
LOWER MISSISSIPPI DELTA INITIATIVE

Stakeholder Interview Briefing Report



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INTRODUCTION

In 1988 Public Law (PL) 100-460 was passed which established the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission and designated 219 counties across the states of Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee as the Lower Mississippi Delta Region. The aim of the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission was to examine the Lower Mississippi Delta Region and identify people's needs, problems, and opportunities. Upon completion of the study, the Commission published a report which made a variety of suggestions pertaining to the protection of natural, cultural, and historic resources, and the development of educational opportunities. This report led to further action through the enactment of Public Law 103-433 which created the Lower Mississippi Delta Region Initiatives (LMDI). The law establishing the LMDI required the development of a series of studies, plans, and a program including (1) a study of important natural, recreational, historical or prehistorical, and cultural lands, waters, places, and structures within the delta region; (2) a comprehensive recreation, interpretive, and visitor use plan for any national scenic byways or national trails system routes identified in the study of resources and sites; (3) a list of sites and structures suggested as potential national historic landmarks or other designations under the National Park Service; (4) a plan for the establishment of a delta region Native American heritage corridor and heritage and cultural center and a delta region African American heritage corridor and heritage and cultural center with a system of satellite or cooperative sites; (5) a plan for a music heritage program; (6) a plan to assist historically black colleges and universities to preserve and interpret identified important prehistoric or historic campus sites and structures; (7) a feasibility study of establishing a delta antiquities trail or delta antiquities heritage corridor; (8) the development of a 10-year plan to stabilize, preserve, and interpret the sites and structures identified for a delta antiquities trail or heritage corridor; (9) the establishment of a program for research, interpretation, and preservation of key historic and archeological resources in the delta; and (10) a demonstration project for curating and conserving archeological accounts and collections within federal and state agencies. To ensure the completion of all items within the legislation, the National Park Service (NPS) was designated the managing agency of the LMDI.

In the founding project charter, 19 NPS units fell within the boundary of the Lower Mississippi Delta region, however, over time this increased to 22 units (new units denoted by an asterisk [*]) including:

1. Arkansas Post National Memorial,
2. Brices Cross Roads National Battlefield Site*,
3. Buffalo National River,
4. Cane River Creole National Historical Park and Heritage Area,
5. Central High School National Historic Site,
6. Fort Donelson National Battlefield,
7. Fort Smith National Memorial,
8. Gateway Arch National Park (formerly Jefferson National Expansion Memorial),
9. Gulf Islands National Seashore,



10. Hot Springs National Park,
11. Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve,
12. Lincoln Home National Historical Park*,
13. Natchez National Historical Park,
14. Natchez Trace Parkway,
15. New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park,
16. Ozark National Scenic Riverways,
17. Pea Ridge National Military Park,
18. President William Jefferson Clinton Birthplace Home National Historic Site,
19. Tupelo National Battlefield*,
20. Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site,
21. Shiloh National Military Park, and
22. Vicksburg National Military Park.

Since the early years of the program, the LMDI solicited projects to implement PL 103-433 and representatives met annually to choose and fund projects for the following year. After operating for more than 25 years, the National Park Service concluded that a review of the initiative's operations was needed to ensure efficiency and align with best practices for program management, and that an Administrative History would provide valuable documentation of past operations as a basis for discussion of change. This effort was particularly timely, given changes in the agency's Financial Assistance program that led to a pause in LMDI program activity in 2019. To meet the need for programmatic background and knowledge the Park Planning and Stewardship branch of the Interior Region 2 (IR2) Cultural Resources Division partnered with the Eppley Institute for Parks and Public Lands at Indiana University to catalog the history of the program, to interview stakeholders concerning program operations, and to develop an Administrative History of the initiative's first 25 years.

Study Purpose

The purpose of the current study is to document the history of the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative and current operation of the program to be able to better plan for the future. To achieve this the project the deliverables included:

- (1) an administrative history of the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative,
- (2) stakeholder interviews, and
- (3) facilitation and observation of an annual meeting.

This document describes the protocol and process used for the stakeholder interview element of the project, and the findings.



METHODS

The Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative Operations Planning study included interviews with key stakeholders. The key stakeholders were superintendents or staff from the National Park Service units associated with the LMDI, involved IR2 regional staff, involved partners, and NPS employees from the early years of the program.

Study Design

The project employed thirty-minute, semi-structured phone interviews to understand stakeholder perceptions of program involvement; program knowledge; program time commitment; communication and outreach; funding and legislative intent; and program effectiveness. The initial set of interview questions were developed by the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative Board Vice-Chair and refined by the Eppley Institute research team. These preliminary interview questions were asked of stakeholders during informal in-person fifteen-minute interviews at the annual meeting in October 2019.

