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LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE BLUE MOUNTAINS RESTORATION STRATEGY TEAM

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In January 2013, the Pacific Northwest Region of the Forest Service initiated the Eastside Restoration Strategy to improve forest health conditions by accelerating the pace and scale of restoration on national forests in eastern Oregon and Washington. As part of this effort, the Region created a dedicated interdisciplinary (ID) Blue Mountains Restoration Strategy team to conduct landscape-level planning across three national forests and innovate strategies to more effectively reach planning decisions. The team worked on two NEPA processes: a 100,000-acre project on one forest, and 600,000 acres of dry forest restoration activities across three forests. In 2016, the Forest Service requested a review to identify transferrable insights from the project.

Approach

We conducted interviews with 25 key informants, observed meetings, analyzed documents, and worked with an advisory group to understand challenges and opportunities faced in project planning.

Lessons Learned

ID team structure and focus

There are significant trade offs between planning across large geographic scales and planning integrated restoration projects. The ID team was asked to focus only on dry forest vegetation management, which was intended to help the team meet the ambitious project timeline by narrowing their focus. However, it also created confusion and tension among forest staff and other stakeholders about how the effort could accomplish a suite of landscape-scale restoration needs, which is where the local collaboratives historically found agreement.

ID team organization, leadership, and reporting structure are critical for effective team function.

Interviewees noted that they wished the team had established more clearly defined roles, responsibilities, reporting, and authority at the onset of the project. They said this would have been helpful because they felt the tasks of the team were somewhat incongruous, requiring them to both work independently as content specialists, and to combine the data and analysis innovations into a joint approach. Interviewees also reported that internal team changes (e.g. turnover, retirement, reaching agreement about analysis approaches) inhibited the pace of planning, and they felt that reporting to a Line Officer would have been more effective than reporting to team leads without decision-making authority.

Diverse ID team expertise can foster consideration of social-cultural planning, communication, and data issues alongside the expected ecological analysis. The team hired specialists to fill capacity gaps during the project, which was key for adjusting to unexpected needs.

For example, hiring a communications specialist improved both the team's external public presence and internal communication. Hiring a part-time GIS specialist helped support team members' spatial analysis and data organization needs. These needs were not anticipated when first designing the team.

Early and continued connection among district- and forest-level staff and the ID team about the content and intent of the planning process is key for planning across national forests. Interviewees felt that the cross-forest planning effort should have better integrated different national forest cultures and expectations, and connected more with line officers and staff from the three forests. Crossing forest administrative boundaries meant that a larger number of individuals in forest-specific leadership and specialist positions needed to understand, support, and engage with the project starting earlier in its development.

Collaboration and public involvement

Connecting with local forest units in the planning area is critical to project connectivity and success. Forest units often have site-specific information that can help guide effective planning efforts that progress more efficiently to implementation. Forest staff also need to understand the content and intent of the planning documents for the planning effort to move forward successfully. Interviewees suggested that planning efforts are more successful when local units are engaged as partners from the beginning.

Public engagement during planning is important for increasing understanding among stakeholders. Interviewees emphasized the importance of engaging with the public to foster support for landscape-scale planning. Deliberate outreach efforts were needed to highlight the shared objectives between planning efforts and perceived social and ecological restoration needs at the local scale.

Aligning stakeholder interests and efforts when planning across boundaries requires a lot of time and energy. Relationships between interested parties working on forest health and management concerns were already well-developed when the Region initiated this planning effort. Although this capacity was valuable because stakeholders had prior planning experience with local forests, it also led to challenges because preexisting agreements were not always directly transferrable to the larger-scale planning efforts. Ultimately, interviewees said that aligning the team's work with ongoing collaborative efforts took more time and effort than expected and was not always possible.

Innovative planning requires new models for collaborative engagement and support. Large landscape planning requires continued investments in collaborative capacity, specifically to help support work at large scales. Smaller collaboratives may require support and tools to expand their focus or to connect with other larger, landscape-scale collaborative efforts. Lessons from this planning effort highlight the importance of sharing innovation and successful projects *between* collaboratives to increase their fluency in working across more boundaries with more groups.



More information

A full report of results is forthcoming, available at:

<http://ewp.uoregon.edu/publications>

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