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THE EFFECTS OF THE INTEGRATED RESOURCE RESTORATION BUDGET PILOT ON FOREST SERVICE RESTORATION PROGRAMS

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Forest restoration is a priority for the U.S. Forest Service, but many have argued that the agency is constrained in meeting restoration objectives by its budget structure. In 2012, Congress approved on a pilot basis the Integrated Resource Restoration (IRR) budget line item to consolidate previously separated budget lines. With IRR, the Forest Service introduced new performance measures that increased flexibility to focus on priority restoration activities. The Southwestern, Intermountain, and Northern Regions of the Forest Service have been implementing the IRR since 2012. We were asked by the Forest Service to provide a third-party evaluation of the pilot.

Approach

In 2013, we interviewed 10 Forest Service Washington Office staff and 54 staff members in the pilot regions. We followed this in 2014 with a web-based survey of 1,210 employees (47% response rate).

Results

IRR gives forests increased flexibility to focus on priority work, supports integration across programs, and complements other restoration authorities. Pilot Regions are using the flexibility of IRR differently: some are focusing at the regional level to identify priority restoration landscapes and projects, while others are giving field units increased discretion to identify priority work. Interviewees indicated that this flexibility allows many units to focus on their most important restoration work in any given year. It also requires staff to collectively discuss priorities, forcing them to work in a more integrated fashion. Although

staff on the whole were on the fence, over half of line officers surveyed said that IRR was leading to improvements to flexibility, prioritization, and integration. On average, respondents did not indicate that IRR is improving efficiency, but they said IRR has some value in complementing other restoration authorities, such as the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) and stewardship contracting.

Given the flexibility of IRR, a key challenge is to align performance measures to support integrated restoration. The flexibility of the budget structure under IRR makes the performance measures all the more powerful in guiding restoration work. Many staff noted that, as budgets decline, activities that are not associated with hard targets, are not in priority landscapes, or are hard to measure or relatively expensive to accomplish may become under-prioritized.



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Effective leadership, internal communication, strategic planning, and collaboration with external stakeholders are key to IRR's success. Investment in effective leadership and internal communication are critical to successful implementation of the IRR approach. Respondents indicated that communication with external partners, who are working with forests in some areas to set restoration priorities, could be improved and would support increased accountability and transparency under IRR. Continued investment in strategic planning and evaluation of the effects of IRR will also be essential if the approach continues and is expanded nationwide.

Implications

IRR is leading to some improvements in the prioritization and integration of restoration programs in the pilot regions, and it affords the Forest Service the flexibility to focus on key landscapes and restoration priorities. The approach supports other restoration authorities, including the CFLRP, stewardship contracting, and the Watershed Condition Framework. However, with increased budgetary discretion there is also the potential for differential effects across units and resource areas. Performance measures can compound these problems and alone will not be adequate to guide the restoration priorities of the agency and create a desired level of accountability. We also find that IRR needs to be coupled with ongoing evaluation, learning, and adaptation; investment in leadership; and collaboration with external stakeholders to support accountability and transparency.



More information

The full reports listed below are available at:
<http://ewp.uoregon.edu/publications/working>

Working Paper #47: Evaluating the Integrated Resource Restoration Line Item: Results from Phase I

Working Paper #51: Evaluating the Integrated Resource Restoration Line Item: Results from a Survey of National Forest System Staff

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