Collaborative Governance Assessment Report

FOR THE SHORTLEAF-BLUESTEM COMMUNITY CFLRP

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SWERI SOUTHWEST ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION INSTITUTES
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Document Development: In FY21, the USDA Forest Service led a collaborative process to develop a CFLRP Common Monitoring Strategy that will be required for all newly authorized and reauthorized projects under the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP). The USDA Forest Service Washington Office requested assistance from the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERI) in developing and deploying an assessment tool to track collaborative governance within and across CFLRP projects and through time. The collaborative governance assessment is intended to assess whether CFLRP is encouraging an effective and meaningful collaborative approach, and addresses question #12 of the CFLRP Common Monitoring Strategy. We developed an online, confidential survey that was administered to CFLRP project participants to address this question. With support from the USDA Forest Service Forest Management, Range Management, and Vegetation Ecology program, SWERI conducted regional webinars to introduce the assessment and identify project-level points of contact, which was followed by in-depth engagement with key contacts to determine recruitment strategies, administration timing, and project-specific questions. In FY22 and FY23, SWERI will be collecting baseline information for all newly authorized and reauthorized projects. SWERI will continue to engage in assessing collaborative health and performance of CFLRP projects. The Ecological Restoration Institute at Northern Arizona University funded survey administration using state funding (Arizona Board of Regents through the Technology, Research and Innovation Fund), which was used as a match to annual federal appropriations to the SWERI.

Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERI)
The Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes include three university-based restoration institutes: the New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute (NMFWRI), the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI), and the Ecological Restoration Institute (ERI) in Arizona. These institutes were congressionally appointed in 2004 by the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act (H.R.2696), and the Institutes work together to develop a program of applied research and service to help create healthy forests, prevent uncharacteristic wildfires, sustain the resiliency of water supplies to wildfires, and create jobs. The SWERI receive funding from five primary sources: 1) federal appropriations; 2) additional federal funding (e.g., the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act); 3) state appropriations; 4) in-kind support from host universities; and 5) extramural funding such as grants and agreements. The Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes receive federal appropriations under the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act provided through the USDA Forest Service. In accordance with Federal law and USDA policy, these institutions are prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability. To file a complaint of discrimination, write: USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights Room 326-A, Whitten Building 1400 Independence Avenue, SW Washington, DC, 20250-9410 or call (202) 720-5964 (voice & TDD).

Ecological Restoration Institute (ERI), Northern Arizona University (NAU)
The Ecological Restoration Institute is nationally recognized for mobilizing the unique assets of a university to help solve the problem of unnaturally severe wildfire and degraded forest health throughout the American West. ERI serves diverse audiences with objective science and implementation strategies that support ecological restoration and climate adaptation on Western forest landscapes.

Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI), Colorado State University (CSU)
The Colorado Forest Restoration Institute is a science-based outreach and engagement organization hosted by the Department of Forest and Rangeland Stewardship and the Warner College of Natural Resources at Colorado State University. Colorado State University (CSU) is a land-grant university with a mission to provide teaching, research, public service, and engagement that CFRI strives to uphold. CFRI was established by Congress as part of the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes to serve as a bridge between researchers, managers, and stakeholders working to restore and enhance the resilience of forest ecosystems to wildfires in Colorado, the Southern Rocky Mountains, and the Intermountain West. CFRI leads collaborations between researchers, managers, and stakeholders to generate and apply locally relevant, actionable knowledge to inform forest management strategies. CFRI's work informs forest conditions assessments, management goals and objectives, monitoring plans, and adaptive management processes.

NAU Land Acknowledgment: Northern Arizona University sits at the base of the San Francisco Peaks, on homelands sacred to Native Americans. We honor their past, present, and future generations, who have lived here for millennia and will forever call this place home.

CSU Land Acknowledgment: Colorado State University acknowledges, with respect, that the land we are on today is the traditional and ancestral homelands of the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Ute Nations and peoples. This was also a site of trade, gathering, and healing for numerous other Native tribes. We recognize the Indigenous peoples as original stewards of this land and all the relatives within it. As these words of acknowledgment are spoken and heard, the ties Nations have to their traditional homelands are renewed and reaffirmed. CSU is founded as a land-grant institution, and we accept that our mission must encompass access to education and inclusion. And, significantly, that our founding came at a dire cost to Native Nations and peoples whose land this University was built upon. This acknowledgment is the education and inclusion we must practice in recognizing our institutional history, responsibility, and commitment.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to acknowledge Hannah Brown for her insightful feedback on an earlier draft and Angela Hollingsworth for designing the layout of this report. We thank Lindsay Buchanan and Bryce Esch, USDA Forest Service, for their support in coordinating and facilitating regional webinars to introduce the assessment to regional and project-level CFLRP leads. We would also like to thank all the participants for taking the time to fill out the survey, as well as Jeff High, Virginia McDaniel, and Don Seale for their support in recruitment and administration. This white paper was made possible with funding from the SWERI through the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act. The white paper is published in partial fulfillment of Focal Area 2, deliverable #4 in CFRI's fiscal year 2022 work plan, as well as Focal Area 3.3 in ERI's fiscal year 2022 work plan. The survey portion of this project and survey administration is supported by funding from the Arizona Board of Regents through the Technology, Research and Innovation Fund (TRIF).

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Executive Summary

The Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERI) developed a collaborative governance assessment as part of the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) Common Monitoring Strategy. The collaborative governance assessment was designed to assess the following questions:

1. What are the structural and functional dynamics of the collaborative? Does the collaborative exhibit characteristics generally associated with healthy, well-functioning, and resilient collaboratives?
2. What do participants need or recommend to improve the process?
3. To what extent do participants feel the project is meeting process, socio-economic, and ecological goals?
4. What challenges or disruptions affect collaborative performance and durability?

The SWERI administered an online survey to members of the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP in the winter of 2023. The majority of respondents indicated that they agreed about key problems impacting their landscape, strategies to solve problems, and the purpose of their collaborative restoration project. Respondents felt that the process has helped build trust, relationships, and mutual respect of others' positions and interests, and they felt participants were committed to the process. Survey respondents found that there were strong leaders who worked well across organizations and entities, communicated a collaborative vision, and motivated others to work together. A majority agreed that participants worked together to co-generate knowledge and solve problems. Knowledge and information were reportedly shared equally among participants. Respondents felt that the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP had adequate funding, time, facilitation skills, and technical expertise to carry out tasks and accomplish work. Respondents also generally agreed that the USDA Forest Service (USFS) was responsive to collaborative input. However, a few respondents noted several areas for improvement. Some respondents wanted to see more collaborative engagement between the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP and USFS. Respondents felt that the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP could be more inclusive of some interests and groups.

Many of these challenges were reiterated in open-ended responses focused on recommendations to improve the collaborative process, which included the need to: 1) coordinate additional outreach and engagement; and 2) increase opportunities for shared decision space and accountability among the USFS and non-USFS partners.

Survey results suggested that the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP has started to make progress on all social, economic, and ecological goals of the CFLRP. However, frequent turnover and funding disruptions challenged collaborative progress and performance.

The SWERI will continue to engage in assessing collaborative health and performance of CFLRP projects, with the goal of gauging capacities and identifying areas for improvement.

Introduction

The Forest Landscape Restoration Act (FLRA) was passed in 2009 and established the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP). The purpose of the CFLRP was to "encourage the collaborative, science-based ecosystem restoration of priority forest landscapes"[1] through a competitive funding program administered by the USDA Forest Service (USFS). In 2021, CFLRP coordinators, USFS personnel, and partners led a collaborative process to develop a CFLRP Common Monitoring Strategy consisting of ecological and socio-economic monitoring questions and indicators that will supplement local project multi-party monitoring plans and will be required for all newly authorized and reauthorized projects.[2]

One core component of the CFLRP Common Monitoring Strategy relates to monitoring collaborative governance.[3] While the CFLRP requires projects to collaborate throughout planning, implementation, and monitoring, 'collaboration' was not defined in the FLRA or CFLRP requirements, nor did the CFLRP provide specific guidelines by which collaborative groups convened and engaged in collaborative restoration throughout the life of the CFLRP project. This has resulted in a multitude of collaborative structures, processes, and practices implemented in diverse social and ecological contexts across the country. Also, collaborative groups are nested within and impacted by changes that occur within their group, external changes in social and ecological conditions, and a fluid institutional environment, all of which require groups to adjust and evolve their structures, practices, and processes (Beeton et al., 2022; Ulibarri et al., 2020). Yet, a systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating attributes of collaborative governance and resilience is lacking. Systematic evaluation could

[1] PL 111-11 CFLRP Authorizing legislation - https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/110th-congress/senate-report/370/1
[2] CFLRP National Core Monitoring Strategy - https://www.fs.usda.gov/restoration/documents/cflrp/CMS-Fact-Sheet-final-20221013.pdf
[3] Here, we define governance as "the system of institutions, including rules, laws, regulations, policies, and social norms, and organizations involved in governing environmental resource use and/or protection" (Chaffin et al. 2014).

lead to better understanding of what factors promote or challenge collaboration across different contexts, help target what kinds of investments are needed, and where to maintain and enhance collaborative capacity.

To address this need, the USFS Washington Office requested assistance from the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERI) in developing and deploying an assessment tool to track collaborative governance. During the development of the CFLRP Common Monitoring Strategy, CFLRP coordinators from the Washington Office elicited feedback from CFLRP practitioners, CFLRP coordinators, and subject matter experts to identify monitoring questions, indicators, and available data sources. With respect to collaborative governance, partners wanted to address the question: how well is the CFLRP encouraging an effective and meaningful collaborative approach? CFLRP practitioners and coordinators expressed interest in documenting collaborative health, function, and resilience, as well as performance (perceived outcomes). CFLRP practitioners and coordinators also emphasized the need for a tool that is straightforward, not time-consuming, easy to administer, and longitudinal.

