



Partnerships on Every Forest

Flathead National Forest Partnership Assessment

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

Partnerships on Every Program (PEF) Overview

[Partnerships on Every Forest \(PEF\)](#) is a jointly managed program between the National Partnership Office (NPO) and the National Forest Foundation (NFF). The NPO and the NFF are working with forests across the country to help build partnership strategies that increase stewardship capacity and create more inclusive land management approaches. PEF work assesses challenges, opportunities, and needs experienced by Forest Service units in their work to partner with community and interest-based organizations, local and state governments, and Tribes. The PEF team will document and share learning around partnership challenges, lessons, and opportunities to create a national network of shared resources.

PEF Work on the Flathead National Forest

Conversations began with staff of the Flathead National Forest in August 2021 to introduce the project and understand the overall partnership environment on the Forest. NFF and the NPO met with the Forest Leadership Team (FLT), discussed the work plan, and decided not to have a focal area for the assessment. From these meetings, we worked with the Partnership Coordinator (acting) to identify partners and internal Flathead staff to interview for the assessment.

NFF staff conducted interviews with individuals on the initial list and utilized snowball sampling (asking interviewees who else should be interviewed) to identify additional partners for interviews. We conducted interviews over the phone and all interviewees were informed their answers would be reported anonymously.

We asked the following questions to gain an understanding of the strengths and challenges that exist in partnerships with the Flathead National Forest and to understand the future opportunities interviewees saw for partnering with the Forest:

- How do you partner with the Flathead NF? What kinds of projects, agreements, etc?
- In your partnership with the Flathead NF, what is working well?

- What do you think is not working so well? Is there anything you are particularly concerned about?
- Do you feel there are opportunities to improve partnerships with the Flathead NF?
- Are there gaps in the partners the Forest works with? If so, who? (Are there partners that the Forest is not working with?)
- Is there anything else you would like to share about the Flathead NF and partnerships?
- Who else would you recommend we talk to?

We outreached to 46 partners and interviewed 38 partners (83% response rate): 5 aquatic partners, 1 botany partner, 1 education partner, 1 engineering partner, 8 fire partners, 14 recreation partners, 2 silviculture partners, 2 timber partners, 1 wildlife partner, and 3 community groups. We outreached to 36 Flathead employees and interviewed 12 (33% response rate): 2 wildlife employees, 1 aquatics employee, 1 education employee, 3 fire employees, 2 recreation employees, 2 silviculture employees, and 1 timber employee.

Upon completing the interview period from November 2021 to January 2022, we analyzed the interviews to identify broad themes - strengths, challenges, and opportunities.

Results

Strengths

Interviewees had very positive outlooks on their partnerships around the Flathead National Forest. They pointed to strong relationships grounded in trust and effective, open communication, and identified the people, both Forest Service employees and partners, working in these partnerships as essential to their success. As shown below, interviewees also found success in partnership through embracing opportunities for joint work and identified having shared goals and missions as beneficial. They also felt that the Flathead has an inclusive approach to partnerships where partners are valued, supported, and empowered. Interviewees saw the benefit of having a dedicated partnership position on the Forest and felt that the Flathead NF could serve as an example of success in partnerships for other forests.

Strengths
"In your partnership, what is working well?"

Strong relationships grounded in effective communication

Across all interviews, partners and employees of the Flathead NF highlighted the **strong relationships** they have with each other, pointing to **effective communication** as driving the strength of those relationships. Partners appreciated the **responsiveness** of the Flathead employees they work with, with many interviewees describing a dynamic where partners and Flathead employees communicate frequently via phone and email, keeping each other in the loop about projects, planning, and public feedback. As one partner put it: "Everybody knows that they can call me anytime, and I know the same about them. We talk year-round." Partners who share office space with Flathead ranger districts highlighted that physical proximity as crucial to the strength of their relationships. Partners also appreciate Flathead employees' help in translating and understanding Forest Service jargon and regulations. Several partners noted that even when things aren't going well, they feel comfortable having **candid conversations** with their contacts on the Flathead and working through those challenges. Flathead employees, too, echoed the **trust-based** relationships they have with partners as a primary strength.

People

Interviewees also pointed to the **people** who make partnerships on the Flathead successful: from **Forest leadership setting the tone for an overall culture** of enthusiasm, passion, and follow-through on the Flathead, to **individual employees who champion partnerships**, as well as **strong partners** who bring ideas and energy to the table. Many partners mentioned the importance of having a key point of contact on the Forest who can advocate for their partnership and its work; partners also celebrated a general **proactive mindset and "can-do" attitude** among the individuals they've worked with on the Flathead. Forest employees value the high level of engagement they see in their partners, especially when it comes to advocating for projects and funding.

