

Greener Parks for Health

Green Infrastructure as a Strategy for
Improving Equity and Community Well-Being

Advocacy Toolkit



WILLAMETTE PARTNERSHIP

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This *Greener Parks for Health Advocacy Toolkit* was informed by research, including a policy scan at the federal, state and local levels, stakeholder interviews and a series of convenings to understand how people are advocating for green infrastructure in parks. Summaries of this research can be found by visiting [NRPA's Greener Parks for Health](#) webpage.

This guide was prepared by Willamette Partnership and Blue Stocking Strategy as a resource for the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA).

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INTRODUCTION

Parks build community, making the spaces where we live, work and play feel like home. And while parks already provide a multitude of benefits to the neighborhoods around them, adding green infrastructure — trees, permeable pavement, rain gardens and other natural features — can multiply those benefits and bring new resources to communities.

Green Infrastructure

Green infrastructure is “the natural and built green spaces that use nature and natural processes to manage a variety of challenges, including water quality, reducing flood risk, providing wildlife habitat, improving air quality, and now, improving human health.”¹ Often seen as an alternative to traditional “gray” infrastructure, green infrastructure uses natural features and specialized materials like green roofs, trees, rain gardens and permeable pavement to help treat stormwater where it falls, bringing additional environmental, health, social and economic benefits to surrounding communities.

Every day, parks and recreation provides and maintains essential services and infrastructure critical to protecting and promoting community health, well-being, and resiliency. Adding green infrastructure to parks can bring even more benefits to surrounding communities, from improved physical and mental health to new jobs and closer social ties. NRPA’s [Greener Parks for Health Communications Toolkit](#)² has one-page fact sheets you can share with your audience to help convince them green infrastructure in parks is a solution.

Expanding greener parks in communities should include support from and coordination with diverse stakeholders and community partners. At the federal, state and local levels, policy often needs to be changed or updated to give park and recreation professionals the resources and flexibility they need to plan, design, implement and maintain green infrastructure.

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) created this *Greener Parks for Health Advocacy Toolkit* to give park and recreation professionals the resources they need to build and broaden support for greener parks from a variety of audiences. With these tools, the field will be one step closer to advancing greener parks as a way to address climate impacts, improve community health and well-being, and advance fair and just access to quality green spaces.

What do we mean by “Greener Parks?”

Parks, trails and open spaces serve important functions for recreation and green space, but incorporating green infrastructure into parks can help boost their overall benefit to communities through increased health, environmental, social and economic benefits. That’s why we’re referring to parks with green infrastructure features as “greener parks” in this messaging platform.

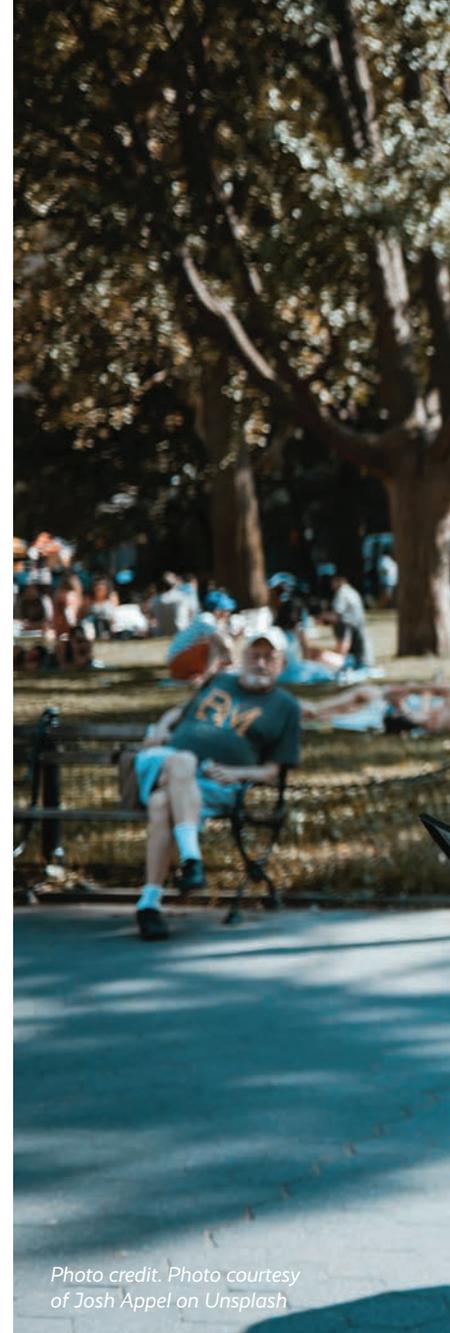


Photo credit. Photo courtesy of Josh Appel on Unsplash

[1] Cochran, B., Henke, E. & Robison, B. (2018). *Green Infrastructure & Health Guide*. http://willamettepartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Green-Infrastructure_final_7_12_18_sm.pdf

