



Report on Lessons Learned from the Experiences of Tribal Wetlands Working Groups

Acknowledgements

This document was prepared by Jeanne Christie (Christie Consulting Services) and Rebecca Kihslinger (Environmental Law Institute). Information for this report was gathered through a series of interviews with Tribal wetland program staff in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Minnesota, and Wisconsin as well as EPA staff in Regions 5, 10 and HQ. We are grateful for their time. Funding was provided by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) through EPA Contract No. GS-10F-0330P. Any errors or omissions are solely the responsibility of the authors.

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Cover design by Evan Odoms.

Environmental Law Institute. 2021. *Report on Lessons Learned from the Experiences of Tribal Wetlands Working Groups*. Prepared for USEPA Region 5, Water Division. EPA Contract No. GS-10F-0330P. Environmental Law Institute®, Washington, D.C.

Report on Lessons Learned from the Experiences of Tribal Wetlands Working Groups

The Pacific Northwest Tribal Wetlands Working Group (PNW TWIG) has supported development of Tribal wetland and aquatic resource programs since 2010. Efforts to establish similar groups in other parts of the country have not been successful with the exception of the Tribal Wisconsin Wetland Working Group (TWWWG) created in 2017. This paper explores the evolution of the PNW TWIG and the TWWWG, the benefits, lessons learned, and ongoing challenges in working group operation in an effort to gain insights into how it might be possible for Tribal Wetland Working Groups (TWWGs) to be established in EPA Region 5 and elsewhere across the U.S. Information was gathered through a series of interviews with Tribal wetland program staff in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Minnesota, and Wisconsin as well as EPA staff in Regions 5, 10 and HQ (Appendix A).

Tribal Wetlands Working Groups - Benefits and Challenges.

A Tribal Wetland Working Group can provide the opportunity for Tribes and Tribal wetland and aquatic resource program staff to learn from each other and work together to collectively address challenges specific to Tribal wetland and aquatic resource programs.¹

Peer-to-peer technical transfer of knowledge and networking are important benefits of a Tribal working group. In-person meetings hosted by Tribes, focused on Tribal issues, and held on Tribal lands foster communication and connections among eco-regionally or otherwise situated Tribal wetland staff as well as other professional staff, Tribal members, and Elders at the host site. These meetings can often inspire new ideas and link practitioners with resources they might not have otherwise been able to access.

A Tribal Wetlands Working Group can also facilitate access to resources online-- especially contact lists for wetland/water Tribal staff in a specific geographic bioregion or EPA regional and funding sources--as well as provide training opportunities and other resources tailored to the needs of Tribes and Tribal wetlands staff.

There are, however, barriers to the formation of Tribal Wetland Work Groups that have made it difficult for Tribes to develop sustainable working groups in some parts of the country. Peer to peer meetings and communication, which are key to creating the conditions for establishing a TWWG, typically do not occur among Tribal wetland staff without explicit funding support and an entity willing to take the lead.² Most EPA sponsored meetings and/or trainings hosted by existing entities (e.g., Association for State

¹ More information about resources available from USEPA to support wetland program development the: Enhancing State and Tribal Programs Initiative can be found [here](https://www.epa.gov/wetlands/what-enhancing-state-and-tribal-programs-initiative): <https://www.epa.gov/wetlands/what-enhancing-state-and-tribal-programs-initiative>

² USEPA has sponsored initiatives in the Arid Southwest, Rocky Mountains, Great Plains and northern forested ecoregions recently to foster tribal collaboration. These efforts may, in the future, lead to the creation of additional TWWGs.

Wetland Managers) that Tribal wetlands staff attend are designed for State wetland programs, under the assumption that much if not all of the content of the meeting or training will apply equally to Tribes and tribal wetland programs. However, there are significant differences between Tribal and State wetland programs.

