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COALITION

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EAST FACE OF THE  
ELKHORN  
MOUNTAINS  
PROJECT

A CASE STUDY

MAY 2019

# EAST FACE OF THE ELKHORN MOUNTAINS PROJECT

A multi-partner project to plan and implement forest restoration treatments that reduce the risk of wildfire and improve forest resilience across 128,000 acres of federal, state, and family forest lands in northeastern Oregon.

## ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

Working across public and private boundaries (an “all-lands” approach) is essential to address the ecological and economic challenges faced by communities in the rural West. The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC) helps foster successful all-lands efforts through a multi-pronged approach of knowledge, tools and products, peer exchanges, and policy learning and actions. RVCC’s case study series illuminates examples of all-lands projects, including how effective partnerships are built and necessary programs, tools, and authorities are acquired and combined. This case study was developed with assistance from Wallowa Resources, and through interviews with key personnel from NRCS, ODF, USFS Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, USFS PNW Research Station, OSU Extension, and the Northern Blue Mountain Cohesive Wildfire Strategy Group.

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Additional photos courtesy of Mark Jacques (pg 3), Tracy Robillard (pg 3, 5, 6, 10, 11), Steven Hawkins (pg 11), Jana Peterson (pg 6, 11)

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## ABOUT RVCC

RVCC envisions healthy landscapes and vibrant rural communities throughout the American 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 the well-being of rural communities.

# PRIMARY PROJECT PARTNERS & COOPERATORS

Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF)	American Forest Foundation (AFF)
Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)	Wallowa Resources (WR)
Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW)	Private forest owners
Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (WWNF)	USFS Pacific Northwest Research Station (PNWRS)
Wallowa Whitman Forest Collaborative (WWFC)	Northern Blue Mountain Cohesive Wildfire Strategy Group
Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Vale District	Forestry and natural resource contractors
Oregon State University Forestry & Natural Resources Extension (OSU)	Eastern Oregon University (EOU)

# PRIMARY ACTIVITIES & OUTCOMES TO DATE

- ✓ Nearly 13,700 acres of forest restoration treatments to accomplish fuels reduction, big game forage, and soil and water conservation across private, state, and federal lands (additional 15,000 acres under contract).
- ✓ 61 private landowners signed up with forest restoration/fuels reduction NRCS contracts.
- ✓ Over \$7.4 million invested from multiple sources, anticipated to support 200 local jobs and provide 22 million board feet of wood to local mills.
- ✓ Reduced fire risk to three Wildland Urban Interface Areas, La Grande Municipal Watershed, Anthony Lakes Recreation Complex, Anthony Lakes Ski Area, and Floodwater Flat Recreation residences.
- ✓ Enhanced public safety through development of new, more comprehensive Community Wildfire Protection Plan for Union County and mapping and inventory of private homes in Baker and Union counties.
- ✓ Installed new bridge and culvert on national forest lands allowing logging/fire response vehicles access and fish passage.
- ✓ Commitment and plan from partners to perform future cross-boundary prescribed burns.
- ✓ Successful demonstration of forest restoration at scale and across ownership boundaries in this region.
- ✓ Interagency cooperation strengthened relationships and partnerships, leading to an increase in funding received from 2018 Farm Bill.
- ✓ New shared positions created between ODF/NRCS and ODF/ODFW, including two foresters.
- ✓ Contributed to creation of the My Blue Mountains Woodlands Partnership that provides strategic, coordinated outreach to private forestland owners.
- ✓ Provision of logs to Integrated Biomass Resources, a local small diameter facility.
- ✓ Sustainable revenue source from timber sales to support active forest management on state wildlife management areas across eastern Oregon.

