



STATE OF WASHINGTON

RECREATION AND CONSERVATION OFFICE

MEETING DATE: July 2009 **ITEM NUMBER:** 7

TITLE: Changes to Project Evaluation Processes

PREPARED BY: Greg Lovelady, Grant Services Program Manager

APPROVED BY THE DIRECTOR:

Proposed Action: Decision

Summary

This memo proposes to reduce the time and resources committed to the project evaluations of some grant programs by switching them to a written evaluation method. Specifically, staff proposes to switch the process for:

- Nonhighway and Off-Road Vehicle Activities (NOVA), Education and Enforcement (E&E) Category
- Program categories in grant cycles that are undersubscribed (more dollars than requests). Written reviews would happen at the discretion of the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) director.

Staff Recommendation

RCO staff recommends adoption of the revised evaluation process via Resolution #2009-16.

Background

Due to the sizable and ongoing time and resource commitment, some project evaluators and project applicants have asked RCO staff to find a more economical way of evaluating certain types of grant projects.

- For example, in the NOVA E&E category, up to 15 evaluators and dozens of repeat applicants regularly travel to Olympia for evaluation presentations that are strikingly similar to those done during the previous grant cycle.
- In other programs, evaluators and applicants travel to Olympia for presentations and evaluation, even though it is clear that there are enough funds for all projects ("undersubscribed" programs). Undersubscribed programs in the past include the Boating Facilities Program, local agency category; Firearms and Archery Range Recreation; and the NOVA off-road vehicle category.

Staff assessed whether there may be a better way to evaluate applications that change little from grant cycle to grant cycle or those that may be in programs that are undersubscribed. Current Recreation and Conservation Funding Board (board) policy allows written reviews in lieu of evaluation meetings for projects in four programs: Boating Infrastructure Grants; Recreational Trails; Washington Wildlife and Recreation (state lands development and state lands restoration categories); and Youth Athletic Facilities.



The written review process eliminates most travel and allows individual evaluators to score projects at their own pace after reviewing key application components provided by RCO staff, including:

- Project description/summary
- Cost estimate summary
- Evaluation question responses
- Project location map(s)
- Photos or other graphics.

In each of these programs, both the technical reviews¹ (if originally a part of the process) and the post-evaluation meetings still take place in person. Evaluators discuss project rankings and make final recommendations at the post-evaluation meetings.

Analysis

Staff suggests expanding the existing board policy to other programs to improve efficiency without compromising the integrity of the process.

Current Evaluation of NOVA Education and Enforcement Projects

In odd-numbered years, the board considers grants for about 30 projects and the evaluation process usually requires about a day and a half. Staff members start the process by meeting with the NOVA evaluation team to discuss the evaluation questions. Next, each applicant has 20 minutes to orally answer the evaluation questions and respond to follow-up questions from the team.

In each grant cycle, the competition for dollars is high and the board usually has sufficient funds to support about half of the projects. The following table describes the last two grant cycles.

Cycle	# Projects	Funding Request	Funds Available	Projects Funded
2007	28	\$3.647 million	\$1.477 million	11 – full funding 1 – partial funding
2005	31	\$3.314 million	\$1.687 million	11 – full funding 1 – partial funding

These projects change little between grant cycles. In fact, the board has supported some of these programs for decades. Projects generally are located in areas where the board funds maintenance-operation and development projects. The E&E projects address on-going recreational use issues such as improper facility use and the lack of ORV registrations or spark arrestors.

¹ RCO conducts technical reviews for many of its grant programs. In these forums, held a few weeks before project evaluations, applicants receive suggestions for improving their proposals and evaluation scores.

Current Evaluation of Undersubscribed Programs

Programs in which available grant dollars exceed the dollars requested also often share features that make it less important for evaluators to have personal contact with individual applicants.

Though not true in all cases, examples of these features are:

- They can be relatively small programs that have few grant dollars and few applicants
- Applicants often make essentially the same requests each grant cycle, sometimes changing only a few details
- The projects may not be very complex (e.g., they all may be requests of a single type, such as primarily maintenance-operation projects or staffing support projects).

Below are two examples of programs in which applicants do not always request all available dollars.

Recent Undersubscribed Programs			
Program: Year	Funds Available	Funds Requested	Undersubscribed
NOVA ORV: 2008	\$2,155,485	\$2,062,314	✓
2007	\$2,269,753	\$2,895,676	
2006	\$2,255,188	\$2,362,143	
2005	\$1,352,828	1,146,703	✓
FARR: 2009	\$495,000	\$200,891	✓
2007	\$661,202	\$848,961	
2005	\$225,300	\$200,000	✓
2003	\$222,185	\$406,516	

According to a 2008 report² by Strategica, Inc. stakeholders in a specially convened focus group complained about the time and cost associated with in-person evaluation meetings. They also said that an all-written process would be well suited to some RCO-administered grant programs. Other stakeholders in board programs have expressed similar concerns over time.

