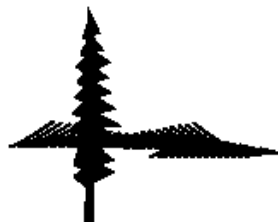# ECOSYSTEM WORKFORCE

# BRIEFING PAPERS

**Community-based Collaboration in National
Forest Management: Experiences in Two Oregon
Stewardship Contracting Pilots**

EWP Briefing Paper Number 6
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The *Ecosystem Workforce Program Briefing Papers* series offers short papers designed to give a clear, brief, easy-to-digest introduction to key issues, innovation, lessons and findings about a variety of areas associated with the effort to build quality jobs in ecosystem management. The target audience includes public land management agency line officers and project managers, community organization leaders, and local community officials. A secondary audience is the broader community forestry constituency.

*Community-based Collaboration in National Forest Planning: Innovation & Constraint in Two Oregon Stewardship Contracting Pilots, EWP Briefing Paper Number 6,* presents two case studies of community-based collaborative groups associated with USDA Forest Service stewardship contracting pilot projects. The study assesses the potential of these groups to contribute to innovative forest management strategies, and analyzes the challenges of incorporating collaborative processes into traditional Forest Service management approaches.

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# Executive Summary

**Community-based Collaboration in National Forest Management:**
**Innovation & Constraint in Two Oregon Stewardship Contracting Pilots**

## Abstract

There is a growing movement towards community-based approaches in national forest management, due in part to the failure of traditional management strategies to reach ecological and political goals. This study looked at community-based collaborative efforts in two USDA Forest Service stewardship contracting pilots- in the Siuslaw and Metolius basins in Oregon- to assess whether these approaches contributed to higher trust and innovative strategies able to address place-specific ecological, social, and economic challenges. It also looked specifically at the challenges associated with incorporating deliberative approaches into traditional Forest Service management.

Findings suggest that community-based groups played key roles in building trust, and in providing the breadth of perspectives necessary to design strategies that met ecological and socioeconomic goals. Agency understandings of and attitudes towards community involvement, however, significantly empowered or constrained this potential. Support from agency leadership, the cultivation of a risk-taking culture, and openness towards multiple forms of knowledge were important contributors to proactive agency attitudes concerning collaboration.

## Introduction

In the last few decades, national forest management has become increasingly controversial and unsatisfactory -- public agencies are left frustrated, rural communities struggle with community and economic stability, and environmentalists feel the land is not properly protected. A collaborative approach to national forest management attempts to bring concerns and voices together to reach a greater common understanding of goals, and to create solutions that address a broader range of concerns. Community-based collaborative approaches emphasize the need to include multiple forms of knowledge and diverse perspectives, and for more direct citizen participation (Brick, Snow, and Van de Wetering 2001; Duane 1997; Gray, Enzer, and Kusel 2000; Snow 2001; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). These approaches are based on the idea that more effective solutions to complex problems are better reached through deliberation than through negotiating from preconceived fixed positions (Dryzek 2000; Barber 1984; Healey 1993; Innes 1995), as well as a growing understanding that the complexity of ecological systems necessitates the consideration of multiple forms of knowledge at different spatial levels (Gunderson, Holling, and Light 1995; Holling 1986). They also acknowledge and address the interconnectedness of local social and ecological systems (Duane 1997; Meffe et al. 2002; Gray, Enzer, and Kusel 2000).

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This research looked specifically at community-based collaborative processes within two USDA Forest Service stewardship pilot programs in Oregon--the Siuslaw watershed and the Metolius Basin-- to understand what role these collaborative groups played in forest management, whether they contributed to more politically acceptable and ecologically effective management, and what barriers or opportunities arose as new forms of deliberation were introduced into traditional Forest Service decision-making processes.

The stewardship pilot program was an attempt by Congress to address the economic needs of rural communities while simultaneously creating efficient ways to get restoration and management work done on national forests. One component of the pilot projects was a shift to a more participatory model of forest management, focused on collaboration among parties of interest. The authorizing legislation required each project to convene a multi-party monitoring group composed of diverse stakeholders to monitor and evaluate the outcomes of the project. It also encouraged broad-based collaboration. In theory, local industry representatives, environmentalists, tribal representatives, agency representatives and community members-at-large were to work together to reach common goals. Although the Forest Service had experimented with this collaborative model of community participation over the last decade, it was still largely uncharted ground within national forest management, and marked a dramatic departure from the Forest Service's traditional expert-driven authoritarian management model, the highly controversial "war in the woods" period of the 1980s and early 1990s, and the gridlock that still characterizes forest planning today.

