



## **Partnerships on Every Forest**

### **Shasta-Trinity National Forest Partnership Assessment**

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

#### **Partnerships on Every Forest Program 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 Shasta-Trinity National Forest**

Conversations began with staff at the Shasta-Trinity National Forest in early 2022 to introduce the project and understand the overall partnership environment on the Forest. Staff from the NFF and the NPO met with the Forest Leadership Team (FLT) to create a workplan that identified the goals of the assessment and outlined a timeline for completion. The Shasta-Trinity FLT identified focus areas of fire, recreation, and 3rd party NEPA assessments. They also identified internal Forest Service employees and external partners to interview for the assessment.

NFF staff, acting as the neutral party between the Forest Service and external partners, conducted interviews in April and May 2022. In total, 6 Forest Service employees and 13 external partners were interviewed. Interviews were conducted over the phone and all interviewees were informed their answers would be reported anonymously, with broad themes being reported out but not tied to their name or organization.

The following questions were asked of each participant to gain an understanding of the strengths and challenges that exist in current partnerships, and to identify future opportunities interviewees saw for building stronger partnerships within the Shasta-Trinity National Forest:

1. To start, can you share your position title and role with your organization/agency?
2. How do you partner with the Shasta-Trinity? What kinds of projects and/or agreements do you participate in?
3. In your partnership with the Shasta-Trinity, what is working well?
4. What do you think is not working so well? Is there anything you are particularly concerned about? Why?
5. Do you feel there are opportunities to improve partnerships with the Shasta-Trinity?
6. Are there gaps in the partners the forest works with? If so, who? (Are there partners that the forest is not working with?)
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about the Shasta-Trinity and partnerships?
8. Do you think that 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA could help the forests planning and implementation efforts?
9. Do you have any concerns about 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA?
10. How could we improve our 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA efforts on the Forest?

We invited 23 external partners for interviews, and 13 agreed to participate (57% response rate): four recreation partners, one education partner, one wildlife partner, five natural resource/restoration partners, and two business partners. We invited 15 Shasta-Trinity Forest Service staff for interviews, and six agreed to participate (40% response rate): one fuels focused staff, three recreation focused staff, one public service focused staff, and one environment focused staff.

In addition to the interviews, a survey was sent to 24 Forest Service employees with the following questions:

1. In which management unit/district do you work?
2. In which staff area do you work?
3. How long have you worked at the Forest Service?
4. How much time do you spend on partnership related work, including but not limited to relationship building, fielding partnership requests, executing and managing agreements, and coordinating partners?
5. In the past year, how much did you rely on partners to complete Forest Service projects?
6. What work do you accomplish utilizing partners?
7. In your partnerships, what is working well?
8. What have been your challenges with these partnerships?
9. What support do you need to strengthen your partnerships? For example, support with administration, project coordination, communication, etc.

10. Are you aware of organizations or interest groups who would be beneficial to and are not yet partnering with your unit? If so, please list the organization's name(s) or general reference to the group.
11. Is there anything else you would like to share about your partnerships?
12. Do you think that 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA can help the Forest in planning and implementation efforts? Please explain why or why not.
13. Do you have any concerns about 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA? If yes, please explain.
14. How can we improve our 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA efforts on the Forest?

Of the 24 surveys sent, we received nine responses (37.5% response rate). Respondents worked for several different ranger districts, as well as with the supervisor's office. They worked in engineering, fire and aviation management, hydrology, wilderness and trails, public services, heritage, planning, and ecosystems. Experience levels ranged from 7-30+ years.

After completing the interviews and survey we analyzed the information we had collected to identify broad themes - strengths, challenges, and opportunities. This process lasted from November 2022 to January 2023. Not all participants answered every question, but the responses were coded and broad themes from the interviews and surveys are outlined below. The interview and survey respondents will collectively be referred to as "participants" throughout this report.

## **Results**

### ***Strengths***

Overall, participants had positive perceptions of their partnerships involving the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. Strengths of partnerships were effective communication, strong working relationships, completing on the ground projects, leveraging multiple funding sources, effective agreements, shared vision for projects, holding trainings, and having a Forest Service partnership coordinator in place to help facilitate partnerships.