We incorporated stakeholder feedback and questions of interest developed during the drafting of the CFLRP Common Monitoring Strategy to directly inform the components of the collaborative governance assessment. Our objectives are as follows:

1. Develop a rigorous, systematic, and longitudinal assessment of collaborative governance that is grounded in the science and practice of landscape-scale collaborative forest restoration.
2. Support program-wide evaluation of collaborative progress and performance, and report on findings to USFS staff and Congress.
3. Facilitate project-level engagement, reporting, and peer-learning to inform local collaborative work and adaptive management.
4. Contribute to the theory and practice of collaborative governance through the synthesis of findings and lessons learned.

The SWERI administered the collaborative governance assessment—an online survey—to the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP in the winter of 2023. The report herein summarizes findings from the collaborative governance assessment. Below, we briefly highlight the approach, followed by a baseline assessment of findings and document recommendations from respondents to improve the collaborative process.

Approach

We developed an online survey to assess:

1. What are the structural and functional dynamics of the collaborative? Does the collaborative exhibit characteristics generally associated with healthy, well-functioning, and resilient collaboratives?
2. To what extent do participants feel the project is meeting process, socio-economic, and ecological goals?
3. What challenges or disruptions affect collaborative performance and durability?
4. What do participants need or recommend to improve the process?

Framework

The survey was structured using concepts from an integrative collaborative governance framework (Emerson et al., 2012), resilience and adaptability literature (Emerson and Gerlak, 2014; Folke et al., 2005; Gupta et al., 2010), and empirical findings from the first 10 years of the CFLRP (Beeton et al., 2022; Butler and Schultz, 2019; McIntyre and Schultz, 2020; Schultz et al., 2018).

Collaboration dynamics – To assess collaboration dynamics, we operationalized the Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance (Emerson et al., 2012). The framework incorporates multiple components of collaborative governance that are grounded in collaborative practice, link collaboration dynamics to socio-economic and ecological outcomes, and promote assessment of collaboratives across settings and time. The components include principled engagement, shared motivation, and capacity for joint action (Emerson et al., 2012).

Principled engagement refers to ensuring the right people are involved, i.e., a representative cross-section of people and entities who have a stake in the issue participate. Principled engagement also emphasizes the principles of open and inclusive communication and negotiation, where individuals with diverse perspectives and knowledge work together to identify shared problems, agree on strategies to solve those problems, and agree on the purpose or scope of the collaborative.

Shared motivation refers to the interpersonal and relational elements of collaborative dynamics. Shared motivation includes the sub-components mutual trust, understanding, and commitment. It is often referred to as social capital, or the "glue" that holds groups together through networks, norms, rules, and trust that promote collective action (Pelling and High, 2005). This glue is crucial for effective collaboration; social capital is built

through investments in social relationships and can be expressed through mutual commitment of individuals and groups to common collaborative goals.

Capacity for joint action comprises four sub-components: leadership, knowledge and learning, resources, and institutional arrangements (Emerson and Gerlak, 2014). Leadership is essential for managing collaboratives, and leaders can fill many roles including convener, sponsor, public advocate, facilitator, and others. They are important for: building trust, sensemaking, bringing people together, initiating partnerships, motivating people to work together, compiling, generating, and disseminating knowledge, developing visions of and support for change, and managing conflict (Folke et al., 2005).

In a collaborative setting, participants should work together to co-create and co-develop shared understanding and knowledge through social learning; knowledge and information should be equally accessible to all members of the collaborative; and learning and knowledge should be used to inform flexible, adaptive management (Emerson and Gerlak, 2014). Social learning occurs through repeated interactions and joint problem solving among participants. It emphasizes testing, monitoring, and reevaluating participants' assumptions and understanding of ecosystem responses and feedbacks to learn and adapt management actions (Folke et al., 2005; Lebel et al., 2010; Sharma-Wallace et al., 2018). Collaboratives often pool and share resources to accomplish tasks and get work done. These can include funding, personnel, science and technical expertise, facilitation, and coordination.

Institutional arrangements are the processes, protocols, and structures needed to manage collaboration over time, i.e., the rules of the game. Collaborative structures, processes, and protocols should be clearly understood, transparent, perceived as fair and equitable, and include mechanisms of accountability (Emerson et al., 2012; Gupta et al., 2010; Stern and Coleman, 2015). Capacity needs change through time, and the relative amount of these four capacity types is contingent upon the local context – e.g., history of conflict, people involved, purpose and objectives of the group, among others (Imperial et al., 2016).

Perceived outcomes – Our assessment focuses both on perceived "process" outcomes (e.g., did the collaborative process reduce conflict, or increase the ability to plan at a landscape scale?) and socio-economic and environmental outcomes. The outcome metrics chosen for evaluation were derived from several sources: the intent of the FLRA of 2009 and the CFLRP, project proposals, and conversations with local, regional, and national CFLRP coordinators while developing the Common Monitoring Strategy.

Challenges or disruptions that affect collaborative performance and durability – Disruptions—i.e., personnel turnover, legal or policy changes, and biophysical disturbances like wildfires or insect outbreaks—can happen at any time. These disruptions may impact collaborative progress and performance, and/or force groups to adapt. We developed a list of common challenges that CFLRP projects and other landscape-scale forest collaboratives reported in: 1) breakout group discussions and focus group sessions at the 2020 SWERI Cross-boundary landscape restoration workshop (SWERI, 2020) and the 2020 Idaho forest collaborative shared stewardship workshops; 2) the 2020 CFLRP Collaboration Indicator Survey administered by the National Forest Foundation; and 3) a survey administered to USFS staff engaged in 2010 and 2012 CFLRP projects (Schultz et al., 2018). Identifying current challenges or disruptions that CFLRP projects are grappling with can support strategic investment towards solutions to maintain collaborative performance and durability.

Needs or recommendations to improve the process – We captured respondents' perspectives on needs and recommendations to improve the collaborative process by including open-ended survey questions.

Data Collection and Analysis

We developed a standardized survey in the online survey tool Qualtrics that consisted of 21, mostly closed-ended statements using a Likert scale. SWERI piloted the assessment with and elicited feedback from the Northern Blues All-Lands Restoration Partnership and Northern Blues CFLRP project participants (n=37), as well as participants of the Colorado Front Range CFLRP (n=3) in FY21 to refine the survey (Beeton et al., 2022). SWERI and the USFS held regionally-focused webinars to introduce the assessment and identify key points of contact for each newly authorized and reauthorized project to help with recruiting participants, scheduling the assessment, and identifying project-specific questions of interest that were appended to the standardized survey (Appendix 1), which is outlined in our standard operating procedures document.[4]

Jeff High, Virginia McDaniel, and Don Seale provided support in recruiting participants and administering the survey through group's listserv in February 2023.

[4] https://cfri.box.com/s/hfu5cdk599j5gp5ixphm2qj7gdp4h1ef

The survey was open for 6 weeks. We received 29 usable responses, representing more than 30% of the population. We used the statistical software program Statistical Software for Social Sciences (SPSS) to document mean responses and variation in responses. Open-ended questions were analyzed using a thematic analysis (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Small sample sizes prohibited further statistical analyses, though this will be possible when more data has been collected.

Findings

Our results are organized as follows. The first section includes responses related to respondents' affiliations, motivations for being involved in the CFLRP project, level of engagement, and the degree to which respondents felt the project was collaborative. We then provide a description of findings related to collaboration dynamics (i.e., **principled engagement, shared motivation, and capacity for joint action**). We provide a short description of each collaboration dynamic construct in italics to orient the reader. We follow with findings on perceived outcomes, disruptions that are challenging collaborative progress and performance, and recommendations to improve the process. Finally, we present results from the appended question set that was developed in coordination with key points of contact affiliated with the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP. For scale items (e.g., strongly disagree to strongly agree, progress scales), figures depict the percentage of survey participants that somewhat agree to strongly agree. This was done for consistency in visualization and ease of interpretation. For clarity, we describe majority or strong majority results as greater than or equal to 60% agreement and slight majority as greater than 50% agreement. Local questions appended to the standard survey questions are reported in Appendix 1.

Introductory questions

The majority of participants represented state agencies, the USFS, and the forest products industry (Figure 1). The most frequently reported motivations for being involved in the CFLRP project were to restore forest resiliency, protect or restore habitat, increase restoration pace and scale, and improve relationships and trust (Figure 2). The level of engagement in the CFLRP project during the past 12 months varied between participants – 74% reported that they were moderately to highly engaged, while 22% reported low engagement, and 4% reported that they were not engaged (Figure 3).

We asked respondents to reflect on the degree to which they thought the CFLRP project was collaborative (on a scale from not collaborative at all to very collaborative) as defined in the survey:

> *collaboration occurs when multiple parties come together to address problems that could not be achieved by acting alone. Effective collaboration should typically include: inclusive and diverse stakeholder interaction throughout the process; venues for open communication and negotiation about values, interests, and appropriate management actions; and opportunities for social learning.*

A majority of respondents (60%) indicated the CFLRP project has been collaborative to very collaborative (Figure 4).

