

Four Forests Restoration Initiative – Assessing the Opportunities for Collaboration
The Keystone Center
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Introduction

There is reason for real optimism about the future of the Four Forests Restoration Initiative's collaboration. The individuals who have worked to bring the group together are deeply committed to landscape-scale restoration over the 2.4-million-acre area called the 4-FRI. Many of them have been working toward that goal for more than a decade and they show no signs of giving up on the vision, despite some considerable frustration and fatigue. Perhaps as important as a shared goal, to a person, they acknowledge that their chances of success increase greatly if they can make progress collaboratively.

Another reason for optimism is the Forest Service's recent commitment of resources to the restoration effort and to the 4-FRI (commitment that the collaborative's participants rightly take some credit for). The agency is assembling a team dedicated to the restoration. They are engaging with the other members of the collaborative and are beginning to make decisions that move the process forward.

There are reasons for concern as well. Successful collaboration is not guaranteed. Real obstacles stand in the way. The assessment that follows enumerates some of these and offers a set of proposals for addressing them. The proposals notwithstanding, the ultimate success of the collaborative lies with each member and her/his willingness to reject old, unproductive habits; look to the future; resolve or discard old battles; and stand together for the years of work that lie ahead.

A real leader faces the music, even when he doesn't like the tune

Anonymous

Leadership has a harder job to do than just choose sides. It must bring sides together.

Jesse Jackson, politician

The most important topic I have covered in my assessment interviews: the role, intentions, trustworthiness, goals and capabilities of the Forest Service. The participants know that the Forest Service must make decisions, want the Forest Service to make decisions and fear that the Forest Service will make decisions. These participants have lived through a mixture of terrible fire, destructive policies, economic hardship, and court battles. Their history has left them with serious mistrust that makes forward progress difficult.

There is truly only one way to move from mistrust to trust. It has been and continues to be my opinion that if the 4-FRI is to succeed, the Forest Service must articulate a long-term trajectory for ecological restoration, identify specific decision points along the way, provide real detail about the connection between those decisions and the 4-FRI and clarify the true nature of the relationship between Forest Service decisions and 4-FRI deliberation. This statement or set of statements will form the foundation for a purpose statement in the 4-FRI charter. Only when all of this is clearly laid out will the participants know what the Forest Service is going to do, what the 4-FRI is going to do and whether they want to take an active role in doing it. The single most important element of this statement of purpose or commitment is a statement about whether the agency intends to move expeditiously toward a site-specific NEPA process that puts in play something on the order of half-a-million acres. If not, the agency should end the suspense and disband this collaborative effort. If the commitment to real and immediate landscape-scale restoration is true, then the agency should simply get the work underway and ask that the 4-FRI participants to pitch in.

Man is a gregarious animal... he may like to go alone for a walk, but he hates to stand alone in his opinions

George Santayana, essayist

If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go with others

Paul Summerfelt, firefighter

Perhaps the most important thing the non-Forest-Service participants must do in order for the collaborative to succeed is that over time they have to transfer loyalty from small factions to the collaborative as a whole. This will not happen on January 1, 2010; it will take time. But if the participants don't begin today to stop thinking and talking about 'us and them', the collaborative may not work. I don't pretend to understand all of the personal and professional allegiances. However there are a few factions that dominate the interaction among the participants. Nearly everyone I interviewed talked about a division between an easily identified group of agreeers and a less clearly defined set of skeptics or hedgers.

If the participants bristle at this description, that's a good thing; these ought to be uncomfortable labels. More importantly, the labels need to disappear and the most effective way to take care of that is for the participants to abandon small-group alliances, established patterns of interaction and the unspoken norms that reinforce these patterns.

Let's use the July 8, 2009 discussion of the Path Forward as a laboratory and fix some of what didn't work.

