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# **Building a Citizen-Agency Partnership Among Diverse Interests: The Colville National Forest and Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition Experience**

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Cover photo of Colville, Washington, by Ryan Gordon.

## **Abstract**

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Concerns about forest health and the threat of wildfire across the Western United States increasingly provide the impetus for communities to find land management solutions that serve multiple interests. Funding and procedural changes over the past decade have positioned federal agencies to put greater emphasis on multistakeholder partnerships and public outreach efforts. Partnerships build slowly over time, but can result in a healthier resource, reduced fire risk, greater stability for agency planning processes, and more resilient communities. Drawing on interviews with stakeholders representing broad interests in a partnership between the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition and the Colville National Forest, we examine some of the critical factors leading to the partnership's success and identify challenges along the way. We illustrate how the citizens of Colville, Washington, overcame conflicts by learning to communicate their interests and use existing resources to advance a variety of goals, ranging from fuels reduction and active forest management to roadless area and wilderness management. We highlight a set of important organizational themes that have emerged from Colville to provide managers and other stakeholders with ideas for similar efforts.

Keywords: Collaboration, community capacity, community resilience, fire and fuels management.

## Summary

The U.S. Forest Service has faced many challenges over national forest management in the past 40 years, especially in the Pacific Northwest. During the latter half of this period, in addition to experiencing forest management conflicts, many resource-dependent communities experienced economic downturns associated with globalization of wood product markets, changes in resource availability, and shifts in federal forest policy. Conflict between timber industry groups and environmental groups often resulted in gridlock, making it almost impossible for agencies to accomplish management objectives, to the detriment of both forest ecosystems and local communities. The community of Colville, Washington, has a history of disputes over forest management.

This paper describes how citizens of Colville learned to communicate their interests and use existing resources to advance a variety of goals, ranging from fuels reduction and active forest management to roadless area and wilderness management. Drawing on interviews with stakeholders representing broad interests in a partnership between the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition (NEWFC) and the Colville National Forest, we explore some of the critical factors leading to the partnership's success and identify a variety of challenges the partnership faced. To guide managers and other stakeholders ideas in similar efforts, a set of organizational themes that emerged from the Colville experience are highlighted.

The Colville story illustrates how community-agency collaboration can generate stability for agency planning processes, laying the groundwork for a healthier resource and a more resilient community. Building social capital—the ability and willingness of different interests to act collectively for a common goal—has been essential to the partnership's success. By lowering the transaction costs of working together, participants have facilitated a collaborative working environment that, in many cases, has led to agreement.

Collaboration has helped stabilize the region, creating a healthier forest that is also a major driver of the local economy. Measurable successes listed by those interviewed include 22 forest stewardship projects completed since 2002, no litigation on forest health projects during this same period, nearly 3,000 acres (1214 ha) treated with prescribed fire in 2008, and 61 million board feet (14 394 m<sup>3</sup>) harvested on the forest in 2008, all of which went to local mills. Members take pride in noting that formerly opposing interests are now represented within NEWFC. Although problems persist, stakeholders have been working together to develop a more balanced, holistic, and sustainable long-term vision for resource management in northeast Washington. This vision includes recognition that forest conservation is not possible without timber harvest, and sustainable harvest levels are not possible without supporting the needs and concerns of the environmental community.

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## Introduction

As concern about forest health and the threat of wildfire continues to grow in the Western United States, communities—once divided over single issues—are coming together to work on solutions that serve multiple interests. For years, the timber industry and environmental groups have held positions at opposite ends of the forest management spectrum. Aided in part by funding and procedural changes, as well as an increasing desire in natural-resource-based communities to find common ground, collaborative efforts are emerging throughout the United States (Flint et al. 2008, Leahy and Anderson 2010, Paveglio et al. 2009). Land management agencies are putting greater emphasis on public outreach efforts and multistakeholder partnerships that seek some middle ground where active management can both reduce fuels to create safer communities and restore forest ecosystems. At the same time, citizen groups and business interests are coming together to protect the values seen as important in their communities.

Research indicates that successful partnerships build slowly, but the result can be a healthier resource, greater stability for agency planning processes, and more resilient communities (Donoghue and Sturtevant 2007, Flint et al. 2008). One place where such activities have matured is in Washington state, where over the past 10 years the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition (NEWFC) and the Colville National Forest have built an effective relationship. The NEWFC represents the tri-county area in the northeast corner of Washington, over which the Colville National Forest is spread.

