Project Title: Enhancing Conservation through Applying Behavioral Science: A Development Campaign for CBEAR

Project Need

The Center for Behavioral and Experimental Agri-Environmental Research (CBEAR) is a consortium of nearly three dozen leading behavioral and experimental scholars from land-grant universities, elite private institutions, and conservation nonprofits that seek to provide evidence-based guidance for conservation programs in the United States and throughout the world. After a decade of existence, CBEAR stands at a critical juncture in its evolution. Having established itself as the premier institution of working with the U.S. federal agencies applying experimental and behavioral economics to conservation—twice recognized as a USDA Center of Excellence—CBEAR now faces the challenge of bridging the substantial gap between its research knowledge and the changing landscape of conservation programs. This challenge is particularly pressing given the recent shifts in the federal landscape that have dramatically reduce the institutional knowledge within federal agencies, such as the USDA and US Fish & Wildlife Service. CBEAR stands well poised to help conservation programs, in a funding limited environment, to use evidence-based insights from behavioral science and economics to achieve greater achieve conservation outcomes while assisting farmers and rural landowners in manner that efficiently invests limited tax-payer funds.

Under the leadership of Director Kent Messer (University of Delaware), who was recently honored with a 2025 award from the USDA Economist Group for outstanding external collaboration on complex policy issues, Outreach Director Mark Masters (Albany State Univrsity), and previous co-Director Paul Ferraro (Johns Hopkins University), CBEAR has worked closely over the past decade with government agencies and key stakeholders on conservation successes such as:

- Designing and testing irrigation water buyback and water source swap programs in Georgia to restore flows for aquatic habitats for threatened and endangered species while addressing water security for farmers and supporting the agricultural community. These new ideas have become Georgia law and will effectively provide for economically and environmentally sustainable outcomes in the region (https://ga-fit.org/).
- Cost-effectively preserving agricultural and open space lands in the mid-Atlantic of the US, protecting hundreds of acres of land by selecting high-quality land and avoiding high-cost projects that would unnecessarily drain tax-payer resources.
- Helping the agricultural community meaningfully connect with consumers around the transparency of new and emerging production processes, such as bioengineering. CBEAR helped highlight behavioral science insights that were embedded in the National Bioengineered Food Disclosure Standard that started in US in 2022, leading to lower soil loss and improved consumer and producer relationships.

These examples are just a couple of the types of important successes that could be achieved if the knowledge generated by CBEAR-affiliated scholars were more widely disseminated and applied by conservation groups. Unfortunately, as described in a recent article by Messer and colleagues, including senior economists at USDA FSA and NRCS colleagues at the USDA, conservation is currently faces a serious 'loading dock problem'. Most conservation professionals lack formal training in behavioral science or economics, and conservation organizations rarely include behavioral scientists or economists on their staff. Meanwhile, academic economists typically publish their work in journals that are blocked by paywalls and write primarily for their academic peers rather than for conservation practitioners who could apply these insights. The result is a significant disconnect between researchers who possess valuable behavioral insights and the conservation professionals who would benefit most from this knowledge. CBEAR is committed to solve this loading dock problem and promote evidence-based solutions that could do the following:

1. Increase uptake and willingness to pay cost-share for conservation best-management practices by farmers by changing in the default of the payment process, such as was done in the mid-Atlantic (Ferraro et al., 2024),
2. Reduce non-point water pollution through stewardship signaling, such as roadside award signs (Palm-Forester et al., 2022),
3. Use behavioral insights to induce consumers to increase demand for food grown with environmentally friendly techniques (Messer, et al., 2025),
4. Reduce irrigation water use by comparing water use by farmer peers, such as was done in Kansas and Colorado (Hrozencik et al., 2023),
5. Improve the spatial coordination of conserved lands to enable larger habitat blocks to be protected (Fooks et al. 2016),
6. Increase the adoption of more ecologically beneficial seed mixes by farmers enrolled in the USDA Conservation Reserve Program (Wallender al al., 2023),
7. Reduce the stigma from the use of an environmentally friendly food production approach, such as recycled water (Ellis, et al., 2022),
8. Extend tax-payer money by design designing auctions to improve the cost-effectiveness of conservation programs (Messer and Allen, 2020),
9. Foster the use of water management technologies by improving the messaging, such as was done in the Mid-Atlantic (Li et al., 2021), and
10. Improve the adoption of conservation practices by groups historically not as highly engaged with conservation, such as veterans, new farmers, minority farmers and women, by providing up-front payments instead of structure the payments as reimbursements, such as was done in Georgia (Ganguly, 2023).

Project Goals and Objectives

The primary goal of this development campaign is to secure $5 million to significantly expand CBEAR's capacity for knowledge dissemination and policy influence over the next five years. This will be done in four key strategic objectives.

