

RPIC – Arkansas Delta Rhythm and Bayous Placemaking Initiative FY2024 Report for Public Distribution

Community Coalitions Drive Placemaking Success

Through the RPIC Arkansas Delta Rhythm and Bayous Placemaking Initiative (ADRBPI) project, Winrock’s technical assistance and support for grassroots efforts led to **increased placemaking planning and implementation, leveraged funding and technical assistance, and enhanced collaboration** for the Arkansas Delta communities of Dumas, McGehee, Dermott, and Gould. All four communities, situated along U.S. Highway 65, are uniquely positioned to attract and leverage tourism stemming from the highway’s cultural designation as the Delta Rhythm and Bayous Highway, and as a result of this project, are better equipped to plan, execute, and monitor placemaking activities and community development projects.

Increased Placemaking Planning & Implementation

Dumas’s Placemaking Coalition



Through Winrock’s intensive capacity building technical assistance, the City of Dumas formed a local coalition to establish priorities and assist with building their placemaking plan. The group formed as an offshoot of the City’s Community Development Committee and engaged a diverse group of residents and community champions representing a variety of interests and organizations, including the Desha County Museum, the Dumas Public Library, the Chamber of Commerce, municipal leaders and staff, and engaged citizens. The Coalition engaged in regular, monthly meetings and technical assistance trainings with Winrock throughout the duration of the ADRBPI project and will continue to meet regularly moving forward to provide sustainability and ensure placemaking efforts continue, despite any potential transition in elected leadership.

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Dumas’s Pop-Up Turned Festival



During one of the technical assistance trainings with the Dumas Coalition, Winrock staff shared a success story from the RPIC – Delta Communities Connected through Placemaking and Innovation (DCCPI) project from the City of Stuttgart. Winrock shared how community leaders

in Stuttgart came together to host a pop-up in their downtown area to demonstrate traffic calming measures along with what a pocket park could look like in a vacant, Main Street lot; community leaders used this opportunity to informally engage the community and seek feedback on the proposed measures, which ultimately led to the City applying for and winning an Outdoor Recreation Matching Grant from the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage, and Tourism to construct the park. Inspired by the example, Dumas leaders got to work immediately planning their own pop-up simulation coinciding with the town’s Founders’ Day. After just a few weeks of planning, the group’s planned “pop-up” became a festival celebrating the town’s founding, bringing together almost 100 volunteers, more than

Dumas’s Placemaking Coalition



35 vendors, and hundreds of residents. Along with the festivities, the Coalition also partnered with a local internet provider to install temporary wireless hot spots downtown so residents and local businesses could test out the technology during the event and provide feedback on whether or not they would like to see permanent hot spots downtown. Following the tremendous success of the event, Coalition members approached city leadership with a request to formalize the festival and celebrate Founders' Day annually to continue the momentum started by their exercise to engage the community. As the group continues to move forward with their placemaking initiatives, Coalition members have committed to hosting quarterly events to revitalize the downtown area and continue drawing attention to the vacant space that they plan to improve over the next five years.



McGehee's Persistent Placemaking



The City of McGehee was the only community in the RPIC-ADRBPI project that did not experience a change in leadership following the 2022 election season as the project began implementation, meaning McGehee was uniquely positioned to continue building on existing placemaking initiatives and priorities. Despite momentum on projects in the city's downtown area, one priority that emerged immediately was improving access to outdoor recreation opportunities, particularly for school-aged children and their families. Despite having facilities scattered throughout town, community leaders noted that most of the equipment and amenities are outdated and that the only playground equipment for older children is at the local school district, leading many families to travel to neighboring communities. The mayor and other interested stakeholders identified South Annex Park, a sports complex located off U.S. Highway 65, as a prime location for improvements. McGehee operates one of the few remaining youth baseball and softball programs in the region, attracting participants from neighboring communities. However, despite this being a high-traffic area and a heavily utilized facility, South Annex Park lacks critical infrastructure to support the families attending practices and games with their children.

