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Conservation
COALITION

CAPITAL 360: AN INITIATIVE TO INCREASE FOREST AND FIRE RESILIENCY AROUND HELENA, MONTANA

A CASE STUDY

JUNE 2021

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CAPITAL 360: An Initiative to Increase Forest and Fire Resiliency Around Helena, Montana

About This Case Study

Land management approaches that cross ownerships and engage multiple partners are essential to addressing ecological and economic challenges that face communities in the rural West. Recognizing the importance of these approaches, the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC) uses policy engagement, peer-learning, and storytelling to empower practitioners to adopt and innovate with cross-boundary, or “all-lands,” management strategies. Our case study series supports this work by highlighting examples of all-lands projects and explaining the tools, processes, and partners important to their organization and implementation. The following case study was developed through interviews with key personnel associated with the federal, state, and local partners involved with Montana’s Capital 360 initiative.

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Introduction

As its name suggests, Montana's Capital 360 initiative is based in the state capital of Helena, a place ringed by mountains that faces increasing risk of catastrophic fire. Forests around the city were already denser and more homogeneous than their historic range of variability when a mountain pine beetle epidemic swept through in the mid-2000s. The result was widespread mortality across more than 75 percent of the 500,000-acre area that makes up the Capital 360 landscape. An increase in wildfire severity, lengthening of the fire season, and expanded threat of wildfire to homes in the wildland-urban interface further underscored the area's need for a more unified approach to improving forest health, reducing wildfire risk, protecting valuable infrastructure, and creating fire adapted homes and communities.

In response, local governments, state and federal agencies, and nonprofits began to pursue a growing number of cooperative fuels treatment and wildfire risk mitigation projects in key areas around the city and its watersheds. The effort to create a strategic approach to these projects, and the ongoing partnership behind that work, became known as Capital 360. The initiative began in roughly 2015 and in its first six years garnered support from key cross-boundary

funding sources including the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership and State & Private Forestry hazardous fuels reduction grants. Partners' efforts to focus work in targeted areas around Helena also has enabled them to more effectively pool and leverage resources, produce more competitive funding applications, and build stronger relationships.

Along with these relational and implementation successes, however, the Capital 360 partners have faced a number of challenges in their first six years as they worked through how to collaborate in a strategic way. Those challenges include a lack of defined organizational and governance structure and the lack of more formalized partner roles and responsibilities within that structure. In addition, partners struggled to move away from more opportunistic, individualistic ways of working and toward undertaking projects according to a coordinated plan and timeline. As of this case study's publication, partners were hoping that recent efforts to create a charter, an executive committee, and an implementation work group would help move the initiative beyond project-level partnerships to more strategic cooperation and coordination across the Capital 360 landscape.



Main Project Partners and Cooperators

Partner	Type	Roles
Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC)	State agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key visionary and coordinator of Capital 360. • Funded facilitation for the Tenmile/South Helena Forest Restoration Collaborative Committee, which produced recommendations and project prioritization for forest treatments in the Tenmile-South Helena Project Area. Entered into stewardship and Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) agreements with the Forest Service to conduct commercial harvest and fuels reduction on national forest land. • Provides technical assistance capacity for NRCS forestry-related EQIP contracts through a statewide agreement between the two agencies. • Provides resources, outreach, and technical expertise to private landowners. • Member of Capital 360 Executive Committee.
Helena Lewis and Clark National Forest (USFS)	Federal agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key visionary of Capital 360. • Entered into stewardship and GNA agreements with DNRC to accomplish commercial harvest and fuels reduction on national forest land. • Entered into participating agreements with Tri-County and the City of Helena to enable those entities to extend fuels treatments from private, city, and county lands onto Forest Service lands. • Lead agency on joint USFS/BLM EIS for the Tenmile-South Helena Project Area. This NEPA decision set the stage for more coordinated wildfire risk mitigation across those land ownerships. • Member of Capital 360 Executive Committee.
Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)	Federal agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completed tree thinning and hazardous fuels removal on private lands within the Capital 360 landscape, including in focus areas near city water sources, key evacuation and transportation routes, and where future USFS work was planned. • Member of Capital 360 Executive Committee.
Bureau of Land Management (BLM)	Federal agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperator on joint USFS/BLM EIS for the Tenmile/South Helena Project Area. • Funded fuels management and Wildland Fire Community Assistance Program in Capital 360 landscape. • Member of Capital 360 Executive Committee.
City of Helena	Local government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implemented tree thinning, slash piling, and mechanical chipping across land ownerships in the WUI around the city of Helena and on private and city-owned lands around the city's key drinking water sources. • Established two collaborative groups that provided recommendations, worked through challenges, and offered input on potential effects of public lands projects in the Tenmile-South Helena Project Area. • Member of Capital 360 Executive Committee.
Tri-County FireSafe Working Group (Tri-County)	Nonprofit that works in Jefferson, Broadwater and Lewis & Clark counties.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage and implement various wildfire risk mitigation activities including thinning and creating defensible space on private properties. • Conducts home assessments and consultations necessary for hazardous fuels treatments and home hardening. • Conducts landowner outreach and coordination about living with fire, wildfire response and forest health. • Convenes monthly meetings where partners provide updates on projects across the Tri-County area, including projects that fall within the Capital 360 footprint. These monthly meetings were initially a key venue for Capital 360 partners to come together before they established the Capital 360 Executive Committee and implementation working group in early 2021.

