



March 2010

## **Woodland Park Healthy Forest Initiative**

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Collaboration Case Study



COLORADO FOREST  
RESTORATION INSTITUTE

**Colorado State University**

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Collaboration Case Study:**

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Corrie Knapp

Prepared for the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute

March 2010

## **ABOUT THE COLORADO FOREST RESTORATION INSTITUTE**

The Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI) at Colorado State University was established in 2005 per the authorizing language of the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2004 and chartered by the Western Governors Association. CFRI is part of the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes along with the Ecological Restoration Institute at Northern Arizona University and the New Mexico Forest & Watershed Restoration Institute at New Mexico Highlands University. The purpose of CFRI is to conduct, compile, synthesize, and translate scientific research to support restoration and wildfire risk mitigation decision-making by affected entities identified in the Act.

CFRI works with public and private forest land managers, researchers, collaborative partnerships, elected officials, non-government organizations, and the general public to identify needs. Annual work plans are developed based on an assessment of these needs and in consultation with an interagency Development Team. An interagency Executive Team approves and oversees accomplishments of the work plans. Funding for CFRI comes from appropriations through the US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service and the Warner College of Natural Resources at Colorado State University.

CFRI has four programmatic emphases areas:

- Information synthesis, outreach, and application
- Collaborative monitoring and adaptive management assistance
- Enhancing wood biomass utilization (in partnership with the COWOOD program of the Colorado State Forest Service)
- Collaboration assistance and support

### CFRI Personnel

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## About this report

Colorado is endowed with several place-based collaborative efforts focused on reducing wildfire risk to communities and restoring healthy forest conditions. Individuals from government agencies, local communities, business and non-governmental organizations of all stripes voluntarily participate in a process to achieve goals they could not achieve by working alone. This is hard work for which many participants receive no direct financial compensation; they are simply taking what they think is the best approach to solve immediate problems affecting surrounding forests and communities.

As is often the case when people are busy figuring out what needs to be done, there is little time for reflection and learning on what they have accomplished and the road ahead. To this end, the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute commissioned Corrie Knapp, a recent M.S. graduate from the Department of Forest, Rangeland and Watershed Stewardship at Colorado State University, to conduct case studies of two collaborative forest health efforts, the Uncompahgre Mesas Forest Restoration Project and the Woodland Park Initiative. The intent is to highlight each effort's accomplishments, challenges, and lessons learned so that others working in similar collaboratives might glean ideas, insights and innovations to apply to their situations.

The case studies were composed of semi-structured anonymous interviews<sup>1</sup> which focused on what the participants of these collaboratives perceived as the key accomplishments, challenges and lessons learned from their own experiences. Many thanks to all those who participated in the interviews.

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<sup>1</sup> The interview protocol was approved by the Colorado State University's Institutional Review Board, protocol #082-09H.

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**HISTORY AND BACKGROUND**

The Woodland Park Healthy Forest Initiative is a collaborative project dedicated to improving the resiliency and health of forests in and around the Woodland Park Area. In order to understand the development and trajectory of the collaborative, it is important to understand the context in which it was initiated. As many participants believe, it was an ideal place to start a collaborative effort focused on forest health. As one participant explained, “I think it is a great opportunity: you have an experimental forest, a fire that happened in 2002, a worried public, and pine beetle spreading into the area.”

Many of the participants described the Hayman fire in 2002 as a pivotal turning point in the way that residents related to the surrounding forest. As one resident remembered, “The Hayman fire burned 140,000 acres in 2 weeks. It was going right at my house so as soon as I got this job (in local government) I said—we have to do something about this.” The fire had a direct impact on people’s lives and their sense of security. As another participant related, “I remember the Hayman and the thick smoke and cinders rolling in. It seemed like it was just over the next rise and people rode around for days, including me, with a trailer with all their stuff in it. We had a plan for evacuation and it crossed the line and stayed over for 20 minutes, but that is too close for comfort.” This experience has radically shifted the way the community thinks about forest, fuels and fire. As one resident stated, “Before the Hayman, people would be chained to the trees, but not anymore. The attitude changed instantly.” The Hayman fire created a shift in sentiment about the meaning of forest health and fire risk and motivated a community to want to do something about it.

