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Build It and They Will Come? Mandating Collaboration in Public Lands Planning and Management

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. public lands are essentially a grand social experiment. Born in the Progressive Era of the late nineteenth century and institutionalized throughout the twentieth century, public lands are a milieu in which American society plays out its ever-evolving relationships with land, nature, and the resources that provide for human material survival and comfort. Public lands are also places in which Americans work out the ever-changing relationships with one another with respect to the natural world, from debates over the appropriate role of government regulation to whether private entities should be able to benefit from the use of public forests. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the participants in this grand social experiment are turning to collaboration as a primary way to work out these relationships.

Collaboration—and related terms like cooperation and coordination—has been infused in just about every significant public lands policy initiative in the past five years. From former Secretary of Interior Gale Norton's "4 C's"—communication, consultation, and cooperation for conservation—and the Bush Administration's "Cooperative Conservation" initiative to the National Fire Plan's 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan¹ and the U.S. Forest Service's forest planning rule promulgated in 2005,² collaboration is the concept du jour. It has transformed from being an emergent process people on the ground turned to as a last resort to address immediate

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1. W. GOVERNORS' ASS'N ET AL., A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH FOR REDUCING WILDLAND FIRE RISKS TO COMMUNITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT: 10-YEAR COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION PLAN (2002).

2. 36 CFR § 219.

needs and conflicts to a virtual national mandate for managing public lands and resources.

For those of us observing and trying to make collaboration work on the ground, numerous questions lie beneath the surface, among them: What is collaboration in the context of public lands planning and management? Can collaboration be mandated? What are the possible paths that lie ahead? In this essay, I will offer an interpretive history of collaboration and explore what collaboration might hold, using evidence and my own personal experiences pertaining to the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) in particular. In the process, I hope to shed some light on what can realistically be expected of collaborative processes by providing some core conditions necessary for collaboration to work in public lands planning and management.

COLLABORATION DEFINED

Barbara Gray, professor of organizational behavior and director of the Center for Research in Conflict and Negotiation at the Pennsylvania State University, literally wrote one of the first books on collaboration, *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multi-party Problems*.³ While her focus was not public lands management or natural resources, Gray lays out a workable, concise definition of collaboration, which I have slightly modified: a process in which diverse individuals who see different aspects of a situation constructively explore their differences and search for ways to improve the situation that go beyond their limited visions of what is possible. Using this definition as a starting point, there are two aspects of collaboration.⁴

The first is for stakeholders to explicitly define, understand, and manage conflicting points of view. No two individuals look at a piece of forest land and prescribe exactly the same management strategies for the next 100 years. Working through these different perceptions of a situation is a prerequisite before progress can be made on what to do about the situation. Hence, inherent to collaboration is managing conflicting views and values. The second part of the definition is the challenging task of finding ways to improve the situation that go beyond rhetorical positions or conventional ways of doing business. It asks collaboration participants to step beyond themselves—their usual ways of thinking and behaving—as well as stepping beyond their organizations' historical procedures to create innovative methods to

3. BARBARA GRAY, *COLLABORATING: FINDING COMMON GROUND FOR MULTIPARTY PROBLEMS* (1989).

4. *Id.*

address the situation at hand. This part of the definition implies that there are many problems that each stakeholder acting alone is not capable of solving; many problems require collective efforts where individuals shift their routine modes of thinking and acting. Gray's definition is a useful lens for understanding how and why collaboration emerged in public lands planning and management.

It is critical to note that Gray's conceptualization of collaboration is a solutions-oriented, problem-solving process. It is not a decision process in and of itself. Decisions may emerge from collaboration, but the primary purpose of collaboration is a collective exploration and search for new ways of looking at and addressing a situation. In short, learning is vital and fundamental to collaboration. Gray's definition also makes no mention of consensus; consensus may emerge from a collaborative exploration of a situation, but consensus is neither mandated nor expected from collaboration. Disentangling collaboration from decision making or consensus is an important precursor to recognizing and operationalizing its full potential.

GENESIS: COLLABORATION AS AN EMERGENT PROPERTY OF PUBLIC LANDS CONFLICT

Theorists and practitioners alike contend that people and organizations will not collaborate until they absolutely have to. Collective action of any kind exacts upfront costs to the individual, while the benefits are not always readily apparent; it is only when the costs of not collaborating exceed the benefits of acting independently that people and organizations will consider collaboration as a viable alternative.⁵ This typically occurs in crisis moments.

