
**Rural Development and Community-Based Forest Planning and Management:
A New, Collaborative Paradigm**
Executive Summary

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Introduction

A national study was conducted of 22 local, community-based development projects with potential for linkage with national forest management and planning. The study was based upon the idea, expressed by the former Director of the Missouri Rural Opportunities Council, that “community planning and forest planning ought to be one integrated whole!” It was felt that the partnerships and community involvement engendered in effective application of the Rural Community Assistance Program’s Rural Development Strategy could provide the basis for effective community involvement in the forest planning process, ultimately improving both forest planning and community development efforts through what seemed to be obvious complementarity. Although very little such linkage was found in the case studies, the study confirmed that building closer relationships between

the Forest Service and its planning processes and local communities is desirable. The study resulted in a wide range of recommendations for strengthening such relationships.

This report summarizes the results of that study and places the results in a broad, policy context. First, the report discusses some major issues associated with an emerging, community-based approach towards forest management. Then it presents the research project itself, including the methods used, a description of the projects and communities studied, including their relationship to the national forest, and the whole range of specific recommendations which emerged from the study. Finally, it returns to the broader, policy context, and presents a series of policy recommendations which will be required for the community-based approach to become a reality.

What is RCA?

The Forest Service has developed a community-based approach, known as Rural Community Assistance (RCA), to implement its responsibility for strengthening rural America through forest resources, related natural resource opportunities, and diverse partnerships. The overall goal of RCA is to facilitate and foster sustainable community development — linking community assistance and resource management. The work done to assist rural communities is part of a larger effort referred to as Economic Action Programs (EAP). The State and Private Forestry (S&PF) branch of the FS is responsible for the leadership and program management of EAP. S&PF is the Forest Service’s major “outreach” branch, and, as such, manages several program areas not necessarily related to public lands. The Cooperative Forestry staff, one of the three major subdivisions of S&PF, is responsible for EAP. Primary cooperators for most S&PF programs are the State Foresters; however, RCA program delivery is most often provided by local employees of the National Forest System in conjunction with the State Foresters and many other partners. “Rural development” programs have been around in the USFS for many years, but current USFS efforts are guided by the RCA national strategy, written in 1990. The strategy included an existing Rural Development (RD) program, and it was strengthened with new authority in the 1990 Farm Bill in the program entitled “Economic Recovery” (ER) — first funded in 1992. Although eligibility for assistance under RD is quite broad, criteria for eligibility under ER are quite specific (for example, rural communities or the counties in which they are located, must be within 100 miles of a national forest, and the county must derive at least 15% of direct and indirect income from natural resource-related industries.) The Economic Recovery program requires the formation of Local Action Teams in eligible communities in order to develop Action Plans; i.e., strategic plans for the communities’ development.

A Context of Interdependency and Polarization

In the United States for almost a century, communities have had an interdependent relationship with their national forest lands. These relationships have involved watersheds, wildlife, timber, range, recreation, and fisheries among others, which in turn have affected the economic and social life of the communities. Resource conditions within the forest and the communities have been variously intertwined. If the lands were healthy and productive, the communities flourished. When the land was over utilized and its resources depleted, then the nearby communities became vulnerable to economic and social decline. In many parts of the country, there has been a cycle of boom and bust accompanied by economic poverty and poor land stewardship.

This principle of interdependence between communities and forest lands has been affected by numerous policy and management decisions by the federal government (USDA Forest Service Committee of Scientists, 1998; McVicker, 1998). From the National Forest Reserves Act in 1897 to the recent publication of the Forest Service's Natural Resource Agenda by Chief Michael Dombeck, the relationship between national forests and local communities has been ever changing. In the recent decade, the relationship has become volatile, contentious, and increasingly polarized. While public opinion varies on the diverse costs and benefits of the changes that have occurred, there is a growing movement to improve the working relationships between national forests and communities. The proponents of this movement believe that improved relationships will benefit both the forest lands and nearby communities whose way of life, whether it is based on agricultural, recreational, or basic ecological amenities, is in many ways dependent on sustainable forest ecosystems.

Underlying the recent polarization is a dichotomy of perspectives and values regarding several issues:

- There is a major on-going historical debate over the proper role of the public lands with regard to how they fulfill ecological goals on the one hand and the interests of commodity users or industries on the other. Opinion varies on which outcome is to be emphasized, and if and how they can be combined.
- Settlement of the fundamental role of national forests is made more difficult by use of varying paradigms by various interests to make their arguments. Some proponents use ideological models, some ecological science, and others believe that their own practical knowledge and experience should prevail.
- There is a lack of consensus over the proper role of human communities in the functioning and management of natural ecosystems. Some advocates believe forests should be allowed to function without human interference, while others argue for varying degrees of management to meet the needs of society or to correct past management errors.

