

Stewardship Contracting Talking Points

1. *The Forest Service should devolve authority to approve stewardship projects, contracts, and agreements to the forest level in cases where there is experience with stewardship contracting.*

Initially, the system of having the regional foresters approve every business plan, contract, and agreement offered security to those who were nervous about how stewardship contracting would be implemented. It also provided appropriate oversight as national forests were learning how to use stewardship contracting authorities. Now, however,

- A centralized approval process has become cumbersome and inefficient for forests and communities that have experience with stewardship contracting. It is time to devolve more decision-making authority for stewardship contracting to the forest level.
- Regional stewardship coordinators should spend their time providing technical assistance to forests that have less experience with stewardship contracting rather than reviewing proposals from experienced forests.

2. *The Forest Service should modify the timber appraisal system so that it does a better job of responding to the realities of removing smaller trees and removing a smaller volume per acre for restoration purposes.*

In particular:

- a. Allow for local flexibility in determining the division between saw log and non-saw log based on local milling capacity and markets.*
- b. Ensure that estimates of removal costs reflect the stewardship context, particularly the costs associated with removal to restore habitats and reduce fuels.*
- c. Improve the quality and consistency of cruises so that they better estimate the volume of small diameter material to within 5-10 % accuracy and make the appraisals more accurate.*

The appraisal system was created when the Forest Service was harvesting larger trees. Today, it consistently overvalues timber because it underestimates removal costs in the stewardship environment and overestimates the value of small material. Inaccurate appraisals increase risks for contractors, increase prices for the government, make it more difficult to find qualified contractors, and skew bids on the service side of stewardship contract offers and stewardship credits.

The challenges with the appraisal and cruising systems are not associated to the stewardship contracting authorities. Rather, these challenges rest in the policy and direction associated with timber sales. However, the problems are most obvious when the policies and direction are applied in the stewardship contracting context, where there tends to be a lot of low-value material.

3. *The Forest Service should allow the use of retained receipts for project-level multiparty monitoring.*

- Local-level multi-party monitoring can play an important role in collaborative learning and conflict resolution by helping the Forest Service and its partners, contractors, and other stakeholders learn from innovation.
- In a tight budget environment, funding of multi-party monitoring is becoming increasingly difficult. National forests and concerned local groups would like the ability to use retained receipts for all components of multiparty monitoring.

4. The Forest Service should create performance measures and budgeting processes that move the agency away from output targets and high-acreage, low-cost management, which short-change both ecological and socioeconomic goals of stewardship contracting and make it difficult for the agencies to engage fully in collaboration. These should include:

- a. Number and percentage of stewardship projects that were collaborative* during multiple phases, including prior to NEPA analysis.
- b. Number and percentage of projects that “met rural community needs” as defined by the local collaborative group.
- c. Number and percentage of projects that addressed multiple ecosystem needs
- d. Number and percentage of contracts awarded to local contractors and/or subcontractors
- e. Percentage of material removed that was processed locally

5. Congress should amend the Federal Acquisitions Regulations to allow the Forest Service and BLM to cover the costs of canceling a multi-year stewardship contract after the contract has been canceled.

Currently, in order to enter into a multi-year stewardship contract, agencies are required to obligate up-front the funds which would be needed to cover the cost of canceling that contract, should that ever become necessary. In a tight budget environment, this creates a big financial burden on the agencies, keeping already scarce funds from being used to meet immediate management needs, and discouraging (and perhaps even precluding) the use of the stewardship contracting authority, especially for multi-year contracts.

* We define collaboration to be ia process through which multiple stakeholders work together to solve a common problem or achieve a common objective (Moote and Lowe 2005).

Who We Are

The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition is comprised of western rural and local, regional, and national organizations that have joined together to promote balanced conservation-based approaches to he ecological and economic problems facing the West. We are committed to finding and promoting solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and well being of rural communities. We come from California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, New Mexico, Montana, Arizona, and Colorado.

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