

# SHARED STEWARDSHIP

## RECOMMENDATIONS for PARTNERING WITH COMMUNITY-BASED AND COLLABORATIVE GROUPS

### CURRENT SITUATION

March 2020

The nation's forests face urgent threats, including uncharacteristic wildfire, insects and disease, drought, and climate change. The complexity, scale, and cross-boundary nature of these threats mean that no single agency has the capacity or resources to tackle them alone. Recognizing the need to partner and leverage resources, the Forest Service released "Toward Shared Stewardship Across Landscapes: An Outcome Based Investment Strategy" in 2018.<sup>1</sup> There are now more than a dozen agreements between state and federal agencies outlining their mutual commitment to addressing these pressing ecological, social, and economic challenges.

However, the role for non-governmental partners (e.g., community-based organizations, forest collaborative groups, and non-profit partners) in shared stewardship remains unclear. This lack of clarity has created confusion, skepticism, and in some cases distrust among key Forest Service partners. The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC) is concerned that bilateral agreements between state and federal entities might undermine the critical roles that diverse

collaboration and partnership efforts have played in improving forest management for more than a decade.

To address these concerns, RVCC has developed recommendations for partnering with community-based and collaborative partners. The recommendations are based on themes from two in-person workshops and one-on-one conversations with early adopters. In October 2019, RVCC brought community-based organizations and forest collaboratives from multiple Western states together at a workshop 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 states, as well as Washington, D.C. Forty people attended. We then refined the feedback and recommendations from the first workshop at a breakout session during RVCC's Annual Meeting in January, 2020. Approximately 35 people contributed feedback in that session, with a similar mix of representation to participants at the October workshop.

### OPPORTUNITY

Community and collaborative partners generally view shared stewardship as an opportunity. There is broad recognition that the only way to address the scale of ecological challenges facing National Forests is to share resources and work across ownership boundaries. This need has been clear since the agency prioritized all lands, cross-boundary projects a decade ago.<sup>2</sup>

State agencies and partners are uniquely situated to define what shared stewardship will look like in

each state and how partners can contribute. Shared stewardship presents an opportunity to be flexible in focusing resources where needed and to the appropriate agency.

Partners recognize that states could bring new assets to the table and fill capacity gaps at the Forest Service. There is also an opportunity to reconsider how the agency measures outcomes, especially those that reflect collaboration, partnerships, and community benefit.

1. Toward Shared Stewardship Across Landscapes: An Outcome Based Investment Strategy, August 2018.

2. Tidwell, Tom. "An All-Lands Approach to Conservation." Western States Land Commissioners Association Conference, winter 2010, Little Rock, AK.

### CHALLENGES

Although community and collaborative partners generally see shared stewardship as an opportunity, there is also skepticism about multiple facets, from the purpose and outcomes, to roles for partners and long-term durability of the initiative. Many remain unclear on the vision, the sideboards, what their role might be, how to be involved, and how shared stewardship is distinct from their local efforts.

#### Inconsistent Terminology

The original report released in September 2018, referred to shared stewardship as an “investment strategy.” In other places shared stewardship is referred to as an initiative, an approach, a framework, and a way of being. The signed documents between states and the Forest Service are interchangeably referred to as MOUs, agreements, or commitments. This lack of alignment in language leads to confusion and allows for varying interpretations both among partners and agency staff, including a sense that it is what the agency has already been doing. It also contributes to a lack of clarity about the purpose.

#### Lack of Inclusion

Partners generally feel the process of establishing state level agreements has not been inclusive of their interests. Most agreements between states and the Forest Service name the importance of collaboration, communities, and other partners. Yet how those interests will be included is largely unclear and will vary across states. There is a sense that state and federal partners are not being inclusive of established collaboratives and that decisions have not been transparent. It is clear that many partners generally do not know how to engage in the initiative, nor who to ask if they did want to engage. And, they are unsure what the effort means at local levels (e.g. national forests and ranger districts).



#### Impacts of Setting Priorities

Shared stewardship encourages and enables state agencies and the Forest Service to mutually prioritize allocation of resources. While there is growing recognition of the potential benefits of strategically locating vegetation management treatments in high priority areas, community and collaborative partners are concerned that new, state-level priorities, in combination with limited funding, will lead to “winners and losers.” Partners are particularly concerned about what will happen to collaborative efforts outside of state-identified priority areas. Moreover, it is unclear what criteria determines which regions, partners, and projects are priorities, and there is concern that the criteria may not reflect local interests or collaborative capacity. Finally, partners expressed concern that landscapes with high timber value will be prioritized, especially for projects using the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA), while fire risk reduction priority areas that lack significant merchantable material will be left behind.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Forest Service should clarify expectations on the opportunity for non-governmental partners to contribute to the vision of shared stewardship. Doing so can help capitalize on the potential shared stewardship offers, leverage diverse resources, and broaden ownership and participation.

