

# Collaborative Group Assessment

## Self-Assessment Tool and Results for the Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative

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All photos courtesy of Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative members.

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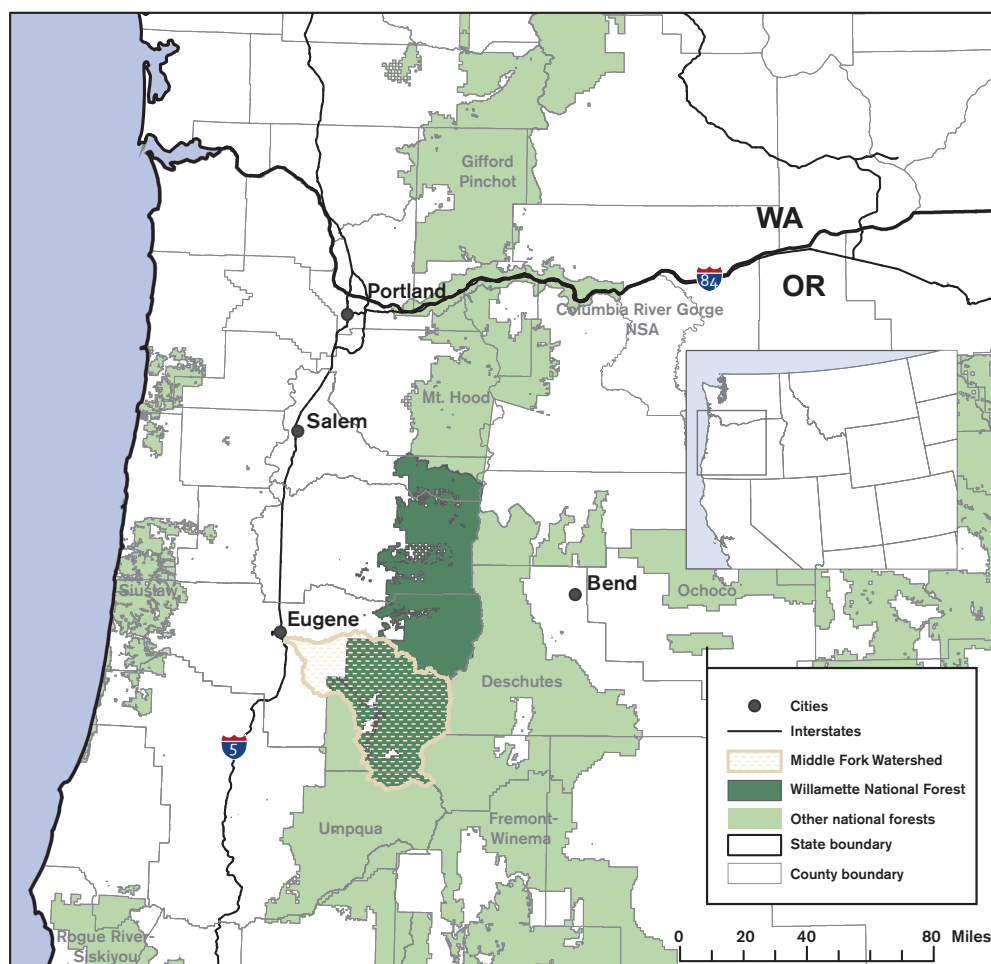


**F**orest collaborative groups can engage a diverse group of stakeholders, build social and community capacity, facilitate mutual learning, and enrich forest restoration work.<sup>1</sup> Collaboration requires continual investment over time, and routinely assessing the health and function of a collaborative group (and its projects) can help the collaborative evolve effectively. Assessments that gauge the participation, processes, and structure of a collaborative group can help a group understand how well it is functioning, both for its membership and in meeting group-defined goals.

Collaboration can take many forms, and groups should design assessments that are tailored to their unique contexts and objectives. The Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative (SWFC) was formed in 2014, with the mission, “to bring together interested parties to promote forest management solutions that sustain ecological resiliency and socioeconomic health for the southern Willamette forest area and nearby communities.” The SWFC’s geographic focus is the Middle Fork Watershed of the Willamette National Forest (see Figure 1, page 2). In 2016, the SWFC started a stewardship collaboration committee to develop recommendations for stewardship contracts proposed on the Middle Fork Ranger District of the Willamette National Forest. The SWFC was interested in understand-

ing collaborative members’ perspectives, both on projects (e.g. SWFC’s 2016 recommendations to US Forest Service for local contracting on the Outlook project), and on the collaborative overall, including structure, process, information, membership, and other aspects of the collaborative.

