

**REVIEW OF USDA FOREST SERVICE
COMMUNITY-BASED WATERSHED
RESTORATION PARTNERSHIPS**

APPENDIX C

Reviews of Watershed Projects

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CONASAUGA RIVER WATERSHED **Completed Winter/Spring 2002**

The Conasauga River begins high in the Blue Ridge Mountains in northwest Georgia, flows north into Tennessee, then west, and finally south again into Georgia for the balance of its 90-mile length. The watershed includes almost 500,000 acres of land. About 125,000 people live within the watershed.

In 1995, the Limestone Valley Resource Conservation and Development Council (RC&D) secured a grant from the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) to study the Conasauga River watershed issues and to suggest ways that the community could work together. Through community meetings and a steering committee of local citizens, Limestone Valley RC&D brought together many different parties to analyze threats to the river (excess sediment, excess nutrients, and toxic chemicals) and to develop cooperative solutions to protect this economically important and biologically diverse river. The US Forest Service was one of several agency partners that participated in these community meetings.

After finishing the report in 1996, local landowners, businesses, conservation groups, and government agencies reorganized their independent efforts into a joint effort known as the Conasauga River Alliance. Beginning with the recommendations in the study report, the Alliance brought people together for many types of watershed projects.

In 1997-98, the two Forest Supervisors with lands within the basin initiated a combined Conasauga River Watershed Ecosystem Assessment in the upper part of the watershed on Forest Service land. A team of 25 USFS specialists were involved. During this time the two Supervisors began to meet and discuss how to manage the many local, state and federal issues affecting the USFS in the watershed. In 1998-99, a USFS Project Coordinator position was created by both forests. In 1999, Kent Evans was hired as the coordinator. The two Forest Supervisors also decided to use a business model to govern USFS efforts. This meant a Board of Directors that included: one director; and five board members including line officers and regional office planning unit leader. The original idea was that the coordinator would have a 2-3-year time horizon.

In 1999, the coordinator, districts, forests, and the citizen led Conasauga River Alliance submitted a proposal and were selected to become one of the Chief's Large-scale Watershed Projects. This action led the USFS coordinator to become active with the Alliance Steering Committee. The Forest Service board was also expanded to include two members from the EPA, and one RC&D coordinator. The project was promised a five-year funding commitment.

The Alliance continues to be led by a steering committee of local citizens, with another 30 different participating groups and agencies such as The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Tennessee Aquarium, Dalton State College, the USDA Forest Service (USFS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Limestone Valley RC&D continues to sponsor the Alliance and is now leading a similar citizen-led watershed-based conservation effort on

the Upper Etowah River near Atlanta, Georgia. The Nature Conservancy has been a major contributor by providing expertise and funding for work in the watershed. The Nature Conservancy has also provided an employee as the project manager for the Conasauga River Alliance for the past five years. Many of the partners also have their own guiding plans and strategies for working in the watershed, such as the conservation strategy of TNC and the identification of the watershed as a priority area by the NRCS.

The priorities for work on Forest Service lands include: 1) Restoration projects on federal lands; 2) Conservation education and interpretation, and 3) Monitoring and applied research. The priorities of the Alliance for work on non-federal lands are to improve water quality and habitat for endangered species.

The Conasauga Project Has Achieved Numerous Successes:

- The USFS decided to start their work leading by example to improve conditions on federal lands. Projects on USFS lands include reducing the impacts of dispersed camping on local streams, restricting vehicle access to water bodies, closing 25 miles of illegal ATV trails that often went through riparian areas, improving the management of horse trails, and reducing sediment erosion from forest roads. Monitoring and research projects have also begun.
- Over 20 local landowners and stakeholders are actively involved in restoring their lands in the watershed and major gaps have been bridged between government agencies, landowners, non-profits and others.
- The NRCS, TNC, RC&D as well as the USFS have effectively engaged private landowners and involvement in the project is growing, as evidenced by the fact that more farmers are coming forward asking for help.
- The involvement of the Forest Service enhanced the Alliance and broadened the focus of restoration efforts to the whole watershed.
- Public education has been a high priority. A two-day event in 2000, attended by over 550 people, allowed participants to see the riparian buffers that had been installed on private lands and what the healthier reference sites look like on public lands. The event also included snorkeling in the stream. A similar event was held in 2001 and 70 teachers learned how to teach about watershed issues.
- The core team involved with the overall watershed project, composed of the Limestone Valley RC&D, the NRCS, USFS, and TNC, continually share information among themselves to ensure that overlaps and gaps in service are avoided.
- While some agencies, including the Forest Service, have experienced high staff turnover since the project was formed in 1995, the USFS watershed coordinator has been involved for the past three years and has consequently provided stability and consistency to watershed restoration efforts. The USFS coordinator is highly respected and has made

a positive impression on community members who increasingly look to him for information, technical assistance, model practices, and advice.

- Due to the issues above, the USFS has become a key resource for many outside groups and is now working in 10 counties, even though the Conasauga watershed encompasses only four counties.
- The project has increased the effectiveness of all of the partners, and most of the other government agencies involved say the project has benefited them.
- Due to the above issues, the project has generated positive public relations for the USFS.
- In sum, the project has very strong support and people want it to continue. In fact, the level of support we found for the Conasauga project was among the highest we found of any of the 14 large-scale watershed restoration projects we reviewed.

While Significant Progress Has Been Made, the Project Faces a Number of Challenges:

- The project has not meaningfully involved all of the key players, including the carpet companies and other interests from the downstream community of Dalton and some federal agencies.
- Related to the above, the recent relocation of the Alliance's office to Dalton may allow better connection to the carpet industry, yet may also pose a risk of reduced support from local landowners who have been so crucial to the success of the project.
- The USFS budgeting process has constrained watershed-level partnership-based work because funds come in pots that are difficult to shift from one funding pot to another, and each line item (pot) comes with specific targets which separates the agency into functions and forces each unit to focus on producing outputs, not outcomes.
- Measurement indicators are limited which could lead, down the road, to questions about the value of the investments being made.
- Most USFS staff, other than the project coordinator, has too many responsibilities to actively participate in watershed program.
- Changing priorities within the Chief's office, such as the loss of off-the-top funding as well as competing demands at the local forest level, may divert the project coordinator to other tasks and cause the agency to miss important opportunities for positive public relations, technology transfer between the USFS and other partners, and on-the-ground restoration.
- Questions exist regarding TNC's communication and fund raising style.

- The USFS coordinator and staff have become overburdened with requests for technical assistance, and without the resources and staff to meet the demand, opportunities may be lost.

Our Analysis of the Strengths and Obstacles of the Project Suggest That:

- The existing local civic capacity has been a key to success of the project and it seems unlikely that the agency could be able to achieve the same level of success had the existing civic capacity not been as high.
- The two-pronged governance model has proven effective and has reduced the fears held by some local landowners and stakeholders that the government or non-profits want to take their land.
- While the project has achieved a number of successes, the budget constraints, siloed functionalism promoted in part by the separate targets set for each unit, the lack of effective outcome or performance-based indicators and measurement systems, the inability of agency staff to actively participate due to work overload, and other problems indicate that the watershed-level partnership-based approach is not yet embedded in the standard operating procedures or culture of the USFS.

To Resolve the Obstacles and Help the Project Achieve Continued Success We Recommend:

- The USFS and other government agencies involved with the project make a concerted effort to continue to support, nurture, and assist the involvement of local landowners and civic leaders as these individuals and groups hold the key to the long-term success of the project. A special emphasis must be made to address the concerns and needs of local landowners if the Alliance office is moved to the downstream urban area of Dalton.
- A full-time coordinator should be maintained as the ability of an employee to focus full-time energy on this project is another key reason for its success.
- Explicit efforts be made to remove the constraints imposed by the budget, target setting, measurement and other obstacles and that concerted efforts be made to embed the watershed-level partnership-based approach within the operating procedures and culture of the USFS.

