Community-based Organizations:
Strategic Assets for Western Conservation

Local rural communities and landowners, when endowed with the appropriate resources and incentives, can serve as a powerful force and cost-effective source for conservation of the Western landscape. Conservation, in turn, is an important tool and strategy to achieve local economic resilience. Our shared vision is for working landscapes to provide multiple value streams to society, including robust ecological functionality and biodiversity, production of food, fiber and other raw materials, aesthetic value, recreation, and a cultural and economic underpinning for local communities.

Background
Federal programs, in particular those included within the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, have increasingly focused on delivering cost-share and incentive programs to private landowners to defray the costs of conservation activities on private lands. At the same time, federal land management agencies such as the US Forest Service and US Bureau of Land Management must also work extensively on public lands with local communities, in particular grazing permittees and contractors that perform work related to watershed and forest stewardship.

In the past 15 years, and in exemplary instances across the West, we have seen the success of locally-based groups that occupy the space between landowners and agencies. We refer to these intermediaries as community-based organizations (CBOs). They have been critical to the successful implementation of both private land conservation efforts by landowners, the collaborative management of federal lands, and harmonizing conservation objectives with local economic needs.

What are Community-based Organizations?
Community-based organizations (CBOs) are a strategic asset capable of aligning the goals, objectives and resources of non-locally based entities (federal and state programs, foundations, etc.) with the activities of local conservation-oriented landowners and businesses.

Key Recommendations
1. All federal agencies that interface with natural resource-based communities (e.g. NRCS, FWS, FS, BLM and RD) should design their programs to:
   a. Enhance and expand partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs).
   b. Provide financial assistance through grant and loan programs as appropriate to local landowners as well as CBOs.
   c. Provide technical assistance and access to government research, data, and other relevant information to landowners as well as CBOs.

2. The Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior should direct their agencies to work with CBOs to increase inter-agency, inter-departmental protocols, staffing, and performance measures to ensure effective, non-duplicative, and integrated approaches to building and supporting CBOs as catalysts for effective conservation and sustainable economic development.

Although there is no set formula for effective CBOs, there are a number of general commonalities:

- a locally focused mission that includes an integrated approach to ecological conservation and restoration, local natural resource-based economic development, and retention and promotion of local cultures;
- a commitment to the use of collaborative processes to define, implement and monitor conservation and sustainability goals and activities on the landscape;
- governance and advisory structures that include significant local leadership, complemented by diverse expertise and representation that often includes conservation organizations, agencies, recreationists, and out-of-area publics;
- a business and markets orientation – driven by local expertise – that finds a role for federal conservation investments inside broader business models or economic development plans that leverage public and private capital, and “sweat equity,” for lowest cost, highest value outcomes.

Who We Are
The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition is comprised of western rural and local, regional, and national organizations that have joined together to promote balanced conservation-based approaches to the ecological and economic problems facing the West. We are committed to finding and promoting solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and well being of rural communities. We come from Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon and Washington.
Why Are They Needed?

Community-based organizations (CBOs) often play unique roles that cannot be filled either by federal agency personnel, or by local landowners and businesses on their own. These roles are often pivotal to ensuring that conservation funding finds its way to application on the ground, and yields positive ecological, economic and social results.

Developing and funding CBOs is an investment that pays its dividends in the medium and long-term. In the short term, building the capacity of organizations, training staff, and developing relationships between landowners and federal agencies utilizes resources that don’t lead immediately to restoration activities. However, once these initial investments have been made, conservation implementation accelerates significantly, and the ratio of funding for capacity-building vs. funding for on-the-ground programs becomes very low. On the other hand, failing to support adequate CBO capacity can condemn an area to “creeping” restoration implementation, with large amounts of conservation funding going unused (see pull out box).

Roles of Community-based Organizations:

Social
- providing critical support to collaborative structures and institutions (committees, working groups, collaborative groups, etc.) that assemble diverse interests and viewpoints, and facilitate toward common ground on shared social, economic and ecological efforts – typical support includes convening and staffing collaborations (participant recruitment, issue identification, meeting design, communications, research, etc.);
- serving as a buffer and conduit between landowners and federal and state agencies (as well as other outside resources) – in many areas there is significant mistrust of government agencies; CBOs can serve as a trusted go-between, helping to broker relations, and channeling conservation resources to the ground;
- providing continuity and institutional memory even as federal agency staff rotate frequently;
- in the long run, creating new trust, relationships and norms that become a “culture” of conservation and sustainability in local communities;

Ecological
- particularly in fragmented landscapes, serving to “re-aggregate” the landscape by coordinating and aligning multiple landowners to achieve landscape-scale impact of conservation funding (vs. “postage stamp” efforts);
- working with partners in conservation project planning, design and implementation;
- serving as an evaluator and monitor of the effectiveness of conservation programs, and an entity that can make that information available to shape community decisions and public policy design;

Technical and/or Financial
- providing skilled resources and staffing to help local landowners and businesses understand and work with state and federal conservation programs, and successfully meet the requirements (proposals, bids, contracts, etc.) necessary to capture and utilize conservation funding grants and programs;
- assisting federal land managers to identify where and how federal funding programs can be applied to dovetail best with local social, ecological, and economic goals; and, to assist in leveraging federal and state funds (“match”) with both local business and non-profit capital that multiplies the impact of these public funds;
- researching, exploring and catalyzing conservation innovations such as markets for small diameter wood products, grassbanks, payment for ecosystem services and other business models that align conservation actions into self-sustaining enterprises.