[2] Robison, B., & Jacob, B. (2020). *Greener Parks for Health Communications Toolkit*. <https://www.nrpa.org/GreenerParksforHealth/>



An Inclusive Vision for Change

We envision a future where everyone has equitable access to safe and inclusive green spaces, and where parks are viewed as essential community infrastructure that provide economic, environmental, social and health benefits. Park and recreation professionals cannot actualize this vision alone: it can only be achieved through community-led planning and decision-making processes as well as active cooperation with other government agencies and community partners.

The Advocacy Toolkit

This toolkit was designed to help park and recreation professionals engage different stakeholder groups to advocate for policies that promote green infrastructure in parks. Part 1, “Creating Advocates: How to Communicate to Spur Action,” which begins on page 6, introduces the concept of values-based messaging and offers best practices to help you communicate with your audiences more effectively. In Part 2, “Tailored Messaging for Different Audiences,” which starts on page 10, we offer sample message platforms for a variety of stakeholder audiences you will want to have on board supporting your efforts. These can be directly taken and used as-is from the toolkit, or you can adapt them to fit the specific needs of your community.

While this toolkit was created with park and recreation professionals in mind, any municipal agency, elected official or community group can use this to advance greener parks in their community.

CREATING ADVOCATES: HOW TO COMMUNICATE TO SPUR ACTION



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Park and recreation professionals can champion greener parks by building broad coalitions of support among local elected officials, municipal colleagues and community members. Before beginning outreach efforts to these groups, it is important to think about specifically who you need to engage, what they care about and what might hold them back from taking the action you want them to take.

This approach to communication, centered in understanding and responding to your audience's specific values, is called **values-based messaging**. Most importantly, it requires you to acknowledge that what your audience cares about may not be the same thing that you care about. Finding the place where your interests intersect is key to building support.

Identify Your Audience

It takes support from all kinds of people to make policy change, and so the first step in building your message platform is to identify which specific audience you want to target with your message. In this toolkit, we've selected six separate audiences you can engage to further your efforts:

- Policymakers influenced by equity
- Policymakers influenced by economics
- Municipal agency partners
- Park and recreation professionals unsure about the benefits of green infrastructure
- Community members
- Local businesses and the private sector

As you think about each audience's values and barriers to action, you also want to consider what kind of information or encouragement they need. Different audiences may have different levels of understanding when it comes to your issue or action item.

For some audiences, you will primarily be **sharing information**. This involves explaining an idea that your audience does not know, believe in or have strong opinions about. Effective communication uses facts and data points to make the audience aware that a problem exists and/or that action is needed. As a values-based message, you will choose your facts or data based on what best aligns with your audience's interests.

For other audiences, your task will be **motivating them to act**. This kind of audience knows and perhaps even cares about an existing problem, but something else might be holding them back from getting involved. For example, a local policymaker may know and care about the effects of climate change on their city, but may also be concerned that the maintenance of a greener park will be too costly or difficult. Effective communication in this instance would provide examples of how collaborating with other municipal agencies to pool implementation costs or volunteer groups could be engaged to help defer maintenance costs, in addition to sharing cost-benefit data about green infrastructure versus conventional gray infrastructure.

Consider this situation: A large, paved lot in an urban neighborhood has been abandoned and fenced off for years. Converting the paved lot into a small pocket park would offer new green space in the neighborhood, promoting physical and mental health, while providing environmental benefits by decreasing stormwater runoff.