This study asks the following questions: 1) Were these local multi-party monitoring groups effective forums for building trust and common ground? 2) Did these groups have potential to collectively envision and create innovative strategies to achieve ecological, social, and economic goals in forest management? 3) What barriers and obstacles did these groups face? and 4) What challenges arose as more inclusive, deliberative processes were incorporated into Forest Service planning and management?

## Methodology

Using a case study methodology, I observed collaborative meetings between February and November 2003 and conducted 28 in-depth semi-structured interviews with group participants.

## Case Studies

The case studies were local multi-party monitoring groups convened as part of USDA Forest Service stewardship contracting pilot projects. The Siuslaw Stewardship Group (SSG) was part of the Siuslaw Basin Stewardship Rehabilitation Project, located in the Mapleton Ranger District on the Siuslaw Forest in the coast range of Oregon. The Metolius Multi-Party Monitoring Group (MPMT) was part of the Metolius Basin Forest Management Project in the Sisters Ranger District on the Deschutes Forest in Central Oregon. Both groups were convened in the fall of 2002.

# Key Findings

## Trust, Social Learning and the Pooling of Resources

Both the Metolius and the Siuslaw cases supported the idea that when citizens with diverse interests are given the chance to come together and build a dialogue around an issue, they can build trust, find common ground, and pool resources to create innovative strategies. The diversity and make-up of each group and the participants' past history working together were influential factors affecting the extent that these goals were reached in each case. The fairly homogenous Siuslaw group had a strong history of working together, began the process with high levels of trust among group members, and were able to function highly and assert themselves as a group. Their lack of diversity, however, constrained the breadth of perspectives at the table, and left them vulnerable to criticism from interests not represented. The Metolius group, on the other hand, brought a breadth of diverse interest together, making strong efforts to begin building trust among historical antagonists. They limited their discussions, however, to the fairly uncontentious role of monitoring. Although this limited the extent of social learning and innovation within the group, it did provide a safe forum to begin building trust and relationships.

*The Siuslaw Stewardship Group*

The Siuslaw Stewardship Group enjoyed a high level of trust within the group from the beginning, in large part because most of the participants had worked together previously on the watershed council. Group members had a high level of communicative ability, and were able to 'hit the ground running,' with regards to group process. In addition, most group members had a strong understanding of natural resource issues within the Siuslaw basin and a strong base of knowledge to contribute to the dialogue. Participants contributed various forms of knowledge and expertise, including ecological knowledge of specific sites in the Siuslaw, connections with economic development interests in the basin, and other contributions such as installing photo points to gather baseline data for monitoring.

The SSG, however, consisted largely of moderate environmental landowners with similar ecological priorities; local industry interests were not regularly present at meetings. This lack of diversity limited the scope of the group's ability to articulate a vision of a true 'restoration economy,' and its ability to effectively meet both ecological and socio-economic goals. This lack of diversity also provoked concern among group members that 'outsiders' not involved in the group would try to derail the process at a later date. Most group members did cite the lack of diversity as a weakness of the group, efforts to reach out to forest industry interests in the basin were continuing, and the lack of diversity appeared to be more a function of inadequate outreach than a function of deliberate exclusion.

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*The Metolius Multi-Party Monitoring Team*

Unlike the Siuslaw group, the MPMT was a diverse group that represented most major interests in the region. The spectrum of interests included wildlife biologists, radical-to-moderate environmentalists, industry representatives, and interested local residents. This diversity, although potentially contentious, generated some progress towards collectively visioning a project that brought people's interests together. Perhaps most significantly, radical environmental interests and local loggers were able to build trust and understanding through informal interactions. In addition, local industry interests provided a valuable perspective and body of knowledge to the group, especially as the group strove to meet pilot goals of designing contracts in ways that benefited the local community socially and economically.

The group, however, increasingly constrained discussion during meetings to its role as a monitoring body. The strength of this was that more radical interests felt comfortable collaboratively participating in a group focused on monitoring, whereas they felt they would not be able to come to consensus on design issues that involved deeper values and more contentious issues. The weakness of this was that the potential to share perspectives and to search for common ground within complex management issues, as well as the opportunity to formulate a collective vision of management strategies, was limited. Although most members were comfortable with focusing on discussions of monitoring, a few members were frustrated that they were not able to address more fundamental issues of trust within the group, and that there was not more effort to collaboratively create acceptable management strategies. Although the group could have benefited and grown from more open discussion of values and perspectives, focusing on the fairly uncontentious issue of monitoring provided a good beginning point to bring diverse interests together.

