
Collaborative Example: Montana Forest Restoration Committee

Case Description/History

In August 2006, a small group of people representing the timber industry, the conservation community, the U.S. Forest Service, and the state of Montana met to discuss the potential for a collaborative group to find common ground around restoration on National Forests in Montana. That small group expanded, and in January 2007, 34 people of diverse viewpoints and interests began what became the Montana Forest Restoration Committee (MFRC). Over the next six months, the group collaboratively developed 13 restoration principles and a plan for implementation. Since then, the MFRC has formed three forest-level committees with expanded, local membership on the Lolo, Bitterroot and Helena National Forests. The Forest Restoration Committees (FRCS) are testing the principles through collaborative design and implementation of projects on the ground.

Primary Partners

Timber Industry

FH Stoltze Land & Lumber
Montana Logging Association
Montana Wood Products Association
Pyramid Mountain Lumber
Smurfit-Stone Container
Sun Mountain Lumber

Federal, State and Local Government

MT Dept of Natural Resources
MT Department of Fish, Wildlife &
Parks
Montana Governor's Office
U.S. Forest Service (district ranger, two
forest supervisors, regional office)

Facilitators

Mary Mitsos, National Forest
Foundation
Brian Kahn, Artemis Common
Ground

Private Landowner/Local Business

Rich Ranches

Nonprofit / Interest Groups

Backcountry Horsemen of Missoula
Great Burn Study Group
Montana Wilderness Association
National Network of Forest
Practitioners
Ravalli County Off-Road Users
Association
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
Sierra Club (Bitterroot Group)

The Nature Conservancy
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation
Partnership
Kootenai River Development
Council
The Wilderness Society
Wildlands CPR
WildWest Institute

How was membership of the collaboration determined?

A committee (which did not include the Forest Service) generated a list of interests that were critical to include, and identified specific people who could represent those interests at a collaborative table.

Organizational Structure/ Decision-making Process

The MFRC was convened and facilitated by two neutral parties, the National Forest Foundation and Artemis Common Ground. At the first meeting, members agreed to a code of conduct and members held each other accountable to it.

A steering committee helped guide the overall process, and two committees were formed to draft the principles and implementation plan. The full group met for a full day each month, and went on a day-long field trip to visit restoration sites on the Lolo and Flathead National Forests. All decisions were made by consensus. If a person disagreed with the language or position the group was considering, it was incumbent on them to propose an alternative.

How was the process funded?

Participants paid for their own travel and other expenses (even their own lunches!) during the initial development of the principles. Facilitation and staff support was funded through a grant from the Cinnabar Foundation. The Wilderness Society provided a staff person to assist in drafting the principles, and sponsored the original Web site.

Facilitation and staffing for the ongoing work of the MFRC and FRCs is currently being supported by funding from the Northern Region of the Forest Service and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and in-kind resources from participants.

Implementation of the Principles

From its very first meetings, members of the MFRC were committed to testing implementation of the principles on the ground. To that end, an Implementation Committee developed a plan to establish collaborative, forest-level committees with diverse membership. As of the fall of 2009, three Forest Restoration Committees (on the Lolo, Bitterroot, and Lincoln District of the Helena National Forests) are working at the project level with Forest Service staff to develop and review projects that put the principles into action on the ground. The Lolo Restoration Committee is currently engaged with four different restoration projects, one of which has a signed Record of Decision and will be implemented in 2010. Both the Bitterroot Restoration Committee and the Lincoln Working group have chosen project areas and are now working on specific project design.

The MFRC continues to meet twice a year, and has an active steering committee. The MFRC developed a charter document to clearly define roles and responsibilities amongst the different committees. In the summer of 2009, the MFRC hired a part-time staff person to serve as coordinator.

What worked?

- Members maintained a high level of energy and commitment to the process.
- A group of members dedicated significant time to committee meetings and drafting of the principles and implementation plan, which enabled the full group to move ahead more quickly in decision-making at the monthly meetings.
- Strong Forest Service commitment throughout the process indicated the agency was serious about applying the outcomes.
- The group set an aggressive timeline for developing the principles, and stuck to it.
- Members communicated with their constituencies about the work being done throughout the process, enabling sign-off on the final product.

Challenges and How They Were Addressed

- Divisive issues among several members were dealt with through ad hoc subcommittees to diffuse tension and prevent distraction from the main work of the group.

Key Ingredients for Success

- Neutral facilitation.
- Frustration of all members with the gridlock resulting from battles over how National Forest management in Montana should be done.
- In-Kind donation of staff support to cover note-taking, meeting logistics, meals, etc.

“Both at the MFRC and FRC levels, people and interests that historically have disagreed are getting to know each other as people and I think that has huge ramifications for the future of natural resource issues in western MT. I hear over and over that this is one of the biggest successes of this effort to date.”

Marnie Criley, MFRC Coordinator

Sources

- Restoring Montana’s National Forest Lands: Guiding Principles and Recommended Implementation (September 2007)
- <http://www.montanarestoration.org/>
- Marnie Criley, MFRC Coordinator (September 2009)