A New Alignment: Community, Economy, and Ecology

While the various outcomes of these public interest and policy debates are presently unclear, there is greater attention to the social challenges of resource management beyond the scientific or technical ones, to the need for greater public ownership in and support of forest lands, their management and policies, and to a more holistic or total ecosystem approach to their utilization (McVicker, 1998).

Greater attention to three factors — the social value challenge, greater public involvement, and a broader ecosystem approach — is moving three processes forward that will create broader and more diverse relationships between the Forest Service and national forest communities. The three processes can be generally characterized as follows:

- an increasing demand by the general public,

interest groups, and local communities to become more involved in resource management planning and decision-making;

- an awareness that stewardship of natural resource systems by knowledgeable and committed community members is more effective than top down governmental mandates and regulatory procedures; and
- growing support for an ecosystem management approach that is community based, incorporating both ecosystem and community sustainability into an overarching theory of holistic ecosystem health.

These processes are contributing to a new alignment of community, economy, and ecology. Rather than viewing these three realities as separate, conflicting, and competing, the longer term, more holistic perspective of public land resource management sees them as interdependent. When community, economy, and ecology are viewed as dynamically interactive and synergistic, the management and policy equation for the Forest Service must shift

from resource outputs to *sustainability*, from products to *stewardship*, from conflict to *partnership*.

The future of national forest management is deeply connected to ongoing developments in these three arenas—*sustainability* of ecosystems, and conversely, the human communities within them, community *stewardship* of public lands which can both strengthen and modify the traditional roles of governmental agencies, and community public land *partnerships* that can build practical consensus on policy and action within relevant landscapes and bioregions.

It is in this national context of changing natural resource perspectives, values, and roles that the importance of relationships between the Forest Service and the communities in close proximity to national forests must be reexamined and given greater attention by a wide range of interests, stakeholders and decision-makers.

Research on Forest Service and Community Relationships

The research described in this report focused upon these relationships, specifically upon the relationship that the Forest Service has with communities near them or dependent upon them and the potential role of the Forest Service's Rural Community Assistance (RCA) program in strengthening these relationships (see "What is RCA?" sidebar). It assumes that closer relationships between the national forest, especially at the local level, and the local community can benefit both the Forest Service and the communities, and that it may result in better forest plans, less-disputed forest management actions, community empowerment, and improvements in the local economy.

Additional research assumptions are listed in the "Research Assumptions" side-bar.

Research Assumptions

- ◆ The majority of interactions between the Forest Service and communities takes place at the ranger-district level.
- ◆ Communities near national forests will benefit from increased involvement in national forest management and planning activities.
- ◆ The Forest Service will benefit from increased community involvement in national forest management and planning activities.
- ◆ Continued community involvement in forest management activities is dependent upon building a positive relationship between the Forest Service and the community.
- ◆ Linking community development and planning activities with forest planning and management activities will benefit both.
- ◆ Before community plans and national forest plans can be effectively coordinated, relationships need to be built or strengthened between the Forest Service and the community.
- ◆ It is possible for local community people to give adequate consideration to broad national interests, as well as to their own local interests, as they participate in the forest planning and management process.

The Method

Forest Service-community interaction takes place in a variety of settings, which include formal public involvement opportunities during the forest planning process, as well as community participation in community strategic planning as part of the RCA program. The study sought to determine how to improve these relationships, especially whether the RCA program was creating closer linkages between the community and the national forest, or whether the RCA program could be used to strengthen these relationships.

The Communities and Projects

The projects are listed in Table 1. They were located in Arkansas, California, Colorado, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Wyoming. They involved 14 national forests. One of these forests had completed its plan revision by the time of the study, three had begun the process, and 10 had not yet started.

The geographic scope of the projects varied widely. Seventeen were limited to a county or part of a county, the other five involved jurisdictions of two to five county governments. Most of the projects had received RCA funding, and correspondingly in most of them the focus was upon economic diversification and community development. However, seven also had a natural resource focus, and four claimed a complete or partial focus on forest planning. Project activities included studies (e.g., economic diversification studies), promotion of tourism, infrastructure improvements, improvements of the local business environment, value-added businesses, education, natural resource projects, conflict resolution, and forest planning.

As a result of the projects, interviewees reported changes in the local economy, changes in community amenities, community revitalization, and

Case studies were performed of 22 community projects in communities near national forests, interviewing a total of 119 people. Twenty of these projects were RCA-funded. Interviewees told about the relationship between the nearby national forest and the community, the community project, and the state of and potential for collaboration between the Forest Service and the community.

relationship building. They also reported upon things which they felt contributed to project success and things they felt were impediments to success. For instance, the involvement of many groups, strong support from the Forest Service, leadership and political skills of participants, use of an effective process, and availability of facilitation were all identified as important for success.

