



# Host Partner Reflections

## *Lessons Learned from Early Successes*

Submitted by West Virginia Rivers Coalition,  
host partner for the Safe Water Conservation Collaborative



### Introduction

With generous support from the Land and Water Initiative, a grant program of the Land Trust Alliance and Chesapeake Bay Funders Network, West Virginia Rivers Coalition has proudly served as the host partner for the Safe Water Conservation Collaborative since its inception in 2017. In this role, we provide grant administration, facilitate meetings, build partner relations, and other functions to maintain the partnership.

We have documented our lessons learned over the past year in serving as the host partner for a diverse, cross-sector regional conservation partnership. These insights may prove beneficial for similar partnerships beyond our project's geographical scope that seek to protect drinking water through land conservation.

*Our key takeaway is that true collaboration is all about people, and their time is our most valuable asset.*

We learned many lessons this year as the Collaborative coalesced into a functioning partnership and began achieving early successes. Coordinating cross-sector, multi-jurisdictional partnerships are inherently difficult, and this past year also brought unique and unprecedented challenges with a global pandemic. Despite these challenges, our partners have achieved the following early successes:

<b>Steering Committee</b>	<b>Conservation Workgroup</b>	<b>Edu. &amp; Outreach Workgroup</b>	<b>Stewardship Workgroup</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <a href="#">Operations Guide</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Website</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Monthly Newsletter</a></li><li>• Functioning Partnership</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <a href="#">GIS Prioritization</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Story Map &amp; Digital Map</a></li><li>• Technical assistance to other workgroups</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <a href="#">Media</a></li><li>• Prioritized Landowner Outreach</li><li>• <a href="#">Legacy Videos</a></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <a href="#">BMP Toolkit, including a conservation survey and brochure</a></li></ul>

# Collaboration is all about people...

*The Collaborative does not exist without people, and the organizations they represent, to champion our shared objectives and strategies. Building trust and relationships with our partners is key to long-term success.*

In May 2020, we asked our partners to [share with us](#) what they liked about the Collaborative, what we can improve upon, and how working together supports the work of their organization.



Overall, partners appreciate the diversity of voices represented, opportunities to interact with new members of their community, and accelerated implementation of conservation practices through shared coordination.

We've also learned that their skills and interests align with the types of actions that we're trying to support to conserve land, educate landowners about conservation easements, and implement stewardship practices.

We strive to be very responsive to partner feedback, and are very appreciative that our partners feel comfortable with telling us not just what works for them, but also what does not.

When asked about what they find challenging with the Collaborative, the most common phrase was "understanding" – how the Collaborative is structured, what we're trying to achieve, what's required of them, etc. Part of the reason for those questions is that the Collaborative is still new, and we're collectively still working through those big, important questions. Over the next year, we'll work to build that base of understanding across the partnership through a partner-led strategic planning process.

On the following page, we provide more information about how we have addressed their concerns about connecting with other partners while also using their limited time efficiently and effectively.

*"Understanding the structure"*

*"Understanding all that is involved."*

*"Frankly, still too new to group to express an opinion."*

*"Lack of connection with other workgroups/the Collaborative as a whole. Sometimes our workgroup comes up with ideas that might be more appropriate for other workgroups, so it would be nice to have more opportunities to share with them."*



*"Moving forward on initiatives in a truly collaborative manner takes time."*

*"I just do not have the time to commit what I would like to help the Collaborative achieve what they can."*

*"Getting together on a regular basis"*

## Lessons Learned

**Strategies to achieve our mission must be defined at the workgroup level.** In order to truly engage our partners in implementing a shared set of strategies, they must feel a sense of ownership in having created them. This ensures there is alignment with their current workloads. The Collaborative should be an outlet to amplify partners' existing work, as opposed to creating new work.

**Prioritizing land to conserve is just the beginning.** We must use our GIS Prioritization model to create targeted outreach strategies that engage priority landowners, while also educating the general public about the link between land conservation and source water protection. We must also increase the funding available for land and water conservation projects in WV.