Key Activities and Outcomes to Date

Mechanical logging, chipping, and hand thinning and piling on just over 1,000 acres of private and City of Helena-owned land and 500 acres of national forest around key water sources in the Tenmile Watershed, Helena's primary source of drinking water.

Fuel breaks, tree pruning, pre-commercial thinning, slash disposal, weed control, brush management, and other fuels reduction activities across about 6,000 acres of private and city-owned land in other priority areas of the Capital 360 landscape, such as in Helena's wildland urban interface (WUI) and near key transportation routes.

Creation of defensible space around 140 homes in the WUI around Helena.

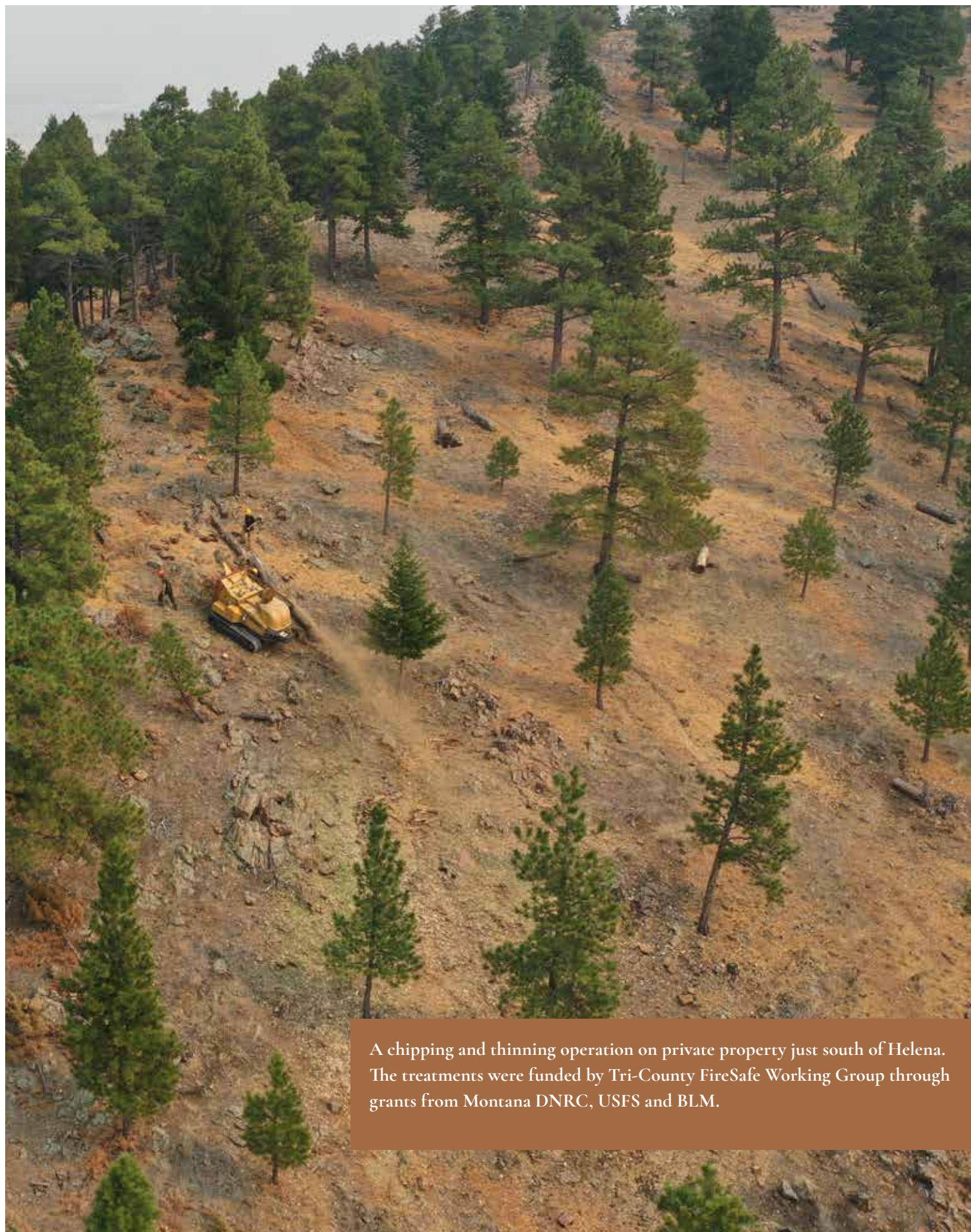
Good Neighbor Authority agreement between the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation for the commercial harvest of more than 500 acres of dead, beetle-killed trees in the Tenmile-South Helena Project Area, a key focus of the Capital 360 landscape.