Surprisingly, the availability of grant funds was mentioned in only five projects. Impediments to success included Forest Service factors, community factors, and aspects of the project process. In half of the projects, Forest Service factors were mentioned as obstacles, ranging from lack of support, poor communication, personnel turnover, complexity of chain of command and of Forest Service procedures, and internal disagreement within the Forest Service itself. Community factors included “old guard” resistance to change, various internal community conflicts, and lack of involvement of key community stakeholders. Project ingredients impeding success mirror the above — lack of leadership, lack of interest and commitment on the part of community people, lack of expertise and problems with consultants, and finally the high cost of things the community wanted to do.

Table 1.
Community projects included in the research.

Project	Community	State	National Forest ¹
Perry County Strategic Vision	Perry County	AR	Ouachita
Newton County Action Team	Newton County	AR	Ozark
Ozark Ecotours	Newton County	AR	Ozark
Butte Valley Action Committee	Butte Valley, Siskiyou County	CA	Klamath
Happy Camp Action Committee	Happy Camp, Siskiyou County	CA	Klamath
Karuk Community Development Corporation	Happy Camp, Siskiyou County	CA	Klamath
Down River Action Committee	Big Flat, Big Bar, and Del Loma, Trinity County	CA	Shasta-Trinity
Hayfork Action Committee	Hayfork, Trinity County	CA	Shasta-Trinity
North Fork Community Action Plan	North Fork, Madera County	CA	Sierra
Mad River Action Committee	Mad River, Trinity and Humboldt Counties	CA	Six Rivers
West Trinity Area Action Committee	Western Trinity County	CA	Six Rivers
ORE-CAL Resource Conservation and Development Council	Siskiyou and Modoc Counties in CA, Klamath and Lake Counties in OR	CA OR	Deschutes, Fremont, Klamath, Modoc, Shasta-Trinity, Winema
Mancos Valley Association	Montezuma County	CO	San Juan
Ponderosa Pine Forest Partnership	Montezuma County	CO	San Juan
Community Study Groups/Community Working Groups	Southwestern Colorado	CO	San Juan
Iron County Action Plan Committee	Iron County	MO	Mark Twain
Swan Valley Ad Hoc Committee	Swan Valley, Missoula and Lake Counties	MT	Flathead
Catron County Citizens Group	Catron County	NM	Gila
Cuba Future Search Conference and resulting community projects	Cuba, Sandoval County	NM	Santa Fe
Vision 20/20	Custer County	SD	Black Hills
Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association	Southeastern Tennessee	TN	Cherokee
Carbon County 2000	Carbon County	WY	Medicine Bow

¹ Eighteen national forests are mentioned in this table. The ORE-CAL RC&D covers more than three large counties in Oregon and California. As many as six national forests are in or near this project area. However, the research project obtained information from only two of them (the Klamath and the Shasta-Trinity).

Relationships Between the Forest Service and Communities

The Forest Service was involved in the development of 20 of the projects and in implementation of at least 15. The intensity of this involvement varied widely. In many cases, Forest Service personnel participated as members of the action team. Sometimes the Forest Service provided facilitators. In one, the Forest Service participated extensively in the conceptual design, funding, and organization of the project. In several cases, the local district ranger provided some leadership to the project. Neither the forest plan nor the planning process were considered relevant in most projects. Of the eight projects

where some connection was made to the forest plan, the consideration varied from mere lip service to being an all-out attempt to improve public involvement in forest planning.

A fundamental aspect of the sustainability of forest-dependent communities is their socio-economic relationship to the Forest Service. Respondents' views on these relationships are summarized in Table 2. As would be expected, there are significant differences between the western and eastern United States. Declining timber production, economic

dependence upon the national forest, conflict due to resource management issues, employment losses and especially the closing of ranger districts are all less-frequently important in the East, whereas economic adjustments are more frequently considered already to have occurred there. Still, it is clear from these data that the impact of changes in the Forest Service and in forest management are important for their communities for a very significant proportion of the respondents.

When specifically asked about changes in the relationship between the community and the Forest Service during the last 10 years, the majority of respondents described the relationships between their community and the Forest Service as good and as having improved. Also, more than 60 percent of the interviewees considered the Forest Service to be open in its decision making and planning.

Interviewees also provided many ideas on how the Forest Service and the community could help each other. These are listed below:

1. Improved communication between the community and Forest Service (46 respondents, 44%, N=104).
2. Greater involvement of the Forest Service in the community (44 respondents, 42%).
3. More opportunity for community involvement in forest planning and management (48 respondents, 46%).
4. Greater contribution of the Forest Service to improvement of the local economy (32 respondents, 31%).