<b>Strengths</b> <b>"In your partnership, what is working well?"</b>
<p><b><u>Communication</u></b> Communication was the most common response for what is working well in partnerships on the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. Partners and Forest Service employees appreciated open and consistent communication and pointed to having regular meetings as helpful for maintaining good communication.</p>
<p><b><u>Relationships</u></b> There was general agreement among participants that both Forest Service staff and partners contribute to strong working relationships and are enthusiastic about the work. Forest Service staff said that partners that are knowledgeable about the Forest Service often have stronger relationships because they understand the policies and</p>

expectations that are inherent when working with the agency. Long-term strong working relationships between partners and the Forest Service were said to help keep work moving forward even when there is leadership and staff turnover.

**Completing on-the-ground projects**

Participants expressed that partnerships enable high quality projects to be completed by providing capacity for on-the-ground work. These projects also help improve visibility of the Forest Service within local communities.

**Funding**

Participants said that partnerships can help leverage multiple sources of funding to help complete projects.

**Agreements**

Many participants said that having formal agreements in place is beneficial for creating mutual understanding and expectations surrounding a partnership and for getting work accomplished.

**Shared vision and understanding**

Having a shared vision and understanding for the partnership was identified as leading toward partnership success. Formal agreements and consistent communication were mentioned as approaches to help create a shared vision.

**Partnership Coordinator position**

A few participants noted that when the partnership coordinator position was filled it helped to establish a point of contact for partners and seemed to help with the administrative tasks associated with partnerships. Both Forest Service staff and external partners mentioned that having this position permanently filled would be beneficial.

**Trainings**

Having Shasta-Trinity staff engage volunteers and partners in trainings helps partner groups feel supported and capable of completing work to Forest Service standards.

**Challenges**

Both Forest Service staff and external partners acknowledged that there are significant challenges in developing and maintaining effective partnerships. These challenges include staff turnover, administrative burdens, lack of capacity, lengthy processes, lack of funding, mistrust, lack of leadership visibility, and difficulty finding partners to help with unglamorous projects.

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

**Turnover**

Nearly every external partner, as well as some Forest Service staff, mentioned turnover as a major challenge to their partnerships. They referred to turnover in terms of Forest Service employees leaving and not having positions filled, focus shifting to fire during the summer months, and Forest Service staff going on detail and losing their point of contact. Interviewees noted that having a permanent point of contact at the Forest Service, such as a partnership coordinator, could alleviate some of these challenges. They acknowledged the difficulties in recruitment and retention for a rural forest.

**Administrative burdens**

Many Forest Service staff noted that partnerships take significant time investment, particularly adhering to the Grants and Agreements process and timelines. Some Forest Service staff felt as though partnerships demanded too much of their time and were a distraction from their other duties due to these administrative burdens, the responsibility of educating partners about Forest Service protocols, and communication breakdowns.

**General capacity**

Both Forest Service staff and external partners expressed that Shasta-Trinity staff often do not have the capacity to effectively maintain partnerships, or to develop new partnerships. Several participants mentioned that when the Shasta-Trinity was consolidated into one district it added to staff workload. With a general lack of capacity, there is a perception that more work that the Forest Service should be completing is falling onto the partners.

**Time of processes**

While having agreements in place was noted as a strength, the time it takes to get agreements executed was noted as a challenge. Forest Service staff pointed to the lack of Grants and Agreements staff, particularly at the district level, as a challenge. Partners also expressed frustration around the length of time NEPA processes take, and the agency's inability to have flexibility around certain regulations that slow down partner work.

**Funding**

Some participants expressed that grant and budget cycles do not align with project timelines and this makes it difficult to raise additional funds for projects. Partners said that they are having difficulty raising match for projects.

**Mistrust**

A mistrust of federal agencies in some of the communities the Shasta-Trinity works in was noted as a challenge. Mistrust was also attributed to negative experiences in the past that resulted in partners feeling discouraged from future relationships with the Forest.