**We need to tell our own unique story.** Our outreach will only be successful if we can succinctly convey to prioritized landowners a unique story that motivates them to begin their journey towards land conservation. We need to share with landowners a new story that inspires them to take action.

**Early successes are important to build momentum, but are not an indicator of long-term success.** The best indicator of long-term success will be true collaboration, measured by enhanced partner engagement and overall understanding and alignment with our objectives and strategies.

# ...and their time is our most valuable asset!

## Lessons Learned

**As the host partner, we need to find a sustainable role within the Collaborative.** We currently only have funding for approximately 1/3 of a full-time equivalent position to support the Collaborative. As our partnership grows, partner engagement will be critical for sustainably balancing the workload.

**Providing opportunities for Steering Committee members to meaningfully engage with the Collaborative's work is critical to long-term success.** The Steering Committee makes the top-level decisions for the Collaborative, but in reality they are the most removed from the day-to-day strategies of the Workgroups. This disconnect must be addressed moving forward.

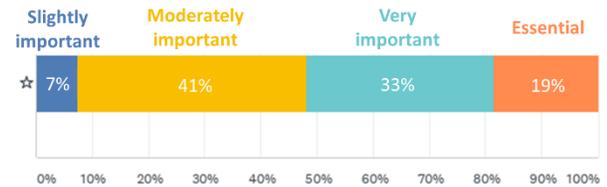
**We are only one voice within the Collaborative.** We must build greater recognition and understanding with our partners that we are not the ultimate decision-makers. Our role as host partner is to help facilitate opportunities for them to define shared goals and work collectively towards implementation.

**Collaboration is hard.** This is not unique to us, but we must remember to be patient with ourselves and with the process. Collaboration takes time, energy, and resources. We must avoid the easy solution of retreating back to our siloes. Progress happens when we continue down the path of collaboration, as the long-term benefits outweigh the short-term challenges.

**We must continue to seek and implement innovative solutions that foster high-levels of engagement while also safe-guarding our partners time.**

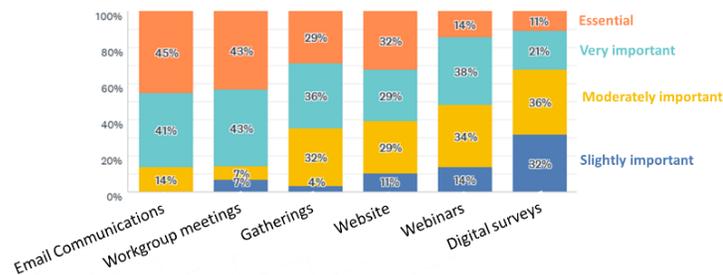
52% of our partners say the Collaborative is "Essential" or "Very Important" for supporting their work, meaning we are aligned with their priorities.

**How important is the Collaborative for supporting the work of your organization?**



We've also learned that it can be difficult for all of our partners to see what progress is being made with other workgroups. We have responded by creating a monthly digital newsletter, "[The Intake](#)", to share our successes, make partner announcements, and recap all of our meetings and events.

**How important are the following:**



Continued efforts should be more for creating efficient meetings and

fostering the best use of limited time. We strive for clear email communications, website transparency, and efficient meetings. We have found success with initiating conversations before meetings using digital surveys, saving valuable meeting time for consensus-building and action.

### How does the Collaborative support the work of your organization?

"As a water utility we are the producers of the end product -- potable drinking water. The condition of the water that reaches our treatment plant is an important cost factor."

"The Collaborative promote[s] source water protection, which helps local drinking water plants... We all benefit... from protection of the water supply [and] land conservation."



"[The Collaborative] expands the influence of [our] organization by highlighting the importance water resources play."

"Our messaging... is finding new expression and energy. In my opinion the participation of some of our members in the collaborative has enhanced our efforts..."

**WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE SAFE WATER CONSERVATION COLLABORATIVE?**

Visit our website at [SafeWaterCollaborative.org](http://SafeWaterCollaborative.org) or contact our Eastern Panhandle Field Coordinator, Tanner Haid, at [thaid@wvriivers.org](mailto:thaid@wvriivers.org).