



Listening and learning: Grants monitoring at BWSR

January 2016 Snapshots

BWSR disburses more than 85% of its annual revenue in grants. During the 2014-2015 biennium, for example, BWSR received \$140,598,000 in revenue (from the General Fund, Clean Water Fund, and other sources), and sent out \$120,042,000 in grants to local governments. Unlike many other state agencies, BWSR really is a conduit, acting in large part as a vehicle to “pass through” money via grants to accelerate conservation work done by local governments.

What is a grant, anyway? Grants are delivered in “contracted” agreements, but, as opposed to a contract itself, a grant is a transfer of money to a recipient to accomplish a *public* purpose. If you enter into a contractual relationship with another party, you tell them more or less exactly what you want them to do for you. If you enter into a grant agreement with another party, you send them money for a shared, public purpose, and they get to determine how best to accomplish that goal. Contracts involve the transfer of money: they (more or less) enrich. Grants *empower*.

With such empowerment comes responsibility. Local governments that receive grant funds accept the responsibility to spend them for the purpose with which they are given, to report on grant outcomes, and to practice careful accounting of the funds, so that the public can see what they are getting for their money. BWSR, in turn, accepts the responsibility given to it by the state Office of Grants Management (OGM) to monitor grants. As described in OGM policy, the purpose of grants monitoring is “to review and ensure progress against the grant’s goals, to address any problems before the end of the grant period, and to build rapport between the state agency and the grantee.”



Attendees of the 2015 BWSR Academy get the 411 on grants administration during a training session.

Grants monitoring at BWSR happens at several points during the grants cycle. It happens at the beginning, when staff work with potential grantees to target projects and strengthen proposals. It happens in the middle of the grants cycle, when BCs--the grants managers--review and approve all required annual reports. And it happens at the end of the grants cycle, when the grant is closed out and the program or project is evaluated.

For a selection of BWSR grants (ten percent in a given fiscal year), grants monitoring also happens well after the end of the grants cycle: during a verification site visit. During a site visit, a team of BWSR staffers checks what a grant recipient has received in grant funds against what the recipient reports it has spent—and matched--on local programs, operations, and projects. The main business of a verification site visit is to perform a [full-scale] financial reconciliation on the grant.

But there are other purposes. Site visits give BWSR staffers the opportunity to get feedback from local partners on what is and isn’t working in the guidance given about grants management. Site visits can often be

opportunities for entire BWSR teams to see the end results of grant programs: Best Management Practices, enhanced community engagement, and the promotion of conservation programs and practices.

Jill Carlier, Manager of the Pine County Soil and Water Conservation District, says that she found her verification site visit to be “very interesting. It makes you think about the process of getting funds in, spending them and tracking them in an entirely different light. It showed us areas where we need to do things better, and we were commended for things we are already doing really well.” Ann WhiteEagle of the Ramsey Conservation District agrees, saying that the site visit “confirm[ed] what we were doing well” while it delivered “suggestions for improvement.”

At BWSR, sharing a public purpose with grant recipients, and disbursing money to them via grants rather than contracts, creates relationships rather than transactions. Relationships, however, need cultivating. Are there more effective ways to practice grants oversight—to monitor progress and reconcile spending on grants-- so that the conservation funds we share can stretch even farther? BWSR’s grants managers and monitors will tackle that question this year, because improving processes is a two-way street, and we’re looking for ways to work better, too.