



Case Briefing

New Mexico Collaborative Forest Restoration Program

The U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution assisted the USDA Forest Service with the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program, a new and innovative program in New Mexico to provide cost-share grants for collaborative forest restoration projects on public land.

NEW MEXICO COLLABORATIVE FOREST RESTORATION PROGRAM

October 2002 to October 2009

Background

Authorized by Congress in 2000, the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program (CFRP) established a new and innovative program in New Mexico to provide grants for collaborative forest restoration projects on public land. Prior to the creation of the program, New Mexico forests had been mired in conflict. Years of fire suppression, logging, and grazing had brought forests to an unhealthy state. In the 1990s, following a federal decision to list the Mexican spotted owl as an endangered species, and a long period of overharvesting, the regional timber industry collapsed. After that, environmentalists and the timber industry were engaged in heated public debates about how to move forward. In partial response to these conditions and a desire to create and maintain healthy, productive watersheds, Congress passed the Community Forest Restoration Act of 2000, which authorized the establishment of the CFRP in New Mexico. Within its legislative authority, the Act provides federal appropriations of up to \$5 million annually towards cost-share grants to stakeholders for experimental forest restoration projects designed through a collaborative process. This USDA Forest Service program provides cost-share grants to stakeholder groups in New Mexico engaged in collaborative, community-based forest restoration work. The intent of the CFRP grants are to enable stakeholders to collaboratively work together to promote healthy watersheds and reduce the threat of large, high-intensity wildfires; insect infestation; and disease while also maintaining the economic interests of the forest industry. To be eligible to participate, grant applicants must use a collaborative process that includes a diverse and balanced group of stakeholders to design, implement, and monitor their project. Grant proposals are reviewed by an independent FACA-chartered committee.



The U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution's Role

In 2002, the USDA Forest Service asked the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution for assistance in organizing and convening meetings and annual workshops and to provide broad support for logistics, facilitation, and reporting. In addition, through contractors, the U.S. Institute provided meeting facilitation and documentation support for CFRP's FACA-Chartered Technical Advisory Panel, which provides recommendations on which grant proposals best meet the program objectives, and guidelines for multi-party monitoring. From 2002 until 2009, the U.S. Institute, working with the Meridian Institute, assisted with many of the innovative and collaborative aspects of the program. In addition, the U.S. Institute helped with periodic special events, including a Report to Congress evaluating the CFRP effort and a workshop chronicling lessons learned.

Results & Accomplishments

Since its establishment, the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program has awarded approximately 144 grants to 99 organizations that are working in 20 counties in New Mexico and have restored over 23,700 acres of forest. Over 450 diverse stakeholders are involved in implementing the projects, and approximately 600 permanent, seasonal, and part-time forest-related jobs have been created in New Mexico. Walter Dunn, CFRP Program Manager, U.S. Forest Service, is quoted as saying,

"The U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution played a key role in the success of the CFRP. The Institute assisted the Forest Service in identifying and convening key stakeholders to develop multi-party monitoring guidelines for the CFRP that have been nationally recognized."

According to the CFRP Lessons Learned Report produced by Region 3 of the Forest Service in 2009 with the assistance of the U.S. Institute, the program has produced both tangible and intangible results. The report says, "More important, perhaps, are the program's less quantifiable results, as an atmosphere of litigation and acrimony surrounding resource issues has given way to a spirit of cooperation."

The U.S. Government Accountability Office issued a report in 2010 on appeals, objections, and litigation involving fuel reduction on Forest Service lands and found that litigation appeals over forest-thinning work in national forests have fallen dramatically in recent years. The report also indicated that the Forest Service in New Mexico and Arizona approved thinning and reducing hazardous buildup on more acres during the 2006-2008 timeframe (more than 3 million acres) than any other region of the National Forest System. According to the report, between the years 2006-2008, none of the Forest Service projects in New Mexico involving hazardous fuels reduction were taken to court, and 87 percent proceeded without any objection, administrative appeal, or litigation. Nationwide, 98 percent of Forest Service decisions approving hazardous fuels reduction projects—covering more than 10 million acres—were implemented without litigation. Just 2 percent—involving 124,000 acres—were taken to court. Administrative appeal rates dropped by 69 percent compared to 2002-2003.

