

# WHITE PAPER

## Understanding and Addressing Emerging Frustration Among Citizens' Collaborative Groups Interacting with the USDA Forest Service

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### ABSTRACT

Unless action is undertaken to confront the problem of deepening frustrations by many citizens' collaborative groups, it is likely that the collaborative outcomes envisioned by the USDA Forest Service will not be achieved. It is the hope of the authors that this paper will be instrumental in beginning a national dialogue concerning this growing trend of frustration among citizens' collaborative groups working with the Forest Service and that actions can be taken to strengthen citizen collaboration.

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## **Purpose of this Paper**

The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness and begin a dialogue regarding a trend of frustration that is emerging on the landscape of citizen collaboration regarding public lands managed by the USDA Forest Service (FS). The authors of this paper are well acquainted with the FS and citizen collaboration. All three have been in key leadership roles of highly functioning citizens' collaborative groups that worked with the FS to positively address major forest disturbances that impacted the ecologic, economic, and social environments of large areas of federal and non-federal lands alike.

Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions (YSS) addressed the recovery and restoration of the Rim Fire (2013), the largest wildfire on record in the Sierra Nevada mountain range of California. The Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative (CBBC) addressed impacts of the mountain pine beetle outbreak in Colorado (1996 – 2010) that impacted 1.2 million acres of high elevation lodgepole pine forests. The authors have been eyewitnesses to the constructive power of citizens working collaboratively to address complex and controversial issues concerning the management of public lands. However, the window of opportunity to accomplish meaningful restoration of large landscapes of our nation's national forests through citizen collaboration may be closing, as evidenced by a recently published collective statement of 19 organizations indicting FS collaborative processes and pledging not to participate in such efforts.

It is the hope of the authors that this paper will be instrumental in beginning a national dialogue concerning this growing trend of frustration among citizens' collaborative groups working with the FS and that actions can be taken to strengthen citizen collaboration among newly forming groups as well as experienced and seasoned collaborative groups regarding the management of the nation's national forests.

## **Introduction**

Recently, several independent, self-governing citizens' collaborative groups that have experienced successful working relationships with the FS have voiced frustrations concerning the inability of the FS to honor perceived and actual commitments. These citizens' collaborative groups are involved in important issues facing the management of national forests, including wildfire recovery and restoration, responding to forest insects and disease, community wildfire planning, landscape scale forest restoration, and forest plan revision. All of these citizens' collaborative groups have been in existence for multiple years and have provided consensus-based recommendations to the FS regarding land management actions involving the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA), and the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Act (CFLRP).

The citizens' collaborative groups anonymously referenced (at their request) have gone well beyond the basics of identifying areas of agreement and developing consensus-based recommendations to the FS. In addition, they have:

- Provided effective advocacy for FS decisions.

- Identified and obtained additional financial and human resources for decision implementation.
- Influenced state and federal legislation to enhance implementation of decisions.
- Supported county and municipal codes to provide compatibility with FS land management actions.
- Intervened in litigation brought by dissident groups that opposed FS decision implementation.
- Provided funding and human resources for hands-on, on-the-ground FS projects.

Perhaps the best way to communicate the severity and potential threat of this emerging issue is in the actual words of some representatives of high performing citizens' collaborative groups:

*"...members of [name of citizen collaborative group] have spent countless hours working on forest issues. They have also developed significant relationships with, and helped educate, state legislators and some state agencies on the importance of forest management. They have come to consensus on many issues that were thought to forever be contentious. They have identified funds to help with the work and even spent time testifying in [state capital and Washington, D.C.] However, they are becoming disillusioned, specifically with the FS. They are beginning to feel it is pointless to acquire funds for projects when the FS timeline to implement is so long and when there is not enough FS staff to support the efforts."*

*"FS inaction is causing [name of citizen collaborative group] to begin to wonder if there is a point to all their efforts if there is not the ability of the FS to implement anything in the near future...It would be a shame for all the efforts to be for naught. The bottom line is they are becoming weary of FS enthusiasm that doesn't lead to meaningful results."*

*"The rhetoric from the FS and the actual results don't match up. The FS regional and forest leadership speak highly of our efforts and tout the collaborative partnership that has been forged, but then due to a lack of funding, resources, and strategic planning, the FS moves at such a slow pace that it can't stay in front of the issues we worked so hard to address. If this trend continues it has the potential to turn positive relationships into adversarial relationships."*