Federal Dividends of Investing in Community-based Organizations:

Local, community-based organizations accelerate conservation by:

- adding value to federal program delivery by integrating federal programs into a broader economic and environmental strategy supported by local communities, decreasing transaction costs for landowners and businesses, and leveraging philanthropic capital and market resources (private capital) to increase total investment or decrease long-term costs of conservation;
reaching ecologically and economically significant scales and impacts by working on both public and private lands, and in forest, riparian, agricultural and range settings without the “silos” imposed by agency missions. CBOs can reach the scale of implementation needed by aggregating individual landowner actions across the landscape and connecting people to effectively address conservation and wildlife habitat needs.

**Recommendations**

While there is a need to grow the resources available to implement conservation activities on public and private lands, there is a near-total gap supporting the critical pre-conditions necessary to accelerate conservation implementation. There is little to no federal support for community-based, institutional capacity to connect federal goals and programs to local people.

Federal funding is the single largest driver to implement and catalyze conservation on the ground throughout the western United States (e.g. conservation programs within the 2008 Farm Bill). In the future, with growing public demand for the creation of ecosystem service markets (especially carbon), the federal government may play an even larger role in monitoring and allocating dollars for restoration across large landscapes. To reach scale and effectively and equitably distribute conservation dollars for the ecologic, economic and social benefit of the Western landscape, federal policy must support “the business of conservation” and the community-based institutions that aggregate and add-value to the lands and land managers willing to engage in this work.

Therefore:

Congress and the Administration should fund and support the strategic asset that community-based organizations (CBOs) provide for accelerating, extending and deepening conservation on the Western landscape.

1. All federal agencies that interface with natural resource-based communities (e.g. NRCS, FWS, FS, BLM and RD) should design their programs to:
   a. Enhance and expand partnerships with CBOs;
   b. Provide financial assistance through grant and loan programs as appropriate to local landowners as well as CBOs; and
   c. Provide technical assistance and access to government research, data, and other relevant information to landowners as well as CBOs.

2. The Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior should direct their agencies to work with CBOs to increase inter-agency, inter-departmental protocols, staffing, and performance measures to ensure effective, non-duplicative, and integrated approaches to building and supporting these CBOs as catalysts for effective conservation and sustainable economic development.

**Community-based organizations can significantly accelerate the application of conservation resources.**

The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board’s (OWEB) Strategic Investment Partnership (SIP) program makes long-term, large-scale restoration commitments for restoration of significant regional or statewide landscapes. The SIP experience is indicative of the difference that community-based organizations make to the ability to carry out projects and bring conservation funding to the ground. In the Upper Deschutes river basin of Oregon – where there are strong community-based organizations established with ample experience partnering with agencies and landowners – OWEB was able to channel $4 million for habitat restoration work in 2008 and has made additional grants of $4 million in 2009. Similar SIP efforts in the Willamette river basin – which lacked comparable community-based organizational capacity, but faced similar resource challenges - were far less successful. Between 2008 and 2009, this area was only able to utilize $1.3 million for on-the-ground conservation projects.  

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1 OWEB, January 20th, 2010 Board Meeting, Staff Report, Agenda Item D.3
2 See OWEB Board Meeting staff reports, http://www.oweb.state.or.us/OWEB/board_meeting_info.shtml

**Examples**

The following examples may be helpful to see how past programs, or modification of current programs could align to implement this policy framework:

**Present Example: Opportunity in the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative**

The Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) in the 2008 Farm Bill is an innovative program that draws from three conservation programs (Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)) to provide financial and technical assistance to private forest and ranchland owners.

CCPI encourages landowners to work together to implement and maintain conservation practices that affect multiple landowners. Instead of piecemeal delivery of programs ranch by ranch or program by program, this initiative allows groups of producers and organizations to compete for conservation dollars for innovative projects that will harness a critical mass of landowners resulting in the integrated application of conservation programs across an ecologically sensitive area. But: This program lacks funding for the “business of conservation” or the supporting activities necessary for partners to implement the initiative.

