



Developing a State-Based Advocacy Program

Beldon's Key States Program sought to increase the clout and policy impact of environmental advocates in five states – Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Wisconsin. Each state had a strong environmental ethic but under-funded advocacy community, and the potential to mobilize a greater public and policy consensus for environmental protection. The program's goal was to bring change at the state level that would ultimately help tip the balance towards federal policy reform.

Beldon's strategies achieved varying levels of success in four of the states. But the effort to promote change in Florida did not succeed.

Here's what we learned from that experience and our more successful work in other states:

1. **Conduct a thorough scoping of the challenges and opportunities to bring change in the state.** Beldon felt it understood the conditions it would face in Florida and the potential for change. On the ground, however, the foundation discovered it had underestimated the difficulties it would encounter.
2. **Set realistic expectations and develop an appropriate strategy.** Beldon sought to have a statewide impact in Florida. But given the size of the state, the divisions within the environmental community, the lack of an infrastructure for collaboration, and the level of funds required to accomplish this ambitious goal, it might have been wiser to focus on a few specific areas of the state and, if successful, to eventually scale up.
3. **Assess in advance the feasibility of engaging other funders in this work and take time to build these relationships.** Beldon had counted on engaging Florida's large donors in supporting efforts to build a strong environmental advocacy coalition. While it succeeded in bringing some smaller foundations on board, it discovered that most of the larger donors tend to give to national projects outside their state.
4. **Identify strong leaders and support them to be successful.** Beldon did not find the leadership in Florida that could anchor and advance coalition-building work.
5. **Be flexible – there is no cookie cutter model.** Beldon's strategy in its key states continually evolved to address the specific dynamics it encountered in each state.
6. **Establish benchmarks, assess at frequent intervals what's working well and less well, and adjust strategy accordingly.** Beldon tried a range of strategies to build a strong environmental coalition in Florida. But given its comparatively short time horizon, the foundation could not afford to maintain this commitment without some encouraging signs of progress. When it became clear after six years that this work was unlikely to bring even gradual change, the foundation phased out its funding.