Senator Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico is quoted as saying,

"The Forest Service and public in New Mexico generally have embraced a collaborative approach to responsible forest thinning and wildfire-risk reduction projects. The willingness of the public and the Forest Service to work together is paying off. I hope this trend continues."

Credits

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High Country News

For people who care about the West

Peace Breaks Out In New Mexico's Forests by Peter Friederici

VALLECITOS, New Mexico — When Bryan Bird drives up the winding road near this northern New Mexico village, he remembers the effigies he saw one stormy evening. The eerie figures swayed ominously from the forest's ponderosa pines. Made of someone's cast-off clothes, they represented environmentalists Sam Hitt and John Talberth — "and their wives," Bird adds, "which wasn't very nice."

It was 1995, and Bird had just begun working with Hitt and Talberth at Forest Guardians, a hard-nosed environmental group based in Santa Fe. He was headed to a campsite to join activists protesting the proposed La Manga timber sale on the Carson National Forest.

Vallecitos is little more than an hour's drive north of Santa Fe, but culturally it's a long way from the state's cosmopolitan capital. In the mid-'90s, times were hard. Logging had slowed dramatically since the 1940s and '50s, when there were 72 lumber mills in New Mexico's upper Rio Grande Basin. A large timber mill was in the middle of a drawn-out shutdown. Then, in August 1995, a federal judge halted all logging on national forest land in New Mexico and Arizona, in response to a lawsuit filed on behalf of the threatened Mexican spotted owl.

Rural residents throughout the state were outraged, but nowhere more than in traditional Spanish-speaking villages like Vallecitos. The Southwest's logging industry was dying for many reasons, including past overcutting, increased global competition, and mills that failed to retool to handle smaller trees. But people needed a scapegoat, and the uncompromising rhetoric of Hitt and his cohorts made it easy to point accusatory fingers at environmental groups full of urban Anglo newcomers. One day, a pipe bomb appeared in the Forest Guardians mailbox.

"When the rhetoric gets heated," Bird says, "the extremists on all sides come out."

Bird and his compatriots lost their battle against the sale, but they may have won the war. For economic reasons, the La Manga area was never logged, although sawyers cut down a few big yellow pines "just to spite us," Bird says. But there are no effigies swinging in New Mexico's forests today. "Everybody has taken a deep breath and stood down," Bird says. "Things have calmed down quite a bit since then."

And it's not the calm that follows a death, when there's nothing left to fight about. Since 2001, an innovative federal program known as the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program (CFRP) has made at least part-time allies of former foes in New Mexico's environmental wars. Because of this program, Bird drove out to the Carson on a humid August morning this year to meet with a logger.

It's a neat turn of events: Diehard logging opponents propose tree-cutting, while loggers scramble to align with environmental groups. Peace has broken out where violence once threatened, and, in small communities like Vallecitos, a few loggers are once again working in the woods. The new program has hatched a new forest industry in the state, but no one is sure whether it will grow into a truly sustainable logging economy. Like most of the trees in the Southwest's tangled and fire-ripe forests, the program is young and green. So far, it has yielded more good vibes than treated acres.

Still, in a land where historic animosities often simmer just below the surface, good vibes are worth a considerable amount.

The logger Bird is here to meet is Alfonso Chacon. He runs cattle on the forest, thins trees for the Forest Service, and for a little extra cash, sells firewood and latillas — the slender posts used in Southwestern architecture and fencing. "I make 100 percent of my living out of the woods," he says.

It's a life that, if not quite hardscrabble, is certainly hard work. It is also traditional. Chacon's family has lived in the Ojo Caliente area for generations. Much of today's Carson National Forest was once part of large land grants managed in common by Hispano communities. Some locals still deeply resent the federal government's acquisition of these lands.

