

Russ Mohnhey Recreation Resource Stewardship Award

A Celebration of Collaboration in the Gifford Pinchot



Representatives from the Pinchot Partners Board of Directors, community members and Forest Service administration members pose for a portrait provided by the Pinchot Partners after a tour of an area of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest in August 2014. Pictured in back row, from left, are Dave Bunting, Gene Zandacki, Fred Norman, Bob Guenther, Kevin Senderak, Gar Abbas and Linda Swartz. In the front row, from left, are Aldo Aguilar, John Squires, Erica Taecker and Kristin Bonanno.

HONOR: Group of Stakeholders Work With Forest Service to Create Jobs, Promote Health of Forest

By Christopher Brewer

cbrewer@chronline.com

When Congress gave the U.S. Forest Service authority to better manage its forestlands, a key provision was finding local stakeholders to work with.

Enter the Pinchot Partners, an ideologically diverse group of people mostly from Lewis County who have worked since 2002 to push for projects that preserve the health of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest while creating local forestry jobs.

The two ideas might sound mutually exclusive, but the Pinchot Partners have been able to make it work — so well, in fact, that the group on Thursday evening will be awarded the annual Russ Mohnhey Recreation Resource Stewardship Award by the Lewis Economic Development Council and The Chronicle at the EDC's annual banquet.

"I'm thrilled to see them getting this award, because they help us as the Forest Service achieve what we're trying to do," Gar Abbas, Cowlitz Valley Ranger District ranger for the U.S. Forest Service, said. "They're getting these stands and helping make them healthier, which is huge for the stewardship of the forest in general."

The Pinchot Partners came together in 2002, during a time when controversies were aplenty regarding timber sales and logging in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. The group brought together the Cowlitz Tribe, conservationists, economic and labor interests, and loggers together to figure out ways to not only preserve the health of the forest, but create job opportunities at a time the timber industry was being hit hard economically and timber production in the forest was essentially halted.

"When the people got together, they all took a field trip and found out there were more commonalities than concerns," group coordinator Jamie Tolfree said. "They've since worked on projects such as road improvements, meadow

enhancement, huckleberry habitat and improving stewardship timber sales."

Perhaps no project the Pinchot Partners teams up with the Forest Service on is more important to Lewis County's economic interests than the stewardship sales. The sales, according to the Forest Service, are designed to thin areas of the forest that are overstocked — essentially growing too close together creating hazards to the health of the trees and increasing fire danger. The Forest Service puts jobs up for bid and uses a system of preference points based on a variety of criteria, an important one being whether or not the company will utilize local labor, in determining who gets the job.

The monetary benefits, Abbas said, are more immediate in that the companies doing the work are paid for the project, putting the money into the local communities immediately, rather than the county needing to wait for a percentage of the money from the federal government as in the traditional timber sale programs. Pinchot Partners have aided in three recent stewardship sales by finding funding for and contracting with companies to do survey work, pinpointing areas that needed to be thinned most desperately.

The group has also worked with the Cowlitz Tribe to help improve huckleberry production through the forest by controlling and curtailing growth of young trees in areas where huckleberry bushes are abundant. By allowing the areas such as Burley Mountain to naturally produce more huckleberries, both the tribe and Pinchot Partners hope that wildlife that feed on huckleberries will become more abundant, in effect enhancing their habitat also.

"It's all part of a combined mission statement of improving forest health and economic capabilities of the forest," Tolfree said. "We continue to have a lot of conversations about how we can continue to work projects like this."

Other projects the Pinchot Partners are involved in include an updated inventory of the Forest Service's vegetation database in the Gifford Pinchot, watershed restoration at Iron Creek and maintenance of several roads in the Cowlitz Valley District.

From a Forest Service perspective, Abbas considers the advocacy and the direct help of the Pinchot Partners invaluable. In previous assignments before coming to Randle in 2012, Abbas said the norm was to listen to different advocacy groups come to him with issues with-

ABOUT THE AWARD

The Russ Mohnhey Recreation Resource Stewardship Award is given annually by The Chronicle and the Lewis County Economic Development Council to recognize people or groups who advocate for conservation of natural resources and enjoyment of the outdoors.

Notably, in 2011 Russ Mohnhey won the award named after him, just months after he died.

The award has been given since 2007 to the following:

- 2007 — Friends of the Cowlitz, for work/advocacy on recreational fishing
- 2008 — Gary Loomis, for fighting for fishing resources via "Fish First"
- 2009 — Backcountry Horsemen of Washington, for work on forest trails
- 2010 — Dan Ayres, for stewardship of resources of coastal shellfish
- 2011 — Russ Mohnhey, for lifelong contributions to improvement of the outdoors
- 2012 — Friends of Seminary Hill, for work on preserving the hill's natural area
- 2013 — Centralia College, for work on KNOLL project and salmon restoration
- 2014 — Centralia Stream Team, for dedication to reviving China Creek
- 2015 — Pinchot Partners, for collaboration in Gifford Pinchot National Forest

WHO ARE THE PINCHOT PARTNERS?

The Pinchot Partners bring together people representing a variety of interests into one collaborative group with a goal of stimulating the economy in and around the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, preserving and enhancing habitat, and advocating for policies that benefit the forest and surrounding area.

The Pinchot Partners' Board of Directors is made up of the following people: chairperson Taylor Aalvik, Director of Natural Resources for the Cowlitz Tribe; vice chairperson Butch Ogden, Southwest Regional Manager for the Washington Conservation Commission; treasurer Bill Little, former elected representative for the Lumber and Sawmill Worker Union; secretary Miku Lenentine, Ph.D. student at the University of Washington; John Squires, member of the board of the National Network of Forest Practitioners; Larry Smith, co-founder of the Cowlitz Basin Off-Road Vehicle club and lifelong timber industry worker; Red Rogers, past president of a local chapter of the Lumber and Sawmill Worker Union; Lisa Moscinski, Deputy Director of the Gifford Pinchot Task Force; and Bob Guenther, board member of the Pacific Mountain Workforce Development Council.

For a list of all the projects the Pinchot Partners are involved in, check out their website at www.pinchotpartners.org.

out first speaking to each other on ways the issues could be brought up or solutions that could more easily be figured between seemingly competing camps.

With the Pinchot Partners, Abbas has seen first-hand the collaborative spirit that can preside when people choose to work together for a common goal.

"A lot of groups just didn't communicate with each other. The typical model was that I had to spend so much time with each one of those groups, then go back and produce a solution that really couldn't meet all their needs," Abbas said. "This group comes to the table with

diverse views and they'll have debate and discussion, but at the end of the day, they work toward a common goal and see common ground. They have done that successfully here on several projects."

Tolfree said the group is humbled to be recognized by both the Lewis EDC and The Chronicle for efforts that, a dozen years after the Pinchot Partners' founding, are more plentiful than ever.

"It's really an honor. The group is excited, and to have some recognition is wonderful," Tolfree said. "We all really appreciate it."