**DSCESU Annual Meeting 12/4/23**

**Attendees:**

Kathryn Stoner, Director, DSCESU

Marie Buck, President and Chief Executive Officer, Western National Parks Association

Daniel Bunting, Geospatial Scientist, US Fish and Wildlife Service

Emily Burns, Program Director, Sky Islands Alliance

Tom Fish, National Coordinator, Cooperative Ecosystems Studies Unit

Naomi Fraga, Director of Conservation Programs, Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden

Melissa Fratello, Executive Director, Tucson Audubon Society

Gail Garber, Executive Director, Hawks Aloft, Inc.

Sallie Hejl, Research Coordinator, US National Parks Service

Ruth Holladay, Administrator, DSCESU

Eleanor King, Professor of Anthropology, Howard University

Angela Lombardi, Associate Professor of Architecture, University of Texas at San Antonio

John Mosley, Tribal Climate Resilience Branch Chief, Bureau of Indian Affairs

Pamela Nagler, Research Physical Scientist, US Geological Survey

Kerri Pederson, Biologist, US Bureau of Reclamation

Katie Predick, Scientist, Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum

Ashley Stewart, Administrator, DSCESU

Aaron Wilkerson, Resource Advisor, Bureau of Land Management

1. **Introductions (0:00 – 4:55)**
2. **Welcome and Updates – Kathryn Stoner (4:55 – 13:13)**

DSCESU formed in 2000 and encompasses Mojave, Sonoran and Chihuahuan desert

**How partners in CESU has grown every 5 years.**

* 40 total partners presently.

**Federal partners, university partners, and non-federal partners numbers**

* Often new non-federal partners join for a specific project then stay on

**Next DSCESU Renewal in 2025.**

**Host University Support**

* Target annual host support is $16,200 – discussions going on about increasing amount and various mechanisms for doing so. Working on white paper; will propose increase to indirect cost rate and host support. First draft will be proposed in December (this month)
* Less university host support 2023 ($16,200) vs 2022 ($18,025)
* NPS funds internship position for managing database and website as well as projects with local parks

**New intern will be in contact with partners.**

* Internship support – Sallie instrumental in getting this for us
* 2022 ($6,075) and 2023 ($5,000)

**New partners 2021 – 2023**

* Tucson Audubon Society 2022
* Two pending applications 2023
  + Cuenca Los Ojos needs letter of support signed by Fish and Wildlife person at a higher level
  + University of Texas Rio Grande Valley on its way to being finalized in amended agreement
* If you do not vote within 2 weeks, we will assume that you have a positive recommendation, because we have to meet a quorum – especially over the summer
* If someone votes no or abstain, Kathryn would like to hear why as this could be important in evaluating an applicant’s candidacy
* Usually no downside for more partners/collaborates because it helps participation and brings more money in
* Ruth Holladay (DSCESU Administrator) will send reminders

**Project summaries every 5 years**

* Consistently more projects and more money over time
* 2020-2025 will continue to climb
* One inactive partner, Universidad de Sonora – Kathryn will reach out to them personally

1. **Federal Partner Updates (US National Parks Service) – Sallie Hejl, NPS Research Coordinator (13:13 – 20:40)**

* How much funding is there going to be for projects FY24?
  + NPS is currently on Continuing Resolution (CR)
  + Congress will pass budget by Feb 2nd 2024, or else they will need to do a new CR to avoid govt shut down.
  + Predicted less money for NPS projects overall this year than last year
  + Even if NPS is on CR for FY24, this would be the best case scenario
  + Because President Biden promised NPS salary increase, there will be less money in NPS budget overall since funds will be allocated toward that increase
* Agreement Summaries FY23
  + 22 new task agreements, 10 money-added modifications
  + $2,500,000 total funding for projects FY23 – more than usual (usually $1.5 million)
    - 20 NPS units funded these projects; 10 non-federal partners received the funding
    - In general, most were Technical Assistance – non-federal partner would give expertise
* Project categories FY23
  + Usually more research projects, less technical assistance; this time opposite.
  + Education is usually a small portion; this year not an exception
  + Natural Resources and Cultural Resources are usually split, this time more than half were Natural resources projects
* **Reminder to federal managers**: Renewal next year!
  + Federal managers (composed of technical and administrative representatives from each federal agency) have to get together to do **3 things:**

1. Provides **list of CESU projects** from 5-year term to CESU Director
2. Nominates at least **two external reviewers** – those who are not involved with DSCESU specifically, but know about CESU in general
3. Jointly writes a **report evaluating activities** of DSCESU including recommendations in support or opposition to renewal
   1. Does not need to be long, but needs to be thoughtful
4. [Sallie\_hejl@nps.gov](mailto:Sallie_hejl@nps.gov)
5. Universidad de Sonora ran into administrative issues finalizing renewal document
6. **National Updates – Tom Fish, CESU National Coordinator (20:40 – 38:45)**

