

CFLRP collaborative governance assessment: Summary of findings for the Southwest Colorado Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative

The Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERI) developed a collaborative governance assessment as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service (Forest Service) Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) Common Monitoring Strategy. The collaborative governance assessment was designed to evaluate collaborative health, function, resilience, and perceived outcomes of collaborative work. The SWERI administered an online questionnaire to members of the Southwest Colorado Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (SW CO CFLRP) from April 25 to June 5, 2023. We received 35 usable responses, representing 32% of the population. Figure 1 illustrates what groups were represented in the questionnaire. The purpose of this brief is to:

- Summarize high-level findings from the collaborative governance assessment; and
- Document participants' recommendations to improve collaborative performance and progress.

Findings

What is working well for the SW CO CFLRP?

A majority of respondents reported that a representative set of stakeholders were involved in the CFLRP collaborative process, and that participants worked together to identify shared interests and concerns. The majority of respondents generally agreed about key problems that have impacted their landscape, strategies to solve problems, and the purpose of their collaborative restoration project. Also, respondents agreed that the process has helped build trust, relationships, and mutual respect of others' positions and interests. Respondents noted strong commitment to the process among themselves, other organizations, and by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (Forest Service) (Figure 2). These findings have positive implications for the SW CO CFLRP. Mutual commitment, especially among those with decision-making authority, is critical for collaborative durability. A majority of respondents reported the presence of strong leaders who worked well across organizations and entities, communicated a collaborative vision, and motivated others to work together. Respondents also felt the SW CO CFLRP had adequate technical expertise to carry out tasks and accomplish their work. They generally agreed that participants worked together to co-generate knowledge and solve problems, were committed to adaptive management, and had some flexibility when forest conditions or the collaborative changes.



Source: Danny Margoles.

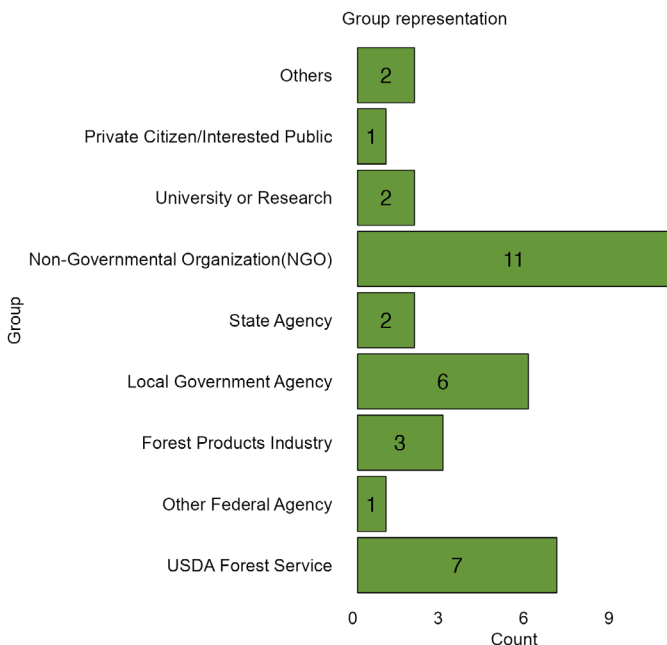


Figure 1: Respondents' self-identified representation with associated organizations (n=35).

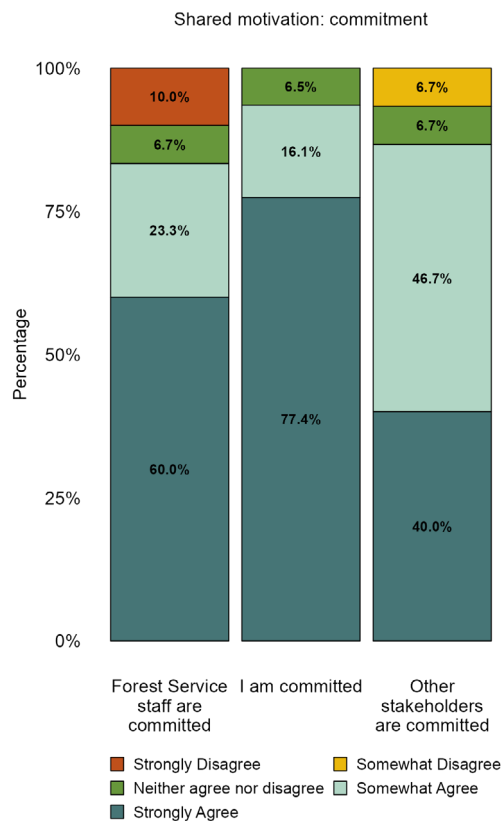


Figure 2: Percentage of respondents who disagreed or agreed that they (n=31), the Forest Service (n=30), and other stakeholders (n=30) are committed to the process.

What disruptions and challenges have affected collaborative progress and performance?

Personnel turnover, moving from direction setting to implementation, limited agency capacity, conflict among participants, and limited industry capacity were the most substantial disruptions faced at the time of our assessment. Turnover can undermine relationships and trust, slow progress, and lead to lost institutional knowledge. Open-ended responses reiterated these and other disruptions. For example, respondents indicated that multiple and conflicting demands and priorities of collaborative members challenged the ability to get work done on the ground. Further, respondents noted that a small, but vocal, minority disrupted collaborative progress and performance. Yet, the SW CO CFLRP has reportedly started to address several of these disruptions. For instance, respondents noted the Forest Service was adding staff dedicated to the CFLRP, and the group was in the process of hiring (and has since hired) a third-party facilitator, which may be helpful to address conflict among members.

Progress toward desired process, socio-economic, and ecological outcomes

Respondents reported progress towards collaborative process, socio-economic, and ecological outcomes, including:

- increased landscape-scale and cross-boundary planning and inclusion of diverse perspectives;
- enhanced communication and decision-making; and
- reduction of fuel hazards.

It is important to note that the assessment was administered during the first year of funding for the SW CO CFLRP. Many of the desired process, socio-economic, and ecological outcomes may take time to achieve.

Recommendations to improve the collaborative process and performance

Respondents provided recommendations to improve the collaborative process and performance, including:

- Establish mechanisms for productive and inclusive participation and engagement. Respondents voiced interest in enhancing engagement and participation among industry representatives from planning through to implementation and among recreation interests. Members also recommended clear processes and protocols for acknowledging and considering minority perspectives while supporting forward progress towards stated goals and objectives the majority of the group can agree upon.
- Clear understanding of collaborative structure, function, and decision space across scales and levels of authority. Collaborative members recommended more clarity on how the SW CO CFLRP process compliments existing place-based collaborative efforts going on within the CFLRP footprint. Others recommended more transparency on how cross-boundary work would be implemented, sideboards on expectations for collaborative project prioritization and implementation, annual treatment schedules, project selections, and funding decisions. Others felt the collaborative could benefit from more clarity on how and to what extent collaborative members can inform decisions on Forest Service-managed lands.

Next steps

Results from this questionnaire provided a baseline assessment of collaborative governance among the SW CO CFLRP. The assessment represents a snapshot in time. It was administered during a period of transition for the SW CO CFLRP. Collaboration is a dynamic process, and thus results may change as the group creates value in different ways or their needs and priorities change. The SWERI will continue to engage in assessing collaborative health and performance of CFLRP projects, the goal of which is to identify where capacities lie and areas for improvement to target investments and activities that support resilient and durable collaboration.