

# Formalizing decisions: A case study on collaborative zones of agreement

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## INTRODUCTION

Forest collaborative groups are increasingly engaged in management of public forestlands in the US West. These groups of diverse stakeholders seek social agreement on planned activities by discussing various resource conditions and developing statements of their shared goals and desired approaches. These statements can help the US Forest Service more clearly understand stakeholder interests and what is socially acceptable to collaborative members. Some groups describe this as achieving “zones of agreement” (ZOA), although the term can vary. ZOA can be developed at multiple scales, such as for a project (planning area), or for an issue, forest type, or plant association group that is found in multiple projects.

We conducted a case study of the process for developing ZOA created by the Blue Mountains Forest Partners (BMFP), a collaborative group established in 2006 and focused on the northern portion of the Malheur National Forest in Grant County. This group was one of the first to formalize their ZOA, and there is interest from other groups and policy makers in learning from this example. BMFP

### Lessons Learned

- **Timing matters:** BMFP had reached seven years of working together and a high level of trust.
- **“ZOA” may not fit you:** Not all groups and stakeholders may want to codify and use agreements in the same manner as BMFP, and/or find the term “zones of agreement” to be resonant.
- **Good documentation provides the foundation:** Thorough and well documented meeting minutes and field trip notes formed the foundation of what became formalized documents.
- **Get the right people:** Identify someone and/or a diverse subcommittee who is familiar with the collaborative and can deeply understand the recorded notes, be transparent, and is perceived as trustworthy. A science or research and analysis background may be helpful.
- **ZOA are living documents:** The existence of ZOA does not preclude the need to discuss even redundant issues that individuals care strongly about, nor does it override the general nature of collaboratives as being voluntary, flexible, and non-binding organizations.
- **ZOA do not replace dialogue with the Forest Service:** If ZOA do inform Forest Service planning documents, a clear articulation of how they are used is important to ensure collaborative group members are aware of their application in project-specific contexts.

developed a compilation of its project-level ZOA in 2013, after which the group initiated an issue-based ZOA approach.

## COMPILATION OF PROJECT-LEVEL ZONES OF AGREEMENT

The BMFP decided to compile project-level ZOA when stakeholders observed that they had begun to have repetitive conversations about the same issues across the projects on which they were collaborating. Members believed that memorializing



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the agreements they had come to during those discussions would provide a useful reference point for future conversations, create a more efficient collaborative environment, and provide continuity in their interactions with the Forest Service despite the high turnover rates for Forest Service personnel.

After a full group decision to proceed, the BMFP Operations Committee (Ops Committee) contracted James Johnston, a PhD candidate at Oregon State University with a long history in the collaborative, to draft a compilation of ZOA in April 2013. Johnston developed a methodology for reviewing 23 sets of full group meetings, sub-committee meetings, and field trip notes for all discussions of agreements about the four projects BMFP had collaborated on between 2006 and 2013. Johnston transcribed relevant notes and edited them to be more concise and germane to future conversations, while maintaining original wording to the extent possible, for example, removing site-based agreements that held no generalizable value and reducing redundancies. The completed ZOA document was presented for full

group review over a period of three months, during which collaborative members provided feedback that informed document revisions. Drafting the document took less than one month, and, in total, the process took approximately five months to reach full group approval.

The resulting 27-page project-based ZOA document has an introduction with an explanation of the methodology, a list of agreements associated with each of the projects, a table that tracks the evolution of agreements over the identified time period, a synthesis of agreements based on issues, context for each of the projects, appendices, meeting minute sources, and a list of BMFP participants during that time period.

## **ISSUE-BASED ZONES OF AGREEMENT**

Almost immediately upon its completion, the project-based ZOA approach became less relevant for BMFP because of the 10-year stewardship agreement and accelerated restoration program initiated by the Malheur National Forest. Under this program, the Forest Service shifted from planning one

project over two to three years to planning two or three projects every year, while also increasing the spatial scale of each project. BMFP realized it would be impossible to continue collaborating on a project-by-project basis, and therefore shifted to orient around issues that were common across projects, such as dry ponderosa pine restoration, riparian restoration, and aspen restoration. The conditions were also ripe within the collaborative to make this shift, as many members had built trust with each other after collaborating for the previous seven years.

A full group decision to begin collaborating on issues rather than projects led to the formation of an issue-based subcommittee that spearheaded the early stages of this process, which involved identifying the issues on which they would focus. This was informed by the synthesis of agreed-upon issues in the completed ZOA, upcoming Forest Service planning areas and the issues that were likely to arise from them, as well as issues on which the group did not have agreement but that arose frequently. The resulting topics included dry ponderosa pine, moist mixed conifer, riparian areas, aspen, and goshawk management. These were then prioritized by what would be immediately relevant, according to the Forest Service upcoming planning areas, although more than one issue may be addressed at one time.