In 2023 during the first year of the RPIC-ADRBPI project, the Arkansas state legislature approved changes to the eligibility requirements for the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage, and Tourism's Outdoor Recreation Grant Program; previously, only communities with populations fewer than 2,500 people were eligible to apply for the program's FUN Park grant that has no matching requirements, but as of 2023, the population threshold has been expanded to include all communities with fewer than 7,500 people. Communities of every size must prioritize projects and funding allocations, but this is especially true in rural communities with limited resources. Knowing

South Annex Park Existing Facilities



McGehee Leaders Discuss Placemaking



that securing match funding would be a challenge, McGehee embraced the opportunity to apply for the FUN Park grant and built a competitive proposal that sought to address the infrastructure challenges at South Annex Park by installing a pavilion with picnic tables and benches, playground equipment appropriate for school-aged children, and improvements to the existing walking path to ensure barrier-free access to the new amenities. The City of McGehee's application scored high enough to be reviewed by the grant selection committee but was ultimately not selected for funding due to the increased number of eligible applicants and the increased competition within the program.

Despite not being selected for funding after the initial application, leaders in McGehee remained optimistic and believed in the proposed improvements for South Annex Park. In 2024 when the ADPHT grant cycle opened again, McGehee expressed an interest in submitting their application again for funding consideration. Winrock staff encouraged community leaders to explore existing assets and other resources available that may have been previously overlooked, noting that the FUN Park grant will likely continue to be competitive for the next several cycles and that submitting an identical proposal may not lead to the greatest chance of success. While reviewing community assets and brainstorming further ideas, the mayor shared that the city had some sales tax revenue with a spending deadline that had to be allocated to park improvements but that they had already identified a number of priorities, including replacing the lights at South Annex Park to ensure that the youth sports programs could continue. The group discussed how those improvements could be built into the existing proposal and that this opened a pathway for McGehee to instead apply to the ADPHT Outdoor Recreation Matching grant program, which will match eligible projects up to \$250,000. Though grant opportunities are often competitive, Winrock staff and community leaders agreed that this strategic approach to leveraging existing funds as match and applying to the Outdoor Recreation Matching grant program, rather than the FUN Park opportunity, was likely a stronger path forward. Winrock staff provided direct technical assistance to community leaders in grant writing, documenting matching funds, reading and understanding Requests for Proposals, budget development, and meeting technical requirements of funders, helping to ensure that all requirements were met and giving McGehee the best possible chance to have their application selected to be reviewed by the grant selection committee. After the initial review, McGehee was notified that their application scored high enough to be reviewed by the grant selection committee and that they were invited to present their proposal directly to the committee during the grant hearings, a slight difference from the review process for FUN Park applicants. McGehee leadership presented to the grant selection committee during the last week of October and is currently waiting for a funding announcement. Regardless of the outcome, community leaders and stakeholders expressed how valuable the technical assistance training has been to building their grant writing skills, which will continue to aid their placemaking endeavors.

Gould's Perseverance Despite Digital Divide



It can be difficult to work with extremely small communities with the challenges of identifying enough interested stakeholders willing to volunteer and commit their time to the program, but Winrock staff encountered an additional challenge in working with Gould: the digital divide. As mentioned previously, three of the mayors who Winrock had engaged at the proposal phase were replaced following elections in 2022, including Gould's, which was an unanticipated hurdle while

beginning project activities. Winrock mobilized quickly to reach out and secure meetings with the newly elected leaders to explain the program and avoid delays in activities. However, Winrock staff initially had trouble communicating with Gould's new mayor, resulting finally in several in-person visits to build trust and cultivate a relationship with the mayor. During one of these visits, the mayor expressed a desire to learn more about computers, admitting that her previous work experience never gave her the opportunity to learn and that she had quickly discovered her lack of digital skills was impeding her ability to effectively run the city. Winrock staff pivoted from planned technical assistance training to providing digital skills training, meeting the mayor and other engaged residents where they were. With matching funds from Heartland Forward, Winrock conducted a focus group with residents in Gould about broadband, affordability, digital skills needs, and other topics that helped inform the Arkansas State Broadband Office's Digital Equity Plan. Residents expressed a variety of concerns, including availability and issues with providers, affordability and access to devices, and the need for digital skills training, which mirrored Winrock staff's observations in its consistent work with the mayor and engaged community members.