Researchers at Oregon State University have tracked development of the coalition and its unique relationship with the Colville National Forest since 2004. In the summer of 2009, our research team conducted followup interviews with key participants, including members of NEWFC representing industry and environmental perspectives, as well as the forest supervisor and other forest and district personnel. We used these interviews to examine critical factors that have led to the partnership's success and to identify challenges they have faced along the way.

This paper describes how the community of Colville recognized the risks of continuing to do business the “same old way.” Citizens saw their rural economy shrinking and the health of surrounding forest land threatened, and recognized gridlock was to blame. Community leaders learned to communicate their concerns and use existing resources to advance a variety of goals, including large-scale fuels reduction and active forest management. Here we use their story to highlight how open discussion, leadership, and trust have contributed to an increase in the community's capacity to agree on and achieve common goals despite a wide spectrum of interests. Progress has not occurred without criticism and challenges—important

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**Open discussion, leadership, and trust contribute to a community's ability to agree on and achieve common goals.**

elements also addressed here. We identify a set of organizational themes that emerged from the partnership-building process with the intent of providing managers and other stakeholders with practical ideas for similar efforts.

## Management Context

Over the past two decades, many resource-dependent communities have experienced social and economic downturns owing to changes in federal forest policy and fluctuations in wood products markets (Trospen 2003). Gridlock resulting from conflict between the timber industry and environmental groups also threatens the survival of these communities. Polarization and delegitimization of the opposition's goals can make resolving disagreements nearly impossible (Clark 2001, Trospen 2003). Under such circumstances, federal land management agencies are often unable to accomplish management objectives, to the detriment of both forest ecosystems and local communities.

Ten years ago, the area around Colville, Washington, served as a case in point. Because of litigation and appeals, the amount of timber harvested on the Colville National Forest had declined sharply and was insufficient to supply local mills (Hansen 2010, Sierra Institute 2002). In 2000, a mill closure in the nearby town of Republic devastated that community's economy. Local citizens largely blamed environmental groups for the shutdown. A social assessment conducted by Findley et al. (2000) chronicled the region's poor forest health and identified a complex web of stakeholders—including environmentalists, commodity interests (primarily timber and grazing), recreationists, and tribes—that were unable to reach agreement or effectively communicate about local problems. Broadly, conflict centered around differing values associated with how the resource should be managed and differences in risk perception associated with various management alternatives. The Colville National Forest, caught between these competing interests and limited by national policies, was hindered in its management of federal forest lands. At about the same time, larger and more frequent wildfires began to consume diseased forests and threaten communities throughout the Western United States.

These events prompted local citizens to take action. Formerly opposed groups recognized that neither their respective goals nor the overall well-being of the community were advancing under present conditions. Findley et al. (2000) referenced the initiation of a collaborative learning process, facilitated by an outside group and designed to help create productive dialog among stakeholders and build collective understanding of the complex issues facing the forest and community. At about the same time, new policies and direction at the national level (i.e., National Fire Plan, Healthy Forests Restoration Act), coupled with personnel changes at the forest level,



better positioned the Forest Service to provide leadership for the growing community dialog. Over time, with leaders emerging from a range of stakeholder groups, NEWFC evolved as a public forum for reaching agreement on local resource management problems. In the words of one self-described environmentalist, early coalition members came together based on mutual needs:

*The needs were a sustainable timber supply and to reach an armistice to preserve what's left of our wilderness heritage, and to develop a working relationship to address the needs of what's left in our forest.*

Today the coalition represents three general natural resource interests—industry representatives, environmental groups, and members of the unaffiliated public who choose to come and go depending on the issue. The coalition promotes a policy of openness and transparency in which stakeholders are actively encouraged to join the discussion at any time. Although other entities—including local governments, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation—have no official representation in the group, NEWFC maintains an active working partnership with many of them; this is especially the case with the Colville National Forest where much of the active management is targeted.

## **Relevant Concepts**

Relevant to this discussion of partnerships are several concepts researchers have been giving considerable attention. Two of these, **community capacity** and **community resilience**, are particularly useful concepts for understanding and describing events on the Colville National Forest. Closely related to each other, these concepts provide a framework for understanding the relationship between successful collaboration, individual and interpersonal behavior, and the natural resource environment.