Priority audience: Neighbors surrounding the vacant lot

What you care about: Using green infrastructure to combat flooding from rain events that overwhelms nearby storm drains

What they care about: Making their neighborhood safer and having recreation space within walking distance

Values-based approach: You might want to lead by providing information about how they can inform the design of the pocket-park to address their specific safety concerns. For example, planning an open and well-lit park-design instead of crowding the space with dense trees might make it feel safer to visit after dark. You can also ask them about what type of experience they want in the small space, whether it's a playground for children or benches to sit and relax on. In addition, ask them about where the water tends to flood during storms and walk them through design options that can address those issues. If you expect neighbors to care about the new space solely because they share your concerns about overwhelmed storm drains, you may miss the chance to spur their interest and engagement.

Gray Infrastructure

"Gray infrastructure refers to constructed structures such as treatment facilities, sewer systems, stormwater systems or storage basins. The term "gray" refers to the fact that such structures are often made of concrete."³

[3] NGICP and IGICP. (2019). "Glossary definition: gray infrastructure." Retrieved from <http://ngicp.org/glossary/gray-infrastructure/>

PRO TIPS: Making the Most of Your Communications Efforts

The following best practices can help elevate your communications to effectively reach your target audience.

1. Use Facts and Data – But Not Too Much!

We have included a variety of messages, data points and information that you can use to help craft messages for your target audiences, but be careful not to overwhelm them with statistics. How much is too much? We encourage you to choose carefully, understanding that **most people can remember no more than three facts at a time**. If you share more than that, chances are your listener may not focus on the three you think are most important, so less is more.

2. Choose the Right Messenger

Regardless of the audience, whether it is a mayor or community organization, it's critical to consider who your most effective messenger will be, bearing in mind it may not be you. As you plan your communications, think about specific individuals or groups who are most influential to each audience, and whether you may be able to secure a champion to carry your message. When your audience trusts the messenger, they will be receptive to the message you are trying to send. Whether this is a policymaker's constituent, community leader, health provider or someone else, **who** carries your message is as important as the message itself.

3. Communicate Your Limits

The messenger needs to be clear about what is and what **isn't** in their power to change. As a representative of local government engaging with the community, park and recreation professionals may be asked to take up causes that do not fit within their purview. Be explicit with your audience, especially community groups, about what you can and cannot help change and what actions you are comfortable engaging in. This prevents mixed communication, encourages realistic expectations and helps build trust with your community.



4. Repeat, Repeat, Repeat

Good messaging is repetitive for a reason. The rule of “[effective frequency](#)” dictates that people need to hear a message as many as 14 times to absorb it.⁴ By the time you are tired of saying something, your audience may have just caught on!

5. Use “Actions” to Build Relationships

When you ask your audience to take action, consider each request as a rung on a ladder. Your request should give the audience an easy entry point to engage and build a relationship with you, one where you can then ask them to take another step to connect with you on a bigger or more sustained basis. For example, your first ask of a specific community might be to participate in a listening session, so you can understand their needs and/or concerns. Once you have a trusting audience, you might ask interested volunteers to join a new or existing neighborhood advisory committee to provide regular feedback to your agency. Vague or non-specific “actions” like “support our efforts” will not provide you measurable feedback about whether you are connecting effectively with your audience.

6. Use Images and Stories

Photos and narratives can be powerful tools in helping your audience see the difference you’re trying to make. When building your message platform, find pictures of green infrastructure projects from other communities or stories from your own community that help illustrate the need for green infrastructure and the opportunity it presents.

[4] Winton, J. (2019). “When it comes to your message, how much is enough?” *Mission Minded*. Retrieved from <https://mission-minded.com/when-it-comes-to-your-message-how-much-is-enough/>



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TAILORED MESSAGING FOR DIFFERENT AUDIENCES



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Sample Tailored Messages

Once you have identified your audience and what they care about, you can create **tailored messaging**. Effective tailored messaging comes out of understanding your audience's values, barriers and readiness to hear your message.

Tailored message sets have four main points:

→ Value

Tap into the audience's existing values and establish common ground. This statement gets the audience nodding along in agreement.

→ Barrier

Help audiences overcome any existing barriers to the action that you want them to take. It's the answer you provide when your audience says, "yeah, but..."

→ Action

Ask the audience to take a specific, doable action.

→ Vision

Explain the benefit of taking action and connect that benefit to something the target audience values.

For each audience, we've included a list of potential **values** and **barriers** that they might share. When tailoring your messages to each audience, check out the different options to see which best connects with your specific community.