Written reviews in undersubscribed programs would be at the discretion of the RCO's director. The default evaluation process would be written, but the director would consider factors such as how close a category is to being undersubscribed and the funding amounts requested for projects that are inconsistent with the program's objectives. As needed, the director would call for oral presentation evaluations.

Considerations in Converting to a Written Evaluation Process

1. Less travel and time away from home and office for both applicants and evaluators; costs would be lower.
2. More flexibility and less structure because those involved would not need to adhere to a tight daily schedule in Olympia; RCO staff would allow evaluators a week or more to complete scoring on their own schedule.

² The report, commissioned by the RCO is available at:
http://www.rco.wa.gov/documents/rco/strategica_grant_mapping_report.pdf

3. Applicants would continue to receive direct feedback during project technical review meetings.
4. Good writers may have an advantage and good speakers would have no opportunity to “show their stuff.”
5. It would be more difficult for evaluators to ask applicants a question; when needed, an evaluator would ask RCO the question; RCO would refer question to the applicant, and then share the answer with all team members.

Public Review

On March 23, 2009, RCO staff circulated a draft proposal to about 30 people involved with the NOVA Program, including sponsors with active E&E projects and members of the NOVA advisory committee. Twelve people sent in comments: six favored the proposal, two favored it with qualifications, and four opposed.

Later, staff broadened the initial proposal to include undersubscribed program categories and circulated the draft to a broader group of reviewers, about 2,000 people. As of June 4, 2009, 15 additional people had responded:

- 10 favored both E&E and undersubscribed programs proposals
- 1 favored both proposals, but had questions
- 1 favored the undersubscribed programs proposal but did not favor of the E&E proposal
- 1 opposed both proposals
- 2 had no opinion

Attachment A contains tables with summaries of all comments.

Next Steps

If the board approves the change, RCO staff will implement the proposals during the next evaluations.

Attachments

Resolution #2009-16

- A. Public Comments on the Proposal To Score Projects in the Homes and Offices of Evaluators

RESOLUTION #2009-16

**CHANGES TO PROJECT EVALUATION PROCESSES:
WRITTEN EVALUATIONS FOR NONHIGHWAY AND OFF-ROAD VEHICLE ACTIVITIES (NOVA)
PROGRAM EDUCATION AND ENFORCEMENT (E&E) CATEGORY AND UNDERSUBSCRIBED
CATEGORIES**

WHEREAS, in-person Recreation and Conservation Funding Board (board) project evaluations require considerable time and resources from volunteer evaluators, project applicants, and staff; and

WHEREAS, some participants have asked the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) to find a way to reduce this commitment without diminishing the high quality of the reviews; and

WHEREAS, a less time and resource intensive system, based on written evaluations, rather than in-person presentations, is now successfully used in four board program categories and can be adapted to other board programs; and

WHEREAS, most stakeholders responded favorably to a proposal to use written evaluations for the Nonhighway and Off-Road Vehicle Activities (NOVA) Education and Enforcement (E&E) Category and for undersubscribed categories, subject to director discretion; and

WHEREAS, evaluators would discuss project rankings and make final recommendations in person at the post-evaluation meetings; and

WHEREAS, adopting this revision would continue to ensure that the board funds the best projects as determined by a fair evaluation process, while also promoting the board's goals to be accountable for and efficient with its resources; and

WHEREAS, using written evaluations in other grant programs has shown that the process supports the board's goal to conduct its work in an open manner;

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the board does hereby adopt the written evaluation process for the NOVA Program's Education and Enforcement category and projects that are in categories that are undersubscribed; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the written evaluation process for projects in undersubscribed categories will be allowed only on a case-by-case basis, at the discretion of the RCO's director; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the board directs RCO staff to implement this revision beginning with the next evaluations.