Despite unanticipated barriers, Winrock staff worked closely with Gould's mayor to build her individual capacity and confidence with navigating computer basics, including monitoring and sending emails, using word

Gould Committee Members Submit FUN Park Application



processing software, and utilizing computer accessories such as printers and scanners. As her skills progressed, Winrock staff shifted technical assistance training to grant writing and project management with both the mayor and interested community members. Participants voiced a desire to apply for the ADPHT FUN Park grant opportunity, noting that they had tried in previous cycles but had been unsuccessful in compiling all of the required materials before the deadline. As with other communities, Winrock provided tailored, intensive technical assistance training and support to the Gould committee as they worked to develop and design a project concept and prepare all of the required materials for the application. Though Gould's application was not selected for funding, the committee celebrated the feat of submitting a complete application package for the first time in many years and are optimistic about utilizing the skills learned through Winrock's training to apply again in future cycles.

Dermott's Placemaking Planning



Dermott experienced its own unanticipated challenges during the RPIC-ADRBPI project that impacted Winrock's ability to deliver technical assistance training. As is common in smaller communities, Dermott experienced strong community

engagement and participation in project activities at the outset but saw a steady decline over the duration of the project as city leadership and community members were forced to manage competing priorities. However, despite various obstacles, a small number of dedicated city staff and interested community members continued to participate in trainings, determined to grow their skills to intentionally plan, organize, and execute placemaking and community development activities in their community.

Dermott community members consistently reported the Community Capitals Asset Mapping Exercises as one of the most valuable trainings and resources from Winrock's assistance. Winrock includes this training as a starting point for many of its communities as part of the overall capacity building framework, as it helps to shift the community's focus to an asset-based approach early on, leading to better planning and more sustainable projects in the long-term. Though many communities struggle initially to identify their assets, it becomes incredibly powerful to visually see all of the resources, tools, and talents available within the community and surrounding regions and allows community members the opportunity to assess where assets are being overlooked and where they may be overused. Winrock compiled all of the assets identified in the exercises into a document that Dermott can use to refer back to as a tool for project planning and design. Though the physical document itself is a helpful resource, Winrock reminded city leadership and engaged community members that the document is a snapshot in time and is only reflective of those who participated in the exercises, encouraging the community to revisit the exercises and make changes every few years to ensure that the tool continues to remain both relevant and useful.

Dermott Identifies Community Capitals



Tourism Amenity Site Plans



Through Winrock's longstanding work in rural communities, communities have consistently vocalized that pre-development engineering requirements in grant applications are often a barrier. As a result, and when appropriate, Winrock continues to center this as a core activity in its programming and utilized the skills of Crafton Tull to craft Tourism Amenity Site Plans for each RPIC-ADRBPI community that aligned with both individual community placemaking priorities and on-going regional efforts related to the Delta Rhythm and Bayous Highway. Winrock and Crafton Tull conducted initial site visits to each community

where Crafton Tull shared the importance of placemaking and thoughtful design with each community and encouraged residents and leaders to share priorities areas for their town. During these initial visits, Crafton Tull also conducted assessments of city-owned locations to identify a prime location within each community to serve as the site for their tourism amenity plan. Over the course of the project, Crafton Tull presented draft versions of the plan to each community for their review and made revisions based on community feedback. Winrock encouraged communities to be engaged during each phase of the process to ensure that the final result was a plan that each community wanted to adopt and seek funding to implement. The City of Dumas is perhaps the best example of this as their plan saw a change in location after the initial draft and underwent several design changes to ensure that community feedback was represented.

Following final revisions, Winrock and Crafton Tull completed final site visits to each community where Crafton Tull presented each plan, including cost estimates and phasing recommendations, and shared examples of funding sources and grant opportunities to support the implementation of each project. Additionally, Crafton Tull provided recommendations for small things that each community can do now to ensure the success of the projects in the long term, including having each community's city council formally adopt the plan, installing wayfinding signage that associates their

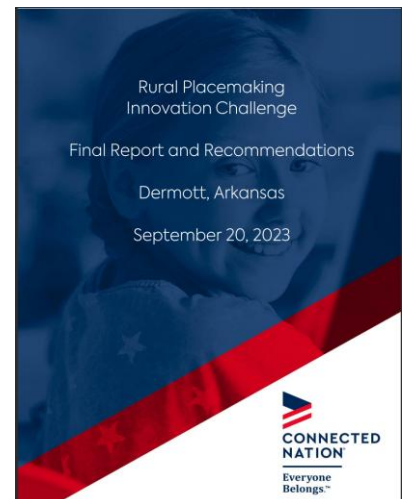
community with the regional highway efforts, and continuing to stay engaged in regional efforts to plan together as a group. Each plan, included below for reference, reflects a balance between local priorities and regional efforts and illustrates a vision for multi-use spaces that can be used to support tourism efforts while improving the quality of life of local residents.