After the annual meeting, the interview questions were revised and updated to ensure that all key issues which emerged during the annual meeting were captured in the questions. The questions were pilot tested with an Eppley Institute staff member for clarity, relevance, length, and question flow and adjusted to maintain clarity and flow. The revised questions were reviewed by the Branch Chief of Park Planning and Stewardship at the IR2 and it was agreed that minor adjustments to questions would be made during interviews based on the role and affiliation of the interviewee (i.e., park superintendent, program lead, or leader of a non-NPS organization) as well as for those who had played a specific role within the LMDI (e.g., website development or assistance with an early report). Due to the similarity of the final interview questions to the informal interview questions, those who had participated in an interview at the annual meeting were requested for a second fifteen-minute follow-up phone interview.

Each interview began with a script to assure participants of the confidentiality of the interview process and to obtain agreement to record the interview (see Appendix A). The script was followed by the interview questions (see Appendix B for the informal interview questions and Appendix C for the final set of interview questions).

Study Participants

A total of 36 different stakeholders with 27 different affiliations were identified through the Park Planning and Stewardship Branch at the IR2 regional office and through the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative Board of Directors. The participants in the stakeholder interviews included superintendents or staff from the 22 National Park Service units associated with the LMDI program, IR2 staff with high levels of program involvement, partners with high levels of program involvement, and NPS employees who were instrumental during the early years of the program. There were 16 individuals who attended the annual meeting and were requested for an interview and 11 individuals completed interviews. All 11 of these individuals were requested for a follow-up interview and 9 completed one. A total of 27 individuals were requested for a full interview and 22 completed interviews. Overall, 31 individuals were interviewed for the study.



Data Collection

The stakeholder interviews were designed to collect information about perceptions of program involvement; program knowledge; program time commitment; communication and outreach; funding and legislative intent; and program effectiveness. A set of preliminary informal interviews were implemented to inform the development of the final interview questions. These informal interviews took place at the annual meeting on October 17, 2019.

The Branch Chief of Park Planning and Stewardship at the Interior Region 2 emailed all stakeholders for participation in either a full or follow-up interview on January 23, 2020. The Eppley Institute followed up with all interview participants on January 24th, 2020 to schedule interviews. Interviews took place from January 2020 through May 2020. All interviews were recorded, and notes were taken.

Data Analysis

All interview notes were reviewed by Eppley Institute staff. The recordings were consulted when notes were not sufficient to understand participant meanings. The Eppley Institute entered data by question into Microsoft Excel for analysis. All data was coded and categorized to identify trends among stakeholders. Coding was data driven, meaning that the codes arose from the interview text. Individuals were noted for their current or past participation with the program and for their participation through the Board of Directors or in another role and when applicable results were separated by current or former engagement and role.



RESULTS

The Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative Operations Planning project included important perceptions from the stakeholders which are shared below.

Program Involvement

More than half of the respondents heard about the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative when they began engaging with it whether serving on the board of directors, applying for a grant, working on a project, or facilitating grants for others. However, many had heard about the program before their involvement; several were aware of the legislation when it was passed. Almost all of the respondents had heard about it from someone serving on the board of directors, but a few heard about it as they were informed of job duties or through the regional office.

Among those interviewed, most had become involved in the last 10 years, but 8 were involved since 2001-2010 and 5 first engaged in the very early years from 1995-2000. A third of the interviewees were park superintendents when they first engaged with the program, just over a quarter were park division chiefs in either interpretation and education or natural and cultural resources, three held leadership positions in NPS partner organizations, two were museum technicians, and the rest held varying roles mostly at the regional level. When asked about others from their park unit or organization involved, the majority of respondents named at least one other person who engaged with the program, however 11 respondents shared that they were the only person involved. The other involved personnel largely included park division chiefs, superintendents, deputy superintendents, administrative personnel, and regional grant staff.

Program Knowledge

When asked how they learned about the LMDI program, most participants had learned from someone at their park unit. Several others learned about it from someone on the board of directors at another park unit or from someone involved at the regional level. A few people learned about the program through research, board emails, the annual meeting, or through a grant application.

No respondents received formal onboarding or training for the program, however seven shared that they received informal training which mainly consisted of conversations with involved NPS staff or learning during the annual meeting. The rest of the respondents indicated they did not receive training at all.