Indeed, early collaborative approaches to public lands planning and management were born from crisis. In the early 1990s, many parties with a stake in the management of U.S. public lands came to the realization that existing institutions and conflict resolution venues (i.e., legislative arenas, courts) were being stretched to their limits. When any one party did achieve a victory, it was usually temporary and partial, and achieved at high costs—not just financial costs, but costs to human and social capital.⁶ Anecdotal stories about violent schoolyard fistfights between kids whose parents stood on opposite sides of public lands debates demonstrated the depth to which the social impacts some public

5. MANCUR OLSON, *THE LOGIC OF COLLECTIVE ACTION: PUBLIC GOODS AND THE THEORY OF GROUPS* (2nd ed. 1971).

6. *MAKING SENSE OF INTRACTABLE ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS: CONCEPTS AND CASES* (Roy J. Lewicki et al. eds., 2003).

lands conflicts reached. Bomb threats and actual bombings of land management agency offices and the homes of agency staff also indicated the virulence that some local people (albeit a very small number) had for federal policies, agencies, and agency staff.

People living in communities in and around the public lands bore the direct brunt of these human costs during these crises.⁷ For such people, the core values for living in small rural communities adjacent to public lands were being eroded while powerful groups were waging political battle in Washington, DC or in federal courts—forest fragmentation due to decades of intensive timber harvesting; the decline of well-paying, secure jobs as environmental lawsuits and increased global market competition forced timber companies to lay off workers to keep costs low; the evaporation of opportunities for young people to stay in these communities, forcing them to leave and never return; and the general loss of civility in small communities—the schoolyard violence, the federal office bombings, and the hatred neighbors often had for one another for being on the other side of the issue.

Out of these desperate times arose efforts like the Applegate Partnership (Oregon), Quincy Library Group (California), Flathead Forestry Project (Montana), Ponderosa Pine Partnership (Colorado), and many others.⁸ What these efforts have in common is that they were largely organized by local people who felt like they had no other option. For people living in many of these public lands communities, no one would ultimately win in these public lands conflicts. Everyone would lose something and the place itself would be something less than what they aspired it to be. Leaving was not considered a viable option, especially for those with deep family, social, cultural, and personal ties to the place. This collective “sense of place,” in part, provided the organizing principle for the emergence of public lands collaboration efforts from Oregon and California to Montana, Colorado, and New Mexico.⁹

It is clear to me that these early collaborative efforts were as much about community sustainability as they were about renegotiating sustainable public land management goals, strategies, and practices. Sustainability in this sense is not simply jobs and income for local people

7. FOREST COMMUNITIES, COMMUNITY FORESTS: STRUGGLES AND SUCCESSSES IN REBUILDING COMMUNITIES AND FORESTS (Jonathan Kusel & Elisa Adler eds., 2003).

8. *Id.*

9. Antony S. Cheng et al., “Place” as an Integrating Concept in Natural Resource Politics: Propositions for a Social Science Research Agenda, 16 SOC’Y & NAT. RESOURCES 87 (2003); JULIA M. WONDOLLECK & STEVEN L. YAFFEE, MAKING COLLABORATION WORK: LESSONS FROM INNOVATION IN NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT (2000).

– it includes the endurance of core personal and social identities and values that are intertwined with living and working in a rural, forested landscape. When asked, community leaders, agency staff, and local stakeholder group representatives in places like Delta, Colorado and Enterprise, Oregon would lament the fact that young people would move away, never to return and raise their own families. When these problems are so close to home, making peace and creating a better future for individuals and families in the community takes paramount importance. To be sure, the conflicts centered on the competing visions for how to appropriately manage public lands. But the result of these conflicts had very real and significant social consequences.

MATURATION OF COLLABORATION IN PUBLIC LANDS POLICY AND MANAGEMENT: FROM EMERGENCE TO ENDURANCE

In the past ten years, I believe we have seen a maturation of public lands collaborations from being reactionary coalitions trying anything to change the existing situation to highly functional social networks that pro-actively emphasize experimentation, social learning, and critical self-reflection towards more restoration-oriented management of public lands. Of course, the universe of public lands collaboration is so diverse and rooted in such different histories and goals that it is impossible and imprudent to cast too broad a net. In addition, the sustainability of even highly-functioning collaborations is under constant threat due to funding constraints and external political and market forces. However, there are cases where public lands collaborations may be the few working examples of adaptive ecosystem management we actually see on U.S. public lands. In such cases, public lands collaborations are “learning-based” approaches to public lands planning and management. This is in contrast to a regulatory-based approach, where significant decisions result from expert-based technical analyses or are prescribed by laws and administrative rules applied across all contexts. In previous writings, I have called this a “techno-reg” approach to resource policy and management.¹⁰

