Successes, Challenges, and Opportunities for Collaborative Accelerated Restoration in Oregon's Blue Mountains

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About the Ecosystem Workforce Program:

The Ecosystem Workforce Program is a bi-institutional program of University of Oregon's Institute for a Sustainable Environment and the College of Forestry at Oregon State University. We conduct applied social science research and extension services at the interface of people and natural resources. Our publications aim to inform policy makers and practitioners, and contribute to scholarly and practical discourse. More information available at: http://ewp.uoregon.edu/about/intro.

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Executive summary

The USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) and the Oregon Department of Forestry have made targeted investments to increase the pace, scale, and quality of forest restoration in the Blue Mountains region of eastern Oregon (which includes the Ochoco, Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests). These accelerated restoration strategies have been underway for more than five years, but there has been little recent exploration of how members of collaborative groups, agency staff, and partner organizations currently perceive the strategies, or how these efforts complement or challenge the work of collaboratives. The purpose of this study was to present some perceptions and opinions of collaborative group members and other key stakeholders regarding their interpretations of accelerated restoration and the roles and functioning of collaborative groups in the Blue Mountains. For this assessment, we conducted semi-structured phone or in-person interviews with 25 key informant stakeholders working on restoration on the four national forests in the Blue Mountains region.

Key findings

- **Many interviewees had a similar understanding of the term accelerated restoration.** They believed it meant simultaneously increasing the pace and scale of *both* commercial and non-commercial forest health treatments. Some thought it also implied experimentation with new management strategies to increase efficiency of planning and implementation of forest restoration. Many interviewees thought that others interpreted the term accelerated restoration differently based on their social position. Some interviewees expressed frustration that, in practice, commercial components of accelerated restoration projects seemed to be completed much more frequently than non-commercial work, which has led some to question the efficacy of the overall effort.

- **Interviewees noted that collaborative groups' successes have occurred in a progression of stages, requiring that groups first build a safe space for dialogue, then trust, then agreements, to accomplish restoration outcomes.** Interviewees believed that some of the greatest successes of collaborative groups have been to: create productive space for dialogue and relationship-building, develop agreements about management recommendations for certain forest types, support the Forest Service in NEPA planning processes, integrate significant new scientific information into decision-making, and leverage funding or other resources to help the Forest Service accomplish restoration goals.

- **Interviewees discussed collaborative groups' challenges related to both their internal capacity or structure and external factors.** Interviewees said that some of the greatest challenges were: unstable funding for administrative coordination; interpersonal challenges caused by turnover at the Forest Service and within collaboratives' membership; fatigue and impatience of members; insufficient capacity and funding for project implementation; antagonism from outside entities; and increasingly challenging decision spaces such as more contentious forest types, larger projects, new issue areas, or implementation of projects. Interviewees also discussed difficulties related to coordinating between agencies and collaboratives.

- **Interviewees discussed interrelated challenges and opportunities for strengthening collaboratives' capacity and scaling up impact.** They saw opportunities for collaboratives to grow their contributions by shifting from project-by-project agreements to "zones of agreement" that could be broadly applied. Some interviewees hoped to increase support for collaboration and the diversity of participating stakeholders through outreach and communication. Some hoped to expand collaboratives' roles to recommending management prescriptions for new forest types, issue areas, stages of project planning and implementation, and cross-boundary projects. They also saw opportunities for collaboratives to more actively engage in advocacy and leveraging resources to implement projects.

For more than five years, the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) and the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) have made targeted investments that aimed to accelerate the pace, scale, and quality of forest restoration in the Blue Mountains region of eastern Oregon (Blue Mountains). The Forest Service's "Eastside Restoration Strategy" began in late 2012 and focused on increased investment in the national forests in the Blue Mountains. ODF's Federal Forest Restoration Program (FFRP, formerly the Federal Forest Health Program) complements the Eastside Restoration Strategy by supporting forest collaborative groups and developing new approaches for state and federal partnership in managing federal forests. Many FFRP activities have focused on the Blue Mountains. Collectively, the purpose of these accelerated restoration investments is to mitigate the risk of large wildfires, insect outbreak, and disease; restore ecosystem functions; and increase economic opportunity through restoration of federal forest lands. Specific strategies have included a dedicated Forest Service interdisciplinary team for large landscape projects, new state-federal partnerships focused on implementation, increased technical assistance opportunities, and a grant program.

Successful implementation of accelerated restoration in the Blue Mountains depends in large part on the work of multi-stakeholder forest collaborative groups ("collaboratives"). Collaboratives work together to discuss and make recommendations to land management agencies about how to manage forest lands. The accelerated restoration effort has challenged the Forest Service, its partners, and collaboratives in the Blue Mountains to work through individual projects faster, take on spatially larger and more complex projects over time, and develop management prescriptions applicable to larger, landscape-scale work.

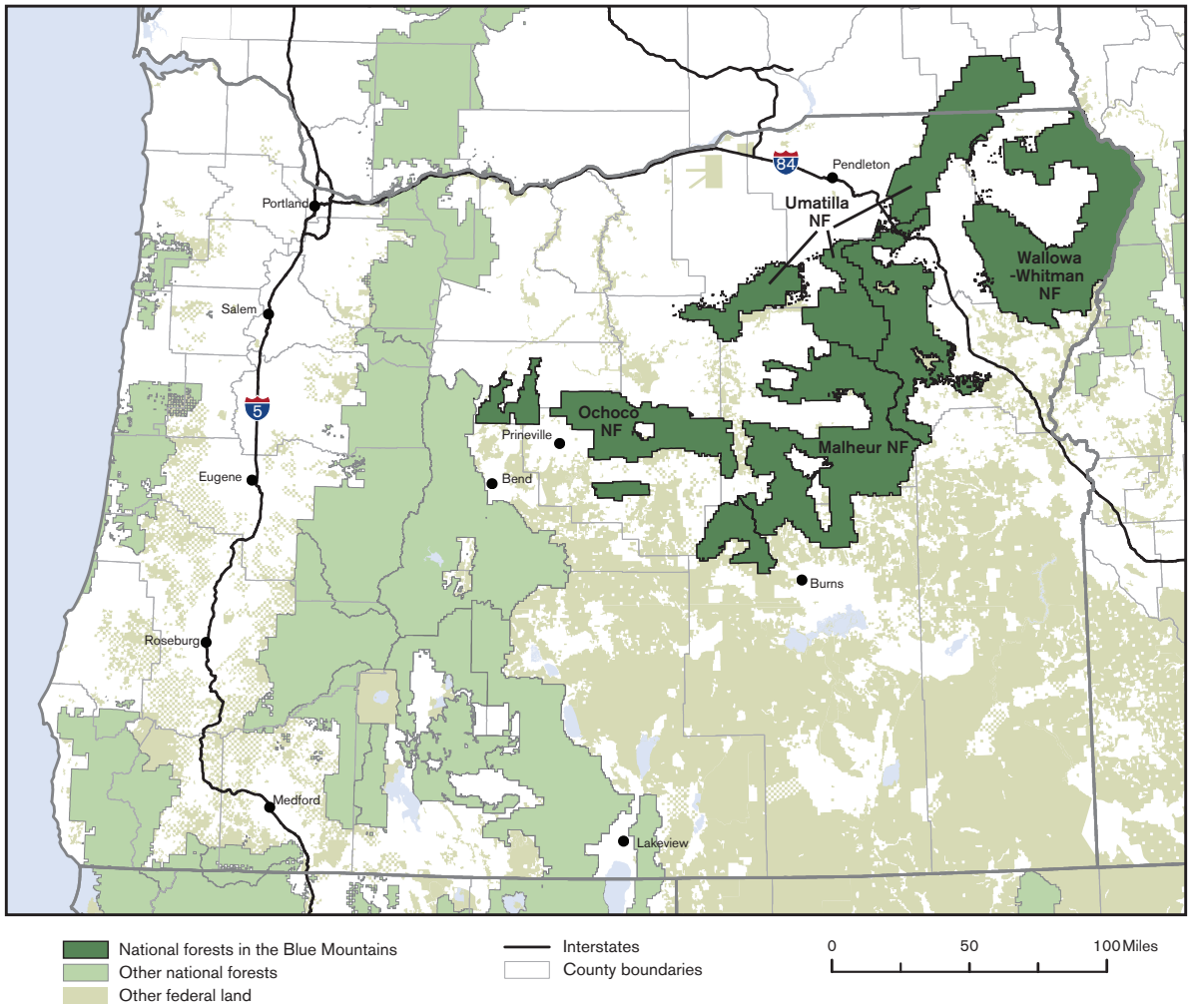
Accelerated restoration strategies have been underway for more than five years at this time, with accompanying monitoring and learning processes.[1] However, there has been little recent exploration of how the strategies complement or challenge the work of collaboratives, or how members of collaborative groups, Forest Service and ODF staff, and partner organizations perceive the accelerated restoration strategies. The purpose of this study is to present some of the perceptions and opinions of regular members of collaborative groups and other key stakeholders engaged in accelerated restoration in the Blue Mountains. We explored these stakeholders' interpretations of accelerated restoration, and the roles and functioning of collaborative groups, through four research questions:

1. How do key forest collaborative participants define accelerated restoration and perceive its effectiveness in the Blue Mountains?
2. What are the perceived successes of collaboratives during the first five years of accelerated restoration strategies?
3. What challenges have collaboratives faced during the first five years of accelerated restoration strategies?
4. What future challenges and opportunities are anticipated for collaboratives?

Approach

We conducted semi-structured phone or in-person interviews with 25 key informant stakeholders working on forest restoration on the four national forests in the Blue Mountains region: the Ochoco, Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests (see Figure 1, below). Four additional individuals agreed to participate but were unable to schedule an interview within the timeframe, and one additional individual did not respond in time for participation. None declined to be interviewed. We identified key individuals who were actively and regularly engaged in collaborative forest restoration work in the region over the past five years. Interviewees included representatives from federal, state, and local government; employees for NGOs focused on environmental conservation and recreation; timber industry personnel; and coordinators or facilitators for forest collaborative groups. All interviews were confidential and no identifying information is provided with any quotes in this paper. This assessment was intended to distill common themes and perspectives shared by key stakeholders engaged in accelerated restoration efforts in the Blue Mountains. These results should therefore be considered as a qualitative snapshot of current perspectives of a key group of stakeholders, and not an exhaustive survey of all stakeholders involved in federal forest restoration in the Blue Mountains region, or an evaluation of forest collaboratives' outcomes.

Figure 1 National forests in the Blue Mountains region of Eastern Oregon



How do key forest collaborative participants define accelerated restoration and perceive its effectiveness in the Blue Mountains?

Most interviewees had a similar set of ideas about the meaning of accelerated restoration, but perceived various motivations and goals around the use of the term. Many interviewees felt that the term accelerated restoration implied an increase in the number and size of projects that were planned and implemented to both generate commercial timber value and address non-commercial forest health and other objectives. Many interviewees also thought the term did not have a single, clear meaning, and that it was interpreted by others based on their position and interests in federal forest management. One interviewee said, "That phrase will mean different things to different people depending on which lens you primarily look at the forest through." Most interviewees had expectations of how different groups of stakeholders would interpret the term. One interviewee said, "Timber may think it's an increase in timber volume. Some environmental groups may think it's increasing aquatic restoration activities, tribes may think it's providing for additional first foods for their members. I think it depends on where they came from." Some interviewees felt the purpose of these bigger, faster restoration treatments was primarily to mitigate wildfire risk. For example, one interviewee explained, "Accelerated restoration does mean more treatments particularly around fire resiliency." Others believed that these treatments primarily served to increase timber volume output to stimulate the local economy.

Most interviewees agreed that accelerated restoration involved simultaneously increasing the pace and scale of both commercial and non-commercial forest health treatments. One interviewee said, "For me it means doing more, doing work faster in the full suite of restoration outcomes. That doesn't just mean timber harvest, it also means increasing the rate at which we are doing non-commercial thinning, hazardous fuels reduction, prescribed fire, streamside restoration . . . All of that as a full package." Nearly all interviewees recognized increasing the size and scale of commercial timber harvests as one element of accelerated restoration, but there was widespread agreement that vegetation treatments alone do not fully encompass what accelerated restoration strategies

intend to accomplish. One interviewee said, "Increased pace and scale means increasing the forest into a desired condition that we all feel is appropriate. Commercial timber obviously is an integral part of that, but maybe just one of three legs – commercial, non-commercial, general restoration activities." Many recognized that the commitment to completing both commercial and non-commercial work is what makes diverse stakeholders supportive of the accelerated restoration concept. One interviewee noted,

> "That's what brings the diverse parties together to the table, and creates the conditions that motivate multiple stakeholders to try to work together. That we aren't singularly focused on forest vegetation conditions, but we're really . . . designing restoration that is ultimately good for watershed hydrology, fish population recovery and growth, wildlife habitat, soil health, cultural resources."

Some agency interviewees felt that the term accelerated restoration also implied experimentation with new management strategies to increase efficiency in forest management. Some interviewees discussed how they viewed accelerated restoration as a call to try new management strategies, authorities, technologies, and partnerships. One interviewee said that accelerated restoration "runs the gamut of different ways we can mark trees and administer timber sales, to different pieces of technology that we can use to be more efficient, making NEPA more efficient . . . quicker, faster, less onerous." They recognized the value of this experimentation for learning what works and does not for agencies and stakeholders, and hoped to use these learning experiences to create new efficiencies in forest management. When describing a project being conducted as part of the accelerated restoration strategies, one interviewee said,

> "We were pretty upfront . . . we told folks, 'We are going to try new things that aren't going to feel very good to you, they're going to feel kind of foreign to you – they're foreign to us. But, we have to try these things in order to see if we can be more efficient . . . we may fail at some of these things, but that's part of the learning. You don't learn unless you try and learn from those failures and there could be successful things as well, and building on those successes is also really important.'"