Resolution moved by: _____

Resolution seconded by: _____

Adopted/Defeated/Deferred (underline one)

Date: _____

ATTACHMENT A

Table 1: Summarized responses to RCO's initial proposal that this process apply only to the NOVA E&E category

Commenter	Summary ³	Comments ⁴
1. Susan Ranger, Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests, Naches Ranger District, 3/24/09	Supports the proposal	It would save money and preparation time for applicants, as well as travel time, to submit a written application for the E&E OHV Program. I have an idea of how much of a time commitment the volunteer evaluators put in now, and if they think it's good for them, I'd go with that!
2. Bob Pacific, Mt Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, Snoqualmie Ranger District, 3/24/09	Supports the proposal	For efficiency and cost savings it sounds like a better method especially for the evaluators. We already do this with the RTP program. My only question is why the E&E program would be any different than M&O or some of the others. A development request would definitely be better served with a formal presentation. Some do better at performing in the formal presentation rather than writing or vice versa. If evaluators have questions they could go through the RCO project manager to pass on to the applicant. From my perspective, I spend about the same amount of time writing answers to the evaluation questions verses preparing a power point. I probably do a better job at answering the questions via writing so I would support the proposal to submit evaluation questions.
3. Jonn Lunsford, Anacortes Parks and Recreation, 3/24/09	Supports the proposal	If I remember right, this proposal would make the E&E grants similar to the NRTP program where we submit everything in writing, but do not appear in Olympia for a presentation. If that is the case, that works for me.
4. James Horan, State Parks, NOVA advisory committee, 3/30/09	Supports the proposal	<p>The "possible proposal" works for me. As a member of RCO's RTP Advisory Committee, I have been scoring those projects at home/in the office for years. That process is an efficient use of my time and effective in that it gets the funds to those projects the committee feels most valuable.</p> <p>That process has been tweaked since its inception through the use of post scoring meetings to discuss the process and make recommendations for change. It is the right environment for frank discussions about process.</p> <p>Key to the process working is clarity in the grant program's intent in the grant application materials, ability of RCO staff to filter out applications that do not fit that intent, and the willingness of committee members to give careful consideration to scoring each application based on the grant program's intent.</p>
5. Rick Burk, NOVA advisory committee, 3/31/09	Supports the proposal	I like the proposed E&E evaluation method but would not want to apply it to the even year project evaluations.

³ The "summary" column is RCO staff's attempt to summarize each respondent's position. This can be challenging because some are unclear about their views.

⁴ In some cases, we have edited the remarks for brevity.

Commenter	Summary ³	Comments ⁴
6. John E. Spring, NOVA advisory committee, 3/23/09	Supports the proposal	<p>After my experience of serving on NRTP, I have experienced the "written process." I personally prefer this process and would vote strongly for this process to be used, not only for E&E.. but all categories of NOVA evaluations. For further clarification the advantages I see in this written process are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Less expenses for the state 2. A written process allows me as an evaluator more time to truly think over my scores on a grant request at home for several days and make a better decision. 3. Grant requestors would not have to leave their "duty" stations to come to Olympia. <p>In these times of tightening budgets, it seems only right that the evaluation process be converted to a written process done at home or office. I am HIGHLY in favor of this "Proposed" change to happen this year.</p>
7. Arlene Brooks, NOVA advisory committee, 4/1/09	Has some reservations but generally favors	<p>If the consensus of the advisory board is to go forward with the idea, I'd give it a try as long as there is an option open to reconsider the process if it was felt the effectiveness was lacking.</p> <p>I have reservations to the proposed E/E grant evaluation change. Under your consideration list -</p> <p>#4) We do have good writers vs. good presenters. I question if a new proposed E/E program will receive the same consideration through the written evaluation process as an in person presentation.</p> <p>#5) We would be unable to ask applicants a direct question, and going through RCO to retrieve an answer may cause time restraints and may reflect upon evaluation scoring. One on one question may bring an answer that results in a second question just as important as the first.</p>
8. Paul Dahmer, Department of Fish and Wildlife, NOVA advisory committee 3/31/09	Supports the proposal only if evaluations cannot be completed in a reasonable week	I would prefer to evaluate them all in-person in one reasonable week
9. Cyndy Welsh, Department of Natural Resources, 3/31/09 NOVA advisory committee	Does not support the proposal	<p>We understand the positive part of this proposal, specifically the savings and the flexibility that scoring at home would provide for the evaluators. We also understand the challenge to review the large number of applications/presentations. We believe though that the importance of having the opportunity to present the need/application in person and to receive questions from the evaluators, and respond to those questions first-hand is more compelling than the benefits gained by eliminating in-person presentations.</p> <p>The technical feedback comments show that for some evaluators it is how the information is presented rather than what the information is. Our concern is, that not having the opportunity to have that first-hand dialogue with the evaluators could result in an uneven "playing" field. Including both a written and an oral part to the application process provides each project "equal" review opportunity and maintains the integrity of the process - especially in the E&E classification, which is a critical part of providing a safe and enjoyable recreating opportunity.</p>