Learning-based public lands policy and management is based on the assumption that there is no one “right” way to manage a piece of land, for “right” is necessarily a social construction. The land’s present condition is formed by a unique combination of past natural and human disturbances and its desired future condition is solely a function of

10. S.E. Daniels & A.S. Cheng, *Collaborative Resource Management: Discourse-Based Approaches and the Evolution of TechnoReg*, in *SOCIETY AND NATURAL RESOURCES: A SUMMARY OF KNOWLEDGE* (M.J. Manfredo et al. eds., 2004).

socially-defined goals and objectives. Moreover, any desired condition is fraught with uncertainty. Hence, the piece of land has many possible futures, each of which can be achieved by many possible management strategies and tactics. For many public lands collaborations, any land management objective must be treated as provisional, for its attainment is never assured. To see if management strategies actually achieve desired goals and objectives, monitoring strategies are developed and implemented by participants in the collaboration—commonly called “multi-party monitoring.” Results are interpreted and debated and management goals, objectives, and strategies are adjusted accordingly. While these lofty ideals often fall short in practice, they are a new set of pathways for how public lands planning and management are taking place.

The primacy of learning in public lands collaboration is evidenced in cases too numerous to mention here, but I will highlight two examples. The first is from northeast Oregon and involves a local non-profit, non-governmental organization, Wallowa Resources. The organization was established as a result of the leadership and guidance of the Wallowa County Board of Commissioners, the Wallowa County Natural Resources Advisory Committee, and Sustainable Northwest, a regional organization located in Portland, Oregon. Wallowa Resources spearheaded a collaborative assessment of the Upper Joseph Creek watershed as a first step to learning about historic and current ecosystem conditions, defining desired conditions, prioritizing management actions, and building trust and credibility among traditional adversaries, such as loggers, environmentalists, the USFS, landowners, and local officials. This was the first landscape-scale assessment of its kind in the area. As a result of the Upper Joseph Creek Watershed Assessment (UJCWA), numerous projects were identified that would restore historic ecosystem conditions and functions, especially in lower montane Ponderosa pine forests on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, as well as generate raw material to sustain a few local, small-scale wood products firms. Wallowa Resources also took the lead in the Spooner stewardship project, another collaboratively developed initiative on the national forest. Forestry projects stemming from the UJCWA and Spooner project were among the first since the mid-1990s when litigation effectively shut down the forest. As a compendium to the UJCWA, Wallowa Resources also catalyzed a multi-party monitoring process.

The second example comes from western Colorado, where the Public Lands Partnership (PLP) developed a collaborative process to design, implement, and monitor a salvage timber sale on the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forest (GMUG). Formed in 1992 as a collaborative alternative to the burgeoning county wise-use

movement, the PLP has been committed to collaboration to address pressing public lands conflicts on the GMUG and surrounding Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands. In 2002, the Burn Canyon fire scorched some 31,000 acres near Norwood, Colorado. The USFS subsequently offered three salvage timber sales to remove merchantable timber as a way to offset rehabilitation costs. Several national and state environmental groups immediately filed appeals of the sales. The environmental participants on the PLP, many of whom represented local environmental organizations with long histories of appealing and litigating the USFS and BLM, sought to learn more about why the appellants were opposed to the salvage sales. After organizing field trips and discussions led by forest ecology and management experts, the appellants agreed to two of the sales because they were on relatively flat ground and had little chance of causing irreversible damage. But their approval and agreement to drop the appeal on the two sales came with a stipulation: the projects needed to be monitored more extensively than the agency had resources or capacity to implement—periodic “ocular assessments” that lacked any controlled plot sampling schemes. The third sale was eventually withdrawn by the USFS because of its high potential for damaging soils.

To address the monitoring concerns, the PLP leveraged grant money to bring in two forest scientists to consult on the design and implementation of a monitoring strategy. Upon learning about plots, sampling, and statistics, the PLP devised a monitoring plan that was overseen by a subgroup of environmentalists, timber industry advocates, local officials, local schoolteachers, and other interested citizens. The salvage sales were implemented in 2004 and 2005, with pre-treatment monitoring occurring in Spring 2004 and post-treatment monitoring occurring the past three summers. Most of the post-treatment monitoring was conducted by a retired USFS forester-turned-environmental activist in Telluride. Monitoring data were analyzed by research faculty at Colorado State University and the results collectively interpreted by PLP in collaboration with the USFS. In addition, a socio-economic monitoring protocol was developed and implemented by an emeritus professor from Colorado State University to assess the impacts the timber sales had on local employment and economic activity. In general, the ecological monitoring results show that the salvage projects had limited effects on soil compaction but in some areas did lead to the invasion of undesirable plant species. Time will tell if native plants can out-compete the invasive weeds; further vegetation treatments may be needed. The socio-economic monitoring indicated a positive contribution to local employment and a net economic gain for local community businesses. In the summer of 2006, PLP convened a series of “Learning Day”

workshops during which agency staff, community residents, university researchers, and the original environmental appellants reviewed the data, went into the field, and engaged in a constructive dialogue about the project.

