



Integration of Social Science

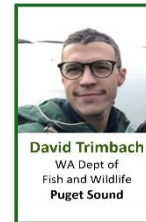
STAC February 2026 Topical Meeting Synthesis

The Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) to the Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP) held a virtual topical meeting titled *Integration of Social Science in Other Programs* on February 20, 2026, organized by the STAC Social Science Standing Workgroup (SSWG) to further the 2025 [Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement](#) core value of social science (ref. Principles section of Agreement). The meeting drew on expertise of comparable programs across the country to understand how they integrate social science and co-production in their practices. The SSWG, co-chaired by Christine Kirchhoff (Penn State) and Ellen Kohl (UMBC), draws on expertise across the social sciences, including from economics, sociology, environmental justice, public policy, and planning.

The two panels, “Sister Programs” and “Aspirational Co-Production,” were followed by breakout discussions on applying lessons to the CBP. The meeting was facilitated by Lara Fowler (Penn State).



Panel: Sister Programs



Panel: Aspirational Co-Production



Social Science Integration: Lessons Learned

Sister programs shared consistent lessons: integration requires dedicated capacity (staff, funding, sustained leadership), structural and cultural change, and social scientists in meaningful, not token roles. Programs that embed social science in governance structures see the most durable impact in enabling more holistic approaches to governing coupled human-natural systems. Mirroring this integration into CBP would require fundamental shifts in how STAC and the CBP think about and use science in their work.

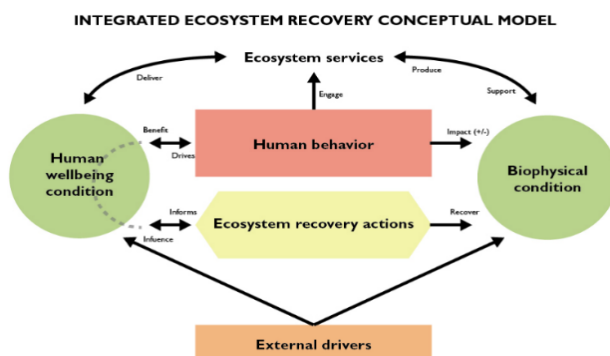


Figure 1. Integrated ecosystem recovery conceptual model illustrating this interconnectedness: human wellbeing, biophysical condition, and ecosystem recovery actions are not separate but a single, interdependent system (Harguth et al. 2015).

Integration in some sister programs is enabled by state legislation, others are building the case for integration from scratch. All highlighted integration is essential because it: (1) increases stakeholder engagement; (2) enables monitoring human indicators alongside natural and physical ones; (3) strengthens capacity-building; and (4) supports more holistic assessments of ecosystem health. Programs have a responsibility to know what matters to people; integration is more than checking a box.

Sister programs shared social science research that demonstrated real impact resulting from sustained partnerships and a holistic integration of social sciences across the programs. [Puget Sound’s human wellbeing vital signs](#) inform recovery efforts (see Figure 1). [Delta’s resident survey](#) informs adaptation implementation efforts.

The social sciences encompass many disciplines and approaches for understanding human and social systems. Our sister programs recognize the interrelationship and interdependence between humans and natural systems, and that social sciences are necessary to understand how these relationships influence environmental policy and natural resource management. Overlooking this human component can lead to unintended consequences and management ineffectiveness.

Co-Production as a Research Approach and Tool

Co-production is “a process that brings together diverse groups to iteratively create new knowledge and practices” (Jagannathan et al. 2020). Unlike traditional researcher-driven science, it starts with stakeholder and management needs and centers them throughout, requiring time, trust, and genuine humility about whose knowledge counts.

Rather than researchers generating knowledge and delivering it to stakeholders, management needs drive the questions from the start. The [NERRS Science Collaborative](#) (Wondelleck) institutionalized this by requiring reserve managers to identify priority knowledge gaps that researchers can help address. These gaps serve as the starting point for research helping to produce science that gets used, not shelved. The [Shrimp Futures Initiative](#) (Gervasi) demonstrated that co-production requires flexibility. Researchers adjusted their work in response to concerns raised by shrimpers about red tide impacts, resulting in research that was more relevant and actionable for the fishing community. [OysterFutures](#) (Goelz) demonstrated that a scientific model, used as a shared tool rather than a final answer, can bring historically adversarial groups to joint recommendations. Co-production is slower. It is also more likely to work.

Co-Production	
Challenges	Benefits
Necessary to build relationships and trust	Real-time data
Scale of watershed	Science that will actually be used
Does not always align with academic workflow	Social learning
Need time and resources	Actionable knowledge

Table 1. Challenges and benefits of co-production synthesized from participant discussions.

‘Big S’ Successes and Goals

“If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” – Traditional proverb

Social science integration is essential to CBP success and aligns with the principles of partnership in the revised Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement. If we don’t pay attention to people and their needs, we’re not going to solve the problems that the CBP is trying to address. For the CBP, this means prioritizing: (1) capacity building to support social science; (2) making room for multiple forms of knowledge production; and (3) deeply integrating social science, not simply expanding what we measure but changing what questions we ask. Incentives matter as much as intent: real integration must be built-in to all levels and work of the CBP. This requires holistic thinking and integration, not checking boxes, with trust as the foundation of process and relationships.

Summary Conclusions

Social Science is essential, not optional

Social Science must be integrated holistically throughout the CBP

Co-Production, a research approach, can be used to help the CBP meet their goals

Recommendations

1. Create accessible best practice guides (analogous to the CESR model) that illustrate how to incorporate social science in common STAC activities.
2. Develop frameworks to incorporate co-production into integrated modeling to help meet CBP goals.
3. Incorporate co-production and social sciences into STAC RFPs and reviews (shifting from top-down science delivery to knowledge developed with management partners and stakeholders).
4. Establish a recurring social science touchpoint at STAC and CBP meetings to normalize concepts, build shared language, and keep integration on the agenda.
5. Invest in capacity building across STAC and the CBP including staff time, training, and sustained funding for social science work.
6. Formalize ongoing exchanges with sister programs to share lessons, track evolving practices, and build cross-program relationships.

Results of a Topical Meeting

STAC manages a series of topical meetings throughout the year. This topical meeting was conducted by the [STAC-led Social Science Workgroup \(SSWG\)](#), and this short synthesis represents a rapid turnaround overview, which will be accompanied by a more in-depth reporting by the SSWG at a later date.