RPIC-ADRBPI Tourism Amenity Site Plans



Completed Broadband Assessments and Mobile Connectivity Assessment along U.S. Hwy. 65

To support broadband infrastructure and increased access in rural communities, the RPIC-ADRBPI project completed a series of technical Broadband Infrastructure Assessments and related technical assistance in Gould, Dumas, McGehee, and Dermott. The assessments identified gaps in infrastructure or services and real and perceived broadband needs of residents, leaders, and stakeholders. The assessments also provided mobile drive testing to collect mobile broadband data along U.S. Highway 65 which runs through or adjacent to all project communities. The data enabled stakeholders to effectively plan and make informed decisions to help support both their community needs as well as planned tourism efforts. These assessments have proven to be a valuable resource to each community as Arkansas works alongside other states to deploy funding from the BEAD program. Stakeholders in several communities reported using the data and recommendations from the trainings and reports to mobilize members of their communities and actively participate in the state's challenge process to ensure that all areas of their community were represented accurately in the state's mapping. Throughout the duration of the project, Winrock provided training to project leaders to ensure that they received the most updated information from the Arkansas State Broadband Office and were well equipped to address any projects that could be directed to their communities.



Additionally, Winrock staff continued to provide relevant training and information related to adoption efforts and the importance of digital skills training in communities. Winrock encouraged community leaders to discuss the importance of having strong broadband availability in their communities and ensuring that residents of all ages have the skills and opportunity to connect. The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online work and school spotlighted the digital divide and

plainly illustrated gaps where people are missing out on opportunities either due to affordability, a lack of skills, or access. Community leaders will continue to utilize these resources over the next several years as funding and resources continue to flow down to address the needs of unserved and underserved populations.

Innovation Implementation Challenge Projects

After placemaking planning technical assistance led by Winrock, RPIC project communities engaged in an application process to earn the Innovation Implementation Challenge grant funds of \$10,000 per community. These funds were funded by USDA RPIC project funds (\$5,000 per grant) and a 100 percent Match (\$5,000 per grant) provided by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. An overview of each community project is included below.

To earn the grant, communities completed an application, which mirrored elements generally found in RFPs (Requests for Proposals). Winrock provided trainings to provide best practices on how to read an RFP, how to write an effective project proposal and budget, and how to responsibly manage a grant, including budget management, communicating with project teams and funders, leading project activities, and the “art” of crafting a narrative that shows the funder and the public the impact that the funding had on the community. Winrock and USDA RD staff reviewed the applications from each of the project communities to ensure they met the eligibility criteria, which included: the project is innovative, highlighted in the placemaking plan, high probability of success and sustainability, with identified outcomes to be achieved; and leverages partners and provided letters of support. After award decisions were made, Winrock and the project communities completed formal grant agreements with reporting requirements. Throughout this process, Winrock and USDA RD provided significant one-on-one technical assistance to each community to address particular needs around their projects, invoicing, and reporting requirements. All project communities consistently reported the importance of this training in building their capacity to better apply and manage grant funds, which demonstrates the significant impact that the unique Innovation Implementation Challenge element of RPIC has had on increasing the capacity of rural communities.



Request for Proposals:

RPIC – ADRBPI

Innovation Implementation Challenge

Key Dates	
RFP Announcement	Friday, August 14, 2023
Informational Webinar	Pre-recorded; must be viewed before submitting application.
Last Day to Submit Questions	Friday, December 29, 2023 12:00pm
Application Due Date	Accepted on a rolling basis. Reviewed and awarded on a quarterly basis with final applications due 11/30/2024.
Notice of Award	Quarterly through January 31, 2024
Project Completion and Final Report Due	Friday, June 28, 2024

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City of Dumas – Innovation Implementation Challenge Grant Project

As noted above, as a direct outcome of placemaking planning during this project, the City of Dumas completed a “pop-up” event in the vacant area of downtown selected as the location for their tourism amenity site plan to seek community feedback on utilizing the space as a park and testing public hot spot technology. The Dumas Coalition received a lot of valuable feedback and strong support for adopting broadband technology in the area and selected this area as the focus of their Innovation Implementation Grant.