Not only do we see many public lands collaborations as working examples of true social learning and adaptive management on U.S. public lands, but these efforts have become quite effective at pooling and applying resources that would otherwise not be available for projects, especially restoration projects. Once again, PLP provides an illustrative example. One of the areas of interest for the PLP is the Uncompahgre Plateau. Decades of fire suppression, high-grade logging, and livestock grazing have altered the vegetation composition of the 1.4 million acre plateau. What was once prime habitat for mule deer is now prime habitat for elk. Once-open areas of scattered pockets of trees are now filled with trees and brush. The encroachment of invasive non-native plants has added to the ecological mix. Large areas of the plateau are out of what ecologists call the "historic range of variability" – the range of ecological conditions that persisted in the area before intensive human management.

While the USFS manages the upper reaches of the plateau, largely comprised of mixed conifer, aspen, and lodgepole pine, the BLM manages the elevation band between 6,000 and 8,000 feet, comprised of pinyon-juniper, Ponderosa pine, and sagebrush. Private lands dominate at 4,500 to 6,000 feet. With regard to the mule deer problem, the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) has wanted to see coordinated vegetation restoration and management. Restoring the plateau to within its historic range of variability clearly requires collaboration across agencies and landowners and an enormous budget. Obviously, no one entity could have improved the situation on its own. Enter the PLP and its 501c3 arm, Unc/Com, which, as a non-governmental entity, was able to secure grants and pool federal resources in ways that federal agencies could not. Through the PLP, the USFS, BLM, CDOW, and community stakeholders were able to pool nearly \$4 million for the Uncompahgre Plateau Project. While this is still a fraction of the funding required for a multi-year, large landscape-restoration program, it is leaps and bounds more than what would have been available for ecosystem restoration in the absence of collaboration. As of this writing, experimental vegetation treatment methods have been conducted on a paired-watershed study basis on approximately 4,000 acres, further evidence of the learning-based, adaptive approach that characterizes collaboration (how many paired-watershed management studies have ever been conducted on public lands as part of management prescriptions, not just for research?).

The central importance of learning as an operational mode is a far cry from how public lands collaboration has been portrayed, especially by detractors. Comprehensive studies¹¹ and ongoing inventories¹² show that numerous public lands collaborations are patently not forums where local elites can exert undue influence to exploit public land resources for short-term economic benefit as critics have assumed.¹³ Certainly, there are cases where processes claiming to be “collaboration” are hijacked by powerful economic interests.¹⁴ The learning-based approach taken by many public lands collaborations also defys claims that collaboration is nothing more than a process for compromising and acquiescing away stakeholder positions until there is a watered-down outcome. I would argue that landscape-scale assessments and cross-boundary restoration projects have added tremendous value to public lands management and have raised the bar for future planning and management. A good argument can be made, however, that critics like Michael McCloskey and George Coggins have forced many public lands collaborations to consciously avoid even the perception of being biased towards short-term economic interests or a process of endless compromise. For this reason, critical questions must continually be raised about public lands collaboration and skeptics like McCloskey and Coggins have to be part of the ongoing conversation about the appropriate role of collaboration in public lands planning and management.

In summary, in the 15 or so years since we first saw public lands collaborations emerge, it is striking how closely these efforts parallel Gray’s conception of collaboration—the constructive exploration of differences and systematic search for ways to improve the situation that goes beyond each party’s limited vision of what is possible. The learning-based approach many collaborations take is a sign of patience and evolving maturity. It is slow going to be sure. Most public lands collaborations’ projects are in the hundreds to low thousands of acres—

11. WONDOLLECK & YAFFEE, *supra* note 9.

12. Collaboration Stories, Red Lodge Clearinghouse (2006), available at <http://www.redlodgclearinghouse.org/> (last visited Aug. 27, 2006).

