

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

APPENDIX D

Reviews of Watershed Projects

**Bob Doppelt and Craig Shinn, Portland State University
DeWitt John, Bowdoin College
For the United States Forest Service**

**Mark O. Hatfield School of Government
P.O. Box 751
Portland State University
Portland, Oregon, 97207
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LOST RIVERS NATIONAL LEARNING SITE
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Summary

The Lost Rivers large-scale watershed restoration program – called the Lost Rivers National Learning Site in Holistic Management is unique among the Community-based Watershed Restoration Partnerships. Its origin was a meeting in August of 1999 in Washington, D.C. when Allan Savory, Savory Center for Holistic Management, proposed that the Department of Agriculture support a project to reduce conflict by applying holistic management techniques on a specific site. Over the next year, the Lost Rivers area was selected as the National Learning Site and then the Lost Rivers were incorporated into the Forest Service large-scale watershed program.

The Lost River valley is located in the Rocky Mountains of Idaho just over the hill from Sun Valley. Small towns and a heroic landscape characterize the valley. Craters of the Moon National Monument memorializes one of the largest lava flows in the world. The towns of Arco, Mackay and Moore are losing population. Increasingly, conflict has arisen over natural resource use and management. A number of initiatives to address the changing economy, public land management, and effects on communities began in advance of the National Learning Site designation and the inclusion of the Lost Rivers in the Large-scale Watershed Restoration Program.

This project received no federal funding in the first year of the Large-scale Restoration Program. In the second year (FY 2001) the project received \$120,000 from the USDA Forest Service and \$55,000 from USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service. This was about half of the requested funding for the project. Most of the funding was used to establish the presence of the Center for Holistic Management in the Lost River Valley through workshops and contract services. This year's funding (2002) was frozen in the summer as part of the call back of funds for fire fighting.

The Lost Rivers Program Has Contributed In Some Expected and Some Unexpected Ways:

- Simply establishing the National Learning Site was a significant step.
- The Lost Rivers program has also established a very committed CORE Team, the three-person local leadership team.
- Through the program, a number of local community members have been exposed to different ways of approaching management that include environmental as well as economic and community issues. The additional funding allowed people in the Lost River valley exposure to sets of ideas they would not have been exposed to otherwise.

- The Program has completed some modest projects and established a presence of expertise through the devotion of a half-time NRCS position to the project.
- Unexpected outcomes in the first years of the program include working with the city of Mackay to complete a comprehensive plan using Holistic Management principles. Also, one staff person worked with local entrepreneurs to create a “Lost Rivers” brand for fruits, vegetables and crafts.
- Finally, several local property owners or land managers have begun to express interest in holistic management and in applying the principles on their land.

However, the Lost Rivers Program Faces Significant Obstacles.

- First, the late involvement in the national Large-scale Watershed Restoration Program caused a slow start, as did less-than-optimum funding.
- A primary focus on finding a site of 50,000 acres on which to exhibit holistic management became an obstacle. The difficulty is, in the Lost, the lands are largely publicly owned (96%) and many allotments are jointly held and managed in common.
- The national exposure of the Learning Site designation made landowners and leaseholders uncomfortable with the prospect of heightened national scrutiny. Indeed, a national figure in the movement to eliminate cows from public lands is based locally.
- Major hurdles were noted in total funding and total staffing needed to be successful and in the difficult contracting procedures required to complete any work on the ground.
- The Learning Site was promised administrative support in assuring that actions taken by the Lost Rivers initiative following holistic management principles would not be contested legally. This support has not been realized in tangible ways leaving the Learning Site with a difficult task of asking private property owners to try new approaches that have the risk of legal contest.
- The Lost Rivers Program also has the burden of being a focus of national attention by Senators, senior administrative officials, and senior agency leaders causing community members some doubt about volunteering local solutions.

Our Assessment of the Lost Rivers National Learning Site Suggests That:

- These problems exist in part because of the early stage of development of the project, the lack of sufficient financial and human resources, and to a real degree the contest of national interests with local solutions. In particular, one local party

uses the threat of lawsuits to arrest commitment among community members to specific action projects.

- There is a common concern with fund restrictions for work on non-federal lands and with the difficulty of moving funds from federal to non-federal partners.
- The Lost Rivers Program also seems overly focused on the goal of a single demonstration-learning site. Much of the first two years has been focused on locating a single large allotment where holistic management can be carried out. Only recently has the Program focused on the watershed as a whole and the range of alternative activities that could contribute to the Lost's goals of sustainability and local community well being.

