

# Ecosystem Services Messaging

## Needs Assessment and Initial Messaging Recommendations



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### TABLE OF CONTENTS

BACKGROUND	2
METHODOLOGY	3
SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS	3
DISCUSSION	6
WORDS MATTER: THE LANGUAGE OF ECOSYSTEM SERVICES	8
AUDIENCE	9
MAKING THE CASE	11
INCENTIVIZING GOOD LAND MANAGEMENT	14
CONSERVATION ALTERNATIVES	18
CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS	22
REFERENCES	23

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## BACKGROUND

*The U.S. Forest Service launches a new software technology called i-Tree, designed to calculate the monetary value of services provided by urban forests, including carbon storage, air and water filtration and temperature modulation.*

*Weyerhaeuser, one of the world's largest pulp and paper firms, launches a new business unit to quantify and find markets for some of the benefits provided by its timber holdings, including air and water filtration, carbon sequestration and wildlife habitat.*

*The city of Ashland, Oregon, contemplates planting and maintaining trees along a local creek in lieu of building a cooling tower and chiller to meet water quality requirements. The tree planting option is estimated to save the community millions of dollars.*

These three projects fall under an emerging field called “ecosystem services.” While different in scope, scale and the stakeholders involved, they share a sensibility around calculating the value of services provided by natural systems and utilizing that valuation in decision-making processes—whether by governments, businesses, landowners or taxpayers. Beyond that, they share something else: their champions struggle mightily to convey the importance and value proposition of ecosystem services to a range of audiences.

The language surrounding ecosystem services projects is a jargon-rich, dense amalgam of scientific, financial, regulatory and conservation parlance. Those working to advance ecosystem services projects struggle to articulate what they are trying to do, and why their approach is more effective and efficient.

Resource Media is a nonprofit PR firm dedicated to helping our partners succeed in today's dynamic media landscape. We develop and execute smart communications strategies for the environment and public health. With support from the Bullitt Foundation, Resource Media prepared an ecosystem services messaging needs assessment as a first step toward helping practitioners more effectively convey the value of their work. Our report focuses on the specific messaging challenges and issues faced by advocates in the Pacific Northwest, but we anticipate our findings will be relevant elsewhere.

## METHODOLOGY

Resource Media conducted in-depth interviews with ecosystem services practitioners, government officials, scientists, academics and other experts. We examined media and digital coverage of ecosystem services projects and reviewed a wide range of materials produced by practitioners. We worked closely with the Intertwine Alliance, a Portland-based nonprofit, to develop communications materials in support of Portland’s “Grey to Green” green infrastructure initiative, which allowed us to get a feel for some of the on-the-ground nuances and test some of our assumptions. We presented early research findings to a group of Pacific Northwest ecosystem practitioners at a gathering at the Harmony Hill Retreat Center in early March 2012, and facilitated a discussion of priority audiences and their views and values to inform the message development process.

## SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

We have organized our overall recommendations into three categories: messaging, strategy and research needs.

<b>Messaging</b>	Instead of ecosystem services, talk about nature’s value or nature’s benefits. Ecosystem services is both difficult to understand and inadequate to convey the core values at stake.
	Frame the issue around land use and land management. When possible talk about specific lands and natural areas. Within that overarching frame, develop messaging for categories of projects that are similar in their goals, objectives and target audiences (recommendations on how to group projects and develop messaging for each project type are below).
	Acknowledge the many intangible and incalculable benefits provided by nature before talking about dollar values for specific benefits or services.
	When it comes to nature’s benefits, focus on those that are most tangible, easy to understand and beneficial for public health and safety: filtering water to keep it clean; providing clean water for drinking and irrigation; removing pollution from the air; keeping soil fertile and productive; protecting against floods and hurricanes, etc.
	Emphasize the need to fill a gap in traditional economic analysis in which the default value provided by healthy natural systems is zero. By quantifying benefits, we give land managers a more complete picture, allowing for better land management decisions.
	Bypass jargon for plain English. Instead of markets and credits, talk about paying land managers to manage their land in a way that provides benefits to the community. Instead of natural capital, talk about benefits provided by healthy natural systems.



<b>Messaging (cont.)</b>	Contrast green infrastructure projects with the resource-intensive interventions they replace. Frame green infrastructure projects as a more cost-effective and resource-efficient choice. Continually remind taxpayers/ratepayers of the cost savings associated with a green infrastructure approach.
	Be disciplined and avoid overselling the potential of ecosystem services markets. Ensure language about the potential of a transactional approach be based on things the government is empowered to regulate. Develop specific examples of tradable services as defined by regulatory statute and stick to them.