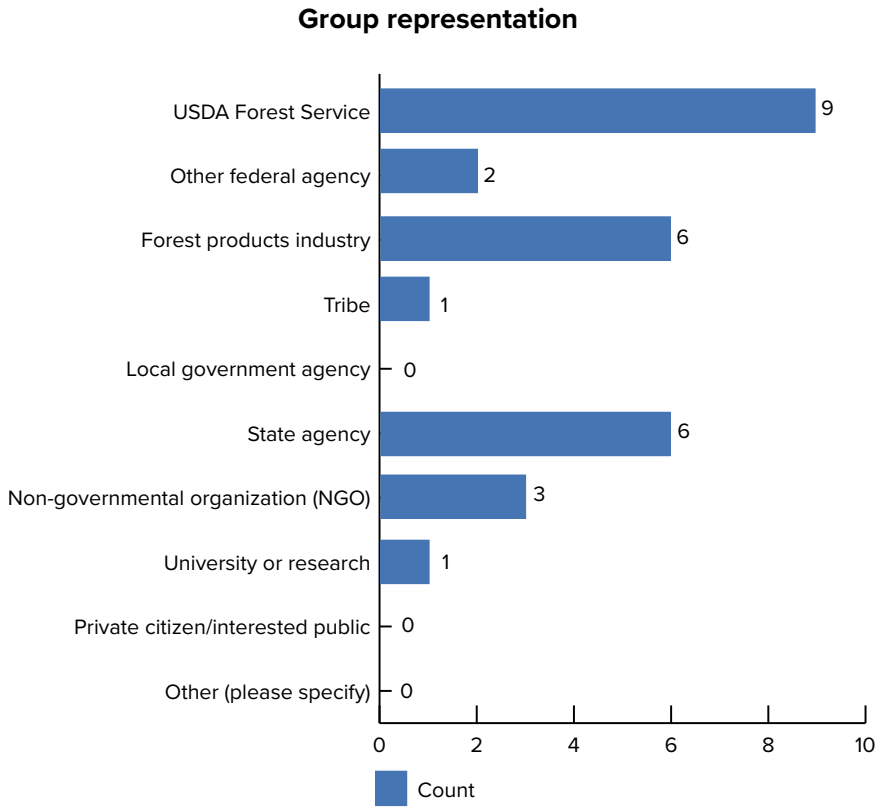

Figure 1: Respondents' self-identified representation with associated organizations.

Principled engagement

Principled engagement refers to having the right people involved in iterative and inclusive dialogue to determine shared problems, identify shared strategies to solve problems, and agree to the shared purpose of the project.

A majority of respondents (70%) agreed to strongly agreed that a representative cross-section of individuals who have a stake in the issues and outcomes of the project are involved (Figure 5). However, open-ended responses indicated that there is a need to include more stakeholders, specifically "a significant number of wood product companies, loggers, and small sawmills" and "local constituents and communities" should be better represented within the group. A majority of respondents (86%) agreed to strongly agreed that participants worked together to identify shared interests and concerns, and a majority felt the collaborative process created a neutral space (76%) for CFLRP participants to openly discuss controversial issues (Figure 5). A majority of respondents indicated that participants had a shared understanding of the problems that impact their landscape (67%), the strategies to solve those problems (73%), and the purpose of the CFLRP project (88%; Figure 6). Most respondents felt that the level of collaboration between the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP and the USFS met their expectations during planning (68%), implementation (83%), and monitoring (88%) (Figure 7).

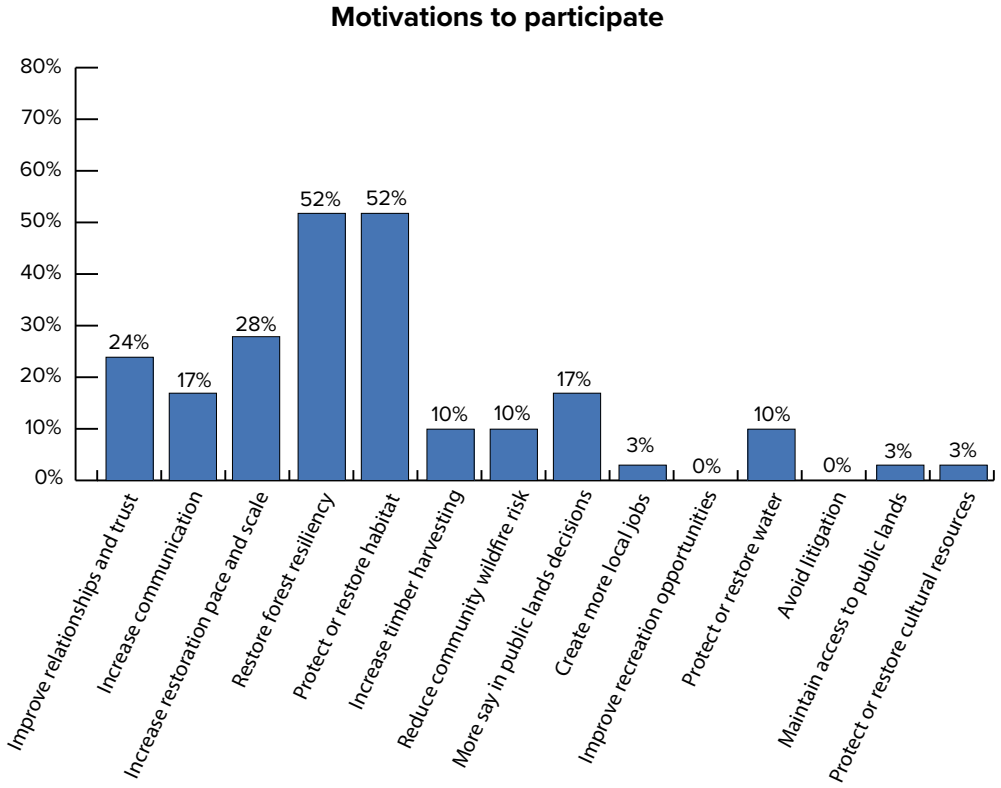

Figure 2: Percentage of respondents who identified the associated motive as reason for their participation in the collaborative. Note - respondents were able to select multiple motives.

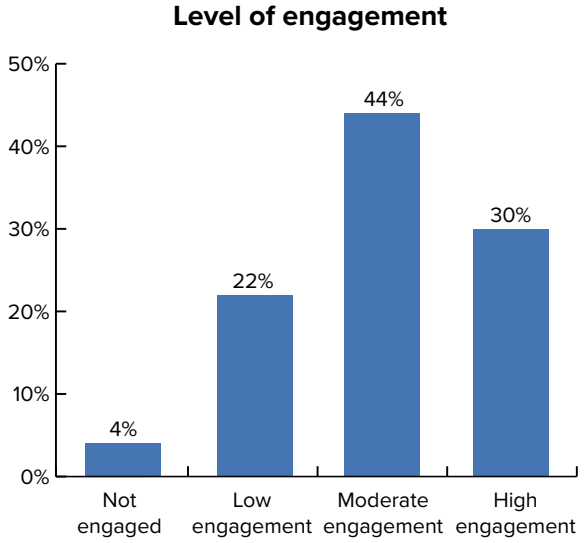

Figure 3: Percent of respondents who rated their level of engagement.

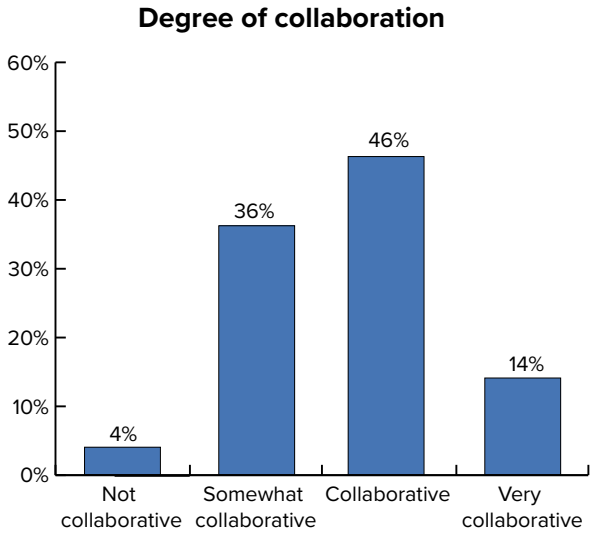

Figure 4: Percentage of respondents who reported this project to be "Not collaborative," "Somewhat collaborative," "Collaborative" or "Very collaborative."

Shared Motivation

Shared motivation refers to trust, mutual understanding, relationship-building, and commitment to the collaborative process.

A strong majority of participants agreed the collaborative process helped build: trust in each other (93%), relationships (97%), mutual respect of others' positions and interests (81%), and trust in the group's ability to achieve desired actions and outcomes (84%) (Figure 8). Respondents also indicated that they, the USFS unit level staff, and other project participants were all committed to the process (Figure 9).

Capacity for Joint Action

Capacity for joint action includes four components: collaborative leadership, knowledge and learning, resources, and institutional arrangements that support fair governance.

Leadership

Leadership is a critical component for collaborative governance. Leaders are needed to convene partners, communicate a shared vision, and motivate people to work together.

A strong majority of respondents agreed that the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP had leaders who work well with other people (88%), and maintain and communicate a common vision and direction (83%). A smaller majority of respondents (64%) agreed that leaders motivate others to work together (Figure 10).

Knowledge and Learning

Collaboratives should engage in a knowledge generation and social learning process for joint action. Knowledge should be co-produced, equally available to all partners, and be used to implement adaptive management.