The SWFC partnered with the Ecosystem Workforce Program (EWP) at the University of Oregon to develop assessment tools to help inform their ongoing work. Using a number of existing collaborative assessments as examples, EWP created two assessment tools crafted to the needs and goals of the SWFC: 1) a self assessment of the collaborative overall, including processes, membership, functions, and 2) a project-specific assessment that SWFC members can administer themselves before or after individual projects. This working paper outlines the tool developed to assess the participation, process, and structure of collaborative and reports on the results of the assessment for the SWFC. Although the results are a “snapshot in time,” this assessment is the first member survey of the SWFC, and provides information to the SWFC about how their process and structure is working. As the collaborative continues to develop and refine their efforts, this information can be used as a reference point or baseline for future years of self-assessment surveys.

**Figure 1 Willamette National Forest and the Middle Fork Watershed**

## Approach

In this working paper, we report only on the collaborative self assessment. The SWFC plans to administer the project-specific assessment later in 2017, linked to a recent project. For the collaborative self assessment, we gathered and synthesized a variety of guides and documents that provided sample questions for collaborative process or collaborative group assessments.<sup>2</sup> We identified questions from these existing assessments that were relevant to the SWFC, then worked with the SWFC to determine the most relevant questions for the group, then to refine questions to best address their unique context and objectives.

Final questions were included in a survey instrument that was developed in Google forms, a free

and open access survey instrument which could be easily transferred to the collaborative for future use. The survey was sent to all individuals who had attended at least one SWFC meeting since the group initiated its first collaborative project (June 2016), funded by the Federal Forest Health grant, and including board members, volunteers and staff of the SWFC. Individuals receiving the survey included state and federal agency employees, nongovernmental organizations, local citizens, and private businesses. Recipients represented a variety of interests, including land management, environmental, recreational, cultural, among others. Recruitment for the survey was conducted between February 14 and 22, 2017 via email (the main mode of communication for the SWFC). Recipients were provided a link to access the survey, and no identifiable information was collected in the survey. The survey contained

18 mainly open-response questions, all of which were optional responses, the only question respondents were required to answer was their frequency of meeting participation. Open-ended questions were coded to identify key themes in responses. In many cases respondents provided answers that fit multiple codes per questions (most questions were not mutually exclusive), so the findings below include multiple responses per survey, as relevant. Of the 44 people invited to participate in the survey, a total of 21 individuals completed the survey between February 14 and 22, 2017 (48 percent response rate). Although this may appear to be a low response rate to represent the full collaborative, it is important to note that the majority of survey respondents had attended multiple meetings, indicating that they were consistent participants. The full list of 44 people included many individuals who were peripherally involved or who had only attended a single meeting.

This first administration of the self assessment survey provided an opportunity to test the assessment tool and evaluate which questions seemed to work well for respondents, and which were confusing or in need of additional clarification. The SWFC will use feedback about the survey instrument to refine the instrument for future use. The assessment survey tool included in this working paper (see page 11), has been refined (mainly clarified) based on survey feedback.

## Findings

### SWFC participation and engagement

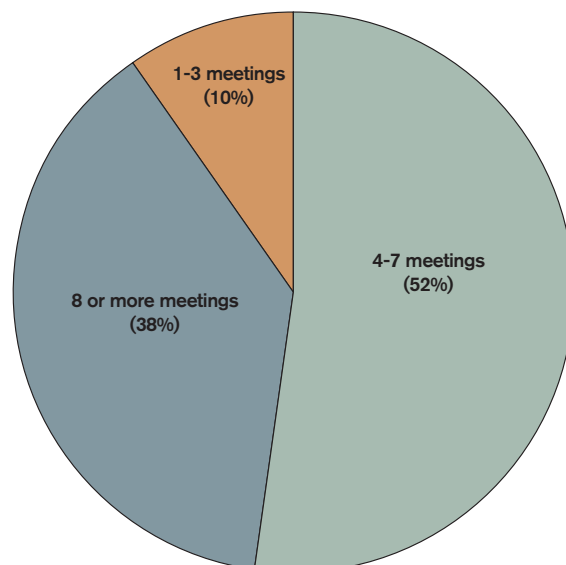
When seeking opinions from individuals about how a group or process is working, it can be helpful to gauge their exposure and understanding of the group in question. In this case that means understanding the frequency of survey respondents' attendance at SWFC meetings, to recognize both their level of experience with the group and the frequency of participation represented overall. With a relatively new group, it is also important to understand individual motivations for participating—essentially why the diverse group of stakeholders has come to the same table. This can be helpful not

only for understanding the motivations and composition of the collaborative, but also to identify areas of commonality between stakeholders in why they engage.