<b>Strategy</b>	Focus communications resources on projects that have the greatest potential for controversy. These include green infrastructure projects and projects designed to provide landowners with incentives to manage their land in specific ways.
	On that note, we see the need for a movement-wide investment in public education and outreach around green infrastructure projects. These projects have the greatest potential for environmentally-beneficial outcomes, but are the most likely to stir up controversy and opposition. While green infrastructure is yet not a well-known concept, voters in the Puget Sound are inclined to see it in a positive light. <b>Now is the time to take advantage of initially positive reactions.</b> A well-accepted understanding of the many benefits of successful green infrastructure projects will pave the way for other municipalities to adopt the approach. Alternatively, excessive controversy and negative press around one or more green infrastructure projects could have a chilling effect for municipalities and utilities contemplating a new approach. Now is the time to get ahead of the story and ensure the public narrative supports future projects.
	Position green infrastructure projects as locally-driven and locally-appropriate. Projects that lack authentic local support may feel “handed down” by government or outside interests and generate opposition. Inoculate against this by engaging stakeholders early, developing local champions and framing projects as meeting specific local challenges such as flooding, standing water, or the need to protect a local waterway.
	On that note, proactively tell stories about successful projects. Securing support from many stakeholders – regulators and landowners in particular—often boils down to overcoming risk aversion. Proof of concept is critical. Develop easy-to-understand project briefs or case studies highlighting the benefits to the various players.
	Visually show the choice between green infrastructure and conventional projects, particularly in situations in which advocates are seeking to make the case for consideration of a green alternative to traditional resource management. Visuals showing both the natural <i>processes</i> at play, via diagrams and infographics, and the <i>options</i> before

<b>Strategy</b> <i>(cont.)</i>	decision-makers can help frame the issue as a matter of making pragmatic choices between various techniques. For example, juxtapose an image of a water cooling tower and a shaded stream with the associated costs of both to illustrate the choice between built and natural techniques for managing water temperature.
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<b>Research Needs</b>	While the Action Media research indicates that Puget Sound voters are inclined to see green infrastructure in a positive light, further research is needed to confirm whether that is the case in other parts of the Pacific Northwest and the rest of the country.
	Qualitative and quantitative public opinion research could help confirm the utility of an overarching land management/land use frame and messaging recommendations for specific project types.
	While the three types of ecosystem services projects have different stories associated with them, we believe the ideal overall frame for the issue is the same: sound resource management decision-making to address specific local challenges. If message testing confirms the effectiveness of this frame, and highlights specific language through which to talk about each of the three project types, then additional research into the potential for mass market media to reinforce and support the narrative will be needed.

## DISCUSSION

### ***Big Picture: What goes into a Message?***

Before we discuss the factors that will inform messaging for ecosystem services projects, it helps to step back and consider what goes into a solid messaging framework.

Behind every good message is a story frame that provides structure and context for the message. A frame answers the question, “What are we talking about?” The frame is critical because it defines the central issues at stake.

The message is the story that unfolds within the frame. Effective messages are built on a clear goal (what do you want to have happen?) and audience (who can make it happen?). They speak to the views and values of one’s audience and are designed to elicit the response (action) needed to make one’s goal a reality.

“ Different types of ecosystem services projects have different goals and objectives and speak to different audiences. Using the same phrase to capture them all contributes to confusion around the phrase's meaning. ”

In the context of ecosystem services messaging, a challenge at the outset is that there is no single goal—there are many goals. And for each goal there are many audiences. And while we see the potential to frame all projects under a land use and land management frame (see below), with current messaging, there are many frames. Within each frame are different stories – or messages.

The phrase “ecosystem services” is used to describe simple valuation efforts (i.e. calculating the financial value or other methods of valuating various services); creation of markets for the buying and selling of ecosystem services credits; and use of green infrastructure to address water and air quality management by utilities and municipalities. Each of these kinds of projects has different goals and objectives and speaks to different audiences.

### ***Three Project Types***

In light of this complexity, we have separated the universe of ecosystem services projects into groups of projects that share similar goals and audiences.

<p><b>Making the case</b></p>	<p>The first set of projects focuses on calculating the value of benefits provided by natural systems. Many assign actual dollar values—e.g. the dollar value of the services provided by a particular tree in a park over a specified period of time—while others also include non-dollar values. These kinds of approaches are generally an attempt to persuade stakeholders of the value—and therefore importance—of ecosystem services to better ensure that value is factored into decision-making. Audiences range from the public to legislators and other regulatory bodies.</p>
<p><b>Incentivizing good land management</b></p>	<p>A second set of projects goes beyond assigning value to attempting to create and encourage the use of mechanisms to pay land managers—farmers, ranchers, forest owners, etc.—to manage land in a way that provides specific benefits. Many stakeholders are working to create markets and financing mechanisms, and set up an infrastructure to facilitate payments to landowners and land managers for managing land in a way that provides these benefits. Audiences for these types of projects are diverse and varied. They include resource agencies, environmentalists, business interests, farmers and ranchers, forest owners/managers, municipal credit purchases, developers, tribes and others.</p>

<p><b>Conservation alternatives</b></p>	<p>In a third set of projects, public resource managers and utilities—working with a variety of stakeholders—seek to utilize the power of nature to solve or prevent problems that would otherwise require more expensive—and often intrusive—technological fixes. For example, a public utility purchases riparian land in its watershed to naturally control sediment loading and cool water in lieu of building an expensive water treatment/cooling facility. Audiences for these projects include resource managers, legislators, fiscal conservatives, utilities, environmentalists, landowners/land managers, business interests, tribes and others.</p>
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Our research suggests that most of the public-facing communications efforts to date fall under the *making the case* category. Meanwhile, most of the practitioners and advocates in the Pacific Northwest are focused on projects in the second two categories, and it is here that we see most of the communications and messaging challenges.

### ***State of the Conversation***

Most conversations about ecosystem services projects are happening below the radar, among nonprofits, scientists, regulatory staff and academics. But that will change as more projects are brought online and into the public sphere.