Forest Service participating agreements enabling hazardous fuels work happening on private, city, and county land to extend onto 94 acres of national forest land, including acreage along a mile of county road that is a critical evacuation route south of Helena.

Increase in public awareness of wildfire risk and acceptance of forest fuels treatments, thanks to public open houses, field trips, lectures, and wildfire/fire management seminars.

Partnership between the City of Helena and the nonprofit Tri-County FireSafe Working Group that enabled logs harvested from nearby tree-thinning projects to be delivered to the city's low-income firewood program.





A chipping and thinning operation on private property just south of Helena. The treatments were funded by Tri-County FireSafe Working Group through grants from Montana DNRC, USFS and BLM.

Primary Programs, Tools, Funding Sources, and Authorities Used

Program, Funding Source or Authority	Purpose or Function
Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership	Competitively awarded NRCS and USFS funding for coordinated conservation activities on public and private lands. In the Capital 360 landscape, JCLRP dollars supported fuels reduction treatments across national forest, municipal, and private parcels around several of the city's key water sources as well as on private parcels near important transportation routes and near USFS planned work.
Good Neighbor Authority	USFS and BLM authority that allows states, counties, and tribes to implement watershed and forest management activities on federal land and allows states to use the value of trees harvested to fund other GNA projects. Enabled DNRC to implement an approximately 500-acre commercial harvest project on USFS land in the Tenmile-South Helena Project Area, allowing the USFS to shift resources to another timber sale that otherwise would have been delayed by a year. Program revenues from the sale were planned for use on restoration projects identified and prioritized by the USFS and DNRC.
Stewardship agreement	Allows a non-federal partner to implement restoration projects on USFS land and use the value of trees harvested to fund other restoration service work on the forest. Enabled DNRC to work with the USFS on implementing about 490 acres of forest treatments around the Red Mountain Flume/ Chessman Reservoir in the Tenmile-South Helena area, including commercial harvest and hand treatments.
Participating agreement	Enables the USFS to partner with non-agency entities to accomplish mutually beneficial work related to forest protection and other goals. The USFS entered into participating agreements with the City of Helena and Tri-County to extend tree thinning and hazardous fuels removal work happening on city, county, or private lands onto adjacent USFS lands.
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	NRCS program that provides financial resources and technical assistance to private landowners for conservation practices, such as fuel breaks, tree pruning, pre-commercial thinning, slash disposal, weed control and brush management. Used to support private lands fuels treatments near one of Helena's key water sources and in targeted areas within the Capital 360 footprint.
Montana-wide forestry technical assistance agreement between NRCS and DNRC	Allows DNRC staff to augment NRCS capacity by conducting required forest inventories, developing forest management plans, laying out units, and monitoring project implementation for landowners with NRCS EQIP contracts. Used to facilitate the implementation of EQIP contracts for private lands hazardous fuels removal across the Capital 360 area.



