

Background

The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC) hosted a workshop on October 1st, 2019 to help inform the Forest Service's approach to shared stewardship by gathering community-based organizations and forest collaboratives from multiple Western states. The workshop aimed to move beyond the high-level vision and concept, to actionable ideas & constructive feedback. Participants included a mix of state and federal agency representatives, community members and members of forest collaboratives from 9 Western states, as well as Washington, D.C. Forty people attended.

These notes are intended to memorialize the discussion during the workshop, but do not represent endorsement by attendees, or their organizations, of any specific comments, concerns, or recommendations.

Meeting Objectives

1. Provide an update on the current status of shared stewardship efforts in the Western U.S. from Forest Service and State leadership, including goals, existing processes (i.e. Montana Forest Action Council), opportunities for engagement, and actionable items.
2. Provide a forum to offer feedback on shared stewardship from a community-based and collaborative perspective, identifying both positive aspects of the approach and naming concerns.
3. Help community-based and collaborative partners influence what shared stewardship looks like at a national level, and in their states, particularly how it can both reflect community interests and build on existing collaborative efforts and priorities.
4. Develop a set of recommendations for federal and state agency leadership on strategies for working with and involving community-based organizations and forest collaboratives in shared stewardship.

Shared Stewardship – Lay of the Land

Summary

RVCC staff started the meeting by orienting participants to the concept and history of shared stewardship, noting that it was a key topic in the 2012 Planning Rule Advisory Committee recommendations, and is one of USDA and the Forest Service's core principles. The need for a shared stewardship approach is in part being driven by the scale of the ecological problems in the West; no one agency has the capacity or resources to tackle the challenges alone. RVCC also distinguished between the concept of the shared stewardship approach, and the Toward Shared Stewardship investment strategy released in August, 2018.

After the investment strategy was released, several states entered into MOUs or agreements with the Forest Service, establishing mutual interests and committing to statewide priorities. RVCC summarized the existing agreements in a crosswalk to help create a shared understanding, while acknowledging that it's a simplified summary with inherent limitations. Most participants found the crosswalk useful.

Conversation with Forest Service & State Staff

State and Forest Service leaders involved in shared stewardship were invited to share their perspectives and experiences to date. The first panel focused on the vision for shared stewardship, and what the agencies are trying to achieve. The second panel was more focused on implementation, specifically what work is happening, how are state and federal partners are engaging differently, and how states are engaging with community-scale partners and collaboratives.

Discussion + Q&A

After each of the two agency panels, participants had a chance to ask questions of the presenters. A few themes emerged from the questions, including concerns that the initiative is too focused on timber outputs; questions about how to operationalize "shared decision making"; the intersection with Good Neighbor Authority and timber volume targets; Tribal inclusion; and preserving collaborative agreement in light of statewide prioritization.

After a break, participants returned to a full group discussion to share takeaways from the morning panels, and to identify what collaborative and community partners want to see from the initiative. As in the earlier question and answer, some of the same themes emerged. Comments and questions from participants showed concern about a number of issues, including whether the initiative is truly additive; where funding for prioritized landscapes will come from and at whose expense; a need to continue to support and rely on collaboratives for social license; and concern that the initiative may be too focused on timber production. Furthermore, participants expressed concern that while the initiative speaks to greater partnership, this may conflict with the broader goals of the current Administration. Participants were also concerned about the lack of formalized Tribal engagement to date.

Participants expressed excitement that increased state-federal partnership may help alleviate county-level distrust for federal agencies; that state-federal partnership on wildfire response is a huge improvement in and of itself; and that the principle of shared stewardship is an encouraging example of functioning democracy in a time of national dysfunction. Participants also expressed encouragement that the National Forest System side of the agency would become more integrated with the work of State & Private Forestry.

RVCC identified key themes from the morning discussion, including measuring progress (outcomes), shared decision making, setting priorities, inclusiveness (building on existing work), states as conveners, GNA and capacity, and scaling up (winners and losers).

Afternoon Breakouts

Participants were asked to prioritize what they wanted to discuss more deeply in the afternoon, using the themes and discussion from the morning. The group chose the following topics:

- The nexus of forest collaboratives with shared stewardship
- Measuring progress – outputs/outcomes
- Setting priorities
- Shared decision making
- Budgets, capacity, and resources

During the breakout sessions, participants were asked to think about challenges and opportunities from their local perspectives. They were also asked to name what information, tools, products, or platforms would help in understanding the initiative; and asked to think about how different partners could address these needs at different scales. Finally, groups were asked to provide general feedback to state and federal agency staff. Table leads used a worksheet to guide the discussion, and everyone had the chance to participate in two topics.

