

Forest Products Modernization: Innovation Underway

Mill Creek A to Z Stewardship Project, Colville National Forest



Field meeting in A to Z treatment area. Photo by Jonathan Day, USDA Forest Service

Since 2013, the Colville National Forest has been working with the contractor, Vaagen Brothers Lumber, under a unique stewardship contract to conduct beginning-to-end planning and implementation of a 54,000-acre forest health restoration project called the “Mill Creek A to Z Stewardship Project.” Vaagen Bros. further subcontracted the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review to a third-party private company. Contracting NEPA and sale preparation activities has given the Colville National Forest increased capacity to implement restoration at a faster pace than with its current resources.

Ingredients for Success

Leadership and collaboration from all parties have resulted in successful forest health restoration. At the outset, outreach to involve community leaders, politicians, and key stakeholders led to support for the project at both the national and local levels. Also critical for project initiation was the willingness and capacity of Vaagen Bros. to take on the risk of entering a contract prior to the completion of the NEPA process.

While Vaagen Bros. has encountered challenges in its ability to carry out quality control, the Forest has assisted the company by adding two contract officer representatives to increase capacity for oversight. The NEPA process was successfully navigated by communicating directly with the third-party subcontractor regarding minimum legal requirements and standards for analysis and documentation. The Forest retained all decisions required by the Forest Service deciding official and communicated these decisions to the subcontractor. The Forest and the subcontractor also shared some responsibilities during the NEPA process, and the subcontractor supported the Forest in its review of objections.

Lessons Learned

Mill Creek A to Z has yielded several important lessons regarding NEPA processes, communication, and the

delineation of responsibilities in beginning-to-end stewardship contracting:

- The contracting of NEPA drew significant public attention to the project. Oversight of the NEPA process required a large time commitment from Forest staff, indicating the need for clearer upfront specification of NEPA requirements and standards.
- Communication among all parties is paramount. Forest Service line officers must clearly articulate resource and process objectives and provide oversight. The Forest can also help contractors to identify opportunities for public participation to garner community support and mitigate conflict through transparency.
- Staff turnover and overlapping authority have been challenges. The parties would have benefited from clearer definition of responsibilities, timelines, and objectives at the outset of the project. To better understand their roles and maintain awareness of project progress, Forest resource staff can serve as inspectors.

Next Steps

The Forest plans to expand the use of the A to Z concept to implement needed restoration around Chewelah Creek, where the Forest has identified a need for fire risk reduction in the wildland-urban interface. The community of Chewelah has been heavily involved in project discussions, and it may encompass recreation objectives and involve cooperation with the Washington Department of Natural Resources.

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