**Lack of leadership visibility**

Some partners felt that Forest leadership is not engaged in partnerships and that this creates confusion around the decision-making process for the Shasta-Trinity.

**Partner projects**

Forest Service staff noted that it is hard to find partners to complete the unglamorous projects like bathroom cleanings, and there is a perception that partners only want to complete the high visibility projects.

***Opportunities***

Forest Service staff and external partners identified opportunities to help address some of the challenges outlined above, and to help strengthen the partnership culture within the Shasta-Trinity National Forest.

**Opportunities**

**“Do you feel there are opportunities to improve partnerships with the Shasta-Trinity NF?”**

**“Are there gaps in the partners the Forest works with? If so, who? (Are there partners that the Forest is not working with?)”**

**Grants and Agreements staff**

It was widely acknowledged that the Forest needs significantly more capacity in Grants and Agreements, particularly at the district level.

**Learn from other forests**

Some external partners felt that the Shasta-Trinity could learn from other forests on how they manage and work with partners, and how they create flexibility for project completion.

**Utilize Agreements**

Agreements were mentioned as a strength due to the benefits of formalizing partnerships and creating a shared vision, but they were also noted as a challenge due to administrative burdens. Partnerships that utilize forest-wide Master Agreements with Supplemental Project Agreements for specific projects can create efficiencies and reduce administrative burdens in the agreements process. One interviewee expressed an interest in creating agreements with larger, more established partner organizations over smaller, newer organizations, since larger organizations can be more equipped to take on administrative tasks associated with agreements. It was also noted that it is easier to have agreements with larger organizations because smaller organizations often don't understand Forest Service policies and procedures.

**Partnership Coordinator**

Hope was expressed for the partnership coordinator position being permanently filled to help with the administrative requirements of partnerships. A partnership coordinator could do more outreach to potential partners and share partnership accomplishments.

**Forest-wide collaboration**

There was a desire to see the Forest work in a more coordinated way around partnerships, from the district level up to the regional office.

**Additional roles for partners**

Some partners noted additional roles that they could take on such as recruiting and organizing volunteers and engaging in trainings with the Forest Service to better understand how to complete projects and tasks at Forest Service standards. Partners felt that they could do more work if they had more flexibility and trust from the Forest Service.

**Public outreach and training**

Some partners felt that the Forest Service could do more public outreach to help alleviate the mistrust and negative perceptions associated with the agency. Partners also noted that the Forest Service could host more volunteer trainings to get people engaged with their work.

**Gaps**

Participants acknowledged that with the limited capacity of the Forest Service it is difficult for them to engage with all potential partners on a meaningful level. Some potential partners that were mentioned as needing more engagement are fire organizations, the Yurok Tribe and other Tribes in the area, the Bureau of Land Management, larger recreation groups, city and county municipalities, and businesses that can bring funds or programming. Suggested strategies to engage these partners included hosting general outreach and public engagement events, outreach to organizations that have a more adversarial relationship with the Forest or have not been engaged in the past, and holding meetings with local businesses.

**Results 3<sup>rd</sup> Party NEPA**

One of the focus areas for the PEF assessment that the Shasta-Trinity FLT identified was 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA assessments. Not all interviewees responded to the questions regarding 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA assessments, but of the interviewees five out of six Forest Service employees responded and five out of thirteen external partners responded. In addition, all nine survey respondents answered questions about 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA. Responses to questions about 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA assessments were very mixed, but there were some general themes around opportunities to improve this process in the future.

### **General Impressions**

Both Shasta-Trinity staff and external partners tended to agree that 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA can be helpful. Only one person said that it is not helpful. However, there were many caveats to this sentiment and suggestions to improve 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA. Generally, participants thought that 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA is helpful when working with an experienced contractor that can provide a product that meets Forest Service standards, and when the Forest Service is still involved in the process.