- 1) Often Tribal staff assigned wetlands responsibilities do not know who the other wetland Tribal staff are in a specific EPA region, who among those contacts might have similar issues, or where to go/who to seek advice.
- 2) Tribal environmental programs are often small and most do not have a dedicated wetlands program, or sustained funding. As such, for most Tribal nations, Tribal environmental staff are responsible for multiple natural resource programs (e.g. water quality or wildlife plus wetlands).
- 3) There is high turnover among Tribal environmental staff assigned wetlands responsibilities and new staff often have little information about the existing program or access to training about running a wetland program for the Tribe. Many times, turnover is due to lack of dedicated funding to support wetlands specific programs, or temporary or inconsistent funding support through short-lived grants.
- 4) In the past, most wetland program guidance from EPA has been designed with States in mind and is often not as useful for Tribal wetland staff who work in much smaller organizations with access to the entire management and leadership chain.³
- 5) Another key difference is that wetland program staff are responsible for technical program development, but policy decisions are made by tribal leadership.
- 6) In addition, unique Tribal perspectives such as cultural values and traditional ecological knowledge are not addressed in existing guidance⁴ on how to run wetland programs.
- 7) Program resources (and/or knowledge thereof) such as program funding, training, access to wetland research is often very limited within many Tribal organizations.

The Pacific Northwest Tribal Wetlands Working Group (PNW TWIG)

The Formation

In 2009 EPA hosted a workshop for Tribal wetland staff in Region 10 (Figure 1) that focused on Tribal wetland programs issues and program development.⁵ The meeting was a unique opportunity for Tribal staff to meet and talk with their counterparts, other Tribal staff from across EPA's Region 10 (e.g., from Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington), and EPA Wetlands/Aquatic Resources Program managers and staff to discuss opportunities and

³ USEPA is in the final stages of creating wetland program guidance specifically for Tribal wetlands programs that reflects the perspectives, challenges and opportunities that are part of Tribal wetland program creation and implementation. It's anticipated publication date is November 2021.

⁴ Examples include current guidance on Wetland Program Plans, the Core Elements Framework and Water Quality Standards including Water Quality Standards for Wetlands.

⁵ This meeting included a training on financing and different funding sources as well presentations and discussion on EPA's new Enhancing State and Tribal Programs Initiative and Core Elements Framework to address the four core elements of a complete Wetland Program (monitoring and assessment, regulatory activities, voluntary restoration and protection and water quality standards for wetlands).

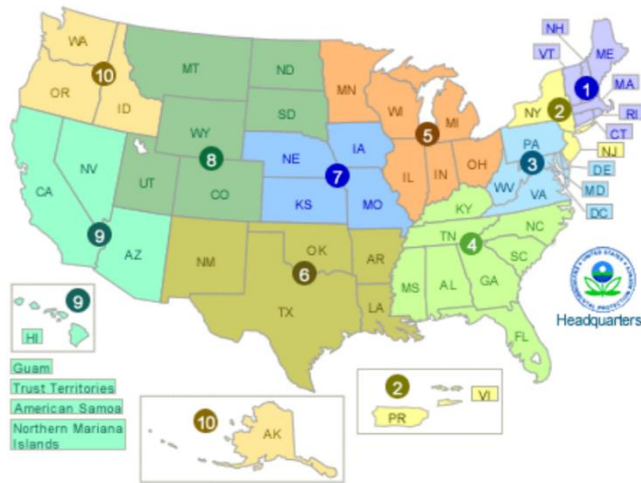


Figure 1 - U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Regions

challenges working on wetlands programs for Tribes. Some Tribal wetland programs were well-established and had been receiving EPA Wetland Program Development Grants (WPDG) for a number of years, but many other programs were relatively young and under-financed especially when compared with wetland programs in States with comprehensive programs like Oregon and Washington. During the meeting, EPA expressed concern over the limited resources and challenges Tribes

were having building their programs and creating Wetland Program Plans.⁶ Discussion started with the goal of having more workshops focused on Tribes and including only Tribal staff as participants. Through time this evolved into the concept of establishing a Tribal Wetlands Working Group in the Region. The Tribes were interested in having their own organization so they could continue to get together and talk and collectively build Tribal wetland programs across the Region. This would, over time, become the Pacific Northwest Tribal Wetlands Interagency Group (PNW TWIG)