As a Pathway to Future Success, We Recommend:

- The Lost Rivers National Learning Site should expand its vision to the whole watershed. Establish learning sites as a part of a larger pattern of programmatic activity. Use the successful learning components of the first several years to develop collaborative projects on public and private lands.
- Engaging the local communities on several fronts to spread the risks of being a single point of focus for both the local and national communities. Strike a deal providing for experimentation of several management regimes within the Lost River Valley including continuing the Savory model, but also adding areas of more conventional management and an area with livestock removal to compare effects.
- Taking other steps to success include working with the Forest Service and perhaps Congress to make funding a priority and to make fund administration flexible. This means clarifying the Wyden Amendment and the division of funds through State & Private Forestry and National Forest System.
- Maintaining support from high-level administrative, elected officials and agency leadership as well as growing local support will be important to future success.

Successes

- **The Lost Rivers National Learning Site in Holistic Management Has Been Established.**

Just establishing a national learning site to experiment with the application of holistic management principles is a significant accomplishment. This was accomplished through the matching of local interests with a national mandate. A high-level meeting between senior executive branch officials, senior agency administrators and Alan Savory of the Savory Center for Holistic Management agreed to establish a national learning site in the interior west. During the period this was going on, a number of Idaho-based initiatives sought to explore new ways of working together to address resource use conflicts. At the same time, a number of people in the area of the Lost Rivers were exposed to Holistic Management principles. The result was a match between local interests and a national agreement.

- **The Lost Rivers Large-scale Watershed Program Has Exposed Local Community Members to Holistic Management Principles.**

The funding and program objectives of the Lost Rivers project included conducting a number of workshops and training events. Alan Savory and his staff, as well as local people familiar with the techniques, have run the workshops. The events have been successful in that a number of local community members have been exposed to new ideas about managing natural resources. In particular, the idea of sustainability – simultaneously meeting the economic, social and environmental needs of the area – has taken root.

- **The Lost Rivers Program Has Established a Committed CORE Team and Re-Established Technical Resource Expertise Available to the Project.**

The Lost Rivers program has established an extremely committed CORE Team of three local people. A larger committee with broader stakeholder representation meets quarterly to guide the CORE Team. The good collaboration within the CORE Team is noteworthy. The Lost Rivers program has established working relationships with their primary partner, the Savory Center for Holistic Management. The Lost Rivers program has also established technical expertise. In addition to the technical support from the Savory Center, the Lost Rivers program negotiated for a person from the Natural Resource Conservation Service to work half time. While some voice concern that more technical expertise is needed, the program has established local expertise devoted to the projects and purposes of the National Learning Site.

- **The City of Mackay Completed a Comprehensive Plan Using Holistic Management Principles.**

An unexpected outcome of the Lost Rivers program was that people associated with the program were called on to help the City of Mackay in development of their first

comprehensive plan. While not tied directly to the public lands targeted for experimentation, the effort is within the watershed and shows the local acceptance and use of the experimental principles.

- **Establishing the “Lost Rivers” Brand Identity for Locally-Produced Fruits, Vegetables and Crafts.**

While people interviewed expressed frustration over not identifying a demonstration site and moving forward with the range management program seen to be central to the program, unexpected outcomes are evident. One was the establishment of a “Lost Rivers” brand for locally-produced goods. The effort was the result a group of people, many of who had been exposed to Holistic Management principles. While rather independent of the primary focus of the Lost River program in terms of watershed restoration, the effort reflects a significant community and economic success that can contribute to long-term watershed goals.

- **There Is Local Interest in Holistic Management**

A number of local property owners, or their land managers, have begun to express interest in applying Holistic Management principles on their lands and leases. This is remarkable in the face of scrutiny at both the local and national level. While few are willing to “go public” and no large-scale site has been identified for demonstration, individuals are using the principles and others are expressing interest in using the principles in their resource management.

Obstacles and Limitations

- **There is Strain in Meeting National Goals and Serving Local Interests.**

This can be said about many western land issues, but here in the Lost River Valley it is a significant issue. The Lost Rivers National Learning Site in Holistic Management was established in concept to be one place in the nation where the principles of holistic management, as developed by Alan Savory, could be applied on public lands. The intent is to engender local interest and support. This goal is largely compatible with the goals of the Large-scale Watershed Restoration Program. The notable distinction is that the goal of the National Learning Site was a single large parcel that could be managed using the holistic principles, whereas the focus of the watershed program is the larger watershed. This, coupled with the inevitable tension between local community agreement and national goals, creates strain.

