**Highlights from 9th Conservation Finance Roundtable March 30-31, 2022**

**Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden | Des Moines, IA**

In March 2022, conservation finance practitioners convened at the Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden in Des Moines, Iowa. The 9th Conservation Finance Round Table was organized by the Conservation Finance Network with co-host Adam Kiel, Executive Vice President at [AgOutcomes](https://www.agoutcomes.com/). After two years of operating online, it was electrifying to meet friends and colleagues in person to share our experience, foster collaboration and collective action for greater impacts.

Thanks to Adam Kiel and his Iowan colleagues, this Roundtable featured the state’s innovative solutions to conservation finance and other initiatives from across the country.

**Key Takeaways**

There is an unprecedented number of public and private funding mechanisms and opportunities to finance conservation efforts. However, accessibility remains an issue to small organizations, producers, and underrepresented groups because of eligibility requirements and transaction costs. Fortunately, some innovative solutions and technologies are helping lower these barriers.

**Unprecedented public and private funding mechanisms and opportunities**

It is an exciting time for conservation practitioners. In recent years, there has been an increase in public programs and funds and private capital for conservation activities ranging from water quality to regenerative agriculture.

For instance, at the federal level, in May 2021, the Biden-Harris administration released the outline of [America the Beautiful Initiative](https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/report-conserving-and-restoring-america-the-beautiful-2021.pdf), a locally led and voluntary nationwide conservation goal to conserve 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030.[[1]](#footnote-2) Later, the administration launched the $1 billion [America the Beautiful Challenge](https://www.nfwf.org/programs/america-beautiful-challenge).[[2]](#footnote-3) The fund, managed by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), acts as a one stop shop to consolidate various federal agencies conservation and restoration investments with private and philanthropic funds to spur nationwide land, water, and wildlife conservation efforts.

In September 2022, the USDA announces an initial commitment of $2.8 Billion to pilot a New Revenue Streams for [America's Climate-smart Commodities](https://www.usda.gov/climate-solutions/climate-smart-commodities) with additional project funding in the future.[[3]](#footnote-4) State Revolving Funds (SFRs) have seen an increase in both federal and state contributions[[4]](#footnote-5) to leverage private funds. Since the concept was first introduced in 2009, there are now 21 Green Banks in the USA that have driven $7.0 billion into clean energy and other green projects since 2011, with $1.69 billion of this investment taking place in calendar year 2020.[[5]](#footnote-6)

**Access to conservation finance remains unaffordable and exclusive**

[The Arch Framework for Conservation Finance Projects](https://gordianknotstrategies.com/enduring-arches/) provides a blueprint to design, develop, and implement conservation projects with a list of elements needed for each phase, analogous to building an arch with its various structural elements. [[6]](#footnote-7)

The framework captures the complexity of successful conservation finance projects. For instance, in her presentation “Developing Des Moines’ Waterway Activities”, [Hannah Inman](https://www.linkedin.com/in/hannahinman/), CEO of the [Great Outdoors Foundation](https://greatoutdoorsfoundation.org/), described the process of bringing alive the vision for Des Moines to meet the standards of a “golden city,” i.e. a city with a world-class university, world-class art, world-class gardens, and active waterways. The process started eight years ago with the Great Outdoors Foundation (GOF). GOF, which originally got its start as a friends group for Polk County (IA) conservation, built a coalition of municipalities, elected officials, the business community, public and private investors around the vision of Des Moines as a Golden City. Finally, GOF raised money to hire staff for fundraising and managing high-impact conservation projects.

The initiative required knowledge of the public and private financial opportunities available and the mechanisms to access them, political will, intensive stakeholder engagement, and financial and environmental experts working over an extended period of time, much of it before the design stage of the project. These long-term activities are highly technical and costly. Because of the resources needed upfront, accessibility of the available funds remains an issue for many small organizations, producers, and underrepresented groups.

