COLORADO FOREST RESTORATION INSTITUTE

FOREST AND RANGELAND STEWARDSHIP
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Cultivating Collaborative Resilience among Collaborative Forest Restoration Groups

Collaboration is increasingly used to meet national-level policy goals in public lands management. While there is increasing evidence of the benefits of collaboration (e.g., increased planning efficiency, trust, and capacity to do work), less is known about how collaboratives adapt and remain resilient (i.e., the capacity to adapt to socio-environmental change without losing desired structure, function, and feedbacks) to internal and external disruptions. In a recent paper published in the Journal of Forestry, Beeton et al. (2022) asked: *1) how did Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) projects and other collaboratives adapt to disruptions (e.g., personnel turnover, biophysical disturbance, legal or policy change); and 2) what barriers inhibited adaptation?* They paired a systematic literature review with focus groups and a national survey to address these questions.

Collaboration on a field trip in Northern Colorado. Photo credit: Karina Puikkonen

Adaptations to disturbance

Collaboratives adapted to disruptions by undertaking boundary spanning activities, co-developing boundary objects, engaging boundary-spanning individuals and organizations, and demonstrating flexibility. **Boundary-spanning activities** like field trips, onboarding workshops, joint fact-finding, and multi-party monitoring helped collaboratives build trust and relationships across networks and individuals (both old and new) to reach consensus about the purpose and need for restoration, evaluate the impacts of biophysical disturbance (e.g., beetle kill, wildfire) and treatment alternatives, and temper conflict between differing objectives. Strong relationships and trust with forest leadership helped maintain support and commitment to collaboration amid biophysical disturbance and turnover. The **co-development of boundary objects** (e.g., charters, MOUs, maps, models) helped translate shared learning and understanding into codified expectations, agreements, and strategies to maintain accountability and commitment towards common, shared goals despite disruptions. **Boundary-spanning individuals and organizations** (e.g., Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes, American Forest Foundation) provided critical resources and support functions, such as facilitating onboarding activities for new personnel, legal support, and technical capacity for monitoring disturbance impacts. **Collaboratives demonstrated flexibility** by altering treatment plans, developing cross-boundary agreements to continue working towards restoration objectives despite forest-wide injunctions, and changing their structure to accommodate new policy requirements and legal challenges.

Barriers

Notable barriers to collaborative resilience were related to the cultural and business practices of the USDA Forest Service, namely the confluence of capacity, authority, and accountability. The culture of frequently rotating personnel and vacancies undermined trust, institutional knowledge, and **capacity** to engage.

Uncertainty in the amount and timing of federally-appropriated funds, restrictions on its use, and a lack of time among all collaborative participants, many of which were volunteers, to meaningfully engage were significant **capacity** challenges. The USDA Forest Service retains sole decision-making **authority** on Forest Service-managed lands, and local unit leadership have substantial discretion in decision-making. USFS staff are formally accountable to overlapping laws, regulations, priorities, and performance measure which may conflict with collaborative priorities and recommendations. We found that commitment and **accountability** to collaborative engagement was variable across cases and contingent upon individuals in leadership roles who prioritized the collaborative process. This signals that collaboration is not yet institutionalized, which is exacerbated by frequent turnover.

Recommendations

Expand Funding for Collaborative Planning and Capacity Building: CFLRP funding is limited to the USDA Forest Service and can only be used for implementation and monitoring. Our findings indicated activities supporting social learning, conflict management, and relationship-building were critical, but depended on leveraged funds from collaboratives. Financial investment in these activities and the leaders, facilitators, and researchers to coordinate them is necessary to cultivate collaborative resilience.

Change in Agency Culture and Commitment to Collaboration: Ensuring that staff are dedicated to collaborative projects until completion, facilitating promote-in-place opportunities, and hiring dedicated partnership liaisons could help address turnover and incentivize commitment to collaboration. Including expectations for collaboration in job duties and requiring collaboration training could provide the skills, interests, and requirements for collaboration. Developing agency performance measures for collaboration and external evaluation could incentivize personnel to invest resources in collaboration.

Co-develop and Periodically Revisit Boundary Objects: The co-development of, and engagement with, boundary objects is important for restoration practitioners to build trust, absorb learning, and institutionalize knowledge. Boundary objects should be situated within agency decision-making procedures when applicable. Doing so may reduce reliance on individuals and encourage accountability. With new personnel, partners re-negotiate responsibilities, accountabilities, and capacities. Thus, boundary objects should be periodically reviewed to maintain legitimacy, saliency, and creditability.

Conduct Frequent Self-Assessments of Collaborative Resilience: Collaboratives may experience external and internal disruptions at any time. Therefore, routine self-assessments (e.g., surveys, focus groups) can identify how disruptions impact collaborative performance, which in turn can inform dialogue around the feasible and desirable adaptation strategies needed to cultivate collaborative resilience.

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