

Chapter 5

Socioeconomic Dimensions of Restoration

A triple-bottom line approach to restoration means that in addition to ensuring restoration of forests for ecological concerns, land managers actively work to improve economic and social outcomes in local communities. For years, forest legislation and policies have recognized the importance of sustaining rural communities, but clear steps and management of forests to directly improve community well-being has been limited or lacking altogether.

Restoration-focused land management will be done in ways that contribute to the wellbeing of communities within, adjacent to, and dependent upon the forest. A restoration focus does not play off environmental concerns against economic and community interests. Restoration forestry aims to restore the biophysical landscape and, with a triple-bottom line focus, simultaneously improve local well-being and socioeconomic health of rural communities.

Improving economic, community and environmental land management outcomes is consistent with current Forest Service direction. The Region 5 Ecological Restoration Leadership Intent (March, 2011) includes a focus on "...ecosystem services and community economic benefits..." Nationally, Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack emphasized, "We must work towards a shared vision—a vision that conserves our forests and the vital resources important to our survival while wisely respecting the need for a forest economy that creates jobs and vibrant rural communities."

The USDA Strategic Plan for fiscal years 2010-2015 further clarifies the Secretary's vision by identifying key policy priorities, including Goal 1, which states: "Assist rural communities to create prosperity so they are self-sustaining, re-populating, and economically thriving." The Forest Service 2012 Planning Rule also supports vibrant communities and rural job opportunities. As stated in the preamble, the Planning Rule "is designed to ensure that plans...provide jobs and contribute to the economic and social sustainability of communities."

Creating vibrant, prosperous, and socially sustainable rural communities means improving local well-being and socioeconomic health of rural communities. It means being responsive to diverse elements of communities, including economic conditions, social conditions involving health of residents and local law and justice; and educational conditions that include social and job training services. It also involves

working with local entities, particularly local collaboratives that are vital to maintaining and building community capacity and essential to effective agency work.

Forest Service contribution to local well-being is typically viewed as taking place through natural resource management activities that directly produce jobs or lead to job creation in related or secondary sectors. While the Agency creates jobs through its resource management and services it provides, as well as through direct employment of its workers, it can and must do more. For example, jobs are important, but there must be consideration of whether jobs are local and whether jobs as well as broad outcomes of the work contribute to local well-being and the diverse elements listed above.

A triple-bottom line approach encompassing community wellbeing is necessary to achieve the leadership intent. Incorporation of the triple-bottom line recognizes that managing for forest products and habitat improvement requires local investment and local engagement to succeed.

An initial step towards improving economic and social outcomes in local communities involves determining local conditions by monitoring social and economic conditions and trends. It also involves identifying how management activities and forest work can contribute to supporting vibrant and prosperous rural communities. Monitoring these conditions and trends is consistent with the new USDA Strategic Plan and the New 2012 Planning Rule. Such work is essential to development of activities that address key conditions and trends, and directly improve community health and well-being.

Monitoring social and economic conditions and trends involves the Agency working with partners to understand what data need to be collected, as well as collection and analyses of the data itself. Measures like median income, unemployment rate, elementary school student participation in Free and Reduced Priced Meals, job training enrollment and success, and crime rates, to mention just a few, are common to all areas and will be collected and analyzed. Some measures evaluated will be unique, tailored to specific locales and circumstances. It is not, however, the responsibility of the Agency to do all of this work; the agency will work with local counties and other partners, including

experts and collaborative groups, to identify and collect needed information, and identify optimal next steps.

The three Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Projects (CFLRPs) in the Region (the Basins Project on the Lassen National Forest, the Cornerstone Project on the Eldorado and Stanislaus National Forests, and the Dinkey Landscape Restoration Project on the Sierra National Forest) coupled with launch of the new Planning Rule and Forest Plan revision on the Sequoia, Sierra, and Inyo National Forests, provide opportunity to pilot implementation of the triple-bottom approach and associated work. Collection of data for measures will form a basis for understanding of local conditions and trends. These data also represent the foundation on which forests can develop a program of work that addresses ecological restoration, along with improvement in social and economic outcomes in local and other affected communities. Triple-bottom line data are an essential foundation on which a forest's program of work is advanced, and to the extent feasible, linked with land management by adjacent landowners.

The pilot work with the CFLRP projects along with implementation of the new Planning Rule will be documented to help us understand how to effectively do this work. This documentation will also identify how forest work is adaptively modified as subsequent data and lessons are developed and inform management. New contracting arrangements will likely be needed to assure benefits from this work are shared locally. Development and documentation of these and other lessons will pave the way for implementation of triple-bottom line work across forests in the Region that improves local communities.

This is exciting work. Implementing the triple-bottom line requires more partnering than some are used to, and perhaps more than some are comfortable with. But after years of pitched battles in which more often than not, few benefitted, or important work was held up, it is a positive way forward. Ensuring that social and economic benefits flow from the forest is a fundamental part of the integrative restoration vision that encompasses the land, and the rural communities and people reliant on it.