13. George C. Coggins, *Regulating Federal Natural Resources: A Summary Case Against Devolved Collaboration*, 25 *ECOLOGY L.Q.* 602 (1999); George C. Coggins, *Of Californicators, Quislings and Crazies: Some Perils of Devolved Collaboration*, in *ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE: EXPLORATIONS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION AND THE AMERICAN WEST* 27 (Philip D. Brick et al. eds., 2001); Michael McCloskey, *The Skeptic: Collaboration Has Its Limits*, 28 *HIGH COUNTRY NEWS*, May 13, 1996, at 7; Michael McCloskey, *Local Communities and the Management of Public Forests*, 25 *ECOLOGY L.Q.* 624 (1999).

14. S. Singleton, *Collaborative Environmental Planning in the American West: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, 11 *ENVTL. POL.* 54 (2002).

hardly a dent in restoration needs and economic opportunities. Starting slow and small is necessary to building trust, enhancing learning, and gaining confidence in trying new things. One of the best resources for people interested in public lands collaboration I am aware of and draw on repeatedly is *Working Through Environmental Conflict: The Collaborative Learning Approach*.¹⁵ More than any single resource on collaboration, it lays out a philosophical, conceptual, and practical framework for a learning-based approach to collaboration in natural resource and environmental management and includes several helpful examples of “collaborative learning” in public lands policy and management.

CAN COLLABORATION BE MANDATED?

No fewer than four federal policies have been enacted in the past five years that put collaboration front and center. Specifically:

- The Implementation Plan for the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy of the National Fire Plan. The Implementation Plan was developed in May 2002 by federal land management agencies, the Western Governor’s Association, State Foresters, the National Association of Counties, and the Intertribal Timber Council. Titled, “A collaborative approach for reducing wildland fire risks to communities and the environment,” the Implementation Plan organizes collaboration into local, state, and national levels. Local level collaboration is tapped as “the primary source of planning, project prioritization, and resource allocation and coordination” for treating hazardous fuels and restoring fire-adapted ecosystems on both public and private lands.¹⁶

- Permanent authorization of Stewardship End-Results Contracting.¹⁷ Section G of this authorization states, “The Forest Service and the BLM shall establish a multiparty monitoring and evaluation process that accesses the stewardship contracting projects conducted under this section. Beside the Forest and the BLM, participants in this process may include any cooperating governmental agencies, including tribal governments, and any interested groups or individuals.”

- The Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003.¹⁸ The HFRA directs the USFS to implement hazardous fuels treatments on federal land to mitigate catastrophic wildfire risk and to collaborate across administrative and landownership boundaries and interests to

15. STEVEN E. DANIELS & GREGG B. WALKER, *WORKING THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT: THE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING APPROACH* (2001).

16. W. GOVERNORS’ ASS’N ET AL., *supra* note 1.

17. 16 U.S.C. § 2104.

18. 16 U.S.C. § 6501.

coordinate treatments on non-Federal land. The venue for collaboration is in the development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans which in turn "identifies and prioritizes areas for hazardous fuels reduction treatments and recommends the types and methods of treatment on Federal and non-Federal land."

- Administrative Rule for National Forest System Land Management Planning.¹⁹ The so-called "planning rule" has perhaps the strongest and most unambiguous language with regard to collaboration: "The Responsible Official must use a collaborative and participatory approach to land management planning...by engaging the skills and interests of appropriate combinations of Forest Service staff, consultants, contractors, other Federal agencies, federally recognized Indian Tribes, State or local governments, or other interested or affected communities, groups, or persons."

It is reasonable to assume that the USFS in particular and federal land management agencies in general (including the BLM, National Park Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) have sufficient statutory and administrative direction toward collaboration. Like all good national policies, however, specifics are lacking, allowing field staff to innovate and adapt processes to their unique situations. But is this innovation and adaptation happening? Can collaboration be mandated? No comprehensive assessment of USFS collaboration exists as of yet. However, it is worth pondering the conditions in which we are likely to see collaboration.

First of all, it should be apparent to readers of this essay that collaboration in public lands planning and management is not simply an enhanced form of public involvement. As the above descriptions of Wallowa Resources, PLP, and numerous documented examples on the Red Lodge Clearinghouse website demonstrate, many of the shining cases of public lands collaborations are not one-off, agency driven processes to gather public input. They are entirely new institutional arrangements with their own missions, values, and goals, and, in some cases, have paid and volunteer staff, and 501(c)(3) incorporated non-profit status. They are technically and politically savvy and innovate new ways of doing business, such as landscape-scale assessments, multi-party monitoring, and leveraging and pooling financial resources—approaches that current public land management agencies do not and often are not able to do.

