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Sense of urgency prompts Brainerd sunset

Ann Krumboltz

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Driven by a sense of urgency about ecological issues facing our planet, and by founder and president Paul Brainerd's desire to see the results of his foundation's efforts in his lifetime, the Brainerd Foundation is developing a strategy to spend out its assets over the next 10 to 12 years.

The Seattle-based foundation currently invests about \$2.5 million in grants per year, often exceeding the minimum required by US law and dipping into its endowment to fund projects of special importance. It now plans to almost double that amount, which means that sometime around 2020, after 25 years of grantmaking, the endowment will be gone and the foundation will close.

The foundation is currently working with external stakeholders, including grantees, advisers and other foundations, to help identify opportunities for expanding its effectiveness during the spend-out period. Its current strategic plan, adopted in 2005, sets out the primary goal of building 'the will of communities and policy leaders to protect our region's air, land and water'.

It is likely that much of the additional spending will be used to deepen investments in the foundation's three current programme areas: conservation policy, place-based conservation, and organizational capacity-building for the conservation movement. Recognizing that advocacy and activism are keys to achieving environmental change, the conservation policy programme focuses on helping decision-makers at state and local levels to make informed choices by uniting policy development and civic engagement efforts. The place-based programme aims to conserve specific landscapes, selected using conservation biology and other criteria. The organizational capacity programme promotes leadership development and the effective use of technology and communications tools.

The foundation also has three special funds – the Catalyst, Opportunity and Grassroots Funds – that supplement its programme grants. The Catalyst Fund gives grantees the luxury of 'planning grants', which are designed to increase grantee capacity to think how to become more effective in the future. The Opportunity Fund provides small grants to help groups take advantage of short-lived, new opportunities. The Grassroots Fund supports small organizations facing critical challenges in their communities.

The foundation also wants to ensure that spending out does not harm its grantees. Thus, it expects to fund more capacity-building efforts to help grantees build up their donor base, among other things. As the same strategic plan will remain in place, many grantees can expect to receive the same level of support from the foundation. But some will receive increased funding and others will inevitably need to be cut. In the short run, the foundation will have more money to give away and some new initiatives may be added. All the foundation's work has been focused on environmental issues in the north-west of the US and that will remain the case.

Besides intensifying support for its current grantmaking, the Brainerd Foundation may also invest time and effort in helping to cultivate more regional philanthropic leadership, to build capacity among the next generation of philanthropists.

Spending out or 'sunsetting' isn't for every foundation. It's important that some foundations, like Ford and Rockefeller, don't spend out but remain in perpetuity as they were designed to do. Paul Brainerd, who was a newspaper editor and a software company CEO (he financed the foundation with proceeds from the sale of Aldus, the software company that created PageMaker) prior to his career as a philanthropist, has been thinking about spending out for a while. He doesn't have heirs, he wants to see the money spent in his lifetime, and he wants to have the biggest impact possible. He was inspired in part by discussions with John Hunting, Trustee of the Beldon Fund, which completed a spend-out this year after initiating the process ten years ago.

More important, however, was Paul Brainerd's desire to 'be able to see for myself that our work has a lasting impact'. As a concerned environmentalist, he is aware that the ecological challenges before us create an urgency to spend the money sooner rather than later. 'The world is a precarious place,' says Brainerd. 'Waiting can be a very dangerous strategy, as can relying on halfway measures. We must strive to save what we can now.'

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