For the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP, a strong majority of respondents somewhat agreed to strongly agreed that the CFLRP process provided opportunities to co-generate knowledge to solve problems together (84%), that knowledge and information was shared equally among participants (76%), and that participants are

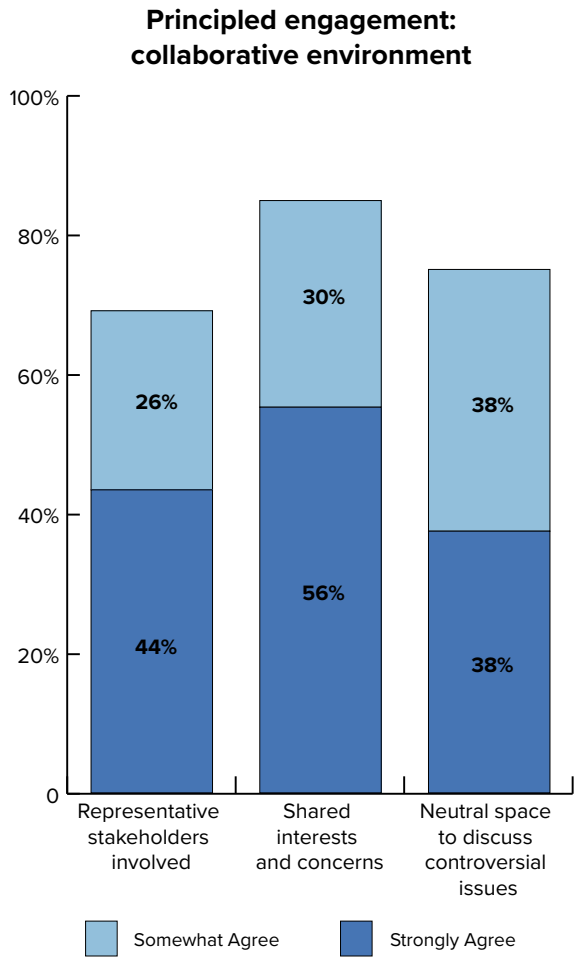

Figure 5: Percentage of respondents who either "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that representative stakeholders are involved, stakeholders have shared interests and concerns, and the collaborative is a neutral space to discuss controversial issues.

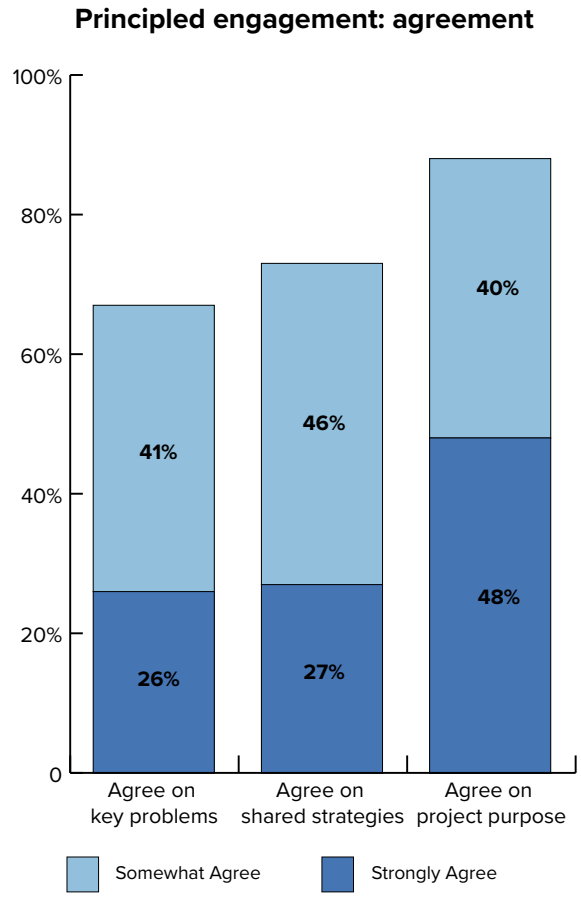

Figure 6: Percentage of respondents who either "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree" on the key problems that impact the landscape, strategies to solve problems, and purpose of the collaborative.

committed to informing adjustments to management practices based on learning and feedback, i.e., adaptive management (80%). Further, the majority of respondents also agreed that the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP had the flexibility to alter course when landscape conditions change (e.g., wildfire affects a planning unit; 71%) and when the collaborative changes (e.g., new faces or priorities; 71%) (Figure 11).

Resources

To accomplish tasks and get work done, collaboratives often pool and share resources, including funding, personnel time, technical expertise, and facilitation, which, in turn, can support buy-in.

The majority of participants somewhat agreed to strongly agreed that the project had adequate access to the funds (68%), and time (60%) needed to accomplish their work. Meanwhile, a strong majority of participants somewhat to strongly agreed that the project had the technical expertise (96%), and facilitation skills (96%) to get work done (Figure 12).

Institutional Arrangements

Institutional arrangements are the rules of the game. They include processes, protocols, and structures needed to manage collaboration over time. They should be clearly understood, perceived as fair and equitable, and include accountability mechanisms within and between entities.

A majority of survey respondents somewhat to strongly agreed there were protocols in place that promote accountability among CFLRP participants (66%) and between the USFS and CFLRP project participants (e.g., decision rules, charters, memoranda of understanding; 53%) (Figure 13). Similarly, a majority agreed those protocols were clearly understood among participants (69%), fair and equitable (83%), and used appropriately (66%) (Figure 13).

A majority of respondents felt that project participants understood when and what collaborative input was useful to inform USFS decisions (71%). Further, a majority reported the USFS was responsive to collaborative input (66%), and the agency was clear with CFLRP project

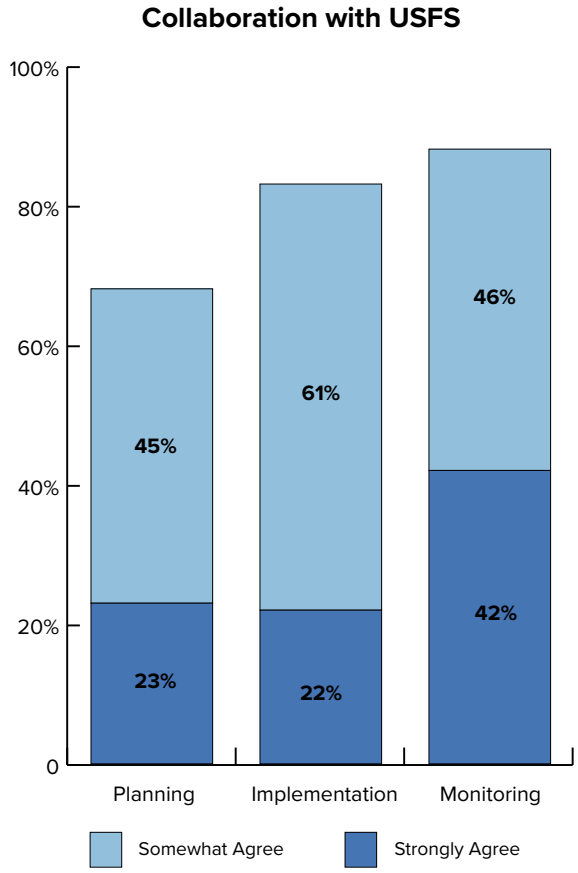

Figure 7: Percent of respondents who either "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that the USFS collaborates during planning, implementation, and monitoring stages.

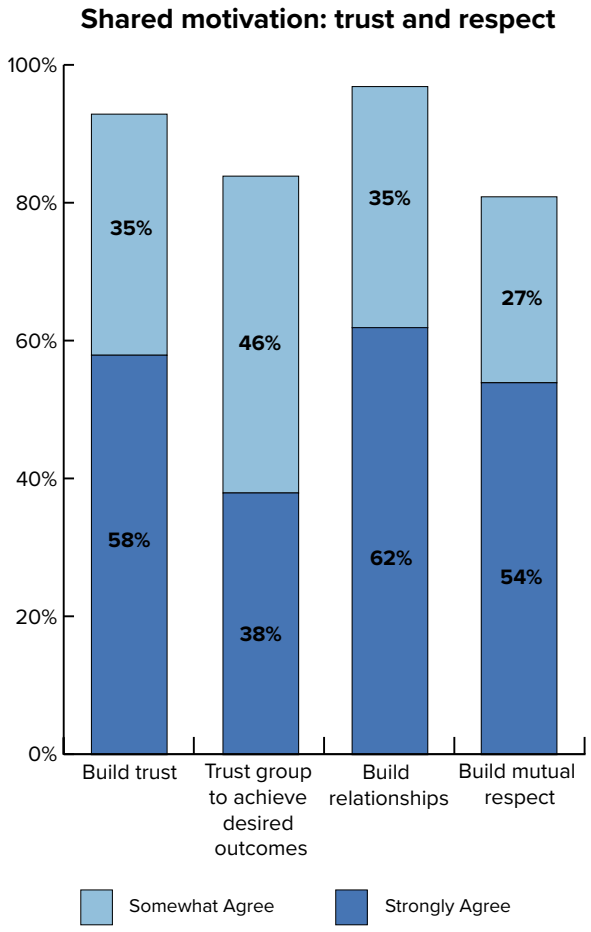

Figure 8: Percentage of respondents who either "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that the collaborative process has helped build trust, relationships, and mutual respect, as well as the extent to which participants are committed to the process.

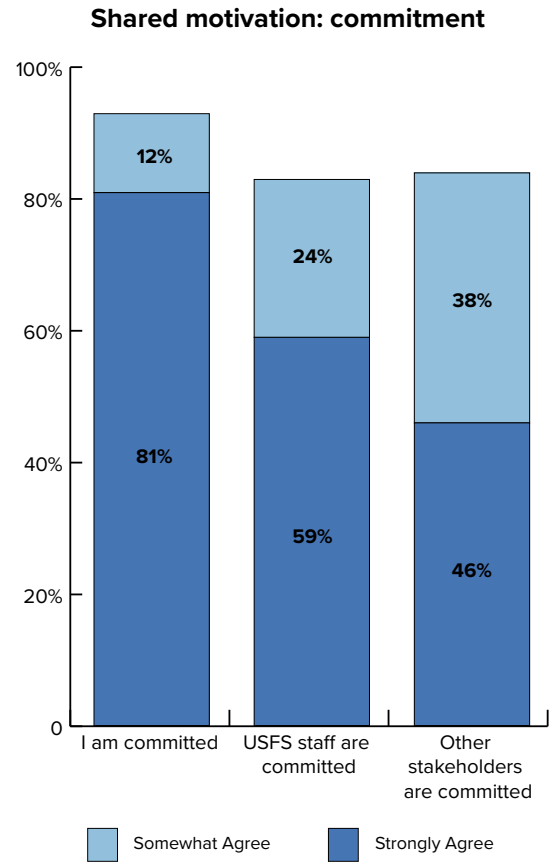

Figure 9: Percentage of respondents who either "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that they, the USFS, and other stakeholders are committed to the process.