5. Forest Service assistance in obtaining community development and planning facilitation (25 respondents, 24%).

6. Internal changes in the Forest Service increasing the capacity to work with communities (10 respondents, 10%).

Interviewees also identified factors which interfere with relationship building. These included limited Forest Service resources, the nature of the public involvement process in forest planning, Forest Service rules, regulations, and policies, Forest Service lack of knowledge about and interest in working with communities, Forest Service chain of command, Forest Service inefficiency, lack of Forest Service assistance to the local economy, specific aspects of the community's projects, community attitudes towards the Forest Service, community-Forest Service communication difficulties, and intra-community relationships.

An important issue was the potential role of the RCA program in building relationships and facilitating effective forest planning and management. Aside from knowing it was a source of funding, respondents were remarkably unfamiliar with the RCA program. Many did not respond to this question at first. When it was explained to them, they emphasized the importance of continuing RCA funding and agreed that it could play an important role in building relationships. Most thought that the RCA program could help overcome the factors hampering the community-Forest Service relationship by continuing to fund community projects, facilitating relationship building, improving RCA program administration, and strengthening the position of the RCA program within the Forest Service.

Table 2. Respondent views on community and national forest socio-economic relationships.

Description of socio-economic relationship	Percent agree - all (N=86)	Percent agree - West (N=63)	Percent agree - East (N=22)
The timber industry is in decline.	77	86	50
The community is economically dependent on the national forest.	57	60	50
In recent years, conflict has increased between the community and the Forest Service due to external interest group perspectives about local resource issues.	54	56	45
In recent years, conflict has increased between the community and the Forest Service due to resource management decisions being made by the local forest.	47	49	36
Within the last five years the national forest has closed one or more ranger district offices.	44	52	18
The ranching industry is in decline.	43	54	9
Most people in the timber industry lost their jobs 10 to 20 years ago.	40	51	5
The community has made an economic transition from the timber or ranching industry to other industrial and retail activities such as recreation and tourism.	37	37	41
The economic and social relationships between the community and the national forest have not changed much over the past ten years.	23	19	36

Recommendations from the Research

Sets of recommendations for district rangers, forest supervisors, the National Forest System Deputy Chief, for RCA program leaders, national forest level RCA coordinators, and community leaders were developed based upon the on-site interviews. These recommendations, together with the key assumptions of the study, were then submitted to the respondents for confirmation in a mailed survey. Seventy-four percent of the original respondents returned the survey and, not surprisingly, nearly all assumptions and recommendations were supported.

Summary of Recommendations and Respondents' Assessment

The recommendations focused upon the following general topics:

- *Leadership* — Direct all levels and branches of the agency (National Forest System, State and Private Forestry, Research) to give high priority to Forest Service-community relationship building.
- *Legal Authority* — Clarify, more aggressively apply, and where necessary, seek additional legal authority for national forests to work collaboratively with forest dependent communities.
- *Funding* — Present Congress the necessary funding requests and supporting documentation for relationship building as part of the agency's budgeting process.
- *Training* — Provide orientation and skills training throughout the agency and its cooperating partners as necessary to support effective efforts to build strong agency-community collaborative relationships.
- *Interagency Cooperation* — Cultivate closer working relationships among Forest Service divisions, and between the Forest Service and other agencies, that have responsibility and expertise in working with rural communities.
- *Project Targeting* — Favor RCA projects that have high potential to both benefit the target communities and strengthen community-Forest Service relationships.
- *Community Capacity Building* — Promote the building of community leadership and planning capacity for participation in agency-community collaborative efforts.

Rating of Recommendations

These recommendations, which were derived from the on-site interviews, were rated by the same respondents in a mailed survey. They were rated on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat agree, and 5 = agree. Not surprisingly, most were rated high, somewhere between 4 and 5. Those rated the most highly (4.80 to 5.00) are shown in bold, while those rated the lowest (from 3.70 to 4.50) are shown in italics.

The recommendations for district rangers, for forest supervisors, for the National Forest System Deputy Chief, for RCA program leaders, for national forest level RCA coordinators, and for community leaders are given in order below.

Recommendations to District Rangers

The recommendations for district rangers concern both setting the stage for closer collaboration and reaching out to the communities.

