

2010

# The Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition: A Citizen-Agency Partnership that Works

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Shindler, Bruce, "The Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition: A Citizen-Agency Partnership that Works" (2010). *JFSP Briefs*. 42.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/jfspbriefs/42>

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Spring vista on the Colville National Forest. Credit: Carolin Maier.

## The Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition: A Citizen-Agency Partnership that Works

### *Summary*

With the urgency of wildfire near every community's door, federal agencies have sought a middle ground between the extremes of timber-industry and environmental positions, one that would enable active management to reduce fuels and create safer communities. At the same time, citizen groups have organized themselves to protect important community values connected with their neighboring forests. These developments have set the stage for increasingly successful multi-stakeholder partnerships. The collaborative processes facilitated by these partnerships require considerable patience and perseverance at the outset, but the result can be a healthier forest, reduced fire risk, more stable planning processes, and sustainability for communities. The partnership between the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition (NEWFC) and the Colville National Forest is a notable success story. In the summer of 2009, our team of Oregon State University researchers interviewed key people in the partnership, including the Forest Supervisor, forest and district personnel, members of NEWFC representing both industry and conservation perspectives, and members of a local environmental group. Their experiences and observations are presented here with the goal of providing managers and other stakeholders with ideas for similar efforts.

## Key Findings

- The Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition (NEWFC) and the Colville National Forest have created an effective and ongoing multi-stakeholder collaborative partnership.
- Collaborative decision-making required considerable time and commitment at the outset, but it significantly increased the success of fuel-reduction and other management projects by increasing community buy-in and reducing the number of projects stalled by appeals.
- The NEWFC officially represents conservation and industry groups and the general public, but any interested person is encouraged to take part in discussions.
- Support of the Forest Supervisor and top managers was essential to the success of the partnership.
- A key catalyst of the partnership-building process was a Forest Service-sponsored workshop on effective communication.
- The presence of NEWFC has increased public involvement generally in the Colville National Forest's decision processes.
- The practice of transferring top Forest Service personnel after a few years was seen as a barrier to long-term collaboration.

## The right environment

Participants in the partnership described key factors that led a diverse group of people to come together to keep their communities functioning. The first was a commonly acknowledged need for community stability. The Colville National Forest is spread over three counties in the northeastern corner of Washington State, bounded by the Canadian border to the north and Idaho to the east. Forest headquarters are located in Colville, 90 minutes north of Spokane. Communities in this area are traditional resource-dependent towns that have lost most of the manufacturing base that formerly supported them.

Mill closures a decade ago were credited with raising awareness about the need for stable rural economies. In the words of one self-described conservationist, early Coalition members came together because “the need was sustainable timber supply, and to reach an armistice to preserve what’s left of our wilderness heritage, and to develop a working relationship to address the needs of what’s left in our forest.” Most participants agreed that the wood utilization infrastructure still present in the region—several sawmills, a cogeneration plant, and a paper plant—provided the backbone for a large-scale forest management program that targets thinning and fuels reduction.



Logs await processing at Vaagen Brothers Lumber in Colville. Credit: Carolin Maier.

The second factor was a window of opportunity provided by the passage of the 2003 Healthy Forests Restoration Act and concurrent changes in leadership on the Colville National Forest. One pivotal event was a three-day workshop hosted by the National Forest, for which the Forest Supervisor hired professional facilitators to present ideas on how the group can work together and also to explain the legal requirements and constraints faced by the agency. Forest Service managers viewed the workshop as a chance to correct the public’s misperception that, “...if all of us (community members) agree, then the decision is made...you’ve got to do it because we all agree.” Members of the fledgling Coalition affirmed that the workshop was instrumental in helping them understand the Forest Service planning context, including legal requirements and agency directives.

Finally, there was near-universal agreement that the most valuable skill learned in the workshop was that of leaving personal positions at the door, and, instead, choosing to discuss core issues of mutual concern. Learning to talk about goals instead of positions was identified as a defining moment in the Coalition’s evolution. One member reflected: “Trust comes from people coming together...having all these different opposing views, but also common interests... and saying guess what, I like that too...I enjoy recreation on public lands and I like to see a healthy forest.”

