

# Remarks by Lois DeBacker, managing director, Environment Program, The Kresge Foundation

## River Network, River Rally 2016 May 23, 2016 Mobile, Alabama

### Introduction

It's a pleasure to be here at River Rally. This is at least the third rally I've attended, although it's been a long time since I last participated. I was here last when I led the C.S. Mott Foundation's freshwater ecosystems grantmaking. It was fun to see so many familiar names in the program. You have an excellent set of sessions this year. It's exciting to see the emphasis on diversity and inclusiveness. It's also great to see the increasing prominence of climate change in the program.

I'll focus my remarks this morning on three key points and, after that, offer a few resources that you may find helpful in your climate-resilience work.

- Relevance of climate change to the important work you do.
- How to incorporate climate change more explicitly in your work if you haven't already done so.
- Prospects for foundation funding of climate-change related work.

### Relevance of Climate Change

There's a scientific consensus that climate change is occurring. Its impacts already are being experienced.

While climate change is a global problem, its effects are felt locally. The impacts vary by region, but they include:

- Increased frequency of extreme heat events;
- Changes in patterns of precipitation, resulting in both drought and flooding;
- More intense storms and winds;
- Increased incidence of wildfires;
- Sea-level rise;
- Altered habitat for species; and
- Loss of biodiversity.

Climate change is certainly an environmental concern, but its implications for public health, social justice, and the economy are equally grave.

Climate change has significant consequences for the river conservation community. The freshwater resources you are working to protect are facing – and increasingly will face – new pressures.

Many who work on climate change have come to think of it as a threat multiplier; it will exacerbate threats freshwater ecosystems already face, including:

- Combined sewer overflows,
- Nutrient pollution,
- Surges in flow during storm events,
- Excessive withdrawals during times of drought,
- Risks from unstable dams, and
- Others.

Properly stewarding freshwater resources in an era of climate change requires that you understand and begin to prepare for the anticipated effects of climate change on the resources you're working to conserve and restore. As you know, the historic variability on precipitation, temperature, and flow no longer will predict the range of future conditions.

Perhaps ironically, the need to prepare for the effects of climate change becomes a new argument for the importance of your work. Healthy rivers and the wetlands and floodplains associated with them become even more important in a climate-changed world where their capacity to absorb and store water and provide natural protection from hazards will be in increased demand.

#### Incorporating Climate Change in Your Work

If you haven't already, how do you begin to incorporate climate change in your work?

Rather than view climate adaptation as an entirely new line of work for your organization, I'd encourage you to think of climate change as an additional lens that you apply to your work. That is, I encourage you to begin to mainstream consideration of climate change into what you do.

Many, if not all, of you already base your work on sound science. What does the science say about the anticipated impacts of climate change on the river system of interest to you? What do those data suggest you need to do differently – or do more of – to keep your river system healthy and improve its resilience as climate change progresses?

Adam will offer insights into some practical steps you can take. I want to encourage you not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. The important thing is to get started – to begin to systematically understand how your conservation efforts are likely to be affected by climate change and how your work can contribute to both climate preparedness and climate change mitigation.

We at Kresge call that “asking the climate question.” At this point in time, climate change mitigation and adaptation are both critical. While this session is focused on climate adaptation, Kresge encourages people to examine how their proposed efforts affect both mitigation and adaptation. The two-part climate question involves asking:

- First, are the greenhouse gas implications of my proposed project or action positive or negative; do they contribute to making climate change better or worse? How could my proposed project be more climate beneficial?
- Second, how will climate change affect the viability or durability of my proposed project or action? Also, how might I alter it to contribute to beneficial climate change adaptation?

As you incorporate climate change considerations in your work, I encourage you to look for partnerships. You don't have to be immediate experts. Who has already done work you can learn from?

Who from the River Network community can you learn from? At least eight rally workshop descriptions explicitly mentioned climate change. Your peers already are working on green infrastructure, stormwater management, water efficiency, flood recovery, and flow management with climate change explicitly factored in. What can you learn from them?

Can you tap the expertise within a local university? There's a growing number of university-based climate change centers. Graduate students can be a great resource .

Has your city or region already assessed its vulnerability to climate change? Has it developed a climate adaptation plan? Can you begin to work with your community's sustainability director, planning department, or hazard-mitigation planners?

Have other nonprofits in your region begun to assess climate impacts? Can you draw from their data?

### Prospects for Foundation Funding

Rebecca asked that I speak to prospects for foundation funding. Few foundations specifically fund climate change adaptation directly.

- The Kresge Foundation helps communities build their resilience in light of climate change. Our work is urban focused with a strong emphasis on social equity and low-income inclusion and benefit.
- The Wildlife Conservation Society administers a Climate Adaptation Fund, supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. (The application deadline this year was in April.)

Increasingly, funders are beginning to see the relevance of climate change to their funding priorities.

There's a growing interest in green infrastructure and stormwater management -- with that a recognition of the need to factor the impacts of climate change into the design of green infrastructure and to use green infrastructure to solve for multiple problems -- e.g., flood control, heat-island reduction, community amenities, job creation.

There's also a growing interest in integrated water management, again factoring in projected impacts of climate change.

I encourage you to look to your traditional funding sources and build in a climate change lens to your work -- include adding climate impacts into the set of data you examine in your work.

## Resources

I promised to recommend some resources to you as you explore incorporating climate adaptation into your work.

- Climate Adaptation Knowledge Exchange – [cakex.org](http://cakex.org) – case studies and tools, including the climate adaptation ladder of engagement
- Georgetown Climate Center – Adaptation Clearinghouse
- California Adaptation Forum – Sept. 7-8 in Long Beach, California; scholarships available
- National Adaptation Forum – May 9-11, 2017 in St. Paul, Minnesota
- Urban Sustainability Directors Network, Equity In Sustainability Capacity Building Program – best practices for adding a racial equity lens to your work.