

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview of the CFRP

With over a century of fire suppression, logging and livestock grazing within many forests of New Mexico, the ecological structure and function of these lands have been considerably altered from self-sustaining ecosystems. In partial response to these conditions and a desire to create and maintain healthy, productive watersheds, Congress passed the Community Forest Restoration Act of 2000 (Title VI, Public Law 106-393). The Act authorized the establishment of the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program (CFRP) in New Mexico to provide cost-share grants to stakeholders for forest restoration projects on public land designed through a collaborative process.

Within its legislative authority, the Act provides Federal appropriations of up to \$5 million annually towards cost share grants to stakeholders for experimental forest restoration projects designed through a collaborative process. These projects may be entirely on, or any combination of, Federal, Tribal, State, County or municipal forest lands and must include a diverse and balanced group of stakeholders in their design and implementation. Each project must also address specific restoration objectives, including: wildfire threat reduction; reestablishment of historic fire regimes; reforestation; preservation of old and large trees; and increased utilization of small diameter trees. Projects must also include a multiparty assessment and efforts to create local forest-related employment or training opportunities. To assist with the evaluation of proposals and provide recommendations, the Act also establishes a Technical Advisory Panel (TAP) comprised of 12-15 members representing diverse stakeholders.

Multiparty Assessment of the CFRP

This multiparty assessment and report examines efforts by the USDA Forest Service to develop and implement the CFRP and pursue the purposes and objectives outlined in the Act. It also identifies lessons from the CFRP and offers recommendations for improved implementation of the program in New Mexico and perhaps in other states. A National Collaborative Assessment Team was formed to conduct the multiparty assessment. The Team designed an innovative approach that reviewed the CFRP from three different perspectives: Implementation, Effectiveness, and Validity.

Implementation Review

The Implementation section examines how well the CFRP put into place key program components and mechanisms outlined in the Act.

At the heart of the CFRP lies a robust grants program that seeks to encourage and support critical forest restoration work in innovative and collaborative ways. The program has developed specific structures and mechanisms to encourage diverse participation, facilitate proposal development, provide for a fair proposal review and selection process, and facilitate grant implementation and reporting. During the program's first five years (2001-2005), it has received 188 proposals requesting more than \$62.5 million and has awarded 75 grants totaling more than \$22 million. The Technical Advisory Panel (TAP) both implements and guides the CFRP grant review process.

The panel's diverse representation of expertise and experience is frequently mentioned by its members as a unique strength of the CFRP. The TAP operates through an open, public process for proposal evaluation, reviewing 30-40 proposals each year. The facilitated discussions that occur during TAP meetings provide excellent opportunities for mutual learning about collaborative forest restoration.

Communication and peer learning are strong components of the CFRP. Several program structures have been established for sharing challenges, successes, and lessons learned among the CFRP grantees, staff and other working relationship between the CFRP projects and the resource management structure, or line officers, of the National Forest System. One of the key program adaptations has been the creation of full-time CFRP Coordinator positions on each of the five National Forests in New Mexico in order to help with project development and implementation, as well as communication between the CFRP and other Forest Service programs.

The CFRP has adopted several strategies for providing technical assistance to grantees including: guidance materials on specific subjects; direct technical assistance through external providers such as the Ecological Restoration Institute; direct assistance through CFRP Coordinators; and peer-to-peer learning through organized grantee workshops and meetings. Technical assistance is an essential program element that has been adapted as the CFRP has evolved and as participants have identified additional needs.

The CFRP initially addressed its legislative requirements for multiparty monitoring by working with other organizations to develop a set of multiparty monitoring guidelines. In 2003, the program provided a grant to the Ecological Restoration Institute to develop a series of six multiparty monitoring guidebooks and provide technical assistance to CFRP grantees on the development and implementation of project level multiparty monitoring. Because this specific assistance has only been available for two years, challenges remain and much is being learned regarding multiparty monitoring.

Effectiveness Review

The Effectiveness section assesses the extent to which the CFRP has achieved key purposes set out for the program in the authorizing legislation.