## Roles, rules, and focus

Three general groups are represented in the Coalition: conservation/environmentalists, industry representatives, and members of the unaffiliated public who come and go depending on their interests. Forest Service personnel, local government representatives, and members of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation are actively encouraged to come to the table, but they have no official representation in the group. The Coalition views itself as an independent organization in a working partnership with the National Forest.

As a result of the workshop, the Coalition and the Forest Service entered a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) spelling out the terms for formal communication. The MOU was intended to minimize confusion, avoid rumors, keep the group on task, and develop agreement on levels of support for projects. Members of NEWFC described the organization's decision-making as consensus-based: "If we can't work it out, we leave it alone, or we work elsewhere. Working on a consensus basis—if we do it right—prevents us from alienating anyone." The group also adheres to a set of codes and bylaws that guides communication and serves as the "rules of the game."

Finally, everyone enters the conversation understanding that the central guiding principal is sustaining their community and its assets. A recurrent theme in discussions about the Coalition's success was the group's persistent focus on creating healthy forests. Within this emphasis there was agreement about boundaries: no clearcuts, no net increase in roads, and no cutting in old growth. Members recognize their mission is not all-encompassing, and while they do not restrict input or participation from members of other interest groups, they maintain they are most effective when they keep a narrower scope on forest management activities.



Ron Gray, Kettle Falls Generating Station and Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition. Credit: Ryan Gordon.

Out of these discussions has come what the Coalition refers to as "The Blueprint." It is a document that divides the National Forest into three zones—an active management zone, a restoration zone, and a wilderness/roadless zone. Distinct management strategies are identified as being appropriate for each zone. This document has drawn criticism from parties outside the Coalition who assert that the Blueprint is designed to direct development of the National Forest's management plan. Coalition members maintain it is merely intended as a tool to help everyone determine which projects they can support and at what level.

### Wall-to-wall collaboration

It is widely recognized in the community that many Colville National Forest personnel have become adept at working in a collaborative environment. One employee acknowledged, "We happen to have some folks who are very good at relationships with the public and collaborating within the agency." Many credit the Forest Supervisor with

hand-picking line officers well suited for the job, including one who stated, "I think some of the staff have been selected not only because of their resumé, but because of their personalities...they can deal with collaboration, and even enhance it." The Forest Service screening process does take into account interpersonal skills and a willingness to hear different viewpoints. Agency leaders also believe talented individuals are drawn to the Forest and its reputation as a positive, productive environment.

One employee was quick to dispel the notion that national forests need to hire a partnership coordinator or public affairs specialist or other "public person." Instead, staff can benefit from specialized training in collaboration, learning how to leverage their skills and guide colleagues in making collaborative processes work. A Coalition member said: "We don't want to see one person who can put a good spin on things. Let's get real with each other." A Forest Service employee stressed the importance of having someone with real decision-making authority present during important collaborative sessions—emphasizing that the public responds better to processes that address final answers and demonstrate commitment to progress.

Supportive leadership is critical. The Forest Supervisor was widely credited with creating an atmosphere for outreach and citizen interaction, characterized by open communication between line officers and along the chain of command, and including regular check-ins and opportunities for constructive criticism. Agency staff take pride in "barrier-buster sessions" that allow personnel from any level to identify obstacles in the organization that inhibit job performance. Creating an open working environment, according to one District Ranger, requires (1) allowing people freedom to experiment through trial and error and without retaliation for mistakes, (2) reminding staff that outcomes on the land are what count, and (3) willingness of management personnel to take ultimate responsibility for outcomes, good and bad.

Forest Service staff characterized their working style as "wall-to-wall collaboration," meaning initiating communication with all interested parties at the beginning of a project and exchanging information throughout the process. Collaboration is used for all important decisions on the Colville, not only those pertaining to timber management but also to forest planning, recreation management, and rangeland resources.

Interviewees universally acknowledged that a collaborative process is time-consuming and requires a greater commitment from both the agency and the public. Nevertheless, an extended decision-making process was acknowledged to be preferable to the old model of churning out dozens of projects a year only to have them appealed and stalled. One Coalition member noted: "The old style was—no one knew what any of the problems were until the 11th hour...and all of a sudden local people or the conservation community came out of the woodwork to appeal it, and you spend almost all the money at the tail end trying to work through appeals and litigation." There was

wide agreement that involvement from the beginning allows all participants to fully understand the planning process, such that when a final decision is made everyone recognizes the terms of the agreement and how it was reached.