**Forest Service Attitudes: Innovation or Constraint?**

The Siuslaw and Metolius cases tell different stories of how community-based collaboration was incorporated into forest planning and management. Although the Metolius and Siuslaw pilots operated under the same authorizing legislation and guidelines, the ways that the Forest Service in each case framed and guided the group heavily influenced the purpose and progress of each group. Two models of agency attitudes towards collaboration emerged. The proactive model of collaboration, prevalent in the Siuslaw, was shaped by an agency attitude that involving the local community was an opportunity to create and implement better management strategies, and that the community's involvement would lead to more resources in the future. The reactive model, prevalent in the Metolius, was shaped by an agency attitude that collaboration was a necessary obstacle to build credibility so that the agency could continue to implement its management strategies.

These stories show both the challenges and the opportunities that arise as new ideas of governance intersect with traditional institutions of natural resource management. While the Metolius case clearly demonstrates the tensions that arise in this intersection, the Siuslaw case provides some insight into how agencies and communities can create a synergy to better address new and increasingly complex management challenges.

*The Metolius Multi-Party Monitoring Team*

The Sisters District Ranger convened the MPMT early, while the Forest Service was undertaking its environmental analysis. The district realized that involving the public was a necessary step towards building trust that had been lost over the last few decades, and it recruited a large group of diverse stakeholders, including environmentalists and local industry representatives, who were mostly local loggers. Although the district began with strong rhetoric concerning public participation, it progressively constrained the MPMT, narrowing the meaningful role of the community, both through limiting the group's role in substantive ways and through employing attitudes and rhetoric that illustrated resistance and inflexibility. In short, the Forest Service saw the group as a necessary entity to provide accountability – and thus to regain Forest Service credibility-yet they endowed them with an increasingly narrow substantive role focused largely on making sure the agency implemented its own predefined goals. Although this attitude limited the potential of a meaningful and innovative partnership between the group and the agency, it did provide a crucial avenue for accountability, a priority to many in the group. A lingering agency culture of expert-driven management within the district, the lack of active support from higher leadership within the Forest, and the particular point that the Forest Service was at in their relation of trust with the community, contributed to a more reactive stance towards collaboration.

*The Siuslaw Stewardship Group*

The Siuslaw National Forest approached community involvement in the stewardship pilot as an opportunity to collectively achieve goals in watershed health, and it empowered the group with a meaningful role in the project. Although they made some mistakes along the way, Forest Service staff showed they were willing to learn from the community and to stretch the parameters of their process to incorporate community involvement. Perhaps most significantly, the Forest Service welcomed other perspectives and forms of 'expertise' as opportunities to generate creative strategies, not as a threat to Forest Service expertise. Future efforts to involve the community earlier in the planning phase and to start reinvesting stewardship funds would strengthen the project. The Siuslaw Forest Service was able to adopt a proactive attitude towards collaboration because the Forest had demonstrated a committed shift to ecosystem management and community involvement, they had regained public trust through recent work with the community on the watershed council and in other partnerships, they had the active support of higher leadership, and the Forest Service individuals involved were willing and able to take risks and test out innovative strategies. The high-level role that the community was willing to take, and that the agency encouraged them to take, provides a powerful example of how a community can pool its resources to address complex issues like watershed connectivity and broad-scale ecosystem restoration

**Factors that enabled or constrained Forest Service innovation**

The Siuslaw National Forest was able to stretch the parameters of traditional Forest Service processes to open up possibilities for a synergistic partnership with the community where 'the whole became greater than the sum of its parts.' This case illustrates that the 'culture' of an agency is pliable, and that assumptions, however deeply embedded, can change. The compelling question is -- what precipitated this change? Why was the Forest Service, an agency with deep roots in top-down planning, in this case able to embrace the meaningful inclusion of community deliberation?

*The Continuum of Trust*

As noted above, both the Mapleton and Sisters Ranger Districts were recovering from a drastic loss of trust that began in the 1980s. The Mapleton district, however, had regained a fair amount of public trust through demonstrating its commitment to ecosystem management and through partnering with the community on the watershed council and through other projects. They had demonstrated that their mission now was solely restoration-based, and that all of their harvests took place in plantations. The late-successional reserve status of much of the forest provided a baseline of ecological comfort to environmentalists, and the Forest went beyond these baseline requirements in 1994 when it made a decision not to harvest in mature forests even when it was allowed under the Northwest Forest Plan. In addition, the Forest Service had several years' experience partnering closely with the watershed council and other governmental and non-governmental agencies to work together towards watershed connectivity. Thus, it viewed the SSG not primarily as a chance to regain credibility, but to reinforce partnership work it had already been doing to leverage more resources in the basin.

