.
- Build in programmatic and process adaptability and flexibility.
- Identify/secure sustainable funding for life of the integration project from multiple sources.

- Include a strategic public outreach/education project component and invest in creating public understanding.

To learn more about integration for aquatic resource management and explore case studies of state wetland programs integrating with other entities to strengthen project outcomes, look into ASWM's Healthy Wetlands, Healthy Watersheds project, which was designed to help states and tribes build their capacity around integration efforts that leverage wetland restoration and protection programs to improve watershed health. The products of this project include a [white paper](#), state program [integration case studies](#), [watershed project integration case studies](#), and [other support resources](#), located on the ASWM website.

**For more information, contact:**

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