Smaller or underrepresented groups are often not made aware of the available financial resources. When they do, they may not meet all the requirements which constitutes another barrier to accessing these funds. Finally, because of the high transaction costs, including project tracking and monitoring costs, smaller projects are often not financially rewarding for both financial and conservation institutions. These barriers exclude individuals, organizations and communities that would have benefitted from the financial, economic, social and environmental rainfalls of conservation efforts.

**Innovations can help lower costs and better track outcomes**

The Roundtable’s fifth session, “*Innovation roundup: New projects and initiatives,”* was comprised of five presentations from organizations that seek to address social and environmental challenges and fill gaps in the existing conservation finance landscape. These included:

* [The National Black Food & Justice Alliance’s](https://www.blackfoodjustice.org/) Resource Commons initiative
* [ReHarvest Partners](https://www.reharvestpartners.com/), which manages the Soil and Water Outcomes Fund in partnership with AgOutcomes
* The Environmental Policy Innovation Center’s new Restoration Economy Center
* Lyme Timber’s Aggregation for Ecosystem Services Markets and Conservation Programs Report
* Two Newly Designated Sentinel Landscapes in [Southern Indiana](https://sentinellandscapes.org/landscapes/southern-indiana/) and [Northwest Florida](https://sentinellandscapes.org/landscapes/northwest-florida/)

For example, the National Black Food & Justice Alliance addresses social and environmental challenges by reaching out to groups that are often not aware of existing opportunities, do not meet certain criteria and requirements or do not have the resources necessary. Other projects proposed tailored fundraising and financing schemes to meet the needs of their target audience. Overall, these innovative efforts and initiatives will facilitate better access to available financial resources.

Technology can also help lower transactions and project costs. Upstream Tech made a demonstration of their GIS and remote sensing tool, Lens Technology, that makes land monitoring easier, faster, and more affordable. There also are some promising new developments for using this technology in carbon monitoring and cover-crop projects.

Financial, technological, and other types of innovations are needed to decrease project costs and increase inclusivity in the conservation space. However, these efforts need funding to be scaled up to reach their full potential. This will require public and private financial actors to invest in these initiatives with a clear acknowledgment of the potential risks and failures.

Through the [Conservation Finance Roundtable](https://www.conservationfinancenetwork.org/conservation-finance-roundtable)s, CFN is building a community of practice to support the efforts of practitioners implementing conservation finance approaches across America. The Conservation Finance Roundtable in Des Moines provided an opportunity for practitioners to learn from one another to develop projects, tools, and technologies to achieve success and scale more rapidly.

1. [*https://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/news-updates/2021/05/06/biden-harris-administration-outlines-america-the-beautiful-initiative/*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/news-updates/2021/05/06/biden-harris-administration-outlines-america-the-beautiful-initiative/)*;* [*https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/report-conserving-and-restoring-america-the-beautiful-2021.pdf*](https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/report-conserving-and-restoring-america-the-beautiful-2021.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. [*https://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/news-updates/2022/04/11/biden-harris-administration-launches-1-billion-america-the-beautiful-challenge-to-support-and-accelerate-locally-led-conservation-and-restoration-projects/*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/news-updates/2022/04/11/biden-harris-administration-launches-1-billion-america-the-beautiful-challenge-to-support-and-accelerate-locally-led-conservation-and-restoration-projects/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *h*[*ttps://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2022/09/14/biden-harris-administration-announces-historic-investment*](https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2022/09/14/biden-harris-administration-announces-historic-investment) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. [*https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2020-11/documents/national\_summary\_0.pdf*](https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2020-11/documents/national_summary_0.pdf)*;* [*https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/documents/state\_and\_national\_ims\_report.pdf*](https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/documents/state_and_national_ims_report.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. [*https://greenbankconsortium.org/annual-industry-report*](https://greenbankconsortium.org/annual-industry-report) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. [*https://conservationfinancenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/V10%20Enduring%20Arches%20Infographic.pdf*](https://conservationfinancenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/V10%20Enduring%20Arches%20Infographic.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)