Setting the Stage

District rangers should: **(1) educate themselves and their staff regarding local communities and their social and economic relationships with the national forest; (2) allocate staff time and other resources necessary to build positive relationships between national forests and communities; (3) support and encourage district employees in devoting appropriate levels of work time, personal time, and agency resources for meaningful involvement in the communities served by the ranger district; and (4) during the analysis of ecosystems, attach comparable importance to the relationship between the Forest Service and human communities as to all other major ecosystem relationships.**

Reaching Out

District rangers should: **(5) frequently educate the community about the national forest, the Forest Service, and its planning process by using current, understandable, and useful information; (6) use the Rural Community Assistance program to actively build positive relationships between national forests and communities; (7) include community development plans and activities within the area served by the ranger district in ranger-district planning and management; (8) give affected communities the opportunity to participate in decisions regarding ranger-district consolidations, starting early in the decision process.**

Recommendations to Forest Supervisors

There were four recommendations for forest supervisors. These are also organized into those dealing with setting the stage and those dealing with reaching out to the communities.

Setting the stage

Forest supervisors should: **(1) establish a forest-wide policy to devote a substantial share of staff time and agency resources to building relationships with communities; (2) *assign and vigorously support at least one employee in the supervisor's office to serve as a full-time rural community assistance coordinator and community liaison, even though the RCA program may only fund a small fraction of this position.***

Reaching Out

Forest supervisors should: **(3) encourage community participation in the forest planning process, project planning process, and plan implementation through making these processes accessible to community members (for example, through clear and concise written and oral presentations, community education workshops about forest planning, public meetings held at convenient meeting times and locations, public meeting content targeted at citizen interests, and follow through to demonstrate how public input was used); (4) require that ranger district employees be able to accurately explain the forest's planning process, project planning process, and plan implementation to community members.**

Recommendations to the National Forest System Deputy Chief

It is recommended that National Forest System Deputy Chief should: **(1) create working relationships with other agencies, especially within the USDA, that have expertise in working with rural communities; (2) provide the guidance, finances and incentives necessary for national forests and their ranger districts to establish collaborative working relationships with local communities; (3) maintain dialogue with the RCA staff in State & Private Forestry in order to benefit from RCA's experience in working with communities; (4) clarify the legal authority for national forests to work collaboratively with communities; (5) provide concrete guidance to forest managers on incorporating the social, economic and cultural concerns in analyses of ecosystems, especially a consideration of the relationship of the Forest Service to local communities.**

He or she should also: (6) assert influence on the budget process to favor allocation of funds to collaborative efforts; (7) recommend law and regulation changes to policy makers necessary for national forests to work collaboratively with communities; (8) *make interaction with local communities a performance-evaluation criterion for Forest Service leaders.*

Recommendations to RCA Leadership in Washington, D. C.

There were seven recommendations for the leadership of the RCA program in Washington, D. C. To strengthen the position of the RCA program within the Forest Service, RCA leaders should: (1) strongly advocate meaningful dialogue and coordination between State and Private Forestry (especially the RCA program) and the National Forest System to increase potential for successful outcomes in community collaboration processes.

To strengthen the RCA program as a relationship-building tool RCA leaders should do the following: (2) when awarding RCA funds, they should give priority to projects in communities most heavily affected by national forests; (3) establish a clear set of RCA program objectives emphasizing its role in relationship building, creating dialogue, and developing new community stewardship collaboration; (4) ensure that RCA funds are used for projects that have the potential to benefit both the community and the Forest Service, when awarding RCA funds; (5) *give priority to projects that will contribute to building relationships between the Forest Service and communities;* (6) *make modest RCA loans for the community self-assessment component of action planning in communities that otherwise do not have the resources to get started on an action planning process;* (7) *encourage use of RCA funds to hire facilitators for national-forest-related group and community projects.*

Recommendations to RCA Coordinators

There were six recommendations of things that RCA coordinators should do to enable district rangers to create or improve relationships between the national forest and communities. They dealt respectively with setting the stage and reaching out to the communities.

Setting the stage

RCA coordinators should: (1) establish positive working relationships with the district rangers of the national forest on which they work, for instance through increased communication and technical assistance; (2) *manage the RCA program as an integral part of the forest's and the ranger district's forest management responsibility, rather than as a separate rural development program.*

Reaching out

RCA coordinators should: (3) remain involved in (but do not control) RCA funded projects, thus providing the community with a link to the Forest Service; (4) participate in the development of community capacity to work cooperatively with the Forest Service; (5) encourage communities to include current forest or ranger-district-level planning and management issues in their own community development processes, and provide technical coaching for helping them do so; (6) aggressively advertise the RCA program and its accomplishments to both communities and the Forest Service; (7) participate in the development of the capacity of communities to plan for their own future; for example, by offering capacity building training and on-going coaching.

