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McKenzie River Stewardship Group Stakeholder Interview Summary

Members of the McKenzie Stewardship Steering Committee interviewed 22 community stakeholders to gauge their interest and understanding of stewardship contracting. These interviews provide a variety of perspectives from scientists; land managers, contractors and residents. Lessons from these interviews will help the Steering Committee plan their next steps in developing a collaborative stewardship group.

Community stakeholders were positive in their perceptions about stewardship contracting and cited multiple restoration priorities. Their principle economic priority was the need to create and maintain jobs in the local community. Only a few participants have had any experience with stewardship contracting so the Steering Committee has an opportunity to provide some “ground-up” education. The following recommendations suggest next steps for the committee’s education and outreach efforts.

- Pursue a pilot project to provide a “nuts and bolts” learning opportunity for community members.
- Address participants’ concerns about stewardship contracting as an excuse cut old-growth trees.
- Address concerns about financial feasibility both in terms of sufficient markets and contracts for local businesses and the adequacy of funds for meaningful restoration work.
- Highlight successful outcomes as the process develops to maintain stakeholder interest and enthusiasm.

Restoration Priorities

Participants expressed a wide range of restoration priorities, often citing multiple objectives in their responses. Over half of the participants put a high priority on riparian restoration including the restoration of riparian vegetation, improving fish habitat and protecting water quality. Forest management was the second most common response. Participants wanted to see tree thinning to accomplish fuels reduction, restore stand complexity and old-growth characteristics for wildlife habitat and to promote fire resiliency. The eradication of invasive species was also a significant concern. Other concerns included one comment each for restoring flood plain function to the lower watershed, restoring stream channel structure and function, obliterating decommissioned roads and restoring elk habitat.

Experience with Stewardship Contracting

Few of the participants said that they had prior experience with stewardship contracting. Only six of the 22 participants said they had experience with stewardship contracting. Two participants were familiar with projects on in the Siuslaw and Alsea basins. Another participant had worked on the Jim Creek project on the Middle Fork ranger district. Only one participant expressed that they had a “good grasp” of the stewardship authorities citing specific experience with projects on the Cottage Grove ranger district of the Umpqua National Forest.

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Perceptions of Stewardship Contracting

Approximately 75% of the participants had favorable perceptions of Stewardship contracting and the remainder were neutral. One participant pointed out that it is beneficial and feasible when there is a clear restoration benefit. Many of the positive responses were nonspecific, simply stating that they felt it was a good idea or that they had heard positive results from other stewardship projects. Specific benefits cited by a few participants are: restoring forests and watersheds, keeping revenue in the local economy, dedicating revenue to the area that generated it and the potential to fund work on private land. Three of the six participants with experience in Stewardship contracting had positive perceptions, the others were neutral.

The neutral responses expressed some ambivalence or concerns without being directly critical of stewardship contracting. For example, a member of the McKenzie River Watershed Council (MWC) and landowner, was concerned about what “thinning” means and would like to see older trees protected. Another member of the watershed council wondered what incentives could be used to sustain long term enthusiasm for stewardship contracting. A participant from the timber industry shared a similar concern suggesting that USFS planning process can be too slow to maintain interest.

Barriers to Stewardship Contracting

Almost all of the participants could suggest at least one type of barrier to stewardship contracting and many listed multiple barriers. The most common response was some sort of political opposition arising from divergent stakeholder interests. Many participants were opposed to using stewardship as an excuse to cut old growth trees or saw that perception as a reason for environmental groups to oppose stewardship contracting. One person said that there would be political opposition from those who would rather see money generated from timber sales support the county budget.

The second most common response focused on financial feasibility. Three participants were concerned about profitability from the contractors’ perspective. They cited concerns about sufficient contract size, adequate markets, and sustainability. Another raised a concern about the adequacy of retained funds for successful restoration.

Two participants said that it is important to ensure that not all of the contracts go to large companies. Two other participants highlighted the need for trust to ensure that there are no hidden agendas or that private landowners are unjustly scrutinized.

It is interesting to note that two participants said that the watershed council’s priorities are focused on the lower watershed but there are more opportunities for stewardship contracting on the upper watershed. The Steering Committee will need to educate stakeholders about how restoration work in one area of the watershed can be linked to projects elsewhere through the retention of receipts to accomplish a comprehensive basin restoration strategy.

Economic Priorities

When asked about their economic priorities for McKenzie communities, most participants were concerned about jobs. Most participants would like to see sustainable jobs for a decent wage that allow the younger generation to remain in the area without altering the rural character of the

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community. One participant focused on schools as the “lifeblood of the community” and another cited the importance of small businesses and a supportive infrastructure for those businesses.

Most participants felt that stewardship contracting has the potential to help generate jobs in the community by funding work crews for restoration, possible biomass utilization opportunities and a venue for diversifying the service economy. One participant suggested that local manufacturing jobs could be created in the production of furniture or art. A few participants cited indirect benefits from recreation, reduced fire hazard and learning opportunities for school children.

Some participants responded to this question by talking about clean water, riparian restoration and a balance between business, recreation and environment. Without more probing questions it is difficult to determine if these responses are off-topic or suggestive of the importance of these attributes for other economic benefits.

Participation and Further Information

Nearly all of the participants said that they would like to stay informed and email is the preferred method. When asked about topics that they would like to learn more about, a few participants cited basics such as the definition of stewardship, the difference in format between a traditional contract and a stewardship contract, who is involved in the stewardship group, and how revenue is generated through the stewardship authorities. One participant raised the more complex and specific questions of how to enhance the market for round wood to benefit McKenzie communities and the current levels of funding for restoration work.