### **Community Capacity**

While there is no dominant definition of community capacity, it typically refers to local assets or resources, and how they are used to improve the lives of community members (Laverack 2006) or achieve a common goal (Magis 2010). Most researchers agree that community capacity should be viewed as a dynamic process rather than a condition, accounting for changes in the way resources are used by a community over time to address concerns important to local community members (Lyons and Reimer 2009). Once resources are invested in collective actions for a shared community goal, they are considered capital. This capital exists in many forms, including natural resources, physical infrastructure, financial assets, and human or social resources (Magis 2010). Of these, social capital has received a great

deal of attention recently from researchers who view it as a crucial element of community resilience and collaboration (Flint et al. 2008, Leahy and Anderson 2010). Social capital lowers the transaction costs associated with working together (Pretty 2003), allowing communities to more effectively use available resources to increase their well-being.

Researchers have identified several features of social capital that are particularly important in collaborative efforts. They include (1) individual leadership; (2) common goals, rules, and norms; and (3) trust, relationships, and reciprocity (Dales and Sparkes 2010, Olsson et al. 2004, Sturtevant and Jakes 2008). Citizen leaders are essential participants in the organization of community-based collaborative efforts and conflict resolution (Olsson et al. 2004). They can act as a catalyst for change by providing vision, direction, and structure to processes, and play an important role in fostering trustworthy relations (Sturtevant and Jakes 2008).

Agreeing on goals is another critical step in building a collaborative effort, but can prove difficult when there are competing interests. Researchers have observed that an inclusive structure and broad representation of stakeholders contribute to successful collaboration (Selin et al. 2000, Shindler and Gordon 2005). Different goals typically reflect the way different community members frame a problem. The process of identifying common goals therefore requires an open discussion of perceived problems among community members, which in turn provides an opportunity to learn about others' interests and values and can lead to a common framework for discussion.

A willingness to negotiate and compromise is also an indicator of successful collaboration. This process of finding "middle ground" can be the basis for trust-building. According to Pipkin and Doerksen (2000: 16), "Trust is a matter of building credibility and building relationships...and demonstrating an attitude of inclusiveness." Thus, the foundation for trust is laid in the initial stages of collaboration as stakeholders work to find common ground and forge relationships with others. Other research recognizes that trust is a fragile commodity (Shindler et al. 2002). Trust takes time to build; on the other hand, it can easily be lost. The work of trust-building is an ongoing endeavor.

## Community Resilience

As with community capacity, there are many definitions of community resilience. Most differ in their emphasis on **resistance** versus **adaptation** to change. For example, Adger (2000: 361) described the concept as "the ability of human communities to withstand external shocks to their social infrastructure," such as environmental variability or social, economic, and political upheaval. Other researchers (e.g., Folke 2006) argued that resisting or attempting to control change ignores the opportuni-

ties disturbances provide—opportunities to view resilience as a dynamic process of constant adaptation and renewal. Magis (2010) suggested that adaptation is indicative of communities that effectively use their resources to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise. Members of a resilient community intentionally develop collective capacity to respond to and influence change, to sustain and renew the community. This definition illustrates the close relationship between community capacity and community resilience. Resource-based communities with low levels of capacity are less likely to recover as quickly, if at all, from large disturbances (e.g., wildfires, flood events) or fluctuations in the economy. Because community capacity and community resilience are so closely connected, encouraging one helps build the other.

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## **Research Approach**

Our research team at Oregon State University first conducted semistructured interviews with members of NEWFC and Forest Service personnel on the Colville National Forest in 2004. Five years later in spring 2009, another series of interviews were completed with most of the same individuals as well as several new agency staff members to document important elements contributing to the partnership process. In addition, the research team also tracked progress by periodically attending NEWFC meetings, observing a community workshop on stewardship contracting organized by the Colville National Forest, reviewing postings on Forest Service and NEWFC Web sites, and following news media reports. Using information and insights gained from these efforts over time, we identified and examined critical factors leading to the partnership's success as well as challenges along the way.