Objective 1: Central to this expansion is the creation of a full-time Executive Director position for CBEAR. This new leadership role would not replace Kent Messer and Mark Masters but would complement their expertise and experience, because, both Director, Kent Messer, and Outreach Director, Mark Masters, can dedicate only a portion of their time to CBEAR activities due to their other academic commitments. Given the recent wave of early retirements and resignations from USDA and other federal agencies since the beginning of 2025, the pool of candidates for this position is uniquely strong, presenting a timely opportunity to bring aboard a seasoned professional with deep knowledge of both behavioral science and conservation policy.

Objective 2: A cornerstone of this expanded CBEAR will be the implementation of Behavioral Science Advisory Boards, as advocated by Messer and colleagues at USDA-NRCS and USDA-FSA (Messer et al., 2024). Similar to natural science advisory boards found in other federal agencies, these boards will serve as bridges between academic research and conservation practice, bringing together scholars, conservation leaders, policy experts, and practitioners to translate behavioral science insights into actionable conservation strategies. Initially focusing on four key areas—water conservation, wildlife habitat protection, adoptions and resistance of conservation practices, and emerging conservation challenges (such as PFAS)—these boards will systematically address the "loading dock problem" where valuable research remains unused because it fails to connect with practitioners' immediate needs.

Objective 3: In concert with these Behavioral Insight Advisory Boards, CBEAR will establish a Rapid Response Research Fund (3RF) to support time-sensitive projects. This fund will enable CBEAR to address emerging conservation challenges promptly, providing evidence-based solutions when they are most needed and in collaboration with the conservation organizations that would be able to implement the research results for years to come.

Objective 4: Finally, CBEAR will significantly enhance its knowledge translation capabilities by expanding the popular CBEAR Behavioral Insight Brief series, the CBEAR Seminar Series, and developing practitioner-focused training programs, such as those it developed for USDA field staff. These efforts will ensure that the insights from behavioral science research reach conservation practitioners in accessible, applicable formats.

Timeline

The development campaign will unfold over five years, beginning in late 2025 with the finalization of the development strategy and initial outreach to key foundations, such as the Walton Family Foundation, Arnold Foundation, and Fidelity Foundation. The initial phase of the campaign will focus on building infrastructure, with the hiring of the Executive Director, establishment of the Behavioral Science Advisory Board and the Rapid Response Research Fund, and expansion of the CBEAR Behavioral Insight Brief series. By 2028, CBEAR will evaluate initial outcomes, adjust strategies as needed, and expand outreach to additional foundation prospects. The final years of the campaign (2028-2030) will concentrate on sustainability planning, documenting and disseminating successful models, and securing long-term institutional partnerships to ensure CBEAR's continued impact beyond the campaign period.

The development campaign will primarily target foundations with demonstrated interests in conservation, evidence-based policy, and organizational capacity building. The Walton Family Foundation, with its strong history of supporting conservation initiatives, heads this list, followed by the Arnold Foundation (focus on evidence-based policy), Fidelity Foundation (interest in organizational capacity building), Moore Foundation (support for conservation science), William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (evidence-based policy focus), and MacArthur Foundation (support for conservation with strong evidence base). Secondary targets include the Packard Foundation (environmental focus with interest in science-policy interface), Pisces Foundation (interest in water conservation), and the Rockefeller Foundation (focus on resilience and science-policy translation). Whenever possible, we will engage with high-net-worth individuals with an interest in behavioral approaches to conservation.

Leadership Team

This development campaign will be led by Dr. Kent Messer, who co-founded CBEAR in 2014. Messer is the S. Hallock du Pont Professor of Applied Economics at the University of Delaware. He has been a Principal Investigator or Co-Principal Investigator of research proposal worth more than $83 million. This effort will be supported by Mark Masters, who is the Executive Director of the Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center at Albany State University and has raised more than $60 million in external research and extension funding.

Potential Obstacles

There are two significant obstacles to this effort. The first challenge is that I may not be able to invest sufficient time to develop the materials and do the necessary outreach to the philanthropic community, since these activities will compete with obligations and activities that are more traditional for faculty at land grant institutions. The second obstacles is that even when asked, the foundations will not want to fund this effort.

Support Network and Mentorship

This development campaign will benefit from strong internal support at the University of Delaware from both Department Chair Martin Heintzelman and College Dean Brian Farkas, graduates of the Food Systems Leadership Institute who understand the value of CBEAR's work. Additionally, former Delaware Senator Tom Carper will be asked to serve as a mentor for the development campaign, providing strategic advice and potential introductions to key stakeholders. His extensive experience in environmental policy and fundraising will be invaluable to the project's success. Efforts on underway to identify other mentors that could be helpful in this effort.

Conclusion

This development campaign represents a pivotal opportunity to amplify CBEAR's impact at a time when evidence-based approaches to conservation that are effective in resource limited times are more critical than ever. By expanding organizational capacity, establishing advisory boards to bridge the research-practice gap, creating mechanisms for rapid response to emerging challenges, and enhancing knowledge translation capabilities, CBEAR will be positioned to transform conservation practice for decades to come.