

How It All Began

The High Desert Partnership's origin story is like something out of a Marvel superhero movie. Out of conflict and strife, an idea was born, one that was different and untested at first, but one that gained strength, confidence and support until it became a fixture in the community. Now the High Desert Partnership facilitates collaboration that brings positive change in Harney County to achieve outcomes that benefit the greater good.



The seed was planted in 1999 when local rancher Gary Marshall was introduced to assistant Malheur National Wildlife Refuge manager Chad Karges. "There was a lot of tension between the refuge and the local community," Karges said. "After I'd been here for a year or two it was fairly obvious that there was a lot of strained or failed relationships."



From the local ranching side, Gary said that he'd had good associations with the refuge biologists, with whom the permittees had the most contact. However, the refuge had gone through several managers since 1971 when John Scharf, who had successfully mitigated the gap between the local community and governmental policies, stepped down. The succession of managers did little to ease the discontent in the community. "In defense of them, they were getting direction from a higher level, so they were focusing on what the mandate for the refuge was and it was just for wildlife," Marshall said. "Uses of the refuge were changing and people weren't happy and refuge personnel weren't happy."

Karges and Marshall started sharing ideas and talking about the history of the situation. Both agreed that there had to be a better way of doing things. "We started working on it at that point, and that was how the High Desert Partnership began. We had a lot of meetings at our kitchen table,"

Marshall said. They looked at a few other groups that were working to solve problems in a collaborative way and took an interest in the way the Blackfoot Challenge was doing things in Montana. Karges and Marshall both travelled to Montana to learn how the group was overcoming obstacles by bringing together opposing sides. Folks from the Blackfoot Challenge even travelled to Harney County to help solidify the concepts Karges and Marshall were working to develop.

Local ranchers Mike Bentz and Dick Jenkins joined the effort as Karges and Marshall brought their idea of using collaborative decision-making to a larger group of local stakeholders. They also met with a lot of local groups and individuals to gauge interest and participation. They travelled around the state and met with agency heads and folks with political clout. They even had lunch at the Governor's mansion, meeting with then-governor Ted Kulongoski. It took a lot of talking and convincing. In general, people thought the idea of a collaborative problem-solving process was great, but they were skeptical that it could work. "At that point we found that what was important for this to work was figuring out who the right people were to get involved,"

Marshall said. “They needed to be able to listen to other people and hear what that other person was saying and consider what they were presenting as important. We were looking for people on all sides of the issue.”

Karges and Marshall realized early on that the drive for this collaborative problem-solving process needed to come from within the county. “This could not be driven by an agency and be successful. It had to be driven by the community. It had to be something the community wanted,” Karges said. Founders of High Desert Partnership knew that if they focused on the process for decision-making; common ground could be reached.

Creating A Plan



The Malheur National Wildlife Refuge was on the verge of creating a 15-year plan. Such plans had gone badly in the past when agencies created plans through traditional government planning processes often resulting in litigation. The whole plan would then get put on hold until the litigation was resolved. From the local perspective, the refuge’s ways of doing things seemed chaotic and illogical. “It was managed by litigation and legislation and was going downhill,” Marshall said. “The community was continuing to stay disconnected from the

refuge. It was just a government agency that was out there, and nobody could have any effect on what was going on.”

Karges and Marshall’s collaborative process was going to be put to the test with the creation of the refuge’s 15-year Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP).

Meetings between opposing groups were planned with purposeful positioning to develop strong relationships. Voices from the conservation side were brought to the table from Portland Audubon, The Wetlands Conservancy, Defenders of Wildlife and The Nature Conservancy. The local ranching perspective was present thanks to Marshall, Bentz and Jenkins. This was a plan the community would have a say in. “Community meaning not just local Harney County residents but the community stakeholders out there who were truly interested in making the refuge work for wildlife and for the people living around here and the refuge employees and the whole agency,” Marshall said.

In the end, the High Desert Partnership was successful in helping reach an agreement in 2013 for management of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and surrounding Harney Basin. “The refuge planning process was a unique achievement, especially within the historical context of the issues around refuge management,” said Bruce Taylor, one of the conservation representatives involved in the discussions who has been an HDP board member since 2009. “The whole refuge plan was built around the concept that the refuge does not exist and cannot be managed in isolation from the surrounding context.”

Growing The Concept

With the success of the CCP, the High Desert Partnership worked with the stakeholders to create the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative in 2011, which is focused on achieving healthy aquatic systems by adaptively managing invasive common carp and maintaining and enhancing the riparian and wet meadow habitats. “We came out of the refuge planning process with a plan that everyone was really excited about,” Taylor said. “Among the stakeholders we were saying, let’s not say we’re finished here. Let’s go on and talk about implementation, which became the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative, which is broader than the refuge.”

