

Tools: Guidance for Collaboratives Seeking to Design a “Citizen’s Alternative” for National Forest Projects

Summary

Engaging a wide range of stakeholders in designing the projects that take place on our National Forests can improve the quality of the U.S. Forest Service’s (Forest Service) decision-making, increase the social license for forest management, and diminish the likelihood of legal challenges.

This case study illuminates how forest collaboratives and the Forest Service can work together to achieve better informed, less controversial, more enduring outcomes. The lessons learned through this process can assist the Forest Ser-

Background

The Panhandle Forest Collaborative (PFC) consists of stakeholders representing a range of social, environmental, and economic interests. Its membership includes community members, local landowners, elected officials, and individuals representing environmental organizations, outdoor recreation organizations, and timber companies. PFC members collaborate with each other and with land management agencies for the stated purpose of bringing a balanced approach to managing timber, wild ecosystems, and recreation in the region.

In 2012, the Idaho Panhandle National Forest (IPNF) identified an 11,000-acre Project Area known as Bottom Canyon. The purpose and need of the project were to:

- Establish and maintain resilient stand structure and species composition across the landscape;
- Improve water quality and aquatics habitat; and
- Provide forest products that contribute to the sustainable supply of timber products from National Forest lands

Prior to announcing the proposed action and soliciting public comment on how to design the project (a process known as project “scoping”), the Forest Supervisor and her staff agreed to consider analyzing a “citizen’s alternative” submitted by the PFC. From February 2013 to April 2014, the Coeur d’Alene River District Ranger met frequently with the PFC as it developed a project proposal (or “alternative”). The PFC drafted a proposal that responded to the IPNF’s Purpose and Need statement for the Project Area, with consideration for wildlife habitat and improved recreational opportunities within Bottom Canyon.

IPNF used the PFC’s proposal as the basis for its proposed action during the subsequent public review and analysis process under the National Environmental Policy Act. In August of 2015, after completion of the environmental analysis and public comment process, the Forest Supervisor approved the final plan for managing Bottom Canyon. Since then, the project has been implemented successfully. This achievement is recognized as a success story for collaborative management of our national forests. The following case study examines how PFC members and IPNF staff overcame several challenges throughout the collaborative process.

Challenge

Enabling IPNF to feel comfortable suggesting that the PFC develop a project proposal for consideration.

Key to Success

Establishing a shared belief that collaboration was the best means of designing a robust project alternative.

Challenge

Ensuring effective communication between IPNF staff and the PFC.

Key to Success

“Persistent and meaningful engagement,” according to the District Ranger.

Lesson 1

The District Ranger set a strong leadership example for his team, impressing upon them the value of engaging the public in creating a shared solution to forest management challenges. This was a shift from the prior experience of the PFC. Some members of the group had felt that, up until that point, the IPNF viewed stakeholder recommendations as an imposition on agency discretion and expertise, rather than as valuable contributions to project planning. The ultimate success of the collaborative process demonstrated to skeptical PFC members and skeptical IPNF staff that guidelines proposed by stakeholders can be valuable to, and valued by, the Forest Service.

Lesson 2

By ensuring a transparent and inclusive decision-making process, participants surmounted a hurdle that often stalls collaborative efforts: turning talk into action. The Bottom Canyon case study provides a model for collaboratives who seek to transform the content of their discussions into concrete deliverables that advance forest management projects.

Some of the elements that led to successful collaboration included:

- The PFC delegated the task of putting pen to paper to the Forest Projects Committee, a dedicated group of members with relevant expertise. This committee was more nimble than the full group, and could meet more regularly than the PFC, which allowed them to complete deliverables by the IPNF’s deadlines. The recommendations were then presented to the full group, who voted to submit them to IPNF.
- The District Ranger made a commitment to transparency and inclusiveness. The Forest Projects Committee Chair served as the primary point of contact with IPNF, relaying data requests to the District Ranger. IPNF staff responded with the requested information promptly, and the Chair shared information with the rest of the group.
- The facilitator supported the group in identifying an overall meeting plan, with objectives for each meeting. Through discussion in the Forest Projects Committee meetings, the Committee identified when expert presentations were most needed and what topics would be addressed at each meeting. Furthermore, the entire team of Forest Service staff (“Interdisciplinary Team”) working on the Bottom Canyon Environmental Assessment regularly attended PFC meetings to observe and provide technical information.

