

# Has Collaborative Planning Taken Root in the National Forests?

By Steven W. Selin, Michael A. Schuett, and Deborah S. Carr

The natural resource profession is at a watershed when it comes to citizen participation and conflicts in land management policy. We have been driven to this point by forces both external and internal (Selin and Chavez 1995). Natural resource disputes are increasingly resolved by Congress or the courts...the authority of resource management agencies has been challenged by the emerging county supremacy movement...government employees, their budgets cut and their colleagues downsized, operate in a climate of stress...perhaps most important, the American people—owners of the vast federal estate—are debating the role of these lands and the appropriate tradeoff between production and preservation.

Although public participation in national forest management was mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 (NEPA), the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Re-

sources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA), and the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA), some observers believe that foresters, with their specialized training, should assume primary control over natural resource decisions (Wellman and Tipple 1990). That traditional view is being assaulted on many fronts. Increasingly, citizen groups are exercising their legal right to participate fully in natural resource policymaking and management decisions. Foresters themselves are realizing that collaborative approaches may be

their best and only chance to influence the direction of natural resource policy.

Sometimes voluntarily, then, and sometimes not, public land management agencies are experimenting with ways to involve citizens in natural resource policy and allocation decisions.

**“Because our partners are involved and respect us, we have very little in the way of appeals at this forest.”**

—A USDA Forest Service employee at the Ashley National Forest in Utah

Anecdotal evidence suggests that collaborative planning is indeed on the rise within national forest planning and management. Much of the literature on collaborative methods has been descriptive. Reports from the field have described “bridging activities” (Wondolleck and Yaffee 1994) or innovative cases like

the Yellowstone Coalition (Lichtman and Clark 1994) and the Montezuma County Federal Lands Program (Preston 1995). What has been lacking is a systematic examination of how these methods are being implemented across the national forest system. How are USDA Forest Service employees implementing collaborative methods?

Before empirically investigating how collaborative planning has been adapted within the Forest Service’s organizational and political culture, we must understand collaborative plan-

ning under ideal conditions. Gray (1989) defines collaboration as “a process of joint decision making among key stakeholders of a problem domain about the future of that domain.” Gray then identifies five characteristics thought critical to the collaborative process: (1) the stakeholders are interdependent, (2) solutions emerge by dealing constructively with differences, (3) joint ownership of decisions is involved, (4) stakeholders assume collective responsibility for the future direction of the domain, and (5) it is an emergent process.

## Study Methods

The field for this study on collaborative planning was the national forest system. Altogether, 115 Forest Service employees representing all 155 national forests (including some employees of more than one national forest, such as the national forests in Alabama) were contacted by telephone and asked to participate. The names of the Forest Service employees were obtained by an initial telephone call to the public affairs officer for each national forest, who was asked to name the person with the “most knowledge or experience” in collaborative planning on that forest. The purpose and scope of the study were explained to the potential respondents and their experience was verified. If the potential respondent was unavailable or other-

wise not interviewed, an alternate was called.

Of the 115 managers asked to participate, 113 consented to being interviewed—a response rate of 98 percent. The five-page questionnaire included a number of items that varied from Likert scales to open-ended questions. The questions covered the respondent's job, extent of participation in collaborative planning, benefits, constraints, level of support, suggested policy and organizational changes, and the future role of collaborative planning.

**Respondents.** The 113 Forest Service employees participating in the study represented all 10 Forest Service regions and 153 national forests. A majority of respondents (58.4 percent) identified themselves as planners, and another 19.5 percent were public affairs officers. It is interesting that researchers were nearly always directed to staff rather than to higher-level line officers as the employees most knowledgeable or experienced in collaborative planning. In fact, only three line officers—two district rangers and a forest supervisor—participated in the study.

**Participation.** Overall, respondents indicated that collaborative planning was being integrated into national forest planning and management. When asked whether their national forest had engaged in collaborative planning, 91.2 percent indicated that their national forest had been or was currently involved in collaborative planning activities. Common reasons given for lack of participation included lack of training, lack of supervisor support, lack of resources or incentives, and concerns about violating the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA), which controls the membership and function of advisory committees.