Commenter	Summary ³	Comments ⁴
10. Deputy Gene Ellis, Chelan County Sheriff's Office, 3/31/09 NOVA advisory committee	Does not support the proposal	Chelan County would prefer to continue the in-person presentations. Having experience in the written version, it is very difficult to explain your grant in 3 pages or less of typed word.
11. Mikki Douglass, Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests, Cle Elum Ranger District, 3/26/09	Does not support the proposal	<p>I have a large program to present in a short amount of time, and a well-planned oral presentation seems to give me the opportunity to do this. Pictures are worth a thousand words; could they be attached? I think I read it was just 3 typed pages. If you want to change it, you should consider doing it in the 2012-2013 cycle, unless a presentation and the three pages can be submitted. Our program can stand on its own no matter how it is presented, but dramatic changes should not negate the effort and work we have already committed to this grant cycle.</p> <p>Often, critical questions are answered and there is a sort of accountability when you are presenting in front of your peers.</p>
12. Tim Foss, Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests, Cle Elum Ranger District, 3/26/09	Does not support the proposal	I can see advantages and disadvantages to both, but honestly on balance, I think in-person presentations are more effective for this kind of grant. I say that because there seem to usually be a lot of questions the committee has for the presenters, and only an in-person presentation allows these questions to be aired and addressed. By having this kind of dialog with the committee, we are able to make a more effective case in person that we could with strictly a written format.

Table 2: Summarized responses to RCO's second proposal that the written evaluation process apply to both NOVA E&E and selected undersubscribed program categories

Commenter	Summary ⁵	Comments ⁶
1. Lori Flemm, Kent Parks Dept., 5/26/09	Supports the proposal	I support the proposal. An all-written process would be a good change. Less cost and staff time is critical.
2. Patricia Powell, Whidbey Camano Land Trust, 5/21/09	Supports the proposal	The draft proposal is a good recommendation. RCO staff and volunteer evaluators do an excellent job but it is very time-consuming. It makes sense to reduce unnecessary workload when appropriate and this proposal seems like a way to do that.
3. Rocklynn Culp, Town of Winthrop, 5/19/09	Supports the proposal	The proposed changes seem reasonable to try and retain a selection process that results in high quality projects while meeting the objective of less travel time.
4. Russ Burtner, City of Kennewick, 5/18/09	Supports the proposal	I would support the recommended changes. Having been an applicant and a project evaluator at various levels in several programs, I agree the process is time and resource consuming for applicants and the review teams. The RCO process is the most easily accessed and understandable process I've encountered. Any way we can reduce the cost of the program must be evaluated and I believe this suggestion is warranted.
5. Margaret M. (Gromek) Peterson, Chelan Ranger Dist., Okanog-Wenatch. Nat'l Forest, 5/15/09	Supports the proposal	I support anything you can do to streamline the evaluation process for all your grants. It's not only "greener" but it allows the evaluators to do their work at a time and place that "works" better for them and likely would result in better thought out evaluations.
6. Pam Schmitz, FARR grant committee, 5/18/08	Supports the proposal	Some of the revision changes make sense. I do think that at least one meeting needs to be in person. A preliminary meeting would be best in person, the final grant selection to be done via home/office. There are a lot of questions to be asked and answered, suggestions made (are there other safety concerns for gun ranges?), and sharing of ideas from the grant committee members from the different area of life and business and budget figures - realistic or not. If all goes to home/office evaluation, then any new grant committee members would not be well-versed as to the process, and that is where the real knowledge comes from! You have volunteers with great knowledge and experience to draw from. You don't want to lose that completely.
7. Janet Burcham, 5/18/09	Supports the proposal	I wholeheartedly support this idea. It is such a burden for agency and other NGO staff to make a trip to Olympia according to availability of the evaluators. Please include my support for this policy change.

⁵ The "summary" column is RCO staff's attempt to summarize each respondent's position. This can be challenging because some are unclear about their views.

⁶ In some cases, we have edited the remarks for brevity.