1. Drum Roll Please

Nowhere in the meeting summary (and I suspect in the meeting itself) was there a moment or reckoning. I opened the document with real anticipation that I would find a clear and unequivocal statement of agreement and some notation that spoke to the manner of each participant's explicit affirmation. In the future, if the collaborative needs an agreement, there must be an in-session, impossible-to-miss moment when the final text of an agreement is presented and every member makes an unambiguous show of support. (Given the possibility that members of the collaborative will be missing or on the phone, the protocol has to account for all of the participants.)

2. Who Talks

The July 8th meeting summary is a nearly uninterrupted series of positive statements from supporters of the proposed document. In the future, those whose needs are already satisfied must say far less and those whose needs haven't been satisfied have to speak. The meeting summary reads like a set of power-of-positive-thinking speeches. To make future meetings more successful, the collaborative has to value dissent in precisely the same way that many of the members now value agreement. Insistence about agreements has to be replaced with real respect for disagreement and an explicit protocol that requires participants to speak in dissent. That will happen only if the participants come to see dissent as an opportunity to improve a draft agreement and not a barrier to it.

3. No More Agreements that Contain Disagreements (at least until trust increases)

Some of what's wrong is an unnecessary misunderstanding born of imprecise communication about what the Path Forward says. It says that there are areas of disagreement. Unfortunately, when a 4-FRI participant makes a bold statement that the Path Forward is a Capital-A-Agreement; others have to wonder whether they are being tricked into acquiescing. If you don't have agreement on the cap, then don't put the cap in an agree-to-disagree agreement.

4. Who Gives Context

To add to the fix for #3, when there may be an agreement, those who are most enthusiastic about it must state the caveat, affirm the conditional elements and speak about the degree to which unknown, future circumstances will impact how final the agreement can be. If the most skeptical do that, they sound weasel-ish. If the most enthusiastic fail to do that, they sound manipulative.

This is one example of a set of strategies that could help the 4-FRI move away from two emerging factions. This form of factionalizing is not the only one, and perhaps not the most important one. There are other ways that the 4-FRI is in jeopardy because of small groups of participants who are, at present, more loyal to each other than to the collaborative as a whole. Again, the transfer of loyalties won't happen at once, but if the participants don't take significant action quickly to dissolve unproductive factions in favor of commitment and loyalty to the 4-FRI as a whole, the collaborative effort may not succeed.

The more important the subject and the closer it cuts to the bone of our hopes and needs, the more we are likely to err in establishing a framework for analysis

Stephen Jay Gould, scientist

Problems are solved in well-understood stages: problem identification, data collection, option generation, evaluation, agreement building. Agreements come at the end. This is true of the problem-solving process embedded in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA processes move from scoping to the development of alternatives then to the analysis of the alternatives, selection of a preferred alternative and, after review and comment, a record of decision. Failure to utilize these stages in the proper order puts NEPA-based decisions at risk. Those I spoke with in the Forest Service reiterate that decisions about treatments and restoration activities (decisions about what will happen on the ground) can only stand up to legal scrutiny if the decision comes at the end. Those who have worked for decades to advance landscape-scale restoration know this is true. And yet many in the 4-FRI have decided, beyond all logic, to start at the end. Sideboards, commitment documents and front-loaded agreements dominate the 4-FRI's early discussion. The problem is that a collaborative process – at least a successful one – begins in disagreement and becomes the venue for problem identification, data collection, option generation, evaluation and agreement building – in that order. The only theory I have is that these participants are too close to the issues; the subject cuts to the bone. They need these agreements too much to wait for them.

The only remedy I can imagine lies, again, with the Forest Service. If the agency moves with all deliberate speed to begin a large-scale, site-specific NEPA process perhaps the 4-FRI participants can begin to believe that the agreements that truly count are within reach.

