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ADOPTING STEWARDSHIP CONTRACTING: LESSONS FROM FOUR NATIONAL FORESTS

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Congress granted broad stewardship contracting authority to the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management in the FY 2003 appropriations act to help these agencies accomplish restoration and hazardous fuels reduction and increase community benefit from these activities. During the first several years of the authority, the use of stewardship contracting was uneven, with some national forests making significant use of the authorities while others hardly used stewardship contracting at all. Although the stewardship contracting has become more wide spread in recent years, it is not clear why some national forests were early adopters and others were more hesitant to use the authorities. This study provides insight into the question of why the use of stewardship contracting was initially so variable.

Approach

We conducted case studies of four fire-prone national forests-- two in California (Modoc and Eldorado) and two in Oregon (Fremont and Winema)-- to examine their use of stewardship contracting for hazardous fuels reduction. The Fremont and Winema national forests were treated as separate cases, although they were administratively combined in 2002. We conducted 77 in-depth interviews between spring 2007 and winter 2008 with Forest Service personnel, community members, businesses, and others in each location.

Findings

We found that pressures and incentives from regional and national managers (“from above”), external biophysical, economic, and sociopolitical conditions operating locally (“from outside”), and internal leadership and dynamics at the local national forest and district levels (“from within”) all influenced whether particular national forest

staff chose to use stewardship contracting early on (figure 1).

FROM ABOVE: Declining budgets and increasing pressure to meet targets for hazardous fuels reduction strongly influenced behavior on all case-study national forests. However, national forests addressed these pressures differently. Personnel on the Eldorado and Fremont saw stewardship contracting as a strategy to treat more acres with limited budgets. They felt that stewardship contracting made more funds available for on-the-ground work, freeing up appropriated funds to pay for staff. Personnel on the Modoc and Winema saw stewardship contracting as a threat to their budgets because stewardship contracting does not involve the collection of Knutson-Vandenberg (KV) funds, which help support timber staff.

FROM OUTSIDE: Local political support and collaboration played complex roles in affecting stewardship contracting use. In the Eldorado and



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Fremont cases, elected county leaders did not oppose stewardship contracting, whereas in the Modoc and Winema cases, they opposed stewardship contracting because it threatened timber revenues to county governments. The role of collaboration was more complex. A strong, well-organized collaborative group played a central role in fostering the use of stewardship contracting on the Fremont while local collaborative groups, though supportive, played a more limited role in spurring the Eldorado's adoption of stewardship contracting.

FROM OUTSIDE: Processing infrastructure can support and be supported by stewardship contracting, but the existence of appropriate infrastructure does not ensure stewardship contracting will be used. It is hard to imagine stewardship contracting working in places where there is no way to utilize any of the material removed, although stewardship contracts can (and have) been used to try to foster new kinds of wood utilization. In all four cases, there were willing bidders for stewardship contracts. Some forests saw stewardship contracting as a tool to help sustain and increase saw milling and biomass utilization capacity, while in other cases, the national forests were not particularly focused on maintaining utilization capacity, and preferred timber sale contracts because that was what they had always done.

FROM WITHIN: Internally, staff perceptions and knowledge of stewardship contracting influenced its use. On both the Fremont and Eldorado, there were internal champions and substantial support for the use of stewardship contracting. These forests also built internal expertise on the tool. For example, once the Fremont was committed to trying stewardship contracting, the forest supervisor hired a contracting officer with stewardship contracting experience. In the other two cases, there was active internal opposition to stewardship contracting, typically focused on one or two of its features, and more limited understanding of how it worked and what it could do.

Implications

Although the data collection for this study occurred in 2007 and 2008, these four case studies offer some insights into the reasons that some

national forests adopted stewardship contracting early on, while others were less interested in it early on. They also suggest some strategies for addressing the current barriers to adoption.

For stewardship contracting to be adopted early on, a national forest's staff needed to see stewardship contracting as a solution to a serious problem or to multiple problems simultaneously. These challenges could come from above or from outside. In instances where staff felt that current practices were working well enough and stewardship contracting threatened some part of the local management unit, or there existed external opposition to stewardship contracting, investing time and energy in learning about and trying stewardship contracting did not seem worthwhile.