We found relatively little media coverage of ecosystem services projects in our media scan beyond some niche blog coverage. The news coverage we did find generally pertains to *making the case* projects. Reporters are clearly intrigued by the idea of quantifying—in dollars—the value of nature. Reporters are also clearly interested in the technologies being developed to monetize ecosystem services. We came across several articles about software tools (i-Tree, InVEST, etc.).

We found no coverage of incentivizing good land management projects, and very little coverage of *conservation alternatives*. But, the latter may reflect the fact that in many cases, practitioners are not using the phrase “ecosystem services” to describe conservation alternative projects. We know anecdotally and from tracking coverage of stormwater management in the Puget Sound and Portland that coverage of green infrastructure and other conservation alternative projects exists, but it did not surface in our national news scan.

**“Projects that rely on funding from taxpayers and/or ratepayers must be prepared to argue for their approach in the court of public opinion; thus the message has to have broad public appeal.”**



Through our work with Intertwine Alliance, we saw firsthand the vulnerabilities public officials face when it comes to utilizing taxpayer funds for green infrastructure projects. In that case, a handful of large water users opposed to Portland’s “Gray to Green” green infrastructure initiative filed a lawsuit alleging misuse of ratepayer funds. The city had reams of data—most buried in its hard-to-navigate website—demonstrating the fiscal benefits of its approach. And while city staff had dedicated time and energy to communicating with ratepayers about Grey to Green, they found that voters and opinion leaders still are in need of significant education about the benefits. When the lawsuit was filed, the city was caught relatively flat-footed. Coverage focused on the alleged misuse of public funds and neglected to balance the allegations with commentary on the many benefits of using new green techniques to address longstanding water management needs.

The Intertwine example illustrates three critical points. First, those advancing projects that rely on funding from taxpayers and/or ratepayers must be prepared to argue for their approach in the court of public opinion; second, because of that, the message has to have broad public appeal; and third, municipalities need help conveying the benefits of a green infrastructure approach.

## WORDS MATTER: THE LANGUAGE OF ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

As noted above, language used to describe ecosystem services projects is an amalgam of financial, conservation, regulatory and scientific parlance.

The phrase ‘ecosystem services’ is fairly well-accepted within the nonprofit, scientific and academic communities. But, public opinion research commissioned by The Nature Conservancy and performed by the polling firm FM3 in 2010, coupled with Resource Media’s experience working on conservation issues throughout the country, suggests there are some downsides to the phrase.

“ **The use of financial parlance to describe ecosystem services projects may undermine the ability to convey what is at heart a relatively simple concept: compensating land managers for managing their land in a way that benefits the larger community.** ”

An ecosystem is an abstract concept at best and has little to do with the average American’s day-to-day life. Very few Americans think of themselves as living in an ecosystem. And while Americans strongly value the many benefits provided by nature and natural systems, they resist use of the term “services” to capture those benefits insofar as it suggests nature’s primary value is in the services provided to people. To put it another way, “services” offends our expansive sense of the incalculable and intangible benefits nature provides.

The financial language used to describe many ecosystem services projects—especially those in the “incentivizing good land management” category—is confusing for the average American, most of whom are financially illiterate. Few understand how markets work and are created. For most, a market is an abstract concept. The use of financial parlance to describe ecosystem services projects may undermine practitioners’ ability to convey what is at heart a relatively simple concept: compensating land managers for managing their land in a way that benefits the larger community. While we can all wrap our heads around what that means, we may have a harder time conceptualizing the creation of credits and markets for goods and services provided by a particular piece of land.

“The TNC research indicates that voters are skeptical of equating benefits to specific dollar amounts and less persuaded by dollars and cents messages.”

It’s also worth remembering that in the financial frame, the setting is a financial market—something most Americans have a hard time conceptualizing—and the action of the story is comprised of all of the mysterious activities that go on in a financial market.

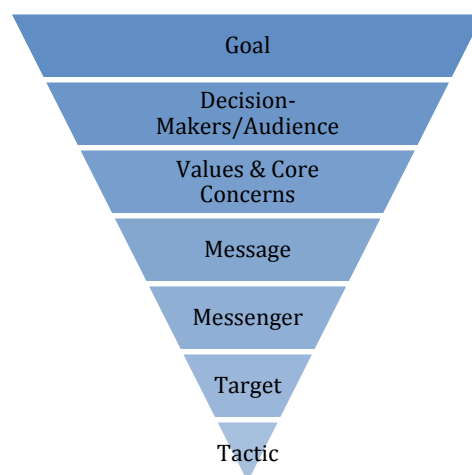
The TNC research indicates that voters are skeptical of equating benefits to specific dollar amounts and less persuaded by dollars-and-cents messages. References to the amount of clean air and water provided, or the number of people who benefit, are far more persuasive.

So while we have every reason to believe that Americans believe the benefits provided by nature are very important, especially when it comes to public health and safety, and broad majorities support efforts to calculate the value of ecosystem services to inform decisions about the use and management of natural resources, it’s likely the language used to describe projects fails to tap into that support.

## AUDIENCE

From a communications perspective, understanding whom we are talking to—i.e. the audience—is critical. We have to identify the decision-makers who hold the keys to success, develop a framework for understanding the attitudes of those with the power to move projects forward and identify the ways that messaging can and should be tailored to influence them.

