Lessons Learned from a Collaborative Effort to Develop A Programmatic Environmental Assessment

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Background

The South Zone of the Cherokee National Forest (Tennessee) and the Tennessee Chapter of The Nature Conservancy convened a collaborative of key resource management stakeholders to address the implementation of Goal 17 of the Cherokee National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. Goal 17 states that the forest will: "restore and maintain forest communities to those plant communities predicted as most likely to occur based on the ecological potential of the site potential natural vegetation." A primary restoration challenge in the South Zone of the National Forest is the restoration of areas with off-site white pine.

The goal of the group was to generate recommendations and sideboards that would be used in developing a Programmatic Environmental Assessment (pEA) for restoration activities. A pEA increases restoration and management efficiencies by creating sideboards for future projects. Proactively obtaining agreement among major stakeholders through a collaborative process streamlines the planning process and helps maximize the public participation.

We present a few lessons learned from this collaborative effort to help others in the development of pEAs.

Lesson 1: Understand the Regulatory Process for Programmatic EA and How a Programmatic EA Impacts the Interests of Each Stakeholder's Interests

- Define the scope of the pEA decision to be made and what decision space will remain prior to implementation (see this guidance from the Council on Environmental Quality on the use of programmatic NEPA for helpful details) .
- Ensure appropriate and comprehensive information (ex. map of forest communities) is available to develop a pEA for the management actions proposed.
- A pEA for vegetation management was new for the stakeholders involved in this effort. Therefore, a focus on what would be different and clarity on the specifics of what to expect were critical to success. This included timing of documents and comment periods and a discussion of how the pEA impacts each stakeholder's interests

Lesson 2: Determine and Make Explicit USFS Engagement, Leadership and Involvement in the Process

- Successful collaborative efforts hinge on the engagement of Forest Service leadership, however, how and when they participate should be clear from the beginning.
- The South Zone Collaborative was convened by The Nature Conservancy. The Forest Service had one staff person in the group. Other Forest Service staff gave technical presentations and led the field trip. Line officers were present to kick off the first meeting, to close the last meeting, and during a few key conversations throughout. This structure and a somewhat "hands off" approach gave the group autonomy and helped ensure success.

Lesson 3: Ensure that all Key Stakeholders are Involved
- All stakeholders from the full spectrum of economic, recreation, conservation, and restoration interests should be invited to participate in the effort.
- Considerations for location and timing of meetings should encourage participation.

Lesson 4: Determine Clear Scope and Desired Outcomes When Process is Initiated
- Includes both the geographic (the whole Forest, part of the Forest, which states) and ecological (forest type, distribution of an off-site species, elevation gradient) scope.
- The South Zone Collaborative initially focused on the occurrence of off-site white pine in mid-slope and upper slope forest types. The scope expanded to include another pine species that can invade dry sites (Virginia pine) because of its similar ecological attributes, and then further expanded to dry forest communities because they share the same natural ecological process (fire). All members of the collaborative did not easily accept this evolution of scope, with several wanting to only address the scope that initially brought the group together.

Lesson 5: Agree on a Collaborative Meeting Process
- Use a neutral facilitator, this will help establish trust in the group and in the process.
- Respect people's time by having effective and efficient meetings with a balance between the time needed to address the issue and convenience for participants (start and end times, number, and location of meetings).
- Build a collaborative environment through presentations and breakout exercises that build collaboration.
- Work toward an equal understanding of the issues (off-site species, natural communities, fire as a management tool) through presentations and field trips. The field trip was one of the best learning tools.
- Agree upfront on how decisions will be made: consensus, consent, super-majority or majority. We recommend consent, which is a general agreement on a recommendation, with no significant objections. Consent based

decision-making allows the process to move forward and prevents small disagreements from blocking the recommendation process.
- Maintain the focus on the outcomes.

Lesson 6: Integrate Effective Tools
- Build the discussions around a simple restoration model of
    Current condition → management actions → future conditions
- Provide mapping products early in the process. This process utilized stand data from the USFS (current conditions) and Ecological Zone modeling by Steve Simon (as models for where restoration may be planned). Both provide an ecological framework for decision-making. Obtain agreement from stakeholders on the validity of the mapping products.

Lesson 7: Develop a Draft Report Structure Early in the Process
- Developing this structure early helps drive discussion and reporting of the group. The report structure used in this project included:
    - Introduction/Background
    - Planning Process
    - Scope: Geographic and Ecological
    - Restoration Framework
    - Current Conditions
    - Desired Future Conditions
    - Management Actions: General Guidance and Recommendations
        - Prescribed Fire
        - Herbicide Use
        - Mechanical Treatments
        - Soils
        - Roads
    - Prioritization
    - Monitoring and Responsive Management
    - Appendices for Supporting Material