### Meeting attendance

The large majority of survey respondents (90 percent) attended at least four of the total 10 Outlook Committee meetings,<sup>3</sup> 5 Rigdon Committee meetings,<sup>4</sup> or 5 SWFC Board of Director meetings held between May 2016 and February 2017. These different meetings typically include different attendance (e.g. typically only board members attend board meetings and collaborative members attend project and field tour meetings), so attendance at four to seven meetings is considered semi-regular attendance for the collaborative, and eight or more meetings is very frequent attendance. Half (52 percent) of respondents attended between 4-7 SWFC meetings, another 38 percent attended eight or more meetings, and the remaining two participants attended 3 or fewer meetings (see Figure 2, below). This indicates that the majority of survey respondents have been continually engaged in the collaborative, and have been to a number of meetings.

**Figure 2** Number of SWFC meetings attended by survey respondents



### **Participation and incentives to participate in SWFC**

**SWFC survey respondents mainly noted 1) an interest in informing land management, and 2) professional interests (9 respondents each) as motivating their participation in the SWFC.** Participants described interests in informing land management as including addressing ecosystem, habitat, and/or restoration concerns in the area (7), recreation interests (3), and an interest in creating jobs (1). Participants who listed professional interests as driving their SWFC participation mainly explained that part of their job included participating. Five respondents also identified personal reasons for participating, such as personal ties to the area, including both the forest and nearby communities. The two respondents with the least SWFC participation (as measured by the number of meetings attended) noted their main reason for participating as having been invited to the meeting by an SWFC member.

On a very similar question (What are the incentives for you to participate in SWFC?), over half the respondents reported similar incentives for participation, namely the interest in informing land management, many of whom noted that SWFC provides a place to inform land management. Respondents noted that SWFC and informing land management has impacts on ecosystem health, community engagement, recreation opportunities, and policy. Eight respondents also talked about how relationship building with other entities and direct access to Forest Service employees were incentives to participate in SWFC. Due to the similar responses between these two questions (including respondents noting it in the survey), we combined these two questions for the future survey, to ask about reasons and incentives for participating in SWFC overall.

### **Most helpful parts of SWFC**

**SWFC survey respondents principally noted the learning and field trip opportunities as being the most helpful parts of their participation in SWFC.** Respondents described this as shared learning opportunities with other collaborative members and Forest Service staff through meetings and field trips, and the opportunities to hear from experts as well as stakeholders. Three respondents also

identified the facilitator as helpful for their participation—both for sharing information and for having a dedicated liaison with the Forest Service. Respondents also noted that participating in SWFC was very helpful for engaging in informing land management decisions.

### **SWFC and US Forest Service engagement and incentives**

**Survey respondents identified several ways in which SWFC and the US Forest Service were working together to achieve desired outcomes.** The majority of respondents described the partnership and information sharing between the collaborative and Forest Service as working well. Many respondents noted their appreciation of the agency's willingness to share their expertise on forest health and restoration and the use of good science. Finally, respondents explained that the relationship between SWFC and the Forest Service was still developing and would likely evolve over time.

**When asked what has worked well in how the Forest Service and SWFC work with each other, SWFC survey respondents most often identified the Forest Service's (primarily the Middle Fork Ranger District) consistent and committed level of engagement with SWFC.** Respondents described the information the Forest Service shared with SWFC, their responsiveness, and their consistent communication as key components of how SWFC and the Forest Service were engaging together. Others noted that the ability of SWFC to bring together a broad diversity of stakeholders complemented the Forest Service's work with SWFC and allowed them to communicate effectively and learn together.

A related survey question asked respondents about the incentives they saw for the Forest Service to engage with SWFC. Respondents most frequently listed incentives around increasing community buy-in and support of Forest Service activities, and avoiding conflicts or other disputes later down the line. Respondents also noted that Forest Service engagement in SWFC could provide more transparency, lead to less litigation from project opponents, and reach a broader audience with their plans and activities earlier in the process.

## SWFC compared to other processes

Collaboratives often form in response to a need such as bringing diverse stakeholders together, mutual learning, and/or informing land management decisions via compromise and discussion. It is important for a collaborative to understand the role or roles they are filling for their members. By asking about the processes that individuals use to provide input into forest management decisions and why they choose those options, we can understand more about the role(s) and value of SWFC to its members.