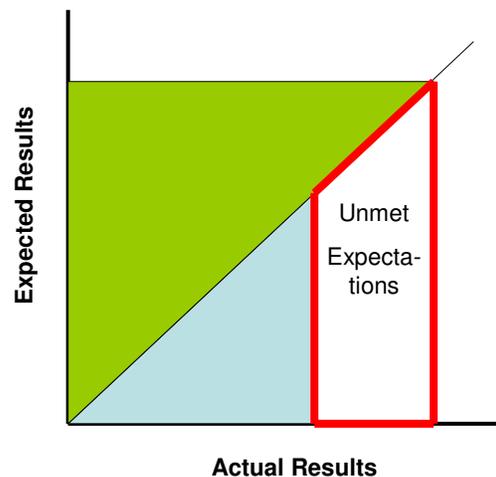
*"I have been involved with two collaborative groups over the past several years. The collaborative work of both groups has led to on-the-ground results carried out by the FS that responded favorably to the groups' recommendations. But now, the FS tells us that they don't have the 'capacities' any longer to implement decisions. Now, when our groups meet we simply share information. I don't need to be spending my time going to meetings where nothing will happen."*

*"Our collaborative group responded to the request to bring diverse interests together to find common ground in which to make*

*recommendations to the forest. We went beyond just making consensus-based recommendations. We also addressed a variety of policy, legislative, fiscal, and legal barriers that could hinder implementation of FS decisions. But now we are informed that it could take several years to implement the decisions. Has the FS created and encouraged something by which it now feels threatened?"*

If the quoted comments were from only one citizens' collaborative group in only one region of the FS, then they might be atypical, but these comments and ones similar to them are being voiced by multiple citizens' collaborative groups in multiple FS regions. It appears that the FS may be over-promising and under-delivering in response to agency direction for initiating and participating in increased levels of collaborative processes, while at the same time the agency is undergoing reductions in financial and human capacities. Some citizens' collaborative groups firmly believe that their involvement in building consensus among stakeholders and removing barriers to implementation should shorten the timeframes for the FS to produce results, but they are not experiencing any changes in the status quo of lengthy planning processes and the agency's hesitance to implement decisions. Unmet expectations are often the sources of frustration and dissent.

## Unmet Expectations



In the current policy environment of increasing collaboration, and the current fiscal trends of reducing financial and human capacities of the FS, the volatile conditions are establishing high expectations, while delivering less. This is the perfect storm for frustration and dissent among people who desire to assist the FS in being good stewards of the nation's forests and grasslands. Unmet expectations in any type of human relationship can quickly change an environment of trust, optimism, and cooperation to distrust, pessimism, and animosity.

The authors of this white paper have been involved with numerous national forests and citizens' collaborative groups across the National Forest System, and detected recent trends similar to those voiced by the quoted citizens' collaborative groups. The growing

frustrations of many FS employees and citizens alike, participating in collaborative efforts regarding federal land and resource management, have led to a condition that can be referred to as “collaboration fatigue.” In the absence of actions to address this emerging issue, collaboration fatigue has the potential to significantly diminish the promise of more-inclusive, less-confrontational FS land management through collaboration.

In the words of one forest supervisor with a positive track record of working with citizens’ collaborative groups,

*“I believe in collaboration, but it requires transformational management practices [leading an organization through change in direction, processes and operations]. With my limited staff and budget, the best I can do is to maintain transactional management [leading an organization by supervision, structure, and performance].”*

The personal frustration expressed by this forest supervisor is impacting not only management of the national forest, but also FS staff morale, while creating frustration within the citizens’ collaborative group that has interacted with the forest over the past several years.

## Background

Prior to the enactment of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) on January 1, 1970, the general public had few opportunities for direct input into the processes used by federal administrative agencies regarding decisions for the use and management of federal lands. The ways in which the public could influence federal land management decisions prior to NEPA were primarily through:

1. The electoral process of electing persons to Congress sympathetic to the views of constituents.
2. The legislative process of lobbying Congress for the passage of laws that directed federal agencies in land management policies and actions.
3. Operational relationships between user groups and FS managers.
4. Citizen protest.

When NEPA was enacted, it required federal agencies to enter into a public process and seek comments and input from interested citizens prior to making decisions. In addition, NEPA established the formation of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), responsible for implementing the requirements of NEPA in federal agencies and requiring early and frequent public involvement opportunities in the NEPA process. Although collaboration is not required by CEQ in NEPA planning processes, it is nonetheless, identified, discussed, and encouraged in the CEQ Handbook.

