

Chapter 1: Background and Approach

Northern Spotted Owl, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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Introduction

The Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP), signed in 1994, provides management guidance for over 24 million acres in 17 national forests and 5 U.S. Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management (BLM) units in Washington, Oregon, and California (USDA Forest Service & DOI Bureau of Land Management, 1994). The NWFP shifted federal forest management priorities from sustained-yield timber production to species-level to ecosystem-level conservation while accounting for and attempting to mitigate anticipated negative social and economic impacts of mature forest conservation (Johnson et al., 2023). Beginning at the 10-year mark and every five years following that, the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service), initiated social and economic monitoring to assess the continued impacts of the NWFP on local communities within the plan boundaries. These monitoring requirements were part of the NWFP Record of Decision, framed as a question: “Are local communities and economies experiencing positive or negative changes that may be associated with federal forest management?” (Charnley et al., 2006; USDA Forest Service & DOI Bureau of Land Management, 1994).

For the fifth NWFP monitoring effort (marking 30 years since the adoption of the NWFP), the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Region contracted the Ecosystem Workforce Program (EWP) at the University of Oregon to conduct eight case studies of social and economic changes experienced by NWFP-area rural communities over the 30 years in which the plan has been implemented. While the NWFP 15- and 20-year monitoring efforts presented analyses of secondary social and economic data at the county level only (Grinspoon & Phillips, 2011; Grinspoon et al., 2015), this 30-year monitoring effort follows the model of the 10- and 25-year monitoring efforts (Charnley et al., 2006; Grinspoon et al., 2025), by conducting multiple qualitative case studies at the local community-level.

The 25-year social and economic monitoring selected 10 rural forest-based communities from California (n=2), Oregon (n=4), and Washington (n=4) (Coughlan et al., 2021; Coughlan et al., 2025). Analysis of community attributes placed each community into one of three social and economic groups: (1) amenity driven, (2) production driven, and (3) isolated and declining (Coughlan et al., 2021). Amenity driven communities have natural or cultural amenities that attract economic activity through tourism and recreation, second/vacation home ownership, and gentrification involving remote workers and retirees. In the 25-year study, only one community was amenity driven. Production driven communities retained significant elements of the timber industry with varying degrees of other economic support such as

other industry, tourism and recreation, retirement destinations, or serving as bedroom communities to nearby metropolitan areas. Seven of the 25-year communities fit into this group. Isolated and declining communities were the most distant from metropolitan areas and major transportation arteries. They had lost many services as well as major industries, including timber harvesting and processing businesses. Two of the 25-year communities fit into this group. While the one amenity driven community had arguably recovered from or moved beyond the post-NWFP social and economic shock, the other communities had not. Below we detail case study methods for the 30-year monitoring and provide an overview of case study selection and interview recruitment results.

Approach

We organized the 30-year community case studies around national forest ranger districts distributed relatively evenly across the NWFP area. We defined the local “community” for each ranger district as a group of people variously connected to each other by their residence, employment, or other vested political or economic interest in a specific geographic place hosting a Forest Service Ranger Station. Thus, each of our case study communities represents a “community of place” (Charnley et al. 2006, 2018; Machlis & Force, 1988).

This approach builds on sampling procedures from the NWFP 25-year social and economic monitoring (Coughlan et al., 2025). The 25-year effort used school districts to define each community of place. For the 30-year monitoring, we modified this approach slightly by using US Census County Subdivisions (CCDs) to delineate study area spatial boundaries to more reliably assess demographic changes. This sampling procedure identified study areas comprised of one (or two adjacent) US Census County subdivisions (CCDs) located within the NWFP area that fit the following criteria (Figure 1.1):

1. Sample communities were “forest-based”: the CCD’s land base is comprised of at least 30 percent federal forest lands (i.e. national forest or BLM lands).
2. Rural: less than 15,000 residents.
3. Sample communities hosted a Forest Service ranger station.
4. Forest Service’s national priority landscapes for wildfire risk reduction (priority landscapes): Four CCDs within, two CCDs adjacent to, two CCDs neither within nor adjacent to priority landscapes.
5. Not included in the 25-year NWFP social and economic monitoring.
6. “Gateway” communities: CCD contains or is adjacent to areas or geographic features with high potential for nature-based recreation and tourism.

Rural, forest-based

We classified potential study areas as “forest-based” where national forest comprised at least 30 percent of the land base or where the CCD was relatively circumscribed by national forest lands and the coastline. We classified potential study areas as “rural” if the 2020 United States Census population was less than 15,000 individuals (Kurtz 2010).