At this point in the program, the primary indicator for the effectiveness of CFRP projects in achieving ecological objectives is the number of acres treated. From project accomplishment reports, information has been compiled showing that 6,160 acres have been treated during the first four years of the CFRP. Based on proposed grant activities, the CFRP coordinators estimate that 19,394 acres will have been treated when the currently funded projects are completed. The treatments represent a variety of on-the-ground activities, including: thinning or fuels reduction, riparian and forest restoration, non-native species eradication, and reforestation. These different treatments are accomplished using a variety of prescriptions that reflect multiple program objectives described in the enabling Act. A critical assessment of whether ecological restoration goals are being achieved through CFRP projects is difficult because project-specific multiparty assessments for the four-year CFRP projects are only now being completed for the first round of projects.

Many CFRP participants commented that collaboration among diverse stakeholders may be the most promising way to make progress toward the dual goals of sustainable communities and

sustainable forests. CFRP is uniquely designed to integrate these two goals. A key indicator of the program's effectiveness in providing economic benefits to communities is the number of jobs created through CFRP projects. To date (through 2004), 464 jobs have been created. While these jobs reflect full-time equivalents, it is difficult to consistently characterize them. In addition, the CFRP has given substantial attention to the marketing and utilization of small-diameter trees, funding a number of projects focused on these objectives and building on the experience of similar projects in the region supported through other previous programs.

The CFRP has established an excellent framework to encourage broad and diverse involvement in the program through the grant application requirements and the structure and process of the TAP. By including strong requirements for project applicants to include clear indications of early collaboration in their project proposals, CFRP has raised the bar for expectations of collaboration. The emphasis placed on communication and problem solving, as modeled by the open process as well as the facilitated discussions, has resulted in issues and challenges being discussed and documented, which has allowed for strategies to be developed. The CFRP also has created collaborative and adaptive learning mechanisms to function effectively as a demonstration program exploring forest restoration techniques. To date, however, many of the "forest restoration" treatments accomplished through CFRP projects have been based on prescriptions developed by the Forest Service through its planning and environmental review processes. Program participants have expressed interest in strengthening efforts to clarify forest restoration relative to fuel reduction treatments

Validation Review

The Validation section explores the degree to which the principles and strategies of the CFRP provide a model framework for making progress toward the broad purposes of the program. It examines important themes and topics that have emerged through discussions of community-based forestry groups, as well as CFRP participants. The section also includes perspectives from the National Assessment Team, reflecting a broader policy-oriented view of CFRP.

The emphasis on collaboration and partnerships, including the eligibility requirement and the grant incentive, has strengthened the performance of the overall CFRP program and the accomplishments of individual projects. Collaboration appears to be an essential component of the CFRP, bringing considerable validity to the overall model. The components of the CFRP focused on building capacities—from assisting with grant writing skills, to investing in multi-party monitoring activities, to enhancing collaborative partnerships through the grant making requirements of the TAP—are also essential to achieving the goals of the Act and are worthy public investments.

While the CFRP model has faced a number of institutional challenges in the Forest Service, clear progress is being made, especially among District Rangers opening up to the idea of working with local collaborative groups on proposed projects. The National Assessment Team sees significant merit in a grant-funded approach to accomplishing the objectives of collaborative forest restoration, due to the creativity and synergy that tends to come from placing a focused set of resources in the hands of a qualified external entity, while maintaining the land management agency as a key and vital partner.

An underlying assumption of the CFRP is that efforts to restore healthy forest ecosystems will be clearly connected to efforts to revitalize and sustain local economies. To facilitate the development of a renewed economic infrastructure for forest restoration will require an initial public investment. A good case can be made that the CFRP is accomplishing restoration work in a cost-efficient manner while also making investments in community and economic infrastructure. It is the program's attention to and investment in both of these objectives that makes it unique.

From a policy perspective, the CFRP is an integrated approach to community-based forest restoration that seeks to address ecological, social, and economic objectives. Through its various program components, such as its grant-making approach and its mandates for collaboration and multiparty monitoring, the CFRP model possesses important policy direction to stimulate successful projects. The CFRP also can be perceived as a catalyst for tackling a range of regional and national forest restoration challenges. Looking more broadly at the CFRP, as one program among others, such as the National Fire Plan, stewardship contracting, the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, and various rural development activities, it is evident that CFRP could contribute more to collaboration and forest restoration efforts, as well as benefit from them over time, if more comprehensive integration were sought and achieved.

