

## John Allen: Bringing Stakeholders Together to Restore the Forest and Protect Communities

By Chris McGowan

If there is one phrase that best summarizes John Allen’s career philosophy, it might be “shared stewardship.” In his supervision of forest restoration, collaborative programs, and friends’ groups, he has repeatedly taken the initiative to bring stakeholders together to implement projects. This is necessary in part because there is no one answer when it comes to reducing devastating wildfires, saving old-growth forest, protecting watershed, extracting resources, or managing recreational use of the land. A holistic approach must be used that brings all the interested parties together.



*A Legislative Tour of the Deschutes National Forest on October 22, 2014: (left to right) Oregon Rep. Brad Witt; Deschutes National Forest Supervisor John Allen; U.S. Forest Service Regional Forester Jim Peña; Oregon Rep. Gene Whisnant; Oregon Sen. Michael Dembrow; Oregon Sen. Herman Baertschiger (front); Oregon State Forester Doug Decker; Natural Resources Policy Advisor to Governor Kitzhaber, Brett Brownscombe. (source: Oregon Dept. of Forestry).*

“Our culture is reevaluating and redefining its relationship with our natural resources. And people are starting to better understand that you can’t just solve the water issue by itself, the recreation issue by itself, or the timber issue by itself. It’s all connected, it’s all integrated. You can’t just solve your particular piece of the forest that you’re interested in, and that’s the challenge for land management agencies. That’s our mission, to integrate all of the resources into a long-term sustainable solution,” says Allen, the Supervisor of the Deschutes National Forest, who is retiring after four decades of working for the USFS.

Allen grew up in San Diego, California and graduated from the University of California, Berkeley in 1979 with a B.S. in forest management. He joined the Forest Service in 1978, working as a seasonal employee for the Fremont National Forest, then in a variety of positions in timber, silviculture and planning for the Winema and Umpqua National Forests (the Fremont and Winema National Forests merged in 2002). He was a District Ranger for the Willamette National Forest for 11 years. He left Oregon to serve as Deputy Forest Supervisor for the Gallatin National Forest in Montana before coming to the Deschutes, headquartered in Bend, Oregon, in 2007.

The Deschutes National Forest encompasses 1.6 million acres that range from the eastern slopes of the Cascades through the emerald green conifer forests of central Oregon to the juniper-and-sage landscapes of the high desert. It contains the Newberry National Volcanic Monument, as well as five wilderness areas, and six National Wild and Scenic Rivers. It is known as one of the more actively managed national forests in the U.S., with much of it designated as Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and covered by Community Wildfire Protection Plans.

The Deschutes National Forest is regarded as a high-functioning forest. Allen’s peers attribute this partly to the supervisor’s high expectations and to his ability to be visionary while leading real change; he is both aspirational and realistic in how he leads. Allen has been an integral part of the Deschutes Collaborative Forest Project (DCFP), which has gained attention at national levels in the Forest Service and has been called “the most successful collaborative” by the Sierra Club. The DCFP covers 257,000 acres and runs west to the Cascade crest and south from Bend to Sisters. It brings together various stakeholders in a quest to restore forest ecosystems and make them resilient in the face of fire and insects. The goals have been to “restore a forested landscape that can be managed within a natural range of variability and provide a diversity of habitats, while protecting the surrounding communities,” and to safeguard municipal watersheds, and preserve long-term quality of, and access to, recreational areas and trails.

The modest but highly accomplished Allen has played an instrumental role in the success of the DCFP, bringing together a diverse set of stakeholders and local government officials to collaborate on such matters as prescribed fire and smoke management. Along with the Nature Conservancy and the Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council, Allen helped draft the original CFLRP proposal for the Deschutes National Forest in 2009. For the DCFP and other programs, he has expanded the relationships between the USFS and entities like the BLM, BIA, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, Oregon colleges, public health agencies, and state and municipal fire departments. By connecting diverse interest groups and facing contentious issues head on, Allen has been able to provide a vision for working together in the future.



*Forest in the West Bend Project after successful restoration work (source: DCFP).*

Discover Your Forest, another successful project, is the official friends group of the Deschutes and Ochoco National Forests and has raised over \$400,000 to support forest programs, the recruitment of over 2,000 volunteers, and service to over 11,000 kids through educational programming ([discoveryourforest.org](http://discoveryourforest.org)). And, in 2011, John was

instrumental to the creation of the Children's Forest of Central Oregon, the first nationally recognized Children's Forest in the Pacific Northwest ([www.childrensforestco.org](http://www.childrensforestco.org)). Today, this stakeholder-run organization serves over 20,000 kids every year.