### Clarify Terms

Clearly defining the vision and purpose, and aligning language used by federal and state agencies, can clarify expectations. Absent this clear purpose, and explicit acknowledgment of the role for partners, non-governmental partners may continue to see the effort as a bilateral state-federal approach that excludes their interests. Strategies to provide clarity could include reconciling terminology, developing one-page summaries that are shared broadly (such as on the national shared stewardship website), hosting additional webinars, and creating glossaries.

### Improve Transparency

State and federal agencies need to be clear on decision making processes (particularly state-level priority setting), sideboards on available decision space, and how collaborative and community partners can participate. Being clear about how decisions are being made, who can make them, what is happening and why, and how partners can influence the decisions will help build trust. Establishing clear points of contact at the forest level, making it known that they exist and how to contact them, can also address confusion and a perceived lack of transparency.

### Dedicate Capacity

Complex landscape scale projects involving numerous partners require dedicated capacity to coordinate. RVCC's all lands case studies and peer exchanges have made clear that this cannot be a collateral

duty. Adding additional expectations on staff already working at capacity will exacerbate stress and ultimately contribute to more confusion. Dedicating coordinators that can serve as boundary spanners - assembling resources, serving as a liaison to partners - to implement the concept of shared stewardship is essential. Initially these coordinator positions could be at the regional office level, perhaps in joint positions with state agencies. As projects are planned and implemented forest level coordinators might be warranted.

### Clarify the Role for Community-based and Collaborative Groups

Shared stewardship agreements and MOUs make clear that state and federal agencies will mutually set priorities and actions. While the agreements signed to date regularly reference communities and collaboratives, their role in implementing the vision is less clear. The Forest Service should make clear how they can be involved and what role they can play. Partners recognize that they may not always be involved in all aspects of planning and implementation, yet do want to know that these things are happening and how their interests will be considered.

### Ask What Your Partners Can Offer

A wide range of partners – such as community-based organizations, collaborative groups, tribes, and watershed councils – can bring resources and knowledge to bear, including local knowledge, outreach capacity and funding. Understand what they can bring, how they want to be involved, and what roles they can serve. Line officers and partnership coordinators may be well-suited to ask partners how they want to contribute and be involved. However, outreach will require clarity on what shared stewardship is and what the agency is doing prior to asking what partners can contribute.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Build on the Success of Collaboration

The Forest Service has a long history of working collaboratively with diverse stakeholders to achieve its mission. There is tremendous opportunity for shared stewardship to build on the success of the collaborative movement, a point the agency has recognized. Forest collaboratives offer existing venues to understand community values, share information, obtain feedback, and can help bring stakeholders along. State venues may set the general priority areas and issues of concern, but local partners can still help inform what that looks like at a project scale. Many groups have already done the hard work of setting local priorities, which should be nested into broader scale statewide priority-setting.

### Measure Outcomes

Partners are eager to see metrics that evaluate the success of shared stewardship to achieve cross-boundary implementation at a meaningful scale. There is a strong desire for measuring outcomes, not outputs; institutionalizing an expectation to work in partnership; and offering meaningful avenues to be held accountable for the goals of shared stewardship. The Forest Service needs to establish performance measures that move the agency towards achieving land management objectives that include collaboration, partnerships, and community benefits, and away from output targets.

## CONCLUSION

The need to leverage capacity, resources and expertise from multiple partners to address the complex, landscape scale challenges facing National Forests is clear. Shared stewardship offers a promising approach, yet more clarity on the concept, role for non-governmental partners, decision making processes, and outcomes is critical to meet the potential.



### 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.

### CONTACT

Karen Hardigg, Director: [karen@wallowaresources.org](mailto:karen@wallowaresources.org)

Tyson Bertone-Riggs, Policy Analyst: [tyson@wallowaresources.org](mailto:tyson@wallowaresources.org)

Jessica Sabine Brothers, Communications & Design Specialist: [jsabine@wallowaresources.org](mailto:jsabine@wallowaresources.org)



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