Partner	Type	Roles
Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF)	State agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding, technical assistance, and outreach to private landowners</li> <li>• Assist in development of forest management plans and treatment prescriptions</li> <li>• Funding and technical assistance to plan treatments on ODFW's wildlife refuge</li> <li>• Timber sale marking on national forest lands</li> <li>• Allocate USFS State and Private Forestry funding to landowner education and outreach, counties to implement priority actions under Community Wildfire Protection Plans, biomass utilization feasibility studies, and community wildfire response plans for landowners</li> </ul>
Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)	Federal agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contract with ODF to provide technical assistance to private landowners to implement treatments using ODF/NRCS statewide agreement</li> <li>• Provide financial assistance and contract management to private landowners</li> <li>• Provide mailings to landowners informing them of available financial resources</li> </ul>
Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (WWNF)	Federal agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete prescriptions and treatment layout on national forest lands</li> <li>• Survey to establish public/private boundary</li> <li>• Contract with Eastern Oregon University to perform cultural surveys, ODF foresters to assist in timber sale marking on national forest lands, and forestry contractors to perform treatments on national forest lands using Indefinite Delivery Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) contracts</li> <li>• Complete National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis for both USFS and BLM lands</li> <li>• Expand public land treatments along private/public boundary outside original NEPA approved footprint through challenge cost share funds</li> <li>• Outreach to private forest landowners</li> <li>• Led collaborative planning with Wallowa-Whitman Forest Collaborative</li> </ul>
Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW)	State agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiate timber sales on wildlife refuge (with technical support from ODF and funding from USFS State and Private Forestry funds)</li> </ul>
Northern Blue Mountain Cohesive Wildfire Strategy Group	Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic planning, platform for coordinating resources, and maintenance of partner commitments regarding (1) fire adapted communities, (2) resilient landscapes, and (3) wildfire response</li> </ul>
Wallowa Whitman Forest Collaborative (WWFC)	Forest collaborative group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative planning with USFS on national forest lands</li> <li>• Develop purpose and need statement for NEPA for national forest lands</li> <li>• Field trips to increase understanding about proposed project among partners</li> <li>• Multi-party monitoring of the project (e.g. wildlife surveys, water quality)</li> </ul>
Bureau of Land Management (BLM)	Federal agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NEPA on BLM lands (completed by WWNF)</li> <li>• Treatments on BLM lands</li> </ul>
American Forest Foundation (AFF)	National nonprofit organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding to Wallowa Resources for outreach and coordination</li> <li>• New landowner outreach tool</li> </ul>
Oregon State University (OSU) Forestry Extension	University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach and education to private forest owners</li> </ul>
Wallowa Resources (WR)	Community-based organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach to private forest owners</li> <li>• Coordinate landowner action plans, outreach, and reporting among partners (through AFF funding)</li> <li>• Facilitation of Wallowa Whitman Forest Collaborative</li> </ul>
Private forest owners	Non industrial private forest landowners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fuels reduction and forest health projects on private lands</li> <li>• Participate in demonstration site tours and provide outreach to surrounding private forest owners</li> </ul>
USFS Pacific Northwest Research Station	Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mapping assessment to evaluate and prioritize restoration efforts</li> <li>• Articulate economic and ecological benefits of planning at a landscape scale</li> </ul>
Forestry and natural resource contractors	Private businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expertise, equipment, and workforce to implement treatments on private and public lands (commercial and pre-commercial thinning, mechanical and hand slash piling, and burning)</li> </ul>
Eastern Oregon University (EOU)	University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students and professors to perform cultural surveys for NEPA on national forest lands</li> </ul>

