

Beyond the Loading Dock: Scaling CBEAR's National Impact on Behavioral Science in Agri-Environmental Issues

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The Center for Behavioral and Experimental Agri-Environmental Research (CBEAR) was founded in 2014 through a competitive process with the USDA Economic Research Service to address a persistent challenge in conservation policy: outcomes depend fundamentally on human behavior, yet conservation programs are rarely designed with behavioral science at their core. Over the past decade, as the Director of CBEAR, I have helped it grow into a national and international leader in doing research using behavioral and experimental economics techniques and applying them to agri-environmental issues. Through collaborations with federal agencies, conservation organizations, and academic partners, CBEAR has produced a substantial body of peer-reviewed research and helped design programs that improve environmental outcomes while making more efficient use of limited public resources. Since its founding, CBEAR has contributed to approximately 80 peer-reviewed publications and helped secure more than \$70 million in external funding, reflecting both the demand for and value of this work.

Despite these accomplishments, the central challenge remains stubbornly unresolved. Much of what we know about improving conservation programs through behavioral science is not consistently reaching those responsible for implementing them. This “loading dock problem” reflects a structural disconnect between academia and conservation practitioners. Research is often written for scholarly audiences and disseminated through channels that are difficult for practitioners to access, while conservation organizations rarely have behavioral scientists or economists embedded within their operations. Furthermore, the extension efforts of most land grant institutions do not put significant on conservation issues. As a result, even well-intentioned programs are implemented without fully leveraging insights that could improve their effectiveness, efficiency, and equity.

This challenge has intensified in recent years. Changes within federal agencies, including retirements, restructuring, and staff reductions, have reduced institutional knowledge at the same time that conservation programs are being asked to operate at larger scales and under tighter budgets. In this environment, the need is not only for rigorous research, but for systems that ensure research is used. CBEAR is well positioned to play that role, but doing so requires a deliberate shift from knowledge generation toward knowledge translation and engagement.

My FSLI project has focused on advancing that shift. The objective is to expand CBEAR's capacity to function as a national platform that integrates research, extension, and stakeholder engagement in a more intentional and sustained way. This includes strengthening institutional infrastructure, deepening partnerships with stakeholders, and developing

mechanisms that translate behavioral science into actionable guidance. A central component of this effort is a development campaign aimed at securing external funding to support outreach and coordination, including dedicated leadership focused on engagement and the expansion of practitioner-oriented tools and training.

An important part of this work is the continued move toward co-produced and embedded research. Rather than treating research and implementation as separate activities, this approach integrates them by working directly with stakeholders to design and test interventions in real-world settings. Collaborations with USDA and other partners, including work published in leading outlets such as the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, demonstrate the potential of this model to produce findings that are both rigorous and immediately applicable. Progress on this project reflects both strong momentum and ongoing challenges. My fundraising goal was originally to raise \$5 million. I have been able to exceed that amount through my leadership of a new \$7 million NSF-supported interdisciplinary projects. I am also deeply involved in another \$6 million NSF project that recently started. Additionally, I have developed new partnerships with USDA-NRCS, The Nature Conservancy, and Ducks Unlimited thereby demonstrating continued demand for applying behavioral insights in practice. At the same time, CBEAR's institutional capacity to fully capitalize on these opportunities remains a limitation. While there is increasing interest from philanthropic organizations, including ongoing conversations with the Walton Family Foundation and the Fidelity Foundation, additional resources and dedicated personnel are needed to sustain outreach and coordination at scale.

The connection between this project and my personal FSLI development plan is direct. A central goal of that plan was to enhance my leadership by expanding CBEAR's impact, strengthening fundraising efforts, and improving time and project management in a sustainable way. The development campaign provides a concrete mechanism for achieving these objectives, requiring more deliberate prioritization of projects and deeper engagement with stakeholders beyond academia. A related goal has been to shift CBEAR toward a stronger emphasis on knowledge dissemination and policy engagement. While the center has been highly successful as a research organization, it has been less structured in translating research into practice. This project directly addresses that gap by prioritizing outreach and building mechanisms that support sustained engagement with conservation professionals.

Participation in FSLI has helped me clarify how best to move forward. Rather than pursuing a traditional administrative role as a Dean or Provost, I am better positioned to leverage my role as an endowed professor to build and lead a Center that operates at the intersection of research, policy, and practice. FSLI training has reinforced the importance of leaning into my strengths in collaboration, relationship-building, and innovation, while creating structures that enable others to contribute effectively. Looking ahead, the next phase of this effort will focus on expanding institutional capacity, deepening partnerships, and refining mechanisms for translating behavioral science into practice. The goal is to move beyond a model in which insights accumulate on the loading dock toward one in which they are actively transported, adapted, and implemented to improve outcomes on the ground.