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Community-based Forest Restoration in the Southwest:  
A Needs Assessment

Ecological Restoration Institute  
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## **Purpose and method**

The goals of this effort were: (1) to characterize community-based forest restoration in the Southwest – how many groups, their characteristics, goals, activities; (2) identify challenges and needs these groups are facing; and (3) identify preferred forms of technical assistance. To answer these questions, we interviewed individuals from 30 communities in Arizona and New Mexico that are involved in forest restoration. Most of these individuals were coordinators or representatives of community groups, but some were private forest contractors or businesspeople.

## **Characteristics of community-based forest restoration in the Southwest**

At the time of the interviews (2002-2003), there were 25 community groups and three regional networks focused on forest restoration or fuels reduction. Three general types of rural southwestern communities are involved in community-based forest restoration efforts, falling generally along ethnic lines: Native American Tribal communities, Hispano land grant communities, and rural, formerly timber-dependent, Anglo-American communities. They commonly focus their forestry efforts on three broad goals: restoration and fuels reduction; economic development; and building social capital.

- **Forest restoration and fuels reduction:** All groups report working toward forest health and forest restoration in some form to meet the goals of improving forest health and reducing the risk of catastrophic fire. For most of these groups thinning to reduce fuel loads and fuel continuity is the primary focus. Roughly a quarter of these groups are also reintroducing fire to fire-adapted forests. Other goals are to:
  - create or improve wildlife habitat;
  - reduce competition or encroachment of excess trees;
  - control exotics and pathogens (particularly mistletoe);
  - and, to improve grasslands.

Fire risk reduction through fuel reduction and the creation of defensible space are top priorities for many communities. Some communities are also involved in post-fire rehabilitation that includes reseeding, often using native species, but sometimes using non-native annuals to stabilize soils and improve conditions for the reestablishment of native perennials. Rehabilitation also includes the planting of nursery-grown seedlings to encourage reforestation.

- **Economic development and utilization:** Economic development and utilization of thinned by-products are equally important goals of many community-based forestry groups. Specific economic goals include to:
  - provide jobs to local workers;
  - support the economic viability of rural communities;
  - increase the community capacity to do restoration work;
  - to produce timber and/or enhance the productivity and health of local timber stands;
  - and to improve utilization of restoration by-products.
  
- **Education and cooperation:** The third category of activities, again equally as important as economic development and forest health, deals generally with education and community organizing. Specifically, this includes public education, youth education, restoration practitioner training, and conflict resolution / collaboration. Specific goals are to:
  - give locals substantive input to restoration goals and outcomes;
  - resolve persistent conflicts between commodity users, environmentalists, community leaders, agencies and forest practitioners;
  - encourage residents and real estate developers to create defensible space; and,
  - reconnect people with the land.

Strategies used include youth programs such as environmental education curricula, YCC (Youth Conservation Corps) and 4H programs, and apprenticeship and training programs, as well as mutual education. Mutual education involves taking forestry practitioners, stakeholders, and the general public out into the forest to broaden people's perspectives regarding restoration and to allow the public to gain an understanding of the need for restoration and of

what restoration management looks like on the ground. In addition, five groups reported that their communities are developing new policies, such as Firewise guidelines or new ordinances requiring fuels reduction on private property.

## **Challenges and needs**

- **Funding** is the number one need. There is a persistent lack of money for community groups to buy the necessary equipment and to pay for the work that needs to be done. Community groups find it hard to maintain needed funds through grants. One community member stated that their greatest need is *“consistent funding and especially consistent funding that does not require non-existent matches.”* Several noted that the National Forests or their local forest districts do not have the funding needed to do the work recognized as necessary. Some community groups say they are raising funds for the Forest Service: *“The Forest Service does not have money for implementation, so the community group had to raise money to implement the project.”* Said another, *“We want to do a service contract with embedded timber sale, but the Forest Service does not have the money to do it that way, so the community group is fundraising for them.”*
  
- **Policy challenges** are second greatest need. Particular problems include:
  - difficulties dealing with the Forest Service bureaucracy;
  - problems with service, timber sale, and stewardship contracting;
  - failure to complete NEPA review in a timely manner;
  - financing; and,
  - an inconsistent supply of timber which makes economic sustainability particularly challenging.

For example: *“The Forest Service is under criticism from practitioners who are afraid to invest in equipment when bidding is different depending on the forest and line officers. The process is not clear and forest managers don’t understand how to be proactive and streamline procedures.”*

According to another: *"It's been virtually impossible to get the Forest Service to think of this as anything but a timber sale, but the wood really has no market value."*

Seven groups report writing their own management prescriptions and fulfilling NEPA requirements on their own. Said one, *"Thinning contracts are so small that we are limited in the amount of resources we can take out. Everyone wants to clean up the forest, but they don't allow the contracts to go through because the NEPA studies are not being done. All of that kind of bogs everything down."*

Specific challenges include getting the State government to recognize infrastructure and funding needs and the astronomically high workman's compensation rate. High labor and equipment costs combined with an unpredictable supply of material makes the creation and sustaining of infrastructure virtually impossible: *"Banks and financial institutions want 5-10 years, guaranteed. The Forest Service and even the BIA at this point have not stepped up and made that commitment. You can't do anything without a commitment."* There is also a need for technical assistance with federal contracts and applications: *"If you really wanted to do something that could help us or help other rural communities - take the money and set up a website and have in there the excel spreadsheets templates for determining cost per unit. Have in there a glossary of financial terms, a glossary of forestry terms, [contract administration details]..., templates for filling out a 428, for filling out a 429. Because do you think these small rural communities have any idea how to do those federal applications? That would be worth its weight in gold."*

- **Utilization & marketing** are important aspects of creating and sustaining an economic base for restoration work. There is a need to know what kinds of utilization opportunities exist, and how well they are working. There is also a need for marketing assistance and expertise to help locate or create markets for what are often niche products or products derived from low-quality wood. *"There is just no way for us to be able to move that product... We don't have a lot of markets out there for smaller products."* A common database or information pool

to link product suppliers with product purchasers would go a long way toward improving marketing and economic feasibility.