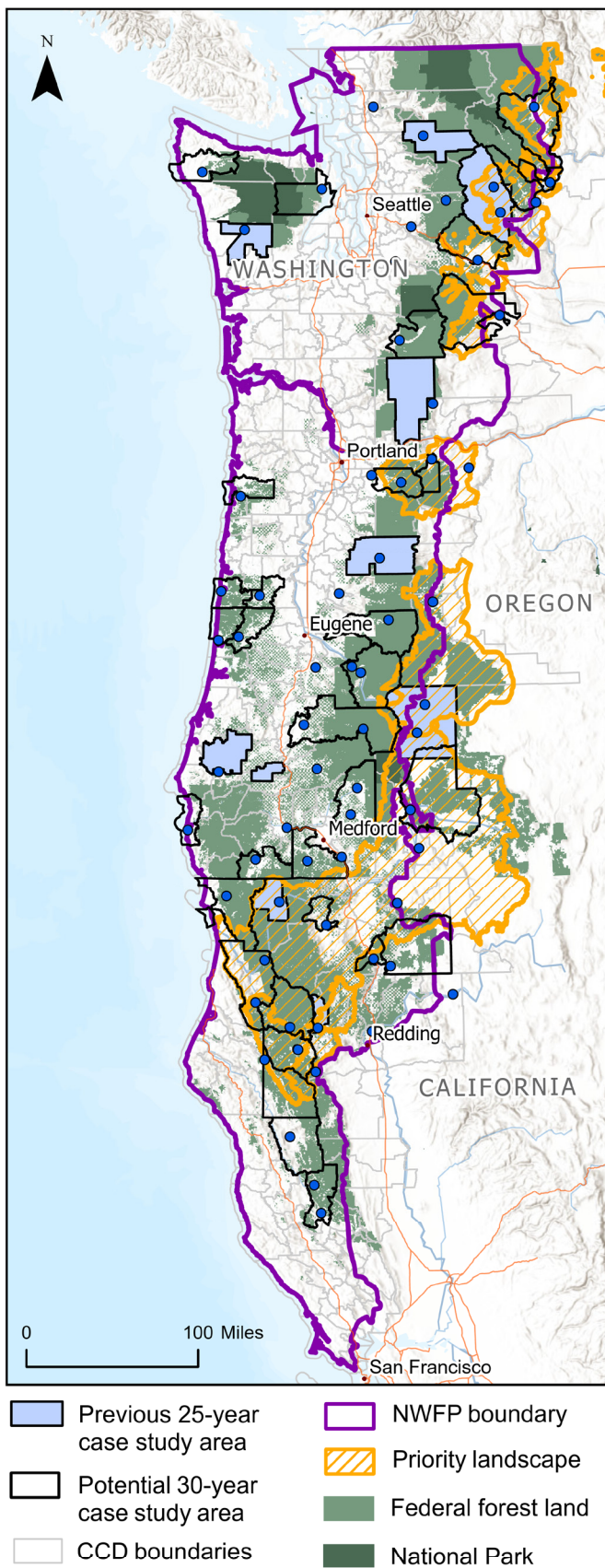


Figure 1.1. Map of potential case study areas.

Gateway communities

Economies involving natural and cultural amenities offer alternatives to production-based economies for rural, forest-based communities (Winkler et al., 2007). Results from the NWFP 25-year monitoring suggested that few of the communities selected as case studies had high potential for developing natural amenity-based economies, although some communities did have moderate success capitalizing on lake or river-based recreation and scenery (Coughlan et al., 2021). To understand if and how NWFP communities developed amenity-based economies, we specifically identified formerly timber dependent “gateway” communities as case studies for the 30-year social and economic monitoring effort. Gateway communities are communities that are located on a main route to a popularly recognized natural feature or area with high tourism value or interest such as an iconic mountain, scenic coastline, or geological feature (McMahon 1999). These natural features are also often designated as National Parks, wilderness, or recreation areas, providing them with additional recognition. We considered that gateway communities have higher potential for developing economic activity related to nature-based recreation and tourism (Stoker et al. 2021; Hjerpe et al. 2022). Identifying rural, formerly timber dependent gateway communities allowed us to focus this round of monitoring on the trajectories and future potentials of places with natural resource amenities beyond timber. This multi-part sampling approach also provides a diverse and more complete set of community experiences to draw from for continued monitoring.

Other Forest Service policies

Lastly, to understand the potentially uneven impacts of more recent Forest Service policies, we designed the sample frame to include four case studies that fell within the Forest Service’s priority landscapes, two case studies that were adjacent to priority landscapes, and two case studies that were neither within nor adjacent to priority landscapes.