Recommendations to Community Leaders

Finally, there is a set of recommendations to community leaders. In order to create or improve relationships between national forests and communities, community leaders should try to do the following:

Setting the stage

Community leaders should: (1) sponsor community development processes for determining what the community would like to see happen on national forest lands in the future; (2) help develop, sponsor and promote trainings, workshops, and other means for developing the community capacity for cooperating in Forest Service planning, resource management, and stewardship; (3) educate and lobby local government to ensure their involvement in RCA-funded projects; (4) promote citizen participation in community development activities, including those supported by the Rural Community Assistance program of the Forest Service, as a means for directly influencing planning for the National Forest; (5) encourage local government to give leadership to bringing the diverse interests of the county together in order to present a coherent message to the Forest Service about community issues.

Reaching out

Community leaders should: (6) invite and maintain partnerships between the local ranger district and community groups regarding community planning and development and forest management; (7) participate directly in forest planning, and encourage integration of local community planning in forest planning.

The research concluded that building stronger collaborative relationships between the Forest Service and local, forest-dependent communities is perceived by both community members and Forest Service personnel as desirable and as an important avenue for improving forest planning and management processes, as well as stimulating community improvement in general. However, there are, as yet, only a very few places where the kind of complementarity envisioned between community planning and development activities, on one hand, and forest planning and management, on the other, are actually occurring.

And there are many obstacles. In fact, some respondents oppose the very idea of such linkage, hoping to insulate the community development process from the contentious, political processes so dominant in the forest planning process.

Recommendations in the Context of Policy

In order to further clarify and support these findings and recommendations, we want to place them in an integrated and more systematic policy context, informed by the three themes described above — sustainability, stewardship, and partnership. In essence, we believe that the recommendations drawn from the experiences of the 20 case study communities participating in the RCA program and the two case study communities that did not receive RCA funding offer many opportunities for expanding and strengthening relationships that will increase sustainability, improve stewardship, and develop partnerships. This is especially true when compared with the more traditional relationships that communities have had with the Forest Service.

From a broader policy perspective, the RCA initiatives can serve, in alliance with other Forest Service resources, to establish community relationships for forest stewardship and sustainability. Let us address several major areas of policy within which the recommendations can be placed, grouped and further analyzed over time.

RCA Program Improvements

In spite of the excellent work that State and Private Forestry has done to develop a coherent rural development strategy, the RCA initiatives are still too often being seen as a “grant” program, rather than as a means of developing relationships between national forests and communities and engaging communities in forest management and ecosystem sustainability tasks. A more strategic perspective is needed that incorporates

the granting of economic recovery, diversification and assistance funds with both the strengthening of rural communities and the building of partnerships with the Forest Service in its entire mission. Several things will be required.

Because awareness of what RCA is about is not consistent nor widespread, a more coherent marketing initiative of the program is needed. This strategy needs to clearly demonstrate the linkage between rural community development, ecosystem stewardship, and community and forest planning and decision-making.

Both RCA initiatives and forest planning processes need to be flexible, yet coherent enough to engage the relationship building process at the point where communities need assistance; i.e., economic development, stewardship, or policy planning. This is especially true because communities are at different stages in the relationship-building process. There are varying levels of trust and cooperation, and communities have different orientations towards action — from focusing on their own economic development, to landscape stewardship, to participating in forest planning processes. A flexible and yet focused and integrated approach on the part of the Forest Service will enable communities to move forward in a concrete manner to connect their own visions with the needs for planning and stewardship of nearby forest lands.

Staff at the regional and forest level needs to take a more hands-on, process-oriented approach if RCA efforts are going to be effective as a community development program. Community leadership, readiness, and capacity building need to be utilized as indicators and tools to build a development process (see community capacity section).

RCA Program Linkages

As a result of the legislative mechanisms and organizational structures utilized to develop the RCA initiatives, RCA has been separately placed within a Forest Service division that addresses community forestry and state and private forestry issues. Many proponents do not wish to lose the flexibility which RCA possesses as a result of this arrangement. Nevertheless, being outside the National Forest System portion of the Forest Service has reduced the influence of RCA in some respects.

- Without necessarily reassigning the RCA role and initiatives and resources, their role and responsibility needs to be more strategically aligned with the broader mission of the Forest Service. There are many aspects of this reframing.
- The RCA program and its resources need to be viewed as assisting with the strategic challenge of community relationship building that benefits rural development, sustainability, forest planning, community stewardship and partnership development. The combined benefit of these outcomes should elevate the importance of the RCA initiative throughout the Forest Service in terms of the organization's overall mission and actions.
- At all levels of the Forest Service, but especially at the local level, the RCA initiatives should be viewed as a way to incorporate community perspectives, resources, and actions into forest planning and management themselves. Forest supervisors and individual national forest RCA and community partnership coordinators will need to encourage broader, forest-system staff recognition and support of relationship-building activities. Suggestions more or less to this effect have been incorporated in previous Forest Service proposals such as the draft statement of the Collaborative Stewardship Team.