USEPA supported the effort by providing both technical (i.e., an experienced member of the EPA Regional staff to work with them) and financial (i.e., an initial \$10,000 noncompetitive grant from EPA HQ) assistance at the start to begin exploring the concept of training for the Tribal wetlands staff.

Number of Tribes participating in the PNW TWIG. USEPA Region 10 includes [271 Federally recognized Tribes](#) in Alaska, Idaho, Oregon and Washington. The great majority of these are in Alaska; 29 are in Washington, 9 in Oregon, and 5 in Idaho. Over time there have been 15 to 20 Tribal wetlands staff from Oregon, Idaho, and Washington Tribes who have consistently participated in the PNW TWIG and another 15-20, including from Alaska Tribes, who have participated less frequently.

Logistical challenges are part of the reason there has been only occasional participation by the Tribes in Alaska at the in-person meetings. Travel to and from Alaska is very expensive and logistically challenging (Tribal lands in Alaska are often remote and it can take 2-3 days each way for someone working in Alaska to attend a TWIG meeting hosted by a PNW Tribe). Although the Wetland Grants that the PNW TWIG receives has a budget to help fund tribes to travel to trainings and workshops, few Alaska tribes have been able to attend. However, more recently

⁶ Wetland Program Plans (WPPs) are voluntary plans developed and implemented by state agencies and tribes which articulate what these entities want to accomplish with their wetland programs over time.

with most meetings being virtual during the COVID19 pandemic, broader short-term participation has been easier, and attendance has been higher.

Essential Characteristics of the PNW TWIG

Self-governance. Self-governance is a crucial characteristic of the PNW TWIG (Figure 2). Tribal wetland staff need a forum where they can focus on issues that are specific to Tribal wetland programs undiluted by perspectives of States, federal agencies or other interested parties. Their meetings include Tribal wetland program staff and Tribal members and also, as needed, other interest groups or invited outside experts to provide training.

Administration. From its inception there has been a Tribal wetland program staff person who has volunteered to take a leadership role and carry out the administrative work associated with the PNW TWIG. A primary responsibility has been applying and successfully competing for EPA's WPDG. To date, the role has been held by a host Tribe for approximately 4-6 years or 2-3 grant funding cycles. The PNW TWIG staff is supported by their home Tribe. The role currently includes maintaining a [website](#), applying for two-year WPDGs, using the grants to cover the costs of participant travel to the workshops and trainings, organizing and holding workshops and trainings (2 events per year), writing and distributing two newsletters each year and sending out occasional emails about time sensitive news and opportunities.