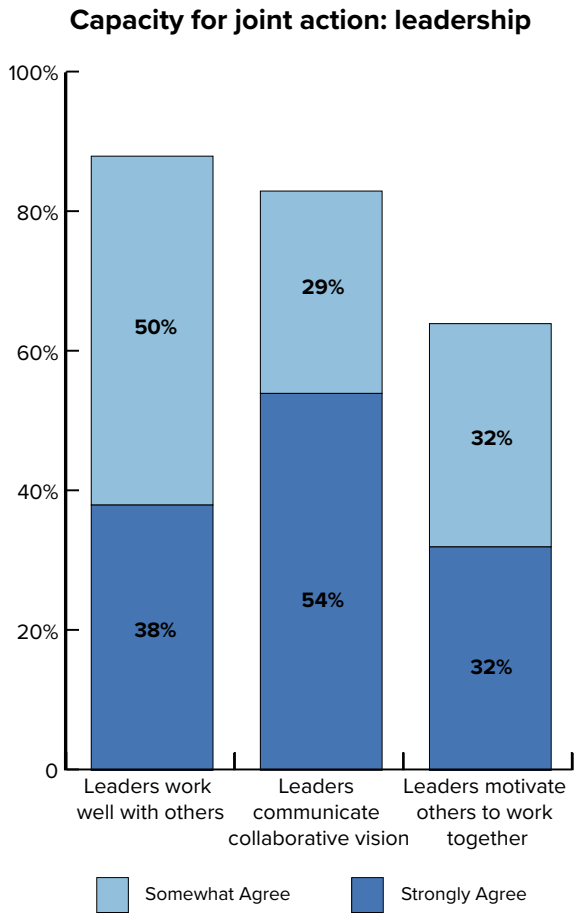

Figure 10: Percent of respondents who either "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that the leaders work well with others, communicate a common vision and direction, and motivate others to work together.

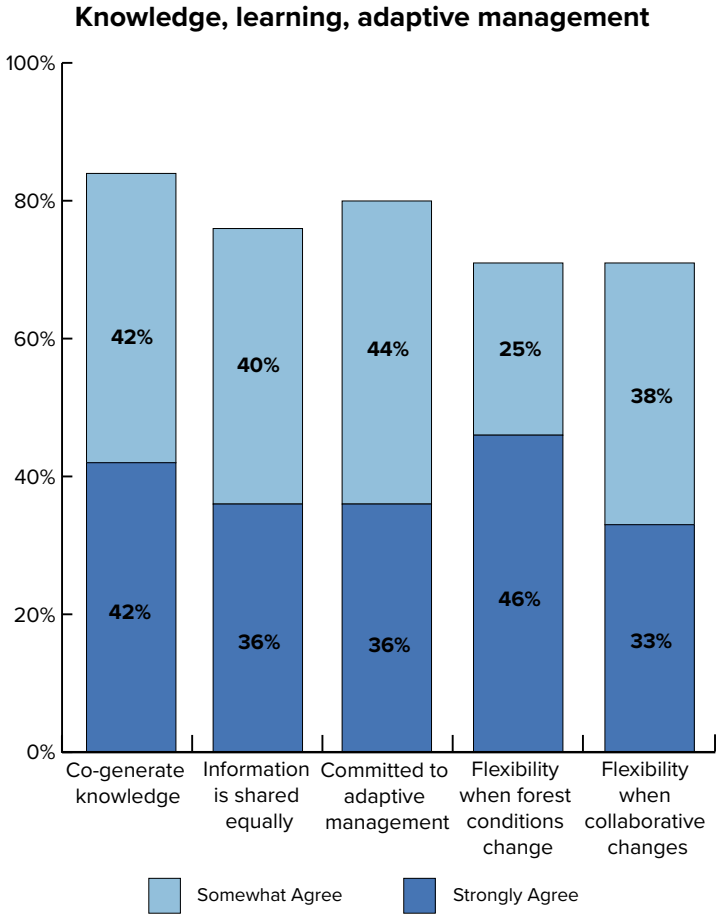

Figure 11: Percent of respondents who either "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that knowledge and information is co-generated by participants, shared equally, and used by participants to adjust management practices.

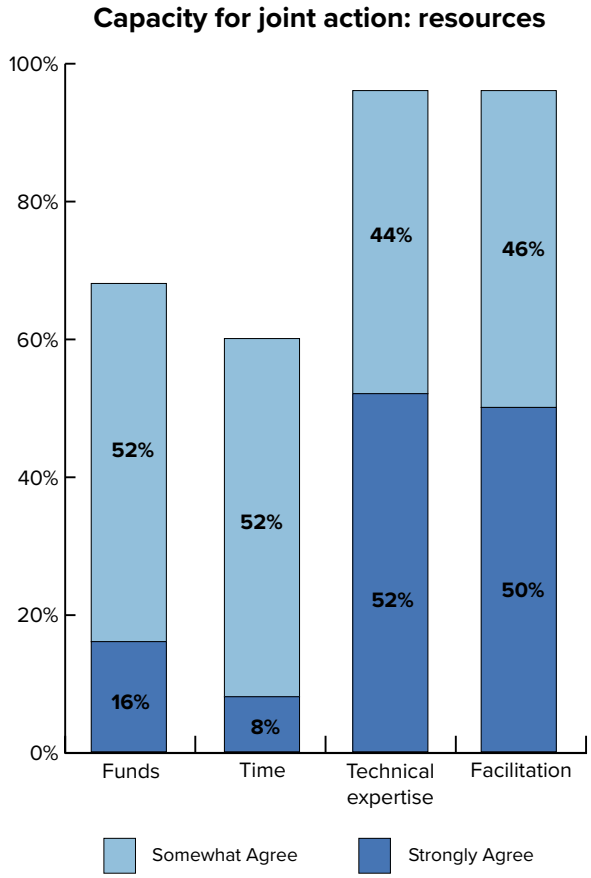

Figure 12: Percent of respondents who either "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that the collaborative has adequate: funds, time, technical expertise, and facilitation skills to accomplish work.

participants about the decisions they make and why they make them (80%) (Figure 14).

Outcomes

We assessed perceived progress on process, socio-economic, and ecological outcomes for the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CLFRP. The assessment was administered after the first 10-year CFLRP funding period. Each question was voluntary, and 20% or more of the respondents did not respond to questions about perceived outcomes. A strong majority of respondents agreed to strongly agreed that the collaborative process had improved across all measures. These include the following: enhanced communication among participants (84%), minimized conflict (86%), enhanced decision making (77%), included diverse perspectives (75%), minimized litigation (82%), enabled landscape-scale planning (87%), and enhanced planning across boundaries (77%) (Figure 15). A majority reported moderate to substantial progress in meeting the ecological goals (Figure 16). Specifically, a strong majority indicated moderate to substantial progress on improved or maintained restoration pace and scale (90%), reduced fuel hazards (95%), improved fire use (90%), and improved habitat (85%). Most respondents also reported the project had made moderate to substantial progress on socio-economic goals (Figure 17), but emphasized progress on reducing community wildfire risk (89%), and support for local employment or training (82%).

Disruptions

We developed a list of common challenges CFLRP project participants and other landscape-scale forest collaboratives reported in forest collaborative meeting breakout groups and in the literature. Based on that list, frequent personnel turnover and funding were the most substantial challenges Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CLFRP faced at the time of this survey (Figure 18). Both the amount and timing of funding was reportedly disruptive. In a short answer response, one respondent noted that:

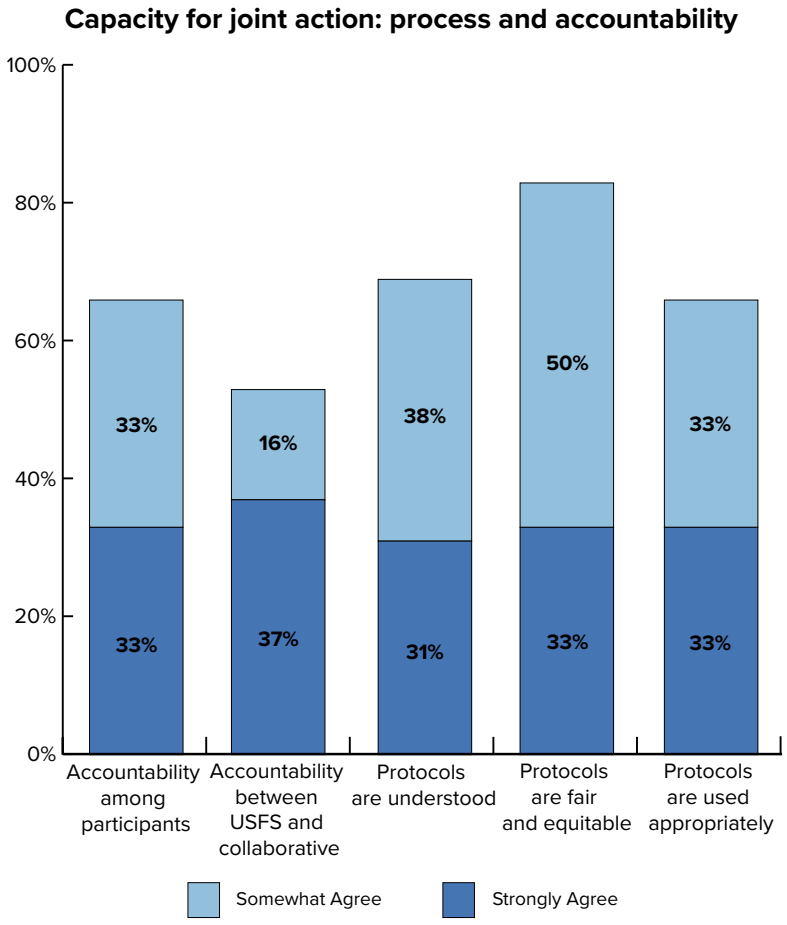

Figure 13: Percent of respondents who either "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that protocols promote accountability among participants, between USFS and the collaborative, and that protocols are understood, fair and equitable, and are used appropriately.