*The Strategic Communications Pyramid*



Our research illustrated the various constituencies involved in this field. It also showed us that ecosystem services represent something different for nearly every one of them. Landowners see new revenue streams, regulated businesses see cheaper compliance alternatives, conservationists strive for conservation improvements, and regulators see some mix of opportunity and potential disaster if the mechanisms aren't developed properly. Understanding who you need to reach in order to see a given project succeed is the first step in developing effective messaging. Below, we identify the top priority audiences identified by practitioners for ongoing projects.

<b><i>Elected officials and their staff</i></b>	Elected officials are often decision-makers when it comes to conservation alternative projects, and their actions can make or break incentivizing good land management projects insofar as they can create the regulatory framework that drives demand for certain services.
<b><i>Regulators</i></b>	Like elected officials, local, state and federal regulators have a very important role to play in advancing conservation alternative projects and creating a regulatory framework for ecosystem services markets. They are also often creators and consumers of tools that calculate the value of various ecosystem services.
<b><i>Land managers</i></b>	Farmers, ranchers, forest owners and other land managers are important audiences when it comes to the second category of projects. Many are open to- and interested in- receiving payments to manage their land in a way that provides specific benefits, but this often translates into a belief that they will be paid for doing what they have always done. Agriculture trade associations are intrigued with ecosystem services projects as a means to diversify farm revenues. Many farmers have experience receiving compensation for conservation-oriented management practices through Farm Bill programs and therefore intuitively understand the ecosystem services approach. Forest landowners, on the other hand, are generally less familiar with the concept and need examples to illustrate how it could work. As businessmen and women, they are open to getting paid for managing their land in a certain way, but the concept is for the most part abstract.
<b><i>Business community</i></b>	Business owners find the market approach to funding ecosystem services intuitive and see it as a potentially cost-effective and efficient way to meet regulatory requirements. Many larger companies—for example Coca Cola, Dow Chemical, DuPont and Puma—have already invested resources into figuring out how to operationalize an ecosystem services approach.

Below we summarize messaging considerations and initial messaging recommendations for each project type.

## MAKING THE CASE

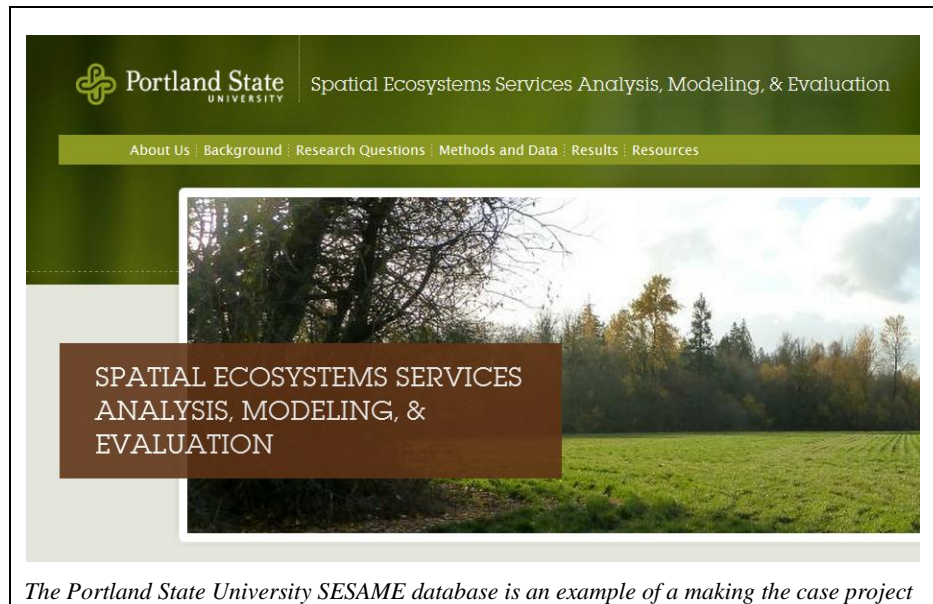
Most of the public-facing communications around ecosystem services projects has been done in the context of *making the case* projects. We reviewed numerous fact sheets and other materials produced by practitioners to describe projects. They tend to focus on the relatively non-contentious argument that humans derive benefits from nature, and that understanding the extent and value of those benefits will make safeguarding them easier and more effective. Press coverage of *making the case* projects tends to focus on the dollar values associated with various ecosystem services. It's not hard to imagine why reporters do this: it's an easy story to write.

These projects serve first and foremost as research and education initiatives. They are designed to help resource managers better understand the resources under their jurisdiction, and ecosystem services advocates use them to educate the public and specific stakeholders about the concept of ecosystem services and why they are important.

Reportage of *making the case* projects very rarely delves into conflict and controversy. Messengers tend to be academics, researchers and economists.

The public opinion research commissioned by TNC in 2010 found that the average American voter is predisposed to appreciate such undertakings: they understand that nature provides a host of benefits, and agree that understanding the breadth and scope of those benefits is important. But, while voters support calculating the dollar value of benefits provided by nature, they are even more supportive of measuring the value of nature in terms other than dollars. As FM3, the pollster, noted, "Voters' strong support for this approach stems from their firm belief that impacts on surrounding communities should play a primary role in land use decisions.... Voters have a strong, intuitive belief that the benefits nature provides impact people throughout the surrounding area—and thus must be kept in mind when decisions are made about how land is to be used."