Community Capacity Building

With the RCA program increasing its attention to sustainable rural development and a more systemic linkage with the National Forest System of the Forest Service, there will be opportunities to enhance and support capacities within the participating communities. The capacities needed by communities are quite varied. The RCA initiatives can address many of the following topics within a broad development and relationship-

building framework that focuses more attention on community sustainability, stewardship, empowerment, and the community's role within its relevant ecosystem.

- Enhancing the crucial capacity of local forest-dependent communities to play a positive role in building the kind of “common ground” that is essential for effective site-based forest planning and collaborative stewardship.
- Utilizing the RCA initiative to facilitate consensus building, visioning, and comprehensive planning activities within communities that serve both the community and the nearby forest lands.
- Focusing appropriate resources on leadership development, facilitation skills, and local organizational enhancement at the community level, which will further expand community abilities to plan and engage in collaborative activities.
- Encouraging collaboration among all levels of government from local to federal. Local government contributions in building an integrated community-ecosystem sustainability process have been a neglected resource.
- Facilitating interaction between communities, economic development districts and programs, colleges and universities, USDA Cooperative Extension Services, cultural heritage programs, the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, et al., in order to diversify funding and cross-boundary relationship building.
- Emphasizing a multi-funded, sustainable development process that brings private foundations, state and other federal resources together into the total community development process, thereby increasing the scope of potential relations with the Forest Service, and opportunities for community sustainability.
- Assisting communities in understanding the role of a forest plan, emphasizing the land resource management functions in the context of holistic natural and human ecosystems.

Forest Service Capacity

We have already noted the programmatic separation of the RCA program from the National Forest System of the Forest Service. If an improved linkage could be crafted between the RCA program and the National Forest System, individual national forests could more strategically utilize the resulting combined resources to build relationships with their surrounding communities. This would require some different focusing of resources and development of staff skills.

- Individual national forests could be encouraged to incorporate community visions and plans into resource management actions in order to integrate community and ecosystem sustainability.
- Linkages could be encouraged between RCA funded community initiatives and ecosystem stewardship opportunities to raise the level of community support and involvement in ecosystem-health projects.
- Community stewardship projects could be linked to forest planning as a means of involving community knowledge, skills, and commitment with policy development to improve a sense of community ownership.
- Individual national forests could receive initial capital to establish forestwide integrated community stewardship teams that work with similar partnerships at a community and multi-community level to link community, economy, and ecology.
- Emphasis could be placed on the forest plan revision process as a means of building community relationships and incorporating community ecosystem stewardship strategies.

Forest Plan Revision

For many of the national forests, long-range plan revision is imminent. It is widely agreed that the previous planning process outlined by National Forest Management Act (NFMA) was, in many respects, a failure (USDA Forest Service Committee of Scientists, 1998). A key failing was that it exacerbated, rather than reduced, conflict. It put the Forest Service in the untenable position of mediating among conflicting national interest groups, whose interests frequently were to play strategically by staking out extreme positions. Forest-dependent communities then became the battleground for these conflicts.

To avoid such gridlock in the future, the planning process must be shared, with other actors taking responsibility together with the Forest Service. Local, forest-dependent communities provide one set of actors with whom responsibility for the process must be shared. It is in the local area (watershed, landscape, and community) that both long-range and project planning can be dealt with on a site-specific basis.

The partnerships already built by the RCA program could, in many cases, provide the basis for this kind of collaboration and sharing in the planning process. For example, the action teams could be mobilized to assist in obtaining community input into the planning process. Additionally, of course, the RCA effort, as well as other sister agencies and programs in the USDA can, in the future, be mobilized to develop a truly community-based and collaborative-planning process.

Unfortunately, there is continuing uncertainty as to when plan revisions will be able to proceed and time is short. Furthermore, as was learned early in this research effort, very few in the Forest Service or in forest-

Linkage Between Community and Forest Planning

As obvious as it seemed to the researchers at the outset that community development planning (especially when funded by the Forest Service through RCA) and forest planning ought, logically, to have some relationship to each other. Such a relationship existed in very few of the 22 cases.

In one case — where the RCA program, its Rural Development Strategy, and the RCA coordinator, appear to have been phenomenally successful in stimulating a self-sustaining community strategic planning and development process — the community leaders involved in the latter knew virtually nothing at all about the Forest Service's long-range or project-planning process, or about any aspect of forest management for that matter; even though there are national forest lands all around the community. Nor had they expected that they would be involved in any way in an up-coming forest plan revision. Even within the national forest's supervisor's office itself there was virtually no coordination between RCA and planning. The RCA Coordinator has now retired and the position has not been refilled.