Considering the CFRP in regional and national policy contexts, a number of program participants were enthusiastic about the CFRP model and thought it could be applied widely among states in the West with a strong federal forestland context. The program might evolve differently in various local and regional contexts, but the basic model provided for open and adaptive responses to these contexts. A prudent approach for expanding the CFRP might be to start with those states in the Southwest with similar contexts. As more is learned about the CFRP model and its adaptability over the next 5-10 years, a broader application of the model may be appropriate.

Lessons and Recommendations

After approximately four years of implementation of the CFRP in New Mexico, numerous lessons can be gleaned from the experience. These lessons reflect trends, successes, and challenges that are worthy of consideration by those involved in the CFRP as well as a variety of groups interested in community-based forest restoration more broadly.

Key lessons are that the basic model for the CFRP—a grants program providing incentives for collaboration and integrated forest restoration projects—has been effective in stimulating many and varied proposals, encouraging collaboration among diverse stakeholders, and accomplishing significant work in treating forests as well as building infrastructure for local wood-products enterprises. The program has established innovative and effective structures, mechanisms and processes to pursue its goals and objectives, such as the Technical Advisory Panel, CFRP Coordinator positions, and annual workshops to foster peer and collaborative learning. Along the way, the CFRP has encountered and documented challenges to both its program approach and its vision of integrating forest restoration treatments and community capacity building. Its open and collaborative approaches have enabled the CFRP to work towards overcoming these challenges, at both the project level and the program level.

The National Collaborative Assessment Team views the CFRP as an effective program for pursuing the purposes and objectives for which it was created. These recommendations are

intended to reinforce CFRP dialogue and deliberations and to highlight actions or proposed responses that we believe would be constructive.

- Continue the strong role of the TAP not only in developing grant recommendations, but also as a means of exploring community-based forestry concepts and issues, building consensus, maintaining accountability, and sustaining a statewide collaborative network.
- Continue to stress communication and peer learning among all the participants, partners, and interests involved in the CFRP. Widely communicate information from TAP meetings, CFRP workshops, and dialogue among various partners about the principles and practices of community-based forest restoration as a means of increasing understanding and capacity.
- Continue to address the goal of integrating CFRP funded projects into the regular program of work of the Forest Service. Suggestions for Forest Service leadership in Region 3:
 - Convene a working group in Region 3 made up of agency line officers, State and Private Forestry staff, and external CFRP partners, including project grantees and assistance providers, to examine the challenges to integration and potential solutions.
 - Set appropriate and achievable goals in Region 3 for integrating CFRP projects with projects under other forest restoration initiatives, such as the National Fire Plan, Healthy Forest Restoration Act, and stewardship contracting.
- Explore broader organizational opportunities to enhance the ability of CFRP to pursue its vision of integrating forest restoration and community capacity-building. Suggestions for consideration by Forest Service leadership at the national level:
 - Develop performance measures and a national reporting system reflecting the community capacity-building and economic development goals of CFRP.
 - Develop a budget line item that would support this integrated vision, providing resources for both forest restoration and community capacity-building.
 - Request legislative authority for the National Forest System to use grants and agreements for accomplishing collaborative forest restoration work, particularly for community capacity-building and economic development.
- Continue and strengthen the program’s capacity to provide technical assistance on multi-party monitoring, recognizing its importance for both collaborative learning and accountability.
- Given the strong and vital ethnic and cultural heritage of New Mexico, continue to emphasize interaction and work with the Hispanic Land-Grant and Native American communities in ways that strengthen their visions of land use and conservation, needs for economic development, and community sustainability.
- Strengthen efforts to bring the “best available science” to CFRP projects in order to enhance their capacity to develop their own collaborative approaches to restoration treatment, rather than simply adopting prescriptions from the land management agency.
- Develop methods for understanding the effects and potential contributions of CFRP projects by including them in larger-scale landscape or watershed assessments and by linking the planning and development of new CFRP projects with larger-scale collaborative planning efforts, such as “community wildfire protection plans.”