Most interviewees perceived that noncommercial treatments were not keeping pace with commercial treatments as accelerated restoration strategies have been implemented. Interviewees described how some treatments, especially noncommercial or very low-value treatments, were sometimes not completed as planned during project implementation. As one interviewee observed,

> "[Accelerated restoration] has been pretty effective in getting a constant supply of timber and saw logs off the national forest, which is doing good work for restoration, but the other, maybe more extensive and detailed work of restoration that should be going on alongside that is not always happening."

Some of the noncommercial elements of accelerated restoration cited as being left incomplete included:

- Noncommercial thinning and fuels reduction
- Applying prescribed fire
- Reinstalling large wood in streams
- Culvert replacement to improve fish passage
- Water quality improvements
- Improving recreation resources, such as trails and interpretive signage
- Rangeland grazing improvements, such as ensuring appropriate water sources
- Native species planting
- Invasive species removal
- Habitat restoration for Endangered Species Act-listed species
- Aspen stand restoration
- Decommissioning of roads

Many stakeholders acknowledged that the disparity between what is planned and what is implemented had become a source of conflict and/or frustration, especially for environmental constituents. Some interviewees said that incompletion of non-commercial treatments was causing tension between partners. One interviewee explained,

> "Some of the social licensing, or the agreement to increase pace and scale of timber harvest was

> this promise that the other restoration was going to be taking place. And when that doesn't take place, then I feel like certain groups – especially environmental and conservation groups – start to question the effectiveness of it, and whether they want to continue to participate in it."

Some interviewees felt that accelerated restoration projects had not always been ecologically-effective given that non-commercial treatments have often been postponed or sidestepped. One interviewee noted,

> "A lot of work that needs to get done is not getting done. The science is really clear that if all you do is the commercial thinning, the stand is more resilient to wildfire, but it's only like 10% more resilient. If you get the whole suite of things done . . . your stand is way more resilient to wildfire. We are leaving our forests continuing to be susceptible to wildfire, drought, and insects because the noncommercial treatments are just as important."

Some interviewees expressed doubt or questions about whether the push for faster and larger-scale project planning has been effective. As one interviewee commented, "I think the jury is still out about whether [the large-scale accelerated restoration projects] will be seen as a plus, a minus, or irrelevant." In particular, interviewees expressed concern about the pressure on collaboratives and Forest Service staff to work faster, "People don't work particularly well when they are pressured and feel afraid, and some people do [feel that way] under 'accelerated restoration.'" Interviewees also expressed concern that projects were implemented too quickly for learning to occur, saying that, "Because everything is accelerated, we don't actually stop to learn, and we just repeat." Some interviewees sensed that working on larger-acreage projects strained relationships within collaborative groups, "Increasing the pace and scale of restoration really [conflicts] with effective collaboration. The best collaboratives started with small projects, small areas of agreement, and they worked from there." Finally, some interviewees also questioned whether the push for accelerated restoration had actually improved outcomes for national forest lands,

> "I have wondered–other than just setting an intention, and also other than perhaps being something that would galvanize resource[s]–has accelerated restoration actually led to accelerated restoration? Is it really making a difference? Or is it just a way to structure work that was already going on and resource it better? Has this extra pressure of doing more faster actually helped? Or has it put social pressure on things and created a lot of pushback and fear that has unintentionally undermined the process? . . . I don't know."

Some interviewees said that, in practice, they could not distinguish between accelerated restoration strategies and agencies' business-as-usual operations, and they were not sure how accelerated restoration integrated with other work. Many interviewees were unsure if there had been an additional influx of funding, personnel, or resources for accelerated restoration, or how recent investments differed from agencies' normal budgets. One interviewee noted, "As a unified effort, accelerated restoration lacks branding. . . If it's an additional effort . . . it's hard to know what's above baseline. Every forest would do something annually, so it's hard to claim or identify which part is accelerated restoration . . . as opposed to day-to-day [restoration]." Some interviewees expressed that they did not have a clear understanding of the strategy behind accelerated restoration, or how it was integrated with other region-wide strategies,

> "I'm not exactly sure what the [accelerated restoration] strategy is. I'll be perfectly honest . . . I've never read a document, for example, that explains what the strategy is surrounding that. There have been things that have happened recently that are part of that . . . but how that all fits together, or if it indeed does [fit together], into one overall accelerated forest restoration strategy, I honestly don't know."

Furthermore, some interviewees felt that many people in their communities were unaware of accelerated restoration efforts. One interviewee said, "I just feel like … getting the awareness out there about [accelerated restoration] is kind of one of the major hurdles."

What are the perceived successes of collaboratives during the first five years of accelerated restoration strategies?

Interviewees reported that successes from collaboration have occurred in a progression of stages, requiring that groups build a safe space for dialogue, then trust, then agreements, to accomplish restoration outcomes. Nearly all interviewees acknowledged that the collaborative(s) they were involved with had created a space for productive conversations that was necessary for people with disparate worldviews to work together. Most mentioned the important role that dialogue and relationship-building played in establishing trust, respect, and civility between previously adversarial stakeholders. One interviewee said,

> "It has allowed a pretty diverse group of stakeholders who in the past not only didn't, but couldn't work together, to magically somehow work together. . . . The collaborative effort has brought a level of mature discussion and civility to conversations . . . and helped integrate different silos of knowledge."

Interviewees frequently cited trust-building and dialogue as their most important accomplishments, and noted that collaborative relationships were now the foundation for discussion of management options and reaching consensus agreements. They described how, as trust grew, participants felt they could discuss increasingly more complex projects, more challenging topics, and start to develop "zones of agreement" that could be applied to multiple similar projects. Interviewees generally recognized that different collaboratives were at different stages within this progression. Some felt their group had stalled at trust-building, while others felt their group had progressed toward achieving significant on-the-ground impacts. One interviewee felt that the ability of a collaborative to move through this progression of stages was related to maturity of the group:

> "What I think we're seeing is a shift from project-level agreements to what we affectionately call 'zones of agreement' -- more of the issue level [agreements]. We're not seeing that everywhere, [but] we are seeing that more in mature forest collaboratives."

Many interviewees believed that certain collaboratives' consensus agreements had resulted in significant National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) planning and/or on-the-ground forest restoration accomplishments. In particular, many interviewees recognized the important role that the two oldest collaboratives in the region, Blue Mountains Forest Partners and Harney County Restoration Collaborative, have played in increasing the number of acres that are approved for treatment through the required NEPA planning process and treated on the Malheur National Forest. One interviewee stated, "Clearly the other success . . . is a significant ramp up of acres treated and volume harvested on the Malheur National Forest." Interviewees recognized that the collaboratives' support had allowed the Forest Service to accumulate hundreds of thousands of NEPA-approved acres that are ready for project implementation. Interviewees also felt these two collaboratives' agreements had played a key role in significantly reducing litigation of Forest Service project proposals, which significantly expedited the NEPA-approval process. One interviewee noted, "The [Harney County Restoration Collaborative] has been very, very effective at coming to consensus so that NEPA projects are not litigated." Many interviewees recognized that social cohesion within these groups allowed them to increase the size of projects and develop zones of agreement in a way that has been effective at reducing litigation. One interviewee said,

> "Project areas increased in size. We went from working on five-to-seven thousand-acre projects to forty-thousand-acre projects. . . . And, we were treating a larger percentage of those project areas . . . we were actually getting better product, or more product per acre because we had social agreement about doing so."