Successes

- **The USFS Has Led By Example By Improving Conditions on Federal Lands**

The extra funds and special designation created by the large-scale watershed program have allowed the Forest Service to make significant progress in addressing key problems on federal lands. The government agency Board of Directors felt that the Forest Service needed to, as one person said, "Walk the talk and fix our problems before telling others downstream what they should do." As a result, the agency has reduced the impacts of dispersed camping on local streams, restricted vehicle access to water bodies, closed 25 miles of illegal ATV trails that often went through riparian areas, improved the management of horse trails, reduced sediment erosion from forest roads, and implemented other projects. An assessment of aquatic species and habitats should be completed in the summer 2002. An ecological classification of the watershed has also been completed, which addresses soils, geology, terrestrial vegetation communities and other issues. In addition, the Coweeta Hydrologic Research Laboratory has been engaged in projects to monitor sediment loading, evaluate vegetation management strategies to address beetle kill, assess ecosystem response to fire and address other forest health issues.

- **Local Landowners and Stakeholders Are Actively Involved in the Alliance**

The Conasauga Alliance is composed of over 20 local landowners and organizations. The involvement of this group in efforts to improve water quality and habitat for endangered species is a major success. Major gaps have been bridged between government agencies, landowners, non-profits and others. There was a good deal of initial skepticism among local landowners about working with the USFS and TNC. People were concerned that the federal government wanted to take their land or that TNC would acquire it all. However, once people become involved and stayed at the table, most of these fears went away. Over 20 miles of riparian buffers have been installed on private lands on the main stem and tributaries of the Conasauga. Projects have been completed to address chicken waste and to create a composting system for dead chickens. These and other projects make people very pleased with the project so far. One person summarized the successful way in which the Alliance has operated by stating, "When you go to their meetings you see real enthusiasm around the table and wish that other programs were like this." Another landowner called this "a pilot for the rest of the country."

- **NRCS, Along with TNC, the RC&D and Even the USFS Have Effectively Engaged Private Landowners and Involvement is Growing**

Every person we spoke with said the NRCS has been the key player in engaging private landowners in the project. People also said Limestone Valley RC&D, TNC staff who serve as coordinators for the Alliance, and even the Forest Service have been important players. Everyone can claim a role in the success of the project so far. The installation of riparian buffers is one of the key needs on private lands within the watershed and NRCS staff have had the contacts and skills required to encourage private landowners to begin

to restore riparian areas. One respected major landowner agreed to install 18 miles of riparian buffers on his lands. This landowner also installed a waste treatment lagoon. The actions of this landowner have provided a highly visible model for other landowners. A number of people said they have seen a visible change in the last 6 months and that more farmers are now coming forward asking for help. One person said, "The challenge now is to find enough money for all of the demand."

- **The Involvement of the Forest Service Enhanced the Alliance and Broadened the Focus to the Whole Watershed**

Although the Conasauga Alliance was organized before the USFS got involved, many people said the agency has helped the Alliance become more effective. For example, USFS staff manned the sites for the educational events they have operated and provided funds that made the events possible. The involvement of the USFS also broadened the focus beyond just private lands to the whole watershed. One private landowner said, "The USFS has been a lifesaver. Kent Evans has helped us to do a lot of educational projects and helped with on the ground projects." The expanded focus has also provided many benefits. For example, information sharing has been enhanced between the Forest Service and the Alliance. The USFS has provided significant resources to the Alliance to hire a coordinator and complete projects. In general, people are coming to realize that issues need to be addressed within the whole watershed in order to achieve the goals at any particular location.