Takeaways from Breakout Discussions

Concerns

Partners expressed variations on the theme of a lack of transparency in the initiative to date, expressing concern that the process has not been transparent or inclusive of community-scale partners. Partners also expressed concern that the initiative would lead to winners and losers through the prioritization process, but also showed concern that prioritization may favor higher timber-value landscapes, particularly when states utilize Good Neighbor Authority. Furthermore, while partners expressed some support for the use of Good Neighbor, participants noted that it was unclear how collaboratives could play a role in the use of the authority. Perhaps related, participants noted that state agencies don't have as long of a history of participating in collaborative processes and venues, and may lack the skills to convene diverse groups of stakeholders. Finally, some participants were concerned that the initiative is poorly defined and may be short lived.

Excitement

Participants expressed optimism that the initiative could result in state agencies boosting work capacity on federal land, increasing flexibility to direct resources where needed, and smoothing out differing priorities under changing federal administrations. Participants also saw an opportunity for collaboratives to help bring a local, community perspective to help shape the initiative. Good Neighbor Authority was also identified as a source of excitement, with participants noting the use of the authority by counties could help boost local workforce capacity, particularly for road work. Finally, participants noted that the creation of outcomes-based performance measures is an opportunity to influence Forest Service culture, as well as provide greater accountability to external partners.

General Observations

Participants noted that state agency capacity is variably distributed with regard to collaboratives, and may not be present in all locations. State agency participants noted that statewide venues and the process of updating Forest Action Plans provides important venues for collaboratives to be involved in the initiative. Other observations included noting that while the initiative may lead to more inclusion of state agencies in prioritization of work on federal land, that ultimately the Forest Service is still responsible for decisions under the National Environmental Policy Act; a caution that the actual implementation of projects is just as important as the prioritization of where they occur; the complexity of developing performance measures, with a need to think at multiple scales and time frames; and that the initiative should extend beyond just vegetation management to encompass other values such as recreation and wildlife. Finally, participants noted the value of this particular workshop and a desire to continue to see venues for discussion of the initiative.

Recommendations

Participants offered a variety of recommendations, which fell into a few categories:

- A desire to have greater transparency and better definition of the initiative, including what ways, if any, the initiative will affect funding and staffing, and how community partners can be involved.
- A suggestion that as priority areas are determined at a statewide level, agencies should look to local collaborative agreement to define the prescriptions and desired outcomes. Participants suggested local determination of desired outcomes within a statewide prioritization framework.
- An interest in creating performance measures to demonstrate commitment to partners, increase accountability, and enable and reward agency behavior change.
- Continued support for collaborative efforts, even outside of priority areas, including a consideration of the maturity of collaborative efforts when designating priority areas.
- A recognition of the potential of budding state programs to accomplish work on federal land, but a desire for more collaborative involvement and consultation in the use of the Good Neighbor Authority.
- Participants encouraged greater outreach to Tribes in the initiative.

Final Takeaways

After session notetakers reported out on their discussions, the full group had a chance to express final takeaways from the meeting and conversation.

State and federal agency participants offered closing thoughts, including support for the idea that the initiative will help bring increased capacity for work, and will allow the right entity to do the right type of work in the right place. Agency representatives also urged recognition that the initiative is still new, that we should celebrate what milestones have been achieved, and that agencies should continue to capture the collective wisdom of partners through venues such as this meeting. Agency participants also recognized some of the anxiety expressed by partners, particularly regarding the feeling that the initiative is being too top-down and directive without including collaborative efforts, the concern that it may lead to collaborative winners and losers based prioritized landscapes, and the concern that the initiative won't actually support more work.

Community and collaborative participants continued to express some concerns about the initiative, including a lack of certainty about how collaboratives benefit under the initiative and suspicion that the initiative is little beyond working with the Good Neighbor Authority. Partners also expressed a desire to see continued, long-term support for all collaborative and community-based efforts, noting the value of utilizing existing collaborative venues to set priorities and get the right parties to the table, and reiterated the need for greater clarity about the mechanics of the initiative. Finally, partners noted that the true test of the initiative will be its durability through state and federal administrations, and how work under the initiative leads to outcomes on the ground.