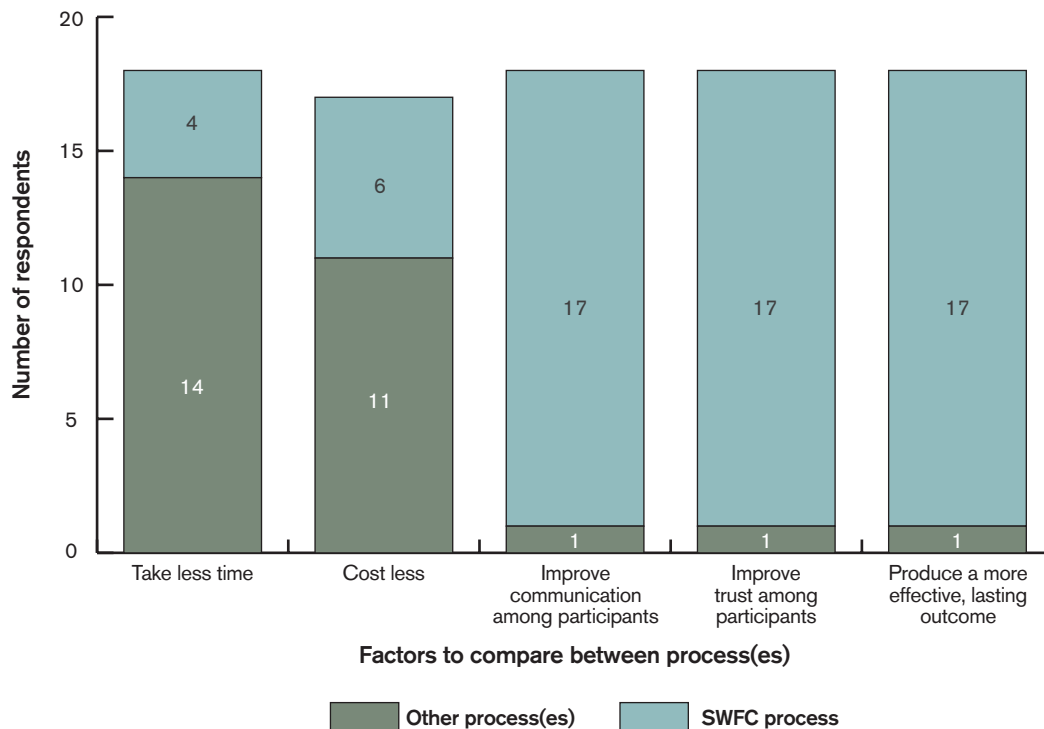
**When asked about the processes they would have used to provide input into forest management decisions if they had not participated in SWFC, the majority (15) of respondents indicated direct discussion with decision makers as the process they would have used.** Eight respondents said they would have used public comments and/or letter writing, and six identified citizen petitions or initiatives as options. Six respondents said they would have taken no action, and five each said that proposing legislation or lobbying would have been

their preferred process. Four noted litigation as a process they would have used. Two of the 21 survey participants did not answer this question.

We then asked respondents to compare the other process(es) they selected for providing input to forest management to the process of engaging in SWFC. **The majority of respondents indicated that processes outside of SWFC engagement would take less time and cost less than engaging in SWFC** (see Figure 3, below). This included respondents who engaged in direct discussion with decision makers, comment letters, citizen petitions, litigation, no action, and/or lobbying. Those few who noted that SWFC would take less time or money than the other processes typically listed several different processes they would have engaged in, and/or proposed legislation.

**Respondents overwhelmingly (17 of the 18 responses) listed the SWFC process as resulting in improved communication and trust among participants in comparison to other processes, and as providing more effective, longer lasting outcomes.** The

**Figure 3 Comparison of SWFC collaborative process to other processes used to provide input into forest management decisions**