<b>General Impressions</b> <b>“Do you think that 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA could help the forests planning and implementation efforts?”</b>
<b><u>Important to use experienced contractors</u></b> Participants acknowledged the limited capacity of Shasta-Trinity staff and that 3 <sup>rd</sup> party NEPA could help alleviate some of their workload. A common response from the Forest Service is that it is important that the contractor has prior experience with the NEPA process so they can produce a report that meets Forest Service standards and will stand up to litigation. Forest Service staff said they often felt they had to extensively review, edit, or redo 3 <sup>rd</sup> party NEPA assessments. Forest Service staff and partners suggested that the Forest Service could provide templates or examples for contractors to follow to ensure continuity of expectations and products.
<b><u>Helpful for smaller scopes</u></b> Some interviewees noted that 3 <sup>rd</sup> party NEPA is most successful when the project is smaller in scope or scale such as an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Categorical Exclusion (CE), as compared to a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

### **Challenges**

All interviewees acknowledged that 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA has significant challenges. These include a lack of trust from the Forest Service that the contractor will produce a satisfactory product and the necessity for Forest Service staff to perform significant oversight to support the contractors and review the reports. Partners felt that the Forest Service does not trust them with NEPA reports, or that they do not receive adequate support from the Forest Service to successfully conduct 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA.

<b>Challenges</b> <b>“Do you have any concerns about 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA?”</b>
<b><u>Lack of trust</u></b> A lack of trust from Forest Service employees for 3 <sup>rd</sup> party NEPA to be done successfully was an overarching theme in both the interview and survey results. Forest Service



employees expressed that 3rd party NEPA analyses often require extensive revisions, or need to be completely redone, because they do not meet expectations of the agency. External partners expressed that they feel a lack of trust from the Forest Service that makes the process challenging, and it has discouraged them from helping with 3rd party NEPA assessments.

**Need for oversight**

Connected to a lack of trust, Forest Service staff noted that 3rd party NEPA work takes a lot of oversight and often the results don't follow protocol, cannot be implemented, and must be redone. Contractors expressed that the oversight does not produce better documents and that the morale of contractors has been degraded from negative experiences trying to help with NEPA assessments in the past.

***Opportunities***

All participants that said that 3rd party NEPA is beneficial had recommendations to improve the process in the future. There were many opportunities identified to improve and provide consistency in this approach including establishing clear expectations, creating a list of trusted contractors, having consistent reporting practices, learning from other forests, building trust, and using contractors for smaller analyses such as Categorical Exclusions (CE's) or Environmental Analyses (EA's) rather than in a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

<b>Opportunities</b> <b>"How can we improve 3rd party NEPA efforts on the Forest?"</b>
<p><b><u>Clear expectations</u></b></p> <p>Both Forest Service staff and external partners said that establishing clear roles and expectations between the Forest Service and contractors would help facilitate effective 3rd party NEPA analyses and alleviate some of the challenges outlined above. One recommendation was to have a dedicated point person in the Forest Service that can answer questions and work closely with the contractor.</p>
<p><b><u>Create a list of trusted contractors</u></b></p> <p>Forest Service staff acknowledged that there are contractors that have a successful track record of completing NEPA assessments, and having a centralized database of those contractors would be helpful. One suggestion was that contractors who are local may be better equipped to produce a satisfactory report since they have knowledge of the local environment.</p>
<p><b><u>Consistent reporting practices</u></b></p> <p>Forest Service staff frequently responded that the products they received were not adequate and needed to be redone. Creating templates for consistent reporting</p>

practices could help address this challenge.

**Learn from other forests**

Since the Shasta-Trinity does not have a successful track record with 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA, it was recommended that they could learn from forests that have had more success. The Six Rivers National Forest was pointed to as a forest with a successful track record of 3<sup>rd</sup> party NEPA that the Shasta-Trinity could learn from.

**Build trust**

Partners can complete smaller projects prior to completing a full NEPA assessment to show that they can be successful, create positive relationships with the Forest, and establish good communication.

**Use contractors for Categorical Exclusions (CE) and Environmental Analyses (EA)**

If the Forest Service does not think it is effective to have contractors perform a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), they could contract out smaller projects such as CE's and EA's. This could alleviate some of the capacity issues within the Forest Service and give them more time to focus on the larger assessments.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this report was to help the Shasta-Trinity National Forest collect information that will help them build and maintain effective partnerships. This baseline information can be used to develop a more robust partnership strategy.

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

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