**Application.** Respondents were asked what issues had been addressed through collaborative planning approaches. Findings (table 1) suggest that collaborative planning has already been well integrated into national forest managers' day-to-day activities at the forest level. Collaborative planning approaches are being used most com-

**Table 1. Application of collaborative planning within the national forests.**

Resolving conflicts	76.1%
Setting goals	74.3
Allocating forest resources	69.0
Scoping procedures	67.3
Formal forest planning process	61.9
Monitoring forest uses	48.7

**Table 2. Perceived level of support for collaborative planning.**

	Scale 1-7
Personally support	6.75
Forest supervisor support	5.77
Regional support	5.19
Washington office support	4.54

Likert scale from Don't support at all (1) to Strongly support (7).

monly to resolve conflicts and advance a shared vision of future resource conditions. The respondents' general comments also indicate that collaborative planning is regularly employed in project-level planning and management. According to one manager, collaborative planning is used "in coordinating day-to-day resource management activities with adjacent landowners." Collaborative planning has not yet been fully integrated into the formal forest planning process, however.

**Support.** One series of questions was designed to determine the level of support within the Forest Service for collaborative planning. These results (table 2) confirm the high level of support found for collaborative planning among study respondents, primarily staff officers at the forest level. Perceived support was seen as dropping off, however, as one ascended the agency ranks from forest supervisor to the regional and Washington office levels. Although the survey questions do not suggest the reason for this drop in the perceived level of support, several respondents provided insight into this underlying sentiment. One manager commented, "I see a lot of collaborative planning material on the Data General and publications, but little support for implementation and train-

ing offered at the regional and Washington level."

**Benefits.** Another aim of the study was to determine the range of benefits managers attribute to collaborative forms of planning (table 3). Some respondents emphasized communication and building constituencies; others saw such practical outcomes as reducing appeals and lawsuits. One common theme was the assertion that the process of collaborative planning and its intangible benefits may outweigh the more tangible benefits. As one planner aptly put it, "The indirect benefits—the partnerships, networks, trust, and information sharing—are more beneficial than the actual collaborative planning effort itself."

**Barriers.** The study solicited managers' concerns about collaborative planning and perceived barriers to its full integration into national forest planning and management (table 4). Not surprisingly, the constraints of FACA and lack of line officer support were seen as barriers. Respondents also cited the danger that a collaborative forum can be sidetracked by personal agendas and become politicized. They tended to disagree with statements that there was little incentive for Forest Service managers, that collaborative planning required too much time and effort, that collaborative planning would lead to decreased federal authority, and that there was little public support for collaborative forms of planning. One theme to emerge from the comments was that the biggest barrier to collaborative planning is considered the Forest Service itself—that its institutional funding, rewards, and policy structures constrain the adoption of collaborative methods. For example, several respondents expressed concern that verbal support for collaborative planning from headquarters and line officers would not translate into time made available to staff to participate in collaborative planning activities.

**Suggestions.** Respondents were asked to identify changes needed to integrate collaborative planning more fully into national forest planning and management (table 5). Managers were clearly

frustrated with constraints on collaborative initiatives imposed by the Federal Advisory Committee Act. In fact, if the change-FACA and eliminate-FACA items are combined, more than 53 percent of the managers interviewed had grave reservations about FACA. Many of the related comments stressed building more flexibility into the act and allowing the Forest Service to convene advisory meetings without requiring the meetings to be open to potential disrupters. Several managers said that FACA limited collaborative forums to information gathering and mutual learning, whereas the real potential lies in forums for building consensus and developing alternatives.

There was also general sentiment among respondents that provisions

**Table 3. Perceived benefits of collaborative planning.**

	Scale 1-5
Better understanding of alternative forest values	4.54
Improved communications	4.51
Establishes informal networks	4.48
Builds sense of forest ownership	4.16
Improved cooperation	4.12
More political support for agency	3.89
Decreased polarization	3.45

Likert scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (5).

**Table 4. Perceived barriers to collaborative planning.**

	Scale 1-5
Initiatives constrained by personal agendas	4.00
FACA constrains application	3.76
Full support of line officers is lacking	3.39
Initiatives become too politicized	3.25
Method is inefficient	2.82
Little incentive for Forest Service managers	2.40
Too much time and effort are required	2.30
Federal authority is decreased	2.10
Little public support	2.00

Likert scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (5).

for collaborative planning be more completely integrated into policy and procedure guidelines for the acts that mandate public participation: NEPA, RPA, and the NFMA. A number of managers contended that many advocacy organizations lack incentive to participate in collaborative forums and prefer to achieve their objectives through litigation and appeals. According to one planner, "There is no political mechanism to force people to sit down; we have to create a process sanctioned by the legislature that when an agreement is reached, there can be no end runs." Another controversial subject among managers interviewed was the degree to which the Forest Service should have control over final decisions. Many managers were skeptical of collaborative forums characterized by shared decisionmaking, joint ownership, and collective responsibility; their concept of collaborative planning contradicts Gray's (1989). Most preferred to see collaborative planning as an advisory function, with the Forest Service retaining primary control over final decisions.