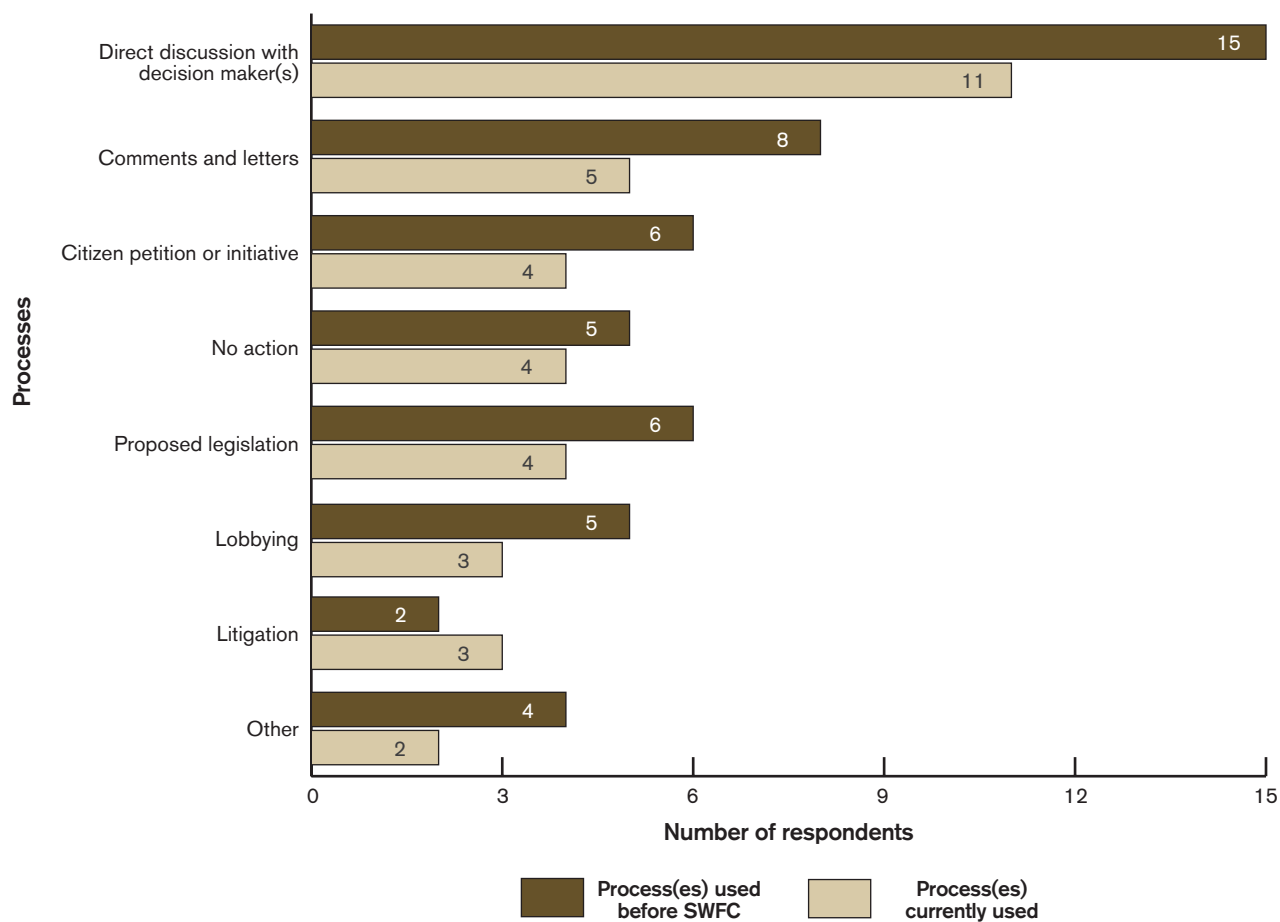


one individual who disagreed with these comments said they would have engaged in direct discussion with decision makers, which they felt would have had a more effective and lasting outcome.

**Respondents were then asked what process(es) they still use to provide input into forest management decisions, in addition to their participation in SWFC, to understand what processes they felt were still important to engage in alongside collaboration through SWFC.** Of the 18 individuals that responded to this question, the majority of respondents (11 individuals) reported that, consistent

with the previous question, they still used direct discussion with decision makers to provide input into forest management decisions (see Figure 3, below). Four to five respondents each also listed: comments and letters, no action, proposing legislation, or citizen petition. Three individuals listed lobbying, and two mentioned litigation. Overall, the number of individuals still engaging in processes other than SWFC decreased by three, showing that SWFC survey respondents are using fewer processes outside of SWFC, especially in direct discussion, comments, lobbying and litigation.

**Figure 3 Comparison of processes survey respondents use(d) to provide input into forest management decisions, before joining SWFC and currently**







## SWFC engagement and collaborative process

A large part of collaborative work is linked to process and engagement. This includes understanding if participants believe their voices (and the organizations they may represent) are heard and incorporated into the collaborative process, and if they believe all the organizations that should be engaged in the group are actively engaged. Similarly, considering how members think the group functions around questions of respect, information sharing, learning and commitment can provide insight on how collaborative members perceive each other and the internal dynamics of the group.

### SWFC engagement

When asked about the reasons or incentives that other collaborative members might have for engaging in SWFC, survey participants primarily listed:

having their voice heard, representing constituents, and engaging in informing land management decisions. All of these incentives were also listed as primary incentives for respondent's own participation in SWFC.

Another survey question asked how much respondents agreed that all organizations needed to achieve SWFC's goals were already engaged. This statement received far more disagree and neutral responses than any other question on the survey, with six participants disagreeing, 11 responding neutrally, and only four respondents agreeing. Two other respondents noted in other places in the survey that SWFC either did not have all participation at the table at all times, or did not have all necessary organizations engaged. Responses like these can flag areas where there is less agreement within the collaborative, and identify areas that might warrant further exploration by the collaborative.