Given the strong professional identity and pseudo-military roots and traditions of the Forest Service, it is intriguing that the agency has made a shift to a more inclusive collaborative paradigm, even though the shift took a couple of decades following the passage of NEPA. Although the evolution of the NFMA planning rule has not continued the strong regulatory mandates for collaboration, other policy innovations like the HFRA, CFLRP, and the Agriculture Act of 2014 (Farm Bill) have attempted to do so. In addition, the broad yet informal rhetorical guidance within the agency is that collaboration has

become a required performance element. In short, collaboration is currently seen as central to achieving the agency's mission rather than a peripheral activity that merely has to be completed to fulfill a procedural requirement.

The Forest Service currently finds itself in an "Age of Collaboration" in its exercise of NEPA and other federal laws and regulations governing its decision processes. This collaborative age is approximately 35 years in the making. What began as a fledgling effort to supplement public involvement techniques with more meaningful ways of involving citizens, has led to citizen collaboration in federal land management coming of age.

One of the outcomes of this movement has been the growth in the number of citizens' collaborative groups interacting with the Forest Service on a wide array of topics. For example, in Colorado in a 2010 report to the Governor's Forest Health Advisory Council, there were 7 active place-based citizens' collaborative groups interacting with national forests within the state, with 3 additional collaborative groups in the formative stages. In Idaho, there are currently 8 citizens' collaborative groups working with the FS, and from recent collaborative group networking meetings held in Ellensburg, Washington and Redmond, Oregon it was reported that there are 33 citizens' collaborative groups currently functioning in those two states.

These citizens' collaborative groups are not to be confused with Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) committees. General Services Administration (GSA) approved FACA chartered advisory committees are formed and controlled by the federal government under a standard set of rules. However, there has been a proliferation of non-FACA citizens' collaborative groups that are independent, voluntary, self-governing groupings of citizens who have come together for a variety of purposes to work with the Forest Service. Because these groups of citizens are exercising their First Amendment rights to "peaceably assemble to petition the government..." and are not controlled by the federal government, they are not subject to FACA.

No two citizens' collaborative groups are exactly the same, with groups differing in purpose, organizational and governance structures, operating procedures, and participant composition. The Forest Service may interact with these groups as they would with any other group, but they do not control the group. Citizens' collaborative groups select their own leadership, set their own agendas, and call their own meetings.

The importance of these citizens' collaborative groups is often far higher than might be expected from a single-interest group attempting to influence or support the Forest Service. In regions where decades of divisive, polarizing controversy over forest management has dominated FS planning processes and thwarted on-the-ground actions, the focus of collaborative groups on identifying areas of overlapping agreement can completely change the environment in which the FS operates. Instead of strident positions being promoted, consensus-based collaborative groups can often promote prioritized needs that highly diverse interests all agree need FS action or remediation. Rather than simply being another political influence on the FS, consensus-based collaborative groups can give the agency strong encouragement and motivation to take on programs of work or projects that the agency might not otherwise feel supported enough to propose or to plan. In addition, citizens' collaborative groups can assist in removing barriers that can hinder or block the implementation of on-the-ground actions resulting from FS decisions.

Many of the citizens' collaborative groups are sympathetic that the FS often finds itself in situations that it cannot control, and they are willing to assist in removing the barriers by addressing issues in ways which the FS cannot. For example, a leader of a citizens' collaborative group on the West Coast said,

*"The timelines of actions of the agency are often out of local FS control. They are held to environmental laws and constraints that will take Congressional action to change. We are working on this with some success, but it will take time and continued effort! This means telling folks what they don't like to hear, and using political power to move roadblocks."*

But, he added,

*"If collaboratives that work well together and expend large amounts of personal time see little progress, they will do other things."*

## **Current Situation**

Collaborative efforts that involve a wide diversity of stakeholders require a period of time of sufficient duration to develop a collaborative environment. That environment must be built on mutual respect, mutual trust, and mutual benefit. It requires significant commitments of time and resources by all of the individuals and groups participating in a collaborative effort, including the FS. In short, collaboration is not without significant time, energy, and financial costs borne by all who voluntarily participate.

As the number of citizens' collaborative groups has grown, it has taxed the limited capacities of some groups and individuals and the FS to be involved on a continuing basis. Often these collaborative groups meet monthly in locations that may require several hours of travel to attend meetings. In addition, most citizens' collaborative groups transcend individual FS projects; they meet over multiple years in their interactions with the FS. Participation in the citizens' collaborative groups often requires a large commitment of time and expense. Although most members of GSA approved and chartered FACA advisory committees are reimbursed for their travel costs, non-FACA collaborative groups generally do not reimburse participants for their time or travel, with the costs of participation being funded by the individuals themselves, or by their employers or sponsors.