Embracing opportunities for collaborations and joint work

Another strong theme emerged regarding the **Flathead's eagerness to embrace opportunities for collaborations and joint work** with partners, seeing the **mutual benefits** of such work to both Forest and partners. From sharing resources, to helping partners leverage funding, to doing community outreach and engagement on shared projects, to staying involved and available through all phases of a project, partners and employees alike appreciate the Flathead's pragmatic approach to finding ways to extend capacity by tapping partners when it makes sense. The **Good Neighbor Authority** came up many times as an example of successful collaboration between the Forest Service and a state agency, as did alignment between Forest Service and Park Service projects. In general, the Flathead recognizes the limits to what it can do and is happy to let partners take the reins on projects or aspects of projects that they're better suited to complete. "The mindset is that it doesn't matter who services the landowners, it's just who can get to them the fastest and do it the best," one partner said. "Nobody has an ego about it."

Shared goals and mission

Collaborative work goes smoothly, many interviewees said, in part because of a strong sense of **shared goals** between the Flathead and its partners, and their ability to present a united front and common message to the public. Partners pointed out alignment between Forest Service and Park Service projects, and said that in general, the Flathead and its partners understand each other's overall missions, even when those missions differ. When it comes to recreation, especially,

everyone in the Flathead is “feeling the crush” of skyrocketing visitation, which means agencies and community groups alike are equally invested in improving the experience of both users and the agency employees who interact with them—by investing more in front country trails systems, for example, and increasing outreach about responsible recreation.

Inclusive approach to partnerships

Partners appreciate the Flathead’s **inclusive approach**, saying that the Flathead puts thought and intention into the selection of partner projects (especially GNA projects) and wants to set partners up for success. The Flathead is proactive about engaging partners, expressing enthusiasm when partners approach the Forest with good ideas, and offering partners flexibility, autonomy, and support in a way that empowers them to take the lead. Overall, interviewees feel that the Flathead **truly values partnerships**.

Dedicated partnership positions

Interviewees noted the importance of having **staff positions dedicated to partnerships** – whether in the role of the Partnership Coordinator, or other positions that fill roles relevant to specific programs and can speak on behalf of those programs’ values.

Setting an example for other forests

One partner said *the Flathead* offers great examples of ways to strengthen partnerships, examples the partner can point to when working with other Forests.

Challenges

Bureaucracy stands out as the primary challenge for partnerships on the Flathead, with capacity and communication, especially around decision-making, also surfacing as major barriers. Vacant positions and turnover at both the FS and partner organizations make partnerships challenging, especially during field season, when capacity is stretched thin. While individuals work hard to make up for lack of capacity, this creates potential for burnout. Interviewees highlighted capacity challenges among field-level staff and Grants and Agreements staff as particularly crucial to address, and also worried about how lack of capacity affects the ability of both the Flathead and its partners to leverage funding. Overall, both partners and Flathead employees sense a disconnect between higher-level partnership strategy and the realities of managing partnerships on the ground. They expressed desire for clarity around the role of the Partnership Coordinator at the Forest level and stressed the importance of partnership coordination at the district level. Finally, COVID-19 remains a barrier to partnerships.

Challenges

“What in your partnership is not working well? Is there something that you are particularly concerned about?”

Bureaucracy

All partners recognize that many of the bureaucratic challenges to partnerships (cumbersome processes, unnecessary red tape, financial rigidity, the obligations of a multi-use mandate, shifts in national politics) are beyond the Flathead NF’s ability to mitigate. Many partners stressed that they know these issues are not the Flathead’s fault and that the individual employees they work with do the best they can. But some also expressed a desire for more willingness on the part of Flathead staff to **think outside the box**, and to understand that new partners face a **learning curve** when it comes to navigating bureaucracy. They asked for better **transparency** around processes and delays.

Communication challenges

Many of the **communication challenges** that came up in interviews are tied to **transparency around decision-making**. Some partners described being unclear about what steps needed to be taken to move forward on projects, and who was responsible for what; one partner expressed frustration over the constant “nagging” that felt necessary to keep a project alive, especially when key positions remain vacant. “There’s this whole chain of command, and people don’t want to step on people’s toes,” he said. “But when you combine that with a leadership void, it can be difficult to get things done.”

