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**Peer Learning Session:
Navigating the Swirling Waters of Collaboration
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Participants:

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Overview:

Mike Peterson of The Lands Council (Spokane, WA): The Lands Council is involved with three different collaborative efforts in the northwest. Their first attempt at collaboration was the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition based on the Colville National Forest. The Lands Council had been involved in litigation of timber sales within the National Forest for two decades, but then they and the timber industry decided to work together on a few small projects in which there was a shared interest.

Starting collaboration between opposing groups – the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition experience: <http://www.newforestrycoalition.org/>

- *Find a common interest:* The situation surrounding the timber sales in the Colville National Forest had been very contentious for many years with members of the community refusing to talk to one another. If common interests can be found between opposing groups it allows those

groups to work towards a common goal and build a relationship that is much less contentious and foster cooperation.

- *Set up a framework:* Very early on a **Memorandum of Understanding** was agreed upon between conservation groups, logging companies, and the Forest Service. This document set up lines of communications between the various groups, provided a foundation for working together, and allowed for a closer working relationship to be developed.
- *Start small:* Collaboration between conservationists and the Forest Service began on a few simple fuel reduction projects. The process went smoothly enough and the Forest Service came away with the perception that there was value added to the projects by having more input. Soon the agency asked for NEWFC to be involved in more and more projects.
- *Inclusion is important:* Who is invited into these collaborative efforts is very important, and if any one group is left out, they may feel alienated and threatened by the work of the collaborative. It is much better to start by casting a wide net to see who might be interested than to exclude anyone and have that group become angry and take an oppositional position. Those that feel the process is important will stay involved. Even if there are groups that choose to not be directly involved, keep up communications with groups on the periphery so they know what is going on.
- *Set up guidelines on project details:* Once a collaborative becomes established, it is a good idea to create a set of guidelines that can work as a framework for what the collaborative agrees makes up a good project. As long as a project falls within the framework of the guidelines expressed in a document, then there is no need for time to be spent discussing potential projects, and time can be better spent on other issues. These can include policies that are very detailed on just about any issue related to work that takes place on the ground.

GROUP DISCUSSION

- **Which positions within the Forest Service are likely to be more successful in collaborating with the public and other agencies?**
 - *Importance of USFS participation at all levels:* All levels of staff within the Forest Service can play an important role in collaborative efforts, even if it is simply showing up to meetings to show support for the collaborative process.
 - *Communications Skills:* One thing to consider is a person's skills at communicating effectively. No matter what position that person holds, as long as they have strong communication skills they can play an important role within the process.
 - *Supervisor vs. Specialist:* A Forest Supervisor can be integral to any collaborative process simply because they have access to a lot of knowledge and they are the authority on that forest. Budget information can be important with regard to what projects are even a possibility, and having a bigger picture outlook can help to frame the issues discussed by the collaborative. A specialist can be important in providing technical details that people higher up within the USFS might not have.

- *Commitment to and enthusiasm for collaboration:* Continuity and commitment to the process are also important. Having someone as a contact that believes the process is invaluable can make a big difference in keeping communications open between the collaboration and the agency.
- **How do collaborative organizations handle changing membership?**
 - *When people leave:* The changing faces representing organizations or interests can often cause disruptions within a collaborative framework. Loss of input on projects from that person or group's perspective is one detriment, along with the possibility that the group may become hostile and litigious towards projects that are being worked on within the collaborative framework. New people must be caught up to speed on issues. It simply takes time for a new person to become integrated into a collaborative that has been established for many years. It is important to forge a respectful relationship to make that transition easier and faster. It requires more work, though, in maintaining communications.
 - *Losing groups over time:* Obviously people can lose interest in participating if they feel that what is being discussed is not directly relevant to their interests. This situation can create two levels of participation; an inner circle that attend all meetings and are involved in every step of the process resulting in having much more input and an outer circle of organizations that attend on a limited basis. When an important issue that affects everyone does come up, a problem may arise of accommodating the influx of outer circle people back into the process.
- **What should you do when a group decides not to participate in a collaborative effort?**
 - *Giving groups outside the process an open invitation to participate:* In an instance where a group refuses to participate because they feel it would compromise their principles or do not trust the collaborative process, leaving a chair open at the table and having open lines of communication can be important to either bring groups back into the process, build future relationships, or to keep uncooperative groups from stopping the entire process. This approach can take some of the energy out of the group that doesn't want to participate and lessen their instinct to become defensive.
- **How can a collaborative balance power?**
 - *Balance of power vs. inclusion:* One possible solution is to restrict membership so that there is not a flood of organizations that represent one view point and consequently drown out the voice of others. Setting up a steering committee that can balance interests represented on the full group and that reflects those diverse interests can help manage issues as they arise.
 - *Bylaws:* Bylaws can be an important framework for any collaborative group to help design how exactly the organization will work. It can also reduce the number of conflicts that might arise, because issues such as power sharing have already been taking care of and don't need to be dealt with on-the-fly. Many organizations have excellent frameworks

already established, and borrowing language from a well functioning group can make the process easier.

- *Facilitation*: Facilitation is important to engendering an environment of openness and mutual respect of ideas. By facilitating an atmosphere in which all participants are encouraged to have a voice, no one opinion can dominate the conversation. When one point of view comes to dominate the discussion and process, it can lead to intimidation of other people's viewpoints, leading to less variety of input and groups not participating.
- *Consensus*: Within the Clearwater Collaborative, one of the things that has been done is to force those at the table to come up with a compromise on any issues which is disagreed upon. This can be set up within the bylaws or charter of a collaborative group. It allows for every interest to be explored and for a wide range of discussion to occur, with the goal being consensus on an issue. This also means that a decision can't be blocked by a single person or group, and forces the collaborative to come up with creative ways to find agreement on issues.
- *Litigation*: Conservation (and other) interests may engage in early collaboration efforts while they are still opposing and litigating other projects. But the true interest is to work away from a confrontational standing to one of cooperation and mutual respect. There will be a transitional period in which conservation groups (or others) use both cooperation and litigation as strategies in different situations. In the end, though, it is always better to have people come to the table so that people can understand different points-of-view.

- **Collaborative forest planning**

Sharon Timko: The Collaboration Cadre is a Forest Service initiative focused on supporting collaborative forest planning. Assistance to forests is built on a foundation of peer-to-peer learning. USFS staff and other, non-FS people from around the country with collaborative experience interview community leaders important to the Forest, then hold a workshop to set the stage for forest planning. A pilot workshop was held on the Inyo National Forest in May 2009, with 32 people involved in the workshop.