The grizzled Chacon and the youthful, raven-haired Bird make an odd couple. But touring the La Ensenada thinning area, they are all smiles. Thanks to a three-year \$360,000 CFRP grant that he won with Forest Guardians' help, Chacon has been thinning small conifers here from 260 acres, where pines, firs and aspens intermingle with grassy meadows.

The project is designed to reduce wildfire danger and promote the growth of the remaining trees, along with grasses and other understory plants. After a century of livestock grazing, big-tree logging, and fire suppression, Southwestern forests today — especially those dominated by ponderosa pine — tend to be far denser and more susceptible to high-intensity fires than they were in the past. Large wildfires have torched communities, including Los Alamos, N.M., in 2000, and Heber and Summerhaven, Ariz., in 2003. Out of those ashes has grown a widespread consensus that some thinning of small trees is necessary to reduce wildfire danger and restore more natural conditions. There is also a recognized need for regular low-intensity fires to keep the fuel loads down.

The CFRP granting process solidifies and deepens that consensus. Applicants are required to work with a wide range of stakeholders. Chacon and a colleague, Hispano activist and grantwriter Luis Torres (also a member of HCN's board of directors), asked Forest Guardians to join their proposal. "We were the grand prize," Bird says, because of the Guardians' reputation for not compromising. The group agreed to participate, with the proviso that the project's thinning prescriptions would be altered to save habitat for Abert's squirrels, which prefer stands of trees with interlocking canopies.

"It was very refreshing, meeting Alfonso," Bird says. "He's vocal about his love for the land and the forests, and I immediately had trust that he wanted to do the right thing."

Chacon likes to boast that he's never cut a big tree, and his handiwork today bears no resemblance to the old days of industrial-scale logging, when Southwestern logging sites were rife with big stumps and churned-up soil. The stand is open and sunny, rich with mid-sized ponderosa pines, white-barked aspens, and — thanks to this summer's plentiful monsoon rains — verdant grasses. Chacon darts around with the agility of a much younger man, lifting up cut fir branches to reveal new grasses and mushrooms thriving in the shelter and moisture they provide.

"This is the best the forest has ever looked," he says. Indeed, it's hard to believe it's been logged, until Chacon points out the many small stumps, about the diameter of cups and saucers. His crew cut those trees with chain saws, lopped the branches off, and carried the wood out of the forest by hand.

Chacon sold some of them as latillas and others as firewood. But that wasn't nearly enough to pay for the necessary equipment, gasoline and labor. That's where the CFRP grant comes in. It provides Chacon \$120,000 a year — minus taxes — to do the work. Yet there's more than tree-cutting involved: Chacon must collaborate with a variety of stakeholders, including Forest Guardians. And he has to develop a monitoring plan, so the effects of his work can be recorded.

So Chacon contracted with the Forest Guild, a Santa Fe-based nonprofit that specializes in community forestry projects. The Guild coordinated the development of an ecological monitoring plan that measures such variables as canopy cover, fuel loads, understory plant cover, and stand clumpiness, a factor important to Abert's squirrels. Last summer, youths from the local community group Las Comunidades spent two days on the thinning site learning how to measure those variables. It's knowledge that might help them find work in the woods in the future.

This is the CFRP ideal: Work that helps both the woods and the local economy. And everybody involved in the project learns something — including how to get along.

"We're creating very powerful alliances here of land-based communities and environmental groups," Bird says, as he and Chacon look at mushrooms together. "We're finding a common love of the land."

Of course, "We still have some disagreements," as Bird says later. "We don't agree about cattle grazing. But for now, we're focusing on what we can agree on." And one thing they agree on is that they benefit by working together. Forest Guardians builds rapport with local communities, and Chacon gains an ally with considerable expertise in battling the Forest Service, the agency his community has wrestled with for generations.