## **Findings**

The NEWFC's emergence and subsequent partnership with the Forest Service were aided by the presence of key community capacity building blocks—namely physical, social, and human resources. For example, the existing wood utilization infrastructure in Colville made forest treatments viable and contributed to the region's economy. Additionally, a diverse group of knowledgeable individuals emerged who were able to set aside their personal positions and join in a discussion as to what was at stake in their community. However, the presence of these assets was not sufficient to overcome long-standing divisions. Successfully reconciling alternative viewpoints to move beyond a state of constant conflict would require dedicated leadership and commitment from agency personnel as well as core community

members. Based on interviews with these central stakeholders, we have organized the outcomes of their interactions under the following themes to illustrate the importance of developing partnerships.

## The Right Environment

Study participants described a number of factors that helped contribute to the “right environment”—one conducive to building a coalition of diverse individuals. First, mill closures a decade ago were credited with raising widespread awareness about the need for a more stable rural economy. Second, with overall forest health declining and the threat of wildfire increasing, more varied interests were also recognizing the need for active forest management. Many agreed that the region’s remaining industry infrastructure—several sawmills, a cogeneration plant, and a paper plant—were essential to community stability. The idea began to take hold that the timber infrastructure could provide the backbone for a large-scale forest management program targeting thinning and fuels reduction. Third, changes in leadership on the Colville National Forest brought a new forest supervisor who wanted to capitalize on the community’s leadership and momentum. Coupled with the 2003 Healthy Forests Restoration Act (which encourages citizen-agency interaction), these factors provided the right combination of circumstance and willing individuals to move forward with collaborative efforts.

## Clearly Defined Roles

An important initial step was to recognize the roles and responsibilities of the interested parties. For the agency, central to this process was communicating that while NEWFC represents important voices within the community, the Forest Service is the ultimate decisionmaker on federal forest land. Forest Service managers noted that it was important to correct a common misperception among the local public:

*If all of us (community members) agree, then the decision is made...you’ve got to do it because we all agree.*

An especially pivotal event was a 3-day workshop hosted by the Colville National Forest. The forest supervisor hired professional facilitators to guide a discussion about collaborative processes, as well as the legal requirements and constraints to which the agency must adhere. Coalition members affirmed the workshop was instrumental in helping them understand the context of Forest Service planning processes, legal requirements, and agency directives. Furthermore, the workshop gave both agency personnel and the coalition a starting point by demonstrating skills for open communication and collaboration. It was instrumental in shaping the working environment within the coalition, as well as structuring a relationship with the Forest Service. The agency would not forego its commitment

to the more traditional National Environmental Policy Act process and public involvement, but the coalition provided a place for discussion organized around community concerns and directed by local leaders. Shortly thereafter, a memorandum of understanding was developed to guide formal communication between the coalition and Colville National Forest. This agreement was intended to minimize confusion, avoid rumors, keep the group on task, and develop agreement on levels of support for projects.

## Focusing on Goals Rather Than Positions

Those interviewed universally agreed the most valuable skill learned in the workshop was that of leaving personal positions at the door. Instead, deliberately discussing core issues of mutual concern became more important. Learning to talk about goals instead of positions was identified as a defining moment in the coalition's evolution and was quickly adopted as standard procedure. This approach allowed members to find common interests despite opposing views, and all believe this provided the basis for trust and relationship building. One member reflected,

*Trust comes from people coming together...having all these different opposing views, but also common interests...and saying guess what, I like that too...I enjoy recreation on public lands, and I like to see a healthy forest.*

To ensure this open communication in the long term, coalition bylaws were created requiring members to be respectful of each other's viewpoint and act in a professional manner. Members of NEWFC explained that the organization's nonconfrontational, consensus-based decisionmaking style was intended to prevent alienating any interest represented at their meetings:

*If we can't work it out, we leave it alone, or we work elsewhere. Working on a consensus basis—if we do it right—prevents us from alienating anyone.*

Issues for which no consensus can be reached are put aside temporarily to focus the discussion on concerns that can more easily be resolved. Most members were optimistic that building relationships over time eventually would allow them to tackle more difficult problems.

A specific tool developed by the coalition to help focus discussion on the forest resource was a document that became known as "The Blueprint." It effectively divides the national forest into three zones (i.e., active management, restoration, and wilderness/roadless) with distinct management strategies identified for each one. Although subject to outside criticism, and a proper amount of caution from the agency, the document has served to guide discussion over priorities among the many interests present in the coalition.