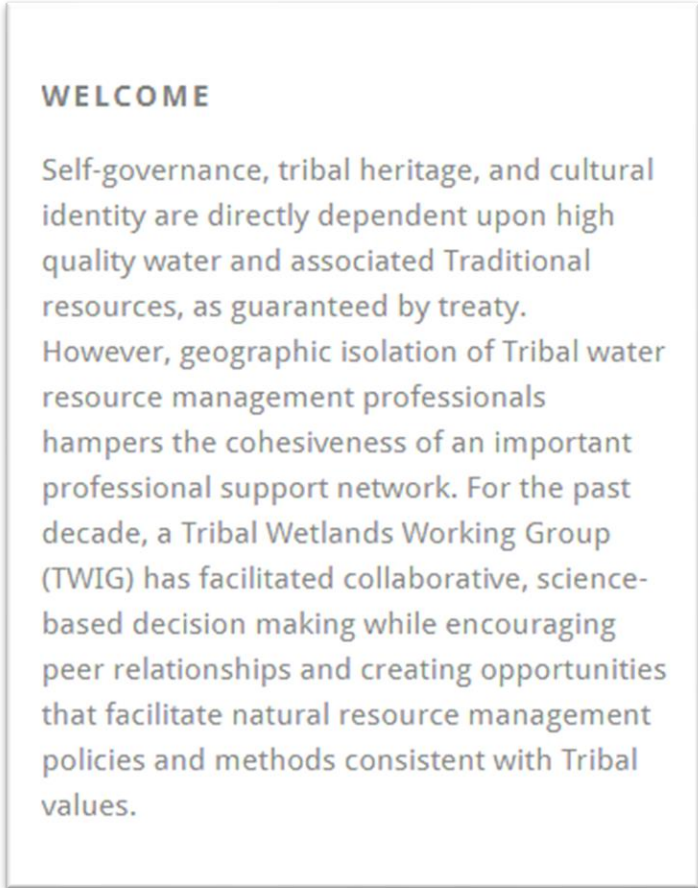


Figure 2- [From the PNWTWIG Website](#)

A long-standing Steering Committee of Tribal wetland staff is in place to provide guidance, help plan meetings and trainings and support the PNW TWIG in carrying out its work. Over time the Steering Committee has increased from 4 to 8 members representing 7 Tribes. One critically important responsibility of the Steering Committee is to regularly review its structure and membership, future plans and the PNW TWIG's Mission and Objectives.

Consistent Funding. Funding for the PNW TWIG has been provided by USEPA WPDGs; around \$60,000-\$70,000 every two years since the inception of the group.

USEPA's role. EPA Region 10 has provided essential support with a single technical point of contact and funding. Early on, the formation of the TWIG was supported by senior management in Region 10 who requested the initial \$10,000 grant from EPA Headquarters to pilot the concept of creating a TWIG. EPA staff provided logistical support during the formation of the PNW TWIG, helping PNW TWIG prioritize the need to establish a source for travel funding through subsequent EPA grants.⁷ Over time there has continued to be a senior EPA staff person available to support the PNW TWIG by attending meetings, answering questions, sharing ideas and identifying potential resources that may be of interest to the PNW TWIG. To support the PNW TWIG's autonomy, EPA is not present at most remote or in person meetings, but participates when invited to present on specific information or provide specific training. Many of the discussions and presentations at the in-person peer-to-peer meetings include only Tribal staff and Tribal members. Tribes are respected as sovereign nations with direct relationships with the Federal government.

State role. State staff are occasionally invited to meetings to share technical information. For example, when the State of Washington was developing their cross-agency, statewide Wetland Program Plan they presented at a PNW TWIG meeting to share about their plan and to offer Tribal representative input.⁸

Communication and Collaboration

Biannual meetings/training. (Figure 3) The PNW TWIG has typically supported in-person meetings annually and they have alternated between the east and west within the Region in either Washington, Oregon, or Idaho. Over a two-year period, there are three meetings and one training. The meetings and training are hosted by different Tribes. Elders open the meetings and Tribal members and/or environmental program staff participate along with Tribal wetland staff. These meetings focus



Figure 3 Two participants review a document during a PNW TWIG training in 2014

⁷ After the PNW TWIG got underway, many of the Tribes that received WPDG grants included travel funds specifically for Tribal staff to attend PNW TWIG workshops, which allowed the main PNW TWIG funding to go much farther in supporting TWIG travel for Tribal staff from Tribes that did not have active WPDGs or other sources of travel funding. PNW TWIG funding also covered staff time of the lead Tribal staff person and sometimes invited trainers' fees.

