

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

APPENDIX J

Reviews of Watershed Projects

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UPPER KOOTENAI RIVER WATERSHED

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The Upper Kootenai Watershed Restoration Project began in 2000, sparked by local concerns over growing unemployment, declining timber harvests, and the opportunity that restoration work represented to the area. A mill closure exasperated County Commissioners who had watched unemployment rise to double digits in the 1990s. They called on the Governor who had grown up in the area. In July, the Governor visited the area with the Northern Regional Forester. This visit produced a commitment by the Forest Service to support the local community through the designation of the area as a Large-scale Watershed Restoration project. The Kootenai National Forest was asked to take on the project. Since then the Upper Kootenai Watershed Restoration Project has completed a watershed assessment and carried out a number of restoration activities within the watershed.

The Upper Kootenai is an extensive (1.4 million acres), remote watershed in the northwest corner of Montana and bordering Idaho and Canada. It has some of the wettest and lowest elevation lands in Montana with some of the most productive and biologically diverse forests. About 80% of the land is federally owned and managed by the US Forest Service. Employment has been tied to the National Forest. Some 18,000 people live in the area and many more use the area for recreation, drawn by the lake, the river, the mountains and the backcountry. While population is concentrated in Troy and Libby on the west and Eureka and Fortine on the east, the Upper Kootenai also draws users from Whitefish and Kalispell. The Kootenai is the third largest tributary to the Columbia River system and is dammed at Libby to create Lake Koocanusa. Lake Koocanusa is 90-miles long, about half of its length in the US and half in Canada. The Lake and the roads surrounding it run through much of the designated large-scale watershed. The Interior Columbia Basin Final Environmental Impact Statement identified the Upper Kootenai sub-basin as a high-priority restoration area.

Particular Successes of the Upper Kootenai Project Include:

- Completing an assessment of the Upper Kootenai watershed.
- Enhancing the restoration of Graves Creek watershed.
- Funding other watershed restoration projects including road closures, eradicating noxious weeds, improving roads and reducing fire risk.
- A new Resource Advisory Committee was formed in spring of 2002. This is not a result of the watershed project but is noteworthy because the RAC has emphasized recommending watershed restoration projects for funding.

The Constraints And Limitations Identified in this Project Include:

- Community partners have limited involvement. Partner involvement is limited to the individual, site-specific project level.
- There is tension within the Kootenai Forest about what the watershed assessment was and what it can do for Ranger District-level decision-making.
- Funding is limited.
- Forest Service commitment to the large-scale watershed project is seen as limited.

To Understand the Status of the Upper Kootenai the Following Must Be Considered

- The initial political agreement to include the Upper Kootenai in the set of watersheds selected for inclusion in the national program planted seeds of discord. The outside-in and top-down nature of the decision process leaves the Upper Kootenai feeling like it is unique and unsure about the level of commitment there is to the Kootenai in the long run.
- This, the lack of involvement of community partners, and the lack of social work in initial program activities means that mission, values, and vision are unfocused. There is not a common understanding or commitment to the community-based watershed restoration partnership.
- The Upper Kootenai has relied on processes internal to the Forest Service to accomplish the work it has completed. This has meant, at best, an incremental change in patterns of decision-making and in governance.
- The Upper Kootenai has a complex authority system that is not reflected by the structure, processes or activities of the Upper Kootenai Large scale Watershed Project.
- A key to success in this project will be designing projects that support the emerging political economy of the area, contribute to community resilience and enhance local economic vitality.

Based On These Findings and Analysis, We Recommend:

- Involving many more community partners.
- Managing at the landscape (watershed)-level, as well as project-by-project.
- Maintaining interest and commitment from high-level policy actors to leverage progress in the Upper Kootenai.

- Working through project design and selection to enhance community well-being and economic vitality as well as watershed restoration.

