

Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program Site Visits

Overview: During Fiscal Years 2013 and 2014, teams from the Washington Office (WO) visited 12 of the 23 Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration (CFLR) Program projects. The objectives of the visits were to validate that projects were being implemented within the intent of the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (the Act), to better understand implementation challenges, and to provide support and recommendations for improvements.

WO Teams: Team members from the Washington Office included a range of leadership and program management staff that reflected the diverse and integrated nature of the landscape-scale restoration projects being reviewed. Leadership participants included Associate Deputy Chiefs for Business Operations, State and Private Forestry, and National Forest System, as well as the Chief Financial Officer. Program areas represented included forest management, fuels, wildlife, watershed, NEPA, and engineering. Reviews also included participation from regional CFLR coordinators and regional leadership.

Projects Reviewed: The 12 CFLR projects reviewed to date are spread across 7 regions and identified below.

CFLR Project Name	National Forest	Region	State	Review Date
Deschutes Collaborative	Deschutes	6	OR	July 2013
Tapash Sustainable Forest Collaborative	Okanogan-Wenatchee	6	WA	Aug 2013
Southwestern Crown of the Continent	Lolo, Flathead, Helena	1	MT	July 2013
Selway-Middle Fork Clearwater	Nez Perce	1	ID	July 2013
Southwest Jemez Mountains	Santa Fe	3	NM	May 2014
Four Forest Restoration Initiative	Coconino, Kaibab, Apache-Sitgreaves, Tonto	3	AZ	May 2014
Weiser-Little Salmon Headwaters	Payette	4	ID	June 2014
Shortleaf Bluestem Community	Ouachita	8	AR	July 2014
Ozark Highlands Ecosystem Restoration	Ozark-St. Francis	8	AR	July 2014
Missouri Pine-Oak Woodland Restoration	Mark Twain	9	MO	July 2014
Dinkey Landscape Restoration	Sierra	5	CA	July 2014
Burney-Hat Creek Basins	Lassen	5	CA	July 2014

Findings: While the 12 CFLR projects reviewed were diverse in their accomplishments and status, all were moving forward and making progress on fulfilling the intent of the Act. Not surprisingly, the rate of progress was mixed, with some projects benefitting from established collaboratives and long-term partners, others focused on building relationships and work in the planning stages, some struggling with limited markets and litigation, and still others finally able to make on-the-ground implementation headway with sustainable funding. Some concerns that were common in the 2013 reviews, such as use of matching funds and budget timing, were less evident by 2014 when processes were more established. Described below are common themes, things that are working well, and challenges. Recommendations for individual project needs were offered during reviews, and common issues identified in the site visits continue to be addressed by Regions and the WO.

- **Accelerating Restoration** – One of the basic intents of the Act was to accelerate restoration work on hundreds of thousands of national forest acres across the country. Based on the sampling of CFLR sites visited, this goal is on track for many projects but not yet consistent due to a number of factors. There is a ramp-up period for all projects; whether the first full year or first 2-3 years, it takes time to plan and set up these initiatives, work out problems, start to function together, and do sufficient work and treatments to produce desired accomplishments. Projects in Region 1 are scaling up and readying work, but litigation is limiting realization and impacting outputs. Projects in Region 5 and Region 6 are being impacted by wildfires, which are creating changes in planned treatments. Habitat improvements such as Red-cockaded woodpecker recovery are already being accelerated along with longleaf pine restoration in Region 8, but more internal capacity is still needed. While funding for CFLR projects has been more reliable in recent years, reduced funding in other programs has impacted forest-wide resources, infrastructure, staffing, and capacity.

One of the challenges of the CFLR initiative that is inherent in how it was set up is that it creates a divide of “haves” and “have-nots” in terms of support for restoration programs nationwide. From the beginning, acknowledgement that CFLR is a priority has required regions and national forests to funnel support to these 23 projects, often at a cost to other restoration projects that are also beneficial. While appreciating the restoration gains associated with CFLR projects, concerns continue that advancing other range-wide restoration work has been difficult. Without more funding agency-wide, both “haves” and “have-not” forests have found alternate ways to do things and stretch funds. One approach successfully used by the Mark Twain in Region 9 for their Missouri Pine-Oak Woodland restoration project, was to develop their landscape-scale project within their established long-term maintenance capacity before CFLR, which just accelerated restoration progress. Several projects use a “militia” approach, not just for CFLR work but for all their projects, to stretch their capacity by cross-training appropriate staff to perform multiple functions. Partners play a key role on most projects in supplementing capacity. A more integrated approach to planning work and using multiple fund sources is also helping do more work with fewer funds. In addition, other initiatives and tools such as stewardship contracting are being used to supplement resources for CFLR and non-CFLR projects alike.