Forest Service staff members were quick to point out that the Coalition is not the only group that has access to planning processes, although they are often the only one at the table. The “standard” public input process still occurs—everyone still has an opportunity to weigh in. However, the Coalition now provides a place where single individuals, even those devoted to a single issue, can deliberate at Coalition meetings and work out concerns before turning to the standard Forest Service comment process.

## Sustaining action

Those interviewed cited numerous accomplishments made possible by the Coalition’s collaborative process, including the following:

- Twenty-two forest stewardship projects completed since 2002
- No litigation on forest health projects
- Nearly 3,000 acres treated with prescribed fire in 2008
- Sixty-one million board feet harvested off the forest in 2008, all of which went to local mills
- Acquisition and leveraging by the Coalition of National Forest Foundation grant funding to complete the first phase of the Stevens County Community Wildfire Protection Plan
- Eight years of working together in partnership

Continued success on projects and positive public feedback were often cited as good reasons for sticking with collaborative processes. As one manager stated, “... folks in my unit say ‘Hey, we really appreciate the way things are going, it’s feeling like the old days’...the days when we see our job has an end result.” Local businesses and organizations seem to have bought into the process as well; industry and conservation representatives said their employers’ support allowed them to attend Coalition activities during regular working hours.

Participants also noted intangible results from the partnership—notably, that environmental groups are now at the table with forest managers, finding ways to agree on complex issues of forest health and fire management. Says one Coalition member: “We’re doing everything we can to be logical, reasonable, use common sense, build relationships, build trust—from the ground up—even among historical antagonists who used to hate each other and be appalled by each others’ perspectives.” Another member described board feet of timber and increased public participation as mere byproducts of the real success, which was bringing diverse interests together in a productive working environment. Each successful project has built relationships that made the next project easier.

Participants felt that the Coalition has brought more public attention to issues on the forest, as evidenced by

attendance at meetings of more “regular” citizens—and that it has served as a community voice. Other interests that do not formally participate in the Coalition—including livestock grazers, recreation groups, and county government—have increased their involvement in the agency’s more traditional participatory planning process. A recent public meeting to discuss a fuels-reduction project drew 40 people; a few years ago only three or four people would have been expected. Participants attribute this to both the Coalition’s outreach efforts and the Forest Service staff’s dedication to calling people and extending personal invitations to meetings, rather than relying on public notices.

## Staying motivated and avoiding burnout

The strongest motivation reported for staying involved with collaborative efforts was that participants feel they and their community have something to gain. Industry representatives and conservationists alike said they were motivated by a desire to keep Northeast Washington from going the way of other regions with dying timber economies. One person from the environmental community stated:

“If it were just about how we make sure roadless areas stay roadless, the timber industry wouldn’t have been involved for very long. If it were just about fuels reduction in the WUI and providing products for the timber infrastructure, the conservationists wouldn’t have been around very long. There’s a lot to gain by being together, and there’s a lot to lose by being together. It’s a balance, and any collaborative process that doesn’t have that balance isn’t a genuine collaborative process, and it isn’t going to retain committed participants. It’s a net gain staying together...so we have.”

Other major incentives emphasized were seeing progress and building strong relationships. One participant described his motives as, “...a goal to reach a long-term friendly, amicable relationship with the timber industry and the community at large.” Another motivation was personal growth; one industry Coalition member reflected on the combined 250 years of forestry experience and 100 years of conservation experience represented in the group, saying that in spite of all he thought he knew about forestry, he had gained a whole new perspective from the conservation community.

For agency staff, solutions to burnout were more difficult to identify. It is widely recognized, for example, that District Rangers sometimes devote extraordinary amounts of time and energy to the process only to see the Forest Supervisor reap the benefits because of his or her more-visible leadership role. Forest Service employees pointed out that burnout thresholds may be different at different levels in the organization. Nevertheless, most personnel reported feeling energized and inspired by the progress made.



Rick Brazell, (former) Forest Supervisor, Colville National Forest. Credit: Ryan Gordon.