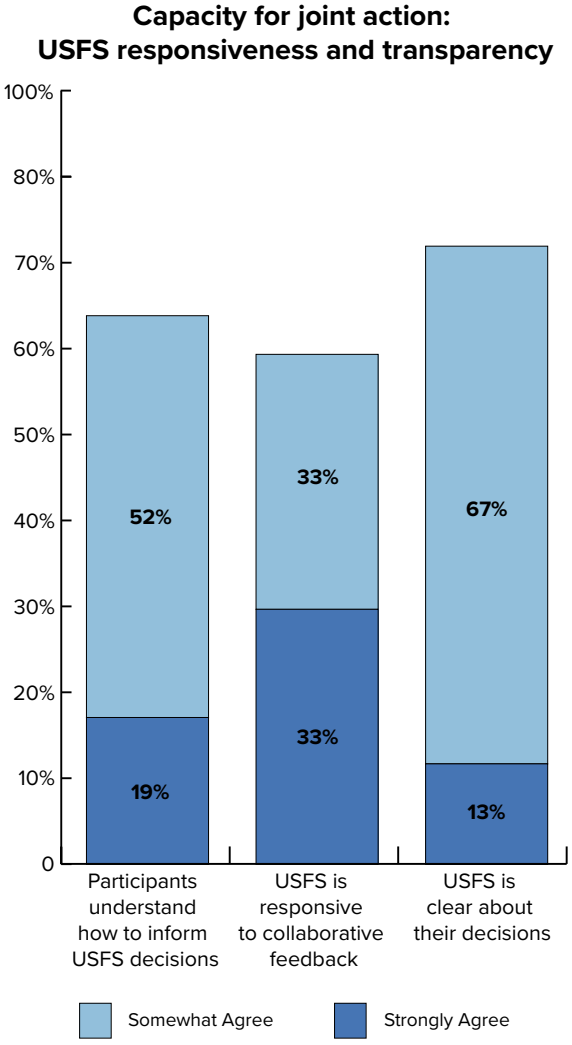

Figure 14: Percent of respondents who either "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that they understand how to inform USFS decisions, the USFS is responsive to feedback, and the USFS is clear about their decisions.

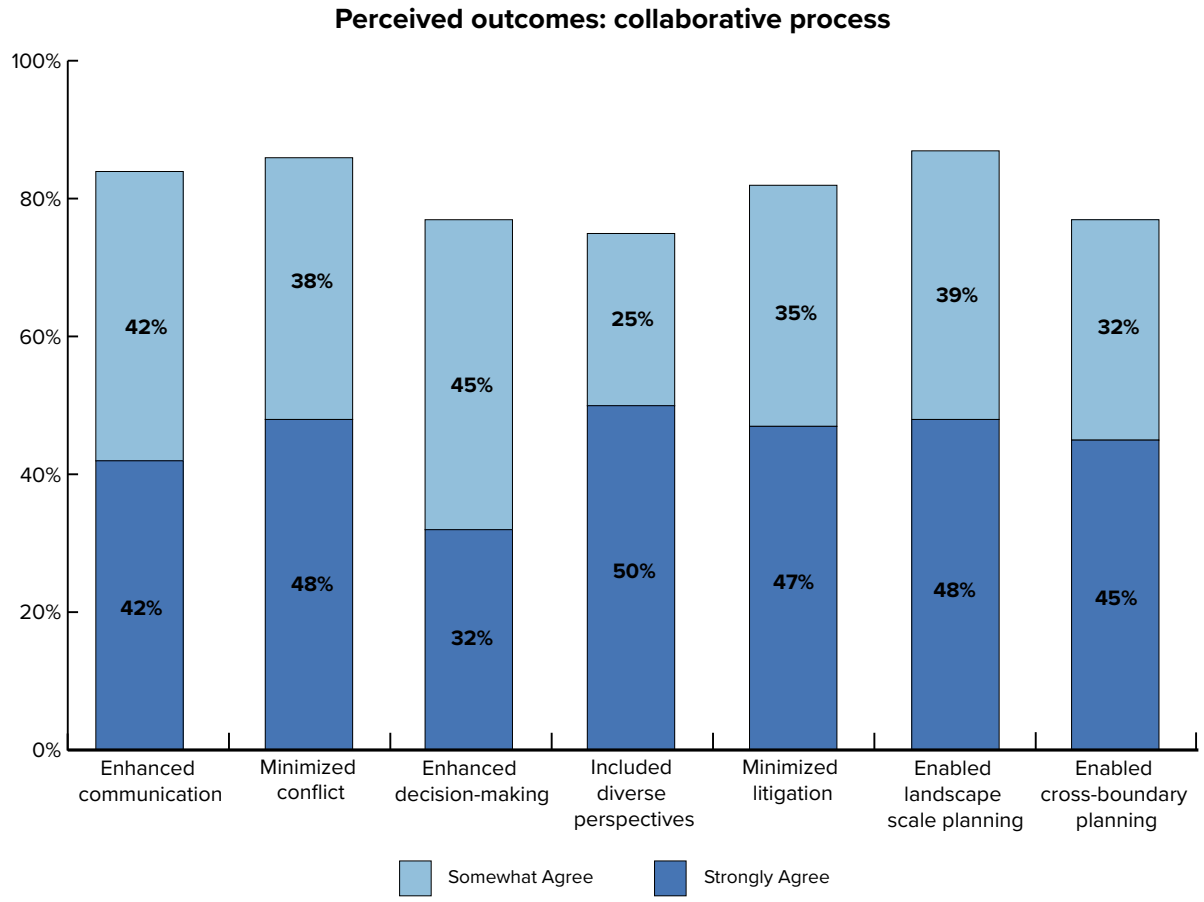

Figure 15: Percent of respondents who either “Somewhat Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that the collaborative process has impacted the function and capacity of the collaborative.

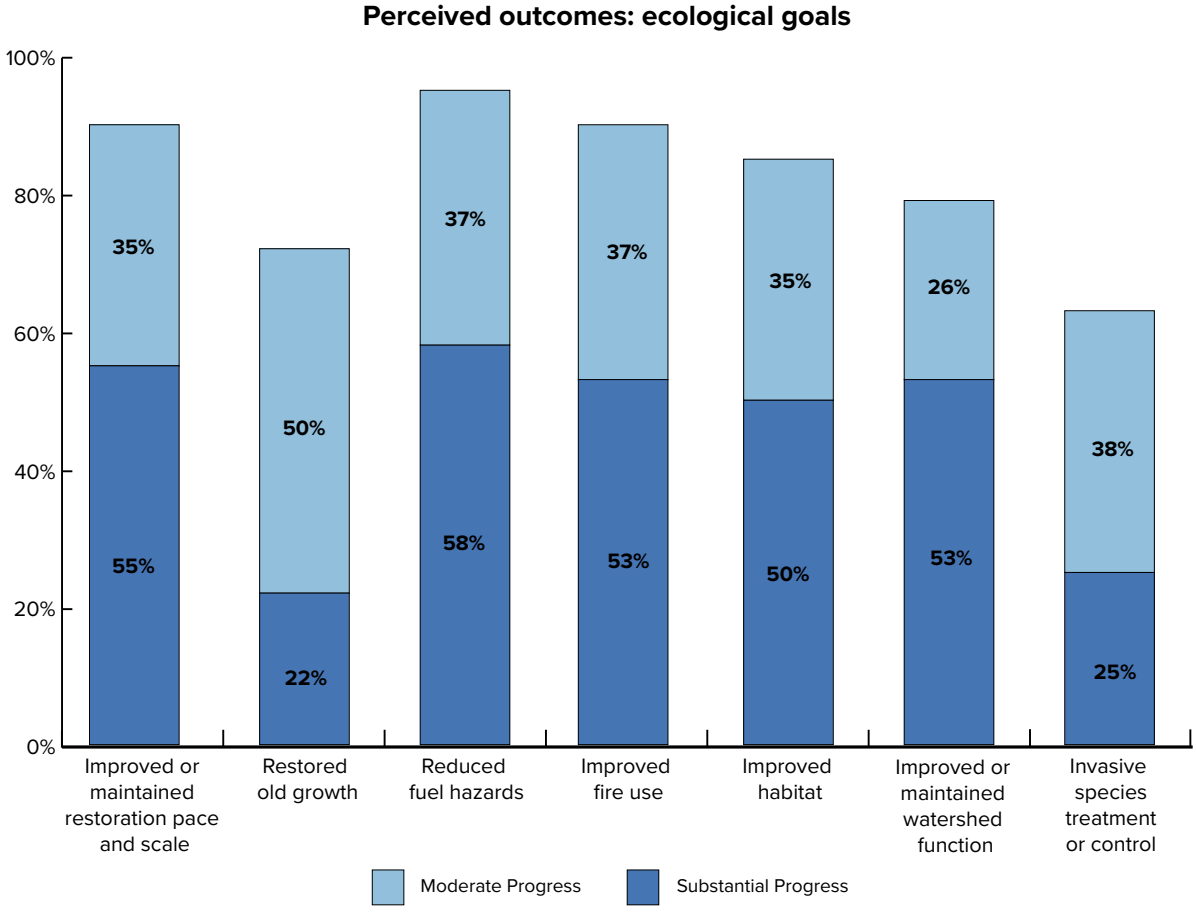

Figure 16: Percent of respondents who reported “Moderate progress” or “Substantial progress” towards ecological goals. Note - several participants did not respond to these questions or chose the option “Don’t know/not applicable,” and thus were removed from this analysis.

