



Rural Capacity for Conservation and Job Creation

Rural communities face complex natural resource challenges

Rural communities face daunting challenges for effective natural resource stewardship, strong local economies, and quality jobs. Historically, the production and extraction of food, fiber, and fuel from public and private forests and rangelands played a central role in rural economies. In recent years, the clash of competing values – resource utilization, species conservation, recreation, and others – has impeded both economic and conservation objectives. The national policy challenge we face is to successfully manage diverse, often competing interests. These can include: fish and wildlife, natural benefits such as clean air and water, public interest in recreational access and aesthetic or cultural values, and the use of lands for grazing, timber, and energy production. As land management has become exponentially more complex, the resources available and dedicated to it are shrinking. In particular, government services such as landowner technical assistance, educational extension, and business development are increasingly constrained. These dynamics have resulted in intense social conflict, loss of traditional business and employment sectors, and ecological deterioration.

With strong capacity, rural communities can integrate the nation's conservation and economic development goals

Rural communities have the potential to respond to these social, economic, and environmental challenges, and many communities and organizations are already strong and effective partners with the federal government. Collaboration has emerged as the broad methodology by which diverse values have been successfully integrated to overcome natural resource stalemates, allowing land management to progress towards desired social, economic, and ecological outcomes.

Successive Administrations, Congresses, and resource agencies have pointed to collaboration and partnerships as the new model for doing business in rural America. For this to work, decision-makers must:

- Prioritize funding to programs and activities that strengthen community capacity, including community-based and regional organizations.
- Improve criteria for grants, loans and cost-share programs to reward and support collaboration and capacity building, including technical assistance.
- Create performance measures that increase federal accountability for collaborative work and focus agency efforts on capacity building.
- Fund and support for capacity building in the America's Great Outdoors Initiative and the 2012 Farm Bill.
- Improve contracts and agreements to support partnerships and grow local capacity.
- Provide agency direction and internal training to expand partnerships and support capacity building around desired ecological and economic outcomes.

With policy and investment focus on strengthening capacity, more rural communities will have the local engagement, planning, analysis, social agreements, staffing, skills, organizations, and businesses to:

- Support collaboration and achieve robust business sectors and stable populations.
- Conserve America's natural heritage of forests, rivers, wetlands and ranges.
- Sustain biodiversity, clean water and air, domestic food supply, fuel and fiber, recreation and open space, and cultural diversity.

Working together to find policy solutions to the ecological and economic challenges of the rural West

RVCC is comprised of rural western, regional, and national organizations that have joined together to promote balanced conservation-based approaches to the ecological and economic problems facing the West. We are committed to finding and promoting solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and well-being of rural communities. We come from Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon and Washington.





To solve the interwoven economic and ecological challenges facing America today, the federal government must invest in rural community capacity. Community capacity is the collective ability and resources of people in rural communities to solve diverse challenges and meet the multiple needs of their communities and American society as a whole, by drawing on human, social, cultural, and physical capital. Capacity investments can take a number of different forms (see expanded definition of community capacity on page 5), but key components include provision of technical assistance and supporting institutions that carry out a community-driven, integrated, conservation and economic development agenda. Two categories of institutions – local, community-based organizations and regional organizations and networks – are particularly important to new models of land management.

In an increasing number of rural communities, **community-based organizations** (CBOs) provide extensive capacity. They form partnerships with leaders, businesses, and agencies to identify local ecological and economic needs, and mobilize local people and resources to meet those needs. CBOs lead problem-solving through collaboration, and assist the growth of private sector businesses to provide long-term, cost-effective resource stewardship. Whether they are nationally-known examples, or lesser known but vital organizations, CBOs are active across the nation, successfully chartering a community-supported, innovative path for rural America.

Community capacity building is often improved and accelerated when community leaders and CBOs can partner with and access effective **regional organizations and networks**. Regional organizations bring local and distant stakeholders together. They work with diverse leaders to support and advance community-based approaches by building local capacity for effective resource management. They can convene, coordinate, and connect multiple local efforts; disseminate lessons learned; accelerate innovation diffusion; and develop and advance policy. They can be integral to catalyzing collaboration when it is nascent, and often help develop and strengthen emerging CBOs. They can also scale-up place-based efforts to achieve regional impact.

Community-based organizations and regional organizations and networks can play very similar roles depending

on the unique needs and characteristics of the communities they serve. *By investing in building the capacity of rural communities and these integral organizations the federal government can:*

- Improve the delivery and effectiveness of *existing* or *diminishing* federal conservation budgets.
- Promote small business development and job creation.
- Foster “bottom up” natural resource decisions that include the input of local citizens and governments.
- Save money by working through a local organization.