⁸ PNW TWIG tribal members are also invited to participate on the Washington statewide Monitoring and Assessment technical workgroup comprised of state, federal, tribal, and academic wetland specialists. A number of PNW TWIG member tribes have presented on their wetland monitoring and assessment work in that forum. The technical state staff and Tribal wetland program staff work well with each other.

on technical transfer and peer-to-peer sharing. Some topics may be broader than wetlands including aquatic management issues, such as stream, river, and floodplain restoration work. Policy development is not on the agenda. Policy is a Tribal Council/leadership responsibility and the wetland staff often are not Tribal members.

TWIG - SPRING 2013 NEWSLETTER

TWIG MISSION AND GOALS

The Tribal Wetland Working Group [TWIG] exists to share knowledge in support of the restoration and protection of wetlands and other aquatic resources from a tribal perspective.

1. Promote wetland and aquatic resources training opportunities for Tribes.
2. Provide a venue for information sharing and transfer of technical expertise regarding restoration, protection, and management strategies for wetlands and aquatic resources between staff of Pacific NW Tribes.
3. Support development and implementation of wetland and aquatic resource monitoring strategies.
4. Increase awareness of cultural importance of wetlands and aquatic resources.

During the past six months much has happened with the TWIG. This newsletter is to keep you aware of the progress, events and upcoming workshops.

Meeting with EPA Wetlands staff in Portland, Oregon
Rudy Salakory and Scott O'Daniel met with Yvonne Vallette, Tracie Nadeau and Michael Szerlog at the EPA Oregon operations office in the fall of 2012. Rudy and Scott delivered a presentation documenting the progress of the TWIG. We discussed the Workshops and the organizational planning effort, as well as the coordination between PNW Tribes and EPA.

"The Makah guys are here – and they brought their coolers."

Events last two-three days and priority topics are identified through the Steering Committee and/or by polling PNW TWIG members. Meetings include a day of presentations and discussion followed by a 'field' day to visit the site of a project the host Tribe has underway. It is often an opportunity for the host Tribe to share their expertise and accomplishments.

Figure 4 - Example of a PNW TWIG newsletter

Topics discussed at the meetings and trainings have been wide ranging including wetlands and steam assessment, the EPA grant application process, how to use UAVs/drones for monitoring wetlands, integration of wetlands with other Tribal programs, wetland program plan development, Endangered Species Act considerations, and mapping wetlands and documenting cultural significance while keeping protected cultural knowledge and traditional ecological knowledge about these resources within the Tribe. Site visits during field trips have had great value, providing the opportunity to explore a variety of wetland types from riverine wetland floodplains to wet meadows. Site visits have also included opportunities to learn about mountain stream restoration, how to do wetland restoration, and reintroduction of wildfires as a management technique for restoring culturally significant wetland places, amongst other topics.

Quarterly or periodic steering committee meetings are held remotely.

Electronic communication. Information is available to members of the PNW TWIG and others at the PNW TWIG [Website](#). A Newsletter (Figure 4) is distributed twice a year and occasional emails are sent out if there is information to share that is time sensitive. The newsletters include: summaries of past events, future plans, updates on PNW TWIG administration actions including Steering Committee activities and relevant news items.

Benefits

The meetings and other activities carried out by the PNW TWIG have supported strong growth in Tribal wetland programs in EPA Region 10. For example, since the PNW TWIG was established, 34 Tribes or Intertribal organizations have participated in PNW TWIG workshops and trainings. The number of Tribes with Tribal Wetland Programs has increased from three to 21. Tribal program capacity has improved particularly in the areas of monitoring and assessment, mapping/inventory and wetland and stream restoration. The participation of Elders and other environmental programs by the host Tribes has been particularly beneficial. Cultural knowledge and traditional ecological knowledge have been incorporated into Tribal wetland programs. Innovative ideas have been pursued such as Tribal adoption of long-term management responsibilities for compensatory mitigation sites. The communication and collaboration between the Tribal wetland staff have reinforced Tribal support for the restoration of salmon through changes in federal and state administrations.