For some groups and individuals with missions and responsibilities on regional, state, or multi-state scales, the strain on available staff and budgets to participate in multiple citizens' collaborative groups can exceed their capacities. The executive director of a statewide conservation organization in the Rocky Mountain West said,

*"I have limited staff and budget and the board of directors wants to make sure we are placing our resources where they will provide the most benefit to the goals of our organization. I simply cannot justify sending staff to participate in some collaborative groups if there is not a direct tie to the interests of my organization, or if little is being accomplished."*

Yet another executive of a multi-state conservation organization said,

*“Every collaborative group wants a representative of our organization at the table, but we simply don’t have the time, resources, or staff to do that. We have to be deliberate in selecting which groups we participate in and how often.”*

The lack of capacity for some interests to participate in collaborative groups is of concern because it can lead to the resulting actions, positions, or endorsements of a collaborative group not fully representing the breadth of interests. Nevertheless, even where less than fully desired participation is occurring, collaborative groups still reflect important perspectives and interests that the FS has come to respect as politically and socially important.

The competition between citizens’ collaborative groups for participants and resources is a natural outgrowth of the increasing number of citizens’ collaborative groups that have formed in response to the expressed and implied encouragement of FS leadership for collaborative processes. Resources and participants flow to those citizens’ collaborative groups that have proven themselves effective in influencing FS decision processes and implementing FS decisions in on-the-ground actions. Here is what the chair of one citizens’ collaborative group said:

*“We were the posterchild of the FS for the way collaboration with citizens could and should happen. We worked collaboratively with the FS on a major fuels reduction project for a couple of years, generating almost 100% agreement among a wide diversity of stakeholders. But when the NEPA decision was issued, we were surprised because we didn’t recognize many of our consensus recommendations. We felt betrayed. What happened to all of that collaboration? Now the [name of national forest] is working with several new collaborative groups on other projects and we seem to have been forgotten.”*

The expectations of citizens’ collaborative groups are legitimate. They desire to work with the FS to make a positive difference by addressing unsatisfactory current conditions. However, when the FS either ignores their consensus recommendations without rationale or without adequate communication, or fails to implement decisions in a timely manner, frustrations quickly grow. Simply put, citizens’ collaborative groups will not continue to voluntarily commit time and resources to collaborative processes with the FS if the results of their efforts are not realized. With shrinking capacities of the FS, competition among the citizens’ collaborative groups becomes even sharper.

There is an unsustainable current situation of:

1. Actual and implied FS encouragement of collaborative processes regarding land and resource management resulting in increasing numbers of non-FACA, independent, self-governing, collaborative groups with high expectations that group efforts will effectively influence the agency and make a difference in forest conditions.
2. Inadequate capacities and skill levels of the agency to meaningfully participate in such groups and implement decisions resulting in actions towards desired conditions, developed through collaborative processes.

3. Existing regulations, or FS interpretation of regulations, that create implementation hurdles, and extensive planning processes that result in years of delays between the development of agreed-upon, vitally needed projects and the actual completion of the plans.

This dichotomy of current trends threatens collaborative processes and cannot be sustained. It is generating frustration in those who are best positioned to be strong partners with the Forest Service. It is also causing delayed implementation of restoration treatments that are needed to respond to decades of fuel accumulations, a lack of sufficient funding for necessary projects, and the need to adapt to a changing climate. If not corrected, these current trends will result in the disillusionment of citizens and/or the FS in the value of collaboration as an inclusive and effective means of addressing complex land and resource management of the nation's national forests and grasslands. If that occurs, the current trend away from more confrontational and litigious processes experienced in the past will be thwarted and perhaps reversed.

In recognition of this dichotomy of current trends, a citizens' collaborative group that is currently gearing up to work with a national forest in the revision of the forest plan under the new 2012 planning rule is taking up-front steps to clarify its expectations for working with the national forest. In preparation for the lengthy and complicated plan revision process, the collaborative group is refining its purpose, process, member skills and experience inventory, membership composition, and operations manual. The collaborative group is developing a two-year strategic plan that will mesh with the forest's schedule for forest plan revision. Realistic and frank talks are currently underway between the forest and the collaborative group to align expectations so that the group will be aware of what they are planning to contribute to the plan revision process, how the forest will utilize those contributions, and in what timeframes. These extensive upfront preparations are necessary to better align expectations with results, thereby diminishing the potential for unmet expectations. Although this is a good example of proactive planning in light of current conditions, this citizens' collaborative group is not reflective of the norm.