The Sisters Ranger District, on the other hand, viewed credibility as its major obstacle to getting work done. Although it successfully partnered with the community to complete the Heritage Demonstration Project, it was still 'walking on glass' in a sense, fearful of lawsuits and cognizant that public trust was critical, especially as forest health issues in the high-profile Metolius Basin demanded active management. Although the pilot project also took place under 'late-successional reserve' ecological guidelines, public fear of mismanagement remained. Many people were watching this process closely to see if it proved to be a success, and the agency knew that while it was an opportunity to build public trust, it was also an opportunity to destroy it, if for some reason they were unable to follow through on promises. Paradoxically, reacting from a fear-based position, the agency knew it must involve the public, yet was hesitant to take the risks necessary to make this collaboration meaningful. An observer noted:

> There's a lack of risk-taking ability in the Forest Service. They're working in a fishbowl- they have an experiment that isn't allowed to fail, so by that token, it isn't really allowed to be an experiment.

Thus, the Sisters Ranger District chose to engage in an energy-intensive experiment with the public, yet tried to fit the process into a narrow and pre-defined Forest Service process. As one observer noted, "They invited the community to the party, but forgot to give them party hats."

*Handbooks and Manuals: agency culture*

Although the Forest Service has been undergoing marked changes, it has traditionally had a very specific institutional culture, that of an expert-driven 'can-do' agency, notably efficient at implementing management strategies (Caldwell, Wilkinson, and Shannon 1994; Hirt 1994; Wilkinson 1992). It is by and large an organization of technical specialists who rely on 'science' and 'handbooks and manuals' to do their work. Innovation and risk-taking are not rewarded; implementation and efficiency are. In addition, most agency personnel were trained in 'natural resources,' not 'human resources,' and many probably never thought their job descriptions would include 'collaboration with the community'. In short, they are not trained in this kind of process, and the Forest Service's culture does not encourage it.

Agency culture in the Siuslaw, however, underwent a transition starting in 1992 when former supervisor Jim Furnish restructured staff, clearly shifted the focus from commodity production to restoration thinning for old growth forest conditions, and encouraged community collaboration. Perhaps most importantly, the Siuslaw National Forest tolerated and even supported innovative and risk-taking behavior, and several individuals had sought out partnerships with the public, worked to fund those projects and make them happen, and were willing to take the risks necessary for innovation. Most community members in the Siuslaw attributed the energy and attitudes of several Forest Service staff members as critical factors in both creating community trust and in enabling and empowering innovative, community-driven, on-the-ground work.

The Sisters Ranger District, on the other hand, was probably the more common case, where the expert-driven, hierarchical culture still dominated. Many staff members in the Sisters Ranger District resisted expanding or changing their traditional roles in the agency, and risk-taking attitudes met with resistance.

*Creating the Space: leadership*

Because risk-taking and innovation are not highly-valued qualities in the broader context of Forest Service culture, the support of higher leadership is crucial in undertaking experiments like stewardship contracting and multi-party monitoring. The active support of the current forest supervisor in the Siuslaw Forest was crucial in giving the group confidence that their recommendations would be taken, and in providing the support to Forest Service staff that enabled them to take risks. In the Metolius case, on the other hand, the forest supervisor never played a visible role in the pilot project. Although the district ranger spoke highly of community involvement, this commitment was never made concrete in the form of proactive support, either financially or by vesting staff with the confidence to support community involvement. Efforts to provide the community with a substantive and meaningful role were not proactively supported by higher leadership, by staff in the Supervisor's Office, or, in turn, by most other personnel. This made it difficult to take risks to experiment with greater community involvement and innovative contract design- the very purpose of stewardship pilots.

**New and old institutions at a grander scale**

Another main finding of this study draws attention once more to the tension between old and new processes, or institutions of governance, but on a larger scale. Even while deliberative community-based processes are testing the waters and forging ahead, these waters are embedded in a landscape shaped by old processes. For example, while specific districts or Forests may invite and empower community involvement, changing directives or policies from higher in the agency, or even a general agency *modus operandus* of inflexibility, can subvert these efforts. This potential was apparent in the Siuslaw project. Although this will always be a reality to some extent, because federal agencies are influenced by changing administrations and national politics, this tension should at least be brought to light. Leadership at the regional and national levels in the Forest Service should recognize that if they authorize experiments in innovation, subsequent efforts to reduce flexibility or to change tacks can undermine or devastate lengthy trust-building efforts between communities and local or regional Forest Service staff. Local and regional agency staff would benefit by knowing that their efforts and 'promises,' so to speak, will be supported from above.