Another pivotal event occurred in 2003, when President Bush signed the Healthy Forest Restoration Act. As one participant explained, “Before there was no meat behind it. It gave us the ability to work across boundaries.” The act provided a tool to form

partnerships and begin work on community wildfire protection plans. Teller County created the first wildfire protection plan in the state in 2004, and in 2007 they began to draft a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) for Woodland Park. As one participant noted, “CWPP’s are the gatekeeper—you have to do that before you can get anything.” These were critical steps for developing relationships and partnerships that would prove useful for future collaborations. As one participant stated, “Most of us have worked with each other for lots of years before this so everyone is really cooperative and friendly towards each other.”

The final event that helped to launch the Woodland Park Initiative was the decision of the Front Range Roundtable (FRRT) to sponsor a forest demonstration project. As one participant stated, “We (FRRT) were doing projects hodgepodge around the Front Range and it is always little projects. We wanted something to take the Congressional Delegation to in order to see what a successful community project looks like.” In 2007 the FRRT put out a call for demonstration sites, and a year later Woodland Park was selected. This provided the financial and institutional support to motivate continued collaboration and begin to apply treatments at a landscape scale.

As one participant noted, “there are a lot of things where the deck is stacked in our favor to win.” The community had already created a working collaboration to create the county and city-level Community Wildfire Protection Plans. In addition, nearly 100% of the wildland-urban interface in the region was public, allowing for large-scale treatments with agency cooperation. They also had one of the nation’s first watershed groups, Coalition for the Upper South Platte (CUSP), which had been working for over ten years on watershed health and was well connected to community partners. The Hayman fire had coalesced community sentiment around the forest. As one participant stated, “The fire was such a common threat and forest health is such a common goal.”

The Woodland Park Healthy Forest Initiative’s primary goal is to create a footprint of treated or protected areas on at least 20% of the approximately 41,000-acre project area by December 2010. In order to accomplish this, additional goals are to build a strong

network of collaborators, engage citizens, plan outreach events, create endpoint options for biomass, and monitor their progress. In the following sections, we will discuss their accomplishments, challenges and lessons learned through the collaborative process.

## **ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

Woodland Park is an action-oriented collaborative group. When asked about the primary accomplishments, the consistent refrain from collaborative members was the ability of the group to get work done on the ground. As one participant stated, “Last year we topped 2,000 acres on the private side and 3,000 on the public.” This was possible due to their ability to bring together a diverse group of partners and effectively fundraise. The loose structure of the collaborative allowed organizations to continue working independently, while also networking with one another. As one participant noted, “working together has allowed us to look at some bigger opportunities that we wouldn’t have come up with if we had been looking at it separately.” It has also allowed them to successfully access larger amounts of money for fuels treatment. As one participant remarked, “The thing that really makes all this happen is large sums of money. And the more people you have collaborating the more able you are to access the money.” It is also true that the on-the-ground actions and successes create tangible places that help to gain further financial and social support for the project. As another participant explained, “They have been able to come together to leverage a lot of money from funding sources. They have been able to say we have all these collaborators and on the ground projects and that makes it (the collaboration) very attractive to put money into. A little capacity begets more capacity.”

In addition to tangible results in terms of acres treated, participants also spoke of the accomplishment in engaging a wide diversity of players in the collaborative effort. As one participant stated, “One of the great accomplishments is how so many diverse people came together to get the job done without a lot of bickering or bureaucratic problems.” The collaborative included representatives from a wide range of groups as this participant demonstrated, “Our major accomplishment is getting all the people: forest, timber, local government, end users like the utilities at the table.”

Collaborative members also saw education as an important accomplishment, as it helps to understand the resource and change attitudes towards certain management techniques. As one participant noted, “With the larger team we try to have some kind of educational piece to broaden our perspective and integrate science.” This steady educational component has radically changed perspectives on thinning. As one participant stated, “About 10 years ago, it was really hard to get anyone to cut a tree down, so it was really difficult. It has taken five years to get the social license to get people to accept it.” The educational piece also provides an incentive for engagement in the collaborative process. As one participant stated, “(the educational presentations) have kept people motivated to come together and learn from one another.”

## **CHALLENGES**

Most participants felt there were few challenges in this collaborative project, because actions were accomplished on the ground and a large range of stakeholders were engaged in the process. As one participant commented, “The challenges were before my involvement with the Front Range Roundtable slogging along through time. Once that happened, I haven’t seen any challenges.” Challenges mentioned by participants fell into two primary categories: capacity and momentum for the future, and the integration of science. Several other minor concerns such as lack of industry and management boundaries and barriers were also discussed.