Challenge

Reaching agreement on the best approach to managing the forest within the Project Area.

Key to Success

Engaging in joint fact-finding, the process by which a group gathers the outside expertise and information needed to resolve scientific disputes.

Challenge

Building consensus within the PFC on the appropriate set of recommendations.

Key to Success

Establishing and enforcing the protocols of the PFC.

Challenge

Informing other interested stakeholders.

Key to Success

Communication with external partners early and often.

Lesson 3

Differences in preferred management approaches were resolved by inviting expert panels to explain the science behind various methods for improving forest, watershed, and ecosystem health. These experts included Forest Service staff (both from IPNF and the Rocky Mountain Research Station), as well as third-party scientists from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, the University of Montana, and the Ecosystem Research Group. The PFC also took several field trips with IPNF staff to examine existing forest conditions on the ground. These shared experiences allowed scientists both inside and outside of the Forest Service to explain the science behind IPNF's desired project outcomes and methods. Furthermore, the technical discussions provided PFC members the opportunity to contribute their own expertise. While joint fact-finding did not always lead to agreement on specific management decisions, it allowed each entity to grasp the rationale of the individual holding the opposing point of view. As a result, the group built the trust and shared understanding necessary to reach consensus on decisions affecting the Project Area.

Lesson 4

In addition to the challenge of coordinating closely with a federal agency, the PFC also encountered difficulty reaching unanimous agreement internally on the final project proposal. The group's decision-making process requires any member of the group who disagreed with a collective decision to offer an alternative solution they thought the group could accept. This protocol, established in the PFC's original operating procedures, allowed the group to resolve concerns that would otherwise have caused a stalemate.

Lesson 5

After the Draft Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact were distributed with the Environmental Assessment in June of 2015, the Kootenai Environmental Alliance (KEA) submitted a formal objection. KEA was invited to attend an objection resolution meeting but did not respond. The following month, the Reviewing Officer notified KEA that the objection review was complete and the project was found to be in compliance with all application laws and the IPNF Forest Plan.

PFC members reflected that they could have done a better job informing other groups who may have concerns about the project about PFC's efforts and the reasoning behind the group's decisions. The lesson the PFC learned from this experience is that it is important to establish protocols for internal communication (to promote healthy relationships within the collaborative), for communication with the Forest Service (to build trust with agency partners), *and* for external communication (to maintain strong working relationships with other groups).

Key Takeaways

This case study of the Bottom Canyon Project serves to inform the efforts of the Forest Service and collaborative groups seeking to engage in the design of forest management projects. Interviews with IPNF staff and PFC members reveal four principles that defined the success of this collaborative effort:

- ◇ *A commitment by the Forest Service to share information transparently and inclusively.*
- ◇ *A commitment by the collaborative to establish and adhere to the group's consensus-based decision-making protocols.*
- ◇ *A commitment by both parties to invest the time and preparation necessary to produce deliverables and build trusting relationships.*
- ◇ *A commitment by each party to be accountable to the other in the pursuit of persistent and meaningful engagement.*

From the beginning of the process, the District Ranger and PFC Co-Chairs recognized that the effort's success hinged on being accountable to each party. This accountability eventually led to **trusting relationships**. Rather than dive in to presenting their desired outcomes and a plan of action, IPNF staff took the time to engage in joint fact-finding with the PFC. The PFC, for its part, established clear channels of communication with IPNF staff and implemented best practices for reaching consensus internally. Additionally, both parties were willing to commit the time and effort required to support open communication, learning, and development of creative approaches in the project design. Ultimately, this collaborative effort serves as a model for incorporating meaningful stakeholder engagement into forest management projects.

“The Bottom Canyon project was one of the most—if not the most—successful collaborative efforts in which I have ever been involved.”

– Former Coeur d'Alene River District Ranger, Idaho Panhandle National Forest

Links

- Panhandle Forest Collaborative website: <https://sites.google.com/site/panhandleforestcollaborative/home>
- Collaboration Resources: <https://www.nationalforests.org/collaboration-resources>