Success

- **An Assessment of the Upper Kootenai Watershed Was Completed**

A major accomplishment of the Upper Kootenai project was completion of an assessment of the watershed identifying conditions and flagging problem areas, i.e. wildlife and fish, hydrologic conditions, and water quality. This assessment has the potential to shift the priority areas for restoration. It has the potential to target project funding from multiple sources: US Forest Service, US Fish & Wildlife Service, other federal agencies and potential community partners. The assessment will provide a platform for analysis in the Forest Plan revision now underway on the Kootenai and Panhandle National Forests. The assessment process also allowed Forest Service staff to develop several analytic methods that will be useful in the future. The assessment has the potential to guide and affirm decisions related to restoration priorities.

- **The Graves Creek Watershed Has Been Enhanced**

The large-scale restoration project provided new money to implement high-priority watershed restoration activities. Graves Creek was a focus of funding allowing for removal of a dam, in-channel improvements and roadwork to reduce sedimentation in the stream. This creek is a key bull trout habitat area. The dam removed was an irrigation dam, so the project involved the local irrigation district to accomplish irrigation needs while improving fish passage and in-stream habitat conditions. State fish & game and federal fish & wildlife agencies were involved in Graves Creek restoration efforts. The efforts are continuing.

- **Funding of Watershed Restoration Projects**

The new funding available through the large-scale watershed restoration program did allow for a number of projects to be completed in the three Ranger Districts in the Upper Kootenai. Major efforts were made to decommission roads and improve other roads by culvert replacement, regrading, etc. In-stream conditions were enhanced in Graves Creek and other locations. Other funded projects ran the gamut from noxious weed eradication to improving habitat conditions. Funding also provided for controlled burns to improve forest condition and reduce fire danger.

- **Shifting Focus of Forest Service Projects**

The large-scale watershed program was initiated in the Kootenai in response to a request from Lincoln County Commissioners for the Forest Service to respond to reductions in timber harvest and related mill closures. The assessment and funding associated with the large-scale watershed designation did add to the shifting focus of Forest Service project funding from timber harvesting to watershed restoration. Recreation, a major value in the Upper Kootenai, is seen as linked to the watershed restoration efforts. Local businesses are involved in the restoration work but as contractors rather than partners. The US Army Corps of Engineers and US Fish & Wildlife Service have been able to support the

watershed restoration focus by collaborating on some projects and funding independent parallel efforts. For example, Trout Unlimited worked with the Army Corps of Engineers to increase access to the Kootenai for river users.

- **New RAC Formed in the Spring of 2002**

A new Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) was created in the spring of 2002 for Lincoln County. The RAC is composed of people with a variety of interests. Money from the federal Payments to States legislation is available to counties through the RAC. This year half of the monies approved by the RAC went toward watershed restoration projects. All the projects had been through NEPA. The Upper Kootenai assessment provided some guidance in project selection.

Obstacles and Limitations

- **Community Partners Have Limited Involvement**

A key limitation in the Upper Kootenai Watershed Restoration Project is the lack of involvement. This is especially noticeable in the lack of community partners who are aware of or involved in the whole project. A number of people and organizations have been involved in individual projects but few, if any, have been involved in the overall governance of the project. The exception is the Lincoln County Commissioners who stimulated the creation of the project. They know about the over all project but have not been fully involved. Partnering groups that are available in the region to work with the Upper Kootenai have not been meaningfully involved in over all watershed governance.

- **Tension Within the Forest About What the Assessment Was and How It Can Help Ranger District-Level Decision Making**

A lack of involvement is also characteristic within the Forest Service. The assessment is seen as a forest-level staff effort led by planners using specialists as needed. While most agree the assessment is valuable, debate continues about its utility. Critics raised questions about the “coarse” screen evaluation and its relationship to decisions about projects in particular stream reaches. Proponents argue that it provides support for decisions and about priority setting at the level of the Upper Kootenai sub-basin. All Forest Service staff interviewed independently suggested that more involvement, earlier in the process, would have helped in the roll-out of the assessment, in its acceptance and its use. As one person said, “We’ve had to sell.”