Some interviewees noted that the newer collaboratives in the region were also starting to build the agreement necessary to start making significant planning and on-the-ground impacts. For example, one interviewee perceived that,

> "Since the [Wallowa Whitman Forest Collaborative came] together, we've minimized the number of lawsuits related to vegetation treatments, and I think it's because folks are coming to the table, talking through things, and they see their collective voice being used in the decision-making process."

Another described how the Ochoco Forest Restoration Collaborative, "produced a couple of documents that led to recommendations for the Ochoco National Forest that can be applied across the landscape . . . that's a huge deal." Some interviewees felt that the collaboratives' involvement had also improved the quality of work completed, "They have moved planning forward and that is a real contribution. . . . And, there's a lot of intangible, harder to quantify outcomes, including improved quality of the projects overall."

Many interviewees perceived that mature collaboratives have entered more difficult decision spaces over time. As they have achieved successes, some interviewees noticed that mature collaboratives have taken on bigger, more complex projects in more challenging habitat types. One interviewee noted, "The longer we get together, the more complex and challenging the ecological and social issues that we are talking about, and it gets closer and closer to the heart of values that these folks are really trying to protect, and that makes it really hard for them." In addition, many of the projects that collaboratives have successfully helped to plan have moved into implementation stages, which has required even more detailed decision making. One person noted difficulties associated with that, "We have to get into the actual specifics that we could ignore when we were making the recommendations."

Many interviewees recognized that collaboratives have been successful at using their collective voice to leverage funding or political support for accelerated restoration strategies. One interviewee discussed how a collaborative spoke up for increased state and federal congressional budgets for forest restoration in the region,

> "In Oregon, the Federal Forest Restoration Program was really vocally supported by collaboratives when it was up for discussion in the legislative process. I think absent having some of those collaboratives' voices from the field, a program like that would have been less likely to be funded."

Another interviewee discussed one collaborative's role in finding funding for specific projects on national forests of interest, noting that, "Increasing pace and scale has required an increase in resources – money, budget, people -- the [collaborative] has been instrumental in bringing a lot of money to the National Forest, and also then the community." The collaborative members themselves recognized that their collective voice has been effective at influencing change. One interviewee explained that,

> "The better we got at working together – the better known we became and the more we were able to leverage our successes in trying to effect change. I remember one day several of us went to the regional office. . . . We represented different sides of the fence, yet we sat together in unison and made our request and gained leverage."

Many interviewees described how collaboratives have been successful at generating and integrating significant new scientific information into management decisions. As one noted,

> "There are some groups who are doing a truly remarkable job [with] science… We've gotten really well-respected scientists from around the west to come in and do original research on our forests to help us know what's up. We have shared an appreciation for that research and science around the community."

Others described how the collaboratives' integration of scientific information was leading to better management decisions and outcomes, "They are bringing original science to the table, and so I think they are improving the basic nature of the projects that the Forest Service is planning." Another noted that, "There are limited experiments going on . . . that could be really important moving forward in terms of identifying new and different ways of doing restoration that are beneficial not just to the forest but fish restoration as well." Some interviewees expressed that using scientific information to support discussion and learning has contributed to the overall success of collaboratives. As one explained, "I think that's a real key to the success of the collaboratives. Getting folks to try some things, and then following up with actually going out to monitor some of those things they stepped out a little bit on. Validating their assumptions, and having some dialogue about what we want to do next time."

Some interviewees felt that collaboratives' support has helped the Forest Service to develop partnerships and feel more comfortable taking risks. Some mentioned the vulnerability that agency employees sometimes feel when they make land management decisions, and how the collaboratives' support has helped to mitigate the risk of conflict with the general public. Forest Service staff, in particular, noted that they had more certainty about outcomes when they followed the collaboratives' recommendations, and that they have relied on the collaboratives when facing conflict. One interviewee noted, "The Forest Service can ask the collaborative for help when outside groups don't agree with what the collaborative wants. . . . The collaborative can be a problem-solver and ally with the Forest Service to move through [conflict]." Another stated, "Change is fearful for people. To embrace [risk] and accept that we're going to be ok and have confidence and trust – that's what the collaboratives have allowed the Forest Service to get past." Some also felt that building more open channels of communication between the Forest Service and a broader variety of partners had improved management outcomes and reduced overall conflict about forest management. One interviewee noted, "[Collaboratives are] helping encourage the Forest Service to work with partners, and to adopt more of a network governance approach. Which is ultimately leading to better projects and better outcomes."

What challenges have collaboratives faced during the first five years of accelerated restoration strategies?

Interviewees described challenges that generally fell into two categories -- challenges that constrained or disrupted collaboratives' internal capacity or structure, and external challenges that collaboratives were affected by, but which they had no control over. Regardless of their source, challenges noted by interviewees had the same end result of interfering with establishing or maintaining trust within the collaboratives and with outside partners.

Many interviewees expressed a need for sustained funding to support effective and consistent coordination or facilitation. Funding for staff capacity was widely acknowledged as a limitation, and many interviewees said that it was an ongoing struggle to find funding to sustain collaboratives. Many interviewees recognized that groups with funding for at least one paid staff person were able to progress more quickly and effectively than groups with meeting facilitators only. One person stated,

> "Facilitators only facilitate meetings, but a lot of the work happens outside of the meetings. . . . Groups that have a paid coordinator . . . are doing a lot of work between the meetings to keep things going. And they are seeing the troubles that come up and trying to problem solve ahead of them."

Some interviewees also noted the importance of having consistent facilitation and coordination. They explained how this consistency was important to maintaining the internal social dynamics and trust within the collaboratives that made it possible to scale up collaboratives' work, noting for example that, "It's hard to maintain trust within the group when you're constantly changing the facilitator."

Interviewees frequently cited turnover, primarily among Forest Service personnel, as the greatest challenge that collaboratives faced. They explained that key contacts at the Forest Service changed frequently, which slowed down processes due to the time it takes to get to know a new person, build a relationship with them, and help them learn how to effectively work with the collaboratives. One interviewee said, "You can have the most competent people come in, but if they aren't familiar with the collaborative is or what it's been doing or its role and work with the Forest Service, you automatically have to stop and reset and get them up to speed." Some interviewees believed that Forest Service staff turnover was a "surprisingly core problem" that contributed to a wide range of additional, related challenges for restoring forests across the region. One person felt that Forest Service staff turnover had, "stymied progress on project planning and implementation on pretty much every forest in eastern Oregon." Interviewees also recognized that turnover among nonagency members was also disruptive. Although most interviewees said that the participants involved in their collaboratives had been largely constant, others noted the influence of internal turnover, for example, "The group has evolved over time and the community that is very active in that group has shifted. That has caused, frankly, some internal struggle." Turnover was noted by interviewees as especially problematic for accelerating the pace and scale of restoration because it made it more difficult for collaboratives to scale up projects based on existing agreements. As one interviewee said, "Can we build from the agreements we have had or do we have to go back and start re-evaluating the agreements we had because there are new people at the table?"