Key recommendations:

1. Prioritize funding to programs and activities that strengthen community capacity, including community-based and regional organizations.

a. *Fund and expand the Community Capacity Land Stewardship Award Program, a joint pilot program of the Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and Rural Development (RD), administered by the National Forest Foundation. Grants distributed through the program support collaborative groups and community-based and regional organizations in Forest Service Region 6 (OR and WA) to address capacity building needs that will further their on-the-ground watershed restoration goals.*¹

b. *Fully fund the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (USFS) at \$40 million per year to provide matched funding for proposals in high priority landscapes that support collaborative landscape conservation.*

c. *Fully utilize the capacity building potential of cooperative and contribution agreements. Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture should provide direction and training to increase the use of cooperative and contribution agreements for capacity building. For example, the NRCS Chief should direct local staff to use agreements to support local partners in providing technical assistance, outreach, and community engagement for conservation programs and other land management activities.*

d. *Adopt performance measures that evaluate collaborative land management efforts and their ecological, social, and economic outcomes. Secretaries of the Interior and*

Agriculture should align their budgets with the personnel and program outcomes to ensure collaborative approaches to land management.

2. Use federal grant, loan, and cost-share evaluation criteria to reward collaborative efforts, pay for the business costs of outreach and organizing such efforts, support capacity building for integrated ecological and economic outcomes, and grow partnerships and collaboration where they are nascent.

a. *Competitive grants, loans, and discretionary project spending (including selection of projects for cost-share) should include collaborative and capacity building evaluation criteria.* Criteria should place priority on plans, proposals, and projects that: are collaboratively developed, include diverse engagement of interests, consider integrated economic and ecological approaches, and include complementary capacity building activities. This recommendation can be applied to virtually all competitive grant, loan, and cost-share programs, including NRCS conservation programs; Fish and Wildlife Service restoration investments; and BLM, Forest Service, and Rural Development grants and agreements. For example, in a watershed that both provides habitat for endangered fish species and is undergoing water adjudication, on-farm EQIP projects that support Threatened and Endangered species habitat and decrease water use to provide greater ranch operational stability should receive priority investment. Similarly, when considering expenditure on a forest restoration project, the project that includes a complementary skill-building workshop on low-impact thinning techniques on sensitive soils should receive higher priority because it provides important contractor skill-building.

3. President Obama’s America’s Great Outdoors Initiative (AGO) should prioritize capacity building as a core strategy to achieve landscape-scale conservation.

The AGO Initiative seeks larger, landscape-scale conservation outcomes, thereby creating the need to provide commensurate increases in capacity provision. The AGO Report² mentions the importance of community capacity, but fails to provide detailed guidance for investment, use of programs, or conferral of technical assistance. To effectively implement the AGO Initiative, RVCC recommends that the Administration:

Develop criteria and direction to ensure that the AGO Initiative prioritizes funding for collaboratively developed land management plans and projects.



a. *Support Action Item 5.2, investment of a portion of federal LWCF funds in high yield conservation projects to yield the most significant ecological outcomes and community benefits, and ensure that “commonly accepted criteria” include criteria to give preference to projects that: (a) are collaboratively developed, (b) consider ecological and social and economic outcomes, and (c) support and reward complementary capacity building.*

Common elements of effective collaborations

Collaborative efforts vary from place to place and need to need. Collaboration is increasingly recognized as a method that can help breach natural resource stalemates and provide constructive pathways to economic and ecological outcomes. A principle value of collaboration is that it tends to build accountability, as members hold each other and resulting activities accountable to the shared, diverse goals of the group. There is no “one size fits all”, as each issue, place, and set of interests and stakeholders is different. While collaboration can and should be encouraged, its specific form should not be prescribed. Effective collaborations most often:

- Involve participants with diverse viewpoints and resource objectives (conservation, economic utilization, agency, cultural, etc.), not simply partnerships or associations between several like-minded entities.
- Use open, transparent, and equitable group decision-making processes.
- Integrate and interweave social, economic, and environmental goals and actions.
- Use local and traditional knowledge in combination with the latest scientific information.
- Have multiparty monitoring systems that track results in social, economic, and ecological dimensions and inform adaptive management.



b. *Support Action Item 7.1a, creation of the AGO Collaborative Landscape Conservation Initiative through coordinated competitive processes, but add criteria for selection and funding of partnerships that: (a) demonstrate robust collaborative processes, (b) provide support for capacity building activities needed to underpin achievement of landscape-scale conservation goals, and (c) assist in delivery of local economic benefits from proposed conservation plans.*

c. *Support Action Item 7.2a, coordination and alignment of federal programs that provide technical or financial assistance to public and private organizations to implement collaborative conservation, but seek guidance and directives from the Secretaries and agency leadership to prioritize allocation of funding and technical assistance for capacity building.*