"You know what, Bryan, I think I've changed a lot of people's minds about you around here," Chacon tells Bird. "I mean that. Sometimes we're going to have to get you to fight in the courtroom, and we'll be out here backing you 100 percent."

The Collaborative Forest Restoration Program owes its existence to a man named Walter Dunn, who coordinates the program from the Forest Service's Southwestern Region office in Albuquerque. Before and after he did his graduate work in conflict resolution at the University of Idaho, Dunn worked in Latin America for the Peace Corps and for the Forest Service Office of International Programs. He helped design community-based forestry and economic development projects. Work conditions were challenging, he recalls: Occasionally, some members of indigenous communities would "show up for meetings packing Uzis under their ponchos."

Dunn soon realized that the technical details of forestry projects were less important than the social ones. "What led to their success or failure was more the durability of their partnerships than technical decisions such as spacing of the trees," he says. "As a natural resource manager, that was quite a surprise to me."

Dunn brought this perspective with him to Capitol Hill in 1998, when, as part of a Brookings Institution legislative-affairs fellowship, he began to work on natural resource issues for New Mexico Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D. He helped craft legislation allocating \$5 million a year for community-based forest restoration projects in New Mexico. The legislation passed Congress in 2000: CFRP was born. Over the past five years, the program has doled out three-year grants of up to \$360,000 to 75 projects throughout New Mexico. Today, those projects are thinning trees on about 20,000 acres of public and tribal land, in ecosystems ranging from riparian bosques to montane mixed-conifer forests. According to

an assessment written last year by a technical review panel, they have created some 500 jobs in tree-cutting, wood-processing, and monitoring work.

Decisions about which projects to fund are made not by the Forest Service or other land-management agencies, but by a technical advisory panel made up of agency managers and members from a variety of local groups, communities and tribes.

The panel sets high standards and makes its decisions by consensus, says Melissa Savage, a retired UCLA forest ecologist now living in Santa Fe, who served on the panel in the program's first years. "It was the most pleasurable collaborative project I've ever been on," she says. "A lot of knowledge is shared. The forest community is small in New Mexico, and there's now a wonderfully good feeling around that community."

The grants have gone to a wide range of applicants, including many tribes, a number of small start-up businesses, even a Taos pottery collective. Applications must be submitted by an ad hoc consortium of stakeholders, rather than by a single entity. It is perhaps a sign of the "wonderfully good feeling" Savage describes that Forest Guardians, once so hated for its opposition to logging, won its own \$360,000 grant this year. It's for a fire-protection project on the Santa Fe National Forest that will entail cutting numerous trees for roadside firebreaks.

"A couple of years ago, the idea of a group like Forest Guardians saying anything complimentary about anything the Forest Service was doing — that would have been astounding," says Dunn. He believes the alliances created by CFRP will ultimately lead to better-designed projects that detour smoothly around the roadblocks of the past.

In another sign of today's changed relationships, Forest Guardians joined the Center for Biological Diversity in signing onto a set of "New Mexico Forest Restoration Principles" this May. The 11 other organizations involved include the Forest Service, the state forestry service, and the state's largest electric utility. The principles, which support the harvesting of small-diameter trees for energy production, echo those of the CFRP: Collaborate; leave large trees standing; use low-impact techniques; monitor.

Clear evidence of declining forest health has encouraged environmental groups to embrace limited logging. "We'd been after the Forest Service to stop cutting old growth," says Todd Schulke of the Center for Biological Diversity, "but now there was this clear problem with fire. We saw that, from a management standpoint, the Forest Service had much stronger arguments for thinning than it ever had had for old-growth logging."

Schulke has been a prime mover in Gila WoodNet, a CFRP-funded project that thins small-diameter trees from the Gila National Forest near Silver City and turns them into value-added products such as furniture, house trusses, and cabins. He's come a long way since the 1990s, when his group played a key role in shutting down most of the Southwest's logging industry (HCN, 3/30/98). These days, "I spend more time talking about economics and utilization (of wood) than I do about ecology," he says. It is because of CFRP that the Forest Service has his ear, he says: "We wouldn't even be able to have conversations with the agency if we didn't have these resources to offer."

