



WILLAMETTE RIVER  
INITIATIVE

# *Case Study* Funding

Meyer invested close to \$20 million over the course of 11 years to increase the ability of people and organizations to improve the health of a river.

The project, the Willamette River Initiative (WRI), was a big and bold commitment. The project was selected because of the relevance of the Willamette River to Oregonians. It was designed to respond to the need for capacity, coordination, and the connection of science and practice throughout the field of restoration in the Willamette River basin. The idea was to improve the health of the river by impacting the ability of the people of the Willamette to care for the future of the river.

To a great extent, the impact of the project matched the aspiration. It was not only the size, significance, and duration of the funding that made the difference, however. If they had simply invested good money to good organizations over a good length of time, the legacy of the WRI would have been significant but not necessarily transformational. The funding strategy that Meyer developed and implemented made the impact remarkable.

The funding of Meyer was effective because of (a) what Meyer funded, (b) how Meyer funded, and (c) why Meyer funded. The funding approach in each of these dimensions maximized the depth, expansiveness, and durability of impact through the Willamette River Initiative.

# What Meyer Funded

Meyer focused their funding on mainstem river habitat and function, tributary habitat, projects that could have benefits across the basin, and work that would lead toward a more diverse, equitable and inclusive river restoration movement.

In the early stages, they prioritized actionable strategies to get things moving quickly on the ground. Their intent was to facilitate tangible projects to increase momentum and build energy throughout the system of restoration.

They soon realized that in order to make progress on restoration objectives, a whole system of capacity would need to be developed and strengthened among many people, organizations, and communities. In response, they developed a multi-dimensional, multi-layered, systemic approach to funding. For people and organizations of all kinds to meaningfully and effectively advance the cause of a healthy Willamette, Meyer needed to fund capacity and engagement throughout the whole system. Their involvement was varied, and creative, strategically catalyzing the movement of a whole field of people and projects.

In addition to restoration and conservation projects, Meyer also funded

- capacity-building to attract and retain personnel for nonprofits,
- collaborations to encourage people to work together as partners on projects,
- relationship-building to reach and draw critical stakeholders such as landowners,
- convenings to bring people together and inspire each other toward a common vision,
- coordination to help people and organizations align goals and strategies,
- education and learning opportunities to bring curated knowledge to people,
- knowledge exchange to connect people in shared discovery,
- monitoring practices to improve the ability of the field to measure progress,
- research to advance new knowledge throughout the sector,

- public engagement to activate people's care for the river,
- policy work to build structures of support and public commitment to the river, and
- projects and learning cohorts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in river restoration.

These examples, among others, demonstrate the creative, layered approach Meyer took toward what was funded. As a result, the WRI achieved not a singular metric of progress but an ecosystem of capacity. As with any healthy ecosystem, the interaction among an array of diverse interventions, entities, and leaders produced a strong system and culture. Capacity brought resilience (making the work stronger and better able to withstand threats), synergies (making all of the parts of the system interact together better and produce something far more effective than any of the parts could alone), and mutually reinforcing engagement (making a wide range of leaders and stakeholders committed and responsive to each other).

Meyer's funding was flexible and nimble. If convening was needed, they funded convening. If capacity was needed, they funded capacity. If research was needed, they funded research. If engagement was needed, they funded engagement. However, in funding to meet needs, they were disciplined, focused, and strategic. They took the time to understand what was required for the next step. Their success resulted from their commitment to be deeply engaged in the field, knowing what was happening, where things were going well, and what barriers were inhibiting progress.

Their strategy was not to focus too narrowly and seek to advance one aspect of restoration work. Instead they viewed the whole system and sought to strengthen the fundamental capacity of a broad group of people within a broad context to have a broad range of inter-related skills, disciplines, perspectives, and communities. This system-wide impact accounts for the unique legacy of Meyer's funding in the WRI.

# How Meyer Funded

The approach of Meyer toward funding was unique in many respects, characterized by at least six key features:

## 1 Long-Term Commitment

Knowing the funding commitment of Meyer extended over a decade allowed people to give their attention to projects that mattered most. It released them from the anxiety of chasing funding and enabled them to concentrate their efforts on bigger, bolder, more consequential projects. It provided stability for many, and stability fostered expansiveness of vision and strategy. Long-term commitment encouraged momentum because initiatives could build on each other over time. Long-term commitment formed new habits of collaboration because new ways of engaging others takes practice to become embedded in culture and strategy. Long-term commitment multiplied the impact of projects because it provided years for projects to evolve through multiple iterations, respond to research and evaluation, and grow in effectiveness.