Primary Programs, Tools, Funding Sources, and Authorities Used

Program, Funding Source or Authority	Purpose or Function
BLM Wildland Fire Community Assistance Program	Provides funding and technical expertise to rural communities and collaborative groups to support activities like hazardous fuels management, public outreach, and community preparedness planning. Used by Tri-County to complete fuels reduction work on private lands adjacent to BLM lands and conduct outreach and education.
International Association of Fire Chiefs 'Ready Set Go' program	Helps landowners prepare themselves and their properties for wildfire. Funded portions of Tri-County's work with private landowners to conduct fuels mitigation along evacuation routes in forested areas around Helena.
FEMA pre-disaster mitigation funding	Supports states, local communities, tribes and territories to undertake hazard mitigation projects. Funded the City of Helena to conduct hand thinning on about two dozen private parcels near the city's primary water resource in the Tenmile watershed. Also supported home hardening, defensible space and hazardous fuels reduction work on private parcels in the Capital 360 area.
National Fire Capacity WUI Grant Program	USFS State & Private Forestry (S&PF) funding for projects that address hazardous fuels reduction in the WUI, outreach and education related to wildfire risk mitigation, and community wildfire planning. Supported work by Tri-County and the City of Helena to conduct fuels reduction on private land and city-owned open space.
Hazardous Fuels Reduction Grant Program	USFS S&PF funding for fuels mitigation work on adjacent non-federal lands for the purpose of protecting communities where hazard reduction activities are planned on National Forest System lands. Funding used by Tri-County and the city of Helena to conduct private lands treatments for wildfire mitigation.
Tri-County Regional Community Wildfire Protection Plan	Community-developed wildfire safety strategy. Helps guide hazardous fuels treatments around the Capital 360 area by identifying priority areas for treatment and recommending types and methods of treatment.
Montana Forest Action Plan (MFAP) funding	Montana's all lands, all hands plan for reducing wildfire risk and improving forest health across the state. In 2021, the MFAP funded 14 different collaborative wildfire risk reduction and forest health projects in Montana with a combination of state and federal funding. A grant was awarded to Capital 360 to support hand thinning, piling, and burning of hazardous fuels on BLM, USFS, and to fund public outreach, including the distribution of wildfire prep materials to residents living in the WUI.



Important Steps & Enabling Conditions

- 1** Before Capital 360 was formed, agencies at the federal, state, and local level had developed close relationships and frequent communications around coordination on wildfire response and suppression, creating a community wildfire protection plan, and emergency response.
- 2** State and federal-level initiatives including Forest in Focus, Montana's Forest Action Plan and Shared Stewardship have continued to prioritize landscape-scale cross-boundary work, motivating partners to remain committed to the Capital 360 initiative as the greater Helena area's vehicle for carrying out that goal.
- 3** Use of formal agreements have helped partners create efficiencies, utilize each other's expertise, and share and leverage resources.
- 4** Fuels reduction efforts, such as those organized by the Tri-County FireSafe Working Group, had strong participation from local fire chiefs, which generated the trust and buy-in from landowners that enabled agencies to implement on private lands. Community outreach and education efforts, as well as environmental factors such as the mountain pine beetle epidemic, further increased social support for forest fuel treatments close to the city.
- 5** Continued support from top leadership at Montana's Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest ensured that agency staff engaged with Capital 360-related partnership efforts had backing from higher levels of their organizations.