More significantly, collaboration in public lands planning and management is an operational style and a set of principled behaviors

19. 36 C.F.R. § 219.

rather than a structure, process, or procedure that can replicated from one situation to the next. Collaboration calls on participants to set aside ideological doctrines in favor of workable solutions; pay as much attention to relationship- and trust-building as they would to the resolving the substantive issues at hand; and take a learning-based approach to managing land.

One of the key conditions that spurs public lands collaboration is non-agency leadership emerging from the community. Collaboration implies a reciprocal relationship among participants—every party works to advance the interests of the other parties toward a common objective. Too often, USFS public involvement processes extract input and information from community members and other stakeholders with very few tangible returns. Local leadership—so long as it reflects the diversity of perspectives for public lands—in a collaborative process can help ensure that reciprocity occurs and that the sustainability of public lands is directly tied to community sustainability. Such leadership also can distribute social and political risks and rewards between agency and non-agency participants.

In a recent research project I conducted with Sam Burns at Fort Lewis College,²⁰ we found that there is often pervasive distrust on the part of stakeholder groups, community residents, and local officials for agency-driven processes. People think the process is rigged to arrive at a pre-determined outcome. In the cases of Wallowa Resources and PLP, non-agency stakeholders played significant leadership roles in convening diverse parties, bringing in and honoring diverse sources of knowledge and information, facilitating learning processes such as multi-party landscape assessments and monitoring, and drawing on diverse pools of financial and technical resources to make something happen that ordinarily would not happen. In the process, they made public lands relevant to the lives of community members and made community relevant to public land management agencies. It seems that public lands collaboration is most often happening around ecological restoration.

Where local leadership is slower to emerge despite the mandates is in the area of wildfire mitigation and fuels management on federal and non-federal lands adjacent to federal lands. The challenges may be attributed to two related reasons. The first is that wildfire management is something the USFS has been doing largely on its own (or in limited coordination with other federal agencies) for nearly a century. The USFS

20. SAM BURNS & ANTONY S. CHENG, *THE UTILIZATION OF COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES IN FOREST PLANNING* (Durango, CO: Office of Community Services, Fort Lewis College, 2005).

has what it considers a tried-and-true system. I would suspect that many wildfire management officials think that they probably would not benefit from community collaboration. I know this is a bold assumption that needs to be empirically tested, but consider the General Accounting Office's recent reports that indicate "ineffective coordination among federal agencies and collaboration between these agencies and nonfederal entities." After infusions in excess of \$1 billion per year to wildfire management line items and congressional and administrative mandates for collaboration, there is still much progress that needs to be made.

The second reason is that, because of the historic monopoly and relative success of the USFS in wildland fire management, communities assume wildfire management is neither their responsibility nor a public lands issue that they have capacity to affect. Even in western public lands communities where the threat of wildfire is imminent, the emergence of local leadership—what many wildfire mitigation specialists call "sparkplugs"—has been slow. Without local, non-federal, non-governmental leadership, collaboration is hard to come by. Hence, in the case of wildfire management, the USFS can convene a collaborative process, but there are no assurances that stakeholders will show up. Recent social science research indicates that, if USFS officials desire community collaboration around wildfire management, the process should not begin and solely focus on wildfire—it should begin with a broader discussion of community-landscape connections, what threatens those connections, and how wildfire fits into this threat matrix.²¹

A second key condition is that an organization must practice effective collaboration within its own boundaries before—or at least at the same time as—collaboration with external parties occurs. In this regard, the USFS has a mixed record. Turf battles over functional programs, professional disciplines, and budgets are not uncommon and are part of any large organization's culture.²² Regional, Supervisor, and District Ranger offices battle one another for scarce program dollars,

21. Terry C. Daniel, *Social Science of Wildfire Risk Management: Individual Level of Analysis*, in HUMANS, FIRE, AND FORESTS: SOCIAL SCIENCE APPLIED TO FIRE MANAGEMENT 9 (Workshop Summary, January 28–31, 2003, Hanna J. Cortner et al. eds., Flagstaff, AZ: Ecological Restoration Inst., Northern Arizona Univ., 2003); SAM BURNS ET AL., PEOPLE AND FIRE IN WESTERN COLORADO: FOCUS GROUP ATTITUDES, BELIEFS, OPINIONS, AND DESIRES REGARDING WILDFIRE IN THE WILDLAND-URBAN INTERFACE OF COLORADO'S WESTERN SLOPE (working report prepared for the USDI Bureau of Land Management, Durango, CO: Office of Community Services, Fort Lewis College, 2003).