Of the CFLR projects reviewed, those that were more established were understandably showing more progress in restoration accomplishments. Projects that are still in development stages, such as the Four Forest Initiative (4-FRI) in Region 3, are continuing to build for the future and ready to transition from a planning organization to an implementation one. Most all CFLR projects are looking beyond a 10-year timeframe.

- **Biomass Markets** – Another basic premise of the Act was the possibility of paying for restoration implementation with the value of treatment byproducts. In most areas, markets have not developed, for reasons unrelated to CFLR, and are unlikely to materialize in the near future. In those locations where there are biomass markets with infrastructure in place, such as the Burney-Hat Creek project in California and the eastern side of the 4-FRI project in Arizona, biomass opportunities are working.

- **Fire** – Almost across the board, CFLR projects are making improvements in reducing hazardous fuels; limiting the damaging effects from wildfires; and restoring desirable fire regimes and fire-adapted ecosystems. All projects reviewed are moving toward larger treatment areas for prescribed burns. In the West, projects are shifting from treatment sizes that covered small blocks of less than 100 acres to larger landscapes of over 1000 acres. In the South, where prescribed burning has been a practice for many years, CFLR projects are accomplishing annual treatments of 10's of thousands of acres per year. Regional differences also account for variations in focus for CFLR projects. For western projects, most fire treatments have focused on wildland-urban interface (WUI) lands and taking advantage of natural fire starts to move toward more desirable fire regimes. In the eastern half of the country where populations are more dense and interspersed with national forest lands, there is more of a mix of WUI and non-WUI treatments to reduce hazardous fuels and a parallel focus on creating a desired structure, species mix, and fire-adapted ecosystems.

One area of difficulty consistently brought up during site visits was the use of the R-CAT analysis tool for assessing potential savings in fire management costs. The reasons projects were struggling varied from lack of technical skills needed to provide data files to concerns over regional mis-representation of results to an evolving agency focus on reducing fire risk rather than all individual fire costs. As a result of the site visits, projects were given a choice to pause in their participation in R-CAT. Approximately 70% of projects plan to go forward with the analysis. Their data will be used to form a collective, agency-wide perspective.

- **Maintenance and Restoration** – As projects are starting to implement treatments, discussions are unfolding regarding the point at which landscapes are considered restored and the necessity for maintenance to keep them in desired conditions. There are varied perspectives in different program areas on what constitutes restoration. In some cases, treatments to date may have developed a desirable fire regime on acres that are still decades away from reaching a stable species composition and sustainable conditions for the ecosystem as a whole. Some projects reviewed are concerned that the focus on making improvements in the landscape does not recognize the necessity of investing in maintenance to sustain those improvements. There is also a concern that treatments for protection of desired conditions are just as important as moving toward desired conditions but may not be recognized as accomplishments that need continued support. These questions are also surfacing as projects prepare Ecological Indicator Reports and are leading to a broader understanding that restoration should include improving, maintaining, and protecting desired conditions.
- **Monitoring** – CFLR projects vary greatly in terms of how much emphasis has been placed on developing a cohesive monitoring strategy. Some projects have used developing a monitoring strategy as a way to broaden their collaborative and build trust, while others have given this minimal focus to date. Some projects are also still struggling with understanding research versus monitoring distinctions.

Monitoring exists on a continuum between simple implementation questions (did the project do what the project said would be done?) to more complex questions (how did the environment respond to the change?) that may take years to answer. Some of the collaboratives are very interested in answering these complex questions. However, at some point along the complex-end of the continuum, the questions shift from project monitoring to basic research. Research is beyond the scope of the CFLR initiative. Some project collaboratives are struggling with these distinctions and defining limits on their monitoring questions.

On the 4-FRI, they have gone the extra step to hire a Forest Service monitoring coordinator. Many other CFLR projects are just getting started with multi-party monitoring plans. Also, some projects, such as the Dinkey in California, have substantial monitoring programs while others are more basic. Most projects have identified a certain percent of funds to go toward monitoring, which generally ranges from less than 1% to 10%.

- **Collaboration** – Developing successful collaboratives is showing positive results but has been a mixed bag to date. The collaboration emphasis of the CFLR projects has allowed some forests to shift how they do business and encouraged working together to develop and implement projects. With more partners and interested groups at the table, a lot is gained. However, in some cases, such as the Southwest Crown of the Continent, everything has been done appropriately to build and encourage collaborative involvement, but the project is still getting litigated.