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## Wall-to-Wall Collaboration

Early on, the forest supervisor declared that management issues on the forest would be resolved by “wall-to-wall” collaboration. His intent was to initiate communication with all interested parties at the beginning of projects and to maintain two-way information exchange throughout the process. Wall-to-wall collaboration requires significant commitment from both agency personnel and the public. Initially, it also extends the time needed to bring projects to completion, but those interviewed agreed this inclusive process is preferable to past situations where opportunities for public involvement were less extensive, and many projects were eventually appealed in court. One coalition member noted,

*The old style was—no one knew what any of the problems were until the 11<sup>th</sup> hour... and all of a sudden local people or the conservation community came out of the woodwork to appeal it, and you spend almost all the money at the tail end trying to work through appeals and litigation.*

There was wide acceptance between both the agency and the coalition that involvement from the beginning allows all interested participants to fully understand the planning process, and that when a final decision is made, everyone recognizes the terms of the agreement and how it was reached. Coalition members also saw it as recognition that their opinions were valued.

## A Strong Agency Presence

The Colville National Forest has been clear about its central role among numerous community interests and organizations. The forest supervisor has reiterated that “when it comes to national forest lands, we are the decisionmaker. We recognize that the coalition is not ‘everyone’ and it is up to us to help bridge the gap to keep other agencies and groups up to date.” The research team has observed that when much is at stake, as is the case here and also in other regions throughout the West, a strong agency presence is required to keep efforts on track and provide structured leadership. There is also evidence that local citizens expect and even appreciate this approach (Shindler et al. 2002).

In communities surrounding the Colville National Forest, there also is wide recognition that many agency personnel have become particularly adept at working in a collaborative environment. This attribute is recognized within the organization as well; one Forest Service employee simply acknowledged,

*We happen to have some folks who are very good at developing relationships with the public and collaborating within the agency.*

Many credit the forest supervisor with handpicking line officers well-suited for the job, including one who stated,

*I think some of the staff [on the Colville National Forest] have been selected not only because of their résumé, but because of their personalities...they can deal with collaboration, and even enhance it.*

Forest Service leadership affirmed that the screening process does take into account interpersonal skills and a willingness to hear different viewpoints. However, leadership also believes that talented individuals are drawn to the forest and its reputation as a positive, productive environment.

One agency employee was quick to dispel the notion that all national forests need a partnership coordinator or public affairs specialist to be the designated “public person.” Instead, staff can benefit from specialized training in collaboration and learn how to leverage their skills, as well as those of other personnel within their unit, to make collaborative processes work. A coalition member agreed, saying,

*We don't want to see one person who can put a good spin on things. Let's get real with each other.*

This point underscores the importance of having agency staff with decision-making authority present during critical collaborative sessions, as opposed to someone whose delegated role is partnership coordinator or public affairs specialist. Furthermore, participants noted that the public usually exhibits a more positive response when they can see that a decision has been reached or there is commitment to continued progress when a final decision cannot be made.

## Supportive Agency Leadership

The forest supervisor was widely credited with supporting his personnel and creating an atmosphere for outreach and interaction with citizens. This working style is characterized by open communication and dialogue between line officers and along the chain of command, including regular check-ins and opportunities for constructive criticism of processes that may need improvement. The agency staff take special pride in “barrier buster sessions” that allow personnel from any level to identify obstacles in the organization that inhibit job performance. One district ranger summarized the keys to creating an open working environment as (1) allowing people freedom to experiment through trial and error without retaliation for mistakes, (2) reminding staff that outcomes on the land are what count, and (3) having supervisors who take ultimate responsibility for decision outcomes (good and bad). Study participants praised this flexible work environment as a style that allows personnel to more adequately address citizens’ concerns and ultimately leads to a stronger community-agency relationship.

