

American

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Crowdfunding Matches Good Ideas with Online Investors

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer | 07 March 2013

Washington — Do you need a business loan? Can you convince strangers in the social media world that your construction plan is a wise investment? Through crowdfunding, you can take your ideas to a global audience and harness their collective support to help you meet your goals.

With hundreds of online platforms, crowdfunding projects range from humanitarian relief projects and artistic endeavors to tech startups. Made possible by mobile and Internet technology, this relatively new tool for microfinancing also helps to address the challenge of getting money into the hands of people who may not be able to rely on more traditional sources, such as family or local communities, for capital investments.

“We’re on the cusp of a global movement and ... this is an opportunity to disrupt the way in which small businesses are financed,” Sherwood Neiss, co-founder of Crowdfund Capital Advisors, told a State Department webchat March 7.

Jessica Jackley, who is co-founder and chief marketing officer of the nonprofit crowdfunding platform Kiva, said thousands of people are getting funding through her organization every day, at an average of \$400 each.

“You see individuals making amazing things happen in their lives and in their family’s lives. They are slowly lifting themselves out of poverty, thanks to a few hundred dollars in loans. We see goat herders, seamstresses, farmers, small kiosk owners, small restaurant owners, people raising chickens and all kinds of other animals. We see people doing very hard work every day and ... doing everything right. All they needed was access to this small amount of capital,” she said.

Jackley said there are now many options for attracting contributors, including the pre-sale of inventory at discounted prices and opportunities to purchase equity in a business, along with more traditional cash loans and donations.

For example, in April 2012, the startup company Pebble Technology began a crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter.com after it failed to get enough money from business investors to produce its smartwatches. With the initial goal of raising \$100,000, it attracted investors by offering them significant discounts on the watches once they became available and was able to raise more than \$10 million in one month before it ended its campaign.

The key to success is to first decide upon an achievable business goal, whether it is purchasing a piece of equipment, hiring a staff member or obtaining office space, and then figuring out how much is needed to achieve that, Jackley said.

“I see the best results and I see the most success happen when people have done a lot of the hard work and they are asked the tough questions up front” before asking for investors. “They know why they’re [asking] for what they’re asking, and they know what they want above and beyond the money,” she said.

Neiss said it is important for those wanting to raise capital through crowdfunding to understand the need to convince contributors through communication and transparency that the business plan is sound and tell them how proceeds will be used and how decisions and priorities were made.

“Taking money from anyone is a very serious proposition and it comes with a great degree of responsibility. In exchange for that money, you have to go through disclosures,” he said.

“You have to make sure that investors see the opportunity, but understand the risks associated with it. And you have to look at the crowd as not just money but as people who bring knowledge and wisdom that can help you actually get your company to the next level.”

By offering equity, entrepreneurs will lose full ownership of their business, but they may not be in a position to pay lenders a fixed rate of return on their investment when they are first starting out, he said.

In addition, “when you give someone an actual piece of the pie or you give them the opportunity to own something within that business, they have a vested interest in the success of that company,” Neiss said. In fact, he said, they may become marketing agents for the company and bring it more attention and publicity through free advertising.

Jackley acknowledged a “confidence curve” for some people who are uncomfortable asking for help and unsure they can explain to contributors why they should be interested in their project.

“The truth is, there’s a global community of people that are excited to participate in these entrepreneurial endeavors and to participate in other people’s stories,” she said.

“Just imagine that a dozen other people have a good idea right now. It’s about who is going to execute that, who is going to get it done. And to be honest, sometimes being a

little bit vulnerable and putting yourself out there ... that sometimes is the person who will win," she said.

Conference Keeps Protections for Polar Bears at Same Level

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 07 March 2013

Washington — A proposal to increase the protection of Arctic polar bears failed to win necessary support March 7 among the parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The parties are holding their 16th conference in Bangkok March 3-14.

The United States, backed by Russia, had submitted a proposal that would have classified the polar bears as a species threatened with extinction and banned all commercial trade. Polar bears are currently ranked as a nonthreatened species, but with the potential to become so.

"We are obviously disappointed that the CITES membership failed to give greater protection to polar bears by limiting permissible trade in polar bear pelts and other body parts," said U.S. Deputy Secretary of the Interior David Hayes. "We will continue to work with our partners to reduce the pressure that trade in polar bear parts puts on this iconic Arctic species."