## 3 Responsive to Emerging Needs

Meyer's funding was strategic and deliberate, highly disciplined toward advancing the vision and not wavering into distracting opportunities, but it was also responsive to the unfolding needs of people, projects, and agencies. The funding strategy evolved over time through conversations with people and observations of work in the field. Significant elements of the funding strategy emerged from consultation and co-creation with leaders throughout the basin. WRI staff consistently went to people and listened to people. They diagnosed what was needed for taking the next steps. Then, they responded. They adjusted their funding to meet the need. They did not passively react to requests. They did not rely on open invitation for requests for funding. Rather, they engaged people in the field to develop funding strategy through mutual diagnosis, discovery, and priority-setting.

## 2 Flexible to Fill in the Gaps

People describe Meyer's funding as the "glue" that held things together. Funding from state and federal sources were often bound by the constraints of state and federal policy. As a private funder, Meyer could fund the gaps, fill in the holes, and provide for organizations what they needed to maximize the resources from others and provide continuity of strategy for their programs. Meyer often provided the bridge, the connective tissue. Flexibility of funding offered precious opportunity for continuity, to keep projects moving forward. Flexibility helped people do what they knew would be most effective. Flexibility allowed leaders to think in terms of whole strategies instead of disconnected parts. As a consequence, they were able to develop and deliver effective programs. The flexibility of Meyer's funding also maximized the investment of other funders.

## 4 Coordinating with Other Funders

Meyer provided funding in coordination with two other major funders, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (a state funder) and Bonneville Power Administration (a federal funder). This provided thoughtful and strategic support for organizations. The funders were able to coordinate their own funding in light of the funding of others. They were able to think about the impact of the whole system, and how to maximize their own parts. They could play to their strengths. Grantees, in turn, were able to align their work in coordination with a group of funders working together. They worked within a common architecture of resourcing.

## 5 Developmental

Even though Meyer was exercising leadership for the field through funding and facilitation, they did not attempt to lead the field from out in front. They led from within. This provided a culture of mutuality and trust. It fostered collegial relationships between Meyer and leaders throughout the system. It enabled funding strategy to evolve and develop over time, partly in response to wisdom throughout the basin, to the emerging knowledge of what worked and what did not work, and to a variety of perspectives from various communities and disciplines. They often used funding not as a pre-determined roadmap, but as a spark to get the embers to glow. Then, they used funding to support the development and redevelopment of programs and initiatives.

## 6 Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

As the need to advance equity became a clearer priority for Meyer, the work of WRI began to reflect urgency for the environmental work of the Willamette to become relevant to and representative of all communities, especially communities of color and indigenous communities. The WRI acknowledged that the watershed restoration field was predominantly white, despite a shared goal to improve river health for all. Meyer's approach to funding became characterized by an intention to disrupt the status quo of a restoration field lacking diversity and bring about a transformational change toward community inclusion. Their DEI focus added a critical priority to restoration funding. It was activated in a deeply engaging way, through convenings and critical conversations as much as through the deployment of resources.

# Why Meyer Funded

Improving the health of the Willamette River was the most clear and obvious reason for Meyer to fund the Willamette River Initiative.

The river is linked to the lives of people and communities throughout the basin. Its health is inextricable to the biodiversity of all life in the basin. Its health is inextricable to the health of its people.

To improve the health of the river, Meyer recognized there would need to be improvement in three areas: (a) greater alignment among those working on the river, (b) stronger foundation for organizations dedicated to improving river health, and (c) a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive river health movement where the benefits and impacts of river health are equitably experienced by all communities regardless of race, ethnicity, income level, or other factors.

The team at Meyer was driven by a vision to impact people, organizations, and communities as a way to

improve the health of the river and be improved by the health of the river. This affected the focus and dynamics of funding, for it was not simply about making measurable improvements in the river, it was about building the capacity of people, organizations, and communities to engage in the river and invest in the river and care for the river over time. Improvements in the metrics of river health alone are slow to materialize, taking decades to be empirically verified.

Meyer was motivated to improve the health and vitality of the Willamette River. To reach that goal, Meyer funded improvements in the people, organizations, and communities interacting with the river to bring a legacy of care for the welfare of the river and its communities.

# Impact of the Funding

An evaluation of the impact of the WRI undertaken in 2019/2020 demonstrates the effectiveness of Meyer's approach to funding. As a result of a funding approach that was sustained, responsive, flexible, coordinated, developmental, and equity-focused, people and organizations through the Willamette River basin took enormous strides forward in their capacity to work together towards a healthy river. Meyer's funding forged alignment among people and organizations. It strengthened the capacity of people and organizations. And it advanced the ability of people and organizations to take action toward greater inclusion, equity, and diversity in the work toward river vitality and health. The effects, in many ways, are transformational. The legacy of Meyer's funding through the WRI will continue to be seen in years to come.