

Best Practices: Employing Field Crews on National Forests

The Watershed Research and Training Center has run field crews for 14 seasons on the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. The organization works to achieve multiple goals that meet the “triple bottom line”, including ecological (forest and watershed restoration, fuels reduction, noxious weed removal, trail work), economic (well-paying jobs for displaced forest workers and youth), and social purposes (worker retraining, youth education, community engagement). The following “pearls of wisdom” are based on their experiences:

- ***Devise strategies for success that match the goals of your program and your recruitment and hiring practices.*** The Watershed Center set up hiring criteria to recognize people who had worked the longest in the woods and who lived in communities where mills had closed. The resulting workforce was made up of people who were committed to staying and working in the area.
- ***Find and develop leaders.*** After several years, the Watershed Center was able to identify natural leaders who could take on more supervisory responsibility, liaison with the Forest Service, etc. These people are still working for the group 14 years later.
- ***Commit to keeping people employed at least six months out of the year.*** The Watershed Center would rather run a smaller crew that is employed over a longer period and enable their workers to qualify for unemployment than employ a larger crew working over a shorter period of time.
- ***Look for and use sources of knowledge.*** When just getting started in contracting with the Forest Service, the Watershed Center hired agency retirees to help design programs and teach them how to work with the agency. The retirees’ advice was invaluable. They knew the system, were respected within the agency, and weren’t afraid of paperwork.
- ***Invest in strong relationships with the Forest Service. Find internal champions and work with them.*** Spend time at the Regional Office on the Districts. Know people in the field, the grants & agreements staff, and contracting officers. Do not underestimate how important this is! Off-season months are just as important for relationship-building as during the field season (and you may get more attention).
- ***Pay your crews well.*** Use the Service Contract Act to demonstrate the fair wage when negotiating with the Forest Service. Clearly communicate the full budget (overhead, equipment, insurance, etc.).
- ***Recognize all costs.*** Build into your budget any extra costs unique to your area. For example, the Watershed Center needs to have a person walk through the work-site for several hours after the main crew is done to make sure a fire hasn’t ignited as a result of the day’s activities.

Lynn Jungwirth, Executive Director of the Watershed Research & Training Center, advises knowing agency contracting rules inside and out. “Give the Forest Service examples of how things worked in other places to demonstrate what is possible.”

Links

- The Watershed Research & Training Center: <http://www.thewatershedcenter.com/>
- University of Oregon Ecosystem Workforce Program’s Ecosystem/Watershed Restoration Workforce Training Curriculum: <http://ewp.uoregon.edu/workforce.html>
- Wage Determinations On-line: <http://www.wdol.gov/Index.aspx>