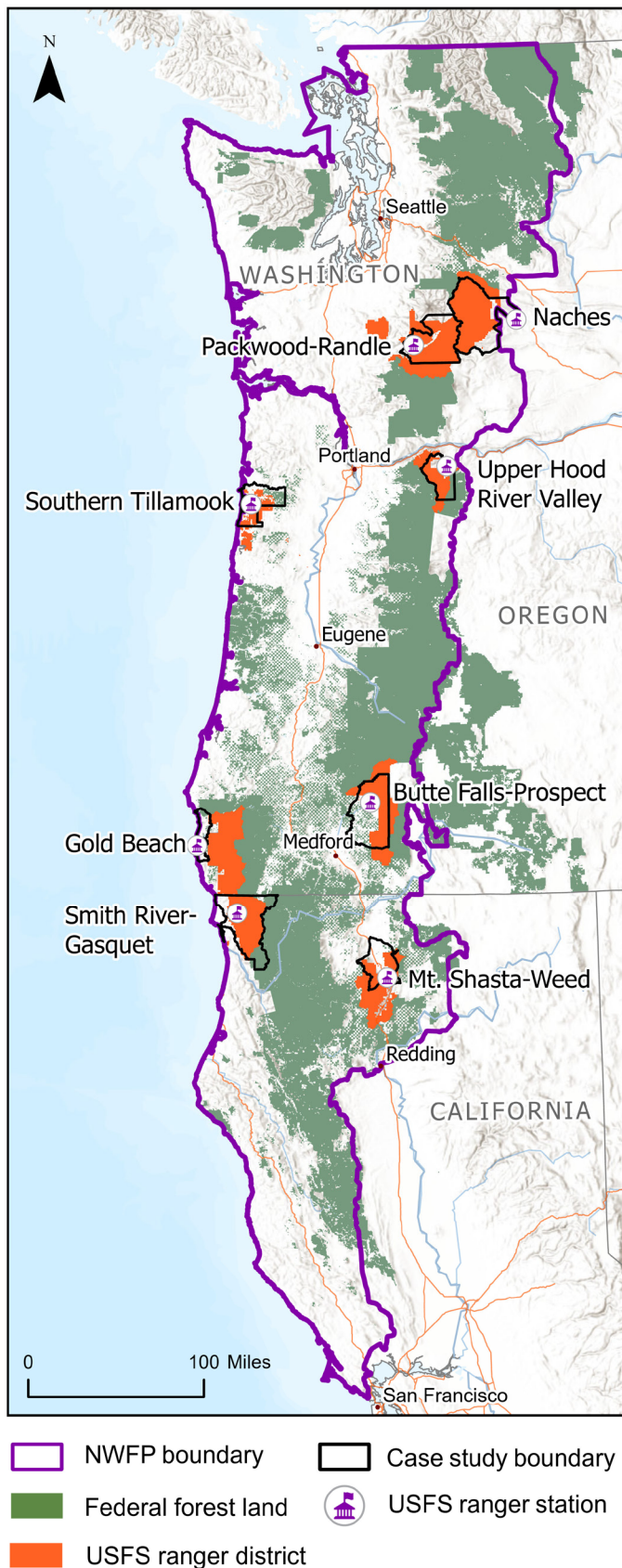


Figure 1.2. Map of all case study areas

Case study selection

To select case study communities, we identified 373 CCDs within the NWFP. Of those CCDs, 89 contained greater than 30 percent federal forest lands or were circumscribed by public lands (including national forest) and the coastline. Eighty-one of those CCDs had fewer than 15,000 residents as of the 2020 decennial census. Of those 81 CCDs, 42 CCDs contained a Forest Service ranger station (there are a total 67 ranger districts within the NWFP). Of this selection of 42 CCDs, nine were eliminated from the sample because all or part of the CCD was included in the NWFP 25-year social and economic monitoring. This left us with 33 CCDs from which we selected 8 potential gateway communities, relatively evenly distributed throughout the NWFP area, and meeting our criteria with respect to the priority landscapes.