Though they now wield chain saws, their groups' core values have not changed. "We believe strongly in a healthy tension between enforcing existing laws and demonstrating that we want proactive work on the ground," Bird says. "The people who fund us want us to hold a line there."

Luis Torres, however, says the "wonderfully good feeling" in the forestry community has its limits. He and Chacon are often frustrated by what they see as a hidebound federal agency: the Forest Service.

Each national forest in New Mexico has a CFRP coordinator. Ignacio Peralta works for the Carson, and Chacon and Torres have recently been arguing with him over the disposal of logging slash from one of the Ensenada thinning sites. Chacon and Torres say the project proposal doesn't require them to remove the slash; Peralta maintains that it does. Peralta says a compromise is being worked out, but in the meantime the dispute has kept Chacon and his loggers off the project since early summer. For Torres, a longtime Hispano activist, it's a reminder of still-painful wounds in the relationship between traditional communities and the federal agency.

"The greatest amount of energy in running a CFRP project goes to relating to the Forest Service," says Torres. "The legislation is so loose that the implementation is left up to the (Forest Service) coordinators. The CFRP is a penetration of community-based forestry into the old system," he adds, "but it did not have built into it reform of the Forest Service."

Torres believes the program's method of dispersing funds works to the disadvantage of small operators like Chacon. Grantees receive most of their funding in the form of reimbursements rather than advances, and that can be a challenge for small operators with limited capital. Torres has lobbied to change that. Dunn, however, says paying more advances would require more paperwork. That would mean that more of the program's budget would go to administrative costs, currently about 16 percent of the \$5 million annual budget. "I'd rather see that money go to grants," Dunn says.

Yet if the CFRP process has been hard on the grantees, it has probably been even more challenging for the Forest Service. The agency is not accustomed to working with outside grantees or sharing decision-making power with an outside panel.

"It's their (the Forest Service's) land," says Melissa Savage, "and now they're being asked to accommodate a collaborative project that can bring a lot of money and resources onto the forest. They should be delighted. Some are."

"I don't know that I'd call it a conflict," says Ruben Montes, CFRP coordinator on the Santa Fe National Forest, "but a readjustment has been needed by some of the old guard who weren't used to having outside groups in the driver's seat on these projects. I had to do quite a bit of mediation to help the groups meet each other halfway."

Some CFRP projects have run afoul of the kind of bureaucratic snares that have entangled other national forest projects. Most projects have been carried out where the agency had previously analyzed environmental impacts under the National Environmental Policy Act. But not all: Savage has worked on two grants intended to thin dense forests on the Santa Fe's Rowe Mesa, where the nonprofit Quivira Coalition operates a livestock grazing grassbank (HCN, 9/5/05: Rangeland Revival). The first grant was awarded in 2001, and the work carried out between then and 2004. The second grant, awarded in 2004, was stalled because the agency had not completed its NEPA analysis.

Once it did complete the analysis, a familiar opponent appealed it: Sam Hitt, the Forest Guardians founder, who now runs a tiny advocacy group called Wild Watershed. He says the project lacks sufficient monitoring of impacts on wildlife. The first CFRP thinning project on Rowe Mesa was "a disaster," he says. "It looks horrible. I see a spiderweb of two-track roads out there where people drove in to collect firewood."

Hitt, who left Forest Guardians in 2001, is guarded when he talks about his former colleagues' new alliances. "I've expressed my reservations to them," he says. "I would resist being embedded in that process. I would want to maintain independence."

But Savage believes environmental groups gain more from participating in projects than appealing them. By applying for grants under CFRP, she says, "They'll have direct experience of the challenges and opportunities. The projects are harder to do than just to say that this is how it should be done."

The Forest Service recently sent a largely positive assessment of CFRP to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which will forward it to Congress. The report is unlikely to have much effect on New Mexico; CFRP's enabling legislation has no sunset date, although the program's funding needs annual authorization.