The most consistent challenge participants mentioned was concern about leadership, capacity, and funding into the future. As one participant stated, “We need a plan for succession so that there is a continual flow of leadership.” Although the group agreed that a diverse group of stakeholders were involved, several talked about concerns to engage small landowners in thinning projects and to raise awareness of the potential benefits of reintegrating fire. As one participant stated, “Our biggest challenge is spreading beyond that group of initial contacts.” Connected with that challenge is the role of fire in the maintenance of thinned areas. As another participant noted, “The next challenge we have is that this is a growing, changing ecosystem and we need to follow up with



maintenance.” Maintenance will require burning, which will in turn require education and communication with the wider public. As one participant stated, “We have the skills, know-how and umph to do it, but we need to develop the social license.”

The ability to maintain funding for the project was also a concern for several participants. Funding was especially a concern for the small non-profit that helped to convene the collaborative. Although they serve a critical function, one participant stated, “so many non-profit groups just can’t get enough wind in their sails to keep moving.” The challenge stems from the desire of grantors to fund actions rather than organizations. As one participant noted, “we can get grant money to do projects, but the base money for operations and overhead is a tougher nut to crack.” Participants were also concerned about long-term sustainability of fire mitigation and thinning. As another participant remarked, “money is the biggest (challenge) and we are trying to work on industries to make it sustainable. Right now we have to beg the state and the feds for money. Once Colorado Springs Utilities starts using the biomass, it might be more sustainable because we have a value for the product.”

Collaborative efforts are time consuming and demanding, and participants were concerned about how to keep the momentum going into the future. Several participants were concerned about the lack of engaged, place-based community members who were willing to make an investment in long-term land management. As one participant remarked, “It came down to capacity. The Woodland Park initiative does not have a lot of place-based people involved. There aren’t a lot of community groups engaged (in the project).” There is also the concern that if people believe others are working on the issue, they will be less likely to participate. As one participant stated, “One of our challenges is to trumpet our successes without creating a false sense of security.”

The second broad set of challenges had to do with the integration and role of science in the collaborative effort. Several of the participants acknowledged the importance of integrating science when they said things such as, “You need the science behind it in order to make a compelling argument for spending that much money.” Despite this belief

that science is important, participants felt that they hadn't spent enough time assessing the appropriate locations to thin or invested adequately in monitoring. As one participant explained, "We should have started to plan our projects more in the beginning—as it worked out it all hooked together, but that might have been more happy coincidence than careful planning."

Several participants felt that the Woodland Park collaborative was not fully integrating monitoring into their prescriptions in a way that would lead to adaptive management. As one participant remarked, "How are they going to show that the treatments they planned are working or not? If you aren't monitoring, then you aren't going to learn anything. Mistakes happen, and that is how you learn. If you don't monitor, you are simply doing it (thinning)." Participants were also concerned about the capacity and commitment of the group to monitoring. They currently have a group of schoolchildren helping to collect monitoring data. One participant remarked, "The ecological monitoring we are doing doesn't have to be top academic rigor, but it needs to be about the data and not about the schoolchildren." Several participants believe that Woodland Park is not investing adequately in learning from treatments on the ground.

They were also concerned about a lack of communication and open data sharing between the Forest Service and the researchers helping to design monitoring protocol. As one remarked, "Getting data from the Forest Service has been difficult. Usually it is here or there, and when it is here it is weeding through masses of information." Several stated that they were unsure whether this had to do with a negative perception of the use of monitoring or goals and objectives from higher in the bureaucracy that did not prioritize monitoring. As one participant stated, "We almost got the sense that the forest service didn't want to do this. I think it may be that agencies feel like ecological monitoring is someone playing watchdog over their work." Several felt that communication should have been clearer at the onset so that effective working relationships could have been established. As one participant explained, "I would want to set up the initial conversation and contact better."