Allen is particularly proud of the West Bend Integrated Vegetation Management Project, which covers some 26,000 acres and is one of ten primary forest restoration projects on national forestland within the larger DCFP. The project has been highly successful in spite of its close proximity to the City of Bend and its intersection with a popular trail system that is a key part of central Oregon's recreation-based economy. This project includes commercial logging, small diameter thinning and prescribed fire, the latter of which has required careful planning and public outreach efforts with the help of the DCFP Collaborative.

On November 7, 2017, the project received the 2017 Forest Service's Chief's Honor Award, the highest award given by the Forest Service. The Chief's Honor Award publicly recognizes outstanding accomplishments that contribute to the Forest Service's strategic goals. The prestigious honor was given to the West Bend Project in the category of "Sustaining Our Nation's Forests and Grasslands."

The project aims to "restore the forest to its historic conditions in Ponderosa Pine stands and dry mixed conifer. This is where a lot of the recreation takes place along the Deschutes. It's where the Bend Municipal Watershed is, where a lot of wildland-urban interface is," according to Allen. By removing hazardous fuels buildup from the landscape and restoring the stands to historic conditions, "We hope we're going to provide for a healthier, more resilient forest in the long run that will better be able to withstand the hot and dry trends that we're seeing with climate change."

Allen observes, "I think our society's perspectives are changing around prescribed fire and smoke. Sometimes it takes catastrophic events to get communities and elected officials to rethink prescribed fire. We're certainly on a continuum of change. The state of Oregon recently just updated its state [smoke management] plan, which for places like central Oregon will certainly be helpful and put more prescribed fire back on the landscape."

He continues, "We want to recognize in the dry forested landscapes that fire had a periodic presence. We're trying to get the stocking densities on the landscape down to more historic levels. If you look at old black-and-white photos [from the 19<sup>th</sup> century], there was obviously a lot more fire on the landscape, a lot fewer trees. Stocking levels were a lot lower. We're just trying to approximate the historic natural processes, which we believe will help better restore some of the ecological function of these forests. And I think it will also be better for protecting our communities that are adjacent to these forests."

Allen has brought a lot of wisdom about the strategic use of fire to bear because of his extensive experience with fire management. "I've always been involved with fire in different capacities," he notes. "Before I became a district ranger, I was on fire crews and a

crew boss on fire crews. And as I became a ranger and forest supervisor I got more into upper-level management, what we call agency-administrator type work. So, my whole career I've been involved in fire, from holding a shovel or ax in my hand to helping make some of the larger strategic decisions that needed to be made."

Allen's Berkeley education had a "strong emphasis on forest ecology and the role of natural processes. So, when I combined it with the on-the-ground experience I was getting, it really helped me think about the role of fire in the forest landscape."

Looking back, Allen observes, "When I started my career it was pretty clear that our relationship to the natural environment was to extract natural resources and use them for mutual economic and public benefit." As time and decades have moved on, that's still an important aspect. "But overall we have to try and understand the long term impacts of using our natural resources. Are we using them in a way that's sustainable? I think that's where our society's at now. How can we use our natural resources and get the benefits of nature, but do it in a sustainable way for future generations?"

"I think there are great challenges for us ahead for managing our public forests," he continues. "One of the most important things a land management agency like the Forest Service can do is develop relationships with our communities and community leaders that are trusting. If we have the trust of our communities, we can work together to address some of these big challenges. That's one of the things I've tried to work on really hard during my tenure.

"You have to look at each other as peers. The Forest Service is not a government agency that's on a pedestal above everyone else because we have more scientific knowledge. You really have to look at all of your relationships on a peer-to-peer basis where you're equals. You can't elevate yourself above the citizen."

Allen will leave a noticeable vacuum when he retires, but feels that "I'm leaving the Forest Service with a lot of confidence that it's in good hands. When I see the mid-career and younger employees coming up behind me, they're smart, they're talented, and they're motivated. And they're going to work with our communities to do the best job we can in managing these public lands. I'm very positive for the future."

*Chris McGowan is a freelance writer who has published articles and blogs about nature and environmental issues in the [Los Angeles Times](#), [Huffington Post](#) and elsewhere. He published an interview with Cal Joyner, "How Primeval Forests and Non-Partisan Alliances Can Save Us" earlier this year on the [WWETAC](#) site.*