The level of program knowledge varied among participants. On a scale from 1 to 10, participants rated themselves across the entire scale, with an average rating of approximately 6. The two lowest ratings came from individuals interviewed for their past knowledge of the program who are no longer engaged. Several participants shared that they felt more knowledgeable when they first got involved, but over time had lost that knowledge. The reasons for the ratings differed by participants; but those who rated their level of knowledge a 5 or lower generally discussed their lower level of involvement, their perception of lack of clarity about program goals and funding



regulations, and operational changes to the agencywide Financial Assistance program that had affected the LMDI program. Those with higher scores described this as reflecting their long-term involvement, substantial involvement, some involvement, or stated they had more to learn.

All participants shared that they were aware of the legislation that established the LMDI. On a scale of 1 to 10 participants rated their knowledge of the legislation on average a 6, but their scores ranged from 2 to 10. Those who rated their knowledge high (above an 8) stated that they had read the legislation and knew it extensively. Others who rated their knowledge above a 5 shared the reason for their score was that time had passed since their last review of the legislation. Interestingly, some who rated their knowledge above a 5 shared that they had read the legislation but did not know it extensively. Those who rated their knowledge a 5 or below most often stated the reasons for their scores were that they had read it but did not know it extensively and that time had passed since their last review of the legislation.

Program Time Commitment

Many of the interview participants stated that they did not devote substantial time to the LMDI program. For those who shared some of the things they worked on the development of project proposals and entering them into PMIS came up the most. Participants also mentioned their participation in the annual meeting and work on executing projects once they were funded. A few participants discussed outreach to partners, engagement with partners on projects, and facilitating the funding for projects at their park units.

Only one of the interview participants tracked their time spent on the program, however most participants were able to provide estimates of the amount of time spent on the program. The estimates ranged from 500 hours (for the program coordinator) to 0 hours for an individual who works on funding projects for the program. Given the pause in processing of Financial Assistance agreements in 2019, this likely explains the low number of hours for this specific individual. Those individuals whose estimates of time were higher generally had LMDI projects they had been working on. When asked if the amount of time spent increased since engaging with the LMDI, just over half of respondents shared it had not, the rest stated it had. One reason several respondents shared for the increase in their time was the effort needed to study operational changes for the LMDI program. This indicates that once the intended operational updates are complete the time spent will stabilize. The majority of respondents felt the amount of time spent on LMDI work was appropriate; most shared that time spent was equivalent to their level of engagement, whether due to project work or a lack of engagement.

Communication and Outreach

More than half of the NPS respondents currently engaged in the program shared that they communicated with other NPS units. Generally they communicated about projects, however in the last year communications have focused on program operations, and in many cases the challenges the program was facing due to the need for improved operational efficiency. They also discussed program participation, whether it was



promoting it to parks that were unaware, reaching out to better understand funding requirements, or work on project proposals. More than half of the respondents also shared information with community partners. Among those who did share information, they usually communicated through conversations. Many reached out to specific partners, such as those they had worked with before or organizations that seemed to align with the intent of the legislation establishing the LMDI. Some respondents shared that they tried to reach out to broader audiences and contacted other organizations to help with outreach. The website, brochures, and emails were used to communicate to partners to a lesser extent.

Just over a third of respondents shared that they promoted the LMDI and two more shared that they did in the past. Two of these individuals only promoted the program to NPS staff. The rest of the respondents did not promote the program and for several participants program promotion was not applicable to their job. Those that promoted LMDI participation most often had formal and informal conversations with existing partners, but several reached out to their local communities. Three people promoted it only within the NPS, two used the brochure, and another two used the website for promotion.

There was some consensus on which audiences the funding helped most. Many respondents felt the funding should go to local communities in the Lower Mississippi Delta region, some specified underserved communities including minority populations, low-income communities, and rural areas. They also felt that smaller organizations were generally better recipients. They believed that cultural and heritage organizations and museums were a good fit for funding as well as projects that benefitted tourism. A few people also noted tribes, universities, and youth as audiences that LMDI funding should serve. Four respondents did not know who the funding would best serve.

Funding and Legislative Intent

When asked about the types of projects that best serve Lower Mississippi Delta region communities, many participants indicated that preservation was important. Preservation was discussed mainly in the context of structures; however preservation of culture also came up several times. Projects that increased tourism were also perceived to be helpful to communities; in many cases the participants specified this as heritage tourism enhancement. Other more frequent responses included heritage, culture, exhibits, festivals, research, and interpretation and education.