Never let your values stop you from doing the right thing

Bernie Mayer, mediator

The agreement talk is accompanied by some fairly hyperbolic language. The more hyperbolic your language the more likely you're in a values dispute. I've heard a great many statements that suggest that the disagreements within the 4-FRI are rooted in values differences. If that's true, the 4-FRI needs to use processes and strategies for discussion and deliberation that are aimed at working through values conflict. First, the group has to work at values clarification. What do the participants believe about the way the world should work? Are the values mutually exclusive or reconcilable? Then the group has to move to problem solving – to transition from what we believe to what we can do. Which topics/issues/agenda

items impinge on the values? What are the interests of each participant? Are there potential solutions that advance the interests of all while upholding core values?

I expect that in the end, the participants will have to make some peace with the fact that others inside the collaborative believe different things about the way the world should work. They will have to decide whether that makes collaborative action impossible or if they can live and let live, work with those who believe differently and do the work anyway.

Collaborative is not a noun; it's an adjective

Mike Hughes

The language that participants in a collaborative process use speaks volumes about the vitality of their work and the likelihood for success. In the interviews I conducted, I honestly can't remember hearing collaborative used as an adjective; everyone in the 4-FRI uses collaborative as a noun. 'The collaborative should (or should not) set sideboards'. The participants speak of it like it's something to own – like a pair of shoes they cobbled or some big-game trophy they've slain, stuffed, preserved and displayed on the wall.

There is far too little talk of and frankly too little evidence of collaborative spirit, collaborative effort, collaborative action or collaborative behaviors. Until I made this noun-adjective distinction, it has been disorienting to hear people say intensely uncollaborative things while referring to the collaborative. Many of the participants have missed an essential truth. A collaborative (the noun) can't thrive if the behaviors of those who are its members can't be characterized as collaborative (adjective).

Optimistically, many of those I spoke with know exactly how to fix this. Among their recommendations to (and through) me:

1. Tell the truth and air assumptions

On countless occasions, I've heard people tell me that a particular discussion in the 4-FRI is masking a deeper issue. Many believe that the landscape assessment vs. PEIS discussion was a proxy for a discussion of the diameter cap. The assumption: if you favor a cap, you favor a PEIS and if not, you favor the landscape assessment. If for some of the participants this is true, it is vital they air the reason for favoring one tool over the other. It is essential that both the discussion about the cap and the discussion of the analytical tool happen above board. Of course, the assumption may be wrong as well. The only way to know is to test the assumption out loud.

2. Disclose your real interest

Participants have to get into the habit of talking about the need that drives any particular preference rather than only talking about the preference. This is Roger Fisher and Bill Ury's distinction between a position (a favorite solution) and an interest (the need that lies beneath the solution) in Getting to Yes. The 4-FRI will make more progress if we can institutionalize interest-based problem solving and move away from hard, positional statements.

3. Stop taking positions prematurely

Recently, I learned about interest in using the Forest Landscape Restoration Act (FLRA) to fund 4-FRI activities. Unfortunately, I first read about it in an e-mail taking a position against applying for FLRA funding. This e-mail was written before the 4-FRI had ever had a single discussion. 4-FRI will not work if that's how it works. The same is true for

a series of statements I received about the agenda for November 13th. I received impassioned, panic-stricken e-mails about an agenda I hadn't yet written. It's simply unnecessary to hit the panic button before anything has actually happened.

4. Listen for understanding rather than for advantage

One important step on the road to fixing #2 and #3 – the 4-FRI should begin each new topic with a collaborative attitude. Participants should be open-minded and inquisitive. When they hear from one another, they should work hard to learn about the interests of the speaker in order to imagine an answer that meets both the speaker's interests and their own. So far, I've heard too much speechifying. That's one of many signs that people aren't actually listening to each other.

5. Let go of favorite answers in favor of shared outcomes

If participants are going to let go of the positions they're carrying around in their heads, they need something to take hold of. That thing is the joint-gain outcome – the solution that meets the greatest number of interests of the greatest number of participants to the greatest extent.

