



Partnership Assessment on the Bighorn National Forest

Compiled by the National Forest Foundation and the USFS National Partnership Office

The Partnership on Every Forest Program

Partnerships are essential to the Forest Service mission. For nearly 20 years, the Forest Service's National Partnership Office (NPO) has collaborated with our field colleagues and non-profit, government, and private sector partners to build a nationwide partnership program. More recently, the NPO has increased its focus on training and education, forest-level stakeholder engagement, and agency-wide support for partnerships through the "Partnerships on Every Forest" (PEF) program. This program is providing tools, expertise, and agency-wide support to continue growing the agency's partnership program and the relationships that make it possible. In collaboration with partnership professionals across the agency, the PEF team is working to address the agency's most pressing challenges one partnership at a time.

As the USDA Forest Service's Congressionally chartered nonprofit partner, the National Forest Foundation (NFF) is an important, neutral entity that shares in the desire to improve and increase partnerships between Forest Service units and nonprofit and community-based organizations. The NFF often serves as a bridge between nonprofit and community partners and the Agency, and is an experienced convener of stakeholders.

Working together, the NPO and NFF are visiting with Regions and Forests across the country to help build partnership strategies to increase land management and stewardship capacity. This Partnership on Every Forest (PEF) work is assessing challenges, opportunities and needs experienced by Forest Service regions and Forests in their work to partner with community and interest based organizations, local and state governments, and tribes. The NFF and NPO will collaborate with local units to address these needs and develop partnership action plans that support the unit's and partners' preferred projects and outcomes. The team will also document and share learning nationally around partnership challenges, lessons and opportunities identified in work across the different Forests and Regions.

The NFF, NPO, Regional, and Forest level staff identified Region 2 and the Bighorn National as the first Region and Forest for this work. Since early 2020, NFF and the NPO have conducted interviews and had conversations with Forest Service staff and partners to identify the strengths, challenges, and future opportunities for partnerships. The results of those conversations are presented below. Working with Bighorn staff, NFF and the NPO will identify outcomes of the interviews and conversations to develop into a partnership action plan. NFF

and the NPO will have additional report-out conversations with Forest Service staff and host a partner round table.

Methods

Conversations began with staff of the Bighorn National Forest in early 2020 to introduce the project and have initial discussions to understand the overall partnership environment on the Forest. Through subsequent meetings, Bighorn staff worked with NFF staff to identify initial interviewees. NFF staff conducted interviews with the initial list and utilized snowball sampling (asking interviewees who else should be interviewed) to identify additional partners for interviews. Interviews were conducted over the phone and via Zoom with staff from NFF to maintain neutrality and all interviewees were informed their answers would be reported anonymously. Interviews were conducted with 14 people including representatives from Wyoming Game and Fish, National Park Service, Sheridan Community Land Trust, Wyoming Wilderness Association, conservation districts, county commissioners, and recreation groups.

The following questions were asked of interviewees and were designed to gain an understanding of the strengths and barriers that exist in partnerships with the Bighorn National Forest and to understand the future opportunities interviewees saw for partnering with the Forest:

- Tell me about your relationship with the forest and your partnership role.
- How do you work with the staff of the Bighorn? What types of projects have you been involved with and with whom?
- In your partnership, what is working well?
- Is there anything you are particularly concerned about? Why?
- Do you feel there are opportunities to partner with the Bighorn that are not utilized?
- Are there any parties that have not been as engaged as they should be?
- Anything else you would like to share?

Strengths

In all interviews, partners pointed to success of partnerships with the Bighorn stemming from the **relationships** with staff of the Bighorn National Forest. One interviewee said they work with three different National Forests and have, by far, the best relationship with the staff of the Bighorn. Many cited **communication** as a reason for these strong relationships, stating that they could easily pick up the phone and call staff members and some staff members even make their cell phone numbers available. Responses also noted that even during controversial projects, it is possible to maintain a healthy working relationship with

staff and that staff are readily available for meetings. Respondents also pointed to the relatively **long tenure** that Forest Service staff on the Bighorn have as a contributing factor to successful relationships.

In terms of project development and implementation, multiple partners referred to the Forest Plan Revision process on the Bighorn that set the current **culture of outreach and communication** regarding project timelines. Interviewees referenced the cooperator agency meetings that convene annually to go over major projects, the convening of steering committees convened for individual projects, and the availability of staff to answer timeline questions as strengths in project engagement. The annual meeting of cooperating agencies was credited with **building trust**, particularly with the agriculture community, and helping to break down the wall between local and federal agencies. Creativity in outreach to the public and looking to partner on public engagement efforts was noted as processes in development on the Forest and seem promising.

Lastly, the theme of **shared interests and goals** arose in interviews with partners in different fields. The Buffalo Municipal Watershed Project and the dispersed camping strategy meetings were both noted as successes in partnership that allowed different agencies and organizations to accomplish multiple shared goals within the same project.

Barriers

Two themes stood out as barriers to successful partnerships in the past – **capacity and a lack of communication of priorities**.

In regards to capacity, interviewees mentioned **partners having to take more responsibility** on projects because either the Forest did not have the staff or the finances to complete the project as quickly as partners would prefer. Partners also mentioned that creative solutions to this problem may exist but the **limitations of being a federal agency** may prevent full exploration of these options.

Partners also expressed difficulty in knowing the Forest's top priorities so that they could offer help. A few interviewees said they would like to offer the work of their volunteers more but that they are **unclear on how the Forest prioritizes projects** and so are unclear in how they can get involved. Interviewees noted they overcome this barrier by reaching out to Bighorn staff and offering help, but also stated that they would prefer to hear from the Forest about priorities first so they could align their work better. Partners would prefer to see forestry sales aligning better with industry in the area and strategizing about priorities more on an agency-to-agency level (i.e., Bighorn National Forest to Wyoming Game and Fish).

Other barriers given by interviewees were feeling as though **the Forest is discouraged to work with the private sector, complications with volunteers** (like having to register volunteers well ahead of an event or getting volunteers reimbursements), **closing offices** (which makes the forest less visible), **confusion over Forest staff replacement** for key

positions, **and lack of communication** beyond the Schedule of Proposed Actions for NEPA projects.

Opportunities for Future Partnerships

Throughout the interviews, partners expressed interest and hope in new areas for partnership and collaboration. Respondents pointed to past and existing projects like the Buffalo Municipal Watershed Project and the dispersed camping strategy meetings as replicable models to tackle other issues like watershed management and recreation trails planning.

Interviewees noted that there is **shared interest** between the Forest and partners and with creativity and flexibility from the Forest, as well as **clear communication on priorities**, it would be possible to share resources to help solve capacity issues. Ideas for this included sharing interpretation staff between agencies, partnering to bring in a Leave No Trace educator, general outdoor education, and contracting with local governments to split the costs of projects (like roadwork) if it is mutually beneficial. Again, it was reiterated that, **if the Forest can identify its needs and priorities and communicate them early in a project, then it would be easier for partners to help and give extra capacity**. In addition to adding capacity, NFF staff noted their role in facilitating corporate sponsorships and contracts that may help add financial capacity to the forest for identified projects.

If you have any questions about this report, or the Partnerships on Every Forest project, please contact:

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