These are followed by a series of **actions** you choose from to meet your audience where they are at. For audiences who might not trust you or are brand new to green infrastructure, you can start with the "beginner" level, then move up to "intermediate" and "expert" as you build your relationship. For audiences who already have a relationship with you and know about green infrastructure, you can start at whichever level makes the most sense. Remember that an effective action stays just inside your audience's comfort zone, meaning the benefits outweigh any risks.

Each section offers a **vision** to help your audience understand how their values are represented for the community in your project.

On pages 12-17, we have included an array of adaptable messages for different audiences, based on their differing values and barriers. Instead of using these examples verbatim, we encourage you to use them as a guide and to tailor them in the way that works best for your community's values.

Communicating in Times of Crisis

Crises like natural disasters, pandemics and economic downturns can force elected officials and other government workers to make difficult decisions about budget priorities and cuts. Leading with the multiple benefits that green infrastructure in parks can bring to communities (physical and mental health improvements, cost savings from reductions in energy use and water treatment, space to connect while physically distanced, etc.) can help demonstrate the essential value of parks during times of crisis.

AUDIENCE:

Policymakers influenced by equity



VALUE: Promoting equity and protecting historically marginalized populations

As local leaders, it's our job to steward taxpayer money so everyone in our community has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible and live a good quality of life.

OTHER POTENTIAL VALUES:

- Improving physical and mental health of people, especially children and older adults
- Undoing systemic/institutional racism
- Centering constituents' voices and views in decision making



BARRIER: Unaware or uncertain that greener parks can play a role in promoting equity

By prioritizing parks with green infrastructure, we can make sure everyone in our community can reap the environmental, health, economic and social benefits that come from access to a quality park. Decades of unjust practices and policies have left too many communities behind when it comes to safe, welcoming and green parks that improve community health, well-being and vitality. Effective green infrastructure policies and equitable planning can make immediate and lasting differences — and offer the opportunity to make change for people who need it most.

OTHER POTENTIAL BARRIERS:

- Competing priorities push parks and green infrastructure low on the list
- Distraction from campaigning during re-election years



ACTION:

Unless **[our community]** is more intentional about the fair and just distribution of greener parks, historically marginalized populations will continue to experience the disproportionate effects of climate change, chronic disease and other challenges that influence community livelihood. That's because long-term disinvestment in low-income communities and communities of color have created neighborhoods without well-designed parks or greenspaces that promote positive environmental, health, economic and social outcomes.

Specific actions:

- **Beginner:** Join us in hosting a community listening session in your district to hear more about what your constituents need and want from parks and recreation in our community.
- **Intermediate:** Use an equity- or health-based tool such as the [Centers for Disease Control's Health in All Policies](#),⁵ [Trust for Public Land's ParkScore](#)⁶ or [NRPA's Park Metrics](#)⁷ to analyze and amend our municipality's development codes and policies to ensure that we are prioritizing equitable infrastructure in our community.
- **Expert:** Adopt anti-displacement policies to help keep our neighborhood communities intact, especially in areas with planned park and green infrastructure development.



VISION:

With effective policies and equitable public investments, we can expand greener parks in neighborhoods where they can do the most good for those who are impacted the hardest by climate change — and improve opportunities so that every individual in **[City/town/county]** can thrive.

[5] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2016). *Health in All Policies*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/policy/hiap/index.html>

[6] The Trust for Public Land. (2020). *2020 ParkScore Index*. Retrieved from <https://www.tpl.org/parkscore>

[7] National Recreation and Park Association. (2020). *NRPA Park Metrics*. Retrieved from <https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/ParkMetrics/>

AUDIENCE:

Policymakers influenced by economics



VALUE: Saving taxpayer dollars and cutting costs

When extreme weather hits, our community pays the price. From opening cooling centers in heat waves to repairing damage from floods, our city and its taxpayers have to pick up the tab. And in a changing climate, we can expect these costs to rise.

OTHER POTENTIAL VALUES:

- Increasing job growth
- Attracting business development
- Reducing private and public healthcare costs



BARRIER: Unaware or skeptical of economic benefits associated with green infrastructure; accustomed to conventional gray stormwater management

Greener parks can cut down on the financial toll of a changing climate, and even save taxpayers money by lowering their water bills and reducing infrastructure costs. Studies show that the short-term costs of green infrastructure can be offset by the immediate and long-term benefits of using green infrastructure to help manage our community's stormwater.

