

RVCC
Rural Voices for
Conservation
COALITION

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INNOVATIVE COLLABORATIVE ENGAGEMENT IN NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST



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ABOUT RVCC



RVCC envisions healthy landscapes and vibrant rural communities throughout the American West. We are committed to finding and promoting solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and the well-being of rural communities. By bringing rural leaders together to share their work, we serve as a vital peer learning and capacity building network that

accelerates the practice of land stewardship and aligned economic development. To learn more about our work, visit: www.ruralvoicescoalition.org

COMPANION DOCUMENT

These vignettes are intended to provide examples of the different ways forest collaboratives engage in Forest Service land management projects. To read more about any of the steps or processes involved with developing and implementing these projects, please refer to our companion guidebook: Forest Service Project Planning to Implementation, available: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/562e839ee4b0332955e8143d/t/62b264569282122e704aabcd/1655858271691/Planning+to+Implementation_FINAL_LR.pdf

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The following table of contents gives a high-level summary of the steps involved in planning and implementing Forest Service vegetation management projects, along with examples of how forest collaborative groups have engaged along different stages of the project timeline. To read about any of these steps in more detail, please refer to RVCC's Forest Service Project Planning to Implementation guidebook: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/562e839ee4b0332955e8143d/t/62b264569282122e704aabcd/1655858271691/Planning+to+Implementation_FINAL_LR.pdf

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PLANNING

The planning of a Forest Service project begins with less-formalized and largely internal agency efforts to develop potential management actions. The agency then moves through the highly structured proposal development and environmental analysis phase dictated by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other associated federal regulations.

○ **Pre-NEPA:** *The agency begins formulating ideas for potential management actions through processes and activities that vary forest to forest and project to project.*



Surveys and data collection support

The Darrington Collaborative contracted with several entities to conduct data analysis and resource assessments that can be used in subsequent NEPA planning 4

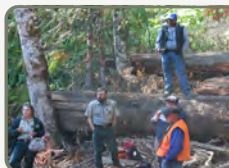


Planning and implementation engagement opportunities and commitments

Several collaborative groups worked with Forest Service staff to formalize written agreements for expectations and commitments 5

○ **NEPA Proposal Development:** *The Forest Service goes through several steps to develop a formal proposed action that is put forward for environmental analysis.*

○ **NEPA Environmental Analysis:** *The Forest Service assesses the potential environmental impacts of the proposed action.*



NEPA interdisciplinary team participation

Representatives from two collaboratives, the Pinchot Partners and the Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative, cultivated buy-in to attend NEPA planning meetings 6

IMPLEMENTATION

Upon completion of the NEPA process, the Forest Service begins the implementation phase. The agency plans out when and how activities will be carried out, develops more detailed site plans, completes project preparation, and develops contracts or agreements.

- Implementation Planning:** The agency considers a number of interrelated factors as it develops plans and timelines for implementing activities that were evaluated and approved via the NEPA process.



Implementation advisory committee

The Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative established an implementation advisory committee that weighs in on plans for carrying out planned restoration and fuels activities [7](#)



Shared learning through prescription development

An interactive exercise allowed members of the Northern Blues Forest Collaborative to better understand Forest Service prescription development [8](#)



Implementation engagement agreements

To clarify shared expectations, the Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative developed a formal request for collaborative engagement in post-NEPA implementation [8](#)



Improving sale economics through support of appraisal and sale design

The economics subgroup of the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative provided support and expertise on the financials of restoration-focused timber sales [8](#)

- Implementation Preparation:** Once a project is designed and slated for implementation, the Forest Service undertakes a number of on-the-ground preparation activities as well as more specific planning needed to prepare the project for inclusion in a contract or agreement.



Adding capacity through contracting

The Olympic Forest Collaborative contracted with a forestry contractor to perform tasks such as pre-sale silvicultural prescription development & unit layout [10](#)

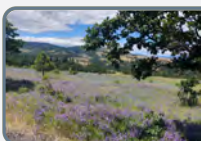
- Contract or Agreement Development & Offering:** The Forest Service frequently uses contracts and agreements to accomplish work. Once management activities are planned and prepared, staff develop contracts or agreements that capture all project activities, specifications, and requirements through clear, enforceable language.

- Project Implementation & Monitoring:** Implementation of planned activities marks the culmination of the implementation planning, preparation, and contract development phases. The agency may perform monitoring before, during, and/or after implementation to assess the impacts and effectiveness of actions.



Post-implementation monitoring

The Blue Mountains Forest Partners often incorporated post-treatment qualitative monitoring into its collaborative field trips [11](#)



Partnering for cross-boundary monitoring

Two collaboratives have worked with an outside partner to develop, fund, and implement a cross-boundary monitoring protocol for Oregon white oak restoration [12](#)



INTRODUCTION

Forest collaborative groups in the Pacific Northwest have a long history of working with the Forest Service on management activities that address forest health, wildlife habitat, watershed restoration and other issues. Over the time that these collaboratives have worked with their local forests and districts – a decade or more in the case of several groups – they have developed a variety of strategies to support Forest Service management actions and the collaborative process more generally. These various collaborative engagement approaches often take place during the project planning and analysis processes guided by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which has long been the more traditional realm for public involvement. However, in recent years some collaboratives have begun exploring opportunities to engage with the Forest Service during post-NEPA project implementation and monitoring, both of which are phases during which involvement from collaborative groups has been less common.



The following vignettes highlight different ways that collaboratives have engaged with the Forest Service at different points along the project timeline – through both planning and implementation. Exactly how collaboratives engage with the agency is a product of the nature of the collaborative’s work, the timeline and geographical extent of a project, the skillsets and capacities within the group, and its relationship with the agency, making it difficult to exactly replicate one collaborative’s approach somewhere else. Instead, it is our hope that these examples may encourage and inspire collaborative groups, other non-agency partners, and Forest Service staff to consider new or expanded ways to work together both during and after project planning in ways that work best within their context.

We also note that this document is intended to be a companion to RVCC’s June 2022 guidebook, “Forest Service Project Planning to Implementation.” The guidebook was developed as a resource for collaborative groups and other partners to better understand the full lifecycle of a vegetation management project. The following collaborative engagement vignettes are arranged in the order that they would take place along the project timeline outlined in that guidebook document.

“Forest Service Project Planning to Implementation” is available at:
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/562e839ee4b0332955e8143d/t/62b264569282122e704aabcd/1655858271691/Planning+to+Implementation_FINAL_LR.pdf



Best Practices for Collaborative Engagement in Implementation

Several of the vignettes below feature examples of collaborative group engagement in the implementation of Forest Service projects after they had been planned, analyzed, and approved through the NEPA process. This post-NEPA engagement is a newer realm for many collaborative groups. The following points reflect words of advice and considerations for collaboratives looking to get involved in this phase of Forest Service management activities.

- To help avoid misplaced expectations and wasted time on a particular project or effort, it can be helpful for Forest Service line officers to be clear and upfront with collaborative groups and other partners about relevant sideboards, legal requirements, and decision space, which is the zone of possibility in which decisions can be made and implemented. These constraints to decisions and actions may be based on existing environmental plans, agency rules and regulations, or other factors.

- Given that the post-NEPA implementation phase is one where collaborative engagement – and public involvement in general – has been less common, collaboratives may need to initially focus on building relationships and familiarity with implementation processes and personnel (e.g., timber shop staff, unit layout teams, or contracting officers). This could include educational field trips specifically intended for the collaborative to learn more about implementation activities and considerations. It may also be valuable for Forest Service implementation staff to attend some of the collaborative’s regular meetings, even if they don’t have an explicit implementation focus. Direct involvement in those discussions can help agency staff better understand the collaborative’s vision and values, improving the likelihood that those priorities get carried over into activities like tree marking and contract development that significantly impact on-the-ground outcomes. Such attendance also provides an opportunity for Forest Service staff to help collaborative members understand important operational considerations and constraints associated with ideas they’re discussing.

- A variety of non-Forest Service entities can play a role in the implementation of federal land management projects, whether that be logging operators working through a timber sale contract, state agencies working through a Good Neighbor Authority agreement, or non-profits working through a partnership agreement. To determine the best opportunities for collaborative group engagement in particular, these groups may find it worthwhile to think about their specific attributes (e.g. diverse makeup, deliberative nature, and/or focus on finding areas of agreement) and use that as a lens to assess whether and how the collaborative can add unique value to project implementation.

- Entities such as Tribes, state agencies, and nonprofits that are members of a collaborative are also often involved in carrying out projects via implementation mechanisms such as stewardship agreements or service contracts. In these cases, it may be important to clarify whether those entities are representing or acting on behalf of the collaborative in that implementer role, whether they are working in their own individual capacity, or something in between.



PRE-NEPA

Surveys and data collection support

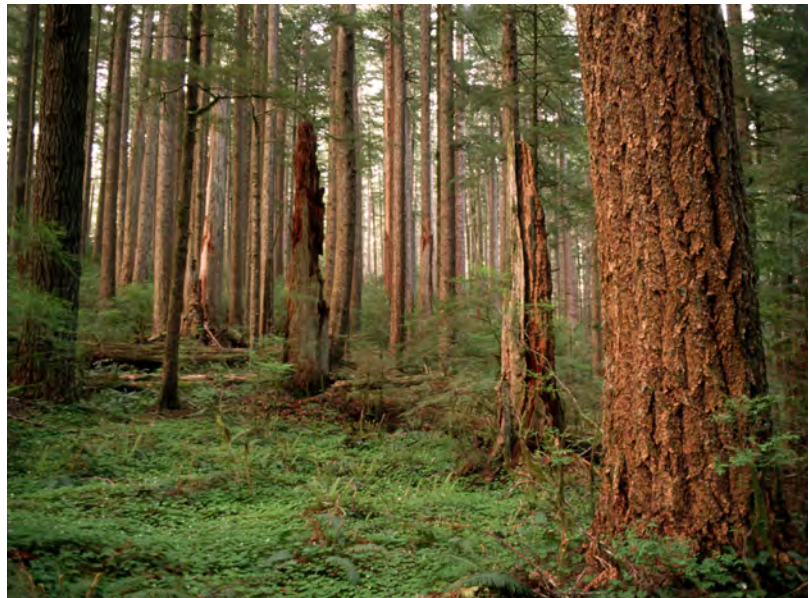
The Darrington Collaborative formed in 2015 and in the first few years of its existence, the group was laser-focused on increasing restoration thinning on National Forest land by contracting out pre-NEPA survey work on two 70-acre restoration thinning projects, one implemented using the Stewardship Contracting Authority and one using the Good Neighbor Authority. Following those smaller, collaborative-momentum-building projects, the Mount Baker Snoqualmie National Forest (MBS), with the collaborative's support, shifted its focus to the planning of a much larger landscape-level (~75,000-acre) project. As they started in on the project, MBS specialists shared that data collection was one area of project planning where they could use an extra hand. Knowing that was a need, the collaborative applied for and received grant funding from the Washington Department of Natural Resources to contract with forestry consultants, Trout Unlimited, and the Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe to conduct legacy stream data analysis, cultural resource surveys, road



assessments, and timber stand exams. The collaborative and the MBS hoped that having such data at the ready would help accelerate the required NEPA analysis for the restoration project. The collaborative's facilitator managed many of the logistics of the contracting process such as evaluating contractors, facilitating conversations between contractors and MBS staff, and working with contractors on data collection procedures and processes. In reflecting on the process, the facilitator said that ensuring that contractor data collection aligned with MBS needs and specifications was a key challenge that likely could have been mitigated through more communication between agency staff and contractors. Despite those challenges, the collaborative was able to bring unique value as a contracting entity because of its role as a convener, relationship-builder and connector among many of the MBS staff, non-profit, tribal, community and industry stakeholders in the area – functions that proved equally important in the contracting realm.

Planning and implementation engagement opportunities and commitments

Several collaborative groups, including the Darrington Collaborative, the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative, and the Oregon Central Coast Forest Collaborative, have worked with Forest Service staff to develop written engagement expectations and commitments, both for their work together generally and for specific projects. Project-specific agreements are developed during the pre-NEPA phase and serve as a roadmap that all parties can reference as work progresses. While some collaboratives captured those agreements in letters, the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative took a different approach. The collaborative has structured its project-level collaborative engagement agreements in a table format that describes how the Forest Service will engage with the collaborative at various phases of project development (referred to as touchpoints in the document). It also clarifies what level of collaborative participation is expected (communication, consultation, involvement or collaboration) at each touchpoint. For example, one table includes a commitment, or touchpoint, by the Forest Service to involve the collaborative in a joint landscape evaluation workshop prior to the agency's development of a purpose and need statement and the proposed action. Another touchpoint in the table commits the collaborative group to assisting the Forest Service in developing and performing public outreach to garner input from citizens and communities during the scoping period of NEPA. These touchpoints are identified and tracked in the project timeline so that both entities can anticipate upcoming points of engagement.



It also clarifies what level of collaborative participation is expected (communication, consultation, involvement or collaboration) at each touchpoint. For example, one table includes a commitment, or touchpoint, by the Forest Service to involve the collaborative in a joint landscape evaluation workshop prior to the agency's development of a purpose and need statement and the proposed action. Another touchpoint in the table commits the collaborative group to assisting the Forest Service in developing and performing public outreach to garner input from citizens and communities during the scoping period of NEPA. These touchpoints are identified and tracked in the project timeline so that both entities can anticipate upcoming points of engagement.



NEPA ANALYSIS

NEPA Interdisciplinary Team participation

The Pinchot Partners and the Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative are two collaboratives that have arrangements with their local districts to sit in on NEPA Interdisciplinary (ID) Team meetings when the projects are of interest to the collaborative. Typically, the collaborative group's facilitator or board chair attend ID Team meetings as observers, though the collaboratives' facilitators said they are occasionally asked to provide technical or resource-specific information or to speak to the collaborative's perspective on specific issues. For their part, collaborative attendees see benefit in the ability to relay relevant updates to their respective collaborative groups, a practice facilitators said has increased shared understanding, transparency, and trust in the agency's work while reducing the possibility that the collaborative is caught off guard by the final analysis or shifts to the project timeline. The facilitators of both collaboratives said that while collaborative member attendance is welcome at most meetings, the ID team will sometimes decide that discussions need to happen internally. That decision, and the reasoning for it, is often conveyed through a conversation between collaborative facilitators and their Forest Service point of contact, such as the planning team lead. It was emphasized that NEPA ID Team participation, which is not a required component of the NEPA public engagement process, is based upon strong relationships and trust between the collaborative and local line officers.





IMPLEMENTATION PLANNING

Implementation advisory committee

The Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative has an implementation advisory committee that meets regularly to discuss service-related activities slated for implementation on private and Forest Service-managed lands in the upper Willamette watershed. The committee discusses strategies for funding priority projects, reviews and shares information about planned restoration and fuels work, and provides input to the Forest Service on post-NEPA project design and funding questions. For example, the group has made suggestions about service activities it would like to see included in stewardship contracts and has made recommendations on how the agency could direct funding such as GNA revenue, stewardship project retained receipts, and grants. To inform its input, the committee works with local Forest Service staff to jointly maintain and populate a running list of restoration priorities that can be considered when funding becomes available. The agency has made an informal commitment to reference that list when funding for service work becomes available and because it is a shared document, the institutional knowledge about project priorities is preserved through turnover within the agency or the advisory committee.

Shared learning through prescription development

To better understand the Forest Service's process of prescription development, the Northern Blues Forest Collaborative developed an exercise that allowed collaborative members to develop their own management prescriptions. Each group developed a prescription for the same area – an untreated representative forest stand that used real stand exam data provided by the Forest Service. Upon completion, each group's draft prescription was run through the Forest Service's Forest Vegetation Simulator (FVS), which projected how the treated stand would fare through two wildfires programmed to occur 50 and 80 years after treatment. While the activity was not intended to influence how the agency designed its prescription for that particular area, the collaborative's facilitator said it promoted a shared understanding about the types of prescriptions needed to accomplish wildfire resiliency goals and the many considerations that go into prescription development.



Implementation engagement agreements

When they neared the completion of a five-year-long planning process for a large landscape restoration project, the Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative's (SWFC) Rigdon Collaboration Committee developed a formal request for engagement opportunities in certain parts of post-NEPA project implementation. The committee included several asks in a letter to the forest supervisor in hopes of garnering a written commitment from the agency to collaborate during implementation. The letter was signed by the forest supervisor when the project got close to a final decision. The committee's requests included: participation in field tours related to pre-implementation planning, attendance at agency meetings meant to review project design criteria with implementation teams, and opportunity for input on how the agency "packages" restoration treatments, including the activities grouped into a project and the mechanism used to implement them (timber sale, stewardship contract, service contract etc.).

Improving sale economics through support of appraisal and sale design

After multiple timber sales went unsold and unbid on the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest (OWNF) from 2016 to 2018, the Forest Service requested assistance from the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative. In response, the collaborative formed an economics subgroup to provide support and expertise on the financials of restoration-focused timber sales. The subgroup included strong representation from the region's forest products industry, as well as from Forest Service staff, staff with state and county agencies, local community members, and nonprofit organizations. Since its inception, the subgroup engaged on several efforts that span

the NEPA analysis, project planning, and implementation preparation phases of Forest Service projects, including:

- Field trips to evaluate sale feasibility (NEPA analysis phase): In 2021, subgroup members and Forest Service planning and implementation staff (e.g., pre-sale foresters, timber sale administrators, engineers, silviculturists) organized a field trip focused on timber sale design. The group traveled to an area within a NEPA project that was still under analysis, but was far enough along that the agency had begun discussing timber sale layout. Participants toured each unit of the preliminary sale area and evaluated economic viability based on the draft silvicultural prescription and unit features, such as unit size and boundaries, resource protection buffers, road access and temporary road development needs, and timber quality and volume. The field trip enabled subgroup members to walk the area and suggest ways to improve operational and economic viability during analysis, prior to the final NEPA decision and long before any sale would be put out for bid. That timing meant the Forest Service still had a good amount of leeway to consider and potentially tweak certain aspects of the sale design to improve its feasibility and the subsequent likelihood of a successfully bid sale. A subgroup member said the field trip demonstrated the benefits of engaging on Forest Service projects during the latter stages of the NEPA analysis, when the agency has an idea of what the projects will look like but still has flexibility to adjust analyses and planning documents.
- 
- Guidelines for sale economics (NEPA and implementation planning phase): In order to help Forest Service staff make determinations about sale economics, subgroup members with timber industry experience and timber sale expertise developed a “rules of thumb” document. Included in the document are rough guidelines on the minimum per-acre timber volume needed for economic viability under different scenarios and assumptions related to logging systems, unit sizes, species composition, tree size, yarding distance, and other factors. The document is intended for use during the early stages of timber sale planning and design, so Forest Service staff can avoid wasting time and effort preparing and offering sales that are economic non-starters from an industry perspective.
 - Timber appraisal support (implementation preparation phase): The appraisal process was another area where the economics subgroup focused its work. Several of the group’s industry members developed a Regional Industry Information Table, which lists information about forest products buyers in the vicinity of the ONWF. The table includes the location of mills, what products they make, the size and species of log they accept, and log purchaser contact information. The table, which was supplemented by map products created by Forest Service staff, is intended to make it easier for agency appraisal staff to get in touch with those industry contacts to get up-to-date, location-specific information on the market value of timber and anticipated transportation costs. By using data that better reflects current on-the-ground conditions, the subgroup hoped the Forest Service would be able to calculate a more accurate final appraisal that would be more likely to garner bids from contractors or purchasers.



IMPLEMENTATION PREPARATION

Adding capacity through contracting

Since its inception in January 2014, the Olympic Forest Collaborative has made it a priority to bolster Forest Service capacity to implement and monitor restoration thinning projects on the Olympic National Forest. To that end, the collaborative has had a longstanding relationship with a forestry consultant in the region and regularly contracts with the company to perform implementation support tasks such as pre-sale silvicultural prescription development, unit layout, and pre- and post-treatment monitoring. Activities are jointly identified by the collaborative and the Forest Service with the goal of moving work forward on stewardship contracting projects where the collaborative has decided to engage. The selected tasks are then articulated in a written agreement, which the collaborative uses to guide its contract with the consultant, Resilient Forestry. The company's staff regularly participate in the collaborative's meetings, field tours, and public meetings, so when it comes to the implementation of those tasks the discussion goes both ways. Resilient Forestry takes direction from the collaborative but the collaborative also looks to Resilient Forestry for technical insight and advice on how to operationalize the group's values and vision. Resilient Forestry also works closely with the Forest Service to ensure it is carrying out activities according to the agency's requirements. Funding for the work has mostly come from Washington State's Department of Natural Resources and because the collaborative itself is not a registered nonprofit, various organizations that are members of the collaborative have served as fiscal sponsors. A collaborative member said the group's engagement with implementation in this way has provided support and encouragement for greater exploration and experimentation within the bounds of existing plans, policies, and regulations. That has included experimentation with designation by prescription in the preparation of stewardship sales and thinning prescriptions that the agency may not have implemented on its own. Additionally, all projects on the Olympic National Forest that feature collaborative involvement include pre-and post-thinning monitoring, which is guided by a monitoring protocol developed with input from the Olympic National Forest, the University of Washington's Olympic Natural Resources Center, and other stakeholder input.



MONITORING

Post-implementation monitoring

Blue Mountains Forest Partners has regularly incorporated post-treatment qualitative monitoring into its collaborative field trips. Collaborative members and agency staff travel to projects that had been planned with engagement from the collaborative and discuss how the end result measured up to expectations. If results aren't what the collaborative had envisioned, agency and non-agency participants try to home in on the cause, whether that be language in the NEPA analysis, the prescription itself, how the prescription was translated into contract language, how operators or marking crews interpreted that contract language, communications between the agency and the collaborative, or something else. Doing that sort of joint investigation after a treatment has been completed has helped identify where change is needed, which may not be due to the NEPA process or language in the decision document. For example, sometimes the collaborative found that it miscommunicated its "asks" to the agency or realized after the fact that what it asked for didn't result in desired outcomes on the ground. If a problem needed to be resolved during NEPA planning, the collaborative aimed to bring those takeaways into subsequent planning processes. Otherwise, it tried to address the issue in upcoming contracts or agreements tied to the same NEPA document.

Partnering for cross-boundary monitoring

Recognizing the cross-boundary nature of many of their own monitoring questions and needs, two national forest-focused collaboratives on the Mount Hood National Forest sought a partner outside their groups to support monitoring efforts that spanned multiple land ownerships. The two collaboratives – the Hood River Forest Collaborative and the Wasco County Forest Collaborative – partnered with the East Cascades Oak Partnership (ECOP) to develop, fund, and implement a monitoring protocol for Oregon white oak restoration. The collaboratives worked with ECOP to secure state funding for the project and provided input on monitoring questions. Monitoring plots were then established on federal, state, and private lands slated for treatment as part of the Central Wasco County All-Lands Project, which was funded by the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership. As the monitoring progressed, a representative from ECOP regularly attended collaborative meetings, often providing updates and feedback on what the cross-boundary monitoring effort could add to the collaboratives' discussions. The groups expected that results from the monitoring project would help inform subsequent adaptive management discussions with the Forest Service. Supporting monitoring through a partnership also allows the collaboratives to play to their strengths as groups with diverse interests and areas of expertise that can help inform monitoring planning, without needing to build specific technical expertise or contracting capacity.



CONCLUSION

These vignettes reflect just a handful of the many ways forest collaborative groups are engaging with Forest Service activities and processes. While the nature of collaborative engagement looks different community to community and region to region, we hope these examples can provide inspiration for other collaborative efforts both within and beyond the Pacific Northwest.

