

Partnership Assessment for the Bighorn National Forest

June 1, 2020



National Forest Foundation



Partnership on Every Forest

- **Collaborative project** with the National Forest Foundation (NFF), the National Partnership Office (NPO), Regional Offices, and local units
 - Part of a larger scope of work within the NPO focused on building and strengthening partnerships and capacity on Regions and Forests through the county
- **Goals of the project** include assessing partnerships on the ground, identifying new pathways for partnerships, and sharing information and lessons learned among peers
 - Interviews and conversations with Forest Service staff and partners
 - Roundtables to discuss next steps and provide feedback
 - Peer Learning Sessions and Toolkit
- **The Bighorn National Forest** is the first National Forest to participate in the project and acting as “the pilot” forest
- **Project methods are evolving** in response to COVID-19



Methods

- **Interviewees initially identified by Bighorn staff** and snowball sampling was used to identify further interviewees (asking “who else should we talk to”)
- **Outreach** to interviewees was continuous as we were given new names
- **Interviews were conducted** over the phone and via Zoom with staff from the National Forest Foundation to maintain neutrality and all participants were informed their answers would be reported anonymously
- Questions asked to participants aimed to gain an understanding of

the strengths, barriers, and future opportunities of partnering with the Bighorn:

- 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

- **Relationships with the staff.** Most all interviewees pointed to one-one-one relationships that they have with a staff, saying they felt they could maintain positive working relationships during controversial projects or pick up the phone and get meetings when needed
- **Communication.** It was noted that staff is always available to answer questions and to explain the process for projects
- **Meetings and committees.** The forest plan revision process was noted as starting a process of annual meetings with cooperating agencies as building trust within the community. Interviewees also noted steering committees for individual projects as a strength
- **Shared interests and goals.** Both the Buffalo Municipal Watershed project and the dispersed camping strategy meetings were noted as successes in bringing together multiple agencies and non-governmental groups to solve shared issues; bringing together multiple outcomes into one NEPA project was highlighted as extremely beneficial
- **Public meeting and outreach.** A few respondents said that the Bighorn staff is trying to get more creative with public meeting formats and that it seems to be doing a better job of engaging the community

Barriers

- **Unclear priorities.** Partners expressed difficulty in knowing the forest's top priorities so that they could offer help. A few respondents 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
- **Capacity.** Partners having to take more responsibility on projects because the forest either doesn't have the staff or the finances to complete the project as quickly as partners would prefer
- **Being a federal agency.** It was noted that there is a reluctance to solve capacity issues in more creative manners but that this was largely due to being a federal agency
- **Complications with volunteers.** Though groups want to offer volunteer help, they felt they weren't sure what projects were happening on the forest to offer help and that administrative difficulties can get in the way
- **Confusion over NEPA process.** Partners did appreciate that they could always ask for help from Bighorn staff but they would prefer more proactive communication when a project moves from one stage of the NEPA process to another
- **Position turnover.** When key positions are vacated, partners felt that it was often unclear who was taking over in those roles and that it stalls partnership work
- **Closing offices.**

Opportunities

- **Adding capacity.** Partners had a number of ways that they thought they could work with Bighorn to improve capacity:
 - Identifying shared goals and objectives to work on projects together (ex. Contracting with the County to complete roadwork)
 - Sharing interpretation staff
 - Partnering to bring Leave No Trace educators and working together to develop an outdoor education plan
 - Utilizing the National Forest Foundation to leverage corporate funds
- **Replicating completed projects.** Partners noted the Buffalo Municipal Watershed project as replicable in other areas as well as the possibility to replicate the creation of the dispersed camping meetings to discuss the trails plan
- **Communication of Forest priorities.** Agency partners expressed an interest in working together annually to collaboratively develop strategies and non-governmental partners expressed wanting to better understand annual project priorities so they can offer volunteer help – some partners even offered to facilitate these meetings

Going forward

- Working with Bighorn staff to deep dive
- In-person meeting
- Questions?

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