- **Collaboration & conflict resolution** are important issues as well. Many groups are particularly challenged by an inability to engage some environmental advocacy organizations; these groups report ongoing conflict and animosity with environmentalists. According to one, *“It has been my experience that radical environmentalists do not wish to communicate with rural, forest-dependent communities. My perception is that they continue to do what they have done in the past in the federal courts. ... Some communities have tried to collaborate with [these groups] in the past with the outcomes being very negative ... there was a hidden agenda [on the part of the environmentalists].”* Another said they *“can’t work with position-based environmental organizations with rigid no-cut positions.”*

Community forestry groups are also interested in learning how to better work with agencies. Respondents report challenges due to conflict within their communities (for example, between long-standing residents and newcomers), extreme conflict between communities and some environmental groups, and lack of cooperation from the Forest Service: *“Our community group and environmental groups came to tentative agreement on a restoration project, but then the agency chose a different alternative – as a result, we lost the support of both the local environmental interests and the people who were in favor of forest restoration to help the economy.”* According to another group, *“The USDA Forest Service is by far the biggest block to getting the project going. It is not a priority for the district so they’ve put no personnel or dollars toward the project.”* At times challenges with the agency and with environmental organizations become intertwined, as in an example where the Forest Service wouldn’t commit to a wood product supply because of *“environmental politics, because environmentalists think that if you commit supply you are bringing in big business.”*

- **Restoration best practices** and restoration research findings are of interest to some groups, but many also note that they pretty much have things under control and aren’t looking to adopt someone else’s theory and techniques. Most groups,

however, are willing to take scientific information into consideration, given that it is understandable and practical: *“Make scientific information understandable to homeowners. We’re not interested in scientific research.”*

- **Public education** is a significant challenge. Education is particularly needed to help homeowners understand the need for thinning and the importance of defensible space. There is a sense that homeowners are still building houses in the middle of the forest and don’t want to cut any trees, and that any forest management is perceived negatively: *“New arrivals into the WUI don’t want to see a single tree cut, even in doghair. It’s a complete misunderstanding of what constitutes a healthy forest. They don’t have a clue.”*

Communities are using several strategies to address public misinformation and apathy these include:

- working through schools;
- training children;
- developing demonstration sites;
- organizing field trips for adults to see these sites;
- organizing volunteer work days; and,
- organizing monitoring projects.

*“We’ve got to get the kids back out into the woods and teach them what forestry really is, because they’re not learning it in their classroom studies. ... The teacher needs to be educated, and so do the students.”*

### **Preferred information formats**

- **Technical assistance and peer-to-peer learning.** By far the preferred way of getting information is individual, face-to-face consulting. Several respondents stressed that communities’ information needs are highly site-specific and quite technical: advice, oversight on treatments and monitoring, outreach on best practices. *“Bring in a 3<sup>rd</sup> party (from outside the community) to talk about forest ecosystem functions and natural processes.”* Some are also interested in having speakers available for public education forums. Others recommended providing

technical assistance to the agencies: *“Train the forestry staff to have a broader perspective, maybe show different management scenarios and outcomes and educate the public about forest ecology.”*

- **Newsletters and direct mail.** If face-to-face, site-specific input is not available, the next best option is a newsletter or short technical guides sent by direct mail. Email and web sites are not recommended, as many working in this field either do not have Internet access or don't have time to consult online material. People say they prefer a document they can take with them into the field and pass on to others. The exception to this rule are the coordinators of established community groups, who spend more time in the office than do the practicing foresters. Respondents emphasized that these publications should be “short and skimmable [sic].” In terms of content, these publications should “highlight success stories; show different examples of community-based restoration, focus on education”; “could use an information piece explaining where the Forest Service in this region stands on forest restoration. Seems like their direction has changed.”
- **Workshops, field tours, & conferences.** There is some interest in workshops and field tours, though several mentioned time cost and cite an inability to get away from work: *“In my business, one day of missed work equates to a \$1,000 investment. If I were to invest that much money into advertising, I'd expect a \$50,000 return. What kind of return can I expect from a workshop?”* Others indicated they would attend if the time away from work isn't too great and if the work is relevant. Many want to see what others have done and what their experiences are, if these others are working on similar issues. Some indicated the usefulness of getting individuals together who share a functional interest: to visit each other's sites and discuss new ideas about equipment or worker management. A few mentioned the importance of mutual education, of agency and private practitioners learning together and sharing experiences.
- One approach would be a joint workshop or training for Forest Service personnel and community members on contracting and NEPA processes: *“If the Forest Service does it internally, nobody from the public will come in. But if we do it*

*community-based, then the key people from the public will come in, and they'll say, 'oh, I didn't know we could contract this way.' And they won't let it drop. I guarantee you once they learn something new that can help wood move, they won't let it drop. They'll hound the Forest Service to get it done."*

- **Regional directory or network.** There is limited interest in either a directory or a regional network; most say they are already well networked or that they wouldn't use it. Some are interested in a directory of service providers, such as consultants, contractors, and others with specific expertise that they can go to for help with specific needs.