- **A Significant Amount of Public Education Has Been Accomplished**

One of the major strengths of the project has been the emphasis placed on public awareness building and education. A two-day event was held in 2000, attended by over 550 people, which showed participants the riparian buffers that had been installed on private lands and what healthier areas looked like on public lands (the reference sites in the watershed). They also involved visitors in snorkeling the stream, which turned out to be a major success. A similar two-day touring and snorkeling event was held in 2001 where 70 teachers were provided with training in how to teach about watershed issues. Many of the road sediment projects and other projects that have been implemented on federal lands have provided examples for local governments and private landowners to use on their lands.

- **The Partners Continually Share Information and Expertise**

Everyone we spoke with said the USFS has been very forthcoming with its data, information, and expertise. The core team involved with the overall watershed project, composed of the Limestone Valley RC&D, the NRCS, USFS, and TNC, get together monthly, usually for breakfast, to share information, ensure that overlaps and gaps in service are avoided, etc. This communication process has proven to be very instrumental in improving the work of all of the partners.

- **The USFS Has Provided Stability and Consistency to Watershed Restoration Efforts**

Most of the local agencies have recently experienced staff turnover that influenced their level of involvement and focus in the project. Although the USFS has also experienced staff changes, the agency has remained visibly committed to the program primarily due to the effort of the coordinator. The steadiness of the agency's commitment has made a big impression on community members who increasingly look to the Forest Service for information, technical assistance, model practices, and advice.

- **The USFS Coordinator is Highly Respected**

Every person we spoke with voiced respect and support for the work of the project coordinator. Private landowners said he listens well, provides good information, and has been effective working on a personal basis. State and federal agency employees voice similar comments. One private landowner member of the Alliance summarized these views by stating, "Kent Evans has been a great leader to help us through things. He's done a great job."

- **The USFS Has Become a Key Resource for Many Outside Groups**

The way that the coordinator and others within the USFS have conducted themselves with private landowners and the way the Forest Service has shared its technical expertise generated a growing number of requests for help outside of the Conasauga watershed. The coordinator is now working in 10 counties, even though the Conasauga watershed encompasses only 4 counties. This underscores the level of respect that the coordinator and other agency staff have garnered through their involvement in the project.

- **The Project Has Increased the Effectiveness of All of the Partners**

Many of the partners we spoke with said their agency has been able to accomplish much more by working together than they would by working on their own. The private sector and local governments have been able to learn effective management practices by observing some of the model road work and sediment projects that the USFS has completed. The USFS has learned a great deal by learning about and observing how management occurs on non-federal lands. None of the partners working alone could have organized the public education workshops and programs. By combining resources and funds, they were able put together programs that have had a major impact. One partner from a federal agency summed up the feelings of many public agencies by stating, "It's been extremely helpful and beneficial to my agency. Our program is better for it."

- **The Project Has Generated Positive Public Relations for the USFS**

Many of the external partners we spoke with said the project has helped them develop a greater appreciation for the USFS. The agency has apparently generated significant good will and positive exposure within the local community.

- **In Sum, the Project Has Strong Support and People Want it to Continue**

Every private and public partner we spoke with voiced strong support for the project and said it should continue. In fact, the level of support we found for the Conasauga project was among the highest we found of all of the large-scale watershed restoration projects. People like what has been accomplished and want the project to continue. One person summarized the level of support that exists by stating, "The project has seen good results, strong partnerships, people who want to maintain water quality and keep it clean. This is a real model for others."

Limitations and Obstacles

- **Not All of the Key Players are Involved**

At least two people we interviewed said although the involvement of local landowners has been important, the carpet companies and other interests from the downstream community of Dalton need to be engaged. The urban interests have not seen the benefits of participating, but this is apparently changing. In addition, the US Fish and Wildlife Service was not asked to sit on government Board of Directors despite being responsible for the ESA listings of mussels and other species.