These benefits have occurred as a direct result of technical transfer of knowledge and networking. In-person meetings hosted on Tribal lands fostered communication and connections among Tribal wetland staff as well as other professional staff, Tribal members and Elders at the host site. Creating these relationships has led to increased information sharing among Tribes and access to online resources and enhanced the ability of participating Tribes to contact Tribal program counterparts and experts across the region.

Challenges

Sustained administration and financing. The principal challenges over time have been finding Tribal staff with wetland experience who have the interest and capacity to provide the required logistical and administrative services for the PNW TWIG including applying for grants. There have been two Tribes that have consistently provided leadership and administrative support since the inception of the PNW TWIG. It is not certain that there will always be someone available to step forward and take over this responsibility.

The work of the PNW TWIG has been supported by staff from other tribes. In the beginning there were key people who had energy and interest in creating an organization to provide intertribal support. Over time those contributions have evolved into the establishment of a formal steering committee. The steering committee's contributions have been vital to carrying out the activities of the PNW TWIG (Figure 5).

Funding for the work of the PNW TWIG. The funding, including travel support for Tribal wetland staff around the Region to attend the biannual meetings, has come from US EPA WPDGs,

“TWIG has been a great place to get knowledge about what is needed in a wetland program and get ideas and examples of what EPA wants in wetland programs. I am an active member and offered to be on the steering committee because they helped me with my program and I wanted to help others. When I started my position, I had very little guidance in what was necessary for a wetland program. The TWIG was where I found the information to help me create a great wetland program.”

--Rue Hewett-Hoover, Nez Perce Tribe

Figure 5 Rue Hoover a member of the PNW TWIG steering committee

November 2, 2021

provides a forum for the eleven (11) federally recognized Native American Tribes in Wisconsin to share information and resources on natural resource and agricultural issues on Tribal lands. The Council reviews and recommends proposals for conservation projects from Tribes in Wisconsin.¹¹ The TWWWG has received two EPA funded non-competitive \$20,000 grants to date to support two trainings as well as annual meetings.

The TWWWG is still in its formative stages. It is only four years old and over the past two years the pandemic has made it very difficult to move forward. Nevertheless, the interviews conducted highlight some similarities and differences from the PNW TWIG and early findings.

Similarities and Differences

Like the PNW TWIG, self-governance is essential. The TWWWG is also administered by a Tribal staff person. EPA Region 5 is committed to providing essential support through both competitive Wetland Program Development Grants and noncompetitive grants. The majority of the funding provided by the grants is for travel to meetings and trainings and that will continue to be essential to the ability of the Tribal staff to gather. The TWIG has initiated an annual schedule of two face-to-face meetings a year, including the WWA conference in February and an annual training scheduled for another time of year.

There are also some differences between the TWWWG and the PNW TWIG. There are 11 Tribes in Wisconsin and most or all of them have been interested in participating in TWWWG meetings and training, regardless of the extent of their wetlands programs. That is a very small number of tribes compared to Region 10's 271. The annual WWA conference provides an external opportunity for all tribes to gather to share among themselves as well as benefit from the information available in the larger conference. Operating under the umbrella of WTCAC also has the potential for unique benefits such as administrative support as well as access to resources--for example, physical equipment or a shared expertise. These are services WTCAC has provided for other programs it supports in the state. Unlike the PNW TWIG, the TWWWG does not currently have a web page, newsletter or steering committee. However, given that TWWWG is just getting started, these or other activities may become part of its operations over time.

Early findings indicate that TWWWG participants value the opportunity to get together and learn from each other. It is important to be able to meet just among the Tribes because this enables discussion on topics that may be sensitive, such as cultural resources, or simply different from the topics that are important to states or federal agencies. Conversations can lead to sharing so that individual Tribes can develop new strategies and programs and avoid taking actions that have proven unsuccessful by other Tribal wetlands staff. In this way, the Tribal wetland programs can grow together.