In addition, the partnership has fostered other initiatives by creating, in 2007, the Harney County Restoration Collaborative to increase the pace and scale of restoration of the Southern Malheur National Forest; in 2014, the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative to



become more effective at reducing the potential for and impact of wildfires; in 2016, the Youth Changing the Community initiative to provide local youth with leadership guidance and opportunities; and in 2018, the BizHarney Entrepreneurs Collaborative to foster entrepreneurship in Harney County by supporting sustainable business start-ups.

Early on, founders Karges and Marshall realized that in order to be a lasting presence in Harney County, the partnership would need to focus on not just the ecological aspects of living in a rural, agricultural county, but also the economic and social aspects.

Jack Southworth, a former High Desert Partnership board member, is a Seneca rancher and the facilitator of the Harney County Restoration Collaborative. He believes this three-legged approach can really be beneficial to the community. “People in Harney County are aware of the triple bottom line of being economically, ecologically and socially viable,” he said. “They know their true wealth lies with wise management of their natural resources and year-round, family supporting jobs that come with good management. They also value the social values of a healthy landscape: clear water, clean air, healthy soils and an abundance of wildlife.”

Making Sure Voices Are Heard

So exactly how does the High Desert Partnership, which is now a 501c3 non-profit organization, foster collaboration? It creates a safe, neutral space in which to discuss issues pertinent to its established collaboratives.

Marshall said that it is also key to select people for the High Desert Partnership board who can respectfully listen to one another and consider all perspectives important. It’s important to have the right stakeholders at the table to provide input and help make decisions.

Karges said that the High Desert Partnership provides a constructive space in which to tackle issues. “People can sit down and start talking through these issues versus using other tools like litigation to try to solve issues,” he said. The High Desert Partnership is built on the foundation that people understand where the other side is coming from so that they don’t rely on what they assume or perceive the other side to be saying. “Once

they understand that they have a whole lot more in common than they actually disagree on, it enables them to focus on say, that 80 or 90 percent on which they agree,” he said. Through this process, people form relationships and trust that enables them to work on that 10 or 20 percent on which they disagree to form solutions. “We’re looking specifically for people, not only with different skill sets but also looking at the world through different lenses,” Karges said.

One such example would be when the High Desert Partnership started working with Taylor of Defenders of Wildlife and the Intermountain West Joint Venture. Coming from Portland and giving voice to the west side of the state, Taylor added a unique perspective to issues with which the High Desert Partnership initiatives were grappling. “We found a great person in Bruce Taylor,” Marshall said. “He was very skilled in communication as well as honest and courteous. He was able to tell you clearly what was important to him, but he was also receptive and respectfully listened and was able to put those things together to come up with a different alternative.”

While the High Desert Partnership gives a voice to the local community and offers locals the opportunity to take an active role in guiding its initiatives, it also recognizes that the term “community” can mean something bigger in terms of representation. Being from Portland, Taylor said that there are a lot of people who care about Harney County. “Certainly, in Western Oregon there are a whole lot of people who have a really strong identification with Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and the Harney Basin and Steens Mountain,” he said. “It’s a place where people go back to year after year even if they don’t live there. The High Desert Partnership has been unique in my experience in recognizing that those interests are legitimate stakeholders and do have a role in finding solutions.”

Collaboration Is A Proven Way Of Doing Business



The High Desert Partnership is a relationship-based system. It took time to build those relationships on which the platform of a non-profit partnership could be built, but now that those relationships are in place and continue to form and strengthen, the collaborative process has become a way of doing business in Harney County.

While the partnership is good at facilitating conversations and collaborations, Karges said it is not structured for crisis management. "When something reaches that point of crisis or attorneys have been hired, the form of collaboration that High Desert Partnership uses is not necessarily going to help," Karges said. However, if those with a more long-term view can identify those important issues that haven't yet reached that crisis point and identify community members that can convene the right stakeholders in a collaborative process, that is where the High Desert Partnership can shine and help create solutions. "It provides the community an alternative way of addressing important issues so they don't have to become a crisis in the future," Karges said.

The successes of creating the refuge CCP, fostering forest restoration and mending relationships in wildland firefighting arena, have shown the collaborative process has a proven track record. When the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge was taken over by occupiers who had disagreements with the federal government, Marshall credits the partnership with having built relationships that could withstand the revisionist narrative pushed on the community by the occupiers.

"I think that the occupation was a real test," Marshall said. "It was another thing that came along that showed that it's worthwhile to do this way. I'm 100 percent convinced that the High Desert Partnership was a big part of the reason this community came through the occupation the way it did."

Karges acknowledged that the High Desert Partnership's current formation is different than how he originally envisioned it with a focus on the ecological issues in Harney County. He's extremely proud of its evolution. "We never thought we'd be talking about some of these other conversations and other issues that the community is facing," he said. "Twenty years from now, if we continue on the path we're on, where could we be down the road? That could be really exciting."

The founders of the High Desert Partnership want to see the culture of collaboration pass down from generation to generation so that the trust and respect that currently exists continues to nurture future inhabitants of Harney County and the land they call home.

~Written by Lauren Brown