

Lessons in Innovation: Trends and Issues of the FY2001 Stewardship Contracting Pilots

The Stewardship Contracting Pilot program was developed in 1999 to test several new administrative processes and procedures for the Forest Service. Authorizing legislation stated that the agency was granted these new authorities to perform services that would help achieve land management goals on the national forests, while helping to meet the needs of local and rural communities. These new processes and procedures include: the exchange of goods for services, retention of receipts, designation by prescription or description, contract award on a “best value” basis, and multi-year contracts.

In early June, the Forest Service officially released the FY2001 implementation report to Congress on its Stewardship Contracting Pilots. The Pinchot Institute develops this report annually for the Forest Service as part of its contract to direct the pilot program’s multiparty monitoring and evaluation process.

INITIAL ASSESSMENT AND PROGRESS REVIEWS

During the early part of FY2001, the Pinchot Institute and our partners distributed standard packages of criteria to individual pilots to collect rel-

evant project information, and help provide a foundation for program assessment. The data contained in these packages provided background on each pilot and quick reviews of their status.

The criteria packages also provided an initial review of the agency’s expanded authorities, which highlighted levels of usage and associated findings. This initial review found that for most projects, the authorities provided local units of the Forest Service with more options and greater flexibility to achieve objectives for ecosystem management (i.e., allowing management in low-value, high-access cost areas, and improving contract and implementation efficiencies through bundled contracts).

The data that was collected also provided valuable information on the program’s significant accomplishments, including resource management activities that were completed (e.g., aquatic habitat restoration, terrestrial habitat improvements, hazardous fuels treatment, and road maintenance/rehabilitation) and preliminary benefits to the local socioeconomic conditions.

KEY ISSUES AND CONCERNS

As part of the monitoring and evaluation process, the Pinchot Institute began to tease out reoccurring issues and obstacles associated with the pilots. Based largely on the regional and national teams’ valuable input, the Institute and its partners were able to identify specific trends in policy and administrative matters. Surprisingly, many of the critical, emerging issues were not isolated to a given region—rather, they seemed to reflect some of the general difficulties faced with managing public lands in a collaborative setting. These key issues are identified below:

Institutional Culture and Policy. In addition to requiring new methods and mechanisms for project design and implementation, these pilots also need greater collaboration to adopt broader stewardship goals and to implement projects at larger ecological scales. For as large and decentralized an agency as the Forest Service, meeting some of these new goals requires overcoming substantial institutional obstacles, such as innovative communication strategies, clear and direct internal policies/procedures, and gradual changes in the overall culture/attitude of the agency.

Several suggestions were offered to help ease the agency through this difficult process. For example, the Washington Office could develop a “command team” (an assemblage of experts) to disseminate important information and provide “barrier busting” resources to pilots facing planning/implementation obstacles. Other suggestions included expanding the focus of agency personnel beyond a single discipline



and increased training (specifically among contract officers and their representatives) to raise the agency's capacity to design and execute innovative mechanisms.

The NEPA Process. Numerous local and regional reports identified general inefficiencies in the agency's compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The issues raised were not related to the relevancy of the legislation, but rather towards the need for streamlined procedures. At this early juncture, it could not be determined if the delays and time constraints associated with the NEPA process were isolated to the pilots or exacerbated by their nature. Further review and analysis of these issues will follow the third year of program implementation.

Funding. Local reports and subsequent team discussions also indicated that the current budget process has secured project funding, at best, over a two-year period. This is an abbreviated time period during which the pilot's large-scale restoration cannot be fully achieved. Additionally, the development of long-lasting, collaborative relationships with non-governmental partners cannot be achieved in such a short period. The pilots recommend that the Forest Service develop a budget process that reflects a sustained commitment to large-scale management efforts.

Community Involvement. Collectively, the pilots are also beginning to show that highly motivated community groups can have an impact that reaches far beyond individual stewardship demonstration projects. Community involvement has helped with landscape-level management (i.e., multiple stakeholders bring particular interest and expertise to the process to

allow for more efficient, effective and comprehensive management), while also building trust and enhancing community support for agency efforts. Additional reviews of FY2001 project data also indicate that firms and individuals in adjacent rural communities are capturing much of the economic benefit from the projects. Several projects have been multi-disciplinary in nature and have had a longer duration in scope, which helps enhance and sustain the local workforce.

Concern over Expanded Authorities. Through outreach and local team reports, some general concerns have arisen over the use of expanded authorities and perceived "perverse" incentives. In particular, many environmental groups are cautions of the "goods for services" and "receipts retention" authorities, which may directly link timber sales and restoration activities, thus creating potential conflicts of interest.

Concern over Project Design/ Implementation. Some concern has also arisen over the general implementation of the pilots. External interests have expressed concern over the individual project scale and the fact that additional projects continue to be authorized without first learning lessons from the initial 28 pilots.

CONCLUSION

In this second year of multiparty monitoring and evaluation, a great deal of progress was made—a monitoring framework was developed and implemented, project-level data was collected and synthesized, and emerging trends and early concerns were identified. At this early stage of the project's implementation, we are cautiously evaluating the overall effectiveness of the program and its authorities, as lessons continue to emerge and feed into the larger cycles of adaptive learning and ecosystem management. Through our efforts, we hope to enhance this educational and experimental initiative—testing not only the efficiencies of expanded authorities, but also means by which the agency can embrace and fully exercise the concept of collaborative forest stewardship.

To download a copy of the FY2001 implementation report, visit: www.pinchot.org/pic/cbf/report_2001.pdf. Please contact Andrea Bedell Loucks at 202-939-3455 or andreabedell@pinchot.org with questions on the Stewardship Pilots or the multiparty monitoring/evaluation process.