### SWFC process and engagement with members

Survey respondents were asked what assumptions or premises SWFC should recognize about its work. Respondents mostly noted that SWFC should recognize that they are informing decision making, but are not the actual decision makers for land management, and that the collaborative should focus on a healthy forest and healthy communities. Several also noted the importance of relationships with the Forest Service, and the need to use best available information to make land management decisions. Respondents also explained that the work SWFC is engaging in should be recognized as being a long-term process.

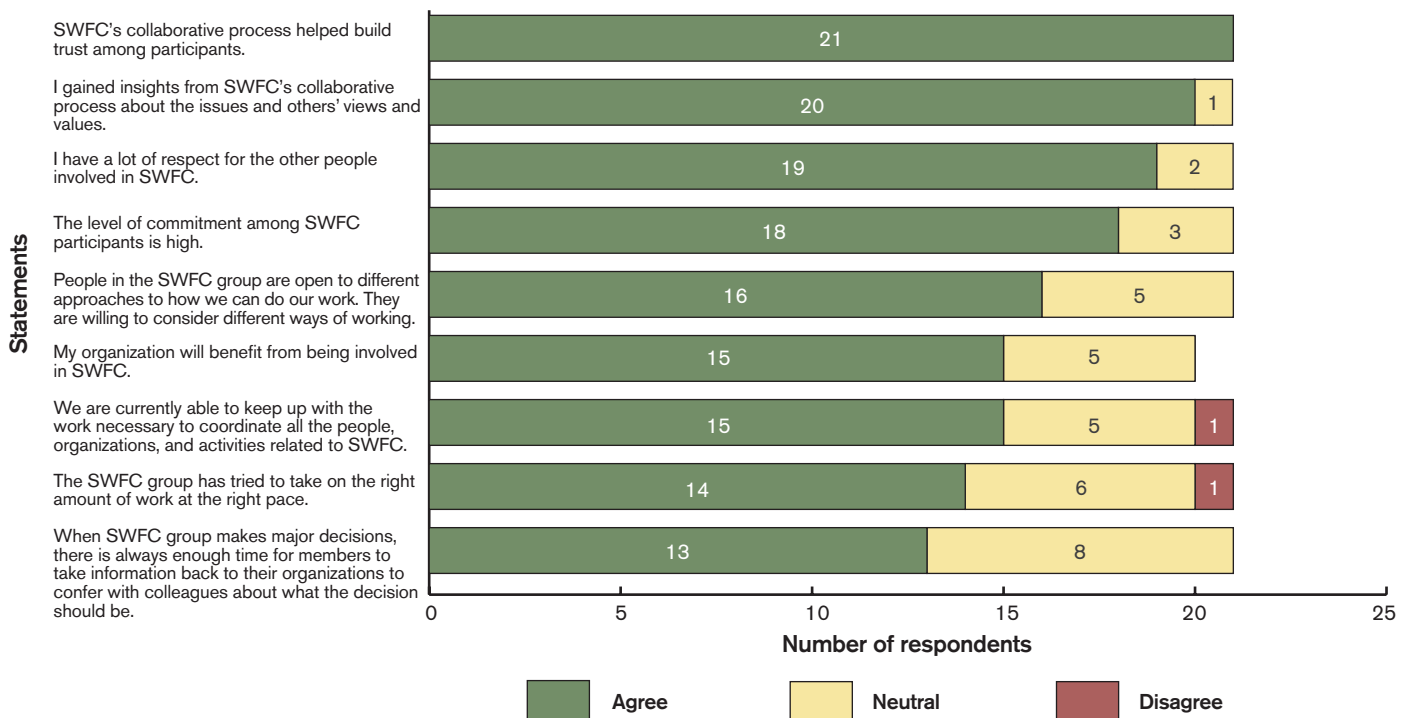
All survey participants agreed that SWFC’s collaborative process helped build trust among participants. The majority of respondents (only 1-3 individuals disagreed with each statement) also believed that:

- They gained insights from SWFC’s collaborative process about relevant issues and others’ views and values.

- They have a lot of respect for the other people involved in SWFC.
- The level of commitment among SWFC participants is high.

The majority of survey respondents agreed that: 1) people in the SWFC group are open to different approaches and are willing to consider different ways of working, 2) their respective organization(s) will benefit from being involved in SWFC, 3) that SWFC has tried to take on the right amount of work at the right time, and 4) that SWFC is currently able to keep up with the work necessary to coordinate the people and activities related to SWFC. More respondents were neutral or disagreed with these last two statements than any of the previous statements (24-28 percent were neutral, and one disagreed). The largest number of neutral responses came in response to the statement, “When SWFC group makes major decisions, there is always enough time for respondents to take information back to their organizations to confer with colleagues about what the decision should be.”

**Figure 4 Level of agreement among respondents for statements about SWFC collaborative processes and engagement**



## SWFC moving forward: Gaps and future considerations

Understanding any process, participation, or information gaps that members may perceive can help a collaborative understand areas where they might want to focus in the future. Identifying future areas for improvement or expansion can also help groups with ongoing planning and prioritization.