It is therefore important to highlight the many tangible and intangible benefits provided by healthy natural systems before talking about dollars and cents. The impossibility of putting a price tag on nature should be part of the message. Valuation efforts should be positioned as a way to quantify a tiny part of the tangible benefits nature provides to assist land managers in their decision-making.



**Decision-makers**

*Making the case* projects are often designed to inform regulatory decision-making processes. As such, the decision-makers are typically regulatory agency staff.

<p><b>Regulators</b></p>	<p>Practitioners report that working with regulators requires a case-by-case approach. It’s necessary to build rapport and dialogue with individual staff, often around a specific effort. When it comes to <i>making the case</i> projects, regulatory agencies may be the driving force behind the research. Whether government or non-government scientists are conducting the research, regulators have generally expressed a strong interest in research to better understand ecosystem function. Such research gives them the data they need to determine the effectiveness of existing regulation, and serves as a needs assessment to determine where regulation is coming up short. While our discovery research suggests that regulators are a critical audience with well-entrenched bureaucratic obstacles to incorporating ecosystem services into regulatory regimes, the challenges associated with communicating with them tend to be associated with the other two project types.</p>
<p><b>Elected officials</b></p>	<p>Elected officials are first and foremost politicians. They are beholden to their electorate and make decisions based on if and how they will impact their standing with voters. To understand the perspective of an elected official, start by looking at</p>



	<p>his or her district. Understanding who an official represents is the first step in determining values and core concerns—and thus the best way to approach them. In our discovery research, we found that officials vary widely when it comes to ecosystem services issues. Most are unfamiliar with the concept, and the most compelling approach to winning them over is through a fiscal argument. Demonstrating the potential cost-savings that could be incurred through the understanding of ecosystem services—and their incorporation into regulatory regimes (via one of the other two project types)—could pique their interest and help diffuse potential opposition</p>
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### ***Recommendations***

In order of urgency, addressing messaging needs with *making the case* projects is a lower priority than addressing communications issues with the other two project types. We see room for some improvement in messaging, but it should be a relatively easy fix.

Instead of talking about ecosystem services, talk about providing land managers / land regulators with information they need to make good land management / regulatory decisions. Emphasize that we are filling a gap in traditional economic analysis that sets the value of nature’s benefits at zero. Calculating the benefits gives us a more complete picture of the values contained in a piece of land, allowing for better decision-making about how to manage the land.

Ultimately, the message should pack a one-two punch. First, acknowledge the impossibility of putting a price tag on nature (given the public-facing nature of the message), and then emphasize the quantifiable fiscal benefits of specific natural values when speaking to elected officials’ and regulators who need to pay attention to the bottom line.

“ Instead of talking about ecosystem services, talk about providing land managers / land regulators with information they need to make good land management / regulatory decisions. ”

### **Frame**

Resource / land management decision-making. Setting: Make it local and specific (i.e. specific trees, stream banks, forests, etc.).

### **Sample *making the case* message**

While it would be impossible to put a price tag on the value of nature, quantifying some of the benefits provided by healthy natural systems allows land managers and regulators to more accurately weigh the pros and cons of different land management options.

Trees and undeveloped areas filter water to keep it clean for drinking and irrigation; remove pollution from the air; keep soil fertile and resistant to erosion; protect against the damages wrought by floods and hurricanes and pollinate plants and crops to help them grow. In doing so they provide huge financial benefits to communities that should be considered in land use decisions.

<b>Supportive talking points</b>	Traditional economic analysis sets the value of nature’s benefit at zero, which doesn’t make sense.
	Armed with estimates of fiscal benefits, land managers can rely on a solid fiscal rationale for protecting intact natural areas.
	Calculating nature’s benefits gives us a more complete picture and allows for better land management decisions.

## INCENTIVIZING GOOD LAND MANAGEMENT

A second set of projects goes beyond assigning value to attempting to create and encourage the use of mechanisms to pay land managers for specific ecosystem services. These projects are typically described using financial language. Practitioners talk about creating markets and credits for specific ecosystem services. Those who would pay for those services are called “buyers,” and the landowners and land managers are referred to as “sellers.”

### *Decision-makers*

*Incentivizing good land management* projects involve a number of decision-makers at different stages of the process.

<b>Regulators / elected officials</b>	Many projects rely on regulatory decision-making to create the demand for ecosystem services. For example, a company or business required to meet a certain water quality or temperature standard may determine it is more cost-effective to pay upstream landowners to manage their land in a way to filter and cool water than it is to build a treatment or cooling facility. Regulators can also be the source of funding for the purchase of credits. Some of the regulators we spoke with registered frustration over what they saw as a lack of communications discipline on the part of advocates. They stressed the importance of ensuring rhetoric about the potential of a transactional approach be based on things the government is empowered to regulate.
<b>Landowners / land managers</b> <b>Landowners /</b>	As we noted above, many landowners and managers are open to and interested in receiving payments to manage their land in a way that provides benefits. Many farmers are familiar with the concept through their participation in agricultural

