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BARRIERS AND PREFERENCES FOR LANDOWNER PARTICIPATION IN CONSERVATION PROGRAMS IN THE INTERIOR NORTHWEST

HANNAH GOSNELL, HARMONY BURRIGHT, MAX NIELSEN-PINCUS, AUTUMN ELLISON,
AND CASSANDRA MOSELEY

Small and medium-sized forest and range landowners have a significant impact on ecosystem health. Conservation programs such as those offered by the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and environmentally-oriented markets offer incentives to conserve ecological functions while helping improve landowner prosperity. However, only a minority of forest and rangeland owners participate in conservation programs. To better understand the influences on landowner participation conservation programs and opportunities to improve participation, we examined landowner concerns and preferences in the interior Pacific Northwest.

Approach

We conducted over 130 interviews with representatives from nonprofit organizations and government agencies that work with landowners on conservation in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana. We also surveyed over 800 family ranch and forest landowners in these states about conservation practices and program participation. We asked about opportunities and barriers for landowner participation in conservation programs and environmental markets.

Results

Public conservation programs are the most common way landowners are rewarded for good stewardship of their land. Approximately one-third of the landowners we surveyed had participated in a conservation program, and nearly the same number reported that they were very or extremely likely to participate in the future. Grants and cost share programs were the most commonly used among participating landowners. A small segment (4-8 percent) of landowners reported having

participated in conservation easements, certification programs (e.g., grass fed beef, organic produce, certified timber), or environmental credit programs (e.g., carbon markets).

Barriers to Participation:

Landowners are concerned about legal and regulatory implications. Regulations are a key driver for participation but over half of landowners rated the lack of regulatory or legal assurances as the biggest reason to not participate in a conservation program. Landowners expressed a great degree of concern that conservation programs can create unintended consequences; for example, if enhanced habitat brings Endangered Species Act listed species to their land.

Landowners believe that it is too much hassle to get involved in conservation programs. Landowners can perceive conservation programs as confusing and complex. Combined with the perception that the financial benefit may not be sufficient and

a lack of trust of the people who run conservation programs, landowners may be less willing to learn about specific programs or engage with people they don't know. Nearly half of landowners feel like participating in conservation programs is not worth the hassle.

Lack of flexibility to fit landowner needs

Landowners must juggle many different considerations when making land and water management decisions and they must manage a significant amount of uncertainty. The perception that conservation programs lack the flexibility needed to adapt to changing and unexpected circumstances is highly correlated with the perception that conservation programs are not compatible with existing landowner goals. These perceptions may be especially true for programs with long contract durations.

Opportunities:

Rewards for participating in conservation programs may not need to be exclusively in the form of a direct payment. Landowners reported that the most desirable benefits for participating in conservation program were tax incentives, an agreeable annual payment, and insurance against legal liability and contract failure.

Programs that protect existing high-quality habitat are more appealing than those seeking to restore degraded habitat. Landowners agreed most strongly with the statement that future programs should reward landowners for protecting existing high quality habitat. Implementing new conservation actions was rated significantly lower. Forestry and ranch operators were more likely to express interest in projects that emphasize water quality than other types of projects. Landowners whose primary use of their property was recreational or residential were the most likely to express interest in projects that emphasized endangered species habitat.

Shorter duration contracts are preferred over longer-term contracts. Ten-year contracts appealed to landowners more than 20-year, 30-year, or permanent agreements. This was especially true for landowners who had not participated in conservation programs before. Shorter-term agreements may allow more landowners to try conservation programs or environmental markets before making long-term commitments.

Local entities matter, especially for recruiting new landowners. Landowners that had not previously participated in a conservation program rated local government and local nonprofit groups as more highly desirable to work with than other state, federal, or non-local entities. For landowners who had participated in the past and who are likely to do so again, state and federal government agencies were rated equal to local government and non-profits.

Implications

Working landowners spend considerable time and resources managing their lands, and are often hesitant to make additional commitments to participate in conservation programs. Outreach efforts to improve landowner knowledge of programs and increase understanding of program requirements are more likely to appeal to landowners who have never participated in a program. Local entities are particularly well poised to provide that assistance. Programs that acknowledge the varying nature of working lands, allow flexibility, and offer different levels of commitment are likely to be the most successful in appealing to landowners who want to maintain or improve the ecological condition of their land.

More information

A description of the project, briefing papers, and fact sheet examples of projects on the ground can be found on the project website at: www.tinyurl.com/SNWEcosystemServices.

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