**When asked what they felt has been the least helpful part of SWFC participation, respondents primarily noted that they found the number of meetings, field trips, and other sessions were time consuming and difficult to attend due to scheduling issues and time constraints.** Related to this, some participants noted that it was challenging to attend enough of the meetings, particularly without funding to support them being there, and that driving time to and from meetings was a large obstacle for them. Participants also explained how it was difficult to schedule meetings during normal business hours and still get sufficient representation from different member organizations. Respondents also mentioned the varying levels of knowledge within the collaborative, and how time was spent getting everyone up to speed, and/or talking about forest management issues that are very hard to change. A few participants noted they were happy with SWFC's process and wouldn't change anything. Thirty percent of the survey respondents did not answer this question.

**Some SWFC survey respondents noted information gaps that could improve SWFC's efforts, although the majority of respondents said they had no suggestions, were unsure how to answer, or left the response blank for this question.** Those that did list information gaps described gaps that ranged from specific questions about ecological forest conditions, restoration, and historical conditions (3 respondents), to economic impacts and local benefits of harvesting (1 respondent), to broader statements about wanting SWFC to use more information on science or best management practices. Two respondents noted that there was already a wealth of information presented at SWFC, to the point of being almost overwhelming at times. One respondent requested more information about how the For-

est Service uses science in its land management and decision making, and another suggested that SWFC could provide more information about how to recruit more of the environmental community to engage in the collaborative.

## SWFC future considerations

**Survey respondents mentioned a range of areas for SWFC to consider for the future, including items about SWFC process and organization, interaction with the Forest Service, and the use and role of science.** Related to SWFC process and organization, respondents asked for shorter meetings and/or more efficient use of time in meetings, clearer goals to be established for SWFC and creating committees, more structure around collaborative decision making, and a better sense of organizational stability and funding. Others asked for more information from the Forest Service, especially around their opinions on topics, and for additional opportunities to engage more with the Forest Service in surveys and other day-to-day operations to better understand the functions of the agency. Participants also had for specific information requests such as up-to-date aerial photography and the continued use of good science in the group. Others noted a need to have more practical conversations and less scientific talk.



## Conclusion

The SWFC clearly plays an important role in connecting stakeholders with a variety of land management experiences to Forest Service decision making and land management in the Southern Willamette region. The SWFC members who participated in the assessment indicated that overall they appreciate the function, process, and engagement of the SWFC. Challenges noted by survey respondents are common for forest collaborative participants; collaboration does indeed require a lot of time, commitment, and meetings. Survey respondents also provided suggestions for areas in which SWFC could improve or expand in the future, such as engaging other stakeholders, providing other types of science or information, and monitoring changes over time.

Like other forms of project monitoring, routine check-ins with the collaborative and its projects can be critical for a group to understand what is working, and what changes might be enacted for more effective efforts. Future assessments could use the results from this first assessment to create categorical responses in multiple-choice questions for participants to select, which would reduce the number of open-ended questions, and subsequently, participant time in taking the survey. As SWFC develops and evolves, the use of this assessment tool will allow the collaborative to track changes over time while monitoring and adjusting as needed. Along with SWFC's project-specific assessment, these collaborative group assessments will help SWFC understand how well it is functioning for member needs, in meeting group-defined goals, and within collaborative projects.

### Key findings:

- Information sharing opportunities (experts, field trips, covering a diversity of topics) are important to SWFC members. At the same time, respondents also noted that they found the number of meetings, field trips, and other sessions time consuming and difficult to attend due to scheduling issues and time constraints.
- The SWFC does not fully agree that all of the organizations that are needed to achieve SWFC's goals are currently engaged.
- The SWFC plays a critical role in connecting collaborative members to Forest Service staff for purposes of learning, informing land management, and providing formal and informal opportunities to interact.
- The Forest Service's engagement with SWFC is well noted and highly appreciated by SWFC survey respondents.
- The SWFC has strengths in communication and organization.
- The SWFC provides an alternative process for stakeholders to engage in, in lieu of what they used to do (e.g. litigation, public comments), and/or as another venue for engaging in informing land management decisions on Forest Service land.
- SWFC survey respondents believe that engaging in the SWFC's collaborative process builds trust and improves communication among participants, and creates more opportunities for longer-lasting change as compared to other processes used to inform land management decisions.

## Appendix: Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative 2017 self assessment survey questions

Dear SWFC member:

As a member of the Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative, we are requesting your participation in a self-assessment survey. This will help SWFC understand how processes are working, and inform future work.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and your responses will be kept confidential. To protect your privacy, you should not include any information about your identity within the survey, and research reports will not include information that can connect you to your answers. We expect this survey to take approximately 1015 minutes.