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Community members lauded related outcomes; particularly the ability of managers in local ranger districts to successfully work outside the lines of traditional procedures and protocol, while still being within the boundaries of legislative directives. One member of the coalition observed this new local level of public participation, saying

*This change has been so refreshing...to be able to think that you can go talk to district rangers or the forest supervisor and that's where the buck stops, that's where you can make a difference.*

### Sustained Commitment

Many participants agreed that continued success on projects and positive public feedback were often the best reasons for sticking with a collaborative process. As one manager stated,

*Folks in my unit say 'hey, we really appreciate the way things are going; it's feeling like the old days...the days when we see our job has an end result.'*

The benefits from community interactions and personal growth also were primary reasons why people stayed committed to the process. One industry coalition member reflected on the collective 250 years of forestry experience and 100 years of conservation experience represented in the group, saying that in spite of all he thought he knew about forestry, he had gained a whole new perspective from the conservation community. At the same time, an environmental group member described his motives as

*a goal to reach a long-term friendly, amicable relationship with the timber industry and the community at large.*

However, both agency and coalition members mentioned long-term participation and burnout as challenges for everyone. Turnover within the agency was particularly difficult. All participants recognized that building relationships and establishing trust among partners can be a slow process; when someone leaves there is a gap that is not easily filled. Despite efforts to maintain continuity, newly hired staff members come in with little awareness of the ongoing collaboration or understanding of previous agreements among participants. In the absence of an official policy to promote long-term tenure in the Forest Service (a suggestion by one individual), coalition members offered several ideas for maintaining continuity between transitions, including (1) formal strategies for documenting collaborative processes, (2) mentoring opportunities for a departing district ranger and his or her replacement, and (3) teamwork improvement within the agency.



Coalition members often find it difficult to balance work with commitments to the partnership, despite generous support from employers. Coalition members successfully addressed this problem by working in teams, so that when one person is not available for part of the process, another can step in to maintain continuity. All recognize that long-term stability will be an ongoing challenge.

## Facing Criticism and Challenges

There has been criticism from the broader community about the coalition's focus on active forms of forest management. Coalition members recognized that their mission is not all-encompassing, instead believing they have been effective thus far by keeping a rather focused interest on activities related to fuels reduction, thinning, and forest restoration. In recent years, they have encouraged participation from individuals with other interests, but recognize that integrating recreation projects, off-highway vehicle use, and roadless area protection has been slower to gain traction. Time and difficulty in crafting agreeable solutions were frequently cited as barriers.

Coalition members described the risk of returning to the old ways of doing business as a continuing challenge to their collaborative efforts. The challenge, in part, stems from an inherent obstacle with the process itself. Simply, collaboration takes time. Some have expressed that while the coalition has made progress on many issues (the "low-hanging fruit"), reaching agreement on more difficult concerns—like wilderness use and designation—seems elusive.<sup>1</sup> This frustration is compounded by what is viewed as a lack of flexibility within the Forest Service at both the national and regional levels. Agency personnel and coalition members alike cited administrative regulations and procedures as additional obstacles that prevent local management units from addressing place-specific concerns.

Another focal point of local criticism has been "The Blueprint"—the coalition document described previously that divides the national forest into three zones for active management, restoration, and wilderness/roadless protection. Some outside parties have charged that the Blueprint is designed to direct development and implementation of the national forest's management plan, though coalition members maintain it is merely intended as an internal tool to aid discussion about proposed management actions. Such criticism is especially salient for the Forest Service,

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<sup>1</sup> The Forest Service, Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition (NEWFC), and other constituencies within the community, have sought clarity on roadless area management, wilderness designation, and related issues for some time, but it continues to be a difficult subject. Late in 2009, a congressionally sponsored "roundtable" was convened in Spokane, Washington, to find common ground on wilderness, but the initiative dissolved as some constituencies dropped out of the process. The NEWFC has expressed a renewed commitment to this effort.

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which has clear motivation for working with the coalition but does not want to be viewed as having its priorities set by someone else.

## Building on Success

While the collaborative effort was initially built around a partnership between NEWFC and the Colville National Forest, participants recognized that it has changed the community-agency dynamic as a whole. All agreed the general public is paying more attention to issues on the national forest now that the coalition is operational and actively involved. Individual citizens, who were not previously engaged, have been attending coalition meetings, thus strengthening its role as a community voice. Meanwhile, other interests that have not formally participated in coalition discussions—including livestock grazers, recreation groups, and county government—have increased their involvement in the more traditional federal agency participatory planning process.

