

Collaborative Restoration Workshop

National Forest Foundation | April 2016

Future of Collaborative Stewardship | Plenary Session: Where Have We Come from and What Does It Mean for the Future?

Key Topics: History of Collaboration, Collaborative Capacity

Speakers

- **Tony Cheng**, Director, Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, Professor, Colorado State University
- **Laura McCarthy**, Senior Policy Advisor for Fire and Forest Restoration, NM, The Nature Conservancy
- **Mary Mitsos**, Executive Vice President, National Forest Foundation
- **Russ Vaagen**, Vice President, Vaagen Brothers Lumber

Overview

In this plenary session, agency partners from a university, conservation organization, non-profit partner, and wood products industry discussed the following questions: What have we learned from 25 years of collaborative engagement in public lands? How do models for collaboration vary based on the regional context in which they originate?

Summary

Tony Cheng focused on the human components of collaborative engagement in public lands - people and their lands and resources. From the start of collaboration in the 1990s, we've seen three themes: (1) place-based pragmatism, born out of noteworthy historical events like the timber wars in the Pacific Northwest, (2) the Clinton administration's Forest Summit, and (3) the formation of the Quincy Library Group and the Communities Committee, which gave birth to the Community Wildfire Protection Plans and Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program. All of this was part of government transition in the 1990s; the idea of "reinventing government" and devolution of responsibility were strong themes.

Mary Mitsos spoke of shifts in agency culture, collaborative groups, and the scope and scale of collaborative projects. In 1995, Mary facilitated a network of Forest Supervisors from across the country that wanted to learn about collaboration. At that time many felt they could not talk about collaboration within the agency. Obviously, this is no longer the case. There has been a major shift in the way the agency thinks about collaboration. In the early years of collaboration citizen groups came together at a small scale to talk about 50-acre projects. The scale has since jumped dramatically, and across boundaries. Nationally and in local communities civil discourse has improved dramatically, increasing understanding of individual values. The Forest Service used to be considered the enemy, yet as the Collaborative Restoration Workshop demonstrates, the agency is now a strong partner. The willingness of line officers to collaborate and be transparent with partners has improved drastically since the 1990s, and continues to grow. Unfortunately, Forest Service capacity to participate in collaborative efforts is still a challenge; collaborative groups are growing, yet the agency's budget continues to shrink, and many Forest Service jobs remain vacant.

Laura McCarthy took the room back in time to the National Fire Plan meeting in 2002. She remembered how there were about twenty people from the Communities Committee at the meeting,



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and most were not interested in engaging with them. However, the meeting signified the beginnings of cross-boundary management for fire, which has evolved into the cohesive strategy. The participants at this Collaborative Restoration Workshop essentially represent a collaborative of collaboratives, and the next big question is, “What do we do with today?” Laura hoped that the workshop participants could discuss one or two specific actions to help the collaborative movement achieve mutual goals. Laura pointed out several needs going forward, including the importance of diversifying collaboratives (what other agencies, water and agricultural communities, and business partners need to be at the table?), leveraging resources (accelerate the pace and scale of restoration by pooling our resources), and breaking down administrative barriers. This is one of the most exciting times in restoration and land/water management.

Russ Vaagen noted that we are now beyond the timber wars. The wars of the past don’t exist because of great partnerships and collaborations. In Russ’s mind, the next challenge is engaging business to help hold collaborative restoration efforts together. The existing toolbox is useful. For example, retained receipts can get more work done on the ground. However, if partners and the Forest Service do not increase the pace and scale of treatment, then the pace and scale of fire, insects, and disease *will* continue to increase. Moreover, if we don’t carry out mechanical treatments, prescribed fire becomes less of an option. Russ asked if anyone feels like we are doing an adequate job managing our National Forests. No hands went up in the audience. “So, where is the urgency?” he asked. We need to start a new century of management, turn the talk into implementation, and use our collective resources to plot a new future.

Lessons

- The Forest Service is a stronger collaborative partner than ever before. Since the 1990s, the willingness of line officers to collaborate and be transparent with partners has improved drastically. Forest Service support for – and involvement in – collaboration continues to grow. However, the capacity of the agency to participate in collaborative groups is still a challenge.
- Need to build collaboration capacity. Partner organization can help the agency increase capacity to collaborate. For example, in 2002 the National Forest Foundation started the Community Capacity and Land Stewardship grant program to build initial capacity in new collaborative groups, such as the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition (which later became a CFLRP recipient). Small startup grants of \$10,000-\$15,000 did amazing things to kick-start collaboration around the country. The burden to managing public lands, however, needs more diverse support. Federal, state, and local partners need to put skin in the game in a more systematic manner. We also need philanthropic support for collaborative efforts. We need to redesign and rethink solutions to pool resources.
- Youth engagement is critical. The only way to sustain collaborative engagement and support for the National Forest System is to engage youth. The understanding that youth have about natural science is impressive. But understanding and caring does not necessarily translate into management and implementation. We need to engage youth in actual stewardship. Many agency partners are engaging youth through conservation corps, but these programs only reaches parts of the country.
- Implementation is an emerging area of needed capacity and expertise. The collaboration community is great at planning, but we need more experts in implementation. There are a growing number of collaboratives that are getting better, but as a collaborative community, we need to strengthen our expertise in project implementation.