<p><b>land managers (cont.)</b></p>	<p>conservation programs. In some cases landowners/managers mistakenly assume they will be paid to manage their land as they always have—i.e. maintain the status quo—versus changing their operations to achieve specific outcomes. In some ways landowners and land managers are an easy audience: broadly speaking they are attracted to the idea of markets / credit transactions. One regulator we spoke with indicated it was the potential sellers who are the most vocal advocates of such systems. Yet with detail comes complexity—and challenges. The largely untested nature of credit markets means landowners and managers fear a bait-and-switch. As one regulator put it, “If it’s worth enough to buy, it’s worth enough to take.” They fear voluntarily complying with conservation practices for pay could be a gateway to the practices becoming mandatory. Yet as long as practitioners can point to funds available to purchase credits, potential sellers will listen. Conversations are more difficult when talking about markets and credits in the abstract. From a sequencing perspective, we see little utility in convincing landowners/managers that getting paid to provide environmental benefits is a good thing before a funding stream is available to compensate them. Instead, early outreach should focus on securing the conditions necessary to create demand—and funds—for specific benefits. Our hunch is that landowners and land managers will be all ears when there is money on the table.</p>
<p><b>Businesses</b></p>	<p>Developers and other business interests with the need to meet regulatory requirements make up a large potential demand base for ecosystem service credits. Most businesses will default to using traditional mitigation approaches because they are familiar with them. The effort to convince them to try credit purchasing as an alternative compliance mechanism could benefit significantly from the development of case studies of successfully completed transactions.</p>

***Recommendations***

Paying landowners for good land management practices that benefit the surrounding community is a relatively simple concept for most audiences to understand. Creating an ecosystem services market with buyers, sellers, ecosystem services credits and a certification methodology is not. While business owners may embrace the financial language, other audiences will likely struggle to comprehend and be left wondering what it means for them.

The FM3 research indicates Americans think about ecosystem services projects in the context of land use. And, as noted above, voters’ strong support for calculating the value of natural services “stems from their firm belief that impacts on surrounding communities should play a primary role in land use decisions.” In

**“ Avoid overselling the idea publicly before the field has proven the concept with actual transactions.”**

addition, FM3 noted that in focus groups, “Voters express frustration that the needs and desires of local communities are not adequately considered when land use decisions are made.”

For public-facing messaging, we recommend using financial language sparingly and keeping the message focused on a more tangible story in which land managers—which includes landowners—are paid to manage their land in a way that benefits the surrounding community.

It’s helpful to consider an analogy: Practitioners are talking about the process of making a theoretical apple pie—the ingredients that go into it, the process of making the dough, the sequencing of ingredients, how to peel the apples, where the apples can be purchased—while its audiences want a piece of pie. Sell the pie—the benefits of a working ecosystem services market—not the ingredient list and process used to make it.

When it comes to the behind-the-scenes conversations practitioners are engaged in as they attempt to get projects off of the ground, we recommend paying close attention to sequencing. Currently, practitioners are trying to help various stakeholders grasp the implications of an envisioned system in which markets are set up and buyers and sellers buy and sell ecosystem services credits. They are simultaneously trying to convince landowners that they should be open to selling credits; regulators and elected officials that it is possible to quantify benefits; and businesses and other potential buyers that they should be open to purchasing credits. And they are doing this in the abstract—i.e. without an actual market to point to.

This approach is inefficient and has the potential to set unreasonable expectations all around. Talking to landowners about selling credits—i.e. accepting payment for specific land management practices—without buyers ready to make an offer strikes us as a potentially inefficient use of time and energy. Our hunch is that once money is on the table, landowners and land managers will be all ears.

**“ There’s a need for the NGO community to understand the full range of constituencies that the agencies have to work with. Go forth and engage those constituencies directly – assuage their concerns – to take some pressure off the agencies.”**

**--Regulator**

Meanwhile, some of the regulators we spoke with expressed frustration that practitioners have in some cases oversold the potential of ecosystem services markets, creating unrealistic expectations about the problems that can be addressed and what can be achieved. This makes regulators' jobs more difficult. Given the difficulties encountered in establishing models for markets and getting them off the ground, it is important to avoid overselling the idea publicly before the field has proven the concept with actual transactions.

It strikes us that early engagement will be most productive on the demand side of the equation. As we mentioned above, bringing in landowners as sellers before the revenue stream is in place could potentially be counterproductive.

When it comes to specific projects, there is no substitute for early engagement with stakeholders. Before getting to the stage of negotiations over baselines and other details, bring people together to connect around the notion that while we may not know the exact natural value of a given piece of land, we know it is more than zero—and zero is the default value. That shared understanding creates a commonality that will be important when disagreements about details emerge later in the process. The regulators we spoke with identified this type of icebreaking between stakeholder groups as a critical step for advocates to take—a step that can and should often be taken before engaging the regulatory community.

A trusted facilitator can bridge differences in stakeholder groups and bring them to the bargaining table. A credible representative of the regulator community, for example, can help secure the participation of the applicable agencies. The same holds true of other stakeholder groups: invest in evangelists.

### **Frame**

Land management decision-making. Setting: Make it local and specific (i.e. specific trees, stream banks, forests, etc.).

### **Sample *incentivizing good land management* message**

We all benefit when we manage land to support healthy natural functions. Healthy stream banks and forests keep drinking water clean and cool, remove harmful pollution from the air, keep soil fertile and productive and protect against damages wrought by floods and hurricanes. But, most landowners need to make money off of their land, and they are rarely paid for the benefits provided to the surrounding community when they manage for healthy natural functions.