In consideration of the types of projects that the grants should be used to fund, consistent responses emerged. Respondents shared that projects that enhanced tourism, especially heritage tourism should be funded. In addition, they emphasized the importance of the legislation and that projects should tie into the scope outlined in (PL) 103-433. The stakeholders interviewed were supportive of education and interpretive projects, festivals and events, projects related to history, heritage, or culture, and those that improved facilities or structures. Many respondents also highlighted the importance that the project have a benefit to local communities. A smaller number of respondents endorsed projects specific to museums and planning. Some people also noted that



projects which had a long term impact were important. Several responses also emerged relating to projects that should not be funded. The most frequently mentioned was park-specific projects, meaning projects that only impact resources within or visitors to parks, followed by those that had one-time impacts such as festivals and events.

Most of the respondents felt that past projects met the criteria outlined in the legislation. A few people thought they did for the most part, but not in all cases. One person thought that half of the projects met the legislative requirements, while three individuals felt that past projects did not align with the legislation. Seven respondents did not know and chose not to respond. For those that did not feel past projects met the legislation or were less certain, when asked what types of projects would meet the legislation, their responses tended to coalesce around projects that had positive impacts for the community. The three project types which were each mentioned once included archeology, education, and historic preservation.

When asked about whether or not limitations should be placed on the grant amounts, a large number of respondents thought that there should be. They seemed to feel that this was necessary because of the availability of funding or because it allowed the program to impact more projects. In addition, some people felt it was important to maintain flexibility for different project needs. Interestingly, those who believed there should be limitations, were undecided, or felt there should be no limits, all cited program flexibility as their reason. Finally six of the stakeholders thought that there should be no limits. Those who thought this mentioned that worthy programs may be deserving of the full amount and limitations discouraged applications for funding.

Program Effectiveness

Stakeholders perceived the most beneficial part of the LMDI as giving back to the communities through funding, expertise, or other resources and partnering with communities. To a lesser extent they also perceived the ability of the program to reach underserved communities, the opportunity to develop relationships with communities, and the education opportunities the program provides for those within the region as well as those outside of it as valuable.

When asked about their perceptions of what the NPS role in the LMDI should be several stakeholders stated facilitating the funding process. Others indicated it should be to develop relationships with the community, to share information about the program with partners, to solely administer the program, to review and vote on projects, or they were not sure. A variety of other opinions were given however in most cases they did not receive support from more than two people.

The stakeholders had several concerns when it came to program management. They were concerned about the potential for bias which might occur when parks submit projects and are responsible for project funding decisions as well. There was also some discussion about the time it takes to administer the program given the time constraints of NPS staff. A couple of stakeholders thought the board membership should be broader than superintendents, that more transparency was needed in funding decisions,



and that communication needed improvement. Five stakeholders discussed that the current structure worked well and that having the parks manage the program was a key asset. When asked if they preferred a different structure just over half of the interviewees said they did, about a quarter did not know, and several said they liked the current structure. The alternative structures that were envisioned included a partner to administer grants, most often this was suggested as a nonprofit, or management by heritage areas, regional offices, or the Washington D.C. office.



DISCUSSION

The findings from the interviews provide some insight for guiding the future of the program. A few of the key findings from the interviews are highlighted below.

1. Most respondents first heard about the program when they first engaged in it. This suggests there is room for more program promotion internal to the National Park Service.
2. No stakeholders had received formal onboarding upon engagement with the program. In addition, the average stakeholder score for program knowledge and knowledge of the legislation was a 6 out of 10. For those stakeholders implementing the program to meet the legislation, training could be helpful. In a few cases training was mentioned as something that could help with long-term sustainability of the program. Any development of training might include board of director training. Should the LMDI program continue to accept project proposals from individual parks, then funding applicant training might be offered since the interviews revealed some ambiguity for stakeholders with program roles.
3. The amount of time the program takes seemed reasonable to most stakeholders, however many stakeholders did not engage very much. Periodically throughout the interviews the stretched schedules of superintendents and other NPS staff were mentioned which likely accounts for those who engage less. A few people mentioned the desire to have a broader membership on the board. Within the current program structure it would be helpful to have an annual representative from each NPS unit with a staff member able to meet the time commitments of the position.
4. The interviews revealed an opportunity to increase promotion efforts to external partners since just over a third of respondents actively promoted the LMDI program. This might align well with the audiences respondents felt the funding would best serve which were identified as local communities in the Lower Mississippi Delta region. It also aligns with thoughts on the most beneficial aspects of the program, namely giving back to communities.
5. There were a sizable number of stakeholders who advocated against park projects and a large majority of stakeholders who felt funding would best serve communities and small community organizations. Several stakeholders also felt that festivals and events were not a good use of the funding. Taking this into consideration alongside the legislation and reworking the funding guidelines if there are changes might help improve the program.



