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California Conservation Innovations:
Constituency Engagement Strategy Evaluation

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Resources Legacy Fund (RLF) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) that works with philanthropists to conserve land, water, and ocean resources while advancing healthy communities and social equity. For 20 years, RLF has made significant achievements in conservation by partnering with nonprofit organizations that can lead the effort to advance conservation benefits in their communities and beyond.

Despite the success that RLF has helped foster, California's environmental policies, institutions, and natural resources face considerable challenges in the years ahead. Conservation policies and funding have not evolved to reflect the interests of California's diverse populations. RLF's California Conservation Innovations (CCI) program, funded by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, seeks to address this imbalance to better reflect the needs, values, and faces of the entire state. To accomplish that goal, one of CCI's three core objectives is to engage younger and more ethnically diverse people in environmental advocacy and leadership. CCI refers to this objective as its constituency engagement strategy.

In the following report, we evaluate the importance and effectiveness of CCI's constituency engagement strategy. The qualitative and quantitative data laid out in this report are intended to:

1) Define CCI's grantmaking approach and impact;

2) Help RLF understand the effectiveness of its CCI constituency engagement strategy; and

3) Provide RLF with recommendations to enhance its constituency engagement strategy and further improve upon the impact and durability of the conservation outcomes in which it invests.

Through this assessment, RLF is endeavoring to establish a framework for broader, more intentional constituency engagement both for the future of the CCI program and for grantmaking across the entire organization.

Why Constituency Engagement is Important

Philanthropies have increasingly focused their resources to solve intractable problems like climate change and environmental justice, but only a small percentage of those funds have historically benefited marginalized communities or been used to bridge social equity with conservation. RLF posits that if broader, more diverse coalitions can be built, conservation outcomes will not only be strengthened, but will also better meet the needs of the state's changing demographics. Building the capacity of diverse new leaders and inclusive coalitions will also help overcome barriers that have prevented many communities from effectively advocating for policies and funding that benefit their communities, whether that be equitable access to parks, climate resilience, or efforts to reduce factors that subject them to greater environmental risks.

Key Findings

CCI's Grantmaking Approach

- RLF is a **strategic connector**. Stakeholders and grantees describe RLF as playing a unique connective role, bridging and coordinating action across

government, academia, community organizations, and the private sectors.

- RLF is a **supportive, strategic thought partner** who meets grantees where they are and works to align environmental and conservation work with their missions. Almost all grantees (90%) reported that CCI funding aligned with their organizational priorities, 86% agreed that RLF was responsive and supportive, and 81% found RLF staff to be valuable thought partners. One grantee reported that "If I want the best strategic advice I can get, I often turn to people at RLF."

- RLF stands out as an **equity leader**, with grantees describing RLF as "ahead of the curve" when it comes to equity in the environmental and conservation space, especially with the CCI program. On the other hand, some grantees reported that RLF has room to grow in this area within their other grantmaking programs.

- RLF's **collaborative approach** is valued by grantees, and is a contrast to other funders. However, some say that RLF has a tendency, like other grantmakers, to deliver a plan to grantees for implementation without engaging grantees to help determine goals and strategy. Grantees desire early involvement in developing strategy, especially regarding constituency building in their communities.

- RLF provides a **mix of episodic grants and strategic grants**. While RLF achieves success with short-term grantmaking that targets specific objectives, more than half of grantees (51%) reported that longer-term grants would better support their work. To sustain organizational engagement in conservation, grantees and stakeholders made a strong case for RLF investment in ongoing capacity development.

CCI's Grantmaking Impact

In a survey of 49 grantees, we asked 16 questions to measure the impact of CCI funding and support in three key areas of organizational capacity: skills, priorities, and leadership. All grantees reported growth across all three categories and 16 measures (see page 25 of full report for more detail).

- **Organizational skills.** Survey data show that CCI grant and organizational support have enabled grantees to advance their skills and effectiveness: 69% found RLF staff support helpful; 58% benefitted from connections made by RLF to coalitions, working groups or networks, as well as strategy development to influence policy and funding.