- **Regulatory Safe-Harbor Promise and High Profile Advocacy Are at Odds.**

One part of the agreement with Alan Savory in the establishment of the National Learning site was that the site would be protected from legal contest as long as the management practices were following the holistic principles. A nationally prominent advocate for cow-free federal lands is located in the Lost River Valley. His interests are directly at odds with the national leaders' agreement with the Savory Center. Even with the best efforts of local agency administrators, no satisfactory assurances can be given to agency decision makers or leaseholders that they won't be subject to a lawsuit and national public pressure even if there is local agreement for the management action they take and it is in accordance with the Holistic Management approach.

- **The Lost Rivers Program Has Been Slow In Getting Projects to the Ground.**

The Lost Rivers program was "folded" into the Large-scale Watershed Program and so was behind the curve initially. From all local reports, the Lost Rivers program received about half the funding it had identified as essential to get the National Learning Site up and running. The CORE Team, along with the Savory Center, decided to go ahead and begin work knowing that the funding would limit personnel and other critical resources. The Lost Rivers program has been slow in getting projects on the ground because of the desire for a single large block of land on which to focus management attention. A contributing factor is that a key person with local connections, acceptance in the community and knowledgeable about Holistic Management transferred to another position outside the area. This required the Lost Rivers program to reestablish technical expertise, which they did. All in all, the Lost Rivers program has been slow to get projects to the ground.

- **Joint Ownership and Common Management Slow Progress.**

Most of the Lost River Valley is in public ownership (96%). The grasslands are held in a variety of allotments. Most of the large allotments suitable for the goals of the Lost Rivers National Learning Site are jointly held by several families who manage the allotment in common. This means that all members of an allotment must agree to participate. The risk of national exposure and legal proceedings, added to the risks of a novel approach to range management, has been insurmountable to this point.

- **Funding Is Insufficient to the Task.**

Mentioned above as a part of slow start, the funding level is worth noting on its own. The Large-scale Watershed Restoration Program has made significant resources available to targeted watersheds including the Lost Rivers program. The message from the ground is the amount of funding available doesn't match the task at hand. This leads to frustration. In the case of the Lost Rivers program, the original design was modified and this contributed to a lack of progress.

- **One Allotment Focus Yields a Null Set.**

The Lost Rivers program intentionally began with a focus to identify a single large allotment held by a single willing leaseholder. This strategy failed for any number of reasons causing the program to begin to look in other directions. The Program is now looking at working with private landowners and their managers on private lands and perhaps working with the National Environmental Engineering Lab, a nuclear site, which has un-leased rangelands.

- **Fund Restrictions and Contracting Procedures Stymie Progress.**

The Lost Rivers program assumed that its primary focus was going to be a large public land allotment. This has been hard to achieve for the reasons noted above. Attention then switched to privately held lands where projects could be initiated to demonstrate the holistic management principles. Restrictions on the use of federal funds on non-federal lands made funding management with benefits to lease holders difficult, and funding projects on private lands extremely difficult. Part of the issue seems to be that the money came through the National Forest System side of the Forest Service rather than State & Private Forestry. Additional difficulties with spending the project monies stemmed from the need to move federal money to non-federal people to implement program activities. Part of the idea of the National Learning Site was to collaborate with the Savory Center. This has been done but because of contract restrictions, the funds have been written as a series of discrete projects and limited the ability of people central to the success of the Lost River National Learning Site the free hand they need to accomplish the goals of the program. Whatever the exact cause, local administrators have had difficulty in delivering money as it was needed to accomplish the goals of the Lost Rivers National Learning Site.

Analysis

- **Single Site Focus Vs. Watershed Focus**

The Lost Rivers partnership spent time trying to locate a single large allotment that could be used as the National Learning Site. This approach emphasized a narrow focus and under-explored the alternatives to meeting the goals of the National Learning Site and the broader goals of the Large-scale Watershed Restoration initiative. The decision to include the Lost Rivers National Learning Site among the Large-scale Watershed Restoration Partnerships was, in part, administrative convenience. It has turned out to be crucial to the future of the effort. By broadening the scope to the watershed as a whole, more opportunities are available for testing the ideas of holistic management and in restoring the Lost Rivers watershed. The watershed focus has promise.

