

Creating and sustaining community capacity for ecosystem-based management: Is local government the key?

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Abstract

Recently, collaborative approaches to natural resource management have been widely promoted as ways to broaden participation and community involvement in furthering the goals of ecosystem management. The language of collaboration has even been incorporated into controversial legislation, such as the US Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003. This research examines collaboration and sharing management responsibility for federal public land with local communities through a case study of the Ashland Municipal Watershed in southern Oregon. A policy sciences approach is used to analyze community participation and institutional relationships between the US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, and local city government in the planning processes of five land management actions occurring over a 7-year period. The knowledge gained from examining differing approaches to planning and decision making in the Ashland watershed is used to suggest future planning processes to develop and sustain the community capacity necessary to support implementation of community-based ecosystem management.

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1. Introduction and problem orientation

Recently, collaborative community-based approaches to natural resource management have been widely promoted as ways to broaden participation and build local community support and involvement in furthering the goals of ecosystem management. However, federal land management agencies have been slow to embrace collaborative approaches and are still primarily organized around a rational planning model, which emphasizes science and the role of government experts in planning and decision making (Lachapelle et al., 2003). The framework for involving the public provided in the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) remains the dominant method for considering the needs of local communities in planning and decision-making processes on federal public

lands. NEPA's focus on meeting procedural requirements has been criticized for promoting an adversarial context for planning that results in increased alienation, apathy, and mutual distrust between federal management agencies and citizens (Bergman and Kemmis, 2000).

Researchers have documented an increased call for collaboration in natural resource management from across the political spectrum (Cortner and Moote, 1999). The language of community collaboration has even been incorporated into controversial legislation such as the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, 16 U.S.C. 6501 *et seq.* (hereinafter "HFRA"). The stated purpose of HFRA is "to reduce wildfire risk to communities, municipal water supplies, and other at-risk federal land through a collaborative process of planning, prioritizing, and implementing hazardous fuel reduction projects" (16 U.S.C. 6501 § 1). The act also requires agencies to encourage "meaningful public participation during preparation of authorized hazardous fuel reduction projects" and "facilitate collaboration among state and local governments and Indian tribes, and participation of interested persons..."

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(16 U.S.C. 6514 § 104 (f)). This directive for community collaboration raises numerous questions. The legislation fails to clarify what is meant by collaboration or specify that how it should occur. It also presumes that both the agencies and communities involved have the interest, capability, and resources to effectively participate in collaborative processes. The collective experience of many community-based natural resource management collaborations that have developed over the past 20 years suggests meaningful participation and collaboration is a far more complex and difficult process than is depicted in this legislative directive, particularly where management actions may challenge community values or where the scientific basis underlying management proposals are complex, uncertain, or contested.

This research reports the opportunities and barriers to collaboration and sharing of management responsibility for federal public land with local communities through a case study of the Ashland Municipal Watershed in southern Oregon. The Ashland watershed serves as an excellent case study for three compelling reasons. First, with its geographic location in the Klamath/Siskiyou mountain range and its designation as a Late Successional Reserve, the watershed has important ecological value which is at significant risk for a high-intensity wildfire due to decades of fire suppression. Second, the US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (USFS) has management responsibility for 96% of the land within the watershed and has a longstanding cooperative agreement to involve the City of Ashland in the management of the watershed. The city owns the remainder of the land and is also the leaseholder for the community-owned ski area located in the headwaters of the watershed. Finally, the community of Ashland has a relatively wealthy, educated, and involved citizenry with a history of both successful collaborative management efforts and bitter conflict over public lands.

Specifically, this study examines community participation and institutional relationships between the USFS and local city government in the planning and decision-making processes of five land management actions addressing wildfire and recreational issues in the Ashland Municipal Watershed over the past 7 years. The names, purposes, and responsible agencies of the five projects are listed in Table 1.

The situation of the Ashland watershed, where a federal agency is primarily responsible for managing resources necessary to sustain a local community, is common throughout the western United States. Understanding the barriers and possibilities for developing and maintaining effective, long-term, collaborative management relationships between federal agencies and local communities is important for successful implementation of ecosystem-based management. The knowledge gained from a detailed examination of the various and differing approaches to planning and decision-making in the Ashland watershed can be used to suggest future alternate processes. The lessons learned here may also be used by other commu-

Table 1
Ashland watershed projects

Project	Purpose of project	Responsible agency
Mt. Ashland Ski Area Expansion Project	Promote long-term economic viability of the community-owned ski area by upgrading facilities and expanding terrain to provide diverse recreation experiences and better accommodate beginning and intermediate skiers	Mt. Ashland Association (501, c3), Forest Service, and City of Ashland
Ashland Watershed Trails Project	Increase trail opportunities and trailhead facilities and mitigate resource damage occurring as the result of increased recreational use of the Ashland and adjacent watersheds	Forest Service, City of Ashland
Ashland Watershed Protection Project	Protect the municipal water supplies and late successional habitat by treating wildfire fuels and manipulating vegetation on approximately 1500 acres in the Ashland watershed to reduce the threat of high-intensity stand replacing wildfire	Forest Service
Forest Lands Restoration Project	Promote forest health and resilience and reduce the threat of high-intensity wildfire by thinning primarily lower and middle canopy trees on approximately 200 acres of city-owned land in the Ashland watershed	City of Ashland
Ashland Forest Restoration Project	Reduce the threat of large scale high intensity wildfire and protect municipal water supplies and late successional habitat on more than 8000 acres in the Ashland watershed and surrounding area	Forest Service

nities struggling to build the community capacity to facilitate implementation of ecosystem management in cooperation with federal agency partners.

2. Materials and methods

In order to understand, describe, and recommend policy approaches for the management of the Ashland watershed, the relevant books, articles, journals, government documents, city council minutes, and newspaper accounts leading up to the present day management situation in the Ashland watershed were collected and reviewed to develop a chronological analysis and management history of the watershed. Additional data were obtained through in-depth

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