The polar range extends through the United States, Canada, Greenland, Norway and Russia. The global population is estimated to be 20,000 to 25,000 animals. Hunters killed 400 to 500 animals in the last decade for commercial trade in their skins, furs, claws and teeth, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) estimates.

Subsistence hunting by the indigenous people of the region harvests about 800 bears per year, FWS reports.

Loss of habitat and decline of sea ice attributed to warmer temperatures are the primary threats to polar bear survival throughout the animal's range. Stronger trade restrictions, in the U.S. view, would have improved the species' chances of survival.

"As polar bear hide prices have skyrocketed, more bears are being offered at auction and hunting levels have increased," said Daniel Ashe, FWS director and head of the U.S. delegation to the CITES meeting. "A CITES Appendix 1 listing would have ensured that commercial trade would not compound the threats of habitat loss that are facing this species."

The U.S. proposal for stronger protections failed by four votes, with opposition from the other range states of Canada, Greenland and Norway. A total of 80 members voted on the measure.

The respected International Union for Conservation of Nature has ranked polar bears as "vulnerable" on its Red List of Threatened Species. The animals are protected by two U.S. conservation laws, the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act. But these laws protect only the animals in U.S. territory, thought to be about 1,500.

In September 2012, Arctic sea ice reached its lowest point since 1979. Some scientists predict that current warming trends could lead to the complete disappearance of summer ice within 30 years.

Sea ice gives the polar bears a platform for hunting, a route for travel and a path back to mating areas.

A treaty that marks its 40th anniversary this year, CITES extends protections to about 5,000 animal species and 29,000 plants.

At the Bangkok meeting, the United States is also supporting proposals to increase protections for turtles and tortoises, considered among the most threatened vertebrates on Earth, and is allied with China in this area. A proposal to control trade of several species of sharks also will be debated. The U.S. delegation supports that proposal, though it is expected to face strong opposition.

On the sidelines of these votes, wildlife enforcement officers from around the world met as a group for the first time. Their goal is to scale up law enforcement cooperation to better coordinate countermeasures against transnational criminal organizations trafficking in illegal animals and animal products.

"The first global meeting of wildlife enforcement networks is an important step in our collective response to combating serious wildlife and forest crime," said CITES Secretary-General John Scanlon. "Coordinated responses that connect and align efforts across borders and organizations provide the best opportunities to combat this serious crime, and protect the species and people at risk because of it."

Burma Offers Opportunities for U.S. High-Tech Delegation

05 March 2013

Washington — The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) recently convened a group of U.S. high-tech representatives in Burma to explore opportunities in the country, USAID said March 4.

Representatives from information and communication technology (ICT) industry leaders Cisco, Google, HP, Intel and Microsoft gathered in Rangoon and Nay Pyi Taw for a weeklong visit to look at a range of joint opportunities

for accelerating affordable access to the Internet, strengthening transparent and efficient government and bolstering skills building.

“It has been an extremely successful visit,” said Maura O’Neill, USAID’s chief innovation officer. “I believe the government and industry and higher education leaders appreciated the commitment these world-class U.S. companies made to exploring collaboration opportunities on both social and economic development priorities.

“The promise of this new era is huge and we all share the same goal to move quickly to realize it.”

The high-tech delegation met with a wide range of public and private sector representatives and universities to discuss opportunities that can advance the country’s progress toward the goals of the U.S.-Burma Partnership for Democracy, Peace and Prosperity, the Open Government Partnership and the government’s Framework for Economic and Social Reform.

The group discussed opportunities for the technology companies to improve people’s access to information, create business opportunities, lower transaction costs and enhance social interaction. They examined skills-building opportunities at all levels of the national education system, including ICT technical training and adult learning to use technology to expand civic participation and to build connections between citizens and their government.

The delegation also explored opportunities to promote innovations in extending information technology access to underserved areas.

USAID has long-standing relationships with major global technology companies that have track records of achieving good outcomes in development while advancing core business interests. The companies bring deep expertise, leading-edge technology and extensive experience in strengthening governance and transparency, advancing education and fostering entrepreneurship and economic growth.

