

Where Do You Start?

Our initial assessment of the state of collaborative capacity in the Forest Service indicated that there are many opportunities to collaborate that are missed because personnel and partners are not sure where to start. Thus, to help new collaborators get off on the right foot, we have produced a brief primer, entitled, "Collaboration: Getting Started."

Collaboration Primer

What Is Collaboration? Collaboration is a process that involves people working together -- often with widely varied interests -- to share knowledge, ideas and resources towards addressing clearly-defined common goals and objectives. Collaborative processes seek mutually-acceptable ways of meeting all participants' key underlying interests with respect to substantive outcomes, fair and transparent deliberations, and respectful working relationships. That said, the goals of a particular collaborative process may vary along a spectrum from a relationship-building focus to a task-oriented focus, or any combination in between. Collaborative processes are designed to foster an environment where people can talk about their needs and interests, listen actively and thoughtfully to each other, and work constructively in an open and trusting environment to chart a shared path forward. Collaboration can be very informal, or quite structured. Because it leverages the energy and resources of many, collaboration represents a powerful way of conducting business for the Forest Service.

Why Would One Use A Collaboration Approach? Collaboration is usually initiated as a result of a perceived need for help in addressing a specific situation -- a situation that no one party can successfully address alone.

Where Is Collaboration Appropriate? Collaboration can be undertaken at an array of scales, from specific projects to broader land-use planning. Every USFS Region has used it at some point in time. The "Empowering Collaborative Stewardship" Project is in the process of developing a map showing the location of collaborative processes in which the Agency is involved; we expect it to be posted on the USFS Partnership Office website when available.

When Is A Collaborative Approach Appropriate? A structured collaborative process takes a significant investment of time and resources on the part of all involved. Ideally, however, that upfront investment will reap far greater rewards in the long run (e.g., implementable solutions to public lands management challenges; fewer appeals and litigation; and positive working relationships that are available for future projects as well). It is wise to begin by conducting a "situation assessment" to determine if your particular situation would be suitable for a collaborative approach. Sometimes this can be done in-house, and other times it is worth arranging for a collaboration expert to do this assessment for you. Please see the Partnership Resource Center website for information about how to access the assistance of both in-house and external collaboration experts. In general, circumstances that are conducive to a collaborative approach include:

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1. High priority issues must be addressed, and there is an opportunity to take action on them;
2. There is wide recognition that effectively addressing these issues will require contributions from many levels of government, as well as the private sector;
3. Resolution of these issues is impeded by responsibilities and authorities that are fragmented and dispersed among many entities.
4. There is an agency with the authority to make a decision, but not sufficient power to implement it alone.
5. The sponsoring agency is able and willing to devote the staff time and funding to support the collaborative process (e.g., accessing the help of a facilitator and technical experts if necessary); and
6. Timing is ripe, with political leadership aligned in support of a collaborative process.

When Is A Collaborative Approach Less Likely To Be Appropriate? Just as there are circumstances conducive to a collaborative approach to addressing public lands management issues, there are also circumstances when a collaborative approach is less likely to be successful.

These include:

1. Affected parties do not see the issue as high enough priority to commit their time and energy to a collaborative process on this topic.
2. There is an urgency to addressing the issue that precludes taking the time to develop a solution collaboratively.
3. The sponsoring agency is not committed to implementing a solution reached through the collaborative process. (Where formal public comment opportunities are required for such an outcome, the commitment sought is typically to use the collaboratively-generated solution as the draft that is distributed for public comment.)
4. There are insufficient resources (staff time, funds, etc.) to adequately support the collaborative process.
5. At least one of the key parties is unwilling to participate out of a conviction that the issues involve a matter of rights or non-negotiable principles.
6. The situation has become so polarized that the parties are unwilling to talk face-to-face.
7. At least one of the key parties could get their interests addressed more effectively in a different way, and is expected to use the collaborative process to delay progress in this venue.

