

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

**ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

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Appendix A

**Note: The Fourteen Individual Watershed Reviews That Were Completed For This Project Are Included In Appendix I Under Separate Cover.**

## Executive Summary

The USDA Forest Service initiated the Community-based Watershed Restoration Partnerships in 1999 to demonstrate how the agency can best engage in and support landscape-level, community-based management. The program represents a significant investment by the Forest Service in funding and resource commitment, and it represents a significant investment as well by numerous partners. This report is a formative evaluation of fifteen watersheds from across the country selected to participate in the program. Bob Doppelt and Craig Shinn of Portland State University carried out the review with assistance from Jessica Wilcox, a graduate student at PSU, and Dewitt John of Bowdoin College.

This review is not a report card on the Community-based Watershed Restoration Partnerships. Rather than simply evaluating success or failure of the land management treatments or collaborative efforts resulting from the projects, the report seeks to determine the agency's strengths as well as weaknesses--those elements helping and those hindering the institutionalization of the landscape-level, community-based management approach into everyday agency operations.

The Community-based Watershed Restoration Partnerships have produced many important successes and outcomes in the short time they have existed. For example, the fifteen partnerships produced tangible on-the-ground outcomes, including restoration of wetlands (3,345 acres), riparian zones (169 miles), and upland wildlife habitat (3,525 acres). Projects have carried out forest health treatments (30,400 acres), including thinning, fuels reduction, prescribed fire and tree planting. They have treated noxious weeds (21,000 acres), rehabilitated roads (700 miles), and improved recreational sites (145) and trails (200 miles). The watershed partnerships wrote collaborative business plans to guide the work and established functioning working groups with diverse interests. Numerous federal, state, and local governments, private parties, and non-profits have been engaged in the projects.

While there is much for the Forest Service, its employees, and the Watershed Partnerships to be proud of, our review found many obstacles to future success. Removing these barriers will improve the functioning of the partnerships and improve the agency's ability to institutionalize the landscape-level, partnership-based approach throughout the National Forest System.

### The Major Themes Of Our Major Findings Include:

- 1) The most successful watershed projects were found in areas where strong people and groups exist within the community external to the Forest Service--that is, where civic capacity is high. Civic capacity can be thought of as the social capital (established network of relationships among individuals and institutions), community competence (variety and abundance of knowledge, skill, and ability within a community), and civic enterprise (history of collective action). Social capital may include local governments, non-profits, special districts, private businesses, and others. Concerted efforts to

understand and collaborate with those who represent existing local civic capacity will provide the Forest Service with a greater opportunity for success in landscape-level collaborative approaches. Learning how to help foster civic capacity would be a key to long-term success in areas where civic capacity is currently low.

2) In a number of cases, we found that Forest Service employees thought they were performing better than did their external partners. Agency staff, for example, often told us they had developed successful partnerships with stakeholders. Our reviews often found, however, that in many cases the most successful partnerships were primarily between the Forest Service and other federal government agencies. Many non-governmental partners said they struggled to be considered full partners in planning and decision-making. The divergent views about the performance of the Forest Service left us with a clear sense that the agency may be too internally focused. When an agency is too internally focused it may unknowingly screen out or block information that may be vital to the health of the agency and the lands it manages. Efforts to turn outward and increase the agency's ability to accurately receive external information may help reduce the crisis-response mode the agency often finds itself in.

3) Many Forest Service employees seem caught between very different views of the agency's mission, goals, and role. Some agency employees believe that their mission is to restore and sustain watershed health and that the production of economic benefits results from, and does not override, these goals. People who hold this view tend to believe that a fundamental change is needed in the way the agency operates--a shift toward landscape-level collaborative multi-disciplinary approaches--to accomplish the goals. These people generally want to see long-term commitment and funding made to the watershed projects and other collaborative efforts so that new planning, decision-making, and implementation mechanisms can be established. Other agency employees believe that the primary mission of the agency is to suppress fires, to produce commodities for industry or local communities, or to foster other single purposes such as recreation. People who hold these views often believe that the existing way the agency operates works just fine and that the major constraints to success are lack of funds and/or ineffectual or outdated legal requirements and procedures (e.g. ESA, NEPA). People who hold this view often believe that landscape-level collaboration diverts time and resources away from their primary tasks.

People with both of the views described above, and others, believe that the Forest Service rarely follows through on new initiatives and therefore see the watershed projects as simply another in a series of projects that will soon fade away. Even if employees feel an urgent need to adopt a new approach, the lack of confidence that the agency will stick with the collaborative watershed approach for long leads many people to primarily focus on getting as much money as possible to complete backlogged projects rather than investing time and energy on designing and testing a new way of doing business. Widely divergent views suggest that a lack of clarity exists among Forest Service employees about the long-term viability of the watershed projects and the mission and direction of the agency as a whole.