A contrast is the Tennessee Overhill near the Cherokee NF. In 1990, it became a pilot area of the Heritage Tourism Initiative of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, creating the Tennessee Overhill

Heritage Association (TOHA), which became a vehicle to realize this "museum without walls."

This highly collaborative effort involves funding from the three county governments, the National Trust, and the Forest Service. From the very beginning, the Forest Service (and especially the RCA coordinator) has been an active participant in the TOHA, keeping people up-to-date regarding Forest Service activities, as well as opportunities provided by the Forest Service and other agencies. Ten years earlier, the community and the Forest Service did not interact very much, and feelings of resentment against the Forest Service abounded.

However, during the last 10 years, the amount of communication between the Overhill community and the Forest Service increased dramatically and became more positive, to the point that a local newspaper published an editorial explaining why the Forest Service should not be considered an enemy. Three things happened: the Forest Service leadership actively promoted participation in community activities, TOHA responded by inviting Forest Service involvement, and, finally, Forest Service employees have gone above and beyond the call of duty to participate in community activities.

The Challenges to Overcome

Why is there little relationship between RCA and Forest Planning and Management?

- ◆ RCA is administered in the State and Private Forestry (S&PF) branch of the Forest Service, the one branch which does not deal with the management of National Forest Lands but rather links with external agencies, especially State Foresters.
- ◆ Some of the legislation upon which the RCA program is based (Economic Recovery Program of the 1990 Farm Bill) is written as a general rural development program, showing little consideration for a potential role in planning for and management of public lands.
- ◆ The FS responsibility for communities, as expressed in RCA, is generally seen as an ex post responsibility, to compensate for and ameliorate the effects of forest management, rather than as ex ante, to involve the affected communities at the front, in planning.
- ◆ Voluntary community leadership tends to be segregated by function. Some work in recreation, some in economic development, some in environmental issues, etc. So, broad-based community development efforts seldom consider forest planning issues relevant to what they do.
- ◆ Community people consider forest planning to be dominated by national interest groups, seeking to use the communities as their battleground and either causing or exacerbating local conflict.
- ◆ Projects were found to be of three kinds, either they: (1) focused upon community development; or (2) they focused upon planning for and management of a particular natural resource; or (3) they focused upon forest planning. Little potential linkage was seen between (1) and (3).

dependent communities see any connection between the RCA program and other community development efforts, on the one hand, and national forest planning and management, on the other, other than that RCA may be available after the fact to try to ameliorate some of the community effects of forest planning and management. Therefore, Forest Service leadership should ensure that Forest Service personnel are aware of the availability of the RCA program and its potential role in community involvement in planning efforts.

Funding

When RCA is articulated merely as a rural development grants program, it is somewhat difficult to argue for additional resources at the national level of the Forest Service. From a broad perspective, there are other sources of rural development funding through the Economic Development Administration, Community Development Block Grants and the Department of Agriculture, among others.

Nevertheless, when viewed from a more strategic perspective that includes community relationship building, community and ecosystem stewardship, sustainability, forest planning, partnership development, and rural revitalization and diversification of forest dependent communities, current levels of funding are not sufficient.

In fiscal year 1999, funds for the Economic Action Programs (of which RCA is a component) totaled \$17.3 million nationally, a significant portion of which is earmarked by Congress and consequently not available for delivering assistance or supporting collaborative stewardship or planning. This is clearly not sufficient.

- With a more extensive relationship and community development responsibility, it would be appropriate to expand the funding level of the Economic Action Programs by five to eight million dollars per year, up to a ceiling of 50 million dollars.
- Some funding could be targeted to underserved, crisis-oriented communities where the changes in forest land management have had a large impact.
- Some funding could be targeted to several collaborative, community ecosystem stewardship forests that volunteer and compete for additional seed capital to pilot an integrated community-ecosystem sustainability program for a minimum, negotiated or stated a period of time.

Summary

New endeavors are trying to reconnect communities with their national forests through ecosystem management, stewardship, and partnership development. In the context of conflict over the appropriate role of public lands, and considerable mistrust of government policies and some managers, these positive endeavors to rebuild community relationships are a very important activity. In these multifaceted efforts, the RCA program of the Forest Service can play a significant partnership role, working collaboratively through an integrated rural development process, to contribute to the emergence of community-based ecosystem sustainability.

A realignment of community, economy, and ecology in the real lives of people and within actual bioregions is the essential, long-range goal. The RCA program is already serving as an important partner in helping rural communities develop their capacities, and to collaborate in more sustainable ways with their neighboring public land managers. As noted in numerous places throughout this report, maximizing RCA program contributions will require greater attention to building deeper connection with the National Forest System of the Forest Service, increasing participating community capacities, linking with other rural development resources, mobilizing the staff resources of local national forests, and gradually increasing funding over a five-year period.

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