22. Hanna J. Cortner & Margaret A. Shannon, *Embedding Public Participation in its Political Context*, 91 J. FORESTRY 14 (1993).

staff, and physical resources. These highly competitive conditions are in some ways good—they promote efficiencies and reward those programs and offices that are producing good outcomes. However, if the outcome measures themselves are flawed or skewed, then it may also promote the wrong kind of efficiency and move the agency further away from collaboration mandates.

For example, “acres treated” for wildfire risk and restoration is currently a primary target that is measured. Units that demonstrate higher numbers of treated acres are rewarded accordingly; in many cases, these are units that do not have robust collaborative processes due to the long time periods between initiation and project implementation. Because units vie with one another for treatment dollars, this ensures a culture that rewards competition and produces an inherent disincentive to collaboration.²³ This intra-agency competition would come as a shock to Herbert Kaufman, who wrote the legendary study *The Forest Ranger*,²⁴ which highlights the USFS as the pre-eminent public organization in terms of cohesion and a collective sense of purpose. Perhaps a pool of financial, personnel, and technical resources can be made available that reward units that combine efforts in order to promote a more widespread intra-agency culture of collaboration. What we still see is that collaboration involving USFS staff is a function of personality characteristics. When personality is the dominant variable explaining successful collaboration, it signals the absence of enduring institutional factors that make collaboration happen.

A third condition is that both the participants in the collaboration and the collaborative group itself must be committed to learning. The concept of “learning organizations” was popularized by Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*.²⁵ A learning organization is “an organization where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.”²⁶ Core to a learning organization is emphasis on taking a “systems thinking” approach to planning, action, and reflection. When faced with an immediate issue, we often go straight

23. See, e.g., LISA GREGORY, FOLLOWING THE MONEY: NATIONAL FIRE PLAN FUNDING AND IMPLEMENTATION (The Wilderness Soc’y 2005).

24. HERBERT KAUFMAN, THE FOREST RANGER: A STUDY IN ADMINISTRATIVE BEHAVIOR (1960).

25. PETER M. SENGE, THE FIFTH DISCIPLINE: THE ART AND PRACTICE OF THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION (1990).

26. *Id.* at 3.

for the most immediate, most obvious solution. By practicing the fifth discipline of systems thinking, we broaden our view of how the issue may in fact be interlinked to a whole set of issues. The immediate, obvious solution will thus have unanticipated consequences far beyond the immediate issue.

In a systems view, improvements to the immediate issue can only be made by making improvements to the related issues as well. Strategies such as wildfire suppression and conversion of old-growth forest stands to fast-growing timber plantations are prime historical examples of the lack of systems thinking in public lands planning and management. On the other hand, anecdotal evidence from more recent public lands planning efforts, such as travel management planning and the revision of national forest plans, show some signs of more integrated systems thinking about potential actions and consequences. However, one of the key pieces to systems thinking—and one of the weakest elements in public lands management—is monitoring and reflection. By its own admission, the USFS does a poor job of monitoring. Monitoring is one of the cornerstones of a learning organization, for the feedback from the system provides opportunities to understand what is going on and to build the necessary skills and resources to continually transform the system in a desired direction. The multi-party monitoring mandate of the permanent Stewardship Contracting Authority presents the clearest challenge to the USFS to be a genuine learning organization. Being only three years old, the authority is still too young to empirically test whether the mandate is leading to the desired behavior. Given its history, the USFS faces an uphill path.

LOOKING AHEAD

The last but certainly not least condition for collaboration to make progress is for public lands agencies to share decision space and implementation responsibility. The USFS is internationally renowned for being a highly professional organization that has a strong and abiding sense of its history and identity. Many land and resource management innovations have come out of the USFS, from linear programming and harvest optimization to ecosystem management and restoration. There has been much written about the pride of the USFS in its capacity to come up with solutions to its own needs. What I believe this has translated to is an attitude that national forest land management is the burden if the USFS to bear alone. The USFS is not used to asking for

help.²⁷ I personally find this organizational pride honorable for it is truly a remarkable agency that survives over 100 years despite the many efforts to take it apart. But for the USFS to survive for another 100 years—indeed, the next 20 years—it will definitely need to progress toward a more collaborative model.

Again, there are signs that this is happening. As the Burns and Cheng report²⁸ illustrates, we found a rich array of collaborative opportunities and strategies developed by USFS staff in the context of forest plan revision—the ten-to-fifteen-year updates of national forests' land and resource management plans pursuant to the National Forest Management Act of 1976.²⁹ In in-depth case studies of six national forests in Colorado (GMUG, San Juan, and White River), Utah (Dixie-Fish Lake), and Wyoming (Bighorn and Medicine Bow), we found evidence of: new steering-committee-type arrangements involving representatives from federal, state, and various local entities; innovative methods for enhancing shared learning between community members, stakeholder groups, and agency staff using maps; and a focus on trust- and relationship-building through informed dialogue.