Provide specific programs and recommendations within the AGO Initiative to increase community capacity.

a. *Support Recommendation 5.1, provide full funding for LWCF programs, but allow a portion of funds from LWCF to also be used to strengthen the community capacity required to achieve effective landscape-scale conservation and community supported acquisitions.*

b. *Support Action Item 8.1a, integrating large, landscape-scale conservation into federal land management plans and actions, but seek that a “Forest Service planning rule that emphasized collaboration” also provides clear guidance on how collaboration and landscape-scale conservation and sustainability would receive support for capacity investment and technical assistance.*

c. *Strongly support Action Item 8.1d, cultivating and supporting local entities through grants, planning and capacity building, but seek an explicit definition of how capacity building will take place in terms of performance measures, criteria, contracting and agreement mechanisms, agency directives, guidance and training, and other methods. Additionally, agencies implementing AGO directives at the local and regional levels (state, region, resource area, etc.) should systematically assess and inventory community capacity needs, and invest in strengthened capacity and community-based and regional organizations as part of landscape-scale collaborative conservation efforts.*

d. *Support Recommendation 10, making the federal government a more effective conservation partner and specifically the encouragement of collaboration, but also*

seek the development of explicit criteria to prioritize federal investment in projects with robust collaboration, and a program of action that would provide the capacity to undergird effective, collaborative, landscape-scale projects.

e. *In addition to Action Item 10.1a, establishing an inter-agency AGO council to improve interagency coordination and alignment, seek a formal AGO advisory body made up of mature and emerging community-based organizations and regional organizations and networks to provide the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture, and relevant agency directors, with guidance on capacity needs to achieve collaborative, landscape-scale projects.*

4. The 2012 Farm Bill must support and fund capacity building.

a. *Increase funding for capacity in the 2012 Farm Bill. Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) funding is necessary for effective outreach, delivery, and implementation of conservation programs. CTA funding supports NRCS field directors and the ability of the agency to partner with community-based and regional organizations through cooperative, contributive, and technical service provider agreements and contracts. The use of partnerships through these agreements can build delivery capacity, create local benefit, and leverage private resources for greater impact. There is a need for additional CTA funding to support existing conservation programs. If additional funds are unavailable, increase the percentage of total conservation program allocations that go to TA, increasing the effectiveness of Financial Assistance cost-share dollars.*

b. *Continue use of funding from Technical Assistance programs to plan and implement on the ground conservation projects, but broaden the use of TA funding for essential capacity activities such as: (a) community engagement and watershed planning, (b) program marketing, (c) support of CBOs serving as intermediaries between federal staff and landowners, and (d) skill building and education exercises for landowners and community members, among others.*

c. *The Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) and Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) should allocate a percentage of authorized funding for capacity building and technical assistance to CCPI implementation partners and organizations. In addition, guidance should be issued to area offices to allocate complementary capacity building and technical assistance funds through cooperative and/or contribution agreements.*

d. *Raise or extinguish funding ceilings on innovative, landscape-scale programs like the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) and Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) that support partnerships and collaborative efforts.*

e. *Designate collaboration and capacity building outcomes as priority preference criteria for allocation of grants, loans, and cost share from programs in the Conservation, Rural Development, and Energy Titles.*

Specifically, what is community capacity?

Community capacity is an umbrella term for the human, social, financial, and ecological capital that a community can rely on to achieve resilience. Federal programs and policies should support the following activities to increase community capacity:

- Building agreement among key stakeholders around land management and economic development goals through community and landowner engagement, collaborative planning processes, use of pilot projects, and facilitated dialogue.
- Providing technical assistance to: 1) implement effective conservation and restoration activities on the ground (e.g. wetland or riparian restoration project design); 2) increase the capability of local businesses (e.g. developing a solid business plan for a value-added small diameter utilization scheme); 3) improve the skills of local community leaders (e.g. training in effective conflict resolution, financial management, or grant-writing techniques); 4) undertake peer to peer learning between community leaders, organizations, practitioners, etc. (e.g. transferring successful models between communities in different regions of the country).
- Supporting improved community and business infrastructure and technology (e.g. low cost or secured loans to acquire specialized equipment for local meat processing or forest thinning).
- Accessing grants and loans available for business development, educational pursuits, skill-building, and the costs incurred through participation in collaborative activities.
- Augmenting base support for organizational operations that staff and organize collaboration, community and landowner engagement, conservation project implementation, and business development.



