Learning from SPER I

Scaling-up to Promote Ecosystem Resiliency

As the first set of six SPER projects in Arkansas, California, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico and Virginia concluded, leaders shared some of their lessons learned and other reflections on the value, challenges and successes of their projects.

On the value of SPER to get the ball rolling

"Even a relatively small scale project can generate enough excitement and momentum to launch a much larger restoration effort within a landscape. Both primary implementation partners in our project identified this investment as the kick-start they needed to garner additional funding and support for treatments in this watershed. One described these funds as 'instrumental in growing the forest fund in our area' and said that because of these funds they were able to garner an additional $1.5 million for ongoing treatment in this and surrounding watersheds."

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On organizing, collaborating and building capacity

"SPER facilitated the integration of two major collaborative efforts—the FLN and the Cooperative Weed and Pest Management Area—by expanding non-native invasive species control from state partner landscapes into the national forest. Restoration of fire-adapted systems and control of non-native invasive species are priorities for land management agencies and organizations in both states we work in, and SPER has allowed the collaborative groups to begin addressing these restorative activities holistically."

"I'm moving forward with greater attention to organizing and facilitating teamwork and collaboration in planning and implementation. We all tend to burrow in and get to work, but the meetings and field trips and discussion and sharing are accelerants for the processes and institutions we need to address the magnitude of dry forest restoration needs."

"Without the ability to secure the UTV equipment through SPER for moving personnel in difficult terrain on these big landscape scale projects, we would never be able to accomplish half of what we did. State agencies at present are not allowed to increase their budget, especially for equipment. But without adequate equipment, we would have been dead in the water."

On working in a changing climate

"Climate change impacts (like the drought conditions we've been experiencing) have unexpected impacts on fire effects. California is experiencing a serious drought—2013 was the driest year on record across the state. With climate change impacts such as this, we have to operate in a new world where model predictions, past experience, and even traditional ecological knowledge fall short of helping us understand all of the dynamics at play."

"We found that VFDs are a good way to build local capacity. Their enthusiastic interest and participation has been a win for local capacity building."

"The lack of a fire management policy and standards for staff within one partnering state agency was a formidable barrier that negated the ability of TNC and other partners to fully assist, in implementation of the larger controlled burns planned.... We focused resources on helping them develop a new fire management policy, implement burn unit planning, and conduct a few smaller burns to help set the stage for success within their agency.... This represents a significant accomplishment for the FLN partnership and will lead to improved integration of state agency into implementation activities in the future."

On the value of demonstrating success

"We tried numerous approaches for mechanical thinning to find the most cost effective way to reduce fuels... With low wood prices and projects in remote locations, mechanical treatments were far more expensive than anticipated, ranging from $1800-3000 per acre. However, the results were so compelling that one neighbor after another (many of whom have never worked with us before in our 16 year history in the landscape) signed up to have their land treated."

As a learning laboratory

"A small project focused on experimentation and learning can be a great way to test new management and restoration strategies. All partners in this project expressed appreciation for the opportunity to test mixed conifer management strategies that were somewhat different than the traditional fuels reduction prescription. Both implementation partners noted that they will continue to adapt and monitor these restoration strategies in future projects. One reported that 'being able to explore, identify and implement new ideas for mixed conifer restoration was one of the greatest benefits of this project. We also now have the opportunity to monitor and learn from these guidelines in the future.'"

"We burned over 70 jackpot piles and three large slash piles. Piling material in dense pockets of small trees was an effective approach to creating openings in the canopy with less cutting and piling because the trees next to the piles torched. We also timed the pile burning when there was just enough snow to safely prevent spreading, but not too much to cause problems with burning. In one stand, the duff layer in one stand smoldered for weeks and burned over several acres. Ground fires are probably the single greatest threat to resilient forests based on observations in past prescribed fires and wildfires. Burning the duff layer under the coolest, wettest conditions (i.e. under several inches of snow) may be a good strategy in the future and one we did not anticipate when we burned the piles. We will monitor tree mortality over the next two years to evaluate the effects of the ground fire, as well as the value of reseeding those areas to promote flashy fuels which support less severe fire in the future."