Some interviewees acknowledged that newer collaboratives have had to take on more socially contentious questions earlier in their development compared to older collaboratives in the area. Interviewees explained that the first collaboratives established in eastern Oregon were located in dry forest types, whereas newer collaboratives have been established in more ecologically and politically challenging moist forests. As one interviewee noted, "Dry forest types are pretty easy for people to get agreement on, the wet types are more challenging. The farther north you go in the Blue Mountains, the more complex and more opportunity for dissension." Some also noted that newer collaboratives are starting with bigger projects: "I think I'm seeing collaboratives start bigger, whereas in the past, collaboratives first coalesced around really small projects." Some interviewees noted that pressure to plan more projects and larger-acreage projects was increasing while the decisions that collaboratives have to make are becoming more complex, further compounding challenges. They indicated that this dynamic had negatively influenced morale and trust within some groups, particularly newer groups that are just establishing trust. One interviewee noted,

> "My experience with effective collaboration is that you often have to start small. You take on low-hanging fruit, you build some relationships and trust by demonstrating willingness to compromise and work together toward some common goal. . . . And, a few of the collaboratives, because of this push for 'accelerated restoration,' some groups have gone big. . . . It challenged some of the relationship dynamics that were already pretty strained in the beginning."

Some interviewees observed that member fatigue and impatience were becoming a challenge for some collaboratives. They expressed that the ongoing, time-consuming work of collaboratives can be energetically draining. One interviewee stated, "We are constantly burning people out. Because to do collaboration well, you have to get people together frequently, and they have to work together a lot. And, that's a lot to ask from someone to do for years and years and years." This was especially true for those who did not feel that they were seeing notable impacts from their work. One interviewee explained, "I think it's really going to be critical that the collaboratives achieve tangible results. There's no question that there's the real threat of participatory fatigue of investing a lot of time and effort into a process that doesn't accomplish really meaningful outcomes." Interviewees also described how fatigue became a problem when collaboratives revisited previous discus-

sions as projects move from planning into implementation stages. One interviewee noted,

> "Looking at how the Forest Service is translating our recommendations from paper to what's on the ground, it reinvigorates these collaborative disagreements. So, instead of people saying, 'Oh yeah, this is what we agreed to,' they go back to what they preferred, and we kind of have to have the conversation all over again about reaching agreement. . . . It wears on everyone's patience, my own included."

Some interviewees felt that some collaborative members were starting to approach the collaborative with antagonism rather than a spirit of compromise. As one interviewee explained,

> "I'm not sure that all of the people who participate in collaboratives right now are really committed to collaboration. I think they're there to defend their own interests or positions, and aren't necessarily . . . willing to listen to people who have opposing views."

Some interviewees observed that people with antagonistic attitudes had been resistant to new information and learning. One noted, "There's holdouts in both directions to the left and the right. People on both sides who have been resistant to hearing the science." Many interviewees speculated that the current political climate may have empowered some individuals to feel they do not need to participate in collaborative processes, because they feel they could achieve their goals more easily through an adversarial, rather than collaborative, approach. For example, one interviewee said, "I do have some concerns that we are in a moment in policy history where there might be some stakeholders who are thinking that, 'I don't need to collaborate right now because I can go to court or I can talk to this high-level official in USDA and get what I want that way.'" In other cases, interviewees discussed how dissenting outside groups have developed their own natural resource management plans in lieu of working through the collaboratives. Interviewees reported that collaboratives were struggling to identify the best way to interact with these individuals and groups, particularly when they also chose to disrupt the collaboratives' work. As one noted, "A lot of these individuals are coming to meetings to disrupt them/be hostile . . . in way that was uncomfortable for quite a while. . . . That just makes efficient work hard."

One of the most commonly-cited challenges for collaboratives was a growing perception that the Forest Service is not fully implementing the projects that collaboratives have planned. One interviewee said, "What I'm observing is that we plan a project area and all the commercial work gets done every time, and the majority of the restoration work never gets funded." Interviewees described feeling conflicted when they are pressured to plan projects faster, yet the projects they have planned have not been fully completed. One interviewee noted, "In Region 6, there's something like a 30-year backlog of non-commercial thinning work that's already NEPA ready. So, it gets harder and harder to hear this line that we need to plan faster." Others reported that their collaborative's recommendations did not appear to be consistently implemented as the group desired. One interviewee said, "We've come to agreement on our restoration prescriptions . . . [but] we're finding that a lot of the prescriptions we envisioned aren't being fully implemented. . . . So, we're really struggling right now with our Forest Service partners…" Interviewees mentioned several reasons they believe projects are not implemented as planned, such as a lack of funding. One interviewee explained, "The Forest Service is left with an anemic budget compared to the tasks that they have to do. I'm sure that's why the non-commercial and riparian work isn't happening." Others cited political pressure, making comments such as,

> "I worry that changes in the administration's priorities are at risk of sinking a lot of the collaborative efforts . . . the agency has dropped down to just two targets, and that's timber volume and acres of hazardous fuels reduction. And so that really sends a signal about not valuing the other suite of restoration work."

Still others identified the key role of communication and relationships, "Others who aren't in the collaborative within the Forest Service don't understand what we hoped to see . . . because we haven't developed those relationships at the regional office level, just at the local level."

Some interviewees felt that the Forest Service did not welcome the participation of their collaborative in some stages of projects, which undermined their feeling of partnership with the agency. One interviewee commented, "We do wonder sometimes why the regional office isn't more supportive of what we'd like to do. . . . We really are here to help the Forest Service do their job and we still get pushback at the upper levels." In particular, interviewees felt that the agency "pushed back" when they wanted to be involved with implementation. One noted, "We feel like there's been push back when we want to engage in implementation side. Collaboration was largely seen as a way to get projects planned and through NEPA, and what we've asked is . . . are we also going to be able to be engaged in the implementation side?" Some expressed that the Forest Service seemed unable or unwilling to share budget information related to project implementation. One said, "Ultimately my objective is to help the Forest Service get things done . . . but if I'm not coming in with full information about what their priorities are or how their budget works, it's really hard for me to give them good advice. . . . It's a total black box right now." Interviewees expressed particular frustration that they were not given information about funds that the collaborative had helped to leverage. One said, "Even in CFLR projects . . . [the collaboratives] don't even understand where all the money is spent, but the Forest Service wouldn't even have the money if it wasn't for the collaborative itself."