6. Generally respondents felt that limitations on the size of grants were necessary given the modest level of current funding (~ \$230,000 annually in recent years) and to better reach more organizations and communities. Several individuals brought up the two-tier system which was discussed at the 2019 annual meeting which would designate smaller grants and larger grants and allow for flexibility depending on the organization. This strategy would meet the desires of those who were undecided on funding limitations but were advocates of program agility.
7. Most stakeholders felt that the NPS should have a prominent role in the program, but more than half felt a different structure would be ideal. The structure most frequently mentioned was having a partner organization manage the funding aspect of the program.

Largely, the stakeholders were passionate about the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative and the benefits it could bring to the region, local communities, local organizations, and the National Park Service. The findings help to provide some guidance for next steps in the program.



APPENDICES

Appendix A: Stakeholder Interview Consent Script

My name is Gina Depper/Nona Henderson and I am an Assistant Research Scientist/Research Associate for the Eppley Institute for Parks and Public Lands at Indiana University. I am conducting research on the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative to be able to better guide the program into its future.

This research will be reported to the Cultural Resource Program at the Southeast Regional Office and the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative Advisory Board of the National Park Service. Your participation will involve one informal interview that will last approximately 30 minutes.

This research has no known risks. This research will benefit the National Park Service through understanding the operation of the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative to improve its functioning.

Please know that I will do everything I can to protect your privacy. Your identity will not be disclosed in any report that results from the study. Notes that are taken during the interview will be stored in a secure location.

I would like to audiotape the interview so that I can remember what was said. Saying no to audio recording will have no effect on the interview. The audio recording will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research project, in December of 2020. The recording will be stored in a secure location until this time. Would it be all right if I audiotaped our interview?



Appendix B: Informal Interview Questions

1. When did you first engage with this program?
2. How did you learn about the program when became involved?
 - a. Did you have any formal onboarding or training?
 - b. What did your onboarding or training cover?
3. Do you track the amount of time spent on program work?
 - a. Approximately how much time per year do you spend in your engagement in this program?
4. How do you communicate about the program with other involved NPS units?
5. How do you share information about the program with community partners?
6. What do you see as the most beneficial part of the program?
7. Who do you think is most impacted by the funding?
8. What do you believe the role of the National Park Service should be with this program?
9. What concerns do you have about program management?
10. How can the funds best serve the Mississippi Delta Communities?
11. What types of projects should the grants be used to fund?
12. Do you want there to be limits on the size of the grants?
13. Do you know of any models you believe could work for the funding?
14. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?
15. Do you have any questions for us?



Appendix C: Final Interview Questions

Opening Question

1. Can you tell us about your engagement with the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative (LMDI)?

Program Involvement

2. When did you first hear about the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative (LMDI)?
3. When did you first engage with the LMDI?
4. What was your position when you first engaged with the LMDI?
5. Is there anyone else from your unit who is engaged with the LMDI?

Program Knowledge

6. How did you learn about the LMDI when you became involved?
7. Did you have any formal onboarding or training?
8. What did your onboarding or training cover?
9. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being no knowledge or awareness and 10 being very knowledgeable and aware, what do you think your level of knowledge and awareness of the LMDI is?
10. Can you explain your reasoning for this score?
11. Are you aware of the legislation that established the LMDI?
12. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being no knowledge and 10 being very knowledgeable, what do you think your level of knowledge of the legislation is?
13. Can you explain your reasoning for this score?

Time Spent on Program

14. What do you work on for the LMDI?
15. Do you track the amount of time spent on LMDI work?
16. Approximately how much time have you spent in the last year on LMDI work?
17. Has that amount of time increased since your first engagement with the LMDI?
18. Does the current amount of time spent on LMDI program work feel appropriate?

Communication and Outreach

19. Do you communicate about the LMDI with other involved NPS units?
20. What do you communicate about with other involved NPS units?
21. How do you share information about the LMDI with community partners?
22. Do you promote the LMDI?
23. How do you promote the LMDI?
24. Which audiences does the LMDI funding best serve?

Projects, Funding, and Legislative Intent

25. What types of projects best serve the Mississippi Delta Communities?
26. What types of projects should the grants be used to fund?



27. Do you think the projects that have been funded in the past meet the criteria outlined in the legislation?

28. If not, what types of projects would meet the legislative intent?

29. Do you want there to be limits on the size of the grants?

Program Effectiveness

30. What do you see as the most beneficial part of the LMDI?

31. What do you believe the role of the National Park Service should be with the LMDI?

32. Do you have any thoughts about program management (i.e., advisory board structure)?

33. Do you think a different structure for funding and program management would work better?

34. If so, what type of model?

35. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

36. Do you have any questions for us?