National Program (numbers of partners) especially as it relates to DSCESU, recent happenings, Interagency Council discussion topics, upcoming policy adjustments, Q and A

* **Map of the program area** 
  + 3 main areas: Research, Technical Assistance, Education
  + Strategic Focus: Innovating, Generating new information, innovative collaborating, then evaluating how we are doing
  + Growing list of federal partners that are part of the program
* **CESU Network Partner Enrollments** as of Oct 2023
  + 521 unique partners across 17 regions; 3.7 % Federal, .6% tribal, 66% IHE, 27.3% NGO, State/Local Got 2.5%
  + Doing data crunching of program looking at 25years
  + 25th anniversary of the program authorization (1999 – present) last month, then 2024 will be 25th anniversary of program being on the ground with first 4 CESU regions
* **DSCESU Partner Enrollments**
  + Increase over time from 2000-current
* **CESU Council Representatives** 
  + A few other agencies in communication with National Office about enrolling as federal agencies i.e. US Coast Guard, Environmental Protection Agency, Department of the Interior Office of Policy & Analysis secretary office
  + Additions happening for other agencies enrolling in CESUs along the coast i.e. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement
  + Representatives for CESU Council Meetings:
    - CESU Director Group Representatives Nathan Nibbelink, PSACCESU director (primary)
    - CESU Host University AOR Representative: Sangita Judge from UA represents for office of sponsored programs and AOR side of program
  + Work in progress getting signatures for next 6-year MOU 2023 – 2029
    - Need all federal agencies to sign
* **National Meeting**
  + Primarily opportunity for CESU Council, CESU directors, and Research Coordinators to meet
  + Will happen 2024 -
    - **Dates:** July 16 17 18; reduced by 1 day
    - **Location:** NCTC in West Virginia
  + DEIA
    - At 2023 meeting, had CESU working group on DEIA; representatives from DoI DEIA council
    - Presented development of indicators and metrics for advancing DEI
  + **Emerging Topics**
    - **Ecosystem Topics**
      * Urban Ecology
      * Integrating Indigenous knowledge in Western Science and Natural Resource Science Stewardship
      * Health and Nature
      * Climate Adoption
    - **Program priorities**
      * **DEIA:** working group
      * **Science translation:** how to take high quality science outputs, and make those usable for broad audience?
      * **Partnering across networks:** Across regions of CESU or other networks like long term Ecological Research Network
      * **Innovative partnerships:** Activities in various parts of the country, where funds are coming from CESU partner agencies, but also working with state agencies and other organizations to advance efforts for conservation
* **Council Meeting topics**
  + **CESU Renewals** – Colorado Plateau, Hawai’i Pacific Islands, North Atlantic Coast, Rocky Mountains, Southern Appalachian Mountains
  + **CESU Network interagency MOU Status**
  + **CESU National Program Office (NPO) & Host University Support (HUS) funding**
    - Funding from NPO supplements cost of host university activities
    - Slight increase in funding from DoI Working Capital Fund for National
  + **DOI Working Capital Fund Program Change Request**
    - Program Office approved last year
    - Developing proposal for additional increase in February to increase level of inputs given to host universities and funding for NPO
  + **NPS Interagency Agreement Indirect Cost Assessment**
    - New with NPS: adding IDC on top of interagency agreements
  + **CESU Programmatic IDC Base and CESU Award Subaward IDC**
    - Conversations about looking at more rigid IDC policy for subawards – expectation is that subawards would adhere to IDC
  + **New Partner Application Memo**
    - Changes to policy posted in September 2023
    - Letter of support have to adhere to narrow guidelines in terms of what federal agencies can include
  + **Inactive Partner Memo** 
    - Lapse in representation for both federal and non-federal; working on guideline for addressing this with steps for withdrawal
    - Partners must:
      * Fulfill required roles as outlined in multi-partner agreements
      * Adhere to scientific integrity policies or organizational codes of conduct as outlined in multi-partner agreements & program policies
      * Participate in funded projects
      * Communicate Technical or Admin representative changes
      * Respond to administrative actions i.e. voting, agreement/amendment actions, five-year renewals, meetings, etc
      * Federal partners must provide Annual Council agency support i.e. host support funding
      * Complete award SOW tasks and invoicing/expending award funding
    1. Non-responsiveness and time since last engagement will be recorded
    2. Project activity will be monitored
    3. Suspension pending completion of required tasks, i.e. signature submission
    4. Executive level of organization will be notified with written confirmation within 30 days regarding withdrawal/suspension
    5. Partnership will be suspended until conditions/requirements are met; partner will be removed at time of next renewal
  + **Agency CESU Award Guidance**
    - Federal agencies will post new or updated brief guidance documents online
    - Brief guidance document that will be posted in CESU website for navigating financial assistance steps for distributing funded projects
  + **CESU Council Working Groups**
    - Have draft DEIA statement that group is finalizing about CESU Network’s commitment to advancing DEIA
      * Will send out for comment later this month
      * Envision referencing this statement in 5-year multi-partner CESU agreements
* **Periodic Project Reporting**
  + CESU Project Tracker resource for national project reporting
  + Representation of CESU project portfolio since program inception
  + Assist in annual reporting and five year renewals
  + Proposed actions:
    - Include “CESU” in each project title, esp. specific CESU
    - Include CESU NPO on email distribution list for each new project at time of award
    - Notify of specific Federal Assistance Listing Numbers
    - Create login for each designated user
    - Rolling vs quarterly, semi-annual, annual record submissions
* National Parks Omnibus Management Act of 1998 - language from beginning of program that authorizes Secretary of Interior to set up network of study units