- **Community-Based Initiatives Contribute to Civic Capacity.**

The Lost Rivers partnership turned its attention to what it could do when the progress toward identifying a single large allotment slowed to a crawl. What the partnership could do was educate, train and provide technical assistance to local community members interested in the concepts of holistic mismanagement. This has established a network of people in the Lost River Valley who know about holistic management and know about each other. The community-based initiatives (i.e. the “Lost Rivers” brand and the Mackay comprehensive planning effort) have contributed to civic capacity by providing successful instances of collective joint action, by creating new on-going relationships among community members and by contributing to the stock of knowledge in the community. Similarly, the CORE Team and the advisory committee contribute to civic capacity.

- **Goals Are Complex and Not Altogether Clear.**

The goals of the Lost Rivers partnership are complex. They include the explicit goal of establishing a National Learning Site in Holistic Management. However, the project also has goals related to the watershed restoration initiative that, while largely compatible, are distinct. The Lost Rivers partnership also has had “goal creep” due to the difficulty in identifying a single large allotment and the local contest over management approaches. This has resulted in a set of “can be done” activities moving toward the top of the list of activities. Also, the Lost Rivers program took advantage of collaborative activities started prior to the Large-scale Watershed designation and supported other community-based activities over the last two years. Two things are happening as a result of these occurrences. First, the values of holistic management are penetrating more deeply into the community. Second, there is less clarity about the goals, objectives and performance targets for the partnership among those involved.

- **Social Scales and Political Agreement**

The Lost Rivers National Learning Site in Holistic Management struggles with the problem of social agreement being different at different social scales. There is also the problem of national political issues being played out locally. There are also differences on the private side where ranch managers may be local and involved in the partnership process, but ranch owners may be absent and more loosely connected to the partnership. Similarly, the geographic distance between the Lost River Valley and the Savory Center is a challenge to building and maintaining holistic management expertise in the local community. These elements are not unique, but they combine to create one of the significant challenges for success. Communities that have the ability to create and hold agreement in the face of the strain represented by the issues of social scales and political differences, exhibit high civic capacity. The Lost Rivers partnership will need to build civic capacity to be successful.

Recommendations

- **Expand the Vision to the Whole Watershed.**

We recommend that the Lost Rivers National Learning Site expand its vision to the whole watershed. Complete the transition from focusing on a single large allotment to the watershed. The watersheds of the Big Lost and Little Lost rivers better capture the social and ecological dynamics of the area. Given that the social dynamics are critical to meeting the goals of the National Learning Site in Holistic Management, the greater watershed boundary must be the focus of attention. Use successful community-based initiatives to build civic capacity that can hold agreements locally.

- **Establish the National Learning Site as a Part of a Larger Pattern of Programmatic Activity.**

Consistent with the recommendation to expand the focus of the partnership to include the whole watershed, the National Learning Site should be seen as a part of a larger pattern of activity. Use the successful learning components of the first several years to develop collaborative projects on public and private lands. Specifically, explore the potential for demonstrating holistic management on the lands surrounding the Idaho National Environmental Engineering Lab (INEEL). Continue to identify and support opportunities related to the local community, economy and watershed.

- **Strike a Deal and Spread the Risks.**

Dealing with national and regional issues locally requires a strategy. We recommend that the Lost Rivers partnership engage the local communities on several fronts to spread the risks of any one project being a single point of focus for both the local and national interests. Strike a deal that provides for experimenting with several management regimes within the Lost River Valley, including the Savory model, but retain areas of existing management with enhanced watershed restoration goals and an area with livestock removal to compare effects. It is fine for the Holistic Management approach to be the primary focus, but include other regimes. The program would then become a National Learning Site with many learning opportunities.

- **Clarify Fund Restrictions and Revise Fund Administration.**

Other steps to success include working with the Forest Service and perhaps Congress to make funding a priority and fund administration flexible. This means clarifying the Wyden Amendment, the division of funds through State & Private Forestry and the National Forest System, and the administrative guidelines for contracting with partners.

- **Maintain High Level Support.**

Maintaining support from high level administrative, elected officials, and agency leadership as well as growing local support will be important to future success. It will be critical to create conditions where there is a “safe-harbor” for designed and agreed-to alternative management regimes having the goals of improving ecological conditions while meeting local community and economic needs. This will take support from high-level elected and administrative officials as well as greater support from the local communities and local agency offices.