Ecosystem Workforce Program

A QUICK GUIDE FOR INCORPORATING COLLABORATION INTO THE WATERSHED CONDITION FRAMEWORK

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The Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) asks Forest Service program managers and line officers to plan and implement integrated watershed restoration. Collaborating to restore watersheds can help you, as a national forest or grassland staff member, achieve diverse benefits. In addition, engaging with partners inside and outside of the agency can help you address community priorities, build capacity, leverage resources, and increase accomplishments across the landscape.

This quick guide provides strategies for collaborating at each of the steps in the WCF. Collaboration takes many forms; you and your partners can design a process that works for you. Depending on your local context and level of experience with collaboration, you may need to lay some groundwork. Perhaps you already have a collaborative group engaged, and want to enhance it. Consider how to involve stakeholders where you are in the process by sharing your work so far, listening to partner perspectives, and learning how you may involve partners earlier next time. Regardless of which step in the WCF process you are in or how advanced your collaboration efforts are, we hope this guide will be useful to you.

Reaching out with authentic intentions will help bring stakeholders to the table, build social capacity in your communities, and enhance your restoration work. Working together can build trust, capacity (knowledge, skills, and resources), and mutual learning for future restoration activities. Collaboration is a continual investment, so even if you are highly collaborative, there may be ways to "take it to the next level."

Starting to collaborate

When you do reach out to partners, you can introduce the WCF process and develop a plan for working together. You can use the WCF interactive maps in presentations and meetings to help people see where they can find information about the watersheds they care about. Include your national forest's partnership coordinator, or if your national forest does not have a partnership coordinator, designate another liaison and point of contact for the collaboration. As you work with your partners, creatively consider new roles you may each play. For example, your partners could be instrumental in conveying restoration and stewardship messages to the general public, or taking the lead in multi-party monitoring to document and evaluate your collective efforts.

Consider the following as you prepare to engage partners:

- Which internal agency partners you want to engage in the WCF (e.g. contracting officers, different staff areas, new employees, employees seeking development or cross-training)?
- Which external potential collaborators should you reach out to? Are there stakeholders beyond your NEPA scoping list, and existing collaborative or other groups that could be engaged?
- What methods will you use to communicate with traditional and nontraditional stakeholders?
- How can you use the media, existing community group meetings, or other venues to engage other stakeholders?

Step A: Classify the condition of all sixth-level watersheds in the national forest.

Stakeholders can play a valuable role in informing the classification process by providing data sets and other local and traditional knowledge. Partners such as watershed groups are likely to have relevant data and may have already evaluated parts of the watershed. Other landowners or municipal water providers may have information about conditions on other lands. Perhaps you already have a collaborative relationship with partners who can provide this information, or you have already completed your classification. If so, you may want to broaden or deepen your knowledge or your relationships with other nontraditional partners to refine your classifications or build a common, shared data set.

- What "gaps" in information might partners be able to help fill?
- Are you and your partners sharing relevant data sets such as state-sponsored water quality studies, watershed plans, and other relevant information?
- Where have you identified potential conflicts or disagreements around condition data? What method have you agreed upon to move forward?
- Is there a benefit in having a common data set across various partners or landowners?

Potential partners and stakeholders

Tribes
Watershed councils
Soil and water conservation districts, resource conservation districts
Economic development entities
Project contractors
Landowners, residents
Upstream or downstream users of the watershed
Water boards and districts
Health providers
Municipal water providers
Local government
Environmental conservation groups
State agencies
Community business interests
Recreation interests and users
Wildlife and fisheries groups
Other federal agencies
Youth organizations
Educators, educational institutions
Philanthropic or leadership groups
Local journalists and media
Job training organizations

Step B: Prioritize watersheds for restoration: establish a small set of priority watersheds for targeted improvement equivalent to a five-year program of work.

Priority setting is a great time for enhancing community involvement and engagement. Clearly, final decisions remain the role of line officers. However, at this stage, you may want to coordinate with other local watershed improvement strategies and prioritize watersheds where work is already occurring, or planned in order to magnify your impact. Stakeholder understanding and participation at this point can also improve outcomes by bringing in social or economic information such as local contracting capacity, community priorities, and education. Engaging people "upfront" can build commitment for later implementation. If your unit already has existing watershed priorities and collaborative capacity, this is a great time to get existing partners talking to each other to further enhance relationships and uncover new pathways to accomplishments.

- How do investments in the prioritized watershed align with other agency and community goals, policies, objectives, and investments?
- Do our planned projects address economic and social issues as well as ecological concerns?
- What opportunities exist to leverage other resources?
- What needs and opportunities exist to work off Forest Service lands to improve whole watershed conditions? Can the Wyden authority be used?

