

## Forest Service Cohesive Fire Strategy: Catalyzing Collaborative Stewardship

In October, the U.S. Forest Service recently released its new "Cohesive Fire Strategy" (available [www.fs.fed.us](http://www.fs.fed.us)) for protecting fire-adapted ecosystems in the Interior West. Earlier this year, the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, requested that the General Accounting Office (GAO) examine issues related to the health of national forests in the interior west. Over the last century, these forests have undergone significant changes in structure and composition becoming much denser, with fewer large trees and many small-diameter, tightly spaced trees and underbrush. In response to the Subcommittee's request, the GAO examined and discussed three issues: (1) the extent/seriousness of forest-health of national forests in the interior west, (2) efforts by the Forest Service to address existing problems, and (3) existing implementation barriers and potential opportunities to overcome them. The review resulted in a direct request to the Secretary of Agriculture to have the Forest Service develop a cohesive strategy for reducing and maintaining accumulated fuels on national forests of the interior west. Additionally, the FY2001 Interior Appropriations Bill (P.L. 106-291) directed that the Forest Service publish its cohesive strategy in the Federal Register within 30 days of the passage of the Appropriations Bill which took place on October 12th.

The Forest Service Cohesive Fire Strategy is intended to improve the resiliency and sustainability of forests and grasslands at risk, conserve priority watersheds, species and biodiversity, reduce wildlife fire costs, losses, and damages, and ensure better public and firefighter safety. The Cohesive Fire Strategy helped to pro-

vide the background for the development of the report to the President, "Managing the Impact of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment".

### THE ROLE OF COLLABORATIVE STEWARDSHIP

How the Forest Service responds to the aftermath of this year's wildfire and implements this cohesive strategy will be an important test of the agency's understanding and commitment to "collaborative stewardship." Within the strategy, the agency recognizes the importance of collaborative stewardship, maintaining that constituency support and collaboration with tribal, other federal/state/local agencies and the public is an essential cornerstone for restoration work. However, this recognition is but one step in building cooperation and long-term commitment between the agency and the public. The concept must now manifest itself in action.

Collaborative stewardship entails a flexible approach to addressing local community needs and objectives within the broader context of national-level policy and the Agency mission of conservation and sustainable natural resource management. Collaborative stewardship supports those activities that are sound in ecological science, economically viable, and socially responsible. It fosters a cooperative approach in the development of goals shared between the Forest Service and the local community- basing its decisions on cooperation, long-term commitments, mutual consideration, and support.

Local communities have perhaps the greatest stake of all in the stewardship of surrounding forests, which

play a central role in determining the long-term social, economic, and environmental well being of their citizens. As such, they should play an essential role in the stewardship of these resources through use, management, and protection. To the extent feasible, the Forest Service should utilize and strengthen local capacity for carrying out resource stewardship- to ensure that this local capacity can be called upon when needed and to contribute to the sustainable economic development of local communities.

However, pressures on the agency to show tangible and significant accomplishments on the ground before the close of this fiscal year may lead officials to opt for planning and implementation shortcuts that minimize opportunities for collaboration. If allowed to occur, such short cuts will likely further erode the public's trust in the Forest Service and undermine long-term support from one of the Agency's historically critical constituencies.

### FROM THEORY TO ACTION

The rhetoric of collaboration is ripe for action and must become an integral part of implementing the Forest Service's Cohesive Fire Strategy. Community forums have been proposed to help cooperatively identify and design ecosystem restoration projects that address community goals for ecological, economic and social sustainability. Stewardship contracts, which empha-



size multi-year, multi-task and results-oriented projects, can also be explored. Such contracts can be designed to expedite the accomplishments of near-term projects, while increasing the capacity of local community-based firms over time by encouraging capital investment and the development of an experienced, highly-skilled workforce. Finally, new partnerships can be forged to help defray the costs of implementation and planning and build networks of support for necessary work.

#### SUMMARY

As stated by the Forest Service in the public release of its new strategy, large wildfires will continue to occur despite focused efforts in planning and implementation. However by concentrating treatments where human communities, watersheds, and sensitive species are at the highest risk, the new strategy will likely reduce future losses and damage typically associated with wildland fires. Involving communities in these efforts will enhance the level of cooperation and trust between the agency and stakeholders; thereby improve the health of public lands and the communities that rely upon them. For more information, contact Andrea Bedell Loucks at (202) 939-3455 or at [andreabedell@pinchot.org](mailto:andreabedell@pinchot.org).

## Congress Authorizes 28 New Stewardship Contracting Pilot Projects

In the recently signed FY2001 Interior Appropriations Bill, Congress officially authorized the Forest Service to enter into 28 new stewardship and "end-results" contracts as part of its on-going pilot program (bringing the total to 56 projects, nationwide).

The Stewardship Contracting Pilot Program was originally established in 1997 as part of a major reinvention effort of the Forest Service. Shrinking federal budgets, reduced personnel and increased multi-purpose demands forced the Agency to re-think its procedures and management practices—slowly evolving into the concept of stewardship contracts. Operating initially under existing authorities, the Forest Service asked for a nomination of pilots designed to test new and innovative approaches to land/resource management through rural community development, improved financial accountability/efficiency, and collaborative stewardship. In 1998, Congress authorized the Forest Service to enter into 28 stewardship "end-results" demonstration contracts—expanding the existing authorities for selected demonstration projects as part of Sec. 347 of the FY99 Omnibus

Appropriations Act (P.L. 105-277). Specific new authorities tested in these pilots include: exchange of goods for services, retention of receipts, "best value" contracting, and designation of timber for cutting by prescription. As part of this authorization, Congress also required designated pilots to be monitored and evaluated on a multi-party basis, with annual reports submitted to Congress. According to the brief language provided in the FY Appropriations Bill, the new pilots are subject to the same terms and conditions as those established under Section 347 of the FY 1999 Omnibus Appropriations Act (P.L. 105-277).

As of yet, no projects have been selected to be a part of this new pilot effort and no timeline has been designated for selection and/or implementation. It should be noted, however, that language within the Interior Appropriations Bill does indicate that of the 28 new pilots, nine shall be located in Region 1 (Northern Region) and at least 3 will be located in Region 6 (Pacific Northwest). For more information, please contact Andrea Bedell Loucks (202) 939-3455 or at [andreabedell@pinchot.org](mailto:andreabedell@pinchot.org).

## Restoring Faith in Forest Service Decision Making

*(continued from page 6)*

elected. History indicates, however, that Jefferson was taking the time necessary to build a broad consensus for such change—broad enough to persuade many Federalists of the validity and efficacy of his approach.

There is an important lesson here for our new political leadership that will govern the conservation and sustainable management of America's

forests. There is an opportunity for building a broad consensus for national-level policies that conserve forests, protect biodiversity, and provide ample opportunities for public review of potential environmental consequences, while still affording local decision makers the flexibility to work out solutions that fit local conditions and local goals for environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

<sup>1</sup> A Vision for the U.S. Forest Service: Goals for Its Next Century, Roger A. Sedjo, ed. (Washington, DC: RFF Press, 2000), 273 pp.

<sup>2</sup> The Forest and Rangelands Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA), 16 USC 1600-1614.

<sup>3</sup> The National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA), 16 USC 1600 (note).

<sup>4</sup> National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 USC 4321 (note).

<sup>5</sup> Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA), 16 USC 1531.

<sup>6</sup> 36 CFR Part 219.