

Report on the Annual Grantee Convening

Of the Northern California Environmental Grassroots Funds And California Wildlands Grassroots Fund

**October 12, 2007
Sacramento, California**

On a rainy, cool, fall day in Sacramento, activists from 43 California environmental groups attended the second annual convening of grantees of the Northern California Environmental Grassroots Fund and the California Wildlands Grassroots Fund. People came from as far north as Crescent City and as far south as Bakersfield and all points in between. A total of 71 people attended the event, which was focused on “Making Your Voice Heard: Effective Communication of Your Vision and Program.” The Sierra Health Foundation hosted the convening at their beautiful conference facility overlooking the Sacramento River. The conference featured an all-organic lunch made with locally grown fruit and vegetables that had no packaging waste. To offset the carbon footprint of the event, conference attendees were asked to vote on which carbon reduction project to support, and they chose anaerobic digesters for small family farms. We purchased seven tons of “re-moo-able” energy credits from NativeEnergy.

What Makes a Good News Story

A panel of veteran news reporters representing print, television and radio kicked off the day. They gave the attendees very practical tips for pitching stories, including put a human face on the story, and suggesting using concise, colorful comments, since you’ll only have 10 to 15 seconds to get your message across. They recommend that you focus your story: “WHO is doing WHAT, and WHY are they doing it,” and stressed the paramount importance of accuracy (as one panelist put it, “burn me once on facts and you are my enemy”). In one of the session’s surprises, all three reporters flatly asserted that “the traditional press release is dead!” Instead, they urged timely and repeated news advisories, plus more detailed backgrounders. (They stressed that these backgrounders should be educational and not time-sensitive).

In a 90 minute session full of practical advice, the reporters urged activists seeking press coverage to “sell the disease before the cure (ie – pitch the doom and gloom outcome if changes aren’t made), and to use metaphors and graphics to illustrate facts (i.e. one day of dripping faucets in Los Angeles would fill enough water bottles to reach the moon). They also warned that news is a contact sport, and that off-the-record comments often are not. And, just because the reporter seems nice, does not mean they will present a favorable news story about your cause. At the same time, they reminded news seekers that developing personal relationships with reporters was one of the best long-term strategies to getting consistent, in-depth coverage of their issues. There was also a discussion of how the advent of the Internet, blogs and YouTube means that traditional media is no longer the absolute gatekeeper of information. They closed by encouraging people to integrate media into everything that they do: e-newsletters, listserv, websites, local access television, tabling at events, etc.

The audience asked questions of the panelists, making for a lively discussion. Of the 40 evaluations we received, 56 % said that it was a “great” panel, 31 % said it was “good” and 13% said it was “average.” The comments included:

- *Very well done, great moderation and great panel*
- *Exceeded expectations!*
- *What great tips and bits of insights*
- *Great, informative, funny, and helpful – broke down some of my intimidation about working with media people*
- *The best presentation of the day, not enough time!*
- *Speakers should have stood – we couldn't see them in the back*

Story Telling

Terrance McNally of “Good Ideas for Good Causes” presented tips on how a nonprofit group can convey their mission and message using the ancient tool of storytelling. Mr. McNally, a former actor and author of the screenplay “Earth Girls Are Easy,” specializes in coaching nonprofit organizations, public interest groups, and public agencies on messaging and media. Storytelling is a tool that helps people to remember, and our culture is a web of interconnected stories. He said that a good story is one that is re-told, that it should be concise but colorful, and that it should be in the language of the audience. Stories shouldn't be predictable, but should engage emotions, be truthful and infused with meaning. He said that nonprofit groups have several types of stories they can tell: the *nature of the challenge* story, the *how we started* story, the *success* story, and the *look how far we've come and look how far we have to go* story. All of these are powerful techniques, and Mr. McNally offered detailed suggestions for how to plot an organization's story using elements such as the *hero*, the *obstacle/challenge*, and the *climax* of overcoming the challenge.

This was by far the most popular presentation of the day, and Mr. McNally deftly executed some on-the-fly adjustments with his presentation in the face of significant glitches in the PowerPoint presentation caused by an incompatibility problem with the conference center's systems. Of the evaluations received, 76% said it was a great, and 21% said it was good. Here are a few of the evaluation comments:

- *Very compelling dynamic speaker. Great for website or to engage interest of reporter, funder, and public at large and to promote consistency of message within organization*
- *Excellent choice of presenters!*
- *Fantastic! Interesting, inspiring-very valuable. PS. PowerPoint wasn't that important-quotations could have been read (or skipped)*
- *Fascinating and engaging speaker!*
- *Flashy, but could have included more detail of how-to. Working with 1 participating organization's story to show how to do it would be more immediate.*

Afternoon Workshops

After lunch, grantees could choose from one of three workshops on how to tell a group's story to donors, the community or the media.

The **fundraising workshop** included two people on the foundation-side of philanthropy and a grant seeker who works with institutional donors. *Cathy Lerza* of the Tides Foundation's California Wildlands Grassroots Fund (the co-sponsor of the convening) moderated the panel, which included *Allison DeLauer* of ForestEthics and *Maritza Schafer* of

Tides Foundation. This workshop was the most attended of the three, and also received the highest marks on the evaluations with 84% saying it was good or great. Additional comments from the evaluations include the following:

- *Excellent*
- *Very good information*
- *Presentation TOO FAST, "rushed"*
- *Only [ranked] "4" because ForestEthics person talked more about ForestEthics than fundraising. Cathy is wonderful!*
- *Parts were very relevant, others were interesting to hear but not as useful from an implementation standpoint. Info that was thrown in by Cathy about how funders can access info about your group and what they look for was very useful. More info regarding how to locate funders (organizations) and how to establish communication and rapport would be useful.*

The **community organizing** session included two grassroots organizers working in vastly different communities: one organizing residents in an extremely urban environment; the other working with small rural farmworker communities in the Central Valley. *Susana De Anda*, co-founder and co-director of the Community Water Center, is organizing farmworkers around the issue of clean and safe drinking water, or lack there of. *Whitney Dotson* is organizing communities of color in the Richmond area to advocate for community access and protection of the shoreline. This session received a 73% good or great rating on the evaluations.