4) Due to the issues above, many projects are struggling to understand or develop clarity about what landscape-level partnership-based collaboration involves. Those who view the watershed projects as a new way of doing business tend to delineate new visions, goals, and strategies and seek synergy among multiple partners (i.e. by working together, each can achieve more than they could by working alone). They strive for entrepreneurial, integrative solutions to problems such as the fragmentation of authorities and laws and the functional silos that exist within the Forest Service. Those who do not believe that a new approach is needed and/or do not believe the agency is fully committed to the new approach struggle to develop effective new visions, goals, and strategies, and tend to believe that improved "coordination" between government agencies and talking with a few trusted external stakeholders constitutes effective partnership building.

5) Given our findings, we conclude that in most cases the competency exists within the Forest Service to engage effectively in the new landscape-level partnership-based approach represented by the community-based watershed restoration partnerships. The agency has employees with an exceptional range of high-quality scientific, engineering, planning, outreach, and communication skills. Forest Service research programs are some of the best in the nation. The agency has been dealing with the public for many years, although not specifically in the manner required for the large-scale watershed projects. The primary obstacles to success are not related to human competency; they are related to a lack of clarity over the mission and goals of the agency, a need for commitment to the administrative and coordination requirements of landscape-level collaboration, and a redesign of governance systems, structures, and human resource practices that were established for purposes other than landscape-level partnership-based collaboration. Our research suggests that the latter issues must be resolved before the new landscape-level partnership-based approach can become fully embedded in the agency's standard operating procedure and culture.

Improving the function of landscape-level, community-based watershed partnerships will fall to those in a leadership role and those involved – the Chief and headquarters staff, the regional office and forest staff, and those within the partnerships.

### **Recommendations Resulting From Our Findings:**

#### **1) The Chief and National Headquarters Staff Can Enhance the Success of the Landscape-Level Partnership-Based Approach by:**

- Affirming that the watershed partnerships, and the landscape-level partnership-based approach in general, is a top priority for the Forest Service by "protecting" the innovation the partnerships represent from being subsumed by the normal agency administrative structure and culture until they achieve maturity
- Demanding accountability for the progress of the watershed partnerships by requiring clear and consistent progress reports

- Instituting strategies to explicitly remove barriers and obstacles to success such as budgeting processes, agency incentive, and reward systems, and aligning human resource systems within the Forest Service to support those people becoming skilled in competencies important to the new approach.
- Providing leadership through symbolic acts like recognition and by expressing a consistent message of commitment to those involved in the innovative approach represented by the landscape-level partnership-based programs.

2) Regional Foresters, Forest Supervisors and Their Staffs Can Improve Success by:

- Identifying and prioritizing landscape-level, community-based partnerships in areas of high civic capacity and/or working to enhance the civic capacity of partnering communities
- Supporting the hiring or maintaining the position of the watershed coordinator both in cases where this person is a Forest Service employee and in cases where this person serves the partnership in another institutional arrangement
- Providing support for those Forest Service staff working in and with partnerships through appropriate human resource management actions, assignment flexibly, and appropriate discretion
- Envisioning their responsibility at the landscape level and working with watershed partnerships to capitalize on the success they represent.

3) Forest Service Staff and Partners Involved Within the Partnerships Can Enhance Success by:

- Developing a clear vision, measurable goals, strategies, and tactics
- Diagnosing and developing an appropriate governance structure and system
- Establishing a transparent, accessible, performance-based management system where outputs (tasks completed) and outcomes (ecological, economic, and social results of the tasks) are both accounted for
- Relentlessly communicating the partnership vision, what counts for success, and stories of such success
- Treating the landscape-level, community-based watershed restoration partnerships as learning opportunities, constantly seeking to identify and eliminate obstacles, and constantly learning to be more effective in the social technologies and integrated ecological understanding necessary for success.

Our findings suggest that the watershed partnerships should be continued, protected, and supported over the next four to six years to allow for the initial efforts and investments to bear fruit. If watershed partnerships are allowed to mature over the near term, they should yield significant results including the following:

- Deliver substantial improvements in local watershed conditions, and at the same time deliver economic, cultural, and recreational benefits that are important to the communities and partners involved in the projects
- Develop effective management tools, budget procedures, accountability mechanisms, etc. for landscape-level, watershed management, which could be instituted agency-wide if the Forest Service (and Congress) finds this to be desirable
- Enhance the skills and knowledge of local Forest Service staff in working effectively in community-based efforts and provide a training model for other Forest Service staff in how to do so, should they and the agency decide to utilize this approach in other localities.

The Community-based Watershed Restoration Partnerships represent a large investment by the Forest Service and by their partners. The initial efforts have yielded success in on-the-ground watershed restoration, forest health improvements, and the establishment of a new way of doing business – across the landscape, beyond the Forest Service boundary, and in partnership with local communities and diverse interests. The watershed-partnership approach has the promise to leverage federal funding and resources, increase public commitment to shared resource-management goals, and reconnect the Forest Service to local communities in ways that meet goals of ecological health, economic well-being, and community resilience. As this summary and the full report suggest, there are obstacles to success and many opportunities to improve the partnerships as they mature. The Forest Service, through the Chief and other agency leaders, has endorsed watershed restoration as one of three key challenges facing the agency. This act committed the agency to community-based approaches. This report provides a mid-course formative evaluation to further the goals of the USDA Forest Service Community-based Watershed Restoration Partnerships.

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