But the report may stimulate interest in other states. Last year, Rep. Rick Renzi, R-Ariz., introduced a bill that would expand the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program to Arizona, using an additional \$5 million in annual funding; it has not yet made it out of the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health. Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, has also expressed interest in the program. But in these times of huge budget deficits and agency cuts, expansion of CFRP is a tough sell.

It's worth asking, too, exactly how much the program has actually accomplished. The acreage it has treated is minuscule compared to the entire state. Almost 180,000 acres of national forest in New Mexico were treated in some way in fiscal year 2005, the Forest Service says, through projects funded by the controversial Healthy Forests Restoration Act, and through acts of nature such as the lightning strikes that ignite managed fires. This makes the CFRP's achievements — 20,000 acres over five years — seem tiny, especially compared to the 3.3 million acres of New Mexico timberland that the Forest Service says are in need of treatment.

And it's not cheap. "The per-acre costs for CFRP projects are relatively high," says Marlin Johnson, assistant director for forestry and forest health in the Forest Service's Albuquerque office. "But," he adds, "they are an investment in the future, in that the collaborative relationships we are developing with communities should pay dividends in less controversy over future activities."

The projects are also regarded as an important educational tool. Rick Delaco, for example, says several CFRP-funded projects carried out in and around Ruidoso in southern New Mexico's Sacramento Mountains have encouraged private landowners to work on their own land.

As a result, some 50 jobs in tree-trimming and related work have been created locally to thin private forests. Local entrepreneurs, funded in part by CFRP grants, collect some 60,000 cubic yards of wood, trimmed branches, and downed pine needles each year and turn it into animal bedding, compost and mulch.

"The CFRP seed money has really led to something sustainable in this case," says Delaco, who serves as Ruidoso village forester. "Investing in human capital — that keeps going."

Still, no one disputes that CFRP projects have had a relatively modest economic impact, and have made only a small dent in New Mexico's forest-health problem. Most have focused on simple tree-thinning rather than on true ecological restoration. But that may be changing: Several new projects are looking at larger landscapes.

One of those projects will teach local youth to assess how much wood can sustainably be removed from the 74,000 acres of Carson National Forest surrounding Vallecitos. This baseline survey could lead to more ambitious projects.

But as CFRP projects tackle larger forest areas, the odds increase that some environmentalists will oppose them. So will the chances — and the consequences — of disagreements between Forest Service officials who are used to making decisions, and local groups like Las Comunidades or loggers like Chacon. A lot rides on the new relationships being forged by the current CFRP projects.

Watching Chacon and Byrd walk together through the forest, though, you can't help but feel some optimism. Back in the mid-20th century, when there were jobs in the woods, no one thought about sustainability; the mills in northern New Mexico processed lumber at a rate at least 25 percent greater than the region's annual tree growth. That angered the environmental community. But sustainability was also forgotten in the 1990s, when the entire regional logging industry — even some small-scale fuelwood harvesting — was shut down by environmental lawsuits. Again, animosity was nurtured by the lack of a middle path.

Today, you can see a middle path emerging from the dense thicket of the past. On the same day Bird and Chacon met at the Ensenada site, John Ussery of Las Comunidades was not far away, overseeing a new sort of work at the mothballed Vallecitos sawmill. Among other things, Ussery's grant calls for him to make use of the enormous pile of bark and shavings composting behind the mill, a relic of the days when huge yellow pines were dismantled with a 54-inch circular blade. Before day's end, a small fleet of semi-trucks pulled out of the yard, hauling 100 cubic yards of aged mill waste to an organic farm near Abiquiu. Perhaps the social tools forged in the heat of New Mexico's forest wars can likewise pull something at once new, productive and sustainable from the ashes of the past.

Peter Friederici writes from Flagstaff, Arizona, where he teaches journalism at Northern Arizona University. His latest book is Nature's Restoration (Island Press, 2006). This story was funded by a grant from the McCune Charitable Foundation.