How Does Collaboration Work? There are many ways to conduct a collaborative process, and many choices that participants will need to make, individually and collectively. Of course, the design of a particular collaborative process must be responsive to tangible needs, such as budgets and safe meeting spaces, but it also needs to fit the culture, the communities of both place (e.g., those stakeholders associated with a particular forest), the communities of interest (e.g., the types of uses valued by affected stakeholders), and the diversity of values of the participants. The collaborative process should integrate these community-driven considerations with science and policy to come up with implementable and durable solutions. Principles that may serve as helpful guidelines include:

1. Work at an appropriate scale; frame the scope of the effort explicitly and thoughtfully.
2. Understand the legal sideboards and agree on working guidelines early on.
3. Encourage diverse participation and communication.
4. Pay constant attention to learning and helping people make sense of what they're learning.

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5. Use conceptual frameworks and collaborative processes that integrate social, political, economic and ecological aspects and focus on the “big picture.”
6. Use an adaptive design anchored with principles and priorities jointly developed with participants, and continuously adjust to reflect lessons learned.
7. Empower the group.
8. Invest in building trust and lasting relationships.
9. Look for ways to tap internal knowledge and experience without over-burdening employees; share the resources and rewards.
10. Allow “power sharing” to emerge.
11. Establish clear, transparent, and public principles and priorities as the process unfolds.
12. Implementation is as important as planning; make feasibility and accountability part of the dialogue.
13. Substance matters; good science is as important as good participation. Develop quality data and meaningful products to address managerially and decision-relevant questions.
14. Whether or not your circumstance is ready for a collaborative approach, or individuals are willing to invest in a collaborative process commitment, local decision officials are urged to incorporate into your standard operating procedures the following norms, which each contribute to establishing the trust needed to gain social license to accomplish our Agency mission in the 21st Century:
 - Active listening;
 - Operating through transparency; and
 - Actively engaging diverse perspectives.

How Do We Work Collaboratively Across Distances? It is possible to collaborate “long distance,” depending on the circumstances. It may work best if parties can meet initially in person to get to know each other, before relying on remote communication. Please see the Partnership Resource Center website for e-collaboration tips.

Who Can Start a Collaborative Process? Any person, agency or organization who wishes to see a collaborative approach taken to address a particular situation can suggest the process. However, it is usually the agency with primary decision-making authority over the focal issues that sponsors and provides leadership for the process. Sometimes the Forest Service is the official convener of the process, and sometimes another entity convenes the process and the Forest Service is a participant. As a general rule of thumb, initiators should approach and discuss the idea with the USFS Line Officer at the organizational level that matches the scale of the issues – e.g., a District Ranger in the case of a local project, the Forest Supervisor in the case of a forest plan, and the Regional Forester in the case of a regional assessment.

Who Should Participate In A Collaborative Process? Those who have significant stakes in the focal issues being discussed in a collaborative process should participate. “Stakeholders” are those who: (a) are potentially significantly affected by how these issues are addressed; (b) have related decision-making responsibilities; and/or (c) could either ensure or block implementation of solutions to these issues. It is wise to provide a range of ways that stakeholders can get involved, depending on their level of interest. Robust collaborative processes include people



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with a diversity of perspectives and ideas, and provide ways of folding newcomers in and sustaining momentum if some need to leave. (See the Relationship Dimension Group Guiding Principles on the transition of incoming and outgoing leaders, including the “handover memo,” on the Partnership Resource Center website.)

How Does FACA Fit In? It is very important that the participants in a collaborative process understand just how their ideas and solutions will be put to use by the decision-maker. The manner in which this “decision space” is defined will have direct bearing on whether the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) will apply to the collaborative process; if so, there are specific procedures you will need to follow to comply with FACA. Please see the “FACA Easy Button” on the USFS Partnership Office website for information that will help you understand when FACA applies, and if so, how to comply with it. Among other things, collaborative processes subject to FACA must be open to the public and properly advertised.

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