Some agency interviewees were aware that collaboratives wanted to be more deeply involved in project planning and implementation, and discussed opportunities and challenges with that involvement. Agency interviewees noted that they recognized the important contributions collaboratives made to project planning and implementation. One interviewee explained how they understood that the collaboratives wanted to be more deeply involved, but that it takes more time,

> "What we hear from collaboratives is that they want to be engaged from the beginning – the very, very beginning of a project -- to the end of the project. They don't like when we come up with the proposed action . . . They want to develop that proposed action, and so, in order to do that, that takes a little bit of time. They are doing that this year on one of our projects where they have spent probably the last year trying to formulate what that proposed action looks like."

Interviewees acknowledged the importance of allowing the collaboratives sufficient time to come to decisions, stating that they, "have to go slow to go fast," but they also noted that in some cases, collaboratives were never able to come to agreement. They noted that "There's a balance depending on age and maturity of the collaborative [and] what they are able to take on." In some cases, interviewees also noted that collaboratives have been unwilling to engage with more difficult issues that the Forest Service is mandated to address,

> "The challenge has been to try to get folks to dive into [more complex decisions] because they tend to just shy away from them. . . . But we, as a National Forest, have a mandate to try to improve those ecosystems in one way or another and trying to get the collaboratives to help us work with that has been a challenge for us."

Some interviewees perceived challenges in the intersection of the Blue Mountain Interdisciplinary Team with local collaborative efforts. One interviewee said, "There are project geographies where people want to get work going, but they are actually being held up waiting for this large NEPA effort to be done. . . . When I see things like that happen – you're actually holding people up from doing work that they are ready to take on – I find that frustrating." Interviewees also described incompatibility between the team and the collaborative's desires. One explained,

> "The collaborative had agreed to focus on the middle third of the project area. . . . The accelerated restoration team came in and said, 'No, we need to go big. We're going for the whole roughly 100,000-acre project area' and they put out a purpose and needs statement without buy-in from the collaborative. And, people like me had to work really hard to try to reach consensus, and we didn't reach consensus, and the project went forward anyway and I'm not very happy about it."

Some interviewees also felt that the efforts of the Forest Service interdisciplinary team created inefficiencies for their local Forest Service partners. One interviewee explained, "The local district that's responsible for implementation was not involved [in planning]. They ended up with a lot of questions about what they're supposed to do." Others further commented that, "We're still trying to figure out at the local forest level, how will the local forest take the work of this regional team and actually deploy it?"

Some interviewees questioned the efficacy of collaboration for individual stakeholder participants and for the effort to accelerate restoration. Some interviewees expressed a feeling that the compromises they made during collaborative decision-making had not been worth their effort. One interviewee stated,

> "I'm not sure what we're doing there as an environmental group other than just giving cover to the timber industry and the Forest Service to do more commercial logging projects. . . . Our needs are not getting met. The conversation is not changing."

Another interviewee stated, "Some of the county governments, and timber industry groups . . . question the investment in collaboration, whether there's a good return on investment there." Some interviewees also wondered whether developing project-level collaborative agreements is truly helping the Forest Service accomplish their restoration goals faster, or whether collaborative involvement ultimately just slows them down. As one stated, "Does it actually help the process, does it hurt the process? Does it speed it up? Slow it down? That's a big question, and a question the collaborative is going to have to answer to in the future." Some expressed that they were not sure that the scale of the collaboratives' accomplishments is keeping pace with the scale of the restoration need. As one said, "I think in the last few years especially, people starting to ask this question – looking back at all the projects that we've agreed on. . . . Did we really make a change at the landscape-scale, or did we really just make stand-level changes?"

What future challenges and opportunities are anticipated for collaboratives?

Most interviewees anticipated interrelated challenges and opportunities for collaboratives in the Blue Mountains region in the next five years. Interviewees' perceptions of opportunities and challenges fell into three categories: opportunities to strengthen their internal structure and capacity, opportunities to scale up their impact through their existing roles, and opportunities to expand or restructure their role. In addition, some interviewees anticipated that external factors outside of collaboratives' control would affect their groups.

Some interviewees felt that collaboratives could have more impact by including more diverse stakeholders at the table, especially local tribes, county governments, contractors, and interested citizens. Some felt that recruiting new members from these groups could help the collaborative develop management prescriptions that might better address more people's needs, and reduce opposition in late stages of project development. Interviewees recognized that tribes may not be involved because they have existing government-to-government relationships with the Forest Service, but that their involvement with the collaborative would be valuable. One interviewee said, "The tribes have a unique relationship with federal government and with the Forest Service. They don't necessarily want to come to the forest collaboratives, but they do play an important role in these projects, and have really important perspectives to share and can add value." Another discussed the importance of local government being at the table, but also explained the resistance they saw from some county governments to engage in collaboration,

> "I've seen some counties want to be engaged, and I think that's been really helpful in helping to get acceptance for the project in the community and understanding the economic dynamics of the rural economy. . . . But, some counties don't believe there's a role for collaboration. . . . National forests [span multiple counties] and so you need to have as many of those voices at the table as you can to be successful."

Some interviewees felt there was an opportunity to better engage the "silent majority" of private citizens "who probably don't even know the collaborative exists, they don't know what it does, and if they did know they might be more involved." Others felt that more contractors should also be at the table. One interviewee said, "The makeup of [our collaborative] doesn't involve enough of our local contractors and private citizens. . . . It's not because of lack of effort to try to get them involved."

Some interviewees believed that improving communication and outreach with the general public could help collaboratives involve new constituencies, generate broader support, and shift public perceptions about some issue areas. Some interviewees felt that collaboratives simply did not have the knowledge, skills, or experience to develop effective outreach strategies. One interviewee noted, "Because we [on the collaborative] are all a bunch of environmentalists, lawyers, scientists, loggers, none of us have a clue about public relations and outreach." Despite their lack of experience, interviewees recognized that collaboratives are starting to try new outreach strategies to generate more support for collaboration. One interviewee said, "I think that if the collaborative is proactive, they can continue to be and build on their relevance. They are working hard to do that with this outreach, and really trying to bump up interest, just get people to recognize that they're there and what they do." Furthermore, some interviewees thought that additional outreach efforts could generate awareness and better education about different issue areas, especially prescribed fire and vegetation treatments in multi-use recreation areas. As one said,

> "I think [the collaboratives] could build stronger community and social support for prescribed burning . . . collaboratives could play a really important role in creating that social license and working with communities to essentially create the enabling conditions for prescribed fire to be a land management tool we could use at scale."

Another observed, "If you can piggyback on that desire to recreate some education about forests, then you can build a powerful constituency for forest restoration."

Some interviewees felt that collaboratives could try to more systematically understand what makes some groups successful at building trust. Many noted the essential role that trust plays in supporting the collaboratives' work, and they expressed a desire to understand the factors that have enabled some groups to be highly successful at building trust. One interviewee noted, "We spend a lot of effort thinking about the hard core [ecological] science in the forests, but not about trust-building, and that trust-building is going to be essential." Some interviewees also recognized that as collaboratives scale up their work, they are going to have to increasingly rely on relationships of trust, "Success . . . is going to be dependent on increasing the pace and scale of trust. And, we don't really know how to do that." Some also felt that information about how to build trust was undervalued or its importance was overlooked; "There's also in some sectors some lack of awareness that [trust] is really fundamentally what is going to undergird the difference between runaway success . . . and mediocre results." Some interviewees shared their ideas about what, specifically, had contributed to trust-building in their collaborative, but were not sure if or how that would scale to other groups or contexts.