Collaboration is also exhibited in different ways in different parts of the country. The history and context within which collaboration has evolved in the East is different than in the West. Collaboration tends to be an integral part of how most forests operate in the East, and this is reflected in the well-developed partnerships and interactions observed on the two CFLR projects reviewed in Arkansas. These projects have had collaborative relationships with the public and partners for years, so they have had time to build trust and relationships and, now that more funding is available, they are able to operate in collective support and get work done, which helps minimize collaboration fatigue. In contrast, collaboration in the West is still evolving and badly needed because the resource is suffering. The gridlock of not seeing work accomplished over the years has been an impetus for many in the West to work together to try to get things moving forward. While progress is being made, the initial need to focus much of their energy on building collaboratives has, in some cases, resulted in collaboration fatigue. Recommendations from the review team for these situations included suggestions for creating more structure within the collaborative, bringing in new interested parties, and involving outside support such as the national collaboration cadre or facilitators.

- **Tribal Collaboration** – Across many projects, there are opportunities to enhance and formalize tribal collaboration. Implementing projects through the Tribal Forest Protection Act (TFPA), which allows tribes to conduct work on National Forest System lands that impact tribal lands, may be an opportunity to increase the pace of restoration. In addition,

implementing TFPA projects may further strengthen already strong relationships with tribes and build trust and capacity with tribes that have felt disengaged.

Many tribes have differing views of how they should engage. Several only want to have their engagement be at the government to government level and not engage from the collaborative perspective. Tribes such as the Jemez Pueblo on the Southwest Jemez project maintain their government to government relationship, but also recognize the opportunity to engage as part of the collaborative while maintaining the formal relationship. A quote from Chris Toya, archeologist with the tribe, “we love working with the Jemez Ranger District” displayed the level of interest by the tribe to continue to be involved in protecting and enhancing their heritage resource.

- **Communication** – A recurring theme for individual CFLR projects was the need for units to hear from Forest Supervisors and regional leadership that this work is a priority. This is happening in some cases, but in others this is not evident and there are missed opportunities for talking about the value of these projects. Communication with partners is also a mixed situation with room for improvement. On some projects, communication with partners is long-standing, and trust built up over the years makes information exchange a way of doing business. For other projects that are newly established, communication is an investment that takes more time and needs more work. It helps to have the collaborative define expectations, understand the various roles and what is expected, and have candid conversations with each other on a frequent basis to make sure things stay on track.

For those forests with good collaborative connections, partners are often strong communicators on behalf of the Forest Service and can be powerfully effective in telling our story. Two positive examples of this type of communication were seen on the Shortleaf Bluestem Community project and the Ozark Highlands Ecosystem Restoration project, both of which are located in Region 8. The Shortleaf Bluestem project has a unique conservation education involvement with local schools and students who produced a video about the restoration program. The Ozark Highlands project is benefitting from a traditionally strong interconnection with state agencies and volunteers who are combining resources on common goals and from an internal emphasis on communication where every staff member knows their CFLR story and can communicate their achievements at all levels. Yet, even projects with effective communication on some levels, see the need for continued improvement in other areas such as improving how they share findings and ways to better centralize information.

- **NEPA** – The CFLR initiative has changed the way many people think about NEPA. The focus on restoring larger-scale landscapes has units thinking about planning from a bigger picture as well. This has resulted in increasing the size and scope of NEPA analysis over typical projects in the past. The projects reviewed also saw this as an opportunity to test out new tools, experiment with different approaches, and share lessons learned.

Related discussions also brought up the value of “social license” or the hard-earned trust and support that is built over time with the public and our partners to support work like

CFLR. Whether this comes into play during NEPA planning or other collaboration situations, this is not something that just happens. It is also an investment that needs to continue to be cultivated and maintained.

- **Changes in Thinking** – CFLR projects have in some ways served as pilots for new ways of thinking. They have allowed experimentation and use of different tools that would not have been done without extra funding. The use of Lidar surveys in Region 3 and ramping up of stewardship contracting across most projects are examples. The emphasis on large-scale landscapes has been a chance to think big and go beyond typical boundaries. The initiative has also highlighted the value of restoration projects in all parts of the country, whether large or small, established or emerging, and recognition of the time that has to be invested to make and maintain progress. The site reviews and sharing across projects have also initiated discussions that challenge our understanding of what restoration is and what it takes to get there.
- **Commitment** – Collaboration can take a lot of time and, especially in the early years of a collaborative, some individuals shoulder a lot of responsibility. Interest and commitment of Forest Service line officers have demonstrated to be critical in several projects. Sometimes line officers or other key individuals have to move on. This transition has been difficult for several projects. Collaboratives with more experience and broader leadership have handled these transitions more effectively. The other finding related to commitment relates to the value of the Agency and the Chief's commitment to providing funding for these projects over a decade. All of the collaboratives stated that this was a significant factor in their involvement and their success.
- **Value of Site Visits** – Having multiple WO teams conduct field reviews provided a good opportunity to interact, understand concerns, see good work, and provide immediate feedback. This was a huge opportunity for leadership at the associate deputy chief, director, and program manager levels to observe things that are not part of their immediate worlds and cut through the chain of command to have direct communication. Everyone came out with a better understanding.