- **Limited Regional Support**

The people involved in the Upper Kootenai project have not felt support from the Regional Office, the Washington Office or really the Watershed Restoration Program staff. The exception is the Chief who was the Northern Regional Forester when the Upper Kootenai was added to the large-scale watershed restoration projects. This feeling may be a result of the political origin of the Upper Kootenai project but people involved in the project feel limited support for their effort.

- **Limited Funding**

While everyone acknowledged that the additional large-scale watershed program funding allowed for work to be done that would not have been done otherwise, there was a general feeling that it is modest by the standard of what needs to be done. The Upper Kootenai also was one of the Forests that did not get this year's dollars committed before the fire-funding call back. This has left participants frustrated with the prospect of having worked on restoration projects that may not get done.

- **Limited Long-Term Commitment**

More than one person said the large-scale watershed seemed like another Forest Service Washington Office initiative that would be “three years and out.” Others echoed the sentiment that the Forest Service needs to make a serious sustained commitment to a program like this if it is going to work. Several people raised concerns about how the large-scale watershed project fits with other forest management direction. Also, a question was raised about funding priorities across the landscape. The concern was not about individual projects like Graves Creek. People feel good about the projects that have been done. The concern is how targeted funding will be reviewed and balanced across the whole National Forest landscape.

- **Limited Community Awareness of the Watershed Restoration Initiative**

Lack of involvement came up in another context--public meetings. When asked who in the community knows about the large-scale watershed initiative most people interviewed responded, “not many did” or “few if any.” When pressed for a reason, people offered several responses. The first response was a reminder acknowledging that Forest Service staff is very aware that a true community partnership had not been formed. This would limit community understanding. A second response was that few of the individual projects required new public involvement because they had already gone through a NEPA process. A final comment was that watershed restoration projects seldom bring out the public. Road closure projects do.

Analysis

- **Initiation of the Project Sows Seeds of Discord**

The Upper Kootenai project was added to the list of watersheds included in the national initiative because of the concerns of local county commissioners who called the Governor of Montana (who was born in the area). The Governor visited the area with the Regional Forester in July of 2000 that resulted in a commitment leading to the designation of the watershed as a part of the national initiative. This political origin is not unique to the Kootenai, but does mean the project is different. The origin is a seed of discord rather than a cord of common interest in watershed restoration. The business plan was developed largely as a staff exercise. The watershed assessment was carried out largely as a staff function. The funding has been allocated by identifying projects meeting the watershed restoration initiative and business plan criteria. Rather than establishing a new governance process for approaching watershed restoration on a landscape level, the Upper Kootenai represents a marginal change in traditional practices. This gives rise to many of the weaknesses apparent in this forward assessment.

- **Confusion Over Mission, Vision, and Commitment**

We found there is a lack of involvement by the community and within the Forest Service, and here is a sense of a lack of commitment from the higher levels of the Forest Service. We also found that people were confused about what the mission and vision of the Community-based Watershed Restoration Partnerships is and how the Upper Kootenai fits within this context. Further, there was a lack of agreement about mission and vision of the Upper Kootenai project among those interviewed. Several thought this reflected the playing out of the general confusion about Forest Service mission and vision. One person said, "What are we? We're not the Park Service. We're not a timber company. What are we? How do we serve people and care for the land?"

- **Confusion Over Patterns Of Governance**

The Upper Kootenai is a good example of "new wine in old skins." The governance system implementing the Upper Kootenai Watershed Restoration Project is the traditional system where planning guides on-the-ground project decisions. Who gets to make what decisions according to what rules remains unchanged by the community-based partnership program designation. The lack of community involvement or partner involvement in the assessment and project planning is both the cause and the effect of this finding. The RAC, newly created in the spring of 2002, has the potential to bring community partners into the governance process. The residual question is one of scale and authority structure. The large-scale watershed defined as the Upper Kootenai covers about 2/3 of the Kootenai National Forest, encompasses most of three Ranger Districts and overlaps the Lincoln County boundary. The RAC makes advisory recommendations over the Lincoln County area advising primarily the Kootenai National Forest in project selection.