Partners mentioned last-minute requests; projects changing from original intent; lack of availability of Flathead employees to clarify or confirm project specifications, leading to dissatisfaction with results; and the need for more direct connections with on-the-ground employees as additional communication challenges. Flathead employees, too, pointed to communication breakdowns on the partner side, as when partners put together projects without consulting with the Forest.

Capacity

Barriers to communication are often tied to **capacity**. Vacancies and turnover in leadership and decision-making positions, as mentioned above, can result in stalled projects. With continued budget and personnel reductions, it’s no secret that everyone working on the Flathead (and some partners, too) are stretched thin and not always able to devote the time necessary to support partnerships. Partners mentioned it can be particularly difficult to communicate with staff during field season, though this is the time when they often need quick answers about projects in progress. Employees noted that while **field staff are crucial to managing partners**, these are the positions that seem most likely to be cut or combined, reducing capacity to train and work alongside partners, in some cases leading to safety concerns with partner projects.

Reductions in FS personnel over the years mean a diminished agency presence in some areas, such as the North Fork of the Flathead, that used to have staffed guard stations. And Flathead employees mentioned capacity issues specifically around **Grants and Agreements** staff; while employees very much appreciate the G&A people they do work with, they stressed a need for more capacity in these crucial positions, which face a steep learning curve and tightened timelines.

While many partners lauded the efforts of individual personnel to overcome capacity issues, they

are also aware of the **potential for burnout** this creates. One interviewee worried that the lack of bureaucratic incentives to go above and beyond feeds a precarious reliance on the initiative of “spark plug” individuals to get anything accomplished.

Several interviewees mentioned **turnover**, on both the agency and partner sides, as a barrier. Partners questioned the practice of having short-term detailers in decision-making positions and noted that it can be disruptive when their key contacts disappear on fire details. When there is turnover among decision-makers on the Forest, partners sometimes struggle to adjust to new management styles. Flathead employees noted that for partners who employ a seasonal entry-level workforce, such as youth crews, high turnover requires yearly retraining; agency crews, by contrast, typically bring more experience even to temporary seasonal positions.

Funding

Several partners expressed concern over how capacity has affected ability to **leverage funding**, leading to missed opportunities for grants, heavier reliance on partners to come up with match, and an unsustainable strategy of shuttling extra funding, such as from the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) to partners who themselves have limited capacity to absorb it. “The Forest Service wants to give us all this GAOA money and have us hire pro crews and stuff, but for us, it’s not sustainable to just balloon our program for five years, because that’s not a secure source of funding,” one partner explained.

Unclear partnership strategy

All interviewees are aware of how the lack of Forest Service capacity has driven a push for partnerships, and while partners are excited about opportunities to work with the Flathead, and vice versa, many sense a **disconnect between top-down strategies around partnerships, and the reality of how that work plays out on the ground**. “I’ve seen in the last five or six years a real disconnect between the regional office saying ‘more partnerships’ as a solution to every district’s problems, but not realizing that partnerships also take a lot of work,” one partner said. This disconnect creates **a lack of clarity and an apparently inconsistent strategy around the role of partnerships** on the Flathead. As one partner put it: “There seems to be a lack of awareness sometimes of that direction from leadership on Shared Stewardship and partnerships.” Another said, “It seems like the drive toward partnerships is to compensate for budget reduction. That can squeeze partnerships into a space that’s not necessarily where they would thrive best.”

Clarifying roles

Clarifying the role of the Partnership Coordinator and other staff at the SO level could help with this. Because it’s not possible for one position to be deeply engaged with every single partner, some partners wondered what the expectation is for the Partnership Coordinator role. Interviewees stressed a need for more coordination with partners at the district and field level. One asked, “Isn’t it every employee’s role to be involved in partnerships to some extent?”

COVID and other challenges

A few other challenges came up: the lack of technological cohesion between partners and the Forest that use incompatible software programs; the need for field employees to feel empowered to carry out projects, and not be micromanaged; and, inevitably, **COVID**. The constraints imposed by the pandemic are familiar at this point, but more than one partner did mention sometimes being unsure which problems are caused by COVID constraints and which could have other solutions that simply haven’t been actualized due to pandemic-related inertia.