The incomplete integration of science may in part be due to a broader argument for the importance of thinning. One participant explained, “There is this taken-for-grantedness among the participants. The FRRT went through this synthesis of knowledge and they provided the boundaries for the ecological need for restoration and wildfire mitigation. There seems to be a taken-for-grantedness among the non-federal participants that the Forest Service knows what that means and can translate that general understanding into specific areas. There needs to be some type of mid-level assessment that allows people to see what applies and what doesn’t.” The Woodland Park initiative has not been actively engaged in questioning or monitoring how the general prescriptions relate to their specific landscape.

One challenge that arises from the focus on thinning and inadequate incorporation of science is that it may be difficult to transition from thinning to reinserting wildfire. As one participant stated, “In the short run, they are creating a fuel break donut, and for the next 10-15 years that will work, but then they will have to come up with a new strategy for how that will work.” Part of the reason for focusing on thinning may be the history of the community with the Hayman fire. As another participant remarked, “we are trying to introduce fire back into the ecosystem again, because communities around here with the Hayman fire are a little skittish about it. We’re trying to start with little sections.” Participants are aware that this may be a challenging sell to a community already scarred by fire. As one said, “As we get closer to Woodland Park, it might get more contentious, but I think they realize that long term it is a good thing.” As the Woodland Park initiative moves forward, it may be necessary for collaborative members to move the focus from fire to forest health in order to focus on working with ecosystem processes that maintain both healthy forests and forests resilient to fire. As this change occurs, it will be critical to draw the larger community into the effort so that community members understand the processes that are necessary to maintain healthy forests.

## LESSONS

### *The Importance of Context*

It is important to understand that timing and luck often contribute to the success or failure of collaborative groups. Several of the participants noted the combination of factors that helped to make the Woodland Park collaborative successful. As one stated, “All of the ingredients were there: we had the full support and involvement of county commissioners, we had the Coalition for Upper South Platte, and I felt that we could get the support of the town pretty easy. It was set up for success.” The success of collaboration depends, in part, on a set of circumstances that provide a ripe opportunity. As one participant noted, “Somebody just didn’t wake up and say, “we need a forest collaborative”: it was the outgrowth of a number of different players coming together. It was a natural growth.”

### ***The Role of Government***

Several of the participants also mentioned that it was important that government organizations provide vision and support without taking the lead for the collaborative effort. As one remarked, “What we thought would be most effective is to not have government run it. We would be at the table, but not run it.” Participants felt that the efforts would be longer lasting and more sustainable if they were driven by community members rather than by official representatives of local agencies or governments. One participant stated, “Having government at the table and not at the lead adds credibility to it. Getting it citizen-driven adds a lot of weight.”

### ***Organization***

Many of the Woodland Park participants felt that the flexible organization of the group was critical for its success. Several of the participants reflected on how the flexible and self-organizing structure of the collaborative helped to provide ownership and allow the group to adapt and change over time. As one participant said, “I like to think that (collaboration) is all of our jobs and we all have to participate. I like self-organization, but you have to have a recognized committee to make decisions.” In this collaborative, the loose organizational structure helped engage participants in the process and be flexible and adaptive over time.

### ***Importance of Resources***

Participants spoke of the importance of ongoing capacity and funding for the effort. When asked about future challenges, one participant stated, “Money. Money is the biggest thing and we are trying to work on industries to make it sustainable.” Securing funds was seen as a major accomplishment because they helped to make the collaboration tangible. As one participant stated, “As the money comes in to do projects the community sees it as a real deal to get things done.” Many expressed how critical it was to get work done on the ground and have results to show residents, policy makers and funding groups in order to keep the momentum moving forwards. As one remarked about the collaborative, “You have to be able to show accomplishment on the ground fairly quickly and we were set up to do that because the Forest Service was already planning several projects close to Woodland Park.” Generating on the ground results also helps to motivate people and keep them engaged. As one participant explained, “People get bogged down with meetings and planning and want to see action on the ground.”

### ***The Right Team***

Many of the participants spoke about the importance of having all the right people at the table and having different needs or functions met by team members. As one participant stated, “If you have the right people there all along talking to the right people then it all comes together.” Many discussed the stakeholders that were important to bring in to the collaborative, including business interests, government, non-profits, and agencies. It was important to the collaboration that these people came together at the same time. As one participant stated, “One of the keys to our success was getting so many people involved at the same time so it didn’t just start out with agencies or government: it started out with all of them. The whole batch came together at once so they all evolved together. We were unconscious competents when we did that.” The diversity of participants was also important, as demonstrated here, “It takes a lot of players to make it successful. Everyone with a meaningful role continues to contribute to it.”