OTHER POTENTIAL BARRIERS:

- Fiscal conservatism/anti-tax mentality
- Lack of trust in health benefits of parks and green infrastructure



ACTION:

Prioritizing green infrastructure in parks could make a meaningful difference for our community by reducing the long-term costs we face from replacing aging infrastructure and responding to climate change. We can save **[community's]** taxpayers money, help create new jobs and spur local economic growth by intentionally making green infrastructure in parks a part of our community's growth and development strategy.

Specific actions:

- **Beginner:** Check out these fact sheets that show the economic benefits (as well as health, social and environmental benefits) of green infrastructure in parks.
- **Intermediate:** Authorize multi-agency and public-private partnership funding for our municipality, so we can work with other partners to collectively fund and implement green infrastructure in parks and throughout our city's stormwater infrastructure network.
- **Expert:** Consider supporting or sponsoring a new sustainable funding mechanism (such as a sales tax or utility fee) for developing and maintaining green infrastructure in our community.



VISION:

Investments in greener parks will pay off now and in the future, whether you measure by economic savings, healthier people or our community's quality of life.

AUDIENCE:

Municipal agency partners



VALUE: Providing excellent public service

No matter which municipal agency we work for, we all share a common purpose: to improve peoples' lives and help our community thrive.

OTHER POTENTIAL VALUES:

- Projects that are low-maintenance and easily replicated
- Keeping regulatory and administrative burdens low
- Attracting positive media/feedback from community members



BARRIER: Fear of increased workload and administrative burden without increased budget

We know that budgets are limited and we are all working our hardest, but coordinating across our agencies could help us find more effective solutions to our challenges while also sharing our workload and funding. Working together on green infrastructure projects could make a bigger impact on our community as well as let our agencies share resources and expertise, instead of each of us working in silos.

OTHER POTENTIAL BARRIERS:

- Inertia/accustomed to doing things a certain way
- Silos/no clear ways of connecting across agencies



ACTION:

Your agency's knowledge and expertise are critical to making this work a success. That's why we need your partnership and collaboration to make sure we get it right for the community we all serve.

Specific actions:

- **Beginner:** Let's schedule a meeting between our departments to talk about upcoming projects and new ways we could partner.
- **Intermediate:** Let's sign a formal interagency agreement for greener park development and maintenance, so we can work on these projects together.
- **Expert:** Let's lead a green infrastructure management plan for our community and bring in even more partners to help further this work at a regional level.

VISION:

When our agencies work together, we can be more effective in delivering excellent services and make **[community]** an even better place to call "home".



AUDIENCE:

Park and recreation professionals uncertain about the benefits of green infrastructure



VALUE: Shared belief in the value that parks and recreation has on peoples' lives

We all know great parks can improve the health, well-being and quality of life of our communities. But as climate change brings warmer temperatures and more extreme weather, our parks system can play an even bigger role by adding and expanding green infrastructure to create greener parks.

OTHER POTENTIAL VALUES:

- Conservation and resource protection
- Provides important spaces for recreation and play
- Measuring success (number of programs, number of participants, number of visitors)



BARRIER: Concerns about cost/capacity

Green infrastructure improvements come in all shapes and sizes. That's why elected officials and leaders should include park and recreation professionals in identifying the ones that make the most sense for our maintenance schedule, capacity and budget.

OTHER POTENTIAL BARRIERS:

- Concerns of added workload and budget constraints
- Belief that agency mission is related to recreation, not green infrastructure



ACTION:

Let's work together to find the nature-based solutions that work for our community.

Specific actions:

- **Beginner:** Look at our current projects and challenges, and help us identify opportunities to use green infrastructure as solutions.
- **Intermediate:** Help us advocate to other staff and interagency partners about how green infrastructure can help save money and bring other benefits to our agencies and the community at large; and support our efforts to formalize interagency agreements to work on green infrastructure projects.
- **Expert:** Let's work with interagency staff and community leaders to create an equity- and health-based framework we can use to prioritize which parks to which parks to redevelop with green infrastructure.



VISION:

[Community] residents are counting on us to do the most we can with our parks and green spaces – and that includes innovations that can make our community greener, cleaner and safer.

