



Issues, Support, Celebration

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Creek Clips

SE Ohio Watershed Council Provides Model for Future Coalitions

By definition, people involved in watershed groups are accustomed to holistic thinking. They know, for instance, that development upstream can affect water quality downstream. They understand that temperature, flow, turbidity, and a myriad of other indicators are all interrelated. They continually outreach to other citizens in their watersheds--teaching them to work together, to take pride in their streams, to think in a watershed way.

If this way of thinking works for people living within a certain watershed, why not apply it to groups working within a certain region? Members of the Southeast Ohio Watershed Council (SEOWC) did just that--banding together to share resources, trade skills, and think holistically about the region's water quality challenges.

Beginnings

The SEOW Council came together in 2004 with the help of Rural Action and the Ohio Environmental Council (OEC). Its purpose was to provide networking and mentoring opportunities. Quarterly meetings drew over 25 representatives from a variety of watershed groups ranging from the very young to the well-established.

Rural Action and OEC built support for the Council by connecting with the regional, federal, and state agencies and organizations that were already, though separately, working with water quality issues in the region. Among them were Ohio University, Ohio State University, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. Rural Action and OEC also built interest in the Council by interviewing watershed groups to discern their needs. Participants felt a greater sense of ownership because trainings at SEOWC meetings were ones that they had requested.

Structure

SEOWC's membership represents over 30 different watershed groups, non-profit organizations, government agencies, and educational institutions. Members select the Council's 5-member Steering Committee, Chair, and Co-Chair. These leaders are responsible for creating meeting agendas and coordinating trainings. SEOWC members have been careful to include multiple perspectives in the steering committee. SEOWC meets every three months and any interested party can join.

And We'll Never Feel Lonely Anymore

According to Dan Binder, OEC's Director of Watershed Programs, camaraderie is the real benefit of SEOWC membership. "Most watershed groups are organizations of one," he explained. Southeastern Ohio, with its low population density, provides limited opportunities for peer interaction. SEOWC meetings give the dedicated staff and volunteers of watershed groups a chance to build relationships with other organizations.

"It's a real cross-section of people," explained J.T. Kneen, co-chair of SEOWC. "It has people involved in recreation, watershed focuses, government. It's supposed to be a time to share ideas." In fact, out of this sharing emerged the SEOWC Resource Directory: an online information source created by those who will use it.

So Powerful is the Light of Unity

The recent failure of Ohio Senate Bill 191--a bill that SEOWC members opposed--gave the group a taste of the power of unity. The bill would have taken away state funding for cleaning streams (about \$1.2 million per year) and used it for activities such as road repairs.

SEOWC's approach was to educate lawmakers: emphasizing successes made possible by the funding and outlining the partnerships and momentum that stream restoration is building.

Education came in the form of a coordinated message or a "Statement of Mutual Support." In it, members of the Council suggested alternative sources for funding (currently, it comes from state taxes collected from gravel-pit and quarry owners) but emphasized that a funding source must exist. The Statement also delineated SEOWC's constituency base--demonstrating broad and diverse support for stream clean-up.

“Legislators need to hear success stories too,” said Binder.

Both Binder and Kneen credit fellowship as a contributor to SEOWC’s successful campaign. “After folks get to know each other, it’s easier to send out alerts and letters,” said Binder.

But can the council be emulated by other organizations?

Kneen thinks so. “Anyone who knows how to work with a group and run a meeting can do this,” he said. “They just need to sit down, start meeting together informally, and share.”

**** Have a Celebration Story of your own to share? Send it to Hanna at info@easterncoal.org !! ****

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