This selection process resulted in two communities in Washington, four communities in Oregon, and two communities in California (Table 1.1, Figure 1.2). We then iteratively modified the study area geographies to better represent local community contexts in the following ways:

1. Although the Parkdale CCD met all sampling criteria, we felt that it was historically tied to the community of Dee. Therefore, the Upper Hood River Valley case study combined Parkdale and Dee CCDs. Both CCDs have greater than 30 percent federal forestlands.
2. The Hebo CCD included Pacific City, but excluded adjacent areas that are clearly geographically and socially connected to Pacific City. Therefore, for the Southern Tillamook study area, we combined the Hebo and Neskowin CCDs. Both CCDs have greater than 30 percent federal forestlands.
3. To achieve a more geographically representative sample, we added the Gold Beach CCD. This CCD does not contain >30 federal forestlands since adjacent national forest is

included in the Brookings CCD. However, Gold Beach is circumscribed by national forestlands and in this way is most similar to other CCDs that contain greater than 30 percent federal forestlands. We opted not to combine Gold Beach with Brookings since this would have resulted in a total population exceeding our 15,000 person threshold.

4. Although the Mt. Shasta CCD met all criteria for a study area, we added Weed CCD to the study area at the request of the Forest Service who were interested in learning more about that community. Mt. Shasta and Weed have historic, forest-industry-related ties and present an interesting case given their divergent trajectories.

Two case studies, Butte Falls-Prospect and Gold Beach shared the same national forest even though the former is located in the Southern Cascades and the latter is located on the coast.

Table 1.1. *Case Studies, National Forest, and Local Ranger District (2024).*

Case study	CCDs	Ranger District name	National Forest	Priority landscape
Packwood-Randle	Big Bottom	Cowlitz Valley	Gifford Pinchot	No
Naches	Northwestern Yakima	Naches	Okanogan-Wenatchee	Yes
Upper Hood River Valley	Dee, Parkdale	Hood River*	Mt. Hood	Yes
Southern Tillamook	Beaver, Neskowin	Hebo	Siuslaw	No
Butte Falls-Prospect	Butte Falls-Prospect	High Cascades	Rogue River-Siskiyou	No
Gold Beach	Gold Beach	Gold Beach	Rogue River-Siskiyou	No
Mt. Shasta-Weed	Mt. Shasta, Weed	Mount Shasta**	Shasta-Trinity	Yes
Smith River-Gasquet	Smith River-Gasquet	Gasquet	Six Rivers	No

*Hood River Ranger District is currently managed jointly with the Barlow Ranger District.

**Mount Shasta Ranger District is managed with the McCloud Ranger District as the Shasta-McCloud Management Unit

Natural amenities identified in the sampling process included two national parks, one jointly managed state and national park, coastal state parks, a national recreation area, a federal wildlife refuge, and federally designated wilderness areas managed by the Forest Service (Table 1.2). Three communities included iconic Pacific coastline as a natural amenity: Smith River-Gasquet, Gold Beach, and Southern Tillamook. The Smith River-Gasquet case study additionally has a unit of the Redwood National and State Park and the Smith River Recreation area. Five of the communities were gateways to iconic, volcanic landscapes along the crest of the Cascade Mountains: Mount Shasta-Weed is a gateway to the stratovolcano, Mount Shasta; Butte Falls-Prospect is a gateway to Crater Lake National Park; Upper Hood River Valley is a gateway to stratovolcano Mount Hood; and Packwood-Randle and Naches case studies are the east and west gateways (respectively) to stratovolcano Mount Rainier.

Table 1.2. Summary of the most significant natural amenity attraction in each case study.

Case study	Natural Amenity	Management	Annual Visitation (2024)
Packwood-Randle	Mount Rainier National Park	National Park Service	1,620,006
Naches	Mount Rainier National Park	National Park Service	1,620,006
Upper Hood River Valley	Mount Hood Wilderness	Forest Service	3,004,000
Southern Tillamook	Oregon Coast state parks	Oregon State Parks; Forest Service	32,500,000* all coastal state parks
Butte Falls-Prospect	Crater Lake National Park	National Park Service	504,942
Gold Beach	Oregon Coast, state parks; wildlife refuge	Oregon State Parks; US Fish and Wildlife	32,500,000* all coastal state parks; <i>wildlife refuge visitation data not found</i>
Mt. Shasta-Weed	Mount Shasta Wilderness	Forest Service	1,499,000
Smith River-Gasquet	Redwood National and State Park; Smith River National Recreation Area	National Park Service; California Park Service; Forest Service	622,883; <i>Smith River National Recreation Data not found</i>

Data collection and analysis

For each case study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with community members, Forest Service employees, and people employed in the local timber industry. Our objective was to interview 15 to 20 people per case study including at least four Forest Service interviewees and at least one interviewee actively engaged in the local timber industry. Interviewees in each case study were selected for their knowledge and experience with local community issues, natural resource management, or timber industry using a combination of snowball sampling and purposive sampling strategies. In addition to local Forest Service staff, community interviewees typically included elected officials, natural resource managers, local school administrators, leaders in non-profit organizations or efforts, forest collaborative members, local business owners, and timber industry business owners or management-level employees. All community member interviewees either resided in or worked within the study area.