But, that's all changing. Increasingly, communities are looking for ways to reward landowners who manage their land in a way that provides valuable benefits. For example, in central Oregon, the Deschutes River Conservancy is rewarding agricultural landowners for conserving water, providing better habitat for



salmon and steelhead and allowing the water to be reallocated to where it is needed most—either by towns or the river itself.

<b>Supportive talking points</b>	These approaches are good for the land, good for landowners and good for the surrounding community.
	Traditional economic analysis sets the value of healthy nature systems at zero, which doesn't make sense.
	We should reward landowners for good land management practices that benefit our community.

## CONSERVATION ALTERNATIVES

In a third set of projects, public resource managers and utilities—often working with a variety of stakeholders—seek to utilize the power of nature to solve or prevent problems that would otherwise require more expensive—and often intrusive—technological fixes. Audiences for these projects include resource managers, legislators, fiscal conservatives, utilities, environmentalists, landowners/land managers, business interests, tribes and others.

### *Context*

This sort of quantification is employed regularly by advocates and regulatory agencies looking to make the case for non-traditional approaches to resource management, particularly green infrastructure. Most, if not all of the *conservation alternative* projects in the Northwest revolve around water resources. Portland and Seattle are the two major urban centers of the Pacific Northwest that have invested heavily in this area, using ecosystem service analyses to justify land acquisitions, rain gardens and other natural water treatment installations. Other municipalities, particularly in Oregon, are exploring alternative approaches to a variety of water management requirements. In Lincoln City, for example, American Rivers is working with the local water utility, regulators, and forest landowners to protect and restore water quality.

**“ Even in politically friendly places like Portland, advances in green infrastructure can be quickly undermined by active opposition. ”**

It is in this category that we see most clearly the potential of ecosystem services thinking to deliver meaningful environmental benefits. Purely in terms of scale, the potential ecological benefits of green infrastructure projects are staggering. For example, some advocates are seeking to build political support for encouraging federal decision-makers with the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Forest Service to include ecosystem services in cost/benefit analyses for federal projects. This, as one advocate put it,

would be a game-changer, shifting billions of dollars toward “greener” infrastructure and legitimizing a shift toward balancing ecological and amenity values with timber and other commodities. Many more are helping land use planners develop ways to address ecosystem services values in their communities.

Perhaps the most famous regional project in this category is the Clean Water Services work to address temperature requirements in the Tualatin River through shoreline restoration, eliminating the need to build a cooling tower and saving millions of dollars.

Because green infrastructure projects represent a change in how taxpayer or ratepayer dollars are spent, those advancing them will always be vulnerable to charges of government/utility mismanagement of funds and/or fraud. Given the prevalence of anti-government rhetoric throughout the country, practitioners must take great care to ensure a strong case is made for the change.

As we illustrated earlier, even in politically friendly places like Portland, advances in green infrastructure can be quickly undermined by active opposition. This is illustrative of the general youth of green infrastructure, and points to a strong need to invest broadly in public education and outreach. A basic lack of understanding of green infrastructure leaves ratepayers vulnerable to arguments against any investment that could lead to an increase in utility bills, or any use of taxpayer dollars to pay for non-traditional mitigation.

***Decision-makers***

Regulators are key decision-makers for this project type as well. Elected officials and their staff are also key decision-makers for many *conservation alternatives* projects, particularly around urban investments in green infrastructure

<p><b>Regulators</b></p>	<p>Regulators become involved in <i>conservation alternative</i> projects when there is an established public service that the government provides— for example, managing the sewer system— that could be performed more efficiently or economically using a green approach. Regulators have a long, well-entrenched bureaucratic history of traditional infrastructure fixes to overcome. They know “grey” infrastructure works, but are intrigued by the idea of doing things better and cheaper. Regulators need to know—with as much detail as possible— what the comparison is between their “business as usual” way of addressing natural resource management and the new “green” approach.</p>
<p><b>Elected officials and their staff</b> <b>Elected officials</b></p>	<p>Winning over officials is often a simple political calculation: whom do they listen to? Who has the power to affect their re-election? In the case of green approaches to resource management challenges, those constituencies can include other key</p>

<b>and their staff (cont)</b>	audience categories touched on elsewhere in this memo: landowners, the business community, environmentalists and— perhaps most critically— ratepayers/voters.
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***Recommendations***

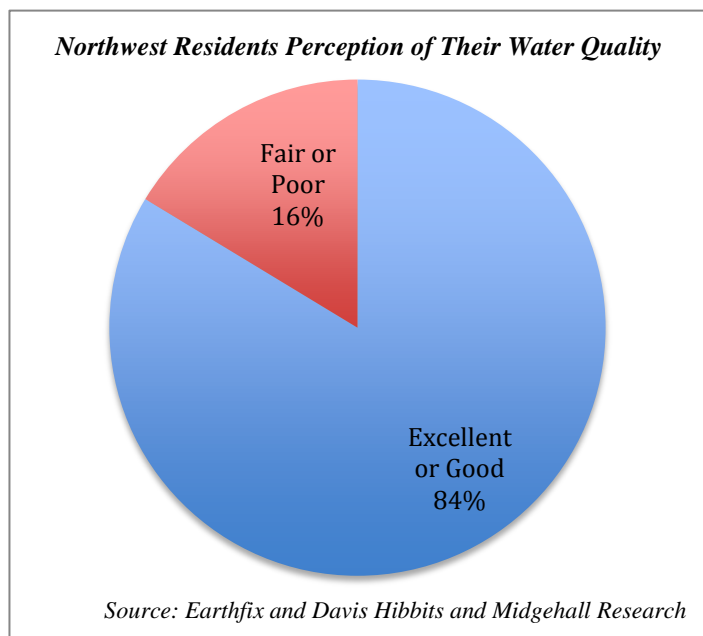
Poll after poll shows that Americans—particularly in the Pacific Northwest—value clean water and desire to see water resources protected and maintained. Yet people don’t clearly understand the ways in which these new, green approaches can protect water resources better than traditional grey techniques.