Participants suggested several key collaborative members including some kind of non-profit organizing and communication player, connected and politically powerful

champions and local business interests that might benefit from the thinning and help to make the collaboration sustainable. Participants suggested that a group like CUSP is necessary for convening, organizing and communicating between members of the collaboration. As one participant put it, “The key to success is having someone there to do the work and keep the process moving.” In addition to the bonding capital that this role provides, collaborations need a source of bridging capital that can provide “insider” information about policies and funding sources. As one participant explained, “Every year there is a new set of rules and a new set of opportunities—you almost need someone in government and connected at local and state levels so that you can see the doors opening.” Participants also felt that establishing links with local businesses or utilities that might benefit from thinning efforts helped to establish links that would provide the effort with long-term sustainability. As one participant noted, ““Biomass has always been an issue, and what to do about it and we talked about whether we could get Colorado Springs to take some of it. The Mayor called the head of the electric plant and they came up and told us what they need and we told them what we had up here and all of a sudden they got really excited about it. That is a coup of an accomplishment.” Overall, participants felt that building a broad base of involvement helped to build energy and increase the commitment of participants.

### ***Balancing Independence and Collaboration***

Organizational representatives thought that the group worked well because of its ability to work together, yet still conduct independent work apart from the collaborative. As one participant explained, “The big lesson is to try to be part of the group and not let the egos get in the way, but still be able to do things independently so that you don’t have to wait for group decisions to act.” Groups felt open to sharing ongoing projects and work without feeling that they needed to check in and get approval for every action. By fostering a sense of openness and independence, partners did not feel intimidated by one another or protective of turf. As one participant noted, “People did not get bogged down with whose turf is whose. Everyone just went off in their directions and it all worked together.”

### ***Prioritizing Communication About Goals***

Several participants in the collaborative felt that a more concerted and focused effort to clarify roles and goals of the collaboration may have helped to get it off to the right start. As one participant stated, “(it is important to) bring together the goals of the different groups and getting people to talk to one another about what they want collaboratively.” One group of participants came in after the initial goals had been set and felt that this set off bad communication from the outset. One participant explains, “(when we came to the collaboration) they weren’t at the stage of defining a common set of work. Instead they were more in an implementation stage.” While most participants held a common goal of a community protected from wildfire, several were frustrated by the lack of attention to forest health in a wider context. As one participant noted, “They are all centered around wildfire mitigation. They were one of the first recipients for community wildfire plans at the county and city level. So there is a different focus on fire and fuels management and the social objective is community protection.” Frustrated participants felt that more honest and direct communication in the goal-setting stage may have helped to alleviate frustrations later on.

### ***An Evolving Process***

When asked what they learned about the process of collaboration, participants stressed the evolving nature of collaborative efforts. They stated that collaboratives develop differently in different contexts, and that it is important to follow the process and not expect a road map. As one participant stated, “people in a collaborative process—the actors are going to change the roles will change—what once was buddy-buddy may become adversarial, but that is part of the process.” Several of the participants stated the importance of using the experience as a learning opportunity. As one participant explained, “There is nothing wrong with going for something and finding out that it didn’t work. At least you’ll learn something in the process.”

### ***Giving it Time***

Participants discussed the importance of giving collaboration time to develop. As one participant stated, “You need process time for all the players to get to know each other

and what each others agendas are.” This collaborative process was seen as the outcome of relationships that had been developed over time, and several mentioned the importance of this long history of working with one another. As one participant stated, “Most of us have worked with each other for lots of years before this so everyone is really cooperative and friendly toward each other.” One participant spoke of the time it takes to prepare for collaboration before anything tangible happens on the ground. This participant stated, “If you are starting it from scratch, you’re looking at three years without any major accomplishments, just to get it together.” The process requires patience and commitment. As one participant said, “People need to not get frustrated, because sometimes you want to shake the person across the table, but this will not lead to good collaboration. It is the time component and the patience. A lot of people think this is easy, but it takes a lot of time and commitment to get it going, but once you do...and once people trust you and believe you’ll stick around and work hard then all of a sudden you can start to get a lot done.” Participants felt that it was important to realize that collaborations don’t just happen, but are the result of long-term investment in relationship building.





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