- **Recent Changes In the Structure of the Alliance May Pose a Risk**

Connected to the issue above, a number of government employees and private individuals raised concerns about the relocation of the Alliance offices to Dalton, a large community at the southern end of the watershed. The Alliance was originally composed of local private landowners, many who have lived in the area for generations. This arrangement was key to generating significant local buy-in. A number of people voiced concern that, although it is important to involve the carpet company and others from Dalton, local landowners may reduce their involvement after the Alliance office is moved to Dalton. One person summarized these concerns by stating, "Its a huge risk to move the Alliance office from the rural area to the city because the landowners may reduce their support."

- **Measurement Indicators are Limited Which Could Lead to Questions About Results**

A number of people from within and outside of government mentioned that although a number of projects have been implemented, few indicators exist to know if and when progress is being made. There is no data to know if mussels or fish, for example, are recovering as a result of activities. While recovery of these species will require a long term effort, and it may be years before they can actually measure reductions in sediment and other impacts, the lack of clear indicators and measurement systems could eventually lead to questions regarding the value of the investments being made. Indeed, one government employee said, "Some people are beginning to ask if the Conasauga is a money pit. There is lots of money going into the watershed. Could it be better used elsewhere?" Better measurement tools could provide an answer to this question.

- **The USFS Budgeting Process Has Constrained Interdisciplinary Work**

A number of USFS staff members said the separate line-item budgets of the agency budgeting system has been difficult to use within the context of the large-scale watershed project. Funds come in different pots and it has been difficult to shift funds from one pot to another. For example, it has been difficult to get funds from other accounts into the road budget to address sediment problems. The separate funding pots come with targets, which forces agency staff to work on specific projects (wildlife habitat enhancement, etc.) in isolation from other work. It has been very difficult and time consuming to merge

the funding pots and allow staff to work on interdisciplinary landscape-level and ecosystem-based assessments, planning, and project implementation. One senior agency official said, "Congress gives us money and wants outcomes, but the agency's budgeting process still deals with programs and outputs, not their eventual outcomes."

- **Most USFS Staff Have Too Many Responsibilities to Actively Participate in the Partnership-Based Program**

Many USFS employees said the success of the Conasauga project could be primarily attributed to the time and work of the project coordinator. Most other USFS staff members do not have the time available to focus on this work. One senior agency employee said full-time coordinators are needed if the agency is to be involved with these programs. Yet, when money is short, partnership-based projects may not be top priorities. This could threaten the Conasauga project in the future.

- **Changing Priorities Within the Chief's Office and from Some of the Local Forests May Affect the Project**

Many Forest Service employees said the changing priorities within the Chief's office and new directions set by at least one local Forest Supervisor could significantly dilute or even end the project. For example, the off-the-top money that has been provided for the large-scale watershed program was extremely helpful in elevating the project and getting work done. The funds support a full-time coordinator, which almost everyone we interviewed said was a key to accomplishing the work that has been so highly praised. The loss of off-the-top funds means that the project will have to compete for funds with other priorities within Region 8 and local Forests. While most people at Region 8 and within local Forests have been very supportive, the new Forest Supervisor on the Georgia side may establish new priorities. These changes will undoubtedly lead to less money and consequently less work being done. The project would become diluted as the coordinator and others become engaged in other work. While most of the agency employees we spoke with said the change in direction is not necessarily bad, but if it leads to a significant dilution of the project the agency would have missed a major opportunity for positive public relations, technology transfer between the USFS and other partners, and on-the-ground restoration.

- **Questions Exist Regarding the Nature Conservancy's Communication and Fund Raising**

Although they do not seem to be major impediments, and although things are apparently improving, a number of people had concerns over the communication style and fundraising approach of The Nature Conservancy. A few people mentioned that TNC had agreed to provide a \$25,000 match for a grant from the National Forest Foundation, but then gave the funds to another group and asked for an extension to give them more time to find new money for the match. This caused considerable angst among those involved as people felt an agreement was broken. In addition, although they were not specific as to the issues, a few private landowners voiced concerns about TNC's communication style.

