Land Use Policy 70 (2018) 432–441

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Land Use Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/landusepol

Navigating social forestry – A street-level perspective on National Forest management in the US Pacific Northwest

Carolin Maier[a,b,*], Jesse B. Abrams[c]

[a] Chair of Forest and Environmental Policy, University of Freiburg, Tennenbacherstrasse 4, 79104 Freiburg, Germany
[b] Forest Research Institute Baden-Wuerttemberg (FVA), Wonnhalde 4, 79100 Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany
[c] Ecosystem Workforce Program, Institute for a Sustainable Environment, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Social forestry
Forest policy implementation
Public forest management
Vetocracy
Street-level
Pacific Northwest

ABSTRACT

US forest policy changed dramatically during the 1990s and fundamentally altered National Forest management in the Pacific Northwest. Via the Northwest Forest Plan, the previous emphasis on timber production was replaced with a broader set of objectives and collaborative management approaches became increasingly important. Yet the legacies of past institutions, such as those related to budget structures and planning processes, continue to weigh on contemporary dynamics of policy implementation in the current 'social forestry' regime. The convoluted nature of the current forest governance system's emergence raises the question of how it affects policy implementation at the local level. We rely on 35 qualitative interviews with various actors involved in public forest management on the Siuslaw and Willamette National Forests in Oregon to understand how multiple and contradictory policies, combined with local stakeholder involvement, influence management decisions. We find that forest management takes place in a vetocratic and neoliberal institutional setting: the implementation of projects is contingent upon getting past numerous veto players who, at the same time, increasingly take on tasks formerly assigned to government entities

1. Introduction

The Record of Decision finalizing the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) in 1994 represented a dramatic shift in US forest policy and management. Conflict surrounding federal forest management—in particular the introduction of roads into roadless areas and the logging of old-growth forests—had grown in the preceding decades, but the US Forest Service (USFS) had been able to avert any substantial changes to its management objectives and agency mission, which prioritized timber production (Salka, 2004). A series of laws passed in the 1960s and 1970s removed some of the agency's autonomy and acted to complicate its traditional focus on timber production and fire suppression. Although these laws created new procedural and substantive obligations on the part of the USFS, no significant changes in management emphasis took place until the late 1980s, when environmental organizations—with the backing of the courts—forced the agency to stop all timber harvest activities in the Pacific Northwest until it could provide a scientifically credible plan for protecting the Northern Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*). The NWFP was an attempt to create a new, science-based foundation for management decisions that would hold up to legal scrutiny and balance the multiple societal demands placed on federal forest land, including timber production, ecosystem restoration, species protection, and recreation (Hirt, 1994; Salka, 2004; Thomas et al., 2006).

The NWFP entailed the designation of large tracts of federal land for sensitive species protection and instituted ecological safeguards even in those areas designated for continued harvest, resulting in a drastic reduction in timber production on the federal forests. The relative decision-making autonomy previously enjoyed by the Forest Service was replaced by extensive analysis and consultation requirements that created numerous opportunities for regulatory agencies, organizations, and individuals to slow, stop, or alter proposed projects. Mandated participation via agency-created public advisory groups had little impact and faded away quickly (Moseley and Winkel, 2013; Salka, 2004; Thomas et al., 2006; Wondolleck, 2000; Yaffee, 1994), yet as of today, many National Forests do collaborate with a variety of stakeholders. These efforts are the result of bottom-up, grass-roots processes that evolved parallel to the science-driven, top-down approach to resolving the conflict surrounding forest management via policy. Multi-stakeholder groups that typically include local citizens, local governmental representatives, environmental activists and timber industry representatives have formed to address conflict over forest management

* Corresponding author at: Chair of Forest and Environmental Policy, University of Freiburg, Tennenbacherstrasse 4, Freiburg im Breisgau, 79104, Germany.
E-mail address: Carolin.Maier@ifp.uni-freiburg.de (C. Maier).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2017.11.031
Received 15 May 2017; Received in revised form 14 November 2017; Accepted 14 November 2017

at the local level by identifying management activities that would satisfy the diverse set of demands placed on federal forests. Collaboration between land management agencies and such place-based groups has become integral to much public land management in western US and has been institutionalized through legislation such as the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Act (CFLR) (Moseley and Winkel, 2013; Winkel, 2014). According to Winkel (2014), a new mode of forest governance termed 'social forestry,' in which societal considerations and collaborative processes drive much USFS decision-making, has become the new forest management paradigm since the mid 2000s.

Overall, the combination of top-down policy changes and bottom-up collaborative processes has redefined forest management objectives and processes, creating what Moseley and Winkel (2013) describe as a "complex, hybrid system." For example, while social forestry emphasizes restoration-oriented, collaborative management, the institutional legacy of federal land management rests upon output-oriented budget structures, the primacy of agency expertise, and use of the courts as a venue for conflict resolution, all of which limit the agency's ability to manage collaboratively (Butler, 2013; Butler et al., 2015; Hays, 2009; Moseley and Winkel, 2013; Nie and Metcalf, 2015). The forest rangers tasked with implementing forest policy within the NWFP area have been—and continue to be—faced with a perplexing array of legislative, judicial, and executive directives in addition to a diverse set of well-organized and well-informed public interests. This raises the question of what the social forestry paradigm means for forest management decision-making at the local level: how does it influence local managers' decision-making and what does it imply for achieving management objectives? Because of the multiple-use mandate of the agency and the managerial discretion afforded to forest rangers and supervisors, this decision-making process greatly influences the provision of both social and ecological costs and benefits from public forestlands. Through an analysis of qualitative data gathered via interviews with key informants associated with the Willamette and Siuslaw National Forests in western Oregon, two forests operating under the purview of the NWFP, we investigate how the implementation of federal forest management occurs in practice under the social forestry regime, with its countervailing and "hybrid" systemic influences.