> *We need money early in the year to accomplish Rx-fires in Jan- April. If funding doesn't come until May, then our Rx fire season is mostly over and acres don't get burned. We are often limited in doing Rx fire in the summer because personnel are on fires out west or we are at PL 5 and are prevented from doing critical summer burns due to FS direction from Chief. So, getting funding in a timely manner is important to us getting the work done.*

The same respondent acknowledged that "delay[s] in the funding effects [sic] when we can hire people" and accomplish on-the-ground work. In addition, a respondent suggested that burn windows have also been limited by burn bans and smoke restrictions. The CFLRP has responded to this challenge by bringing in out-of-state crews to support spring burn opportunities.

Recommendations to Improve the Collaborative Process

We asked participants to suggest recommendations to improve collaborative process, durability, and performance. Based on open-ended responses and the quantitative data reported herein, respondents highlighted two recommendations: 1) additional outreach and engagement; and 2) increase opportunities for shared decision space and accountability among the USFS and non-USFS partners.

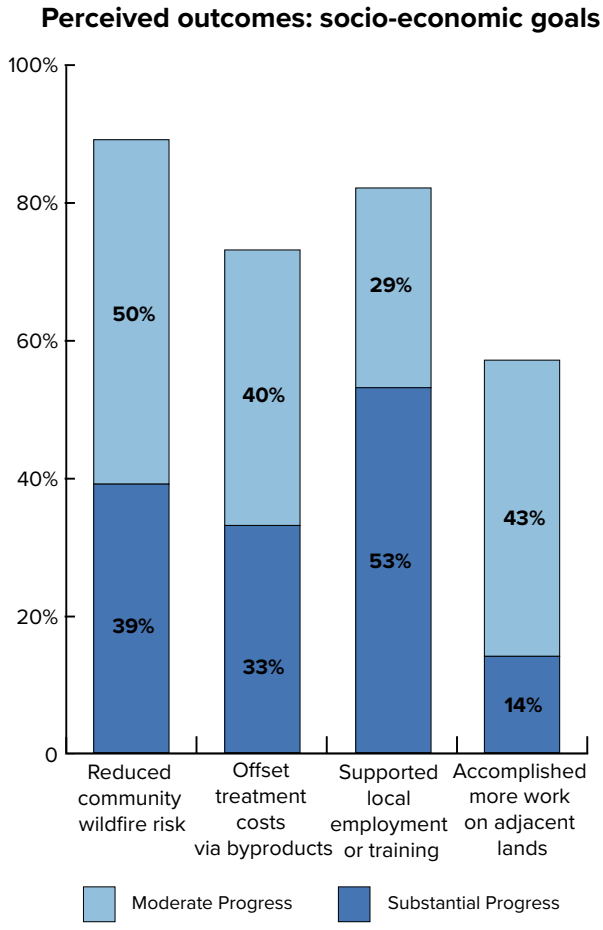

Figure 17: Percent of respondents who reported "Moderate progress" or "Substantial progress" towards socio-economic goals. Note - several participants did not respond to these questions or chose the option "Don't know/not applicable," and thus were removed from this analysis.

Additional outreach and engagement

Several respondents recommended the CFLRP consider including addition entities in the collaborative process. Respondents recommended additional outreach and engagement with a broader network of NGOs, tribal partners, the state forestry association, representatives from the timber industry (wood products companies, loggers, smaller mills), local communities, and counties. In this vein, a respondent called for more inclusive and equitable partner participation.

Increase opportunities for shared decision space and accountability among the USFS and non-USFS partners

Respondents recommended clear communication and opportunities for dialogue and negotiation of the shared decision space between agency and non-agency partners. A few respondents indicated that they felt left out of decision-making processes, as one respondent stated:

> *We need more opportunity for open discussion with honest dialogue and clear answers. We need to be able to have clear answers from Forest Service about decisions and know that they are taking into account opinions of stakeholders.*

Another respondent noted a desire to have open and honest discussions about the development of new shared goals or directions among the group. One respondent added context to this by suggesting that while a number of partners have been engaged in the collaborative process, they felt that decisions were dominated by the NRCS and USFS, and thus wanted to see more active involvement of all partners engaged in the CFLRP. In this vein, a more open venue for healthy communication and dialogue could help identify areas of shared agreement and disagreement, both of which are healthy conversations to have:

> [we *need to] seek out areas where disagreements exist in the need for/proper methods of forest restoration. Too much agreement leads to confirmation bias and [the] echo chamber* effect.

Finally, a respondent recommended the group work towards developing mechanisms of accountability for getting work done and reaching goals set forth in the CFLRP project proposal.

Discussion and Conclusions

The Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERI) deployed an online survey to the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP in the winter of 2023 to assess collaborative health, function, and resilience, as well as perceived outcomes of collaborative work. Specifically, we assessed: whether the CFLRP project exhibited characteristics generally associated with healthy, well-functioning, and resilient collaboratives; the extent to which the project has made progress on meeting process, socio-economic, and ecological outcomes; what challenges or disruptions affected collaborative performance and durability; and actionable recommendations to improve the collaborative process from respondents' perspectives. The assessment serves as the collaborative governance assessment for the CFLRP Common Monitoring Strategy (question #12).

The majority of respondents indicated that they agreed about key problems that have impacted their landscape, strategies to solve problems, and the purpose of their collaborative restoration project. Also, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the process helped build trust, relationships, and mutual respect of others' positions and interests even when they are different from their own. A majority agreed that they, other organizations, and the USDA Forest Service (USFS) were all committed to the process. Mutual commitment, especially among those with decision-making authority, is critical for collaborative durability. The USFS retains decision-making authority in treatment planning and implementation on USFS-managed land. The agency also gives substantial discretion in decision-making to local units; thus, it is often up to USFS unit-level line officers to make collaboration a priority by providing staff, resources, etc., or not (Beeton et al., 2022).

Survey respondents acknowledged that leaders worked well across organizations and entities, communicated a collaborative vision, and motivated others to work together. Often, groups benefit from multiple collaborative leaders who represent a diversity of interests across organizational and institutional levels, and provide a variety of functions (e.g., coordination, expertise/experience) (Emerson and Gerlak, 2014; Ryan and Urgenson, 2019). Having diversity and redundancy in leadership roles is critical for continuity through personnel turnover.

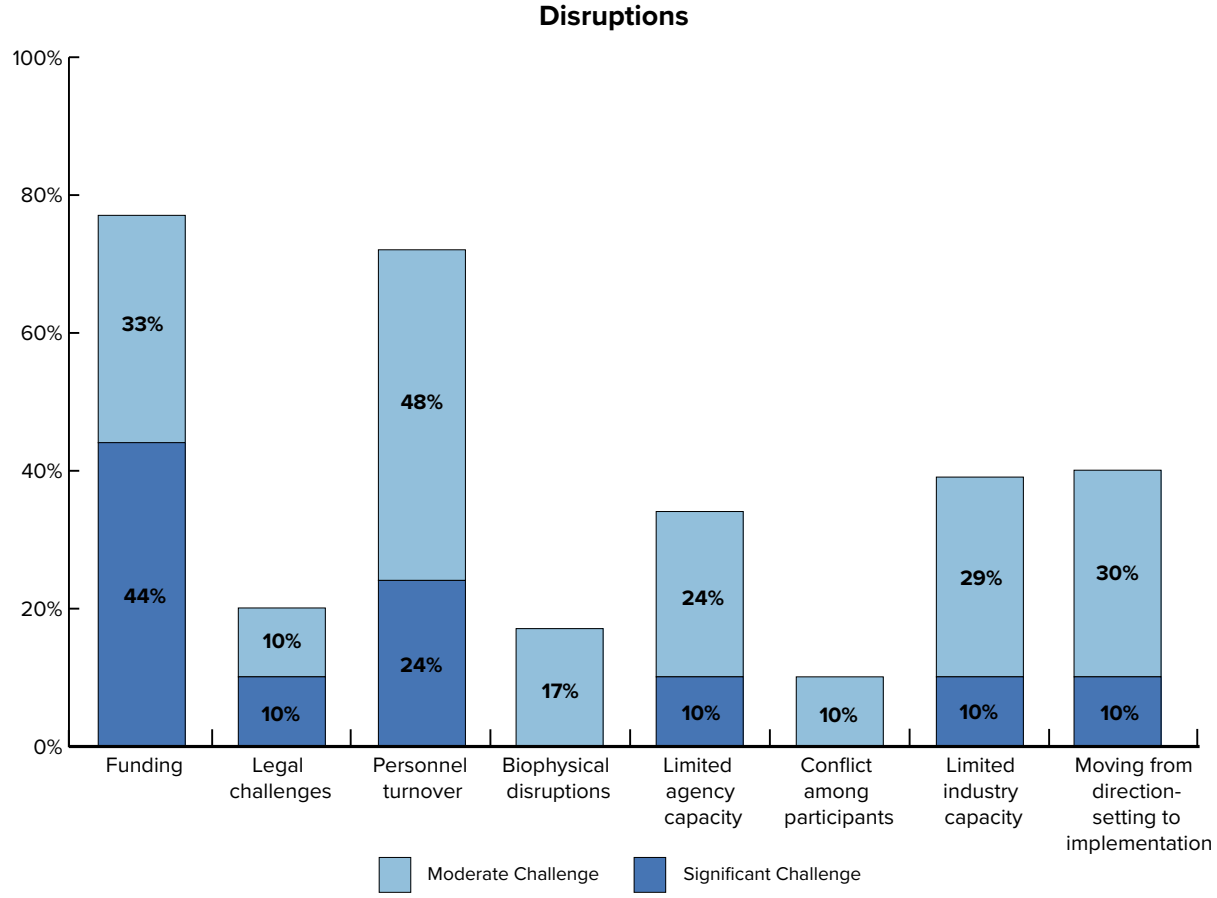

Figure 18: Percent of respondents who reported disruptions posed "Moderate challenges" or "Substantial challenges" to collaborative performance and durability.