The number of times we heard these concerns suggest that issues exist which should be looked at.

- **USFS Staff Have Become Overburdened with Requests for Technical Assistance**

The flip side of the success the USFS coordinator and other agency staff have had is that demand for their assistance outside of the Conasauga now has grown well beyond what can be provided. Staff simply does not have the time or resources to meet the demand. The growing number of requests for assistance suggests a major opportunity exists for the agency to generate goodwill while helping resolve important problems. Yet, without the resources and staff to meet the demand, the opportunity may be lost.

Analysis

- **The Existing Civic Capacity Has Been a Key to Success**

Much of the success of the Conasauga project can be attributed to the fact that a group of active local stakeholders already existed, and those local agencies such as NRCS and non-profits such as the RC&D and Natural Conservancy were already engaged in restoration with private landowners. The Forest Service was able to append itself to existing efforts. It seem unlikely that the agency would have been able to achieve the same level of success had the existing civic capacity not been as high.

- **The Governance Model Has Proven Effective**

The Board of Directors, which makes decisions for projects on federal lands, serves in an advisory role for the Alliance. The USFS and other government interests provide information and feedback that may help to shape the decisions of the Alliance, but the Alliance makes its own decisions. Sometimes the Alliance has decided to go in directions that are at odds with the USFS's advice. This has proven to be an effective structure. The private landowners and stakeholders involved with the Alliance feel empowered to make their own decisions, yet benefit from the perspective that USFS employees offer.

- **Despite the Successes, Numerous Barriers Prevent the Watershed-Level Partnership-Based Approach From Becoming Embedded in the Operating Procedures and Culture of the USFS**

Most of the local Forest Service employees we interviewed said although they are moving in the right direction, the watershed-level partnership-based approach is not yet embedded in the standard operating procedures or culture of the agency. The agency's leadership has not unequivocally declared the watershed approach to be a goal of the agency, not has the leadership provided consistent strong support for those engaged in these programs. The budget process encourages siloed functionalism, not interdisciplinary watershed and partnership-based work. The majority of the staff within the agency is not assigned to, or skilled at, interdisciplinary partnership-based work, and even those who do understand and support the need for this approach have too much on their plate to participate. One Forest Service employee summarized this view by stating, "The agency is too quick to pat ourselves on the back. We have not done it yet. Except for one or two people, partnership-based programs are not really happening."

Recommendations

- **Continue to Support and Nurture Local Civic Capacity**

The high degree of local civic capacity that exists in the Conasauga watershed has been one of the dominant reasons for the success of the project to date. The USFS and other government agencies should continue to support, nurture, and assist these individuals and groups as they may hold the key to the long-term success of the project. Special attention should be given to ensuring that local landowners and government leaders continue to feel engaged and empowered, if and when the Alliance office is moved to Dalton.

- **Maintain a Full-Time Coordinator**

Given the number of times we heard that another key to the success of the project has been the skilled, full-time coordinator, it seems prudent to continue to employ a coordinator. If the project is to continue, and the partners desire to achieve the same level of success, a full-time coordinator will be needed.

- **Take Explicit Steps to Remove the Barriers and Embed the Watershed-Level Partnership-Based Approach within the USFS**

If the USFS decides to continue to emphasize the watershed-level partnership-based approach, explicit steps should be taken to remove the many obstacles that constrain the process. Some of the obstacles that were identified through our interviews and research include the lack of consistent leadership and direction from the Chief's office, the budgeting process, program and staff performance targets and siloed functionalism these issues generate, the lack of sufficient staff time to participate, the continually shifting priorities within the agency and lack of effective outcome-based measurement indicators. Efforts to resolve these issues and provide clarity on future direction and support for the project may unleash even more energy and creativity and lead to greater progress.