

Meaningful Engagement

NOAA is committed to the goals of advancing equity and support for underserved communities and tribes through our work, including our efforts under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. The NOAA Fisheries Office of Habitat Conservation encourages applications from tribes or underserved communities in our funding opportunities. We also encourage other applicants to propose projects that demonstrate strategies to achieve meaningful engagement with tribes and underserved communities. We are focused on continual learning and exploration of ideas as we work toward this goal. As we learn, we will adapt how we evaluate and implement meaningful engagement to ensure that project benefits flow back to the communities.

Our working definition of meaningful engagement refers to “*communities having an opportunity to be an integral part of the visioning, decision-making, or leadership for activities that may affect their environment and/or health and wellbeing. Meaningful engagement relies on the involvement of those potentially affected in a manner that builds trust and addresses barriers to community participation to ensure that the scope of the activities is inclusive of the priorities and needs of communities and that the benefits of the activities flow back to the community.*”

In order to provide more information to applicants, we have compiled an initial list of the types of activities that may help to achieve meaningful engagement with tribes and underserved communities when several of the activities are used in combination. These activities can include but are not limited to:

- **Community identification:** Systematically identifying and describing tribes or underserved communities and how they may be connected to a project. This might include using an environmental justice screening tool, identifying tribes and tribal trust resources, surveying site visitors, or conducting interviews with local residents.
- **Barrier identification:** Working with community members to address barriers to engaging in project planning or accessing benefits provided by the project.
- **Priority alignment:** Clearly aligning project activities with the needs and priorities of local tribes or underserved communities. This might include incorporating goals of an existing official planning document (such as a watershed management plan) or implementing recommendations gathered through community outreach.
- **Strong community support:** Demonstrating strong support from a tribal government or underserved community organization affirming that the proposed project is in alignment with the needs of the tribe or underserved community. Support examples might include a public statement, news release, endorsement letter, or the tribal government or underserved community organization serving as the applicant for funding.
- **Ongoing community-based decision-making:** Ensuring tribes or underserved community members are integral to the vision and are actively participating in project decision-making. This might include establishing a community advisory group or regularly hosting workshops, interviews, or focus groups with tribal or underserved community members.

- **Compensation (decision-maker):** Compensating, such as through a paid position, tribal or underserved community members for their decision-making role in the project. Project decision-making might encompass priority setting, vision, design, or direction.
- **Compensation (other position):** Compensating tribal or underserved community members for their time in contributing to the project. This could include paid labor, administrative or internship positions that are separate from those covered in the previous “decision-maker compensation” activity.
- **Professional development:** Creating opportunities for professional development of tribal, underserved or underrepresented community members. This might include internships, job training, apprenticeships, or incorporation into the curriculum of an educational institution. Professional development for “underrepresented” community members is included here with the recognition that “representation matters”, resulting in a positive influence on community perceptions for realistic engagement with the project.
- **Outreach and educational programs:** Collaborating with tribal or underserved community members to develop and incorporate outreach, education, volunteer, or hands-on opportunities that are tailored to meet the needs of their communities. Examples might include working with nearby schools to develop lesson plans or field trips, or collaborating with community service organizations to develop specific volunteer and outreach opportunities.

We recognize that this list may not be comprehensive. We hope that it allows for discussion and exploration of ways to provide opportunities for tribes and underserved communities to meaningfully engage in coastal habitat restoration activities.

Tracking Progress

The NOAA Fisheries Office of Habitat Conservation has developed a new metric: “meaningful engagement of underserved communities and tribes.” We plan to track the percentage of projects we fund that meaningfully engage underserved communities and tribes. We plan to use the list of activities above as a starting point to evaluate whether projects and our program are achieving meaningful engagement of communities.