## Programs, Tools, & Authorities

## Purpose

<b>Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership (JCLRP)</b>	Competitively awarded funding from USFS and NRCS to implement cross-boundary projects on public and private lands. Utilized in East Face to allow ODF to plan and implement treatments on ODFW Wildlife Management area; provide technical assistance and forest management planning to non-industrial private forestland owners; support numerous thinning and fuels contracts on federal lands; and to help counties implement priority actions under Community Wildfire Protection Plans. Also funded biomass utilization feasibility studies.
<b>National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (CWS)</b>	Provided framework for enhanced communications and collaboration between northeastern Oregon agencies and counties due to application of CWS principles in East Face area. Also provided funding to ODF to award Biomass Program Cohesive Wildfire Strategy Grants to local contractors to perform biomass/biochar plant feasibility studies.
<b>NRCS/ODF Statewide Agreement</b>	Formal agreement between NRCS and ODF to fund technical “boots on the ground” forestry assistance for private landowners and connect them with NRCS financial assistance (began in northeastern Oregon).
<b>NRCS Conservation Implementation Strategy (CIS) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)</b>	Cost-share funding for private landowners within a geographic focus area to conduct fuels reduction treatments undertaken by forest contractors or landowners.
<b>American Forest Foundation (AFF) funding</b>	Funded private landowner outreach and staff coordination capacity through the My Blue Mountains Woodland Partnership and Wallowa Resources.
<b>USFS/BLM informal verbal agreement</b>	Allowed USFS to complete NEPA planning for treatments on BLM lands.
<b>USFS National Forest Survey Funding</b>	Funded NEPA planning on national forest lands, cultural surveys (through university students), and boundary survey between public and private lands. Additionally, the East Face project routed some survey funding through USFS State and Private Forestry to facilitate planning on ODFW lands.
<b>USFS Hazardous Fuels Reduction appropriations &amp; Supplemental Fuels funds</b>	Funded fuels reduction treatment implementation on federal lands.
<b>Forest Health Protection Special Project Grants within USFS State and Private Forestry</b>	Funded white bark pine forest health treatments in Anthony Lakes Ski Area.
<b>USFS challenge cost share with Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (Blue Mountain Elk Initiative)</b>	Pre-commercial thinning and fuels treatments to improve forage habitat on federal lands within and outside original East Face project area (including lands designated as Categorical Exclusions (CE's)) along public/private Wildland Urban Interface to take advantage of challenge cost share funds.
<b>Oregon Governor’s Fund for Environment</b>	Facilitated USFS contract with ODF for timber sale marking on federal lands.
<b>Indefinite Delivery, Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) Contracts</b>	Allowed USFS to use best value contracting to solicit contractors, and use “local” as a criteria to determine who to award contract.



Photo Credit: Mark Jacques



Photo Credit: NRCS/Tracy Robillard

# MAKING IT HAPPEN

East Face began as a typical forest restoration project on Wallowa-Whitman National Forest lands, until a combination of two new national strategies encouraged an expanded vision. In 2012, the NRCS and USFS announced a new national competitive funding opportunity, the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Program, to incentivize cross-boundary restoration projects. Existing collaborative relationships among Forest Service, NRCS, and ODF staff allowed the partners to identify East Face as a priority and apply; in 2014 it was selected as one of 13 Joint Chiefs projects. In addition, northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington were selected as Cohesive Wildfire Strategy Pilot Areas. An existing relationship between OSU Extension, Wallowa Resources, and ODF to engage private forest landowners also helped lay the groundwork for a more sophisticated landowner engagement strategy for East Face than had been used before.

Northeastern Oregon partners developed East Face before many of the authorities supporting all lands work existed, and the process by which they identified these opportunities and implemented the project required flexibility, creativity, and adaptiveness.

## Several programs, tools and authorities had to be combined over time to:

- Accomplish smaller projects and develop a cross-boundary, landscape vision;
- Align landscape prioritization assessment with community level priorities;
- Focus partners' collective resources to engage private forest owners;
- Use each agency's authorities and resources to keep vital partners engaged; and
- Concentrate on a subset of targeted resource management practices rather than trying to do everything at once.