- **Managing A Landscape With a Complex Authority Structure**

Including the Canadian lands, the Kootenai River is the second largest contributory by water volume and the third largest tributary area to the Columbia River. It was a part of the Interior Columbia Basin Assessment carried out by the federal government in the mid-1990s. In the Upper Kootenai drainage designated a part of the large-scale watershed restoration program, a dominant feature is Lake Koocanusa impounded by the Libby Dam and managed by the US Army Corps of Engineers. In the Upper Kootenai the US Forest Service manages almost 80% of the land. Private ownership is concentrated at the ends of Lake Koocansua and along major highways. This mix of ownership and ecological scales makes managing the landscape challenging.

- **Supporting the Emerging Political Economy of the Area**

Three years ago the primary concern of county commissioners was job loss caused by a local mill closure. The closure was attributed to changes in federal timber harvest volumes. The Upper Kootenai is an area in economic transition. The heavy dependence on timber harvesting and processing is changing. While timber remains important in the region, recreation is of increasing importance. The upper end of the drainage is within easy access of Whitefish and the greater Kalispell area. The Tobacco River Valley gives access to a variety of recreational areas and uses. The southern end of the drainage is the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness area. The Upper Kootenai has all of the policy issues of balancing flows for Columbia River at-risk fish stocks, energy production and local irrigation. A major attraction of the watershed restoration program was the potential to create jobs around restoration activities that would provide work for those traditionally employed in the woods and jobs to support the emerging recreation economy. The continuation of restoration funding is important to such a strategy.

Recommendations

- **Involve More Community Partners**

The Upper Kootenai Watershed Restoration Project should take advantage of the opportunity to engage local communities in true partnerships. There are a variety of different models to choose among from collaborations to joint ventures. Consider the alternatives and adopt a strategy to deeply involve community partners. It may be that the newly formed Lincoln County RAC can serve the purpose of a partnership board for watershed restoration. It may be that a good strategy is aligning with the Kootenai River Network for full basin-scale oversight and with councils for smaller watersheds (e.g. Graves Creek) for smaller-scale engagement. There are a number of possibilities, but engaging others in the process of restoring the Kootenai is essential to meet both the local and national goals of economic and community well-being and ecological restoration.

- **Manage at the Landscape Level**

The Upper Kootenai Project must create governance structures that balance the allocation of efforts among drainages and across districts and over land ownerships. The current strategy of funding pre-existing projects that fit within the new funding priorities is short lived. From here on out, the Upper Kootenai Project must generate new projects meeting the criteria of restoration and look for ways to partner in these projects to leverage funding. In general, there is acceptance that the Upper Kootenai assessment can serve to integrate at the landscape level by attending to priorities identified in the assessment.

- **Maintain Interest and Commitment from High-Level Policy Actors to Leverage Progress in the Upper Kootenai**

The Upper Kootenai has a strategic advantage in the personal knowledge and professional relationship the Chief of the Forest Service has with key actors in the project area. The Upper Kootenai would do well to maintain these relationships. The Upper Kootenai also seems to have the support of Lincoln County Commissioners. Maintaining these relationships is important. The Upper Kootenai can improve relationships within the Kootenai National Forest, the Regional Office and with other key national staff.

- **Work Through Projects to Enhance Community Well-Being**

A key component is the success of the Upper Kootenai Watershed Restoration Project will be its contributions to enhancing community resilience and economic vitality. Keeping an eye on how projects are carried out, who is involved and what impact it makes on the social fabric of the area will be a key to success. Involving local partners will contribute to community resilience. Identifying ways to contract locally for restoration work will aid in economic revitalization.