Most interviewees felt that there were opportunities to continue developing consensus agreements that could help the Forest Service achieve efficiencies in planning and implementation. Some thought that collaboratives could continue to increase the Forest Service's capacity to plan and implement forest restoration projects by simply helping the Forest Service stay up-to-date regarding the community's attitudes and opinions about forest management. One interviewee noted,

> "It's always been my hope that collaboration is about building social license and zones of agreement – and providing guidance to the Forest Service about where the public is in terms of their view of the mission, purpose, goal, and priority value of the national forest systems lands so they can move forward with more certainty about the new era that we're in."

Others felt that collaboratives have been successful at developing consensus agreements about managing dry pine forests, and saw opportunities to expand to different forest types:

> "There is a high level of agreement around dry pine. And, you get done with those projects and there are still . . . dry mixed conifer, moist mixed conifer forests that people need

> to grapple with. And we can see that there is a tremendous amount of angst, tension, need for conflict resolution around the moist mixed conifer in northeast Oregon."

Some interviewees thought that making decisions about moist forest types may be the biggest challenge collaboratives face, "The biggest challenge I see right now is actually going to be forest type. . . . There are just some forest types that I don't believe we're going to be able to collaborate on. We're not going to be able to develop enough agreement to do it. So, we're going to have to pick those issues that we can come to agreement on."

Some interviewees thought the collaboratives could do more to influence decision making and generate additional resources for themselves, agencies, and their communities. These interviewees believed that collaboratives have tremendous political power that they do not often leverage. One noted, "Politicians and elected officials . . . look to collaborative groups as important entities where good work gets done, but they don't often speak up actively." Many interviewees also noted that collaboratives could do more to advocate for increased budgets for forest restoration at the federal and state levels, and for funding for projects that they have helped to plan. "Both at the state and federal level, I think collaboratives need to start advocating for funding for the kind of projects they have planned. I think that's a big opportunity." Another agency representative noted, "We are much more successful at going after both internal and external funding if we have the support of the collaborative. So I think that's a huge opportunity not only for the collaborative, but for the [National Forest]." Some interviewees also thought that collaboratives could play a larger role in attracting new industry and business in their communities. One person stated, "I think they could play a stronger role in helping to build local contracting capacity, and support rural economic development, the emergence of new businesses that could utilize wood products and some of the nonmerchantable wood that's coming off the sales."

Some interviewees felt that collaboratives could expand their roles to new issue areas and types of planning and implementation. Some interviewees expressed interest in collaborating on issues areas beyond forest management. One stated,

> "I'm hopeful that the collaborative can grow outside of what we consider the typical vegetation management and aquatic restoration type of projects. . . . I think there's an opportunity there [to look at] livestock grazing, to look at access, wild horse management, facility master planning, . . . travel management planning. Those are some of the issues I challenge the collaborative to help with."

Many interviewees described the traditional role of collaboratives as helping with the project planning and NEPA approval process; however, some felt there was an opportunity for collaboratives to be more involved throughout all stages, particularly implementation and monitoring. As one noted, "My hope is that . . . the collaboratives go beyond just trying to broker the social license to do something – and actually work together to assist the Forest Service in implementation and leveraging additional resources to get the work done." Another said, "The other opportunity is monitoring [after project implementation]. Trying to understand – Was it the right thing at the right time in the right place? Or is there a way that we can shift that? And how does that it incorporate itself into the zones of agreement?" Beyond that, some collaborative members hoped the Forest Service would start to involve them in the earliest stages of planning by engaging them in forest plans and forest plan amendments for their specific national forests. As one stated, "There's an opportunity writ large for collaboratives to participate in the forest plan amendment process. . . . As groups have a longer track record and a sense of agreement on outcomes, they are well-positioned to inform that process." Some interviewees also felt that collaboratives could expand their role to include working with non-federal agencies and private entities, and helping to plan cross-boundary projects; as applying the collaboratives' strategies and processes to state, county, and private lands could allow them to scale up their impact. Some felt that this would be necessary because they believed the scope of the collaboratives' work did not currently match the scale of the problem. One interviewee said, "We need to be doing [collaboration] on both public and private lands. There is a huge assumption that the problem is on federal lands. . . . There are opportunities, needs, issues of concern on private lands."

Many interviewees recognized that the Forest Service has been granted the ability to use new authorities and strategies to expedite project planning and implementation, but support for these tools varied. One interviewee noted,

> "There is a suite of tools that the Forest Service has congressional approval to use that sometimes aren't fully used–categorical exclusions and other things. So, when we have a disaster come through–disease, fire, insects–we can be proactive and ready to harvest the merchantable value of that material before it rots. . . . There's tools in the toolbox that we aren't using and we could figure out how to use them."

But others felt that the use of categorical exclusions was a process that could circumvent full collaborative involvement and have long-term, negative impacts on participation in collaboration. One interviewee explained, "As we face more threats from categorical exclusions and other logging loopholes that cut the public out, I think the tolerance from conservation groups for spending our resources [on collaboration will diminish] . . . we're going to have to start making choices." Most interviewees noted the positive potential of the recent Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) legislation to increase the Forest Service's capacity to treat federal forest lands. One person said, "The Good Neighbor Authority has significant opportunity, as does the state's investment program . . . it would probably generate several million dollars per year that could be reinvested in various aspects of that broader restoration scope." Some interviewees were hopeful that GNA could help offset anticipated budget cuts to the Forest Service, especially for programs such as the Forest Service's Collaborative Forest Landscape Program (CFLRP), which many believed would have tenuous funding pos-

sibilities in the future. One stated, "We are looking at the Good Neighbor Authority as a potential way to fund some of that other stuff that frankly isn't getting funded by Congress." Another stated, "The Good Neighbor Authority has significant opportunity, as does the state's investment program as I've thought about the potential for CFLR to expire." Some interviewees noted that all members on the collaboratives were not yet supportive of the Forest Service developing a more shared stewardship approach with the state, but that the agency was generally headed in that direction. One interviewee said,

> "We don't have the budget or the staffing on the national forest, so we have to rely on partners to help achieve a desired outcome on the landscape. The states have been willing to help with that and so we need to try to take advantage of that and now work and try to bring the collaboratives along if possible with that work."

Many interviewees also noted the importance of and challenges associated with using stewardship contracting to accelerate restoration. They perceived positive outcomes including increased economic activity and commercial acres treated through the ongoing ten-year stewardship contract on the Malheur National Forest. One interviewee noted,

> "By pulling together, and really buckling down we've managed to keep the mill together . . . they're adding new infrastructure. . . . There are attendant economic benefits that are traceable to all that work – school enrollment is up, the housing market tightening up . . . there are trucks with logs on them rolling down main street. [It's] all good from a socio-economic standpoint."