Unless action is undertaken to confront the problem of deepening frustrations by many citizens' collaborative groups, it is likely that the collaborative outcomes envisioned by the FS will not be achieved.

## **Recommendations**

The authors recommend that a gathering of FS leadership and representatives of citizens' collaborative groups be convened to begin a national dialogue that will:

1. **Articulate the expectations of the FS for encouraging the development and organization of citizens' collaborative groups to participate in FS planning processes.**
2. **Articulate the expectations of citizens' collaborative groups for voluntarily participating in collaborative processes with the FS.**

- 3. Assess and develop actions to deal with the increasing frustrations that the citizens' collaborative groups and the agency's field units are currently experiencing.**
- 4. Explore ways to continue to produce meaningful results in working with citizens' collaborative groups despite the reality of shrinking agency capacities.**
- 5. Determine how to expedite decision implementation to achieve an increased pace and scale of forest actions by exercising the full extent of available laws, regulations, and policies (project NEPA, forest planning, execution) where strong multi-stakeholder consensus exists that was derived through collaborative agreements.**
- 6. Examine FS personnel performance processes that encourage line and staff officers to work productively with legitimate citizens' collaborative groups through FS planning processes to bring about timely decision implementation where broad collaborative support exists.**
- 7. Evaluate FS line officer transfer policies and leadership transition/succession planning on districts and forests where there is a strong and vibrant citizens' collaborative environment.**

This convening should take place this federal fiscal year with attendees being comprised of Forest Service leadership at all levels and representatives of active independent self-governing citizens' collaborative groups from across the nation. The proceedings of the convened meeting and recommendations should be presented to the Chief, regional foresters, forest supervisors, district rangers, and appropriate USDA personnel for consideration and action.

*"Rural America is up in arms about wildfires, beetles, shrinking forest industry infrastructure, loss of wildlife and riparian habitat, forest mortality, and a host of other issues concerning our forests. However, we remain cautiously optimistic that positive changes can occur through citizen collaboration regarding the management of our national forests, but not within the current environment of conflicting incompatible trends.*

*"We firmly believe that fellow citizens who come together and work hard, giving of their personal time and resources to find solutions to the most complex and divisive issues through collaboration, can be a source for change. But, unmet expectations can turn hope and optimism into frustration and cynicism. We encourage the FS to strengthen citizen collaboration and continue to strive for positive change.*

*"It will take a strong effort of citizens and the agency working together to push back against the competing current trends. Together, we can communicate a new vision for the future of our national forests that weaves citizens' collaboration into the decision processes of the FS.*

*The FS has a golden opportunity to realign with America's expectations...Caring for the Land, Serving the People."*

-The Authors

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## About the Authors

Mike Albrecht [MikeAlbrecht@mlode.com](mailto:MikeAlbrecht@mlode.com) is president and co-owner of Sierra Resource Management, Inc., a forest management company that specializes in forest thinning. He earned a Bachelor of Science Degree from Doane College in 1975, and a Master of Forestry Degree from Duke University in 1977. Mike is a Registered Professional Forester in California and has been working in the forest products industry for over 35 years. He is a past co-chair of YSS (Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions). Mike currently serves on the board of directors of Associated California Loggers and of TuCARE (Tuolumne County Alliance for Resources and Environment). Mike is the recipient of a number of awards including the 2014 American Loggers Council National Logger Activist Award and the 2010 California Forestry Association Conservationist of the Year Award.

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Gary Severson [seversonbreck@msn.com](mailto:seversonbreck@msn.com) is the retired executive director of Northwest Colorado Council of Governments, where he led a voluntary association of 28 county and municipal governments to collaboratively address a broad array of social, economic, and environmental issues common to the ten thousand square mile region. While in that position, he was a recipient of the USDA Rural Communities Leadership award for collaborative cross-boundary issues management with the White River National Forest. Gary was a founding member of the Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative (CBBC) and served as the CBBC's chair from 2006 to 2010. He also served as the coordinator of the Colorado Governor's Forest Health Advisory Council (2010–2012). He began his career as the public involvement coordinator for the USDA Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Region (1974-1983) and was a co-author of the first Forest Service Public Involvement Handbook. Gary recently served on the USDA Secretary's Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Advisory Committee and is an original member of the USDA Forest Service National Collaboration Cadre (2007 to present).