There are some institutional challenges to creating a strong sense of urgency around green development projects. Part of the problem is that most people don’t think there *is* a problem: focus groups and polls reveal that Northwesterners believe overall water quality in the region is very good, and fail to see the need for change. A Washington, Oregon and Idaho poll conducted in July 2012 by Oregon Public Broadcasting’s Earthfix and Davis Hibbits and Midgehall Research found that 84 percent of respondents considered their local water quality to be “good” or “excellent.” Another challenge is that most people see non-point source pollution as an unsolvable problem and are skeptical of the government’s ability to orchestrate a systematic overhaul to change that.

On the positive side, there is universal acceptance and support for the concept that building and maintaining infrastructure is the government’s job.

**Emphasize successes and making the right choice**

Building from the sense of local pride in the Pacific Northwest’s water resources, we recommend that practitioners popularize the effectiveness of successful projects and let the relevant decision- makers take the credit. These stories will be most effective if they are framed positively and as a way to keep water clean versus addressing pollution issues. Voters are far more inclined to support efforts to keep water clean, or pollutants out, than they are to back efforts to undue damage, or reverse a negative trend.



Specificity is also important. People care about their “own” waterways, such as Puget Sound and the Rogue River, in a far more substantive way than they do about water in the abstract.

Position the successes as the result of people (regulators, elected officials) making the “right” choice between a traditional and green infrastructure approach to natural resource use and management. Such choice-based stories hold the potential to tap into a broader suite of values— natural heritage, quality of life, and clean air and water to name a few— than we can with a fiscal argument alone. Categorizing the *conservation alternatives* “story” as a series of choices lends itself well to visual storytelling (see the WRI example below) and gives us a way to position our audiences— especially those in need of encouragement— as the potential heroes of the story.



Source: World Resources Institute

### **Language to use when talking about green development**

Talk about green infrastructure. Research in the Puget Sound suggests that even those who are unfamiliar with the term intuitively understand it and view it in a positive light. People associate “green” with the region’s commitment to being environmentally friendly and innovative, and “infrastructure” with the kinds of public works tax dollars traditionally support. Avoid the term low-impact development, or LID. People do not know what it means, and are confused by it.

### **Frame**

Land and resource management decision-making. Setting: Make it local and specific (i.e. specific water bodies, trees, stream banks, forests, etc.).

**Sample *conservation alternatives* message**

Healthy natural areas can perform many of the same functions as traditional built infrastructure – and often far more cheaply. The premise is simple: Why pay for something nature can do for free? Healthy natural systems can help communities avoid the expense of costly technological interventions, including water treatment and cooling plants to keep water clean, air scrubbers to remove air pollution and the application of chemical fertilizers to restore soil productivity.

For example, Portland has begun using ecoroofs and other green infrastructure techniques to absorb and treat rainfall where it falls, minimizing the need for costly water treatment.

<b>Supportive talking points</b>	Green infrastructure gives us greater flexibility and more options for finding the most efficient and cost-effective ways to manage our resources.
	Green infrastructure techniques can act as sponges, soaking up rain water and treating it where it lands.

**CONCLUSION**

To date, ecosystem services projects have for the most part managed to avoid generating much active opposition. Yet as more projects move forward, and the profile of the work increases, proponents should anticipate opposition and begin efforts now to inoculate against potential push-back.

This messaging needs assessment points to the need for ecosystem services advocates to get ahead of the game when it comes to messaging and framing to ensure this nascent field does not become embroiled in controversy as projects move into the public sphere.

In terms of setting priorities, we see the need to invest in broad public-facing outreach around the benefits of *conservation alternatives* projects, which hold the greatest potential for backlash. As the cliché goes, you only have one chance to make a first impression. Given how new green infrastructure techniques and approaches are, the impressions people develop from early efforts can have a lasting impression on the advancement of the field overall. Concerted investment in framing green infrastructure efforts in a positive way will pay dividends down the road– just as the failure to do so will burden efforts long into the future.

When it comes to *incentivizing good land management* projects, maintaining a low profile on public messages around markets and credit transactions until there is real money changing hands will ensure the concept isn’t oversold rhetorically before its appropriate scope and scale are established.



In the meantime, continued public education on understanding the value of nature (*making the case* projects) will serve to raise baseline understanding of the concepts and pave the way for more ambitious future efforts.

When it comes to messaging, we see tremendous room for improvement, bypassing financial and scientific jargon to talk about land use and land management and the need to reward land managers for managing their land in a way that provides public benefits. Messaging testing would be useful to test these recommendations, further refine language and talking points and determine whether they are appropriate outside of the Pacific Northwest.

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