Most respondents felt the collaborative had adequate funding and time, whereas nearly all respondents indicated the collaborative had sufficient technical expertise and facilitation skills needed to carry out tasks and accomplish their work. A strong majority of respondents also agreed that participants worked together to co-generate knowledge and are committed to adaptive management. Knowledge and information were reportedly shared equally among participants. Collaboratives can engage in a number of activities to support social learning and co-development of knowledge, including field trips, multi-party monitoring, and joint fact-finding missions. Field trips are a critical component of social learning because they provide opportunities for groups to let their guard down and come to common understandings. Field trips can help illustrate how restoration principles translate to operations on the ground and allow collaborative groups to provide feedback on restoration treatments. Joint fact-finding—where stakeholders work together to co-generate local knowledge and translate it into decision-making—provides opportunities to develop contextual understanding of local landscapes to support decisions. Documenting this learning and knowledge exchange is critical to maintaining transparency, equity, and institutional knowledge (Beeton et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2015).

However, the survey also identified a couple of areas where the collaborative could improve. These issues were discussed in open-ended responses as recommendations to improve the collaborative process. Two themes emerged from these responses, including the need for: 1) inclusion of additional stakeholders and 2) improved communication between USFS and the collaborative.

Survey results also indicated that the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP has started to make progress on a number of process, socio-economic, and ecological goals of the CFLRP. Respondents agreed to strongly agreed that the collaborative process has improved across all items we measured, including minimization of conflict (86%) and litigation (82%), enhanced communication (84%), and landscape scale planning (87%). A strong majority indicated moderate to substantial progress on improved or maintained restoration pace and scale (90%), reduced fuel hazards (95%), improved fire use (90%), and improved habitat (85%). Meanwhile, respondents also acknowledged progress on socio-economic goals, such as reduced community wildfire risk (89%) and support for local employment and/or training (82%).

Frequent personnel turnover (72%) and funding (77%) were the most substantial challenges the Shortleaf- Bluestem Community CFLRP faced at the time of the survey. Turnover can undermine relationships and trust, slow progress, and lead to lost institutional knowledge (Beeton et al., 2022; Coleman et al., 2020). The Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP might want to consider whether partners have the capacity to deal with turnover and limited funds, what they have done to address these challenges, and/or what other support is needed to overcome these challenges.

This report provided a baseline assessment of collaborative health and performance among the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP. Collaboratives are dynamic - they continue to adapt and evolve as needs or priorities change, and in response to internal and external disruptions (Imperial et al., 2016). Thus, it is important to continue to self-assess collaborative progress, durability, and resilience, so that groups can identify what is working well, what may need some work, and what support and/or guidance is needed to address challenges to maintain performance. The SWERI will continue to engage in assessing collaborative health and performance of CFLRP projects. There will be multiple opportunities locally, regionally, and nationally for peer-networking and learning events to share successes and challenges and learn together about how to encourage healthy, durable, and resilient collaboration.

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Appendix 1: Appended Questions

The results of the following questions reported here were developed in coordination with local CFLRP project staff, coordinators, and partners affiliated with the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP. These questions are not part of the CFLRP Common Monitoring Strategy. Respondents indicated that the frequency of group meetings were either just right (63%) or not frequent enough (38%) but no respondents indicated that meetings were too frequent (Figure A1). Nearly all respondents indicated that they planned to continue their involvement in the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CLFRP, whereas no respondents indicated they will not be engaged in the future, and a few were unsure (8%) (Figure A2).

Finally, the majority of respondents somewhat to strongly agreed that the Shortleaf-Bluestem Community CFLRP had met their expectations (62%). However, a group of respondents somewhat to strongly disagreed that their expectations had been met (17%). In short answer responses, a few respondents credited the CFLRP with enabling, "me and my NGO to communicate better and understand what is being done for the wildlife and habitat," or for bringing, "a number of partners together in our state." However, other respondents suggested that, "certain stakeholders are given more say and opportunities creating an inequitable environment," that, "there is little to no open discussion or ability to set new goals or directions," or that the groups is, "dominated by NRCS and USFS in the decision-making process." One respondent indicated that a more equitable distribution of funds to eastern forests for fuel reduction is needed. A more equitable distribution of these funds to eastern forests would help enable additional capacity to carry out more prescribed fire, which is needed.

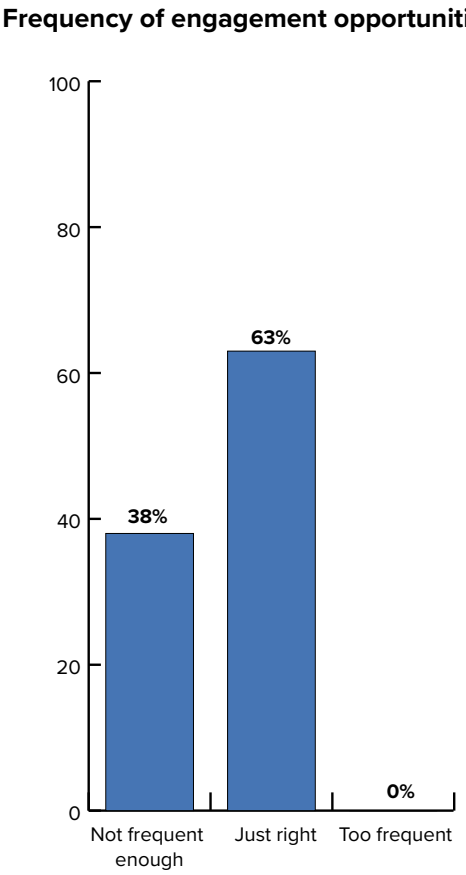

Figure A1: Percent of respondents who reported this project has "Not frequent enough," "Just right," or "Too frequent" engagement opportunities.

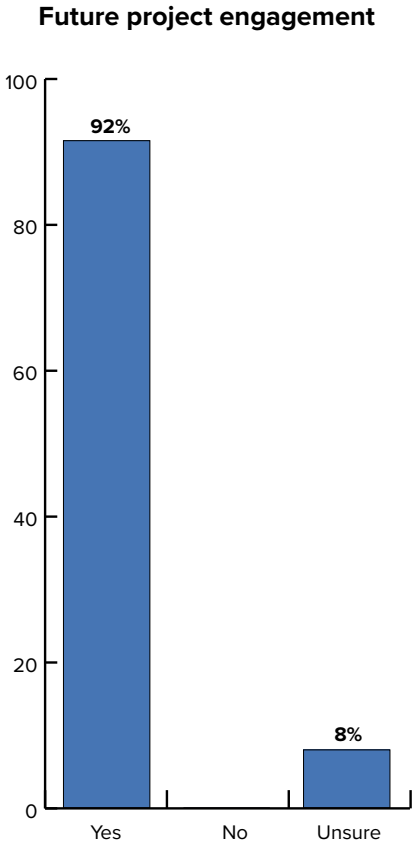

Figure A2: Percent of respondents who reported that they planned, did not plan, or were unsure if they would participate in future project engagements.

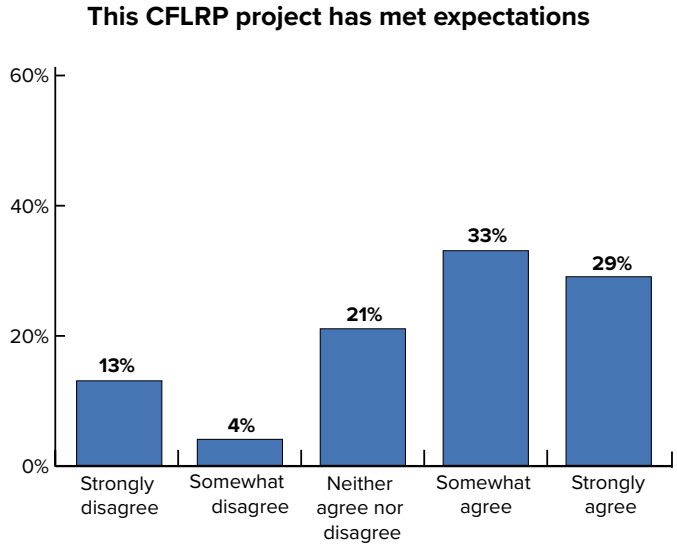

Figure A3: Percent of respondents who reported that this CFLRP has met their expectations.

SWERI SOUTHWEST ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION INSTITUTES

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COLORADO FOREST RESTORATION INSTITUTE
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY
Ecological Restoration Institute

New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute