



Memorandum

To: Chesapeake Watershed CESU Host University, Federal Managers Committee, and Institutional Partners

From: CESU Network National Coordinator, on behalf of the CESU Council

Subject: Chesapeake Watershed CESU Renewal – CESU Council Review Comments and Recommendations

Date: 01 September 2021

The following points reflect review remarks, recommendations, and outcomes from the CESU Council during their 2021 CESU five-year renewal discussions:

- The Council voted in favor of renewal for the Chesapeake Watershed CESU for an additional five-year term (2021-2026).
- Council members were strongly supportive of renewal, acknowledging the active engagement with many agencies, and remarking about their respective positive experiences working with Chesapeake Watershed CESU partners as well as the benefits of the “very active program” to both nonfederal and federal partners.
- The Council acknowledged the development of approaches for increased communications and engagement across the partner community – including in-person outreach and field site visits, redesigned website, well-attended partner meetings, newsletter highlighting projects, partners, and news, and the use of social media and weekly emails with funding and other opportunity announcements. These efforts undoubtedly help to maintain an engaged community of partners and should be shared in the context of best practices among the broader CESU Network.
- The Council acknowledged the results from the host university’s efforts to query partners regarding their level of engagement. They also discussed the value of capturing/quantifying partner engagement activities beyond funded projects (e.g., meeting participation, student activities, trainings, strategic planning). Additional acknowledgement was given to the proposed idea of organizing smaller topical discussions to directly engage partner institutions that may not have had funded projects and to foster connections between partners on shared subject matter and common research interests.
- The Council commended the CESU host university team at the Appalachian Laboratory for the development of the online expert database and acknowledged the value of such a resource for both federal and nonfederal partners. Brief mention also was made regarding the need for follow-up discussions to better understand the capabilities and requirements for replicating this in other CESUs and/or expanding across the CESU Network.
- The Council acknowledged the inclusion of student engagement information with specific examples of students involved in CESU projects. One suggestion was to increase visibility of student involvement by highlighting projects via the website and other information outputs (also mentioned in the self-assessment). Another suggestion was to consider development of an annual student award

competition as mentioned by one of the external reviewers (Powell). Providing opportunities for students to gain practical experience on applied projects and work with federal agency technical staff and scientists is a valuable feature of the CESU program, contributing to the development of future environmental and cultural resource professionals. The Council also expressed an appreciation for the challenges involved in compiling this information from disparate points across the CESU and would encourage development of a systematic approach for gathering this information across the CESU Network.

- The Council discussed concerns over the lack of detailed description of efforts to engage under-represented organizations (e.g., tribes, HBCUs) and recommended that the CESU develop plans for related outreach and engagement over the next five years. Considering recent and expected increases in well-intentioned outreach to tribes, and associated impacts given often limited staff capacity, the Council discussed the need for thoughtful and informed engagement approaches. In following, the Council suggested convening a broader network discussion to share best practices and work toward identifying/developing consistent, durable, culturally competent coordination approaches to build lasting relationships with tribes and other under-represented organizations.
- The Council discussed concerns that over a quarter of nonfederal partners (n=17) had no reported projects with participating federal agencies during the recent 2016-2021 term, and fewer than half of nonfederal partners had reported funded projects in 2020. Due consideration was given by Council members to the fact that many new partners (n=37) had recently enrolled and perhaps had not yet had the opportunity to engage on projects (also mentioned in the self-assessment). The Council strongly encourages federal agencies to proactively engage partners from across the CESU community (e.g., smaller institutions, minority serving institutions, NGOs) on projects.
- The Council discussed the topic raised by the Federal Managers Committee concerning the growth of the CESU and the suggestion of limiting enrollment. Concerns related to increased partner enrollment were outlined, such as reduced response to routine communications, administrative actions, and other CESU activities. The Council acknowledged that concomitant federal funding will likely not keep pace with increasing partner enrollments, also establishing that there should be no expectations of even distribution of funding across the community of partners. Approaches to reduce the number or frequency of enrollment actions were discussed, including the annual application process already implemented by the Chesapeake Watershed CESU. The Council suggested that reducing outreach activities and/or implementing a more strategic approach to partner recruitment targeting specific (e.g., under-represented) organizations could help to manage enrollment. However, in the spirit of maintaining a non-exclusive program linked to federal financial assistance, no recommendations to greatly constrain enrollment were expressed.
- The Council discussed concerns that the most recent Chesapeake Watershed CESU strategic plan was developed 2015, and would reasonably expect the development of a new strategic plan, with input/participation from federal and nonfederal partners, within the first year of the new five-year term (2021-2026). This was considered especially important given the recent growth in the community of Chesapeake Watershed CESU partners.
- The Council also acknowledged the variable and unpredictable impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on both federal agencies and nonfederal partners over the past year plus, relating examples and experiences from their respective agencies, and conveying appreciation for how this situation has undoubtedly had an effect on CESU-related program and project activities and funding.