# Conclusion

As we are faced with increasingly complex management challenges, and the desire to work towards social and ecological sustainability, community-based deliberative processes play an important role. The Metolius and Siuslaw multi-party monitoring groups both demonstrated the potential of community-based collaboratives to build trust, reach common ground, and design innovative management strategies that are both politically acceptable and ecologically effective. Opening up the space for these processes requires, and in turn, promotes, a shift in conceptual thinking from expert-driven, techno-scientific management to a more communicative process of planning that incorporates diverse perspectives, and gives people a chance to transform preconceived positions into common interests. The Forest Service's partnership with the Siuslaw Stewardship Group is a provocative model of how agency expertise and community perspectives can work together to leverage resources and create innovative strategies. The strength of community-based collaborative efforts, however, is in their sensitivity to place-specific contexts and their flexibility in the face of dynamic challenges. Thus, I hope these findings provide insight not as a particular structural model, but as an example of how institutions can display flexibility and adaptability to incorporate new and innovative ideas.

## Recommendations

The particular challenges and opportunities of different community-based collaboratives are context-specific, however, these case studies brought to light certain attitudes and actions that can facilitate the shift towards innovation and more inclusive management processes.

- Empower community groups with a meaningful role, and give them confidence that their perspectives and input will be valued.

     The openness of the Siuslaw National Forest to community involvement facilitated trust within the Siuslaw Stewardship Group. It also created tangible avenues for the group to contribute resources and ideas to meet project goals. The importance of this openness and support cannot be overstated.

- Provide training for agency staff in how to facilitate and/or participate in deliberative processes.

     The need for this was evident in both case studies. Forest Service staff in the Siuslaw case tended to learn through experience and through adopting an open attitude towards the group. The Sisters Ranger District made a concerted effort to keep the group educated and informed on project progress, but had a limited understanding of the scope of community collaboration. Thus, training in facilitation and communicative processes would be helpful, as well as training in what the full scope of substantive community involvement is.

- Cultivate an agency culture that rewards innovative behavior.

     Individual risk-taking behavior is difficult if it is not supported or encouraged. As mentioned, individual Forest Service staff in the Siuslaw worked within an atmosphere where they were able to take risks and try out new ideas.

- Cultivate support for community involvement from higher leadership.

     The support of the Forest Supervisor in the Siuslaw National Forest was crucial in enabling staff members to support the community and in gaining trust from the community that their involvement and recommendations would be taken seriously.

- Engage collaborative groups early in the project-planning phase.

     The Sisters Ranger District convened one consensus-based group to gain input on the project-planning phase, and then convened the MPMT to monitor the project. Continuity between the groups involved in the planning, implementation, and monitoring phases would have fostered greater ownership of the project for the monitoring group, and would have provided accountability to the planning group that their concerns were being considered and monitored.

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The Siuslaw Group convened the SSG after the project planning phase, and would benefit from involving the group earlier in future plans.

- Involve a full range of diverse perspectives.

  The Metolius group gained strength from its diversity, both in bringing in potential opponents and in bringing in all of the perspectives necessary to achieve ecological and socioeconomic project goals. Many participants in the Siuslaw group saw lack of diversity as a weakness.

- Provide a knowledgeable facilitator whenever possible, especially in beginning stages of group formation.

  Independent facilitation in both cases was initially very important in guiding the groups through group process and goal-setting. As the groups progressed, facilitation continued to be important in keeping meetings organized and on-track. The Siuslaw retained an independent facilitator, while the chair and co-chair of the Metolius group took over those tasks. Both methods were successful.

- Hold field trips to share information and discuss goals and concerns.

  Looking at tangible issues in the field proved to be the most effective way of sharing ideas and information, and achieving consensus or innovative solutions. It is easier to leave 'positions' behind when focusing on specific stands or plots of land.

- Try to support group involvement financially e.g., reimbursement for travel costs.

  Both of these groups face the significant obstacle of relying on voluntarism. Although both groups have retained core membership, many informants cited the potential of burn-out and the financial difficulties of volunteering as a significant obstacle. Efforts should be made to support participants in whatever way possible.

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