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THE EFFECTS OF THE INTEGRATED RESOURCE RESTORATION BUDGET PILOT ON FOREST SERVICE RESTORATION PROGRAMS: THIRD-PARTY REVIEW SUMMARY FINDINGS

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In 2012, Congress authorized the Integrated Resource Restoration (IRR) budget line item, which consolidates previously separated budget line items into a single funding stream to support integrated restoration planning and project implementation. With the IRR, the Forest Service created several new performance measures to encourage national forests to focus on priority restoration activities. The goals of the IRR are to support greater integration and prioritization of restoration programs, increase flexibility to focus on priority work, and create budgetary and implementation efficiencies. The Southwestern, Intermountain, and Northern Regions of the Forest Service have been implementing the IRR approach on a pilot basis since 2012. The Forest Service asked us to provide a third-party evaluation of the IRR approach to understand its effects on restoration programs.

Approach

Over the past three years we have conducted a review of the IRR in three phases:

1. Interviews with national and regional national forest system staff members to understand how the IRR is affecting strategic planning and whether it is having the intended effects;
2. A survey of 1,210 regional and forest level staff in the pilot regions to gain a broader understanding of the IRR's effects; and
3. Outreach with stakeholders to share findings and understand their perspectives.

Results

The IRR's primary value is that it gives forests increased flexibility to focus on priority work, supports integration across programs, and complements other restoration authorities. Because of the IRR, regions and forests are reorganizing their strategic planning processes to improve

integration across resource areas and identify high priority projects. Although not universal, there have been significant improvements in integration and communication across program areas on many forests, particularly those with strong leadership. After only two years of pilot implementation, over half of line officers indicated prioritization and integration on their forests had already improved. Based on our review, we would expect these improvements to become more common over time. Some stakeholders also noted they have seen improvements to integration of projects on the ground under the IRR. The approach also gives the Forest Service the flexibility to focus on key landscapes and restoration priorities, and it supports other restoration authorities, including the CFLRP, Stewardship Contracting, and the Watershed Condition Framework.



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Given the flexibility of the IRR, an ongoing challenge is to align leadership, strategic planning processes, reporting, and performance measurement to support the goal of integrated restoration. The flexibility of the budget structure under IRR makes strategic guidance from leadership and performance measures all the more important for guiding work on the ground. Staff indicated that current performance measurement approaches might compromise the goals of the IRR over time. Therefore, if the agency were to expand the IRR, it would be critical to continue to monitor the effects of performance measures over time, understand how they vary across program areas and units, and determine whether adjustments are needed.

Leadership, communication, and collaboration with external stakeholders are key to IRR's success. Investment in effective field-level leadership and internal communication are critical to successful implementation of the approach. Successful strategies and processes for integrated restoration planning and implementation must be shared throughout the organization. Increased communication with external partners should be improved and would support increased accountability and transparency under the IRR. Continued investment in adapting organizational structure and behavior as needed will also be essential if the approach continues and is expanded nationwide.

Implications

The IRR has led to significant improvements in prioritization and integration of restoration programs in the pilot regions. These improvements are not universal, and the IRR may favor some forests, particularly those with strong leadership, collaboration with external partners, and the availability of wood products. Future implementation of the IRR should be coupled with ongoing evaluation of its impacts, adjustments as necessary, focused investment in leadership, and collaboration with external stakeholders to support accountability and transparency. Regardless of whether the IRR continues, the agency now faces several key tasks including: 1)



promoting the diffusion of innovative approaches that have increased successful integration across programs, prioritization of critical restoration work, and involvement of stakeholders in setting restoration priorities; 2) improving performance measurement and reporting to be more effective at guiding priorities and communication outcomes; and 3) defining and measuring efficiency of restoration programs more effectively.

More information

For publications on results of the third-party review of the IRR pilot, go to:

<http://ewp.uoregon.edu>

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