Agencies' approaches to collaboration efforts have taken on new gravity in recent years. With declining budgets for just about every program area except for wildfire suppression and management, the USFS can no longer go about national forest management on its own; by necessity, it relies on the collaborative assistance of state and local governments, as well as non-governmental organizations. Witness the many "Friends" groups helping manage trails, patrolling recreation areas, and caring for unique sites.

The impending challenges facing national forests almost demand that collaboration be integrated into public lands planning and management to actually get the work done. Chief Dale Bosworth's "four threats" to national forests indicate that collaboration needs to happen regardless of a congressional mandate to do so. The four threats—catastrophic wildfire, invasive species, land fragmentation and development along national forest boundaries, and unregulated motorized recreation—are framed in such a way that the USFS alone cannot possibly address each of these threats, let alone any combination of these threats. In public presentations, Chief Bosworth has often introduced his four threats with the need to reframe the debate over national forests (and grasslands), moving away from a 1960's and 1970's

27. GARY LARSEN ET AL., SYNTHESIS OF THE CRITIQUE OF LAND MANAGEMENT PLANNING (U.S. Dep't of Agric., Forest Serv., FS-452, 1990).

28. BURNS & CHENG, *supra* note 20.

29. 16 U.S.C. 1600.

commodity outputs debate and toward issues around which there is general consensus. After all, who actually supports invasive species destroying the native biodiversity on our national forests?

So, here we are in 2006 with plenty of mandates and administrative initiatives that have collaboration written all over them. I do not think we will see the robust, learning-based, systems thinking approaches we see in the Wallowa Resources and PLP examples in the short term. There are growing instances of non-agency, community-based leadership in the Wallowa Resources and PLP mode. However, there is still plenty of evidence that intra-agency competition is alive and well—especially for wildfire management resources—which in many subtle ways stands in the way of the USFS being able to effectively collaborate with non-agency parties, especially community-based efforts. Moreover, the USFS—and arguably any large bureaucratic organization—has yet to demonstrate the characteristics of a genuine learning organization. But the humble beginnings are starting to emerge.

The USFS has established national offices specifically dealing with collaboration. The National Partnership Office was created in 2003 to increase the agency's effectiveness in collaborating with citizens, interest groups, communities, and others. The Partnership Office is located in Washington, DC, has two lead staff running the office, and appears to be expanding. There are also partnership coordinators in each of the nine regional administrative units of the USFS. The purpose of the Partnership Office is to provide guidance and support to unit line officers and staff for any of their collaboration needs. Upon visiting the Partnership Office, I was impressed with the enthusiasm, knowledge, and experience of the lead staff. It was evident that Chief Dale Bosworth took collaboration and partnership-building seriously enough to dedicate space and staff resources to their realization.

At the same time, I was a bit puzzled that it was separate from the Ecosystem Management Coordination unit, one of the larger and more important units in the National Forest System, since it spearheads land and resource management planning—"forest planning," for short. Forest planning is where the USFS articulates the goals, objectives, and management strategies for national forests. Why separate collaboration and partnership-building from National Forest Systems? By keeping them physically separate—and knowing the "turfiness" of any large bureaucracy—it ensures that collaboration and national forest planning will remain functionally separate. Indeed, there are no budget line items for collaboration in national forest planning, despite the common knowledge that collaboration takes an enormous amount of time, human resources, and money to do well. It is simply expected that agency staff—especially line officers and specialists in the field—will collaborate

on top of the many other things they are expected to do. If collaboration is treated as an add-on checklist to public lands planning, it will look and feel like traditional public involvement methods.

In the long-run, the USFS and other public land management agencies are in situations where they need to achieve management objectives while facing flat or declining budgets. Collaboration for agencies may be as much about pooling resources and finding efficiencies as it is about learning, building trust, and the like. Collaboration is the logical pragmatic next step. The Bush Administration's initiative on "Cooperative Conservation" certainly pushes for the pooling of public and private resources to achieve environmental and natural resource conservation objectives. One has to wonder if collaboration and cooperative conservation are yet part of a broader vision of some politicians to further dismantle the federal government and hand control of public resources to private interests. At the same time, I think public lands collaboration in particular is apolitical and will continue to be a reality in public lands planning and management for the foreseeable future.