Opportunities

Interviews revealed a sense of excitement among partners and employees alike about the opportunity to leverage the partnership momentum that already exists in the Flathead. Better coordination, especially around recreation, could take partnerships on the Flathead to the next level. Interviewees see opportunities to find creative ways to increase capacity, especially at the field level, and work together to leverage funding. Partners are eager to work with the Flathead on messaging and public engagement, especially around responsible recreation. The success of GNA so far has created excitement around potential for its expansion; interviewees also see potential for more landscape-scale collaboration. Partnerships can be strengthened by both formalizing informal relationships through added structure and finding ways to create "unofficial" or blanket agreements that minimize paperwork and red tape. Interviewees offered suggestions for a variety of opportunities more specific to individual programs, which are listed in an appendix at the end of this document. Overall, respondents think the Flathead is doing a good job engaging a range of partners, although many said they were unaware of what was going on outside their specific program areas. It could be beneficial to perform a more robust partner gap analysis across programs to identify any missed opportunities.

Opportunities

**“Do you feel there are opportunities to improve partnerships with the Flathead NF?
“Are there gaps in the partners the Forest works with? If so, who? (Are there partners that the Forest is not working with?)”**

Coordination, especially around recreation

Many partners expressed interest in connecting more with other partners and think that the Forest Service is well-positioned to bring partner groups together to share what they are working on and find opportunities for collaboration. While prescribed fire came up a few times as an opportunity for more coordination, **the need for cohesion is most acute in the recreation space.** As recreation explodes in the Flathead Valley, and as patterns of use shift (thanks to Glacier National Park's new ticketed entry system and increasing demand for front country and accessible recreation), **partners want to work with the Forest to be proactive, not reactive.** Partners highlighted new town-adjacent trails systems like Foys to Blacktail, the Whitefish Trail, and Gateway to Glacier as crucial to absorbing expanding recreation impacts and see opportunities for more coordination and connectivity among trails outside wilderness and Park boundaries.

Increasing capacity

Partners and staff alike said **increasing agency capacity around partnerships, especially at the district and field level,** will bolster efforts to improve coordination across the Flathead's crowded partnership landscape. Interviewees expressed that if the Forest Service truly wants to emphasize and expand partnerships going forward, that requires committed investment in

building up capacity for managing partnerships on the ground. Interviewees proposed additions like a central volunteer coordinator, a partnership tracking system, a G&A coordinator, and field-season liaisons as ways to fill those gaps in coordination. FS employees and partners, too, stressed that **adding field staff** has a greater impact than adding positions at the SO level. When field staff have capacity to work with partners, a Flathead employee explained, that frees up managers to focus on program development and expansion. Higher-level partnership staff can be more successful, and their roles defined more clearly, if they have robust day-to-day support on the ground for partnerships.

Working together to leverage funding

Funding came up frequently as a challenge but also an opportunity for the FS and partners to work cooperatively and get creative about ways to leverage funds. More ranger districts could be applying for grants with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; the Tally Lake RD's Joint Chiefs Proposal with Natural Resources Conservation Services could be replicated on other districts; the Forest could advocate for more internal funding through better storytelling around partnerships; and one partner pointed to private philanthropy potential in the Flathead Valley as an untapped resource.

Messaging and public engagement

Partners are excited about opportunities to do more **messaging and public engagement** with the Forest. Around recreation, programs like the North Fork's River ambassadors could be scaled up or replicated, and partners in the North Fork in general were eager to work with the Forest and Park to create more educational opportunities around responsible recreation. There are also ways that messaging, in the form of **clearer communication around goals and strategies**, can reduce conflict and improve relationships among agencies, partners, and the public, especially when it comes to timber sales, prescribed fire, and fuels treatments. Some partners see an opportunity for FS employees to interact more directly with volunteers and partners as a way of strengthening connections between the agency and the public, and one partner suggested convening work parties of user groups sometimes at odds (such as cyclists and stock users) to foster mutual understanding and reduce on-trail conflict.

Continuing to scale up GNA

Those who work on the **Good Neighbor Authority** (GNA) see a lot of potential for its expansion, and some wondered whether a GNA model that allows for cross-boundary work across the Flathead Valley could be applied to other types of work, such as fisheries management.

Defining agreements and relationships

While Flathead partners and employees value the way open, casual communication has built effective relationships, in some cases partnerships can be strengthened further by formalizing those informal relationships—for example, by adding more structure (such as regularly scheduled meetings or calls), or more clearly defining roles.

Landscape-scale collaboration

Opportunities around **landscape-scale collaboration** came up as well: using habitat connectivity as a catalyst for cross-boundary work and building on the success of the Crown Managers Partnership.

Reactions from Report-out Sessions

We shared a summary of these results in three different report-out sessions: with the Flathead Forest Leadership Team (FLT), Flathead employees, and partners to whom we had sent initial outreach about the assessment, whether or not they were interviewed. In all three sessions, the overall reaction from attendees was that **the results rang true** and aligned with people's experiences; no one expressed strong surprise or disagreement with any findings. Rather, **attendees were eager to hear how the results of this assessment would be put into action** and expressed hope that it could spur meaningful changes for partnerships on the Flathead.