- Supporting community-based organizations and regional organizations and networks (including general operations and staffing) that undertake many of the activities enumerated above.

Community-based organizations are a focal point for community capacity

CBOs are as unique as the communities and landscapes they serve. They can be non-profits with a charitable or service motivation, local watershed and/or resource conservation districts, informal collaborative groups, ad hoc representative groups convened by governmental agencies, or programmatic or mandated efforts designed to function at the local or regional level. CBOs fulfill diverse social, ecological, and technical/financial roles in their communities. As partners to the federal resource management agencies they can:

- Create or support collaborative structures and institutions that assist diverse stakeholders to build agreement around land management and economic development goals.
- Provide effective outreach, planning, delivery, and monitoring of conservation programs.
- Identify ways in which activities and investments from single purpose agencies can be integrated with other agencies and investments to achieve broader social, ecological, and economic goals. For example, a CBO can provide assistance to the Fish and Wildlife Service in prioritizing riparian restoration projects on ranches that also have NRCS water conservation projects that assist with the terms of a water rights settlement, thus, increasing the ranches' overall economic stability.
- Serve as a trusted buffer and conduit between landowners and federal and state agencies.
- Aggregate land ownerships at a large enough scale for ready access to beneficial certification or payments for ecosystem services.
- Coordinate and align multiple landowners or collaborative projects to achieve the landscape-scale impacts of conservation funding.
- Leverage or match federal and state funds with local business and non-profit capital to multiply and extend the impact of limited public funding.



Regional organizations and networks build capacity and advance the work of community-based organizations

In lower capacity communities, or where collaboration is nascent, regional organizations often fill the same capacity building roles as CBOs by supporting collaboration, engaging local leaders for community-based conservation and economic development, etc. Regional organizations can also support and leverage the work of CBOs and rural small businesses. Regional organizations and networks convene, coordinate and connect multiple local efforts, disseminate lessons learned, and accelerate innovation diffusion, consequently scaling-up place-based efforts to achieve regional impact.

Regional organizations can be based in urban or rural areas and work across multiple sectors, communities, counties, or states. Regional organizations' roles can include:

- Providing access to technical expertise, tools, and philanthropies.
- Serving as liaisons between local efforts and federal officials, and building common ground with distant stakeholder groups by providing the venues and forums to initiate and build relationships and reframe difficult issues.
- Helping to catalyze and build local organizations in places lacking this capacity, as well as strengthening existing groups.
- Connecting rural community-based organizations and small businesses to wider networks, markets, and opportunities.
- Organizing multiple communities to work together to promote a shared vision and solutions, and promoting peer-to-peer learning and adoption of best practices.
- Documenting and communicating trends and issues that affect multiple communities to help improve policies and programs, including providing vital data collection, mapping, and analysis.

Capacity building and community-based organizations are underfunded

Some community-based organizations (CBOs) have achieved long-term financial support from their communities, foundations, members, and/or other beneficiaries. However, the majority of CBOs lack dependable funding, thereby inhibiting their organizational development, long-range strategic planning, and the scale of conservation and rural economic development outcomes desired by successive Congresses and Administrations.

Findings from a recent survey³ of 92 community-based organizations across the West show that:

- 25% of CBOs surveyed had no paid staff, either part- or full-time. CBOs frequently rely on volunteers to deliver their services.
- 78% of CBOs surveyed had annual budgets under \$500,000. The budgets of the CBOs in the sample are much smaller than traditional environmental organizations; in 2008, only 36% of western environmental groups had budgets under \$500,000.⁴
- 24% of CBOs had no financial reserve, and only 4% had financial reserves of over one year.

The ongoing struggle to maintain adequate funding streams and staff limits the ability of CBOs to produce the local benefits they seek, and to become resilient, sustainable institutions.

¹ The Western Governors Association Policy Resolution includes support for such a program and encourages "the federal agencies to establish a Community Capacity and Collaborative Support Grant Program to ensure that rural communities are engaged in large-scale forest restoration and contributing to forest health solutions where they live" (November 2011).

² America's Great Outdoors: A Promise to Future Generations, February, 2011. USDA Interior and Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

³ Moseley, Cassandra, et al. "Community-based Natural Resource Management in the Western US: a Pilot Study of Capacity." Ecosystem Workforce Program Working Paper Number 27 (Spring 2011).

⁴ Training Resources for the Environmental Community. "2008 Salary and Benefits Survey." Training Resources for the Environmental Community (2008).

