



# Seeing the Forest Through the Trees

Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative takes areas of conflict and seeks to find common ground

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Like many forests, the south end of the Malheur National Forest has issues. It has high tree densities and with climate change, the forest is more prone to fire, drought, disease and insect infestations. In addition, losses within the timber industry, mill closures and a lack of activity in the forest have had a negative impact on the Harney County community. Thankfully however, the south end of the Malheur National Forest also has a group of diverse stakeholders looking out for its varied interests.

The group is called the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative (HCFRC), and it's a working group of the High Desert Partnership located in Hines. The collaborative was created in 2008 and works in cooperation with the Forest Service through the Emigrant Creek Ranger District to foster forest restoration projects that will earn broad support.



*Pictured: HCFRC facilitator Jack Southworth during a 2019 HCFRC collaborative meeting.*

Jack Southworth, a Seneca rancher and facilitator for the group, said the restoration projects work to both improve the resiliency of the forest and create jobs locally. "In the end, we hope we have a forest on the southern Malheur National Forest that instead of being fire-proof is fire tolerant and will provide products, jobs, diverse habitat and clean water for Harney County for generations to come," Southworth said.

Everyone has a voice

What is a collaborative meeting like? "Some of the same people have been involved for more than a decade," said James Johnston, a research associate for the College of Forestry at Oregon State University who has been with the collaborative since its inception. He noted that the meetings are friendly, and he often looks forward to seeing familiar faces and chatting with folks each month.

It is facilitator Southworth's job to make sure everyone who shows up to a meeting has a chance to be heard. Southworth usually starts off the meeting with a few subjective introductory questions, ensuring everyone has a chance to answer. The icebreaker is a way to help people relax and get to know one another, which can be important later when more divisive issues might be raised. "The importance of going around the circle is that

you know you're going to be able to speak, you have time to think, and you can actually hear what the other person is saying so you can better understand a way to bridge that difference," Southworth said.

Southworth noted that people are passionate about natural resources, and he said that there were a lot of raw emotions when the collaborative first started. However, there is less of it than there used to be. "As we've progressed over the years, we would simply have to let some subjects sit because they were too volatile to discuss," Southworth said. "But that didn't mean we couldn't move forward with a lesser area of agreement, so that's how we started. Now our differences are narrower."

Zach Williams, operations manager at Iron Triangle in John Day, participates with the HCFRC, and believes getting those diverse stakeholders in a room together is key to the collaborative's success. "Me and the other timber companies in the

area could talk all week long about how much we agree on stuff, but the key is getting different interests together and coming to some agreement that the forest can bank on from all sides,” he said.



*Pictured: HCFRC participants in discussion during a summer 2019 field trip viewing an aspen grove treatment.*

The collaborative discusses issues, reaches consensus and then sends its recommendations to the Forest Service. HCFRC member Jim Campbell, worked for the Forest Service for 34 years and is now retired. He believes that the reason the Forest Service is willing to work with the collaborative’s recommendations is because its members span the spectrum on social and political forest management. “If you can get that group together singing with one voice, you’d be a fool not to proceed with that,” Campbell said. “The only thing that stops the Forest Service from doing whatever

they want to do is the legal process, and if you get people who were going to sue you on the same page, you may not do exactly what you originally proposed, but you’re going to get a lot done.”

Josh Giles, District Ranger with the Emigrant Creek Ranger District of the Malheur National Forest concurs: "The best way forward for the Forest Service is seeing where we can agree on things and see that as a stepping stone. Agreement opens up discussions on the ground vs. being in a courtroom and gives us opportunities to work together."

Pam Hardy is an attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center and also participates with the HCFRC. She said litigation can be an effective tool and was used aggressively in the 1980s and 1990s to stop the harvest of old growth. However, now she says collaboration is the way forward. “The Forest Service is watched by a number of stakeholders, many of whom are not hesitant to sue if they don’t like what’s going on, and that’s both on the environmental and the industry side,” she said. That’s why she believes the Forest Service wants to know where the different stakeholders overlap on their views. That information is valuable to them.

She noted that the timber industry would like to harvest bigger trees. “They don’t get everything they want, but they get enough to keep in business. The mill is running and has plenty of wood. It is doing upgrades and people are in the woods,” she said, pointing to Iron Triangle Logging operating out of John Day. Ultimately, it comes down to the best way to create a more resilient forest while also creating jobs to utilize some of its resources, and Hardy thinks that happens through collaboration. “I really want to solve environmental problems, not just fight about them,” she said.

#### Personal reasons

The collaborative’s goal is to gather information, build trust and come to consensus on conflicting issues so that it can give input to the Forest Service. These recommendations are science-based and socially grounded from a wide range of community stakeholders so that the Forest Service can move forward with projects that achieve accelerated forest restoration targets while fostering improved communication between the Forest Service and the community.

Currently, the collaborative is in the process of working with the Emigrant Creek Ranger District to increase the number or acres of prescribed fire. While prescribed fire can be controversial because of the smoke it creates, the collaborative acknowledges that overall, prescribed fire is a tool that can be used to help produce a more fire-tolerant forest. “You can



be in smoke for three months in the summertime or six weeks in the spring. Which would you rather have?" Campbell asked.

All the collaborative's participants are instrumental in pursuing forest resiliency, but each member has their own personal reasons for wanting to be part of that process.

Williams is the fifth generation of his family living in Grant County and he and his father both work in the timber industry. When he graduated from Grant Union High School, there were 70 students there. His daughter graduated two years ago, and there were 32 students. I want there to be jobs and a community," he said. He wants young people to be able to return to their hometown to work and raise families. "We're trying to make sure that we retain the industry that we have left while building other sectors of the economy in these rural areas," he said. There's work that needs to be done in the forest, and he said it can't be done without the loggers and the mills. "We have to have all the values at the table to figure out what we want to do, what we can do and what we should do and then back it with science and keep going," he said.



*Pictured: HCFRC participants breaking for lunch and discussion during a July 2021 field trip viewing past treatments.*

Hardy said that as a child, she found solace in the creek behind her house with the trees, water and tiny fish. As she grew older, she wanted to give back to those natural places that had given her so much. That's what her work as an environmental attorney has focused upon. "How can we build a relationship of mutual respect and reciprocity between humans and the natural world, so that it's not just about humans running things?" she asked. "It's about how we can be of benefit to the trees, the fish and the elk and how the trees, the fish and the elk can be a benefit to us. How can we participate in a way that allows all of us to thrive together?"

Campbell truly believes the collaborative is making a difference. "We're working with them[The Forest Service] and giving them the license to try things. The climate is changing, the environment is changing so we're working with them to do better faster."

Johnston noted that from his perspective, the reason for the collaborative is that the national forests belong to everyone. "Every citizen in the United States is an owner and has a say in their management, and management of the national forests is controversial," he said. When there is controversy and disagreement, folks get together to hash out their differences and see if a compromise is possible. "That's what the collaborative does: it helps people build on that common ground," he said. Giles adds: "The forest does belong to everybody and as an agency our management is about multiple use and the collaborative, with their thoughts, helps us come to a broader perspective of what the public views as the best use and management of the land as well".

*High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convenes and supports six collaboratives including the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative.*