**Accomplishing smaller projects and developing a cross-boundary, landscape vision prior to applying for Joint Chiefs funding** enabled East Face partners to respond quickly to the opportunity. ODF, USFS, and NRCS previously had implemented several small, fuels reduction and forest health projects using NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Implementation Strategy (CIS) funding. Public/private

coordination was limited, as lack of consistent funding and obstacles to timber sales on federal forests made it difficult to deliver on implementation commitments. Envisioning the need for a broader perspective and more cohesive approach, the Wallowa Whitman Forest Collaborative invited Drs. Paul Hessburg and Alan Ager, of the USFS PNW Research Station, to share perspectives on how to address the increasing risk of uncharacteristically large wildfire. They articulated a need for planning at a much larger scale than had previously been considered and encouraged partners to think about their work from a landscape perspective. When the Joint Chiefs opportunity became available the partners were able to quickly obtain leadership support, assemble field staff and grant writers, and make a successful application. Once East Face was underway, that landscape perspective on wildfire risk reduction kept partners focused throughout the project.

**Aligning a landscape-level assessment with partners' knowledge of local priorities and community values at risk** ensured that the East Face project could be implemented on both public and private lands, while also maintaining high level political and financial support. The WWNF performed a prioritization assessment to determine its restoration priorities on national forest lands prior to East Face, and initially East Face was not a top ranked priority. However, recognizing the value of cross-boundary projects, the Forest Service worked with partners to recalibrate its landscape prioritization assessment to incorporate private land resources, community values at risk, and private landowner readiness to participate. A key element of the new prioritization approach was soliciting local knowledge

(from ODF foresters and NRCS conservationists) about the willingness and preparedness of private forest owners to implement treatments. Prioritizing foresters' local knowledge maintained local advocates for the project, and ensured landowners were ready and willing to implement treatments. Further, using the USFS landscape assessment

tool kept agency leadership committed to the project and leveraged key funding sources over time.

**Focusing partners' collective resources to engage private landowners** along East Face's over 20 mile public-private boundary maintained momentum on both sides of the line.

*“If you want to be successful once – go in on your own. If you want to be successful over time ... build relationships early and recognize each partner has a different metric of success keeping them at the table.”*

– East Face Partner



Photo Credit: NRCS/Tracy Robillard

## To accomplish landowner engagement along the public-private boundary, partners used several strategies and funding mechanisms:

- ODF worked with NRCS to select East Face as an NRCS CIS area prior to applying for Joint Chiefs funding. This allowed surrounding landowners to observe neighbors implementing projects, develop relationships with ODF foresters, and improve their understanding of the importance of managing forests to reduce wildfire risk.
- NRCS ranked private landowners located near the public boundary higher in their prioritization criteria for EQIP grant funds eligibility.
- ODF encouraged East Face landowners to attend the NRCS annual county work group meeting to inform funding priorities.
- ODF, USFS, Wallowa Resources, NRCS, OSU Extension, and AFF formed the My Blue Mountains Woodland Partnership to perform strategic, coordinated outreach to previously unengaged private forestland owners within East Face.
- USFS obtained and allocated challenge cost share funds to prioritize fuels reduction treatments on public lands not included in East Face's original NEPA analysis, but lands important to private landowners located along the Wildland Urban Interface. The funding helped decrease the risk of cross-boundary wildfire spread and further encouraged the participation of local landowners.
- USFS funneled National Survey Grant funds to State and Private Forestry to fund required surveys of property lines between public and private lands. Absent Forest Service funding, private landowners would have been required to pay half of the survey costs, potentially stalling the project.

## MAKING IT HAPPEN

**Using partner authorities and expertise to accomplish work more efficiently, and ensuring all land managers could participate,** was key to keeping partners at the table over the long term. An example of this was the partnership between NRCS and ODF. NRCS provides cost-share money to landowners to pay for restoration treatments, but does not have technical forestry staff to help landowners plan treatments. ODF had a historic relationship with private forest landowners. NRCS recognized this relationship and contracted with ODF to provide the technical assistance. This agreement began in northeastern Oregon and is now used across the state. Similarly, ODFW had purchased its wildlife refuge land through the Pitman Robertson Act, which made forest treatments subject to NEPA. The NEPA process, and lack of forestry expertise, had prevented ODFW from doing wildfire reduction or forest health projects on the Elkhorn Wildlife Refuge. The USFS offered to assist ODFW in the NEPA process, and used Joint Chiefs funding to contract with ODF to plan and implement fuels reductions treatments on the refuge. The USFS played a

similar role with the BLM – when the BLM was not able to complete the NEPA process in a timely manner, Forest Service staff incorporated BLM lands in the East Face NEPA analysis.