Discussion in all sessions centered around **the need to build capacity around partnerships** on the Flathead, especially at the district and field level, and what that would mean for the Forest-level Partnership Coordinator position—not only in terms of clarifying that role, but also whether it was even necessary at the SO level. The theme of **top-down disconnect around partnership strategies** resonated strongly with attendees, who wondered if district-level support might be a higher priority at this point than support at the SO and above. Flathead employees, especially, emphasized the need for capacity at the district level to maintain direct relationships with partners. Investing in career-ladder positions, they said, can help retain the **ground-level staff who build the foundations of those partner relationships**. Employees asked whether the National Partnership Office can push for increased capacity to strengthen partnerships.

FLT members discussed how, without appropriate investment in capacity, partnerships can feel like a **zero-sum strategy**: while the partnership may add capacity in terms of funding or work on the ground, it also requires management and support that takes away capacity. One FLT member spoke of the balancing act of wanting to be proactive and engaged with partners, while not wanting to take on too much and risk diluting the quality of those partnerships; a dilemma of **how to grow partnerships while maintaining existing relationships**.

The FLT also discussed the challenge of vacancies, turnovers, and details, using the current Partnership Coordinator vacancy as an example—would it be better to fill this role with a second detailer, or let it remain vacant until it can be filled permanently? Details, they said, create a “catch-22” that requires weighing the need of the vacant position vs. the need of the detailer's primary program.

Attendees at all three report-outs expressed **excitement over the role NFF can play in helping to define partnership positions**—at the SO, districts, and in general—on the Flathead. They wondered what role the Regional Office will play in helping to clarify strategies around partnerships. Because there is no one-size-fits-all approach to partnership coordination, attendees saw an opportunity for more **conversations with district-level employees about what they need from a partnership coordinator**, or to support partnerships more generally. There could be a role for NFF in convening these conversations to help define a partnership strategy for the Flathead.

Some attendees also wondered if it's time for a **community meeting or stakeholder conversation to discuss recreation on the Flathead**, in keeping with the desire to maintain a proactive approach to expanding use. Such a conversation could help highlight the capacity needs on the Flathead to manage recreation partnerships. Attendees also pointed out that **continuing to communicate partnership successes, spreading the good news** to both the public and Forest Service leadership, can help bolster the case for increased partnership capacity.

Overall, attendees at the report-outs stressed their hope that the results of this assessment will be put into action and elevated beyond the Flathead itself. Because so many of the capacity challenges originate above and outside the Flathead NF, attendees felt strongly that **sharing this assessment up the chain** will be essential to achieving the systemic change needed to address some of the biggest barriers to successful partnerships.

From the results and discussion summary presented in this report, we will have follow-up conversations with Flathead employees to identify an area on which to build a strategy. We estimate that this process will take around three months, with the resulting strategy directly addressing challenges we discovered through our assessment.

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

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Appendix – Additional Partnership Opportunities

Interviewees had many ideas for partnership opportunities relevant to specific programs or places that we wanted to share for the benefit of those best positioned to pursue them:

- **Dark Sky certification**—Glacier National Park and Waterton Lakes National Park, across the border, have both received Dark Sky certification; it wouldn't be too big a lift for the Flathead NF to pursue it as well, tying together the whole Crown landscape
- After the river management plan is complete, **Flathead Rivers Alliance** has potential to grow into a stewardship organization
- One respondent wondered how much the Flathead is **collaborating with the Lolo NF in the Swan Valley**, and what opportunities might exist for partnership there
- **Mission Mountain Youth Corps** could be expanded to include a river-focused program
- Building respect and trust between FS trails seasonals and **BMWF trail crew leads** by partnering on more trails trainings, going on hitches together
- Using funds for Park firefighting positions to support FS doing more firefighting in Park
- Explore **hiring a shared position with NFF** to help with fundraising and project management
- **Scaling up fire adaptation work** beyond Tally Lake RD, which several partners identified as having a much more active fuels program than other districts
- Working with **private landowners** to increase access to public land
- Creating a **"Youth Crew Work Manager"** position to better connect with, coordinate, and train youth corps
- Opportunity for additional educational signage and information stations on the North Fork Road—stations staffed in collaboration by Forest, Park, and volunteer community members
- Creating a **"bear ambassadors"** program modeled after the FRA's river ambassador program