Coalition Partners

Alaska

Sitka Conservation Society
Southeast Alaska Conservation Council

Arizona

Forest Energy Corporation

California

Alliance of Forest Workers and Harvesters
Calaveras Healthy Impact Product Solutions (CHIPS)
ForEverGreen Forestry
Fourth Sector Strategies
Mattole Restoration Council
Mendocino County Woody Biomass Working Group
Redwood Coast Rural Action
Sierra Business Council
Sierra Forest Legacy
Trinity County Board of Supervisors, District 3
Watershed Research & Training Center

Florida

Farmworker Association of Florida

Idaho

Framing Our Community
Lava Lake Land & Livestock
Lemhi Regional Land Trust
National Association of Forest Service Retirees
Salmon Valley Stewardship
Shoshone County Board of Commissioners
Woody Biomass Utilization Partnership

Kentucky

Center for Rural Strategies

Massachusetts

YouthBuild USA

Maine

Coastal Enterprises, Inc.

Minnesota

League of Rural Voters

Missouri

Missouri Farmer's Union

Montana

Big Hole Watershed Committee
Blackfoot Challenge
Centennial Valley Association
Center for Large Landscape Conservation
Criley Consulting
Flathead Economic Policy Center
Game Creek Forest Restoration, LLC

Montana, continued

Northwest Connections
Swan Ecosystem Center
Vander Meer's Wildland Conservation Services
Watershed Consulting, LLC
Yaak Valley Forest Council

New Hampshire

Northern Forest Center

New Mexico

Forest Guild
Gila Woodnet
Restoration Technologies, LLC
Santa Clara Woodworks
SBS Wood Shavings, LLC

Nevada

Boies Ranch

Ohio

National Network of Forest Practitioners

Oregon

A3 Energy Partners, Inc.
Applegate Partnership & Watershed Council
Backlund Logging Co.
Bear Mountain Forest Products, Inc.
Blue Mountains Forest Partners
East Fork Consulting
Ecosystem Workforce Program
Ecotrust
Grant County Court
Harney County Restoration Collaborative
Hells Canyon Preservation Council
High Desert Partnership
Institute for Culture and Ecology (IFCAE)
Integrated Biomass Resources, LLC
Jerome Natural Resource Consultants Inc.

Oregon, continued

Lake County Resources Initiative
Malheur Lumber Co.
Network of Oregon Watershed Councils
Rural Development Initiatives
Savory Institute
Siuslaw Institute
Southern Oregon Small Diameter Collaborative
Sustainable Northwest
Wallowa County Board of Commissioners
Wallowa Resources

Tennessee

Square O Consulting

Vermont

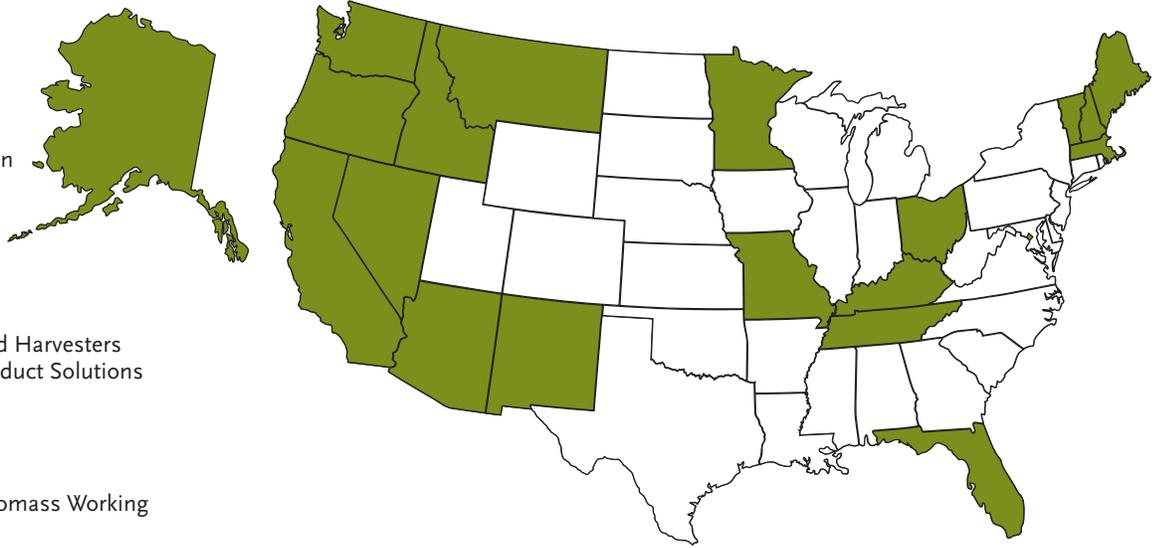
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American Forests
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The Wilderness Society



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