

MANAGEMENT & MONITORING

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Team Assists Community Groups in Monitoring Forest Restoration Projects (New Mexico)

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Since 2001, the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program (CFRP), a USDA Forest Service pilot program, has granted \$5 million annually to community groups in New Mexico to conduct forest restoration and improve the use of small-diameter trees removed from restoration sites. This funding emerged from legislation that requires each grant recipient to conduct a “multiparty assessment” of the “positive or negative impact and effectiveness of the project, including improvements in local management skills and on the ground results.” However, the first group of grantees found themselves overwhelmed by the lack of a more detailed definition of “multiparty assessment.”

In 2002, a group of researchers and forestry practitioners collaborated to develop a clearer definition of the multiparty monitoring requirement. The legacy of this effort is the CFRP Multiparty Monitoring Team—composed of staff from the Ecological Restoration Institute, the Forest Guild, and the Four Corners Institute of Santa Fe, New Mexico—who provide technical assistance and training in multiparty monitoring to CFRP grantees.

The Multiparty Monitoring Team has developed a series of six handbooks, derived from guidelines developed by the larger group in 2002. The handbooks define multiparty monitoring as a way to assess how well a project is meeting desired outcomes and responding to diverse concerns. The handbooks further explain how to develop a monitoring plan and budget, and how to gather and analyze ecological and socioeconomic monitoring data. The team also offers technical assistance to grantees through workshops, individual meetings, site visits and in-the-field training. Technical assistance frequently requires initial meetings to help groups solidify their goals and establish a monitoring plan, and is often followed by more specific training in establishing monitoring sites and collecting data.

Our first challenge is showing grantees what they can monitor and how monitoring can provide them with useful feedback. The second challenge is helping them develop a monitoring plan and budget that provides a balance between what is desired and what is feasible. Because many grantees did not include monitoring costs in their original project budgets, we encourage them to work with in-kind partners or youth from schools or conservation corps as a way to minimize costs. In some cases, agency partners donate time or equipment to assist with data collection. In many

cases communities have trained local youth to do the monitoring as a way to introduce them to biological and social science and to connect them to their local environment.

Grantees are encouraged to use their CFRP project goals as the first step toward developing project-specific monitoring goals and indicators. Goals of the various projects often overlap, since most CFRP projects involve thinning the forest to reduce the threat of wildfires. Many communities choose indicators, such as the size and density of trees, canopy closure, and surface fuels. This has allowed some projects to use standardized indicators and methods so that their monitoring results could be compared.

Field tests have found the ecological monitoring methods to be easy-to-use and affordable for many of the projects. For example, we helped staff of the Zuni Department of Conservation develop a monitoring plan, collect pre- and post-treatment data in a 35-acre (10-ha) ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) stand, and analyze the collected data. One of the project goals was to change the fire regime. Four indicators were chosen to assess whether this goal was met: the size and density of live trees, seedling density, extent of canopy closure, and understory cover. Post-treatment data shows statistically significant changes in these variables. Youth from Zuni Pueblo assisted with the data collection, and the tribe plans to involve youth more extensively in monitoring its next CFRP project.

In other cases, however, the scale and intensity of data collection differs substantially according to what is appropriate and affordable for a given community. In particular, monitoring methods for social and economic goals are less standardized than the ecological methods. Some projects are using surveys or focus groups to track community attitudes toward forest restoration and their projects in particular, while others have chosen to simply track employment rates.

The example of Las Humanas, a community organization in central New Mexico, illustrates how monitoring plans are tailored to the project. When Las Humanas received a CFRP grant for a forest restoration project, they incorporated existing Forest Service photo points by using them as the end points of transects where additional data was collected. Then, because one aspect of Las Humanas’s organizational mission is to reconnect youth in rural villages to the surrounding forest, their multiparty monitoring team adapted the CFRP’s data collection methods to survey plants traditionally important to the community. Local youth used these methods to gather baseline ecological data on these plants that the community can monitor in future years.

While these tools and techniques were developed specifically for CFRP projects, some of the applications may benefit other restoration and community-based efforts. The complete multiparty monitoring handbook series is available online at www.fs.fed.us/r3/spf/cfrp/monitoring/index.shtml.