The US Natural Resources Conservation Service could encourage the development and implementation of CCPIs across western states by entering into “contribution agreements” with community-based organizations to pay for the supporting...
activities necessary to implement a CCPI. A “contribution agreement” would ensure that community-based organizations have the funds necessary for landowner outreach to advance community support and buy-in, workshops to increase program effectiveness, and coordination of CCPI partners and landowners, adding value and ensuring that CCPI funding reaches the ground. In addition, we would support any other mechanisms that would help fund the basic functions – organizational development, strategic planning, and staffing – that allow community-based organizations to effectively function and manage grants and agreements to aid in the implementation of on-the-ground conservation and restoration.

**Past Example: Economic Action Program**

The US Forest Service’s Economic Action Program (EAP) was authorized through the National Forest-Dependent Rural Communities Economic Diversification Act of 1990. It was intended to serve natural resource-dependent communities in and around national forests in building the capacity of small natural-resource related community-based organizations and businesses and increasing collaboration with the Forest Service. The program was eventually ramped down and zeroed out.

EAP was unique because it provided small grants and technical assistance for capacity building activities and sustainable community and business development. The program integrated natural resource management and rural community assistance by granting seed money to leverage large amounts of non-federal dollars, and helping to connect landowners and agencies.

The development of flexible programs like the EAP that fund community-based organizations will ensure that communities build the capacity to engage and serve an important role in the stewardship of our interconnected public and private lands.

**Even established organizations catalyzing significant ecological and economic benefits struggle for lack of sufficient organizational capacity.**

Swan Ecosystem Center (SEC) in the Swan Valley of Montana has harnessed significant private and public investment for their community. In 2009 alone, SEC helped over 70 landowners reduce forest fire risk, address tree insects and disease, enhance forest productivity and restore wetlands. In 2009-10 Swan Ecosystem Center will generate about $575,000 for landowners to pass on to their logging contractors from four public forest stewardship grants¹. A high-capacity, established organization, SEC is able to aggregate many types of grants and supports many programs, including use of ARRA dollars. To retain accountability for public investment requires considerable tracking of matching funds. As an example, one NRCS grant has 25 separate project tasks, several of which require different matching funds ratios. The public grants either do not provide funding, or they provide inadequate funding for oversight and administration. While SEC is clearly effective at catalyzing restoration and creating local jobs in their regional economy, it is underfunded to provide the essential organizational functions required for optimum use of federal, state and private programs. In addition, federal programs should simplify reporting requirements and develop more flexible contract mechanisms to recognize the reality of implementing projects in small, rural communities.

**State partner response to SEC’s work:**

“As a Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) Service Forester, we administer several federal programs to accomplish cost-share and management plans for forest landowners. Our local non-profit partner is the Swan Ecosystem Center (SEC). Local non-profit groups, like SEC, are able to employ more people, and service more landowners with local programs that gain community support. DNRC would never be able to fund the number of employees and volunteers that it takes to provide this valuable local service. This is the best way to get cost share money directly out on the ground without adding more bureaucracy.”

~ Alan Branine², Fire Supervisor and Community Service Forester, Montana’s Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

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¹ This does not include wages for SEC’s land stewards who help landowners develop stewardship plans.

² Affiliation for information purposes only. The comment reflects Alan Braine’s individual perspective and is not the position of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.
**Coalition Partners**

**Arizona**
Forest Energy Corporation

**California**
Alliance of Forest Workers and Harvesters
Calaveras Healthy Impact Products Solutions
California Center for Rural Policy
Fourth Sector Strategies
Humboldt Area Foundation
Redwood Coast Rural Action
Trinity County Supervisor, District 3
Watershed Research and Training Center

**Colorado**
Environmental Defense Fund

**Idaho**
Framing Our Community, Inc.
Lava Lake Land & Livestock
Lemhi County Economic Development Association
Lemhi Regional Land Trust
National Association of Forest Service Retirees
Salmon Valley Stewardship
Shoshone County Board of Commissioners
Silver Valley Economic Development Corporation
Woody Biomass Utilization Partnership

**Maryland**
Communities Committee

**Minnesota**
League of Rural Voters

**Montana**
Big Hole Watershed Committee
Flathead Economic Policy Center
Future West
Madison Valley Ranchland Group
Northwest Connections
Ranchers Stewardship Alliance
Restore Montana
Swan Ecosystem Center
Vander Meer’s Wildland Conservation Services

**Nebraska**
Native American Public Telecommunications, Inc.

**Nevada**
Boies Ranches, Inc.

**New Mexico**
Center for the Education and Study of Diverse Populations
Forest Guild
Gila Woodnet
Restoration Technologies
Santa Clara Woodworks
SBS Wood Shavings

**New York**
East Otto Farmers Collaborative

**Oregon**
Applegate Partnership and Watershed Council
Ecosystem Workforce Program
Grant County Court
Hells Canyon Preservation Council

**Washington**
Mt. Adams Resource Stewards
Northwest Natural Resource Group

**Washington DC**
American Forests
The Wilderness Society

**West Virginia**
Center for Economic Options

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**Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition**

A policy initiative of

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