## Challenging traditional methods

Some Coalition members reported a perception that in the early years the Forest Service didn't want anything to do with the Coalition. The Forest Supervisor agreed, recalling that when he arrived in 2002 the Coalition was ready to disband because the agency didn't want to work with them. Trust had to be built slowly through many forms of communication. Even so, some observe that "old-school" methods are still entrenched, noting that some Forest Service staff find it hard to integrate collaboration into their normal way of doing business. Lack of flexibility at the national and regional levels was also seen as an obstacle to the partnership.

Even so, many participants lauded the ability of agency managers to successfully work outside the lines of traditional procedures while staying within the bounds of the law. Noting the new level of public interaction, one Coalition member said: "This change has been so refreshing...to be able to think that you can go talk to District Rangers or the Forest Supervisor and that's where the buck stops, that's where you can make a difference."

## Passing the torch

Interviewees acknowledged that the Forest Service's promotional structure—i.e., "move around to move up"—presents an additional barrier to long-term collaborative relationships. To maintain continuity through transitions, participants suggested: (1) documenting collaborative processes, (2) creating mentoring opportunities for a departing District Ranger and his/her replacement, and (3) improving agency teamwork.

Coalition members also acknowledged barriers to long-term participation in their organization, particularly when new people join and others move on, or simply because there are too few people doing too many things. An agency employee observed that Coalition members have successfully addressed some of these challenges by working in teams, so that if one person is not available for part of the process, another can step in. In much the same way, the Forest Service attempts to maintain continuity by involving multiple staff members in activities.

A key challenge in passing the torch is likely to be the departure of the Forest Supervisor, which occurred in late 2009, after these interviews took place. This individual was a key figure in starting and continuing the collaborative process, and Coalition members and Forest Service staff

## Management Implications

Public land managers and citizens interested in collaborative decision-making should consider:

- Providing training on communication and collaboration strategies
- Making the partnership open and inclusive and its processes transparent
- Adopting ground rules to guide discussion
- Being clear about the partnership's main objective
- Practicing collaboration in all appropriate decision-making settings
- For public land managers, shaping an organizational culture that rewards openness and collaboration
- Documenting collaborative processes, improving teamwork, and offering mentoring opportunities to maintain continuity through personnel transitions

alike spoke openly about how the transfer might affect it. Yet they were universally optimistic that the partnership would continue to be successful, pointing out that the supervisor is only one staff member in what is now a forest-wide culture of collaboration.

## Looking to the future

Many of those interviewed envisioned an ideal future in which most projects will be approved based on past precedent. Their hope was that the process of collaboration will become more efficient over time, allowing energy to be redirected to other issues. Said one conservationist: "If this process engenders other successful outcomes, that's a sign of success...seven years just isn't enough. I want more, I want to see it work forever; I want a perpetual motion machine for forest management that creates a new paradigm of relations between the timber industry and conservation that is long lasting."

The relationship between NEWFC and the Colville National Forest is in constant evolution. Like many partnerships, the Coalition has room to grow—adding new interests and tackling additional concerns. Growth is expected to become easier as relationships deepen and new ways of doing business develop. Participants acknowledged that achieving a durable process—one that's difficult to challenge because it has become "just the way things are done"—will be a critical milestone. Yet once that milestone is reached, the process will have become resilient enough to withstand influences that threaten to undermine it. Our Oregon State research team, along with the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Station, plans to continue monitoring progress of this successful partnership, tracking its evolution, and identifying the factors that keep it working.

## Further Information: Publications and Web Resources

Shindler, B. 2007. Public acceptance of wildland fire conditions and fuel reduction practices. In *Humans, Fire, and Forests: Social Science Applied to Fire Management*. Corvallis, OR: OSU Press.

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## Scientist Profiles

**Bruce Shindler** is a Professor of Forest Ecosystems and Society at Oregon State University. His research includes public agency-community interactions and communication strategies for sound decision-making in wildland fire settings.



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**Ryan Gordon** is a Graduate Research Assistant in Forest Ecosystems and Society at Oregon State University. His research and professional interests include the social values of natural resources, technology transfer, and media production.

**Linda Kruger** is a Research Social Scientist and Team Leader at the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Forestry Sciences Lab in Juneau, AK. Her research goals include understanding how people use and value public lands, how they engage in management, and the adaptive capacity of communities to respond to change.

## Cooperators

Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition  
Colville National Forest

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**The information in this Brief is written from JFSP Project Number 01C-3-3-17, which is available at [www.firescience.gov](http://www.firescience.gov).**

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