Commenter	Summary ⁵	Comments ⁶
8. Glen Jurges, Boating Programs Advisory Committee, 5/19/09	Supports the proposal	<p>Considering the budget cuts, it is less expensive, which I support, but the downside is the lack of face-to-face exchange which can be very worthwhile. I recommend trying [the draft RCO proposal] but leaving the option open to go back to the way it is done now in the future.</p> <p>My comments are limited to 2008 experience with only the boating grant programs. I participated in two boating advisory committee evaluations at home. In both cases, there were only two or three proposals that made it workable. While I didn't have the advantage of sharing information or questions with other committee members and/or presenters the final scores of all members were reasonably close. The best proposals were substantiated by the final scores of all members.</p>
9. John Keates, Mason Co. Parks, RTP advisory committee, 5/19/09	Supports the proposal	Based on scoring RTP projects, I'd say this is probably a good suggestion. E-E projects are straightforward and no sense in spending lots of money evaluating projects when the funds are there.
10. John E. Spring, NOVA advisory committee, 5/18/09	Supports the proposal	I agree with the reasons listed in the RCO proposal of why the "score-at-home" process makes great sense. I encourage RCO to consider the entire scoring process for NOVA be done by "score-at-home" similar to the process used at NRTP.
11. Patti Miller-Crowley, Port of Shelton, 5/18/09	Supports the proposal, but with questions	<p>Changing the evaluation process reduces the time and resources needed. While this change may favor applicants with better writing skills, the majority of grant and loan programs rely on written applications that must stand on their merit. This is not an unreasonable change. If evaluators have questions before scoring, add time to the evaluation period, with the RCO staff sending out questions, and sharing the answers with all evaluators. Providing specific guidelines for visuals (i.e. maximum of 5 visuals, etc.) would help contain the application size and level the playing field.</p> <p>Finally, on the topic of undersubscribed programs, perhaps it would first be useful to try to learn why the program is undersubscribed: are there restrictions that limit the utility of the program for potential applicants or which place such restrictions on the use or eligibility of funds that these outweigh the potential gains? Do minimum eligibility requirements or the efforts required to apply drive off potential applicants? These issues may need resolution at the policy level.</p>
12. Mark Mauren, DNR and NOVA advisory committee, 5/18/09	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not support the proposal to score E&E projects in writing. • Supports scoring under-subscribed categories in writing 	<p>We understand the positive part of this proposal, specifically the savings and the flexibility that scoring at home would provide for the evaluators. We also understand the challenge to review the large number of applications/presentations. We believe though that the importance of having the opportunity to present the need/application in person and to receive questions from the evaluators, and respond to those questions first-hand, is more compelling than the benefits gained by eliminating in-person presentations.</p> <p>Our concern is that not having the opportunity to have that first-hand dialogue with the evaluators could result in an uneven "playing" field. Including both a written and an oral part to the application process provides each project "equal" review opportunity and maintains the integrity of the process - especially in the E&E classification, which is a critical part of providing a safe and enjoyable recreating opportunity.</p>

Commenter	Summary ⁵	Comments ⁶
		<p>We would add to this request for comments the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If there are sufficient funds for all applications in a specific program (such as ORV) then in-person presentations would not be needed/beneficial for the applicant. • In-person presentations are especially beneficial when a program has more applications than funds available and for a new applicant, or one that has previously not been successful in getting funded. • If the evaluation team is considering whether or not a project meets the “spirit or intent of the grant program” the applicant needs the opportunity to have a first-hand conversation with the evaluators, to provide and clarify information. <p>Realizing the need to find efficiencies in the review process, rather than cutting all in-person presentations for a program perhaps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cut presentations for types of projects (such as “repeat” M&O) while continuing to allow new projects or one-time projects an opportunity to truly present their project rather than having it interpreted from a written request. • Have a schedule that rotates in-person presentations from year to year, so that one year M&O projects are presented and E&E projects are presented the following year, etc. • Let applicants “opt-in” or “opt-out” in regards to doing in-person presentations. <p>If in-person presentations are discontinued, would there be a benefit in considering how to help new advisory committee members become familiar with applicants and projects that are outside of their area of familiarity?</p>
<p>13. Patricia Binder, FARR advisory committee, 5/18/09</p>	<p>Does not support the proposal</p>	<p>I totally understand the logic of having Home-Office evaluations: saving travel and money. But, I wonder about the lack of face to face questions, and ideas, that are passed on during the "non-in-person" evaluations. Would some ideas & comments be lost or never occur due to the "no round table" discussion? As a FARR committee member, I know that some of the ideas discussed at the table are valuable. I really do think that a face to face discussion & evaluation is far more beneficial to the recipients.</p>
<p>14. Scott Thomas, LWCF advisory committee, 5/28/09</p>	<p>No opinion</p>	<p>I looked through the material and have no comments.</p>
<p>15. Don Callen, 5/19/09</p>	<p>Presents another option; no opinion on the proposal as circulated</p>	<p>Greg, an idea on the evaluation of programs: Provide a bingo scorecard to be filled out by each grant applier and submitted with their preliminary grant. This system would allow you to spot projects being resubmitted and devalue or eliminate them from further review. A point system would reflect higher points for those in undersubscribed grant areas. Total points would stack those grants most desirable by the Dept. at that top and only those grant appliers would do presentations for the committee. The bingo card questions and point values (not on the card) could be adjusted each year to fit your needs.</p>