**Concentrating on a subset of targeted resource management practices rather than trying to do everything at once** kept the project focused and moving. NRCS and its partners focused on two private land practices for the project’s implementation and outreach: pre-commercial thinning and slash treatment. This focus helped simplify outreach to private landowners, and the organization and management of private forest contractors. The focus did not minimize other resource concerns (e.g. road erosion and culvert maintenance), but allowed the partners to stretch limited funding to as many acres as possible. Addressing the other resource concerns would have decreased the number of acres treated on private land.

*An example of before and after fuel reduction treatment on a private land site. Similar treatments took place across the East Face's public-private footprint.*







*Landowners Shelly and Jerry Gray signed up for a three year contract with NRCS to thin 52 acres of their forests under the East Face project.*

*This cross-boundary project involves 120 public and private landowners along a 20 mile shared public-private boundary.*

# CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

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## **Incomplete NEPA on public lands prior to beginning the project**

When implementation funding became available, private landowners were prepared to begin treatments, but the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest had not yet completed NEPA on its East Face lands and lacked legal authority to move forward. The delay created frustration between staff on the private and public sides of the line and could have derailed the project. Fortunately, the Joint Chiefs agreement provided assurance to partners and landowners that, despite incomplete NEPA, the Forest Service had the financial resources and political will to complete planning and implement the project.

## **Determining complementary management objectives on public and private lands**

East Face participants disagreed on what management prescriptions should be implemented on public and private lands. Rather than perceiving this as conflict, the group agreed to apply complementary treatments on public and private lands. Although the treatments were different, they each contributed to the overarching goal of wildfire risk reduction.

## **Maintaining communications between partners, landowners and the general public**

When East Face began, there was no organized way to distribute information about the project. The general public, despite living in a wildfire prone area, had a limited understanding of forest restoration and its connection to wildfire reduction. Public affairs staff from ODF, NRCS, and USFS rallied together as a communications team, creating an East Face website, writing and recording landowner stories, and developing joint press releases. They met regularly to address differences in agency operating procedures and to share responsibilities for East Face communications. Team members worked with their respective agency leadership to develop a consensus description of the project's objectives and a uniform method of explaining the project. Keeping the communications team small (one person from each agency), developing clear parameters about the group's purpose, and agreeing some agencies would take the limelight at different stages helped the group overcome challenges.

## **Finding markets**

Despite the collective effort and investment of East Face's partners to undertake the all-lands project – finding appropriate local markets for small-diameter wood and biomass to support the needed fuels reduction and restoration work remained a challenge.

## **Lack of industrial landowner engagement**

Despite being located within the East Face Footprint, due to a variety of factors, the private industrial landowner within the project area did not participate in the all-lands project. Reasons for this lack of engagement included insufficient financial incentive for the landowner, an inability of the Forest Service to treat lands along the industrial-public land border, and lack of capacity on the industrial landowner's part to attend partner or collaborative group meetings.

## **Insufficient local contractor capacity to perform restoration work**

With the loss of natural resource workforce capacity in northeastern Oregon over the past 20 years, the region lacks sufficient capacity in the remaining local workforce to perform the restoration and fuels reduction work needed on East Face. In order to meet the demand, the Forest Service had to hire contractors from outside the region to supplement local capacity.

