

Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project: A Local Collaboration

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Collaboration is a word frequently heard in natural resource management circles today. It refers to having a group of individuals representing a range of views working together to craft mutually agreeable solutions to complex issues. Collaborations help expand the knowledge of those participating by encouraging discussions about the breadth of viewpoints and considerations involved. To be successful, it requires participants who are solution-oriented and willing to consider more than one perspective on an issue, and who are willing to work respectfully with others who have differing viewpoints.

Natural resource agencies recognize the value of collaboration. The traditional process of an agency producing a proposed plan or action and putting it out for public review and comment typically generates criticisms from the different factions concerned with the issue. By having the various factions sitting down together and trying to come up with a proposal that incorporates the diversity of considerations or perspectives, the agency can move forward with much greater public support for the proposed plan or actions it recommends. The same is true with proposed legislation. Legislative proposals developed through collaborative processes are likely to have much broader support than if developed by one faction.

Collaboration can occur at any level; local, state, regional or national. All have their purposes and values. But some of the best collaborations are those that are locally-led, grassroots initiatives. It is at this level that most actions actually take place on the ground and that directly affect those in the area.

The Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project (BCSP) is an example of a local collaboration that has been working on forest management, conservation, and recreation interests in the Blackfoot/Clearwater area for the past 8 years. It began with discussions between timber and wilderness advocates, and expanded to include a broad diversity of interests. The focus of the group was on developing possible legislation that would assist the Seeley Lake Ranger District of the Lolo National Forest to increase its forest management activities, designate several additions to wilderness areas, delineate some additional recreational areas especially for snowmobiling, and promote biomass utilization. The discussions led to a proposal that was recognized by Senator Tester and included as one of the three initiatives in his Forest, Jobs, and Recreation Act. While this act has not been passed, many of the ideas in the act as well as the collaborative processes that contributed to its content have yielded results.

For example, the relationships established through the BCSP helped enable the development of a proposal for a Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project (CFLRP) when legislation establishing this U.S. Forest Service program was passed in 2010. The Southwest Crown of the Continent (SWCC) was one of the first 10 CFLRP's selected. This project provides significant new funding for restoration activities conducted by the Forest Service using a collaborative process, not only for the Seeley Lake Ranger District, but also the Lincoln Ranger District on the Helena National Forest and Swan Lake Ranger District on the Flathead National Forest. The funding provided focuses on forest and watershed restoration, threats from uncharacteristic wildfires, and other concerns best addressed at landscape scales. The SWCC project has met some of the recommendations originally suggested by the BSCP.

However, other recommended actions of the BCSP, particularly the recreation and wilderness components, were not addressed through the SWCC project.

The BCSP has recently been discussing future solutions to the current challenges to its objective of fully implementing the forest plan for the Seeley Lake Ranger District. With growing national interest in forest management legislation, efforts to pass new wilderness designations and other factors have the group considering if additional solutions exist that the collaborative can support. The BCSP has been discussing ways to further increase the level of forest management to address wildfire and restoration needs, revisited its recommended wilderness designations, and reviewed its recreational recommendations. With diverse interests at the table, it is again the desire of the group to reach consensus on additional actions that could provide better opportunities for management of Forest Service lands in the Blackfoot/Clearwater. While a range of views on possible solutions exist within the group, there is recognition that a solid foundation of shared agreement exists. This is the basic principle of collaboration.

Collaboration is not a quick or easy fix. It involves considerable discussion, sharing of ideas and concerns, and compromise. But, effective collaborations work through this process and come up with a product that is balanced, considers the many diverse interests in natural resource management, and that is supported by the overall group. In the broader policy and management arena today, too often little gets accomplished because opposing sides simply stick to one position or view and refuse to seek alternative solutions that address more than their individual concerns. Collaboration demonstrates that other ways of operating are possible. While collaboration may not be the best approach to solving all natural resource management issues, when dealing with public land management and policies related to this management, it certainly offers a compelling alternative to the more traditional and often partisan approaches that frequently result in gridlock.