2. Literature

Created in 1905 during the Progressive Era, the USFS was long celebrated as a prototype of merit-based bureaucracy, equipped with university-educated staff, a clear mission and autonomy from congressional interference. It was considered the quintessential successful public administration and was admired for its efficient implementation of management objectives (Kaufman, 2006). Yet with changing societal demands, the agency's strengths of efficiency and independence eventually turned into weaknesses, and today it is regarded by many as a bureaucracy that is hobbled by its own labyrinthine administrative procedures and whose decisions are vulnerable to constant challenges (Fukuyama, 2014; Hays, 2009). In between, the agency lived through several phases with distinct orientations regarding societal demands towards forests, management objectives, as well as a distinct relationship with the public: from custodial management (protecting national forests from overharvesting by private enterprises) in the early years to wood production, especially following World War II when the agency became a major timber producer and came to support many resource-dependent communities in the West (Hays, 2009).

As early as the 1950s, an increase in federal timber harvest began to trigger opposition by conservationists and recreation groups (Burnett and Davis, 2002; Hirt, 1994). In response, Congress passed a number of laws, starting with the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act (MUSY) (1960). MUSY recognized the outdoor recreation and other forest uses as having equal importance as timber harvest, but, importantly, it also secured the USFS's decision-making authority (Burnett and Davis, 2002). Soon after, concerns by scientists as well as the public about the ecological effects of extensive clearcut logging on federal lands resulted in passage of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976, which emphasized ecological values and introduced public participation into forest policy. NFMA emphasized rational planning, public involvement, and protection of environmental values (Moseley and Winkel, 2013). This same time period also saw passage of a number of broader environmental laws that affected all federal agencies. These included the Wilderness Act of 1964, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, which required disclosure of the environmental impacts expected through federal actions, and the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, which required the protection of threatened and endangered species (Brunson and Kennedy, 1995). However, the Forests Service's interpretation of its mandate—to optimize resource outputs and to supply rural industry, which in turn provided employment to rural communities (Kennedy et al., 2001)—continued to guide forest management decisions even in the face of increasing public criticism.

Ultimately, a court ruling in response to a lawsuit by environmental organizations in 1991 forced the agency to halt timber harvest until a plan to protect the endangered Northern Spotted Owl was developed. By that time, the Forest Service was facing a crisis of legitimacy (Marshall and Goldstein, 2006). The new legal framework, including the NWFP, not only entailed a shift from rational planning to "ecosystem management" as the new forest management paradigm in the Pacific Northwest, but also replaced the Forest Service's previous autonomy with increased Congressional oversight and a multitude of documentation requirements, including extensive planning and analysis processes as well as stakeholder involvement (Abrams et al., 2015; Hays, 2009; Johnson, 2007; Shannon, 2004). This period of conflictive and science-driven management has itself given way to another "epoch" labeled by Winkel (2014) as 'social forestry.' This term refers to the growing importance of local and regional actors in forest planning processes, and is described as challenging ecology as the dominant management paradigm.

Rather than replacing one another, remnants of each of these prior phases persisted, collectively posing barriers to the contemporary implementation of management objectives (Cashore and Howlett, 2007; Moseley and Winkel, 2013; Predmore et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2006; Winkel, 2014). According to Cashore and Howlett (ibid.), this is because the policy change leading to the NWFP occurred without changes to the Forest Service's legal framework or associated management objectives. Instead, the shift towards ecosystem management added layers of analysis, planning and disclosure requirements as well as stakeholder involvement to the Forest Service's tasks, while elements of rational planning of the post-war era—in particular the timber-based funding structure—remained in place. Hoberg (2001) uses the term 'pluralistic legalism' to describe the institutional regime resulting from these fundamental changes to "relations between citizens, Congress, courts and the administrative state" (p.60). Fukuyama (2014) argues that these multiple and layered institutions—along with their corresponding veto points and veto players—results in a "vetocracy," a system characterized by a structural bias against efficient and decisive action. The USFS is thus seen as emblematic of larger systematic weaknesses of the American political system, which provides an overabundance of checks and balances and a proliferation of veto players. Under this perspective, tasks traditionally performed by the executive branch's bureaucracy have been increasingly performed by judges and elected representatives, leading to increasing influence of interest groups and judicialization of administration. According to Fukuyama, the result is incoherent policy-making that rarely ends in decisive outcomes, but leads instead to costly litigation and frequent gridlock.

In addition to the loss of bureaucratic autonomy, the USFS has also experienced a loss of operational capacity. For much of the twentieth century, timber receipts were used to fund many key USFS operations and hire staff (O'Toole, 1988). The legacy of this funding mechanism is problematic in part because the drop in timber harvest that followed the NWFP translated directly into decreased available operational