Transferability of lessons learned from the PNW TWIG and TWWWG

Under the Federal Power Act and other authorities related to environmental protection and salmon recovery, Tribes in the Pacific Northwest have had greater access to funding than Tribes in other parts of the country. As such, Tribal wetland programs within Region 10, although relatively new compared to

¹¹ Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils were first authorized nationally in response to the 1995 Farm Bill as advisory bodies to NRCS and all of USDA on Tribal issues. WTCAC receives a \$500,000 set aside from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds annually to address resource concerns on tribal lands in Wisconsin

November 2, 2021

State programs, may have had more opportunities for program development than Tribes in other parts of the country. Further, prior to the development of the PNW TWIG, some Tribes had wetland programs in place and many of these Tribes were able to provide funding for dedicated wetlands staff who have remained in place over time.

Salmon recovery has been a common interest among the Tribes in Region 10 and wetland protection and restoration are part of recovery efforts. This focus has enabled the PNW TWIG to start from a sense of shared purpose. Thus, shared wildlife or environmental resource issues in other parts of the country could serve a similar purpose. For example, food sovereignty is an important topic among Tribes in the Great Lakes Region. If important Tribal food sources were traditionally harvested from wetlands, it could provide a unifying goal.

While the TWWWG is still in the early development stages; there are commonalities with the TWIG which seem likely to be essential characteristics of any future working group:

- 1) self-governance;
- 2) communication (i.e., regular meetings and trainings, focusing on supporting tribal wetland programs by providing resources specifically for tribes rather than state and tribes);
- 3) administration (i.e., the Steering Committee for PNW TWIG and WTCAC for TWWWG); and
- 4) sustainable funding, particularly travel funding.

Further, the working relationship between PNW TWIG/TWWWG and EPA has proven beneficial. Although the TWWGs are structured to be self-sustaining, they have benefited from involvement by EPA in helping to 1) provide regular opportunities for Tribal Wetland staff to communicate and 2) identify sustainable sources of funding.

For both TWWGs, the creation of the group appears to have occurred after there were certain building blocks in place. These may not be present currently in other parts of the country. One of the first steps in future efforts should be to facilitate a dialogue with Tribal wetland staff and other Tribal staff to understand and support their current needs and priorities as it relates to development of a Regional TWWG. Some of the Tribal needs identified as part of this Region 5 project include:

- Identifying and sharing Tribal wetlands contacts amongst Tribes within a Region
- Creating wetland and water program specific training materials for new Tribal wetland staff
- Creating a regional map and Tribal wetland program descriptions/summaries so that Tribal wetland staff can identify those with similar goals, objectives, and interests.
- Identifying a sustainable source of funding

Conclusion

There are substantial benefits that can be achieved through a regional TWWG. There are also barriers. Understanding the status of Tribal wetland programs across a region (i.e., an EPA Region or an ecologically similar geographic area) and developing a common strategy to support Tribal programs region wide may lead to establishment of a TWWG. Even if it does not; development of a common strategy can identify a series of actions to carry out that are likely to benefit many Tribal wetland and aquatic resource programs.

Appendix A – List of Interviewees

USEPA Region 10

Matt Baerwalde, Snoqualmie Tribe
Kelsey Taylor, Snoqualmie Tribe
Scott O'Daniel, Confederated Tribe of Umatilla Reservation
Rue Hewlett-Hoover, Nez Perce Tribe
Tom Elliott, Yakama Indian Nation
Linda Storm, USEPA
Tracie Nadeau, USEPA
Yvonne Vallette, USEPA

USEPA Region 5

Ferin Davis, Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community
Leya Charles, Prairie Island Indian Community
Cody Mattison, Prairie Island Indian Community
Rick Gitar, Fond du Lac
Randy Poelma, Ho-Chunk Nation Division of Env. Health
Mike Jones, Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians
Celeste Hockings, Lac Du Flambeau Tribe
Tracy Hames, Wisconsin Wetlands Association

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