In fall of 2014 BMFP contracted Trent Seager (also an OSU PhD candidate) as its scientific advisor, a position that included responsibility for adding science and ecological context to issue-based ZOA as well as occasional lead authorship. Seager expanded on the previous methodology with a new approach that would make each issue-based ZOA more scientifically rigorous as a standalone document. This was intended to enable the ZOA to help inform the Forest Service NEPA process, as well as provide more

justification and rationale for the group's agreements, which would be useful for both future BMFP members less familiar with previous agreements and Forest Service staff.

The process for issue-based ZOA is multi-phased for each issue and involves multiple opportunities for full group review, ultimately resulting in a series of standalone issue-based ZOA documents. First the issue subcommittee gleans all of BMFP's meeting minutes, field trip notes, and the project-based ZOA for discussions that look like agreements related to the issue at hand (e.g., riparian restoration). Context is added to the identified agreements where gaps exist, while the content of the agreements themselves is retained as is. These issue-based agreements are then submitted for full group review. If there is any disagreement over content, a discussion and vote is required for any alterations. Next, Seager adds scientific background to each agreement and the remaining document formatting, and brings it to the full group again for discussion and approval. The scientific background may include ecological function and processes related to the issue, desired conditions, tools for management, and references to the scientific literature where applicable, and is geared to support the social agreement in a scientifically rigorous way.

Each issue-based ZOA has an introduction and history about the particular issue, identifies the current BMFP Executive Director and Ops Committee members, and includes the original documentation date and any revision dates. Next is an explanation of assumptions used, followed by the actual zones of agreement, which are the crux of the document. To date, only the riparian ZOA has a completed (but not yet finalized) draft, which has taken approximately two months to complete. It is likely that the application of ZOA will continue to be refined as BMFP tackles larger planning areas with a focus on broad



issues instead of projects. The group has not yet determined how frequently issue-based ZOA will be revisited, but expects to revisit them based on implementation monitoring.

## CONSIDERATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

There are several considerations for those who wish to learn from BMFP's experience with zones of agreement.

- **Timing matters:** BMFP had reached seven years of working together and a high level of trust. The ZOA process also required a commitment to transparency and skilled facilitation. Groups that have less experience with each other and the Forest Service may wish to complete and learn from project-level agreements before expecting issue-based ZOA to be feasible. In addition, groups that are undergoing transition, acclimating to new members, and/or dealing with trust issues may want to delay or slow the ZOA process to ensure that the group's integrity and social relationships are being stewarded first, and that the full group wishes to undertake the process.

- **"ZOA" may not fit you:** Not all groups and stakeholders may want to codify and use their agreements in the same manner as BMFP has, and/or find the term "zones of agreement" to be resonant. For example, the Deschutes Collaborative Forest Project is developing "Plant Association Group (PAG) agreements" and has worked on shared "restoration principles" in the past. The Umatilla Forest Collaborative Group is developing a "decision history" that tracks past conversations and decisions.
- **Good documentation provides the foundation:** Thorough and well-documented meeting minutes and field trip notes formed the foundation of what became formalized documents. The full group review process BMFP included in developing its ZOA allowed for filling in any gaps that may have existed from such notes, but a sufficiently accurate starting place is nonetheless important.
- **Get the right people:** Groups who want assistance with developing ZOA may wish to identify someone who is familiar with the collaborative



and can deeply understand the recorded notes, and is also able to be transparent and perceived as trustworthy. If ZOA are targeted to inform Forest Service planning, someone with a science or research and analysis background may be most helpful for incorporating scientific justification and to interface with Forest Service resource specialists where possible. Group participants from universities, extension, regional nonprofits, or consultants may be well poised to perform this role.

- **ZOA are living documents:** Individuals who are members of BMFP agree to a Declaration of Commitment that states members will honor agreements that are collaboratively developed, suggesting that ZOA represent socially binding

documents. However, it is not yet clear how ZOA will be applied both internally in BMFP and externally in the Forest Service. The existence of ZOA does not preclude the need to discuss even redundant issues that individuals care strongly about, nor does it override the general nature of collaboratives as being voluntary, flexible, and non-binding organizations. They also represent agreements that were made between specific individuals who may no longer be at the collaborative table.

- **ZOA do not replace dialogue with the Forest Service:** Although the ZOA developed by BMFP were geared to be directly used by the Forest Service such that time communicating desired outcomes between the two entities is minimized, the group still

expects to discuss new applications of the ZOA with the Forest Service. If ZOA do inform planning documents, a clear articulation of how they are used is important to ensure collaborative group members are aware of their application in project-specific contexts.

As forest collaborative groups develop social agreements pertaining to public forestland management, documenting these shared understandings may prove useful going forward. Doing so provides a common reference point for current and future members, and articulates the collaborative's perspectives for external stakeholders such as the Forest Service. Collaboratives interested in developing their own version of ZOA may benefit from the experience of groups such as BMFP.

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