Contest Winners Find Ways to Engage Public on Arms Control

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer | 05 March 2013

Washington — Winners of the State Department’s “Innovation in Arms Control Challenge” received cash prizes for developing projects aimed at informing the public about the challenges of securing components and materials that could be used in weapons of mass destruction, and the potential role the public can play in helping their governments keep these items safe.

The contest was announced in August 2012, asking creative problem solvers to find an answer to the question “How can the crowd support arms control transparency efforts?”

The State Department announced the winners in a March 4 media note, and Acting Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Rose Gottemoeller joined them in a Google+ chat later in the day, where they explained their creations in greater detail.

In the chat, Gottemoeller said one of the current challenges of arms control is that the threats posed by nuclear, chemical and biological weapons “seem so arcane somehow” in the era following the Cold War. “These days it seems very remote and something that’s not really important to people’s day-in-day-out lives,” she said.

The contest could help to change this perception. Gottemoeller explained that it is “all important” to engage the public in arms control efforts as part of President Obama’s goal of ultimately ridding the world of nuclear weapons.

First-prize winner Lovely Umayam from Middlebury College’s Monterey Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California, won \$5,000 for developing Bombshelltoe, an online educational platform that examines how culture and nuclear issues can intersect to improve public understanding of nuclear- and arms control-related issues.

In the online discussion, Umayam described Bombshelltoe as a blog that examines arms control issues through popular culture. She said she had noticed that many people get their information about arms control issues through movies and other popular culture, and are often unaware of some basic issues, such as the difference between uranium and plutonium and what a nuclear-weapons-free zone is.

“The goal of Bombshelltoe is to foster a more meaningful conversation about arms control issues by exploring the intersection” between what the public learns through the media and other popular culture and what is true, she said. She hopes the blog will get more people interested in learning more details about arms control efforts.

There were also two runners-up, who each received a \$2,500 prize.

RUNNERS-UP CREATED MOBILE APP, LOCATION GAME

Allan Childers, an aerospace and defense industry consultant from Florida, developed a mobile application

similar to the concept of "Where's Waldo?," a popular book series also known as "Where's Wally?" that has inspired online games, a television show and a comic strip.

"I thought it would be a great idea to create a game along the lines of 'Where's Waldo?' except we'd call it 'Where's TLI?' [treaty-limited items]," Childers said, referring to weapons-related materials that are controlled under international agreements.

Game players would get information on how to spot TLI that is out of place and win points when their online avatars discover it.

"For example, a warhead would not travel as a warhead on the back of a flatbed truck so everyone could see. It would travel in a trailer. We would find those kinds of trailers and have people identify [them] if they see that kind of data," Childers said.

Sharing the runner-up prize is Rudolph "Chip" Mappus, a research scientist at Georgia Tech Research Institute who was inspired by how people are using GPS devices and smartphone technology for geocaching and other games where they find items that are otherwise hidden in plain sight.

"My proposal was to have treaty experts post online locations and tasks for players to complete, and then the players would go out and seek these locations," Mappus said. The players would learn how to verify treaty compliance and would submit what they find online for experts to verify that they completed the task, he said.

Gottmoeller said all three prizewinners were able to figure out "how to get the public more engaged in arms control monitoring and verification and to develop public understanding of the challenges that face us in this policy arena."

She stressed the importance of societal verification, or mobilizing the public to get involved and cooperate with their governments on arms control verification, just as they are already doing on environmental issues.

For example, during the Gulf of Mexico oil spill in 2010, local communities helped federal, state and local officials in their cleanup efforts by alerting them to where they saw conditions caused by the spill, she said.

In the past, arms control verification focused on larger items such as bombers and missiles that can be seen from space by satellites. Gottmoeller said that in the coming years individuals will play a greater role because there will be a much greater focus on smaller objects such as warheads being kept in storage areas.

In her remarks, the under secretary also announced that there will be another Innovation in Arms Control Challenge competition and that the State Department plans to announce details in the next few months.

Sea Temperatures Linked to Indian Malaria

05 March 2013

Washington — A multinational research collaboration links sea temperatures to malaria outbreaks in northwest India, a finding that may allow health officials to take greater measures to prevent epidemics.

Sea surface temperatures in the tropical South Atlantic ocean can be used to forecast malaria epidemics that will develop months later in northwest India, thousands of miles away, according to a University of Michigan (U-M) news release.

