



## OSM/VISTA Watershed Team

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The Office of Surface Mining and AmeriCorps VISTA created an innovative new partnership in 2001 to bring new capacity to the volunteer watershed groups of the Eastern coal region. Working together to find groups that are ready to



sponsor a full-time VISTA position over three years, this growing partnership is quietly bringing new strength and new hope to coal country. State by state, watershed by watershed, partnership by partnership,

volunteer watershed groups are building on a deep tradition of hard work and close ties to community, to their land, and to a place, a watershed, they call home. These are the new stewards of one of America's most ravaged, yet perhaps its most challenging environmental frontier, a huge ecosystem of people, land and water ready to be reclaimed, returned to both environmental and economic health. These watershed groups and their OSM/VISTA Volunteers are pioneering in a land of hardy mountain pioneers, their approach grass roots at its smallest and strongest. The consequences of their work reverberate deeply



in the local culture as well as the regional ecosystem.

These watershed groups (there are now hundreds in coal country) are effective where it counts the most, in their local areas. While many have been remarkably



effective in marshalling the volunteer efforts of many, they are limited by their simple capacity to do even more, to stay in the fight every day. OSM and the AmeriCorps VISTA program partnered to create the OSM/VISTA Team to assist these local watershed groups in building

their capacity to create a better life. Today, after little more than two years of development, there are more than 30 full-time OSM/VISTA Volunteers serving as Watershed Development Coordinators in 7 Appalachian coal states.

These OSM/VISTA Volunteers are often the only staff able to work full-time for watershed interests. Their work is built around a set of Core Goals: build capacity in the watershed

organization, organize the water quality monitoring critical to future funding, reach out to youth and adults in their community to create awareness about watershed issues, engage in economic revitalization efforts and find the funds to keep all this critical work moving forward.



These are challenging goals. Too often, watershed groups have few effective connections to sources of assistance in either State or Federal offices and when they do find opportunities, they often lack the time or the skills to make effective use of potential sources of support. They need useful access to educational materials for their local schools and more effective approaches to fundraising and constituency development and they need access to this information in their own local world. Finally, they need a source of fresh energy, inspiration and leadership that understands and respects their work and their challenges. We



bring OSM's demonstrated record of success in building innovative partnerships in Coal Country and VISTA's commitment to fighting poverty and building local capacity to the local groups determined to make the system work for them and create a better life for generations to come.

While part of the answer to the challenges of coal country is the OSM/VISTA Initiative, we also recognize the need for a critical network of support built around those OSM/VISTA Volunteers. Working with coal-country watershed groups over the last three years, two people at the Office of Surface Mining, both with other duties, worked with State and Federal Agencies to develop the beginnings of this network of support. It now includes:

- a booklet celebrating the best of this watershed work, Hope & Hard Work, funded by EPA and published by the Canaan Valley Institute,
- the OSM summer Watershed Internship Program that placed 33 interns in 9 states in 2003, many with OSM/VISTA sites,

- a Cooperative Agreement between OSM and the National Endowment for the Arts to bring designers and artists into community-driven design projects for acid mine drainage treatment systems,
- a reconceptualized approach to EPA Brownfields Assessment projects to fit coal-impacted watersheds. Local OSM/VISTAs successfully obtained one Pilot project in PA in 1999 and two new projects in 2002, WV and TN, each a \$200,000 grant for environmental assessment in their watershed.
- the Eastern Coal Region Roundtable, a conduit between Federal agency watershed programs and local watersheds and a voice for the watersheds of the region. Now recognized by EPA and jointly funded by EPA and OSM, the ECRR maintains an active list of over 1400 watershed groups.

This was not done alone: other agency funds and other agency personnel play critical roles in virtually every one of these partnership efforts, efforts that bring state and federal partners together in support of local projects assisted by OSM/VISTAs to make a difference.

To learn more about the OSM/VISTA program contact:  
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