We appreciate your consideration of this survey request!

This survey focuses on the questions the SWFC identified as important for self-assessment.

You will be asked questions about:

1. working relationships with partners,
2. processes and structures within the collaborative; and
3. membership characteristics.

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### SWFC collaborative self-assessment

Please answer the following questions from your perspective. If you find a question confusing, or are unsure how to answer, please include those comments in the response box.

1. Since May 2016, approximately how many SWFC meetings, field trips and other events have you attended? Mark only one oval.  
 None  
 13 meetings  
 47 meetings  
 8 or more meetings
2. What inspired you to participate in SWFC/ what are the incentives for you to participate in SWFC? *(open-ended, text box)*
3. What incentives do you see for other members to participate in SWFC? *(open-ended, text box)*
4. What incentives do you see for the Forest Service to engage with SWFC? *(open-ended, text box)*
5. What has worked well about how the Forest Service and SWFC have engaged to achieve desired outcomes? *(open-ended, text box)*

6. What information gaps, if filled, would improve SWFC's efforts? *(open-ended, text box)*
7. What do you see as the essential roles & responsibilities for SWFC members? *(open-ended, text box)*
8. Are there other essential roles & responsibilities for the SWFC Board specifically? *(open-ended, text box)*
9. What assumptions or premises should the SWFC recognize about its work? *(open-ended, text box)*
10. What has been MOST helpful for you as a SWFC participant? *(open-ended, text box)*
11. What has been LEAST helpful for you as a SWFC participant? *(open-ended, text box)*
12. What would be most helpful for you in your future work with SWFC? *(open-ended, text box)*

13. a) What process(es) would you have used to provide input into forest management decisions if you had not participated in SWFC? (check all that apply)

- No action
- Litigation
- Proposed legislation Citizen petition or initiative
- Direct discussion with decision maker(s) Lobbying
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

b) ) If you marked "other" in Question 13a above, please explain what other processes you have used to provide input into forest management decisions. *(open-ended, text box)*

14. Compare the SWFC's collaborative process to the option(s) you chose above (in Question 13a). Which would most likely (mark only one oval per row):

	SWFC process	Other processes you selected above
Cost less?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Take less time?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Improve communication among participants?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Improve trust among participants?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Produce a more effective, lasting outcome	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

15. a) What process(es) are you still using to provide input into forest management decisions outside of SWFC? Check all that apply:

- No action
- Litigation
- Proposed legislation
- Citizen petition or initiative
- Direct discussion with decision maker(s)
- Lobbying
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

b) Why are you still using these processes to provide input into forest management decisions?  
*(open-ended, text box)*

16. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each statement. Mark only one oval per row.

	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
I have a lot of respect for the other people involved in SWFC.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I gained insights from SWFC’s collaborative process about the issues and others’ views and values.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The level of commitment among SWFC participants is high.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SWFC’s collaborative process helped build trust among participants.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People in the SWFC group are open to different approaches to how we can do our work. They are willing to consider different ways of working.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
All of the organizations that we need to achieve SWFC’s goals are currently engaged.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The SWFC group has tried to take on the right amount of work at the right pace.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We are currently able to keep up with the work necessary to coordinate all the people, organizations, and activities related to SWFC.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When SWFC group makes major decisions, there is always enough time for members to take information back to their organizations to confer with colleagues about what the decision should be.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My organization will benefit from being involved in SWFC.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

17. Please share any other comments or questions. *(open-ended, text box)*

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**Endnotes**

1 Davis, E.J., and C. Moseley. Assessing collaborative opportunities on the Willamette National Forest. Ecosystem Workforce Program Working Paper #37. University of Oregon, Eugene, OR. Available online at: [http://ewp.uoregon.edu/sites/ewp.uoregon.edu/files/WP\\_37.pdf](http://ewp.uoregon.edu/sites/ewp.uoregon.edu/files/WP_37.pdf)

2 DeMeo, T., A. Markus, B. Bormann, and J. Leingang, 2015. Tracking progress: The monitoring process used in collaborative forest landscape restoration projects in the Pacific Northwest. Ecosystem Workforce Program Working Paper #54. Available at: [http://ewp.uoregon.edu/sites/ewp.uoregon.edu/files/WP\\_54.pdf](http://ewp.uoregon.edu/sites/ewp.uoregon.edu/files/WP_54.pdf)

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3 Outlook Collaborative Committee. <http://southwillamette.wixsite.com/swfc/outlook>.

4 Rigdon Collaborative Committee. <http://southwillamette.wixsite.com/swfc/rigdon-1>.