U-M theoretical ecologist Mercedes Pascual led the research group, which included contributions from the National Institute of Malaria Research in New Delhi; the Institució Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avançats and the Institut Català de Ciències del Clima, both of Spain; and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

"The climate link we have uncovered can be used as an indicator of malaria risk," Pascual said. "On the practical side, we hope these findings can be used as part of an early-warning system."

The research group delved into data collected from 1985 to 2006. They found that colder-than-normal sea surface temperatures in July were "significantly associated" with increases in both monsoon rainfall and malaria outbreaks in northwest India, which occurred in the final quarter of the calendar year.

"For this region of India and for this window of time in recent decades, the tropical South Atlantic appears to play a dominant role on rainfall and through rainfall on malaria," Pascual said.

Most malaria epidemics in northwest India occur in October and November. The group found that their occurrence correlated with a preceding summer monsoon season with ample rainfall to sustain a population of Anopheles mosquitoes that carry the malaria-causing Plasmodium parasite.

Nature Climate Change published the findings online March 3.

About 9 million malaria cases occur in India annually. The study's findings may give health officials greater warning time on a potential epidemic in a given year. That knowledge would allow better decisions about

mosquito-control measures and the timely mobilization of resources to ease the blow of a disease outbreak.

Malaria is more than a miserable and sometimes fatal disease. Research over the last decade has proven that recurring bouts of the disease can sap a nation's workforce, drain its resources and impede economic growth.

"Where malaria prospers most, human societies have prospered least," was a key finding in a 2002 study by noted developmental economist Jeffrey Sachs. His work showed "a striking correlation between malaria and poverty."

Several U.S. government agencies supported the Pascual research on malaria. The United States is working with international partners to help combat malaria through programs that address HIV/AIDS and the President's Malaria Initiative, which aims to end deaths from malaria by 2015.

The World Health Organization estimates that about 219 million cases of malaria occurred in 2010 with an estimated 660,000 deaths.

Global Law Enforcement Must Step Up to Stop Wildlife Trafficking

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 04 March 2013

Washington – Trafficking in wildlife is becoming a major criminal enterprise. The United States is working with other governments to identify ways to improve the international law enforcement response and protect endangered plants and animals.

The director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Daniel Ashe, explained the need for stronger enforcement March 4 in a briefing with reporters at the beginning of the conference on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) getting under way in Bangkok.

Speaking as head of the U.S. delegation to the CITES conference, Ashe said adopting international regulations for species protection is just one step, which must be followed by effective enforcement.

"How can we provide appropriate assistance so that countries, particularly developing countries, will have the law enforcement capacity, the management capacity, to ensure that these provisions are carried out?" Ashe asked. He said this is an important question being discussed by representatives of the 178 nations that are parties to the convention.

The CITES meeting began March 3 with CITES Secretary-

General John Scanlon telling the delegates, "We know the way, but we need the collective will." He spoke to about 2,000 delegates representing member nations, nongovernmental organizations and intergovernmental organizations.

Effective enforcement is one key activity to protect endangered species, Ashe said, but so is public education. Demand for products made from endangered species is what drives the slaughter of elephants for their ivory tusks, or the hunt for tiger pelts and bones. Ashe said better educating the public about the harm caused by consumption of these products is another important step in combating the trafficking.

The bones of the tiger, for example, are thought to have great healing powers in some cultures. Ashe said that belief can be changed. "We have worked effectively to develop education campaigns that there are modern medicines, proven medicines, that are much more effective in dealing with the same maladies."

CITES already extends protections to about 5,000 animal species and 29,000 plants. Proposals on the agenda for the two-week Bangkok meeting focus on additional protections for elephants, rhinos, polar bears, sharks, turtles and tortoises. Those last are among the most endangered class of animal on Earth, and the United States joins China and Vietnam in proposals to step up protections to help their survival.

The meeting agenda, which Ashe described as one of the largest in the 40-year history of the convention, includes proposals for protections of several species of sharks. Ashe said protecting marine species is especially difficult because the animals migrate widely through the territorial waters of many nations.

Despite that difficulty, Ashe said, protection of marine fisheries is a "particular priority and an important goal." Regional fisheries management organizations already in existence, Ashe said, could provide the mechanisms to "regulate trade and enforce the harvest requirements."