Most interview participants agreed there is a strong incentive to stay involved with collaborative efforts as everyone—individuals and the community—has something to gain. An individual representing environmental interests within NEWFC expressed a sentiment likely held by many in the group:

*If it were just about how we make sure roadless areas stay roadless, the timber industry wouldn't have been involved for very long. If it were just about fuels reduction in the WUI [wildland-urban interface] and providing products for the timber infrastructure, the conservationists wouldn't have been around very long. There's a lot to gain by being together, and there's a lot to lose by being together. It's a balance, and any collaborative process that doesn't have that balance isn't a genuine collaborative process, and it isn't going to retain committed participants.*

Common, overarching goals are not the only components that bind the process together. Positive feedback from the public, seeing progress made on the ground, and building strong relationships were also emphasized as major incentives for continuing to collaborate.

## Conclusion

Colville's story illustrates how community-agency collaboration can generate stability for agency planning processes, laying the groundwork for a healthier resource and a more resilient community. Building social capital—the ability and willingness of different interests to act collectively for a common goal—has been essential to the partnership's success. By lowering the transaction costs of working together,

they have facilitated a collaborative working environment that in many cases has led to agreement.

Before the partnership between NEWFC and the Colville National Forest, the forest was a source of conflict and a growing fire risk (Findley et al. 2000). Collaboration has helped stabilize the region, creating a healthier forest that is also a major driver of the local economy. Measurable successes listed by those interviewed include 22 forest stewardship projects completed since 2002, no litigation on forest health projects during this same period, nearly 3,000 acres (1214 ha) treated with prescribed fire in 2008, and 61 million board feet (14 394 m<sup>3</sup>) harvested on the forest in 2008, all of which went to local mills. Members take pride in noting that formerly opposing interests are now represented within NEWFC. Although problems persist, stakeholders have been working together to develop a more balanced, holistic, and sustainable long-term vision for resource management in northeast Washington. This vision includes recognition that forest conservation is not possible without timber harvest, and that sustainable harvest levels are not possible without supporting the needs and concerns of the environmental community.

Current conditions suggest that community capacity is being built around the partnership between NEWFC and the Colville National Forest, better equipping the community to deal with environmental, economic, and social challenges. The Colville National Forest has been able to meet its fuel reduction goals and deliver a more dependable supply of timber at a time when market prices discourage many private landowners from harvesting. This relative stability now establishes a stronger base for reaching agreement over broader environmental concerns.

As in other productive partnerships, good leadership, effective communication about community interests, and trust-building are central to success on the Colville National Forest (e.g., Olsson et al. 2004, Sturtevant and Jakes 2008). This examination of the Colville case clearly demonstrates the role and importance of stable leadership for developing shared understanding among constituencies. As our research team noted previously, local citizen groups look to the agency to provide this stability and to build bridges across different interests that lead to a strategy for collaborative efforts (Shindler et al. 2002). The forest supervisor accepted this leadership role and set expectations for collaboration within his organization and in the greater community. Likewise, coalition members put aside hard-line positions to focus on pursuing common community interests, and have been forging unlikely relationships along the way. Mutual respect and dedication to professional discourse has helped maintain these relationships, even as the coalition has faced internal and external challenges.

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**Stakeholders have been working together to develop a more balanced, holistic, and sustainable long-term vision for resource management in northeast Washington and conditions suggest that community capacity is being built around the partnership between NEWFC and the Colville National Forest, better equipping the community to deal with environmental, economic, and social challenges.**

Likely the biggest test for the coalition thus far will be the departure of the forest supervisor. At the time these interviews took place, members of both the coalition and the Forest Service spoke openly about the likelihood this key figure would transfer to another duty station in the near future.<sup>2</sup> Participants were universally optimistic the group would continue to be successful, suggesting that the supervisor had sufficiently established a culture of collaboration within the Colville National Forest. In the words of one coalition member,

*We're doing everything we can to be logical, reasonable, use common sense, build relationships, build trust—from the ground up—even among historical antagonists who used to hate each other and be appalled by each others' perspectives.*

The coalition, like many partnerships, always has room to grow—adding new interests and tackling additional management concerns. While challenging at times, this growth will invariably become easier as relationships deepen and new ways of doing business develop—a model that is difficult to replace once it takes hold because stakeholders see its value and accept it as the way to get things done. Participants acknowledged that reaching this transition point is a critical juncture in the collaborative process, but once achieved it becomes far more difficult for anyone to undermine the effort.

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<sup>2</sup> The forest supervisor transferred to become the supervisor on the Clearwater and Nez Perce National Forests several months following the conclusion of these interviews.

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