



NEON Community Engagement Technical Working Group

2020 Annual Report



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National Ecological Observatory Network (NEON) is a project sponsored by the National Science Foundation and proudly operated by Battelle.

Introduction

Since its inception, NEON has relied on expertise within the science, education, and engineering communities to advise on key areas impacting the design, construction, and maintenance of the observatory with the goal to optimize its operation. Currently, two types of external advisory bodies support staff and leadership in making key decisions that guide all of NEON's activities: the Science, Technology & Education Advisory Committee (STEAC) and Technical Working Groups (TWGs). Both bodies are comprised of experts nominated to serve in these roles who are selected by NEON staff following a rigorous selection process.

NEON currently relies upon input from 22 TWGs. These groups play an important role by providing input to NEON's data collection and processing methods and ensuring that NEON infrastructure, data, and programs are a valuable community resource. Working groups are participatory and advisory; they are often tasked with providing input on issues that have scientific, educational, engineering, or operational implications.

This document includes a summary of activities, recommendations, and NEON's response to those recommendations for the Community Engagement TWG during the 2020 funding year (November 2019-October 2020).

The Community Engagement Technical Working Group provides guidance on the ways in which NEON engages with its existing and potential user community. This includes scientists, educators, and students as well as organizations, agencies, institutions, and companies whose activities align with the mission and goals of the NEON program. Members serve as liaisons to the NEON user community while providing input on the program's strategic engagement plan and the activities and outcomes identified in that plan.

Q1 – November 2019-January 2020

Summary of Activities

Launched TWG on 12/18/19 with 15 members. This meeting included member introductions and an overview of NEON's strategic engagement process, activities of the education and engagement team, and the role of the TWG for the upcoming year. During the second meeting (01/14/20), the group charter was reviewed and approved. Two co-chairs were selected: Anya Hartpence, ECCOE Community Engagement Officer, TSSC Contractor to USGS EROS and Miguel Fernandez, Director, Latin American and the Caribbean Programs, NatureServe. The group reviewed a communication going out to all of NEON's TWG members requesting information on social media and other networks NEON should leverage. The TWG co-leads met with the co-chairs on 01/29 to discuss the agenda for the February meeting. The TWG plans to meet monthly moving forward.

TWG Recommendations

The group requested detailed information on available education and outreach resources and staffing of the education and engagement team. A question was raised whether NEON had ever conducted a comprehensive needs assessment with the community to identify NEON's engagement priorities.

NEON Response

The information requested was made available to the TWG members on their shared workspace. During the February meeting, the co-leads will be presenting a brief overview of the findings from the community engagement assessment report from 2018 that guided development of the strategic engagement plan. The agenda includes discussion of these findings to identify whether additional data might be needed to prioritize the activities of the TWG in the upcoming year.

Q2 – February 2020-April 2020

Summary of Activities

The Community Engagement TWG held three meetings in Q2. One was held in February and two in April. A meeting was not scheduled in March due to numerous challenges surrounding COVID-19. During the February meeting, the group was given an overview of NEON international engagement activities. A request was brought to the group about whether NEON should host and support an online community forum which was discussed at length. During this meeting, the TWG decided to break into two subgroups with one subgroup focused on broadening awareness and participation and the other focused on supporting data skills training. Each subgroup met independently in April. Both subgroups discussed the adoption of a public comment period for all recommendations made by NEON's technical working groups. The broadening awareness subgroup reviewed the findings from a survey that was sent out to members of all NEON TWGs to get input on groups that NEON should engage, and conference and meetings NEON staff should attend. The group also discussed ideas for future social media campaigns following the success of the one launched by NEON during women's history month. The data science subgroup discussed opportunities for building open data skills for ecologists and linking NEON to other environmental data repositories.

TWG Recommendations

The group recommended not hosting an online community forum until identifying a specific purpose/need for it. Once that purpose is established, the existing forum should be restructured to support it. The group recommended adoption of a public comment period for recommendations coming from all technical working groups. There was a lot of discussion around the issue but a process for NEON to adopt was not identified. The TWG requested additional information from leadership to determine if there is interest in having the group define the process and/or making a formal recommendation on what should be included in the process.

NEON Response

NEON staff sitting on the TWG took the recommendation of the community engagement forum to NEON's engagement, education, and outreach team. It was decided that an online forum should not be hosted at this time due to a lack of interest and staff's limited ability to fully engage (i.e., answer all incoming questions) with community members. NEON staff will continue to assess the need for such a forum as the user community grows. A summary of feedback from the TWG on NEON having a public comment period was provided to leadership, and it is currently being discussed internally and with the external Science, Technology, and Education Advisory Committee.

Q3 – May 2020-July 2020

Summary of Activities

The TWG has divided into two subgroups: one focused on broadening awareness and the other on building data science skills. During this quarter, each subgroup met twice. The broadening awareness subgroup has been participating in working sessions to support development of a NEON Ambassadors Program. A spreadsheet was created to collect information on existing programs, including expectations, duration of the program, incentives offered, training requirements, and resources made available to participants. The group is identifying existing program features that could be adopted by a new NEON program. The data science subgroup had working sessions centered on identifying opportunities to leverage other programs to teach data science skills using NEON data. Members have been listing opportunities and relevant URLs and will be prioritizing these opportunities in upcoming meetings.

TWG Recommendations

NEON has been reviewing tools for contact management and metrics tracking and reporting. The broadening awareness subgroup provided ideas on tools for NEON to consider.

NEON Response

NEON included the recommendations in the list of tools being considered for adoption by the program.

Q4 – August 2020-October 2020

Summary of Activities

NEON staff presented on the annual community engagement report at the August meeting. During the September meeting, NEON staff presented and requested feedback on current activities and programs to facilitate diversity, equity, and inclusion within the NEON user community. Opportunities to improve DEI was further discussed at the October meeting. Five new members to the TWG were selected to replace five outgoing members.

TWG Recommendations

The TWG co-chairs will be drafting formal recommendations for review and approval by all TWG members during the December meeting.

NEON Response

N/A