Interviewee sampling

We recruited a total of 170 interviewees (Table 1.3). Interviewees included 118 “community members”, 40 “Forest Service employees”, and 12 “forest industry employees.”

Table 1.3. Case Study interviewees including community members (residing or working within the study area), Forest Service employees (employed at the Ranger District or National Forest level), and Forest industry employees (actively employed by the timber industry).

Case study	Community Members	Forest Service Employees	Forest Industry Employees
Packwood-Randle	14	4	1
Naches	19	6	1
Upper Hood River Valley	17	5	1
Southern Tillamook	14	5	2
Butte Falls-Prospect	16	5	2
Gold Beach	11	4	1
Mt. Shasta-Weed	14	6	2
Smith River-Gasquet	13	5	2
Total	118	40	12

Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed a scripted protocol (see Appendix A). We asked interviewees about changes experienced by the community since the implementation of the NWFP. Topical areas included the following domains: employment, housing, services, social life, demography, overall community well-being, the relationship between the community and the Forest Service, and local land use and management policies. During the winter and spring of 2024, we conducted initial scoping interviews with Forest Service staff remotely via video conference. We then spent a minimum of five days in each case study community conducting in-person interviews, frequenting local businesses, and taking notes and photographs of the study area. A total of sixteen non-agency interviews were conducted remotely if interviewees were unable to schedule an in-person interview during the study area visit.

Interviews were digitally audio recorded and transcribed using AI transcription software (Otter.ai). Transcripts were thoroughly reviewed and cleaned by research technicians who referenced the audio recordings. We thematically coded each interview using a deductive coding scheme based on thematic question groups used in the interview protocol. We then thematically coded interview content in Dedoose for emergent themes based on a grounded theory approach (Dedoose, 2025; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Quotes used in this report were selected from the interviews to succinctly represent emergent themes as well as to inclusively represent interviewee experiences.

Community history and secondary data

We conducted literature review and archival research on community history with a specific emphasis on topics addressed in community interviews as well as contemporary changes in industry, tourism, and wildfire management (see Appendix B for additional information). Community histories, which included the local history of the timber industry and other industries, provide context for how communities were variously impacted by the NWFP. In addition, community histories reveal the extent of community isolation and connection to regional centers, key factors for understanding social and economic changes since the implementation of the NWFP.

Secondary data sources on forest products included USDA Forest Service Timber Information Manager (TIM) data on Forest Service timber sales, USDA Forest Service Cut and Sold reports on timber and special (non-timber) forest products, BLM timber harvest data, and demographic data collected by the US Census Bureau (USDA Forest Service, 2023, 2025; US DOI Bureau of Land Management 2025, 2026; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a, 2000b, 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2020a, 2020b, 2022). Data from Forest Service TIM, Cut and Sold reports, and BLM timber harvests were cleaned and summarized using TidyR library in R Studio (Wickham et al., 2026). Additional details available in Appendix B.

Geospatial data included in maps, as well as additional secondary data sources and methods, are detailed in Appendix C. Land management calculations for each case study were based on BLM land management data (U.S. DOI Bureau of Land Management, n.d.) and statistically summarized using ArcGIS Pro 3.3.2 summarize within function. We inventoried contemporary services for each case study by exporting case study boundaries from ArcGIS into a KMZ layer. The KMZ layer was then imported into Google My Maps (<https://www.google.com/maps>). With the case study boundaries visible, we used the Google search function to evaluate the locations of relevant community amenities within each case study area.

To search the map, the following methods were used:

1. Zoomed view extent to case study boundary on Google My Maps.
2. Identified services using the following common search terms, i.e. “supermarket,” “grocery store,” “health clinic,” “hospital.”

Analysis of US Census data tracked changes in CCD population estimates from the 2000 decennial Census, 2008-2012 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates, and 2018-2022 5-year estimates. This allowed us to examine approximately 20 years of change for the period beginning six years after the implementation of the NWFP through 2020 (4 years before the NWFP 30-year mark). We present results on total population, population age cohorts, and low-income populations in the following chapters. Participation in the civilian labor force (unemployed population) and workforce non-participation unrelated to unemployment are reported in Appendix D.

The following chapters offer a synthesis of key findings from the 30-year social and economic monitoring of the NWFP area (Chapter 2) followed by an in-depth analysis of each case study area (Chapters 3-10).

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Cut-over area in Gifford Pinchot National Forest, Randle District, 1956

For full report, visit:
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