Making it Happen

As often happens with cooperative land management efforts, the Capital 360 initiative emerged from a convergence of forest health crises. In Helena's case, it was an increasing risk of catastrophic wildfire combined with a mountain pine beetle outbreak that increased attention on the need for federal, state, and local partners to ramp up forest health and fuels reduction activities. While cooperative efforts toward these goals had occurred around Helena prior to Capital 360, the initiative served to formalize and focus partnership work on a targeted landscape around the capital.

Building from an initial success story

Often, a project needs a starting spark or proof of concept to gain momentum. In the case of Capital 360, coordinated fuels reduction work by the City of Helena, Montana's Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest (USFS) around Helena's primary water source provided a success story to build from. Starting in 2011 and 2014 respectively, the city and NRCS thinned dozens of private parcels around a reservoir and flume south of the city. To complement that work, the USFS and DNRC signed a stewardship agreement in 2014 that enabled the state to complete mechanical and hand treatments on national forest land around the reservoir and flume. It was that project that prompted discussions among those agencies to begin Capital 360. The partners said Capital 360, with its defined project area and goal of leveraging and coordinating work across boundaries, helped establish a stronger narrative for why they should be working together, putting a "more formal bowtie on what was previously a flannel shirt," as one partner said.

Using agreements to operationalize cooperative work

Use of USFS agreements was key to translating partnerships into cooperative, cross-boundary work on the ground. Through both stewardship agreements and Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) agreements, the DNRC partnered with the USFS to administer national forest thinning projects aimed at protecting the city's key water sources and establishing fuel breaks in areas upwind of the city. The USFS also established participating agreements with the City of Helena and Tri-County FireSafe Working Group (Tri-County), which allowed the city and the nonprofit to extend thinning operations onto adjacent federal lands. Doing so allowed both entities to make more efficient use of contractors and resources in key areas such as evacuation routes and in the WUI around the city.

Collaborative efforts and regular convenings

The Capital 360 initiative brands itself as a "coalition of the willing," as opposed to a collaborative group meant to convene diverse stakeholders to discuss and provide input on public lands management actions. However, two planning-focused collaborative groups, the Tenmile Watershed Collaborative Committee and its successor, the Tenmile/South Helena Forest Restoration Collaborative Committee, deserve credit for helping pave the way for work in the Tenmile-South Helena Project Area, Capital 360's main focus landscape for treatment activities. Those committees, established by the City of Helena with financial support from DNRC, produced recommendations for USFS NEPA planning in the Tenmile-South Helena area and prioritized the reservoir and flume project that became one of Capital 360's first success stories.

In addition to those collaborative groups, Capital 360 partners noted the value of another convening entity: Tri-County. A nonprofit organization, Tri-County performs wildfire risk mitigation and outreach in the three counties surrounding Helena, including the Capital 360 area. Its monthly meetings, which predate the formation of the Capital 360 initiative, bring together a range of participants from local government, state and federal agencies, industry, fire departments, nonprofits, and the general public to exchange updates on each entities' activities within Jefferson, Broadwater and Lewis and Clark counties, which each include part of the Capital 360 area. These implementation-focused meetings are broadly attended and, over time, helped build up landowner buy-in for fuels reductions efforts thanks to participation from local fire chiefs who hold credibility among local residents. This increased support for private lands treatments helped set the stage for the Capital 360 partners to take a more strategic and coordinated approach to leveraging resources, coordinating, and implementing work across land ownerships.

Challenges Encountered

Forestry workforce

Across Montana, recent trends in the forestry workforce have been mixed. From 2014 to 2019, the state saw declines in wood products manufacturing, forestry and logging employment, but increases in “industry support employment,” such as tree planters, tree thinners, and wildland firefighters. Amidst these statewide trends, Capital 360 partners still noted challenges finding contractors to do forest fuel reduction treatments around Helena. Addressing this contractor shortage required extra coordination among partners, such as exchanging contractor contact information, updating contractors about available work, and keeping each other updated on program plans and contract workforce capability.