Step C: Develop watershed restoration action plans that identify comprehensive project-level improvement activities.

Stakeholder ideas and engagement can enhance the work of your interdisciplinary team as they create action plans. There are numerous ways to collect project-level information and develop mutually beneficial priorities. One such process, the Community Wildfire Protection Plan process, could easily be modified to collect community and stakeholder input into watershed improvements. In other places, collaborative watershed groups may already have priorities that could be integrated with your unit's priorities. The Partnership Resource Center also has tools your team can use (see Resources, on the next page, for more information).

Bringing internal and external partners together in the same room or in the field can expand on existing ideas or synergize new ones. Collaborative partners could also serve as a reviewing body for a draft list of projects that a team identifies. Even if you have a successful watershed improvement plan, engaging new or existing partners at this stage can add value by enhancing how you implement projects. For example, you might be able to involve youth or underserved groups in a new way, or perhaps a major downstream water user becomes interested in your ideas. If you are just beginning to collaborate at this step, consider ways you can learn from this experience and build collaborative relationships at Step A in the next round of project planning.

- How have you included partners so far in developing or reviewing the proposed projects? Are there partners that can add further value to your activities? Who are they?
- Is your planned sequencing of projects in line with partner priorities, considerations, and capacity?
- What kinds of community capacity exist to implement the work proposed now or in the future? What kinds of skills do they bring? What needs to be enhanced?
- In what ways will these projects collectively create benefits for both the agency and communities?
- Do the action plans set the stage for longer-term community stewardship (e.g. increase community capacity, provide jobs, maintain or build on restoration outcomes, or promote uses that improve resource condition)?

Step D: Implement integrated suites of projects in priority watersheds.

In the implementation phase, you can collaborate with your partners and stakeholders to implement projects with volunteers or via service contracts, stewardship contracts and agreements, or other partnership mechanisms. In some cases, partners may be able to provide access to implementation funding not directly available to the agency. Some partners may be best at concentrating on a certain type of project, phase, or place, while you focus on other priorities.

- What opportunities do you have to use stewardship contracting to implement projects collaboratively?
- How are you and your partners creating volunteer opportunities or jobs together?
- Are there ways that you and you partners could jointly seek funding for restoration than would not otherwise be available to the Forest Service?
- What opportunities exist to involve youths?
- How are you sharing progress with stakeholders and addressing concerns that may arise (e.g. having a public information session, using technologies to communicate, holding a field tour)?

Step E: Track restoration accomplishments for performance accountability.

When you report restoration accomplishments for the watershed, you might also share these accomplishments with your internal and external partners to honor and acknowledge your collaboration, and build common understanding of the impacts of the projects. This can help you build agency and community commitment for future work. You might also ask partners if there are other accomplishments they might like to track in preparation for monitoring.

- How are you informing internal and external partners of project accomplishments?
- How can you improve opportunities for both internal and external partner participation and feedback regarding the project?

Step F: Verify accomplishment of project activities and monitor improvement of watershed and stream conditions.

Although forest staff members will ultimately certify that projects have been completed, partners may be able to assist with monitoring in three ways. First, they may provide feedback about the collaborative aspects of the project, specific project outcomes, and socioeconomic impacts that will enrich your monitoring and collective learning. Second, they may play a key role in conducting or providing resources for monitoring. Depending on the collaborative capacity you and your partners have developed, a multiparty monitoring process, or collaboration with statewide efforts, or simple local monitoring may be best for the project. Some types of monitoring may also be able to enhance community learning or provide additional jobs. Third, you can work with partners to explicitly learn from the monitoring process by creating collaborative adaptive learning opportunities. You can use periodic collaborative meetings and field tours to take stock of progress to date, identify lessons, and opportunities for improvement. Collaborative monitoring and learning can build trust and interest in future projects.

- How are you monitoring ecological, social, and economic benefits?
- Which parts of your monitoring include a role for partners?
- What are the monitoring factors that our partners and the public have identified as significant to them?
- When and how will you ask partners to tell you how you are doing, and what you could do better next time?
- How are you creating opportunities for partners to view and monitor work in the field?
- How will you use monitoring results to engage stakeholders in the next round of watershed priorities or celebrate changes in watershed condition ratings?
- What are your mutual priorities for further learning?
- How will you and your partners best tell the story of the priority watershed's restoration using this information?

Resources

Council on Environmental Quality. 2007. *Collaboration in NEPA: A Handbook for NEPA Practitioners.*

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