- *Susana and Whitney were great!*
- *Some good information, but somewhat less relevant-more storytelling than useable information and advice*
- *Could have had better coordination of PowerPoint on Richmond Shoreline presentation*
- *Presentations were rambling and "self-centered," i.e. there were no techniques offered that others might enjoy.*

The **media workshop** was presented by veteran grassroots activists who have led very successful media campaigns on environmental justice and air pollution issues all over the globe. *Denny Larson* and *Ruth Beech* of Global Community Monitor work with communities impacted by industrial pollution, helping them to establish air sampling systems and helping them sell their story to the media. This session received a 66% great or good rating.

- *Panelists focus was on their work with metro media markets, emphasizing corporate pollution and regulatory-agency failure. Land use and environmental/sustainability coverage meager, especially among Bay Area media – would be nice for a future workshop.*
- *Not directly applicable to a fledgling organization that doesn't have "news" yet.*
- *Totally dominated by issue people and media contact; nothing on long haul and how to build community base, which we needed and got very little idea.*
- *Even in very small group, did not try to reach out to all, lacked balance between talking and listening*

A common theme of the comments on all of the workshops was that the activists who gave presentations used the forum to talk about their specific work, more so than about the topic at hand. While this often provided some inspiring examples, the afternoon panels would have benefited from stronger facilitation to focus the presentations on broadly applicable tactics that other activists could employ or adapt, rather than emphasizing individual success stories.

Telling your story to elected officials: The Do's and Don'ts of Lobbying

The final session was conducted by Alliance for Justice attorney Nayantara Mehta. Ms. Mehta demystified nonprofit lobbying by explaining the legal and technical issues in an easy to understand format. She explained what lobbying is, and more importantly, what lobbying is not, and how to maximize the amount of lobbying a nonprofit can do. She explained that 501(c)(3) non-profits are allowed to engage in lobbying activities as long as these activities do not form a substantial part of their operations, and encouraged groups to file the half-page 501(h) election with the IRS that clarifies the often subjective determination of what constitutes a "substantial part." Charities that have filed the 501(h) election are allowed generally to allocate up to 20% of the annual expenses on lobbying.

She also explained that many governmental officials are not subject to the lobbying rule: these include elected school board officials, administrative officials such as water board members, and governors and the president, (except when signing or vetoing legislation.) Therefore, contacts with these officials are not lobbying. Finally, she outlined levels of permissible involvement in ballot initiatives, and underscored the absolute prohibition against "electioneering" (endorsing or otherwise advocating on behalf of candidates for election). In closing, Ms. Mehta encouraged the audience to take advantage of the Alliance for Justice's free technical assistance hotline to clarify specific questions about their organizations' activities.

Despite the fact that this was the last session of a very long day, the audience was very engaged, peppering the speaker with questions. Of those who filled out the survey 73% thought the session was great or good. Additional comments included the following:

- *Excellent – clear concise well informed speaker*
- *A bit dry but informative*
- *Too much info too little time, very complex topic*
- *Something we all need to understand*
- *Audience went wacko asking for specific "rulings," more suitable for after presentation.*

Summary

When asked *what people like most* about the conference, people responded that they liked the presenters, the quality of the presentations and the subjects covered. They also liked the conference location at the Sierra Health Foundation. They enjoyed networking with people from other groups, and with staff from Tides and Rose Foundation.

When asked *what they didn't like*, they said they wanted more time to network, the room was cold (it was!), that the view of the river was obstructed by the clouds, and that they didn't like choosing between the afternoon workshops. A couple of people suggested that we audio or video tape the sessions and make those available to everyone or put them on our website, and several suggested that we have copies of the PowerPoint presentations in the conference packet. In fact, copies of some of the presentations were distributed in the packet or handed out during the sessions, and a recording of the opening "What Makes a Good News Story" plenary has been posted on the Northern California Environmental Grassroots Fund's webpage, www.rosefdn.org/grants/grassroots.html).

Topic *suggestions for next year's convening* include grassroots advocacy boot camp, liability insurance, expanding membership, finding major donors, outcome tracking

systems, and technology and communications topics such as web development, You-Tube, listserv, blogs, e-newsletter, etc.

Of those who received *travel stipends*, 55% said the stipend covered the cost of their travel, and 45% said it did not – so we will look into increasing the stipends next year. On the questionnaire, none said they would like *childcare* to be provided at future convenings, although 2 people were overheard saying they wished that childcare had been provided (and one Northern California Environmental Grassroots Fund board member couldn't attend because she couldn't find childcare.)

Suggestions for the location of next year's convening were split fairly evenly between Sacramento (45%) and the Bay Area (40%).

Of the *conference overall*, 57% said that it was great, and 37% said it was good, and 6% said it was average. The comments included lots of "thank yous" and several "best I've been too" comments. One attendee said, "Thanks for being such a kind, caring, and supportive foundation. It really feels like something vital and different, the way you seek to support your grassroots grantees."