# KEY STEPS & ENABLING CONDITIONS

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- ✓ Partners had previously worked together on smaller projects to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health, and knew they could depend on each other.
- ✓ Clear alignment with national, state, and local policy and priorities – in particular the National Cohesive Wildfire Fire Management Strategy.
- ✓ Regional staff (NRCS, USFS, ODF) had been in their positions for many years and understood the local social and ecological landscape.
- ✓ The ODF State Forester, NRCS State Conservationist, and USFS District Forest Supervisor provided flexibility in regional staff duties, empowering them to develop support among line level staff and local constituencies, and to apply for funding.
- ✓ The NRCS/ODF statewide agreement combined technical “boots on the ground” forestry assistance with financial assistance.
- ✓ The Northern Blue Mountain Cohesive Wildfire Strategy group kept the project’s focus on CWS principles.
- ✓ East Face’s broad landscape and resources allowed partners to access to new pots of money and build support with new constituencies (e.g. nexus of forest restoration and elk habitat; inclusion of headwaters of the City of La Grande’s municipal watershed; habitat for federally threatened fish species; important agricultural water source; public safety and emergency management).
- ✓ East Face private landowners all shared the same ODF forester, providing continuity across private land treatments and maintaining landowner relationships.
- ✓ The My Blue Mountains Woodlands partnership coordinated outreach to private forest owners.
- ✓ The Wallowa Whitman Forest Collaborative served as a feedback mechanism to alleviate risk and steer partners away from hot button issues and as a forum for partners to meet, communicate, and coordinate with each other about the project.
- ✓ East Face had a concise and compelling narrative easily shareable with leadership, those working on the ground, and the general public.
- ✓ The multi-agency communications team was formed early in the project and facilitated consistent public messaging.
- ✓ Northeastern Oregon’s local forest contractors had training and capacity to perform the suite of treatments needed on public and private lands.
- ✓ Partners focused outreach efforts and treatment funds along the 20 mile USFS/private land boundary, in essence creating an extended fuel break in a known, high fire danger area.
- ✓ Forest Service treatments strategically designed to benefit other landowners provided an incentive for neighbors to treat their lands.



*Union County landowner Dave Mellinger signed up for a three year contract with NRCS to thin 119 acres of his woods under the East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains Project.*

*This project aims to reduce the risk of loss to catastrophic wildfire through forest fuels reduction, restoring and maintaining landscapes, and improving fire response across the shared public/private boundary.*

NRCS photo by Tracy Robillard

## Long-term success requires effective partnerships



Build partnerships early and purposefully. Take time to understand each partner's metrics of success, mission, initiatives, skillsets, funding sources, and relationships. Do not be afraid to bring entities with differing missions together for a common goal; another organization may fill the gap for a key type of funding, expertise, and/or authority that a partner lacks. Throughout the lifespan of the project each partner also needs to be willing to step back, step up, or adjust their goals to let other partners be successful.

## Think beyond current funding sources



Have a vision and don't be too risk averse. If a cross-boundary restoration opportunity has been identified and is supported by multiple partners and aligned with best available science and local priorities, chances are good for finding the necessary funding. East Face partners thought outside the box to figure out how to make existing tools and authorities work to facilitate cross-boundary work and resource sharing.

## Rigorous assessment must be coupled with local priorities



Performing a high level resource assessment with scientific or academic partners to determine restoration priorities can keep federal partners at the table and bring in new funding sources over the lifespan of the project. However, the high level assessment should be coupled with local knowledge about opportunities on the landscape in order to maintain local supporters, advocates for the project, and an ability to implement treatments on private property.

