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COLLABORATIVE LANDSCAPE RESTORATION ON FORESTS WITHOUT CFLRP OR JOINT CHIEFS' INVESTMENTS

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In 2017, we studied two restoration initiatives: the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) and the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership (JCLRP). Both programs competitively award multi-year funding for collaborative, landscape-scale restoration work on high-priority landscapes. To understand how other forests and landscapes viewed these programs and accomplish high-priority restoration work, we interviewed forest-level leadership and collaborative partners on national forests that had never participated in either program. Through interviews with 38 people on 20 national forests, we investigated how forests are conducting large-scale collaborative restoration in the absence of these targeted funding initiatives.

Findings

Forests are participating in collaborative landscape restoration efforts outside of these programs, but the nature of these efforts varies based on presence of partnerships, management priorities, and restoration needs. There was diversity in what forests gave as examples of collaborative landscape, restoration projects.

Interviewees broadly defined *restoration* goals and projects around the concepts of “restoring ecological function” or “restoring or promoting resiliency,” which typically meant mitigating social and ecological impacts from disturbances such as wildfires or forest insect and disease outbreaks.

Interviewees defined *landscape-scale* as projects that combine different land owners or resource benefits, are over a certain size (e.g. 30,000 acres or 100,000 acres), encompass a whole watershed or multiple watersheds, focus around “firescapes” that consider wildfire potential and behavior, or encompass multiple objectives.

Collaborative work was often described as evolving, and the degree to which it was occurring varied greatly among and even within forests we talked to. Overall, interviewees recognized the benefits of collaboration. Even forests that were not engaged in active collaborative efforts recognized that a shift toward increased collaboration was happening and necessary across the agency to leverage resources and build agreement for successful projects.

Even without CFLRP and JCLRP funding, forests are trying to move toward more collaborative landscape restoration. Staff on many forests described efforts to scale-up the size of projects, and many also discussed efforts to develop formal collaborative groups. Some forests reported engaging in these efforts in response to agency directives and to be more competitive for funding initiatives like CFLRP and JCLRP. Other forests said building additional external partnerships could help them accomplish more work on more of the forest.



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Staff on many forests were engaged in innovative partnerships to accomplish their work. Similar to forests with CFLRP and JCLRP projects, staff on the forests we interviewed all reported that funding is the primary issue to being able to accomplish restoration efforts successfully, followed by staff capacity to plan and implement the projects. Many forests have sought out and engaged with partners who could help bring funding and capacity to restoration efforts including from federal, state, and local agencies, tribes, NGOs, and interest groups.

The majority of forests we interviewed had not applied for CFLRP or JCLRP funding. Most interviewees felt that the JCLRP or CFLRP were not appropriate or worth the effort for the forests that they worked on. Reasons included a lack of staff and capacity to submit and implement a project, lack of agency and public partnerships or formal collaborative groups, the sense that the landscape types and restoration needs on their forest were not priorities for these programs, a need to focus on other (usually non-fire) projects at smaller scales, and concerns a projects under these programs would take away resources from other high-priority projects on their forests.

Staff on the majority of the forests we talked to agreed with the intent and objectives of the JCLRP and CFLRP programs but felt that they did not address the fundamental problem of inadequate resources system-wide to address critical management needs. Most agency interviewees were supportive of the programs' efforts even though their forest had not benefitted from the funding. However, most also suggested that the promise of funding with the programs was exaggerated, not financially additive, and that key limitations around funding to get critical work done had not been addressed. Nearly all interviewees suggested that progress under the initiatives came at a cost to progress in other areas and projects, both in awarded forests and in non-awarded forests.

Implications

More attention is needed to determine whether capacity building and funding should be directed to forests that are currently not competitive for focused investments but may be high priorities for restoration. Some forests did not apply for funding due to limited unit-level or collaborative capacity despite significant restoration needs, implying a possible need to examine how funding investments are prioritized. Our findings also indicate that some restoration needs may be more suited to regionally directed investments that can be tailored to local priorities and shorter-term or less spatially contiguous restoration issues.

Prioritization under dedicated programs has consequences for other locations that merit ongoing evaluation. If Congress and the agency direct priority funds to projects that can compete for CFLRP and JCLRP funding, there may be a need to address consequences for management needs and staff in locations that are not funded.

Political and funding stability are key to ensuring sustained restoration progress. This is particularly true on forests without multi-year funding awards from programs like the CFLRP or JCLRP, where time-intensive investments like building collaborative partnerships and planning larger-scale projects are perceived as riskier due to longer-term budget uncertainty.

More information

A full report of results is forthcoming. For this and other publications on results of the third-party review of the CFLRP and JCLRP, go to:

<https://sites.warnercnr.colostate.edu/courtneyschultz/practitioner-reports/>

and

<http://ewp.uoregon.edu/publications>

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