With grant funds, the City of Dumas worked with a local internet provider to install internet hotspots that will support free, public internet access along their Main Street corridor. Grant funds supported the purchase and installation of equipment, a year of service, and technical support services from the internet provider. To ensure continued sustainability of the service, the Coalition approached city leadership with a request to assume responsibility for continued service fees beyond the year of prepaid service, which was adopted. The installation of hotspots in Dumas’s downtown area will help to support on-going initiatives implemented by Dumas’s Main Street program and the Dumas Chamber of Commerce, as well as supporting local businesses and helping to drive residents and visitors to the downtown area. With remaining grant funds, the Coalition purchased picnic tables and signage that can be used for events as they work to identify other funding opportunities to implement their placemaking plan.

City of McGehee – Innovation Implementation Challenge Grant Project

As noted above, the City of McGehee had several ongoing placemaking projects when Winrock began the RPIC-ADRBPI project. One of these initiatives involved the transformation of a vacant lot in their downtown area into a pocket park. After visiting his son in Little Rock and attending an event in the pocket park downtown, the mayor remarked that he did not see why McGehee could not have something similar and immediately got to work organizing a committee, planning, and raising funds. The overwhelming majority of the project was completed through small fundraising campaigns, private donations, and support from local businesses, but McGehee’s community leaders had a vision for the space that had not yet been realized.

McGehee Celebrates Ribbon Cutting for Pocket Park



McGehee’s community leaders selected to utilize their Innovation Implementation Challenge project to support the ongoing efforts to complete the pocket park and utilized the grant funds to finance two larger pieces of the project: a mural and Wi-Fi hotspots. Leaders in McGehee had seen the impact that vibrant murals have made in other towns and recruited an Arkansas-based artist to complete a colorful mural depicting elements from their town’s history and heritage, which is proudly displayed on the side of one of the buildings that frames the pocket park. The addition of Wi-Fi hotspots also supports tourism efforts and on-going community events in the space, which will be much needed. The City of McGehee hosted a ribbon cutting and dedication for the space earlier this year and plans to host regular events to continue building momentum and community support for future placemaking projects.

New Pocket Park in McGehee, AR



City of Dermott – Innovation Implementation Challenge Grant Project

The City of Dermott took great care in selecting an Innovation Implementation Challenge project, and ultimately settled on a project that included both elements that would have an immediate improvement and help them prepare for future placemaking initiatives. Dermott leaders proposed to make the initial investment in the space directly across from City Hall that was identified as the site for their tourism amenity site plan. Within the proposed location, community leaders noted an existing space that has been used as a serenity garden in dire need of upgrades that would make an excellent resting place for visitors. The City used its grant funds to purchase a gazebo, sturdy outdoor benches, concrete to improve the existing pad and walkway, and wayfinding signage to direct visitors to their downtown area as they continue their placemaking improvements. With the remaining funds, the City purchased webcams and a laptop computer to improve communication and access to City Council meetings and other public forums; this technology not only allows the City to stream its meetings to residents, but also allows them the opportunity to invite guest speakers from outside the community to present virtually which had previously been inaccessible to them.

The City of Dermott included QR codes on smaller signage that will be placed directly in the space that will direct visitors and residents to information about the town’s history, things to do, and news and events happening along the Delta Rhythm and Bayous Highway corridor. The City has stored its signage and equipment and plans to set up the new outdoor space when the weather improves to be ready for its recently revived annual crawfish festival.



City of Gould – Innovation Implementation Challenge Grant Project

Though the City of Gould faced several challenges throughout this project, the Gould committee was eager to design and implement their Innovation Implementation Challenge project. The City of Gould has both the unique advantages and disadvantages of U.S. Highway 65 bisecting their community. Committee members noted concerns for public safety with residents of all ages having to cross the multilane highway to access the community’s only park. Gould selected to utilize its grant funds to make the initial investment for another outdoor recreation facility on the opposite side of the highway to improve access to recreational opportunities.

Grant funds were used to purchase a gazebo, sturdy outdoor seating, and wayfinding signage, including signs with QR codes that direct visitors to local town history and events. The City plans to install the equipment and signage to direct visitors to a former bank lot donated to the City that was used as the location for Gould's tourism amenity site plan. This location is also the site that Gould used in its application for the ADPHT FUN Park grant and is likely to see additional improvements in the coming years as the community continues to seek funding to implement its placemaking plan.