AUDIENCE:

Community members



VALUE: Safe, livable community

Every **[community]** neighborhood should be a place where people from all walks of life can thrive. Greener parks can benefit communities by offering more spaces to recreate, improving air quality and decreasing localized flooding. We want to know how you think greener parks could help you love your neighborhood even more.

OTHER POTENTIAL VALUES:

- Changing property values (usually increasing for owners and stabilizing for renters)
- Safety and crime reduction



BARRIER: Fear of gentrification and displacement, distrust in government

We are also aware of the potential for displacement to follow park upgrades and green infrastructure installation, and we are actively working across sectors to address these concerns before development even starts.

OTHER POTENTIAL BARRIERS:

- Language barriers
- Time/capacity to engage
- Distrust in messenger/government
- Unsure of how their input would actually make a change



ACTION:

We honestly believe that no single voice is more important than the many voices of the people who call this neighborhood home, and we want this project to be community-led. That's why we're working to build a relationship with community members from the very beginning of the process, to find out what matters most to you and your neighbors.

Specific actions:

- **Beginner:** We would love for you to participate in a community listening session, so we can learn more about your needs and desires and share how greener parks can provide multiple benefits to your neighborhood.
- **Intermediate:** Help us design the park, as well as plant and maintain the new green features.
- **Expert:** Could you participate in a city council meeting and offer public comment about why you think greener parks are important, as well as express support for anti-displacement policies to go hand-in-hand with greener park development?



VISION:

We all want our communities to feel safe, keep us healthy, and be places we are proud to call home for generations to come.

AUDIENCE:

Local businesses and private sector



VALUE: Profitability, economic stability

The facts are clear that green infrastructure leads to:

- More local jobs
- Increased spending in surrounding areas
- Decreased long-term costs for energy use and water infrastructure

OTHER POTENTIAL VALUES:

- Attracting and retaining quality employees
- Positive image in the community/corporate social responsibility
- Good relationship with local government



BARRIER: Lack of knowledge about green infrastructure; not sure how it's related to business' bottom line

That is why we need greener parks in our community. Evidence shows green infrastructure improvements specifically carry additional benefits like creating jobs, spurring development and making communities thriving places to live.

- Several studies show retail property values go up when well-designed parks and green infrastructure is nearby.
- Consumers are willing to spend 8 to 12 percent more in retail spaces with trees and other green infrastructure features.

OTHER POTENTIAL BARRIERS:

- Anti-tax attitudes/fiscal conservatism
- Views parks/green space as low-priority
- Skeptical of connection between parks and job- and economic-growth



ACTION:

Having the support of our local businesses and job-makers will help us make the case to local leaders that we should prioritize greener parks because of their positive effects on the local economy.

Specific actions:

- **Beginner:** Call your local elected officials to voice your support for the development of greener parks in our community.
- **Intermediate:** Support local funding initiatives (such as utility fees or sales taxes) designed to fund greener parks.
- **Expert:** Partner with us to create a job training program for local community members to gain expertise in green infrastructure development and maintenance.



VISION:

We want to make sure we are getting the most out of our infrastructure. Green infrastructure can bring many economic benefits to our community. Let's create an environment that encourages economic growth for our local businesses.



Photo credit. Photo courtesy of Honey Yanibel Minaya Cruz on Unsplash

ABOUT NRPA



The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing parks, recreation and conservation efforts that enhance quality of life for all people. Through its network of 60,000 recreation and park professionals and advocates, NRPA supports healthy and active lifestyles, conservation initiatives and equitable access to parks and public space. NRPA brings strength to our message by partnering with like-minded organizations including those in the federal government, nonprofit organizations and commercial enterprises. Funded through dues, grants, registration fees and charitable contributions, NRPA produces research, education and policy initiatives that ultimately enrich the communities that our members serve. For more information, visit www.nrpa.org.

ABOUT WILLAMETTE PARTNERSHIP



Willamette Partnership is a conservation nonprofit dedicated to solving complex environmental problems in ways that work for people. We are known for helping state and federal natural resource agencies, businesses, and conservation interests take advantage of opportunities to achieve conservation and economic outcomes. We work throughout the western U.S. with a focus on the Pacific Northwest. For more information visit, www.willamettepartnership.org.

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