- **Strategic priorities.** As a result of CCI grantmaking, grantees are expanding their core work (in areas such as housing, gentrification, and criminal justice reform) to embrace environmental and conservation work. Organizations participating in coalitions and working groups reported they felt supported in finding an authentic nexus between their community and conservation goals to advance socially equitable environmental solutions.

- **Environmental/conservation leadership.** Through coalitions like Parks Now and the Climate Justice Working Group, RLF is creating new leaders to advocate for environmental justice in their communities and statewide. This type of grantmaking aims to develop new leaders to expand the boundaries of both conservation and equity work.

Evaluation Methods

The evaluation findings in this report are based on a **grantee survey** completed by 49 of 75 grantee organizations for a 65% response rate, 19 **interviews** with 10 grantees, 2 contractors and 7 stakeholders (policymakers and influencers), and 2 **focus groups** conducted with 11 grantee participants.

Recommendations

To fully transform the environmental movement, RLF needs to build grantee capacity, hold community organizations up as leaders in the conservation space and help sustain environmental and conservation work that aligns with grantees' community priorities. The following five recommendations will help RLF, and the organizations with which it works, achieve its CCI constituency engagement goals.

1: Provide Longer-Term Grants and Supports

RLF's strategic, episodic approach toward policy campaigns is effective among policymakers and influencers. While this approach results in short-term wins, our research indicates that conservation and equity objectives of community organizations would be more easily attained with sustained, strategic RLF engagement and capacity building. Longer grant cycles can provide a better foundation for organizations to build and sustain capacity in order to implement conservation programs with greater, more enduring success.

2: Standardize Capacity Building Approaches

Standardizing access to capacity-building support can strengthen environmental and conservation leadership from under-engaged communities. Grantees involved in Parks Now and the Climate Justice Working Group benefitted from consultants with expertise in communications, strategy, and policy work; however, that support was not available to the majority of surveyed grantees (65%) who were not part of those coalitions. Consultant support was highly valued by the groups that received it. RLF should consider a strategy of offering a standardized suite of consultant and in-house expertise to help organizations build capacity.

3: Invest in and Support Collaboration

RLF should provide opportunities for community organizations to authentically engage with conservation policy and funding decision makers by involving them earlier and more consistently in the work. RLF should engage grantees earlier to shape the goals, direction, and implementation of the work. Our research also shows that organizations are interested in connecting with other RLF-funded grantees to collaborate on projects and build a network of learning and support. Providing more opportunities for grantees to collaborate strengthens organizations and outcomes.

4: Elevate Equity in the Environmental Field

Many CCI grantees are deeply committed to issues of equity and inclusion in their work and value the support they have received from RLF to pursue these goals. Grantees also see the opportunity for RLF to leverage its influence and position in the field to elevate the discussion of equity and inclusion in the traditional conservation movement. However, in order for RLF to be a credible messenger and champion of this work, grantees encourage RLF to explicitly state its organizational stance on equity and inclusion and to share the work it is doing internally as an organization in pursuit of equity.

5: Align CCI Goals and Community Priorities

RLF should be flexible in pursuing priorities that align with grantees' varied issues. Alignment will build longer-term strategies relevant to both CCI priorities and those of the communities in which RLF works. Going a step further, RLF can increase its impact by helping to integrate these issues into the broader conservation movement.

A Framework for Future Grantmaking

To guide RLF in the implementation of these recommendations, the evaluation team created a framework (page 25-26) that describes grantmaking based on the duration of grants, the degree of collaboration involved in establishing strategy, and the level of capacity building. The framework results in three types of grantmaking—organizational (exploratory, objective-specific grants), strategic (efforts to expand decision making and include diverse constituencies in policy development), and transformational (collaborative, ongoing support that advances emergent, ongoing work to expand the bounds of conservation work). This framework may help RLF and its funders implement a constituency engagement strategy that is increasingly effective in achieving both conservation and community outcomes.