

APPLICANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY

2014 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: Appalachian Forest Heritage Area

Program Name: AFHA - Enhancing Assets to Benefit Communities

Application ID: 14AC155837

For the purpose of enhancing our programs by improving the quality and quantity of applications to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), we are providing specific feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of this application. These comments are not meant to represent a comprehensive assessment; rather the analysis represents those elements that had the greatest bearing on the rating of the application. Please note that this feedback consists of summary comments from more than one reviewer. For this reason, some of the comments may seem to be inconsistent or contradictory. Comments are not representative of all of the information used in the final funding decision.

Reviewers' Summary Comments:

Strengths:

The applicant provides clear evidence of the importance of preserving land/forests in West Virginia by providing data and statistics about the amount of hardwood forest covering land (78-93.5%), the woods industry (30,000 employed; \$4 billion annually), wildlife recreation (\$803 million), and bio-diverse ecosystems at risk due to environmental threats (158 tree species, 255 birds, etc.).

The applicant provides compelling detail about high priority threats including increasing use of national forests for recreation and non-native invasive species (NNIS), including “costs to the nation of more than \$120 billion per year, plus extensive environmental damage.”

The applicant cites data and information from within the past six years detailing the importance of improving and maintaining the community built environment, including Pridemore (2013) and Frey (2011). Preservation is important as “the greenest building is the one already built” and data are used effectively to build their case.

The importance of capacity building is clearly indicated with reliable data showing high poverty compared to the national average, distressed counties, and an average population density of 33.5 people per square mile.

The applicant presents an organized description of six problems or needs for the target beneficiaries of 16 counties, 23 historic districts, and 200 historic buildings.

The applicant successfully links specific data that documents the problems of abandoned buildings, economic deterioration, poverty, and unemployment rate to the West Virginia counties that will benefit from intervention.

The applicant presents persuasive information about the economic value of the State's forests as seen in the 30,000 people employed in the forest products industry and the \$800 million/year generated from wilderness recreation.

The applicant provides persuasive information about the risks of climate change and the effects of non-native

invasive plants on the wild lands.

The applicant provides acceptable information about the status of historic structures as seen in the 110 abandoned buildings in Richwood and the 200 structures identified by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The applicant provides a plethora of evidence about the effectiveness of AmeriCorps volunteers as environmental stewards of at-risk ecosystems. The relationship between the AmeriCorps volunteer and the intervention (upgrading trails, hand-pulling NNIS, conducting research) is clearly defined and linked to previous similar projects. Sites have been monitored (“35 track the progress of these plants and the recovery of this landscape”) and corrections made as needed. The applicant cites 2 non-experimental studies, at least 3 projects described, 1 quasi-experimental study, and a local survey for this intervention.

The quasi-experimental garlic mustard seed (NNIS) example was particularly convincing. The role of Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) members was clearly defined, important, and citing the Barto & Cipollini (2009) study revealed that the applicant is aware of and accounting for previous literature. Tying in the activity to previous successful projects (7 field trips, 50 acres of NNIS inventories, removing 21,000 pounds of garlic mustard) was a significant strength of the application.

The applicant successfully cites convincing evidence for the importance of environmental stewardship of the community built environment and capacity building. The applicant cites 1 quasi-experimental study (no p value was reported, but the word “significant” appeared to be used appropriately) and 5 non-experimental studies for these interventions. The Life Cycle Analysis study of 6 building types in 4 American cities provided evidence of the importance of historic preservation. The applicant ties in the non-experimental data (usefulness of double-glazed windows; importance of heritage tourism) with previous projects and activities very effectively (e.g. the Beverly Heritage Center).

The applicant’s logic plan adequately correlates the Member activities for hands-on forest restoration projects, scientific research, public education, rehabilitation of historic public buildings, and community development activities to the problems/needs.

The applicant provided a worthy illustration of the effectiveness of Members in the garlic mustard weed project where schools incorporated the activity into their curriculum.

The story about saving the Darden Mill by working with a community volunteer organization demonstrated how the AmeriCorps members can be effective in the environmental stewardship and the capacity building activities.

Throughout the application the applicant effectively weaves reports of previous successful projects and ties those projects to non-experimental design studies as evidence of previous success (e.g. pulling mustard seed plants, picnic area at the riverfront, development of a collections policy and protocol for artifacts, etc.).

The applicant met or exceeded all previous performance measures every year. Some outputs dramatically exceeded projections.

The applicant has exceeded all performance measure targets in the years the program has been running.

Weaknesses:

It is unclear whether or not the need is prevalent and severe in the communities where the Members will serve.

The applicant did not link national data (for example, the non-native invasive species information) to the target community.

The applicant cites several problems of ecological impacts, unmanaged recreation, non-native invasive species, and volunteer workforce but provides insufficient specific data to link these problems to the target beneficiaries or justify the proposed interventions. The data that is provided fails to indicate the magnitude of these problems.

The problems of abandoned buildings and economic deterioration seems entirely extraneous to the need for forest restoration.

The applicant does not present an adequate justification for why *volunteer-run* organizations are a problem.

The applicant introduces the problem of strip mine lands in the interventions section of the grant and it seems to be out of place.

There's no indication from the Central Appalachian Spruce Restoration Initiative (CASRI) study whether the 90% sapling survival rate is typical or problematic.

The application is lacking descriptive data about the severity of the invasive species problem and any changes that can be seen in the overall health of the forests due to climate change and recreation overuse. Data quantifying the invasive species problem on the AFHA forests is absent.

No experimental design studies were cited.

The applicant does not explain how proposed interventions will impact the problem of abandoned buildings.

The applicant does not indicate the interventions planned to increase the volunteer base and an assumption must be made that public education will lead to the recruitment of new volunteers.

The applicant did not indicate the impact of past interventions on the five problem areas of this year's grant.

Evidence demonstrating the program is having an impact on the problems identified is absent.