1. **2024 – DSCESU 5-year renewal (38:45 – 42:48)**

* Shared google document – 2016 Strategic Plan
  + Will integrate DEIA and social sciences in strategic plan
  + CESU DEI working group is finalizing draft DEI statement, so can be integrated with DSCESU strategic plan
* Outline of Strategic Plan
  + Introduction
  + Partner Institutions
  + Key Natural Resources of Desert Southwest Region Issues
  + Mission and Objectives
  + Goals and Actions
  + Monitoring of Strategic Plan
* Looking for DSCESU partner volunteers to join the working committee
  + Will get together again next fall
  + As many federal partners represented as possible
  + If you are in leadership position, you can volunteer someone in unit as part of their service work
* 2025 Renewal Guidelines will be delivered at a later date
* Will need project report for past projects (2020-2023), then 2024 project reports next year, from all partners – CRITICAL
  + Ruth Holladay (DSCESU Administrator) or intern will send reminders
  + Give Ruth a timeline if you cannot get to it

1. **Federal Agency Updates (42:48 – 1:00:32)**

* **John Mosley – Bureau of Indian Affairs**
  + Have not heard substantive updates
  + Possible passing back of funding
* **Aaron Wilkerson – Bureau of Land Management**
* Received funding later in cycle than other agencies – working to commit some of that
* Some CESU projects where funding will be directed
* Appears that 400k went to Arizona Game and Fish – desert tortoise monitoring, bird monitoring, bighorn sheep, disease testing, aquatic invasive species testing
* **BLM Financial Assistance Standard Operating Procedures** 
  + Past issues:
    - Difficulty managing projects administratively due to frequently changing GMO changing. New GMOs need to learn how CESUs work, causing confusion.
      * Often projects would come straight from field office to GMO instead of reaching the state coordinator - no policy/guidance for state coordinator review
      * State coordinator helps direct and guide districts and field offices where projects are coming from, and projects are awarded at state office.
    - Inconsistent reporting from Grant Solutions - no way to sort CESU authority unless CESU is in project name
  + National leads, national GMOs, national science coordinator to help BLM AZ to develop SOP for CESU
  + SOP will help with state-level management of GMO and formalize points of contact (like Aaron) as coordinators instead of an informal process
  + Must use SOP when developing a CESU project – formalizes process in a document
  + SOP provides guidance needed to award CESU project at state level, for example:
    - first step for Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)
    - State Coordinator involvement is mandated
    - evaluations of eligibility in post-application reviews
    - define CESU project criteria
    - requirement for project lead to provide slide and project report
    - naming convention for GMO: CESU in project title
  + SOP went out to all BLM state offices
  + State coordinator or GMO will draft an instruction memo along with SOP for BLM AZ districts. State coordinator will also give more information specific to AZ and DS-CESU.
  + Internal Cooperative Ecosystems Studies Units webpage on Sharepoint
    - State Office CESU Contacts
    - Aaron will manage DSCESU and CPCESU within the bounds of AZ BLM, and GMO will be responsible for this
      * Used to have State Lead for individual CESUs, i.e. Utah coordinator and GMO would manage CPCESU even if proposed in Arizona strip
  + Room for update to SOP at renewal of DSCESU agreement
  + Tom would like to share document to other federal agencies – requests for agency-specific guidance
    - BLM Arizona internal improvements can factor into National-level guidance
    - Added incentive/requirement that if it is developed by Grants Management Leadership Group, this can become standard practice
    - Would help with record-keeping