Identifying a niche and a purpose

The Capital 360 partners initially struggled to determine how they would complement—and not duplicate—the activities of existing groups already working on forest and fire resiliency, including the Tenmile/South Helena Forest Restoration Collaborative Committee and Tri-County. Several of the same partners are involved in all of those efforts, so Capital 360 had to find its unique niche. The Capital 360 partners also faced some hurdles determining how or if they would align with other state and national frameworks. For example, the group was eyeing the Montana Forest Action Plan as a guiding document, but then had to wait for the plan to undergo major revisions in 2019 and 2020 before reassessing how their efforts could align. It took several years and at least one year-long pause for the Capital 360 partners to define the initiative’s unique role and its relationship to state and national-level initiatives.

Landscape-level coordination

Although state, federal, local, and nonprofit entities had a history of partnering on individual projects within the Capital 360 area, they said it was challenging to find the time and resources to intentionally coordinate and prioritize activities across agencies and at larger scales within the project area. The diverse processes, goals, and timelines of agencies and individual landowners made it challenging to get everyone on the same page and decide, for example, what type of funding to pursue. One partner said they asked themselves if, instead of striving to coordinate with one another, it would be more efficient to “all just go to the same corner of a cross-boundary project and do our own work next to each other?”

Lessons Learned

Dedicate time early on in the partnership to create a governance structure that supports desired outcomes

Landscape-level coordination across the Capital 360 landscape was hindered by a lack of overarching organization and direction on how the partners worked together and who was involved. For example, without a clear road map, they experimented with a strategy of opening the group to anyone who wanted to join, which became unwieldy and confusing. Building off that lesson learned, Capital 360's main local, state, and federal agency partners began working with the National Forest Foundation in 2020 to better establish governance elements such as a charter, vision, partner involvement, and clear roles and responsibilities. From that work, the partners agreed that they were not a collaborative with a broad array of stakeholders, but a group of willing partners with the capacity and responsibility for conducting fuels reduction work in the area. In early 2021, they solidified this intent by establishing an executive committee of senior administrators and elected officials from each of the involved agencies and governments. The group focuses on identifying shared priorities and objectives, coordinating financial resources, and increasing capacity and resources dedicated to cross-boundary work. It works closely with an implementation committee. While partners noted a desire to avoid over engineering their work together, they recognized that even a coalition of the willing needs some convening and organizing forces.



Get clarity on the “how” and the “why” of the partners’ work

Capital 360 began as a vision for becoming more strategic in addressing the risk of wildfire around Helena. In order to effectively fulfill that purpose however, the partners needed to more deliberately define how they would accomplish it. To that end, they decided to adopt the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy to guide the type of activities they pursue and the updated Montana Forest Action Plan to target their work in state priority areas. They also decided to focus their efforts on facilitating cross-boundary coordination and planning among senior administrators and elected officials at the participating agencies and governments, which is a role existing groups did not fill. Clarifying this purpose helped situate Capital 360 within other local, state, and national efforts, avoid duplication of efforts, and solidify its utility and relevance to all partners involved.

The need for a dedicated coordinator

After coming up with the vision for Capital 360 around 2015, the Helena-Lewis and Clark's forest supervisor and the area manager for DNRC were largely responsible for carrying it forward. However, with already full plates, they had little time to support the partnership and develop a more strategic approach for Capital 360. In 2019, they received a source of support when DNRC committed to providing a coordinator using USFS State & Private Forestry (S&PF) dollars. The coordinator helps organize meetings, support internal and external communications, advance work on governance documents, and coordinate joint funding proposals, implementation, and partner agreements. Directing S&PF funding to DNRC staff who can support on-the-ground partnership coordination was a new direction for the state agency, but is one that it has prioritized and expected to continue supporting.

About RVCC

RVCC envisions healthy landscapes and vibrant rural communities throughout the American West. We are committed to finding and promoting solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and the well-being of rural communities.

We work to strengthen and empower the voices of rural leaders on issues such as collaborative all-lands stewardship, climate change, and local workforce development. By bringing rural leaders together to share their work, we serve as a vital peer learning and capacity building network that accelerates the practice of land stewardship and aligned economic development.

A photograph of four workers in a forest, wearing orange hard hats and safety gear, working on a large evergreen tree. The scene is outdoors with sunlight filtering through the trees.

For more information about the Capital 360 project, visit:

www.capital360.org

www.montanaforestactionplan.org

www.tcfswg.org

To learn more about our work, visit:

www.ruralvoicescoalition.org

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