



Water for Agriculture Webinar Series



A Conversation with The Campbell Foundation

Alex Echols

Program Director – Agriculture
The Keith Campbell Foundation for the Environment

The Water for Agriculture Webinar Series welcomed Alex Echols who shared collaboration insights and experiences from the Keith Campbell Foundation for the Environment, for which he is the Agriculture Program Director. Established in 1998 to improve the conditions of America’s largest and most ecologically diverse and productive estuary systems – the Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays, the Foundation expanded its geographic focus to include Northern California and the San Francisco Bay watershed in 2003. Designed to support regional economies and ecosystems, the Foundation has provided \$255m+ in funding to more than 900 partners since 1998. As the largest environmental funder in the Chesapeake Bay, the Foundation funds projects related to its two program areas: agriculture and civic engagement. “We are very interested in advancing better decision-making support tools,” Echols explained. “We see the need, and we think investments of that kind will yield high-quality results.”

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The Foundation’s agriculture program aims to bring stakeholders together with the goal of collaboratively addressing solutions to regional agricultural and environmental challenges. “We try to break impasses,” Echols explained. “We think a lot about how to get people together that might normally throw rocks at each other. How can we do this while engaging with science in driving those kinds of activities?” The need for collaboration stems back to the future of regional agricultural and environmental sustainability. “We are going to see a massive intensification of agricultural production in the next 50 years,” Echols explained, “and with that, we have to have more than a significant increase in conservation.” In preparation for these stressors, the programs supported by the Campbell Foundation work hard to bring together what Echols described as “OTUS” – Other Than the Usual Suspects – to the brainstorming table. “There are multiple benefits to collaboration in problem-solving, as opposed to solving them in the courts or the legislature,” Echols explained. “By increasing opportunities for constructive dialogue among [different] communities, we think we make a lot more progress in solving environmental issues.”

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The Foundation’s agricultural program emphasizes funding programs in two geographic areas of the Chesapeake Bay: the Delmarva Peninsula (which comprises all of Delaware, parts of Maryland and Virginia) and Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Echols offered two examples of model Foundation programs from these areas:

- Delmarva Land and Litter Collaborative (DLLC)
<https://delmarvalandandlitter.net/>
- Lancaster Clean Water Partnership
<https://lancastercleanwaterpartners.com/>

While these projects differ in geographic location, motivation, organization structure, and collaboration methods, they have each been areas where agricultural production is critical to the economy and contributes significantly to water quality impairment in the Chesapeake Bay. They both provide helpful examples of the importance of engaged and collaborative approaches that include agricultural and conservation interests.

Looking toward the future, Echols called for increased focus on how environmental programs will provide on-farm benefits while increasing technical and outreach assistance available to support such programs. “We’ve got to have a more efficient conservation delivery system,” Echols argued. “Typically, it takes about three years between the time a farmer knocks on an agency’s door until the work gets done. No one wants to wait three years. We have to find a way that’s more responsive to customers and delivers the money more efficiently.”

Concluding his presentation, Echols reflected on the work needed in collaborative stakeholder engagement spaces. “By in large, the things we can solve easily through regulation, we’ve solved,” Echols contemplated. “The kinds of problems we have in the [Chesapeake] Bay are more sophisticated; more difficult. We need sharper tools, and collaboration can bring a whole new set of creativity and energy and resources to solve those problems.” Echols believes that one of the main ways practitioners may begin these collaborative conversations is by “de-siloing”. “When we talk only to folks who come out of similar professions or similar perspectives as us, we begin breathing our own exhaust and we don’t have the kind of creativity it takes to solve these complex issues.”

To view the full webinar, [click here](#).

Alex Echols, Program Director, Agriculture
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