However, some interviewees also felt that implementation of the 10-year stewardship contract had raised questions and concerns about issues such as competition and how to distribute community benefit across multiple businesses, communities, and counties. One commented,

> "There's been a shift over time – from more local, best-value stewardship contracting to packaging work. . . . That it's more difficult for small, local contractors to compete and win. And so you begin to erode the opportunity to generate both economic and ecological benefit, at least at the local scale."

Some interviewees also expressed concern that packaging work into larger contracts may affect the completion of restoration work. One stated,

> "When you have just one contractor, there's not healthy competitive spirit in order to make sure the full amount of restoration activity is occurring. . . . [We wonder] are we devaluing the value of the stewardship contracts . . . which decreases the restoration activities that are possible. . . . I think we need to open up the pool to a couple of entities to make sure we are getting fair value from work. . . . I think there are other avenues to give private industry that security that need to be looked at."

Conclusions

In this working paper we interviewed a sample of key informants who work on forest restoration in the Blue Mountains Region to understand how members of collaborative groups, Forest Service and ODF staff, and partner organizations currently perceive accelerated restoration strategies, and how these complement or challenge the work of collaboratives. Our findings indicated, first, that there was a broadly-held concept of accelerated restoration as simultaneously increasing the pace and scale of both commercial and non-commercial forest health treatments, and experimentation with new management strategies. However, interviewees also felt that accomplishment of non-commercial restoration work lagged behind commercial components, and questioned the efficacy of overall efforts to accelerate restoration as a result. Ongoing support for the accelerated restoration strategies, and for forest collaboration more generally, could be affected by this perception. Second, interviews suggested that collaboration relies on a process of building safe space for dialogue and trust. Where collaborative groups have been able to do this, there have been reported positive outcomes including the development of agreements for managing some forest types, support for the Forest Service during NEPA planning processes, integration of significant new scientific information, and leveraged funding or other resources.

Interviewees also discussed multiple challenges to collaboratives' capacity. They often cited as their greatest challenges: unstable funding for coordination; turnover at the Forest Service and within collaboratives' membership; fatigue and impatience of members; insufficient capacity and funding for project implementation; antagonism from outside entities; and increasingly challenging decision spaces involving more contentious forest types, larger projects, or new issue areas. Many of these factors ultimately undermined trust and respect between members of the group or between the collaborative and their partners, which ultimately affected the ability of collaboratives to build agreement and contribute to restoration work. This may indicate that the local collaborative group approach is not consistently compatible with increasing the pace and scale of restoration. More study and practice may be necessary to identify how the trust and capacity necessary to successfully collaborate is achieved and maintained over time.

Interviewees perceived many opportunities to grow the capacity or impact of collaborative groups. Ideas for growing this capacity included: shifting from project-by-project agreements to "zones of agreement" that could be more broadly applied; increasing participant diversity; and focusing on new forest types, issue areas, stages of project planning and implementation, and cross-boundary projects. However, interviewees also noted the key importance of making significant progress on implementation of restoration outcomes for collaborative members' feelings of efficacy, positive morale, and ultimately the longevity of collaboration.

Endnotes

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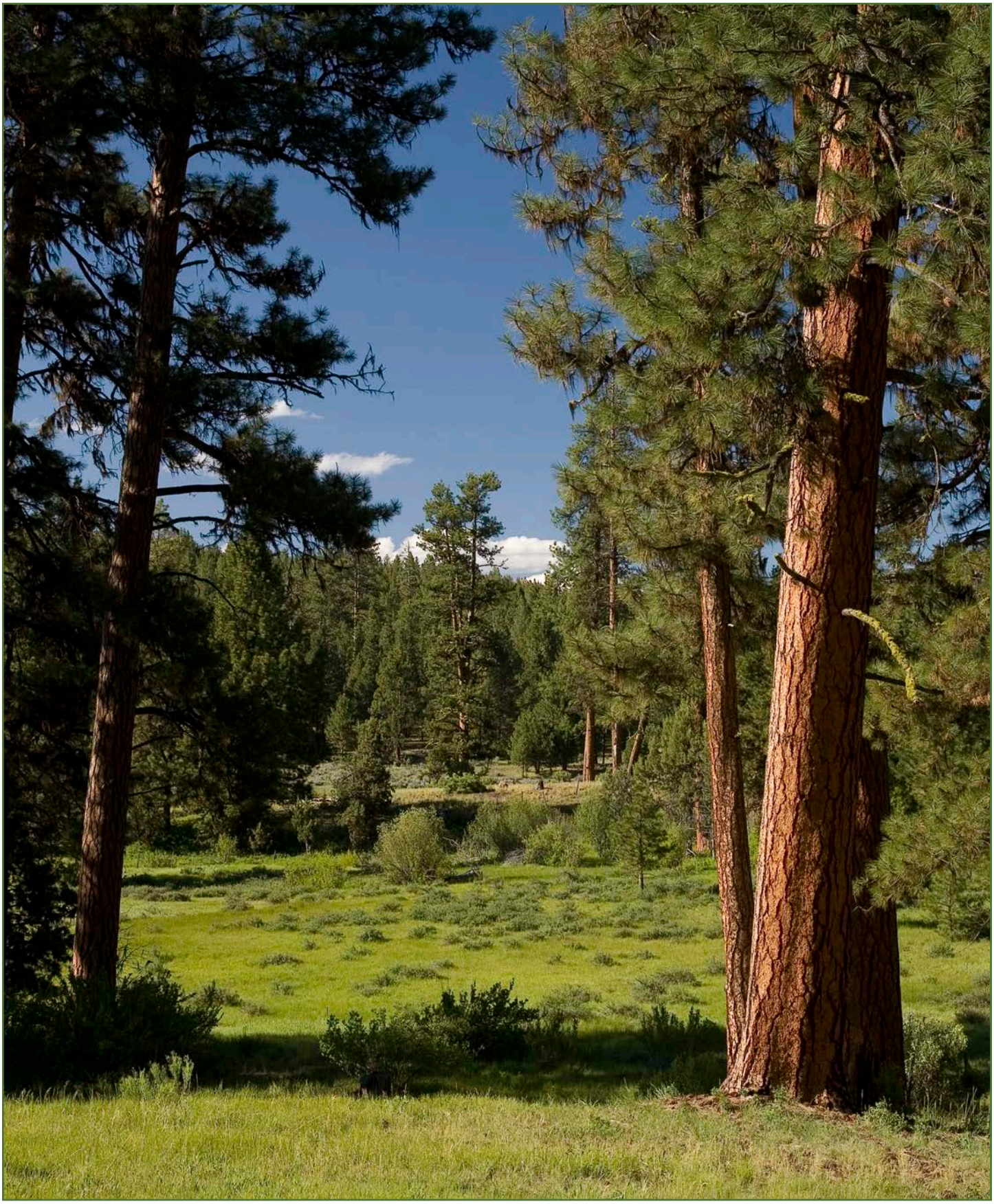

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