

# Modernizing Restoration

Advancing  
restoration benefits  
tracking



ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY  
**INNOVATION**  
CENTER

## *Part of the Series:*

Cracking the Code: Federal  
technology innovation to  
heal our natural environment



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## Why This Matters

- Restoring our environment is critical in fighting climate change; we need to get smarter about where and how we do this.
- RIBITS is a national system, developed by the Army Corps of Engineers (US ACE), to track America's mitigation program across wetlands, streams and habitats for endangered species.
- RIBITS could play a more important role in tracking projects and enabling markets for restoration benefits, but needs more support to realize this vision.

## What To Do

- Expand capabilities for tracking benefits, like carbon, to help create an efficient marketplace for investment.
- Initiate a user-centered design process to simplify tracking progress toward goals and strengthen trust in RIBITS.
- Connect RIBITS to existing data systems to increase efficiency and enable coordinated decision-making.
- Budget and plan for RIBITS continued use and improvement.

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## Why This Matters

Currently, there are a number of federal initiatives to address climate change by managing carbon and other natural resources more effectively. Key to their success will be the ability to concretely track the benefits of restoration projects that store carbon, reduce flooding, and improve biodiversity, among other benefits. A user-friendly centralized system can catalyze the development of interconnected and innovative projects, and drive significant private investments in climate work. It is also necessary for accountability and agency coordination at the national level for policies like no net loss of wetlands.

The Regulatory In lieu fee and Bank Information Tracking System (RIBITS), a national IT system developed by the Army Corps of Engineers (US ACE), was built over a decade ago for the specific purpose of tracking wetland and stream mitigation banking and has the potential to meet this need, but it's falling short. Although RIBITS is national in scope and has been added onto over time, states are seeing limitations and starting to build their own internal systems. Without urgent action states will continue to develop one-off solutions which are not cost-effective and undermine cross-boundary work. Smart federal investment can strengthen collaboration between nonprofit organizations, federal and state agencies, and the environmental sector to make progress on environmental goals.

## What To Do

### Expand options for tracking environmental markets

Environmental projects by their nature yield multiple benefits to biodiversity, air, land, and water - financing and funding projects with an eye towards realizing these multiple benefits presents an opportunity for new investment from the government and the private sector. For example, some states are moving toward a Pay for Success contracting (PFS), a model that defines desired outcomes and invites the private sector to deliver those in advance of payment to ensure outcomes are achieved. Unfortunately, matching the supply of these projects to funding opportunities is a challenge. Updates to RIBITS can accelerate new partnerships to develop innovative projects and unlock new revenue streams.

For another example, carbon sequestration efforts are highly compatible with RIBITS objectives. In addition to reducing credit duplication and market inefficiencies, this update would support landowners in developing projects, which could deliver for trade or sale multiple additional ecosystem benefits. With a one-stop resource for aquatic resources, habitat banking, nutrients and carbon markets, public and private investors can better scale projects to generate co-benefits resulting in more ecosystem restoration and management.

## Modernize RIBITS' Design

Websites that do not leverage modern interfaces reduce engagement. Redesigning RIBITS with a user-friendly interface can build trust and confidence in both RIBITS and environmental initiatives. Efficient and successful environmental markets necessitate visibility into the demand and supply of credits. To spur this, a Human-Centered Design (HCB) process should be used to create and evaluate a feedback-driven redesign of RIBITS to increase accessibility and utility for those looking to understand mitigation banking trends in the US. By redesigning RIBITS around the system's target users' goals and workflows from the start, the system can better support the implementation of environmental initiatives and a whole-of-government approach to data collection, sharing, and use.

## Connect RIBITS to Existing Data Systems

To effectively use RIBITS data to track progress toward goals, like no net loss of wetlands, it must be combined with other public and private data, such as from the National Wetlands Inventory, permits, and mitigation bankers. For example, Section 404 permitting data from another Army Corps regulatory IT system (known as ORMS) is essential to understand where development projects are occurring and what level of mitigation is needed, but a limited amount of data from the ORMS is only available to administrators in RIBITS, not the public. Furthermore, allowing more external data to be submitted and shared publicly in RIBITS, such as on pending and reserved credits, would help the market understand where to focus upcoming mitigation banking activities. Building out the digital infrastructure to expand data sharing would save time, create actionable insights, and give us a realistic picture of whether we are achieving no net loss of wetlands.

## Budget and Plan for Continuous Use and Improvement

Since RIBITS was built, it has not kept pace with stakeholder requests for added functionality due in part to stagnant federal funding levels, the inability for states to fund improvements, and no public plan to help prioritize new features. New federal investment into RIBITS has mainly been to add new modules for very specific purposes, not with a view toward addressing the full range of public and private sector user needs. To stop the cycle of one-off requests and constraints on the overall utility of RIBITS, it's time to budget and plan differently. A new approach should include a streamlined process for requesting new functionality, co-developing a strategic plan for RIBITS expansion focusing on desired outcomes, and the ability to use a greater variety of funding sources.