We need to change how we access, build, and manage environmental data to equip federal agencies with what they need—tools and people—to deliver environmental solutions. That's where a Digital Service for the Planet (DSP) comes in.

WHY BUILD A DSP?

WE NEED TO CHANGE HOW WE ACCESS, BUILD, AND USE ENVIRONMENTAL DATA

Despite ongoing efforts by the Biden administration to tackle key climate resilience and environmental justice goals, most federal environmental initiatives involve numerous, siloed departments and agencies, and have overlapping but unmet data and technology needs. To implement cross-cutting environmental efforts effectively, the government needs to build, buy, manage, and deploy digital resources in ways that meet the needs of multiple agencies at once. Enter a Digital Service for the Planet (DSP). Originally (in 2021), our DSP vision was to expand within, or closely replicate, the U.S. Digital Service (USDS)—an innovative Obama-era initiative that anchored a dedicated team of technologists in the Executive Office of the President (EOP) to give federal agencies on-demand access to the technical expertise they needed to design, procure, and deploy technology for the public good. USDS has garnered many successes since then; but today, still lacks the specialized capacity, experience, and directives needed to meet the shared digital infrastructure needs of environmental agencies.

EVOLUTION OF DSP APPROACH

After two years of working to adapt the USDS model to meet our environmental data and tech needs, we've learned a lot—and are incorporating those lessons into current and future efforts. Although we began with a focus on how a small DSP team might improve strategic planning and procurement, technical development, and cross-agency coordination on digital infrastructure for environmental goals—all of which we believe should remain key objectives—we are currently executing a more comprehensive approach across several agencies and White House organizations (detailed below). At a high level, this evolved strategy maintains our original focus areas—i.e., key leadership (CIOs, CTOs, etc.); identifying resources within and outside of federal organizations; and funding/collaboration linked to environmental data—but it also incorporates a revised set of best practices and new focus areas. In sum, whatever DSP's best-suited organizational "home" turns out to be, we think it should work in parallel with—not as a unit within—USDS, and that a multi-pronged strategy built around targeted service coordination, expanded key skillsets, and actionable data standards across agencies is the best path forward. We elaborate each of these updated efforts below.

WHERE WE'VE BEEN

We launched our first call to action for a DSP in June of 2021, and, nearly a year later (in August of 2022), published a detailed Memorandum on the DSP vision in partnership with the Federation of American Scientists (FAS). The following spring, Jessie Mahr, Director of EPIC's Technology Program, was selected as a Policy Entrepreneur Fellow by FAS. The fellowship's work during 2023 helped illuminate how the DSP concept could be refined and brought to fruition—and also established productive relationships with stakeholders across organizations at both the White House and agency levels. The progress made to date has positioned us to increase our credibility with key audiences and leaders, and to continue focused DSP advocacy through our revised multi-pronged approach.

CURRENT AND FUTURE EFFORTS

We've identified several pathways to drive the DSP vision forward, and are building on this momentum across the following focus areas:

1. LEVERAGE TECH SERVICES AVAILABLE TO AGENCIES

- Many natural resource agencies haven't taken advantage of the numerous, but often obscure, resources available to them for supporting improved technology planning, procurement, and development around environmental goals. Since the DSP vision has started to take shape across several executive branch organizations, we are working to build awareness, facilitate key introductions across siloed agency organizations, and guide efforts to leverage such resources within and outside of agencies instead of creating duplicative efforts.

- Examples to date include federal services like the USDS, the General Service Administration's (GSA) 18F, and efforts to establish Presidential Innovation Fellows (PIFs) focused on DSP-aligned goals in key agencies. In recent months, we've recruited more agencies to apply to host PIFs, and efforts to do so for the next cycle or fellowship are currently underway. We've also made headway building awareness of resources like the US Digital Response, USDS, and 18F, across natural resource agencies.

2. EXPAND SKILL SETS WITHIN WHITE HOUSE OFFICES & FEDERAL AGENCIES

- In the last two years, we have identified and started addressing the need to expand organizational capacity and key skill sets aligned to the DSP vision across agencies. For example, we are in dialogues with the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and key agencies about how best to bolster technical capacity to guide National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Justice40-related efforts.

2. EXPAND SKILL SETS WITHIN WHITE HOUSE OFFICES & FEDERAL AGENCIES

- We've learned that the success of environmental digital services that cross organizational boundaries often depends on close coordination among agency leaders. We've identified Chief Data Officers (CDOs) as key advocates for data-driven policy making in this context—but most CDOs are relatively new positions with limited resources. Hence, we are actively engaging the CDO community, across environmental agencies, to identify strategies for improving how federal decision-makers use, manage, and share key data, and ultimately, how they can help drive toward DSP goals.

- We're also evaluating innovative models for digital services across federal organizations—and how aspects of these models might be adapted or developed across agencies to better realize the DSP vision.

3. INCORPORATE ACTIONABLE AND ACCESSIBLE DATA STANDARDS ACROSS EFFORTS

- Given the key role that expanded, accessible, and better integrated data plays in DSP-related work, we are building and incorporating actionable data standards into all our efforts. At one level, that means building DSP principles and goals into any legislative advocacy, advisory, or public comment efforts we undertake (e.g., as part of the federal rule-making process).

- It also means working to serve as key thought partners in related policy contexts. For instance, CEQ has been a key audience for our DSP advocacy to date, and we're encouraged by recent engagement related to the 2023 Fiscal Responsibility Act. CEQ was tasked with conducting a study assessing "the potential for online and digital technologies" to improve "public accessibility and transparency" in the environmental review process. This effort spans several of our priorities, and DSP's goals can continue to serve as a lens through which we will clarify key challenges and frame solutions.

WE LOOK FORWARD TO COLLABORATING

At EPIC, we believe that technology has real potential to improve and accelerate environmental solutions; but using tech productively, especially across disparate federal organizations, is often more about people and processes than the technology itself. So when it comes to increasing the pace of innovation across the many agencies that stand to benefit from a Digital Service for the Planet, we'll continue to highlight the key role technologists must play in that process. Ultimately, the DSP will serve as a vehicle—and we hope, a catalyst—for that more integrated approach to technology and innovation.

Lastly, your sustained support in recent months (and years!) has been integral to these efforts and our progress to date—and we're eager to keep building that momentum and this coalition moving forward. We also realize it's been a while since you've received an updated snapshot of DSP efforts. If you have ideas, feedback, questions—or if you're doing complementary work—let's connect!

It's time we change **how we access and share data** to equip government agencies with the information needed to **swiftly and effectively advance** environmental solutions.