

Charter to establish a Volunteer Monitoring Working Group

ESTABLISHMENT

This document describes the purpose for and proposed activities of a Volunteer Monitoring Working Group of the National Water Quality Monitoring Council (Council).

STRUCTURE AND DEFINITIONS

Volunteer Monitoring Working Group (Working Group) – proposed Council working group to engage key members of the Council in volunteer monitoring-related discussions so as to encourage better integration of volunteer monitoring activities with ongoing water-quality monitoring conducted by local, state, and federal agencies.

National Volunteer Monitoring Network (Network) – a group that will be developed with key stakeholders from the volunteer monitoring community, external to the Council group but working collaboratively, to support the national volunteer monitoring community. This Network will facilitate communication between the Council and the volunteer monitoring community.

Volunteer Monitoring Community – 1700+ volunteer monitoring/ aquatic-based citizen science efforts throughout the US.

The Council – National Water Quality Monitoring Council

VOLUNTEER MONITORING COMMUNITY - BACKGROUND

Volunteer water-quality monitoring or aquatic-based citizen science is a field in which community members volunteer their time to assess the status of our waterways. General goals of volunteer monitoring programs are to collect data of known quality and use those data to understand, protect and restore aquatic resources. Across the United States there are more than 1700 volunteer water monitoring programs. These are commonly sponsored by universities; local, state, tribal and federal government agencies; and nonprofit organizations. These volunteer monitoring programs use diverse operational models, answer a myriad of water quality and quantity questions, and there have been many valuable outcomes that have resulted from the data collected by these programs.

Since the longest-running volunteer water monitoring programs were developed nearly five decades ago, the degree of volunteer monitoring community connectedness has widely varied, largely as a result of the availability of federal resources. For example, in the 1990s and 2000s, federal funding enabled the US Environmental Protection Agency and USDA Extension Service to support the volunteer monitoring community, cultivating communication, collaboration, and coordination across programs. Several significant outcomes of this support were:

- Development of a national newsletter (*The Volunteer Monitor*), published from 1993-2010. This newsletter played a significant role in chronicling volunteer monitoring methods and outcomes, and it examined relevant questions of and issues faced by programs across the nation;

- Establishment of convening meetings and conferences of volunteer monitoring professionals (now integrated into the National Monitoring Conference);
- Development of web site clearinghouses for volunteer monitoring protocols, best practices, etc. (<http://water.epa.gov/type/rsl/monitoring/> and <http://volunteermonitoring.org/>); and
- Maintaining a directory of volunteer monitoring programs across the nation.

However, financial support from both entities has been reduced significantly, leaving substantial gaps in networking, knowledge development, and sharing across the field. This has resulted in a fragmented, disjointed national volunteer monitoring community.

COUNCIL VOLUNTEER MONITORING WORKING GROUP PURPOSE & SCOPE

With the growing interest in citizen science, resources are required to help support and enhance the volunteer monitoring community. The purpose of the Volunteer Monitoring Working Group (Working Group) is to engage the Council in volunteer monitoring-related discussions so as to encourage better integration of volunteer monitoring activities with ongoing water-quality monitoring conducted by local, state, and federal agencies. As a result, two initiatives will take place simultaneously the establishment of a Council Volunteer Monitoring Working Group and development of a National Volunteer Monitoring Network.

The proposed Working Group will:

- Identify and address topics of high priority to volunteer monitoring practitioners;
- Examine existing avenues and develop new approaches to most effectively support volunteer monitoring initiatives across the country;
- Increase the volunteer monitoring participation at the National Monitoring Conference, facilitate the integration of volunteer monitoring sessions, and support networking opportunities both during the networking block as well as creating the space for a gathering meeting for the volunteer monitoring community;
- Update the volunteer monitoring pages on the Council web site to reflect the current activities of the working group and the field;
- Maintain a national directory of volunteer monitoring entities to populate the map on the Council's web site;
- Facilitate the sharing of relevant research and outreach tools, as well as Council resources to the volunteer monitoring community through the Network; and
- Promote volunteer monitoring as a viable tool for agencies and organizations.

STRUCTURE & COMPOSITION

The Working Group will include 9-12 people:

- 2 co-chairs (Council volunteer monitoring representative and an additional Council member);
- The Council volunteer monitoring alternate;
- A minimum of four additional Council members;
- 2-3 members of the National Volunteer Monitoring Network

Since there are a number of Council members that serve on multiple Council working groups, we will have to work collaboratively to identify a meeting model that will allow for full participation of Council members on this and all of their Council working groups.

TENURE

Members of the Volunteer Monitoring Working Group will serve for a 3 years at a time, with a maximum of 4 years of service by any one member. To ensure continuity of the Working Group, initial members will serve staggered term lengths of 1 to 3 years, with approximately one third of members beginning their service each year.

TIMING

The Working Group is proposed to exist as an interim body to advise, inform, and support the volunteer monitoring community while additional resources are sought (external to the Council) to support a more substantial initiative. The Council will review the purpose and effectiveness of this working group every 2-4 years.

WORKING GROUP AUTHORITY & ITS RELATION TO THE COUNCIL

The Working Group has the authority to provide recommendations and share resources related to volunteer monitoring to the Council and other relevant working groups (e.g., Communication & Outreach Committee).

RESOURCES

The Working Group will rely on existing Council resources and offer communication support to the National Volunteer Monitoring Network, as needed (e.g., conference calls, webinars, newsletter, web site, etc.).

DELIVERABLES/PRODUCTS

The Working Group will strive to support Council activities by disseminating best practices information and documents on volunteer monitoring using varied communication practices (e.g., webinars, articles, listservs, etc.).

- Inventory the volunteer monitoring community on an annual basis to determine needs and relevant topics to focus on;
- Contribute 1-2 articles, per issue, to the Council's newsletter;
- Maintain the volunteer monitoring inventory of active programs;
- Update the volunteer monitoring content on the Council's web site;
- Conduct 3-4 webinars; and
- Develop communication tools on priority topic from fact sheets to best practices documents.

In addition there are other types of deliverables that are not as easily quantified, such as networking, the role of the Working Group to discuss and promote volunteer monitoring, providing additional outlets for volunteer monitoring and water monitoring success stories, and facilitating partnerships to do data comparability studies.

VOLUNTEER MONITORING NETWORK

Unofficially for the past three years, there has been an ad-hoc, informal network in place – where a group of volunteer monitoring leaders to help advise and discuss need for the volunteer monitoring field. However there is a need to formalize this structure with the support and expertise of the Council Working Group. Therefore, at the same time the Council Working Group is established, a voluntary national Volunteer Monitoring Network will be created. This Network will do the following:

- Coordinate communication of volunteer monitoring activities across the nation;
- Identify topics for webinars and Council newsletter articles;
- Identify members of the volunteer monitoring field to help with topics and newsletters;
- Communicate tools, resources developed by the Council and the Council’s Volunteer Monitoring Work Group to the volunteer monitoring field; and
- Assist with National Monitoring Conference planning.

The Network will be comprised of 9-13 people, including:

- 2 chairs (including the Council Volunteer Monitoring Alternate)
- Council Volunteer Monitoring position
- 4-6 representatives from across the nation, ideally from diverse EPA regions and diverse programs (e.g. state, federal, tribal agencies, academia/extension, non-profits, etc)
- 1 representative from a state or regional water monitoring council
- 1 representative from the Citizen Science Association
- 1-2 members of relevant partner groups to the volunteer monitoring community (e.g., funding organization or business sector representatives)

ORGANIZING STRUCTURE