## Early private landowner involvement is essential

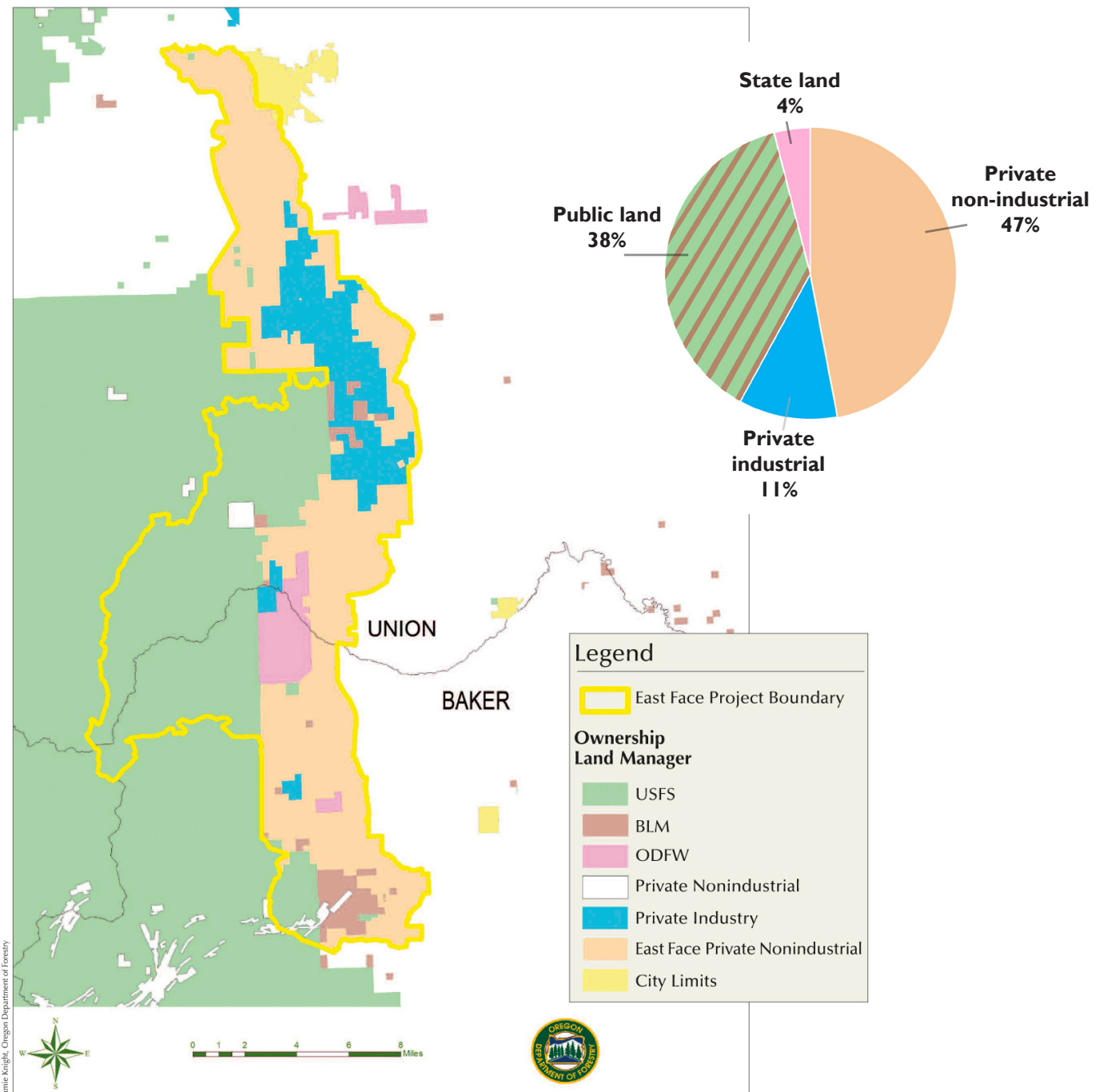


In an all-lands project involving private land, dedicate resources and time early to perform outreach to private landowners using the diverse skillsets, relationships, and resources of partners. Each landowner has individual goals for their forest and responds differently to messaging from different partners. The focus on aggregating multiple landowner projects helps incentivize partners, contractors, and other landowners to participate, along with focused education and communication to build community support for the project.

# LAND OWNERSHIP in the EAST FACE PROJECT AREA

The East Face Project area covers 128,000 acres, includes five land ownership types, and is located in Oregon's far Northeast corner. It spans Baker and Union counties, two ranger districts (La Grande and Wallowa-Whitman), two Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) offices, one BLM office, over 20 miles of boundary with industrial, non-industrial and residential lands, and four Wildland Urban Interfaces - as designated in each county's Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

- Courtesy of Susan Charnley



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NRCS photo sources:

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