

## Ecological Benefits, Resource Significance, and Their Impacts on Budget

18 November 2021

Q&A Session

This webinar provides a description of how resource significance, ecological benefits, and the budget work together. The information presented focused on Ecosystem Restoration projects, but much of the information can also be applied to compensatory mitigation. The webinar went over tools and resources available to help project delivery teams (PDTs) describe resource significance in planning documents and document project benefits. The webinar was presented by Debby Scerno, Environmental Reviewer with the Headquarters Office of Water Project Review.



*This summary of the Question / Answer session of the webinar is not a transcription; questions and responses have been edited and reordered for clarity.*

### **Ecological Modeling**

**Should the Conceptual Ecological Models or the Ecosystem Output Models be used by PDTs in the planning phase exclusively, or can they also be used in the preconstruction engineering and design (PED) or design and implementation phases?**

The models are intended for use in the planning phase to support formulation and show benefits to justify a project. However, if project conditions change dramatically, the project can be remodeled in later phases with the Conceptual Ecological Models or the Ecosystem Output Models used in the Planning phase.

**Are there any environmental justice models that can be used in Planning that are not an economic model? Is it possible to calculate “environmental justice units” to demonstrate project benefits?**

The EPA has several tools for identifying areas where environmental justice may be a consideration. [EJSCREEN](#) is the most common EPA tool used by USACE. EJSCREEN combines environmental and demographic indicators in maps and reports based on a consistent methodology and data sets, however it cannot identify significance. A PCoP webinar giving an overview of EJSCREEN can be found [here on the Planning Community Toolbox](#); EPA also has training (and office hours) available via the EJSCREEN website. There are no methods for using “environmental justice units” in a study, but qualitative or quantitative documentation of benefits in the “other social effects” account would be reasonable.

### **Resource Significance, Ecosystem Restoration Projects, and USACE Policies**

**Do the requirements for documenting or establishing resource significance change for Section 1135 Continuing Authority Program (CAP) projects (Project Modifications for Improvements to the Environment)?**

There are two possible purposes for an 1135 CAP project - 1) Restore the environment, if it can be demonstrated it was degraded by the existing already constructed USACE Project, or 2) Modify

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(structurally or operationally) an existing already constructed USACE project to improve the quality of the environment when the modification of the project does not alter the original project's purpose, modifications are feasible and improving the quality of the environment is in the public interest. While it is not a bad idea to discuss the significance of resources for all Section 1135 projects, for those projects pursuing construction under purpose 1, significance may not play a pivotable role. However, for projects pursuing construction under purpose 2, significance can be one of multiple determining factors.

**There are differing opinions on whether there is a sufficient cost-benefit ratio for budgeting urban ecosystem restoration investment, as the cost per unit is usually much higher than for a rural area.**

**How should PDTs approach urban ecosystem restoration project recommendations?**

Urban ecosystem restoration projects generally require more creativity in documenting resource significance and ecosystem benefits. In addition, presenting the reasoning why the higher cost per unit is a recommended federal investment is also recommended. The PDT should consult with the Ecosystem Restoration Planning Center of Expertise (EcoPCX) and the vertical team regarding ways to fully use all four accounts for documenting the benefits of the project.

**One of your examples noted water quality improvements as a project outcome. Were those water quality improvement efforts performed by other parties or were they realized by USACE as a part of other ecosystem restoration measures (e.g., plantings, filter feeders, etc.)?**

Restoration work was completed by other agencies to address water quality issues in the project area. The ecosystem restoration measures of the USACE project were shown to assist in maintaining and further improving water quality.