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CAPACITY OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS FOR NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

CASSANDRA MOSELEY, KATE MACFARLAND, MAX NIELSEN-PINCUS, KERRY GRIMM, ALAINA POMEROY, AND MAIA J. ENZER

Reliance on community-based natural resource management in the western US has been growing since the 1990s. Collaboration is increasingly essential, and community-based organizations are often relied upon to facilitate this collaboration. This is particularly true in the face of decreasing resources within federal land management agencies and the growing complexity of natural resource issues. The proposed Forest Service Planning Rule, the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, and other programs rely heavily on collaboration to achieve their goals. Community-based organizations, including nonprofits and informal collaborative groups, work to build public agreement around the management of federal lands; develop local business and workforce capacity for forest and watershed restoration; and ensure that the benefits of restoration activity flow to rural communities. The resources, structure, relationships, and other characteristics of these organizations are less well understood than their strategies, approaches, and activities. This paper seeks to provide insight into the organizational capacity of community-based organizations in the American West and to give recommendations to enhance and grow their impact.

Approach

In this pilot project, we surveyed 92 collaborative groups and community-based organizations in eleven states across the western US to examine their capacities and limitations, and the roles that they play in local and regional natural resource management. Our goal was to survey organizations that have been neglected by other surveys because they do not fit into easily identifiable classifications, such as soil and water conservation districts or watershed councils.

Findings

The organizations we surveyed have a broad mission focus, suggesting an ability to take an integrated approach to natural resource

management. Many had missions that integrate sustainable natural resource use and the protection of environmental resources. Over two-thirds of these organizations focused on public lands, watershed management, and forest management issues. On-the-ground projects, collaboration and facilitation were the primary strategies used by community-based organizations to accomplish their goals.

These organizations are small: 30 percent of organizations had only part time staff. They vary in scope and work at watershed, region/landscape, national forest, or multiple county scales. When compared with western environmental organizations, the salaries provided to community-based organizations' staff were generally lower and



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

INSTITUTE FOR A SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT

5247 University of Oregon

Eugene OR 97403-5247

T 541-346-4545 F 541-346-2040

ewp@uoregon.edu • ewp.uoregon.edu

they offered fewer benefits. **About a quarter of the 92 organizations surveyed have no paid staff and rely solely on volunteers.** Volunteers, the Forest Service, and state agencies were the most frequent providers of technical assistance to these organizations.

The budgets of community-based organizations were generally much smaller than environmental groups; 36 percent of western environmental groups had budgets under \$500,000¹ whereas a large majority—78 percent—of community-based organizations had budgets this size. Organizations had little to no financial reserves; only 4 percent had reserves greater than a year's operating expenses. **Half of these organizations depend on federal funding.** In the current budget climate, it is unclear how stable this federal funding will be. Some groups may turn to philanthropic foundations, but groups without nonprofit status cannot apply for much of this funding. Moreover, charitable foundations have been hit hard by the financial upheaval of the past several years and many are not able to give as they once were.

Gaps in internal capacity are overcome through external relationships and networks. Although an organization may not carry out a particular task in house, they often have partners who carry

out this task for them. Their partners are diverse and include a wide variety of governmental, nongovernmental, and other entities. The interest groups and skills represented on their boards also provide capacity to these organizations.

Collaboration is one of community-based organizations' main strategies, and they often facilitate collaboration with and for federal agencies. **However, 30 percent of groups do not have any type of financial support for their collaborative work.** Although this integrative, collaborative work is important, it is often on insecure rather than on solid financial footing.

The characteristics and capacity of these organizations has implications for how their work can be best supported and enhanced in the future. **Increased investment and support will be necessary as land management agencies look to community-based organizations to foster collaboration, build agreement, and integrate ecological and economic outcomes in rural areas.**

More Information

The complete report, EWP Working Paper #29, "Community-based Natural Resource Management in the Western US: A Pilot Study of Capacity" is available on the web at ewp.uoregon.edu.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Training Resources for the Environmental Community, 2008 Salary and Benefits Survey (Sante Fe: Training Resources for the Environmental Community, 2008).*



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