Regarding broader issues to be considered at the CITES conference, Ashe said the United States is also advocating that the polar bear be placed in the most restrictive classification of the CITES treaty, which would halt any commercial trade in polar bear parts. Though climate change and the resulting diminution of its Arctic sea ice habitat are likely the greatest causes of decline of this species, Ashe said ending any trade would help preserve the species.

But the U.S. delegation head predicts the polar bear proposal will be among the most controversial issues of the CITES meeting because the countries with territory in

the range of this animal do not agree that stopping the trade is necessary. The United States and Russia are in favor of restrictions, while Greenland and Canada are against them. Norway is the only other country in polar bear territory, and Ashe said its position is "somewhere in the middle."

U.S. Laws Targeting Gender-Based Violence Empower Women

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer | 01 March 2013

Washington – One important aspect in the achievement of gender quality is the prevention of violence against women and the prosecution of those who commit abuses. The Obama administration is working to protect women inside and outside the United States and improve their ability to seek justice and empower themselves in their societies.

Speaking February 28 in Geneva at a U.N. Human Rights Council event on "Women's Access to Justice," Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs Paula Schriefer said U.S. domestic efforts to reduce violence against women have had "a proven impact," and the United States is expanding its efforts globally through the 2011 U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

"Women in the United States fought long and hard to achieve laws that protect women from discrimination based on gender, and we enjoy the benefits of a justice system that can enforce these laws," Schriefer said.

In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act, which established the Office on Violence Against Women in the U.S. Department of Justice. Schriefer said that office has helped communities across the United States with financial and technical assistance as they developed programs, policies and practices "aimed at ending domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking, including legal assistance to victims, court improvement and training for law enforcement and courts."

All of these have helped to increase women's access to justice inside the United States and have had a significant impact on the level of violence, she said.

"Recent statistics show that between 1993 and 2010, the number of women killed by an intimate partner declined by 30 percent. And annual rates of domestic violence against women plummeted by two-thirds," Schriefer said.

Through its own experiences in recognizing that gender equality is a human right, the United States issued its National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security to "empower women to act as equal partners in preventing

conflict and building peace in countries threatened and affected by war, violence and insecurity," she said.

The plan aims to build the capacity of women living in conflict areas to serve in government, the security sector and civil society; work with countries to develop laws and policies that promote women's rights and meaningful participation; improve the ability of the United Nations to prevent and respond to conflict-related violence against women; and ensure that conflict early warning systems will include gender-specific data and respond to sexual and gender-based violence.

The National Action Plan demonstrates that U.S. efforts to ensure gender equality and equal access to justice "are not limited to domestic efforts," Schriefer said.

"Focusing on protection, the United States intends to support the development of effective accountability and transitional justice mechanisms that address crimes committed against women and girls. This includes multicountry efforts to support women's advocacy and capacity building against violent extremism," she said.

In her remarks, Schriefer highlighted specific examples from Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Liberia, Jordan and Kenya, where she said the United States is "actively working to advance women's access to justice and empowering women."

Universities Get Grants for Research to End Hunger

01 March 2013

Brookings, South Dakota – U.S. Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan visited South Dakota State University on February 27 to announce more than \$75 million in grants for research to ensure greater food security around the world.

The grants were made to teams at 21 U.S. universities to conduct research that will find solutions to increasing food availability and decreasing the number of food-insecure individuals.

"The grants announced today will help policymakers and others better recognize the food and nutrition needs of low-income communities," Merrigan said. "Globally, the population is expected to grow by more than 2 billion people by 2050. By investing in the science of America's renowned land-grant universities, our aim is to find sustainable solutions to help systems expand to meet the demands of growing populations."

Merrigan announced the awards at the university's campus in Brookings with university president David L. Chicoine and Barry Dunn, dean of the College of Agriculture and Biological Sciences.

The National Institute of Food and Agriculture made the grants. The institute supports research that will keep American agriculture competitive while helping to end world hunger, and focuses on achieving the long-term outcome of increasing domestic and international food availability.

This year's projects include research at South Dakota State University to examine community efforts to encourage healthy food choices and research at Purdue University to develop new strategies to defend against ear rot diseases in corn. Scientists at the University of Tennessee will identify ways to improve milk quality. A team at the University of California in Berkeley will work with tribal groups in the Klamath Basin in Oregon and California to build sustainable regional food systems to aid in enhancing tribal health and food security.

(This is a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov>)