*Future role.* Finally, employees were asked to predict the future of collaborative planning in national forest planning and management. Seventy-seven percent of respondents thought collaborative planning would play a larger role in the future, 10.6 percent said the role would stay about the same, and only 2.7 percent saw a smaller role for collaborative planning. General comments reveal that although most managers realize collaborative planning approaches are not a panacea and must be selectively applied, they nevertheless agree with the planner who said, "It's not a matter of *whether* collaborative planning will be used, but only *how*." Clarke and Stankey (1994) expressed these same concerns in analyzing the Federal Ecosystem Management Assessment Team's social assessment: "We must fashion responsive decisionmaking structures built around a core of participative management. Failure to do so will lead to a loss of professional influence."

**Table 5. Suggested policy and organizational changes.**

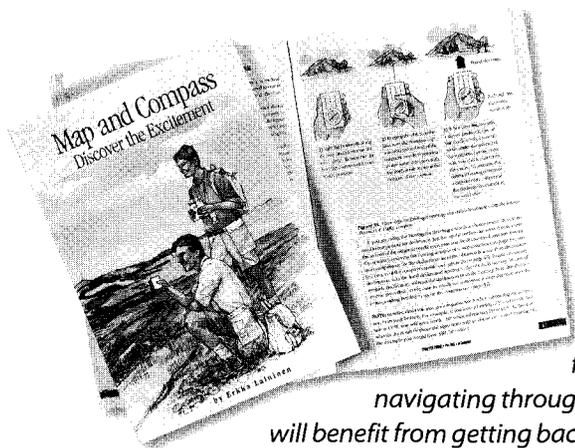
Change FACA	53(n)	46.9%
More flexibility	27	23.9
Integrate into all existing rules and regs	14	12.4
Allow Forest Service to convene groups	12	10.6
More training	8	7.1
Eliminate FACA	5	4.4
No change	5	4.4
Forest Service retains final decision	4	3.6

## Conclusions and Prescriptions

Results from this study should be interpreted cautiously. Respondents included only those Forest Service employees considered most knowledgeable about collaborative planning. One cannot generalize from this sample to the larger population of agency and private parties with a vested interest in national forest planning and management. However, the study is useful for its primary purpose, to determine how and to what extent collaborative planning is being integrated into national forest planning and management. The study presents results from nearly every national forest in the country. It overwhelmingly shows strong support for collaborative planning among forest staff personnel, particularly those most likely to work with the public.

Collaborative planning appears to be well integrated into day-to-day management and decisionmaking. It is used for a variety of purposes, the most frequent being to resolve conflicts and develop a shared vision of future resource conditions. These purposes lend themselves equally well to the long-term process of strategic forest planning. Because the majority of national forests are in some stage of revising their forest plans, it is critical that the lessons learned about collaborative planning be transferred to this realm.

If collaborative planning is to reach its full potential as a tool for citizen participation and conflict resolution, two barriers need to be surmounted. Although the agency cannot effect some of the changes desired by respondents, such as repealing FACA, it is within the Forest Service's control to dismantle the internal barriers they identified.



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**F R E E C A T A L O G**

First, the perception that collaborative planning is not supported at all levels of the organization, with support decreasing the farther one gets from on-the-ground management, bears further examination. If this is a misperception on the part of survey respondents, then simple clarification of support is all that is necessary. If, however, ambiguous messages are being sent to those attempting collaborative planning, or if there is outright resistance, more far-reaching change is called for.

Second, if collaborative planning is to be done at all, it must be done well. This requires training, which must be both cost effective and recognized as important by line officers in particular. The Forest Service must look critically at any institutional barriers that inhibit or prevent the use of collaborative planning. Are employees not rewarded for innovations? Or worse, do they risk being penalized for innovations that do not go smoothly? Does the budget process or agency culture constrain interactions with citizens?

Finally, all Forest Service employees, including those currently engaged in collaborative planning, must ask themselves what they hope to accomplish by using this process. If managers want control over final decisions and use collaborative planning activities in just an advisory capacity, is this truly collaborative planning?

Nearly all Forest Service employees surveyed believe that collaborative planning is likely to play an ever-increasing role in agency policy and management activities. By building partnerships, networks, and trust with the public it serves, the Forest Service has found a powerful tool for accomplishing its mission of caring for the land and serving people. **USF**

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*Steven W. Selin is associate professor, Division of Forestry, Box 6125, West Virginia University, Morgantown 26506-6125; Michael A. Schuett is assistant professor, Department of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, Deborah S. Carr is project scientist, USDA Forest Service, North Central Forest Experiment Station, East Lansing, Michigan.*

