

Collaboration on the Tongass National Forest: Strategies for Success

Background

The Forest Service has always worked with local communities and partners to achieve its objectives, but collaboration is becoming more rooted in agency policy and culture. For example, the Stewardship Contracting Authority requires collaboration and there is a renewed emphasis on partnerships. As the Tongass increasingly collaborates with partners and local communities on forest management projects, particularly restoration and stewardship activities, we are continually learning how to best work together in a collaborative manner; how to best engage partners and communities; and how to maximize benefits on the ground. In an attempt to increase our understanding of what works, communicate those practices, and continue to build upon them, key stakeholders were interviewed for their feedback. Responses were summarized and compared with key lessons identified in other regional and national reports on collaboration and stewardship.

Definition of Collaboration

As it relates to stewardship contracting, the Forest Service Renewable Resources Handbook defines collaboration as:

“A process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond what any one group could envision alone.”

Other definitions abound, but often include terms such as multiple stakeholders, shared priorities, common goal, mutual benefit, and solving problems.

Benefits

There are multiple benefits to collaborating with key stakeholders on a project, such as:

- Leveraging Resources
- Identifying Shared Priorities

“The relationship between Kake and the USFS has improved dramatically since collaboration began in Kake a few years ago.” - Kake Community Forest Collaborative participant.

- Building Capacity
- Increasing Accomplishments at Scale
- Building Public Trust
- Developing Innovative Solutions
- Reducing Appeals and Litigation

Questions to Ask When Considering Collaboration

Before entering into a collaborative process, it's worth a candid assessment of what you hope to accomplish, whether the time is right, and whether you have the capacity to succeed. For example:

- Are the issues appropriate to collaboration?
- Are participants willing and interested in working together through constructive dialogue?
- Who should participate?
- How can partners add value to the process? Are there gaps they can fill?
- How much flexibility do you have to make a decision that honors collaborative input?
- What do you want to achieve?

Key Lessons

Meaningful collaboration requires an investment in time, commitment and energy. Interviews with collaborative participants revealed several common themes regarding what helped make a project successful, and what might be improved upon. Similar themes are reflected in other regional and national reviews of collaborative stewardship efforts.

- *Start Early*

Collaboration over the entire scope of a project (or “wall-to-wall”), from pre-NEPA considerations through implementation, can build greater understanding, buy-in, and trust of collaborators. While it initially takes more time, the likelihood of implementation increases. If collaboration at the outset isn’t possible, be upfront about flexibility given the project planning phase.

- *Clearly Identify Roles and Expectations*

A shared understanding at the beginning of what roles individuals will play and intended outcomes can improve success. Be clear on what people can expect from each other, how participants will communicate, and how often the group will meet. Setting realistic timeframes for project development is essential. Poor communication can easily lead to unrealistic or unspoken expectations, eventually reducing trust and a willingness to work together.

- *Facilitation*

Managing a dynamic group with potentially divergent interests can be difficult. Strong third-party facilitation takes this burden off participants and can move the group through to action. Facilitation by a decision-

maker or line officer may suggest a conflict of interest. A skilled facilitator can also address obstructive participants.

- *Leadership*

A committed leader from the Forest Service that can invest the time and energy necessary, and participate through the life of the project, is essential. The absence of leadership, or turnover among participants and leaders, can easily lead to a breakdown in communication or loss of confidence among stakeholders. An energetic and committed leader can make or break a collaborative effort.

- *Openness and Transparency*

Ensuring that participation is open and inclusive can help identify common ground early, and can ward off potential project detractors in the end. Participants may disagree, but the likelihood of surprise is reduced. Particularly when collaborating on difficult subjects, transparency and openness regarding individual interests (as opposed to positions) will help build trust even in the face of disagreement.

- *Commitment to the Process*

Simply put, collaboration takes time. Meeting with participants with opposing views also requires a certain kind of energy and willingness to work on difficult tasks. Many meetings, field trips, and small successes may be required before relationships and confidence is formed. But research suggests that if participants remain committed, results will come and will come more quickly over time. Follow through on commitments made to each other improves accountability.

Conclusion

Natural resource management on the Tongass has often been mired in conflict, but as social and economic conditions have changed in Southeast Alaska, so has the willingness to work together and solve common problems. Participants interviewed all felt the climate of trust has improved through collaboration and expressed a commitment to additional work. Understanding how to collaborate effectively while following a few key principles is likely to result in benefits to the land, communities, and the Forest Service.