Lessons Learned

Unanticipated Project Challenges

As noted throughout the report, Winrock encountered a variety of challenges when implementing the RPIC-ADRBPI project. One challenge that Winrock did not originally anticipate was the turnover in city leadership that occurred at the outset of the project. Though Winrock always encourages city leadership to identify other community champions to participate in planning and training exercises, the change in leadership before the project activities were underway did pose an initial delay due to Winrock staff having to reintroduce the project and cultivate new relationships with elected officials who were already overwhelmed with new job responsibilities.

Related to the changes in leadership, Winrock also encountered significant capacity challenges in some of the RPIC-ADRBPI communities that resulted in having to execute a different approach for the Innovation Implementation Challenge grants. Due to various staffing issues and limited personnel capacity, Winrock staff sought approval from USDA-RD to instead execute in-kind grant agreements with these communities, rather than dispensing grant funds directly for them to manage. The delays Winrock encountered in these communities shortened the timeline that communities had to implement and manage their projects, meaning direct management of funds would have been too difficult where communities were already juggling competing priorities. For similar projects, Winrock staff would advise beginning the project design and grant writing activities earlier in the project to ensure ample time for communities to complete their projects.

Advice for Organizations Planning Similar Projects

Winrock designed this RPIC project to support rural communities located along the Delta Rhythm and Bayous Highway (U.S. Highway 65) and communities that were at different stages of community development. This regional approach fostered learning among the communities that would not have occurred if communities had been located across the state. Though the communities did have opportunities to learn from one another, if Winrock had the opportunity to replicate the project, we would build in opportunities for communities to participate in technical assistance trainings together, rather than conducting them for each community, to provide more intentional opportunities for shared learning. Peer-learning is incredibly valuable for rural communities who often feel isolated or overwhelmed when facing their unique challenges, and Winrock has found that the opportunity to talk to and learn from other communities with similar challenges is often more impactful than any type of technical assistance provided. Winrock would encourage other technical assistance providers to consider a collaborative, regional approach that allows community participants to learn from one another and build together, rather than focusing solely on building their capacity individually.

As noted above, Winrock also encountered various issues with executing Innovation Implementation Challenge grants with each community. The goal was for this exercise to serve as a "capstone" project following the completion of partner assessments and technical assistance trainings that the communities would use to inform their projects. As discussed, various challenges and delays made it difficult to deliver trainings on schedule and at the same rate to each community, which did not leave adequate time at the end of the RPIC projects for communities to implement their projects. For similar projects, Winrock would advise technical assistance providers to structure any grant projects in the middle of the workplan to ensure ample time for communities to complete their projects and to allow for any unanticipated challenges or delays. Winrock plans to structure project workplans in this way moving forward to ensure that Winrock can provide intensive technical assistance as communities manage their grants, which is often a skill that many communities still need to develop.

Innovation Approaches

In addition to implementing innovative approaches related to regional planning or tiered technical assistance training, Winrock would encourage other technical assistance providers to consider facilitating asset mapping with the Community Capitals framework at the outset of the project. Many communities and providers may be familiar with asset-based community development, but Winrock has found that this approach to asset mapping helps communities better organize assets and effectively assess and manage their use in their project planning. The Community Capitals framework is a great tool when teaching communities how to leverage their existing assets to inform community priorities, develop a concept for a grant proposal, or accomplish a project. Many community members that have participated in the asset mapping exercise share the value that completing the exercise as a group had on the process, noting that the end result was more diverse and representative of the entire community than it would have been had they completed the exercise individually or assigned it to be completed by city leadership. As noted above, for anyone who chooses to complete this framework, it is important to inform the group completing the exercises that the end result is only representative of the

perspectives represented in the group and that the exercise is a reflection of the time during which it was completed and should be updated periodically to ensure its continued usefulness.

Additionally, Winrock would encourage other technical assistance providers to work with communities to document their volunteer hours as in-kind support, regardless of if the communities committed time as match to the RPIC project. Winrock has found that communities may be intimidated by funding opportunities that require match support, are often unfamiliar with the types of match and in-kind support they are eligible to use, and do not consider the value of their own time that they spend designing, implementing, and managing projects. Providing tracking tools and documentation templates for communities and helping them to log volunteer time or other types of in-kind support is an important capacity building technique that can serve communities well in the long-term. As noted throughout, rural communities often face resource constraints or limitations that force them to prioritize their projects and which grant opportunities they pursue, but volunteer hours and learning to document that time is something that every community can do, regardless of size or resources.

For more information about the USDA RPIC
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