6. Put the quality of the outcome ahead of turf and control, then give away the credit

Part of why people work so hard to be right is that they want credit for having been right. Ego is the enemy of the collaborative spirit. When the 4-FRI succeeds in real, on-the-ground, ecologic restoration, there will be enough credit to go around.

I believe that the 4-FRI will be exceedingly well served if at the end of this assessment and chartering exercise, every participant takes a good hard look at whether s/he wants to continue to participate and intends to do so collaboratively, including putting the hardest issues on the table and stepping back from their established positions.

Don't mistake activity for achievement

John Wooden, Coach

The noun-adjective problem has created a second problem. If the collaborative is a thing, then it needs infrastructure to support it. To solidify the 4-FRI thing, the participants have established working groups and charged them with institution building projects. I hear tell that the working groups are now beginning to identify staffing needs. I'm relieved to hear that many of the participants believe as I do that the existing working groups are a distraction from more important efforts and are doing things they need not do.

Much of the work given to the working groups can and should be placed in the charter. This will make it possible to eliminate working groups. In my view, the 4-FRI does not need a communication committee; it needs a working agreement about how participants communicate both for themselves and, when appropriate, on behalf of the 4-FRI. There is not a need for a Forest Service Commitment Committee; the Service should state clearly and unequivocally how it will use the 4-FRI. That statement goes in the charter and we're done. Once we reach the meeting on November 30th and have a charter, the collaborative process working group can end as well.

When there are working groups, they have to be smaller; their charge has to be clear; and their authority in relation to the 4FRI plenary has to be specified. The connection between working groups and restoration decisions has to be precise enough to allow participants to get away from the panic that results

in everyone signing up for every working group for fear that the group will do something they don't like and will be stuck with. The charter will speak to this question.

Finally, the working groups have to deal with the hard, substantive issues rather than process. Enough process, already! Working groups should be talking about whether to use a diameter cap as part of a proposed action in a site-specific NEPA document. That's where the real work lies. It's time to use working groups to get to it; it's time for achievement rather than activity.

So divinely is the world organized that every one of us, in our place and time, is in balance with everything else

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, author

Balance is a vital element of any successful collaborative process. Here are some of the ways that the 4-FRI needs to be re-balanced:

Where – The participants need to think carefully about ways to broaden the geography – include more non-Flagstaff participants and spend time and attention on all four forests.

How Much – There is an imbalance in participation. The most active members of the 4-FRI group have to make room for others to exercise leadership. In addition, too few people speak for too much of the time; the reticent have to step forward and the vocal have to withhold.

Who – Not all potentially affected parties have been included in the process. Beyond geography, there are no tribal representatives and no recreation stakeholders. The 4-FRI membership has to be an inclusive balance of all of the key interests.

Who Advises – There is confusion between stakeholders and consultants/academics. Stakeholders should take up a place in the inner circle. Advisors should take up seats behind those they counsel. Technical consultants who are bringing (or who hope to bring) independent information to the 4-FRI should not simultaneously take a stakeholder seat.

If the Forest Service is going to make the 4-FRI a viable collaborative process, the participants should use the weeks and months ahead, as the Forest Service's permanent 4-FRI team comes together, to assess the most significant imbalances, sort out who has to come to the table, invite new participants who can represent key interest groups and formalize the participant list.

To hope is to risk despair, to try is to risk failure. But risks must be taken because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing. The person who risks nothing... cannot learn, feel, change, grow or live... Only a person who risks is free

Ralph Waldo Emerson, author

None of the problems I've identified are insurmountable. I hope that the participants are willing to solve them and move the collaborative process forward. If they do, they will be taking significant risks. The agency takes a great risk by working in radically different ways and in sharing power and control. The participants risk the certainty of their positions, trading them for agreements they do not have and will not have until and unless site-specific NEPA processes produce real, implementable agency commitments months or years from now. At stake: real, landscape-scale restoration. It may only happen if all parties take the risk.