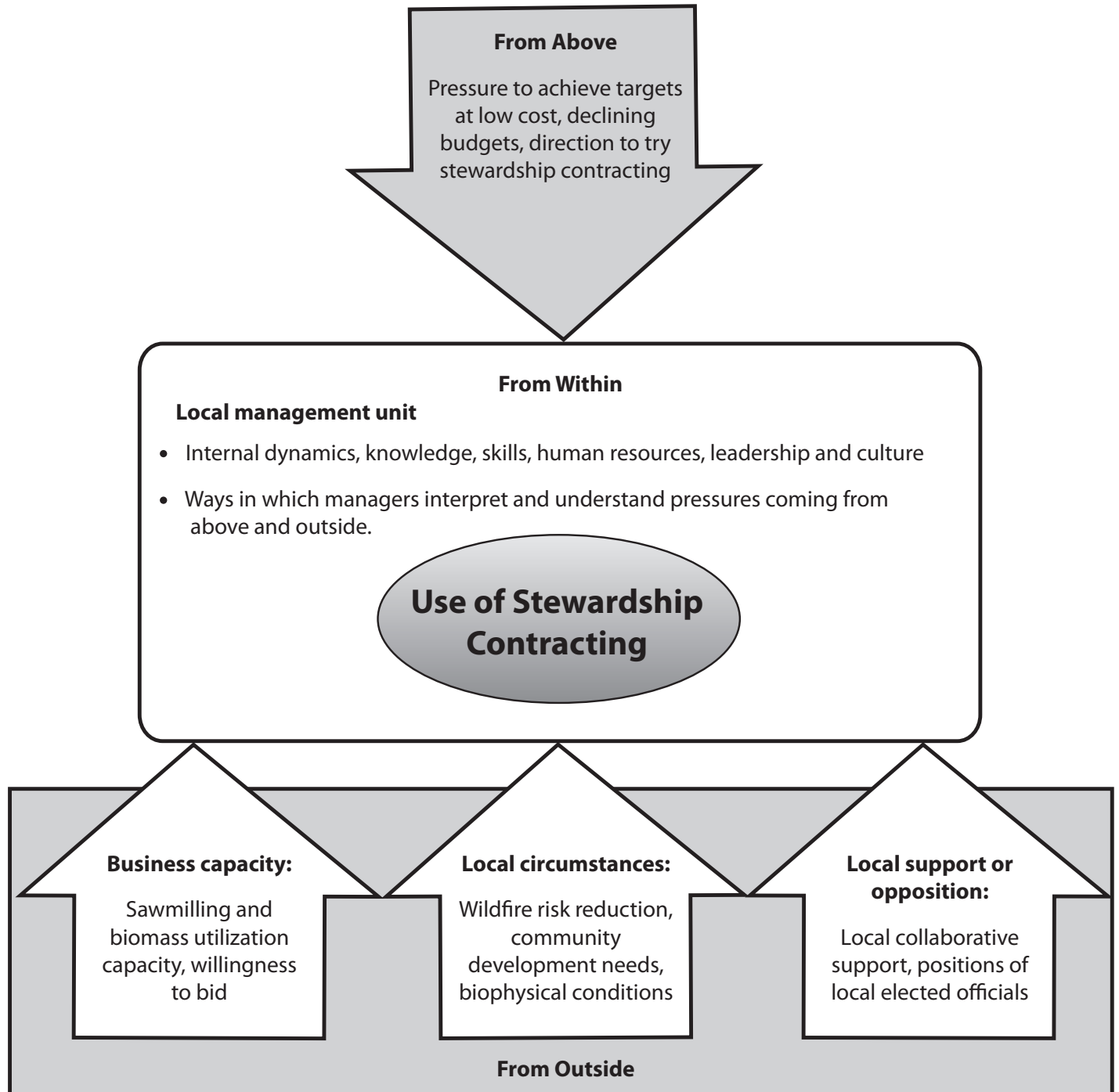
Ensuring further expansion of stewardship contracting will require a broad set of strategies to support both early adopters and those less likely to adopt stewardship contracting. Notably, staff from the national forests using stewardship contracting had a much more sophisticated understanding of the tool and what it could accomplish than staff from the national forests not using it. Educating national forest staff about stewardship contracting could encourage them to use the tool, but is not likely to be enough. Direction from above to try a stewardship contract seemed to help reluctant forests see what stewardship contracting could offer them. In addition, it may be helpful to address the perception that stewardship contracting threatens current funding streams and power relationships.

In the end, however, local conditions and interpretations of those conditions will influence who adopts stewardship contracting. Consequently, in contexts such as the National Forest System, where it is important for local management units to have discretion to effectively achieve the agency's overall mission across extremely variable conditions, adoption of new policies such as stewardship contracting will be inherently complex, uneven, and difficult to predict.

More Information

More information about this project is available at ewp.uoregon.edu/HazardousFuelsReduction.

Figure 1: Pressures and processes influencing national forest use of stewardship contracting



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