**National Estuarine
Research Reserve System
Science Collaborative**

Navigating Conversations with Prospective Grant Partners

Scenario: Reserve staff often receive interest from researchers and other prospective partners hoping to work together on collaborative science proposals. Sometimes outreach from external partners occurs after a proposal has already been drafted or an idea for the research has already been developed. Occasionally, requests are made on extremely short timelines.

Audience: This resource is intended to support reserve staff in conversations with prospective grant partners who are interested in partnering on a collaborative science project. While this resource was designed primarily for reserve staff, researchers may also find this resource helpful to review ahead of reaching out to a reserve.

Step 1: Decide what information will help your reserve make an informed decision about partnering.

The table below offers an overview of objectives and topics to prioritize during conversations of varying length. The suggested objectives and topics are intended to build on each other with increasing depth, i.e., start with the first objective and topics, then move to the next column(s) as time allows.

In addition to the topics in the table below, **listen for indications that the researcher / potential partner is approaching the conversation with a collaborative mindset,** including curiosity, humility, and openness for you to shape the proposal with them as an equal partner.

Quick chats (~15 min)	Longer conversations (~30 min)	Deep dives (~ 60 min)
Objective 1: Understand the need for the proposed project and its connections to reserve priorities.	**Objective 2:** Objective 1, and understand how researchers engage with partners and what success looks like.	**Objective 3:** Objectives 1 and 2, and understand the researcher's familiarity with collaborative science.
Suggested topics: ☐ The need addressed by the project ☐ The project's connection to the reserve ☐ Expectations for the reserve's role	**Suggested topics:** Topics from the "quick chats" column, and ☐ How the idea for the project came about and anticipated outputs/outcomes ☐ The project's approach to partner engagement	**Suggested topics:** Topics from the "quick chats" and "longer conversations" columns, and ☐ An understanding of collaborative science

Step 2: Ask questions to gather more information.

Use the tables below as a reference for what to ask, and what to listen for, during a conversation with a prospective grant partner. The questions are organized by the suggested topics in Step 1 and increase in depth.

What need does the project address?	
Ask	**Listen for**
- What need does the project address? - Why is this need not currently being met? - Why should this need be addressed at this time?	- A clear need for the project that is connected to a reserve need - The identified need is shared amongst different people and is not simply driven by individual interests - An understanding of the current situation and what efforts have come before

How does the project connect to the reserve?	
Ask	**Listen for**
- What made you think to reach out to the reserve? - Why do you think it's important the reserve is a partner on this project? - What kind of outcomes would this project lead to for the reserve?	- Strong reasons for engaging the reserve beyond responding to a specific call for proposals - A mutually beneficial purpose for reserve engagement

What role will the reserve play in the project?	
Ask	**Listen for**
- What role do you envision the reserve playing in the project? - What is the anticipated time commitment for this project? - How will the grant be used to support reserve participation?	- Clear vision for how the reserve will engage with the project, including expectations for time investment - Reasonable timeline for reserve engagement - Adequate resources to support reserve participation

How did the idea for the project come about and what are anticipated outputs / outcomes?	
Ask	**Listen for**
- How did you identify the need the research will address? - What partners / communities did you hear this need from? - What outputs or outcomes do you hope come from this project? - What do you think success looks like for your partners / the community?	- Evidence that the need for project was not driven by researcher interests alone - Co-development of idea or proposal with community / partners - A clear idea of the project's desired outcomes, with a focus on how the project benefits partners and the community

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How does the project engage with partners / community members?

Ask	Listen for
- Who in the community / what partner organization have you been partnering with? - Do you have an established relationship with this community / partner? If yes, explain. - If it's a new partnership, why and how are you looking to foster the relationship? - What do you think success for the community / partners looks like? - Have you discussed with the community / partners how much funding they will need to engage in this project? - Have you set aside participant engagement costs? How did you determine that amount of funding would be sufficient?	- Intention of working with partners and appreciation for building long-term relationships - Long-term engagement with existing partners (e.g. through ongoing projects) or engagement with new partners(s) - The level to which existing partners have already been engaged and how effective engagement to date has been - Funding for partners and community to lead *and* participate in the project - Intention for sustaining relationships that continue beyond the life of the grant

Why collaborative science?

Ask	Listen for
- Why does this topic require a collaborative science approach? - Can you describe in your own words what makes collaborative science projects different from other research projects?	- Key collaborative mindset and principles, like open-mindedness and humility - An understanding of why collaborative science leads to better research outcomes - Practices that align with the reserve's approach to collaboration

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Step 3: Decide on a path forward.

Consider whether it makes sense for the reserve to pursue a collaboration with the prospective grant partner.

If interested in exploring a collaboration on the grant in question, begin to discuss next steps, including what a meaningful collaborative relationship would entail, and more specific reserve role and expectations.

If not interested in partnering on the grant, politely decline. It can be helpful to convey why you are declining to partner with them (e.g., lack of time; not the right moment; you have to prioritize other projects; research doesn't meet reserve needs; research is not collaborative.) Keep in mind, declining an invitation to collaborate doesn't have to close the door to future collaborations. Consider using the sample talking points below and sharing additional resources.

Reason for Declining	Sample Talking Points
Timing	*With the grant proposal due so soon, we won't be able to partner this time around. We usually like to discuss prospective collaborations <<x>> weeks in advance.* *This sort of collaboration takes time, which we don't seem to have at the moment. Let's revisit during the next funding cycle.*
Collaborative elements	*Given the evaluation criteria, this likely wouldn't score very high- you may want to consider other funding sources.* *Collaborative science often requires an approach that is quite different from conventional approaches. Given that your proposed research doesn't engage with community partners / intended users, it is unlikely to be competitive.*
Relationships with community partners	*It sounds like community partners are vital to the success of this research and I'm afraid the current budget won't be enough to support these community partners and their participation.* *From our experience, the community members you are interested in working with receive many requests for partnerships. I'm afraid this project won't be successful if you haven't already established a relationship with those community members.*
Needs	*Unfortunately, this research doesn't match our current research priorities. You can take a look at this resource to learn more about our reserve's current management needs.* *This is an interesting idea that might meet a management need at our reserve sometime in the future. Let's keep talking about your idea so that, if it does meet an important need, we can get it as a management need for next year's RFP. Let's touch base in <<suggest a month in the future with enough time to iterate the idea before management needs are due in mid-summer.>>*

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Step 4: Consider sharing additional resources.

[Overview of NERRS Science Collaborative Funding Opportunities](#)
Use this webpage to learn more about the type of funding opportunities the NERRS Science Collaborative offers.

[Reserve Management and Knowledge Exchange Needs](#)
Use this webpage to learn more about individual reserve needs and research priorities.

[Guide to Collaborative Science](#)
Use this guide to better understand what collaborative science is and how to plan collaborative science processes. The guide contains examples, tips, user insights, and downloadable tools.

[Catalog of Collaborative Science Projects](#)
Use this catalog to learn more about projects that have been funded by the NERRS Science Collaborative. Projects can be filtered by project type, reserve, region, focus area and number of reserves involved.

[Checklist For Writing Grant](#) [Proposals that Encourage](#) [Meaningful Community Engagement](#)
Use this checklist while writing grant proposals to ensure that community engagement is central to your project's design and implementation.