RVCC
Rural Voices for Conservation COALITION

Priorities and Opportunities

Current State of Western Public Lands

The West's open spaces, forests, rangelands, watersheds and agricultural soils – and the benefits they provide to all Americans – have never been more important or more threatened.

The proliferation of noxious species, insects and disease, the prevalence of drought, an increase in the number and size of wildfires, land fragmentation, and the loss of stewardship infrastructure and workforce needed for resource productivity and protection are just a few of those threats. At the same time, the increase in collaborative engagement from multiple and diverse stakeholders on land management decisions provides a bright spot, paving the way towards a future of locally-driven economic growth and ecological resiliency on our public lands and in our rural communities. This movement toward collaborative agreement must lead to a consistent and predictable program of work across communities and landscapes, resulting in durable jobs and sustained ecological benefits.

Creating and Sustaining Local Jobs

The restoration and stewardship of our nation's public and private lands presents a significant opportunity to stimulate rural economic growth and create a durable and entrepreneurial local workforce. Conservation activities like forest and watershed restoration, fuels reduction, prescribed fire, and road and trail maintenance, offer rural workers the chance to secure stable employment close to the families and landscapes they call home.

We must ensure that federal policies create quality employment opportunities for rural communities to steward the lands and resources that sustain our country. Keys to success include creating a year-round program of work and best-value contracting that incentivizes local employment.

Our Priorities

Increasing Rural Community Capacity for Natural Resource Management and Conservation

Rural communities face daunting challenges in achieving effective natural resource stewardship, building strong local economies, and retaining high quality jobs. Local people, programs, and institutions must be engaged in the effort to solve these interwoven economic and ecological challenges. They have the unique ability to leverage community resources including local knowledge and workers. Policy and investment that strengthens these existing networks and organizations will create more robust economic and conservation outcomes backed by the longevity of local engagement, social agreement, and local expertise.

In order to empower rural communities to achieve restoration and economic goals decision-makers must: 1) Prioritize funding to programs and activities that strengthen community-based and regional organizations (e.g. the Community Capacity and Land Stewardship Program); 2) Improve criteria for grants, loans, and cost-share programs to reward and support collaboration and capacity building, including technical assistance; and 3) Create hiring criteria and performance measures that increase federal accountability for collaborative work and focus agency efforts on capacity building and maintenance.

Ensuring Effective Implementation of Collaborative Agreements

Collaborative, multi-stakeholder approaches to public lands management have increasingly become the preferred model of doing business and making decisions. Rural communities across the West are proactively engaging in these collaborative processes to restore and steward forests and rangelands, while creating local and regional economic benefit. Even as many communities and collaborative groups are still struggling to see timely accomplishment of the agreed upon work, the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLR) has demonstrated the ability to improve forest health and provide jobs

and essential services to rural communities. Engaging in multi-party monitoring and transferring lessons learned can increase acceptance, accountability and effective implementation of these projects.

Congress should fully fund the CFLR program and ultimately increase investment in and expand the authorization timeframe. If the Forest Service invests the CFLR funds in planning as requested, there should be a cap on those funds, and the Federal Advisory Committee originally appointed to select projects in 2010 should be reconvened as a means for monitoring and accountability.

Working Across Boundaries

People work and natural resources function across public and private land ownership boundaries. This reality requires solutions that are capable of operating across these boundaries and at larger scale. Wildfires and endangered species conservation are notable examples of the need to emphasize an "All Lands" approach that can yield better landscape outcomes by pooling interests (and thus leveraging assets) and resources between federal land managers and adjacent landowners. These all lands efforts must incorporate local participation into all aspects of cross-boundary planning and project implementation, and use tools such as stewardship contracting, partner agreements, and jointly arrived at positions to increase innovation, flexibility, and adaptive management.

Congress and agency leaders must prioritize and invest in programs and tools that incentivize work across boundaries, such as the Good Neighbor Authority, Regional Conservation Partnership Program, and the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Program. Agency and community leaders should develop clear guidance and direction that fosters inter-agency and public-private coordination, planning and project implementation, and measurable outcomes while transferring lessons learned through deliberate monitoring.

Investing in Fire Adapted Communities and Resilient Landscapes

Wildfire suppression costs are climbing annually, and in response Federal, State and Local agencies pull from an ever shrinking budget. Longer fire seasons and increasing suppression costs cripple the Forest Service's ability to invest in other, critical programs that create and maintain jobs in our rural communities. Fire adaptation, or living in harmony with wildland fires, is not a choice, but a necessity. A Fire Adapted Communities (FAC) approach incorporates an understanding of natural fires and emphasizes the value of foresight and investment. Funding local organizations in workforce training and retention will aid in the creation of the next generation of FAC practitioners. With support, local fire response agencies will be more able to participate in planning efforts ensuring an integrated response and a cohesive approach.

Congress must address the ever increasing costs of wildfire on the Forest Service's budget by passing legislation like the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act that reforms the way the agency budgets for wildfire. In addition, Congress should increase investments in rural communities in wildfire prone areas so they can enhance the practice of fire adaptation, and work together at multiple scales to help communities live safely with fire.

ABOUT RVCC

The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC) promotes new approaches to the ecological and economic problems facing the rural West. We are committed to developing practical solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and the well-being of communities. RVCC focuses on practical, equitable and sustainable solutions that are grounded in the experiences of rural community members, workers, and businesses. We work together to improve issues that affect rural communities, public and private land management, and the continuation of a natural resource-based economy in the West, advocating for the inclusion of comprehensive community interests.

RVCC Leadership Team Members

Wallowa Resources, OR; Sustainable Northwest, OR; Ecosystem Workforce Program, OR; The Watershed Research and Training Center, CA; Forest Stewards Guild, NM; Salmon Valley Stewardship, ID; Siuslaw Institute, OR; Blackfoot Challenge, MT; Mt. Adams Resource Stewards, WA; Sustainable Southeast Partnership, AK