Conflict and Cooperation at the Public-Private Interface:

A Case Study of Fire Management
in Eastern Oregon

FINAL REPORT

submitted to

by

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OVERVIEW OF REPORT

This final report is intended as an overview of the project funded under the Community Forestry Research Fellowship program for the 2000-2001 academic year. The report is divided into three sections: (1) research question and objectives; (2) methods of data collection and analysis; and (3) emerging themes. In conclusion, I reflect on my experiences as a research fellow.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research question and objectives have not strayed far from those outlined in the proposal. The original question remains the focus for the project: What are the opportunities and challenges for cooperative fire management among public and private forestland managers in the John Day Valley? In refining the proposal, I reduced the research to two objectives: (1) describe and analyze the historical context of cooperative fire management; and (2) describe and analyze current perspectives toward cooperative fire management among forestland managers. The research question and objectives informed the methods of data collection and analysis.

METHODS

This research utilizes qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. The research design is based on naturalistic inquiry, a research paradigm that assumes social processes are most completely described when research emphasizes the natural setting or context, intuitive knowledge, and qualitative methods. The design draws from an array of research strategies including case study, ethnography, grounded theory, historical social science, and participatory action research. I believe that the combination of naturalistic inquiry, research strategies, and qualitative field methods helps to provide a solid understanding of cooperative fire management in the John Day Valley.

In summer 2000 (early July through mid-October) I resided in John Day, Oregon, where I conducted the fieldwork for my thesis. Data collection consisted of interviewing,

examining historical archives, and pursuing opportunities for involving community members in the research process.

Interviews

During the fieldwork in John Day, I concentrated on identifying and interviewing stakeholders. Through conversations with community members, I selected informants who were either knowledgeable about the history of the valley or who were involved with cooperative fire management. As I became apprised of informants, I would rank them in terms of interview priority. Interviewees with the highest priority fell in stakeholder groups where the theoretical saturation was weakest. Regardless of the priority of the interviewee, the relative significance of each informant was treated equally during data analysis.

During my stay in John Day, I conducted 36 interviews among five stakeholder groups. Several interviews were with two people, resulting in a total of 42 informants among the 36 interviews. There were also two interviews that were repeated with the same informants. Interviews ranged from under an hour to several hours in length. With the informed consent of interviewees, the interviews were tape recorded; I also took notes during the interviews.

I interviewed public land managers, private landowners, representatives of the local timber industry, local environmental activists, and other community members:

- *Public land managers:*[1] I conducted 13 interviews with public land managers, including employees of the Forest Service (8), Bureau of Land Management (2), Oregon Department of Forestry (2), and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (1).

- *Private landowners:* I had 11 interviews with private landowners, including ranchers (6) and non-industrial private forest (NIPF) owners (5). Although the line between ranchers and NIPF owners is nebulous, I defined ranchers as those whose operation

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[1] Within this bulleted list, numbers in parentheses indicate the number of interviews.

focused mainly on grazing and NIPF owners as those who concentrate on tending their forests.

- *Local timber industry:* I had 5 interviews with representatives of the local timber industry, including employees of local mills (3) and private forestry consultants who work for industry (2). The John Day Valley has three industrial wood products mills, and I interviewed people from the two largest ones.

- *Local environmental activists:* I conducted 4 interviews with local environmental activists. In the John Day area, there are few individuals who openly pursue environmentalist agendas. I was consistently directed to these key people, probably because they are the most vocal in the community. Indeed, a number of my informants within the other stakeholder categories display attitudes consistent with the more vocal environmental activists that I interviewed.

- *Other community members and leaders:* I also had 3 interviews with other community members and leaders.

The interviews were selectively transcribed. The bulk of each interview was transcribed verbatim, but those sections that were unrelated to the research question were summarized rather than transcribed. I tried to ensure confidentiality by coding all place and person names on the transcriptions.

Following transcribing, I thematically coded and analyzed the interviews.[2] Thematic coding and analysis is a process of drawing meaning from text. The technique is common for qualitative research that compares perspectives across pre-defined groups. Using the guiding research questions, the interview texts, and my field notes, I first established a list of codes that approximated the content of the words of informants across all interviews. Then, I grouped the codes in two successive levels of abstraction.

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[2] I used the computer program Atlas.ti (version 4.2) to help with the management of the interview data throughout all phases of analysis.

I conceptualize the process of thematic analysis as progressing through several levels of increasing abstraction. Coding represents the first level, when the researcher tries to capture the essence of an interviewee s words. For me, coding is the most difficult task of analysis; it is the stage at which the ground is formed as the researcher walks on it. Once a code list is established, codes are grouped in one or more additional levels of abstraction. The makers of Atlas.ti enable the researcher to group the codes into families and the families into networks . Throughout this process, I used the research question to direct and focus the emerging results. Emerging themes were further informed by self-reflections recorded in the field journal and ongoing conversations with community members.

Historical Archives

In addition to interviews, while in John Day I also perused relevant archives to try to get a sense for the historical context of cooperative fire management in the area. One key informant (a local history buff), directed me to specific historical newspaper articles, photos, books, and other data relevant to the historical context. With his help, I identified components of the historical context that illustrate the deeply rooted relationships between public and private land managers. I am still considering to what extent I am going to explore the historical context in the thesis. In all likelihood, I will integrate the historical information throughout the thesis to critically examine the emerging themes.

Participant Observation

Throughout the research process, I pursued opportunities for participant observation. Participant observation is a spectrum of qualitative methods in which the researcher attempts to observe local phenomena from the perspective of community members.

Through my scoping trips in 1999, I had identified watershed council, Soil and Water Conservation District, and public hearing and comment meetings as potential avenues for participant observation. Unfortunately, during the 2000 field season most of these events were inactive. Still, I was able to take advantage of some community events

that proved useful. I found that one of the most productive modes for participant observation was merely "hanging out" walking around town and dining in restaurants. I was also invited to several of gatherings by a local birding organization, which in turn lead me to a key informant.

Participation of Community Members

Community members helped me to identify informants and historical records and to assess emerging themes. For each interviewee, I have shared the transcription of our interview and asked them to comment on it; interviewees seem to appreciate this activity. At the inception of the project, I had anticipated that I would ask select community members to conduct interviews, review historical records, or in some other way become intimately involved with the research process. In practicality, these activities proved too time consuming for most community members.

Ranchers, foresters, Forest Service employees, and community leaders are busy people. Ranchers, for example, are in their fields before sunrise and often stay until sundown. This was especially the case during haying; one rancher could only meet me in his tractor. Research involving the participation of people such as full-time ranchers might be more successful at a different time of year, when they have fewer demands.

As a result, community participation has mostly taken the form of conversations with informants. A series of community gatherings that I attended lead me to develop relationships with two key informants, in particular. Ongoing discussions with both informants have served to evaluate ideas emerging from the interviews. Their long-time, personal experiences in John Day have helped to identify strong themes and dispel tenuous ones. Of the data collection activities I undertook while in the field, I have found my discussions with these key informants to be invaluable.

EMERGING THEMES[3]

Thematic analysis of the 36 interviews has revealed five dominant themes pertinent to the research question. The themes revolve around: (1) power; (2) land tenure; (3) trust; (4) ideologies; and (5) community and agency change. The data indicates that there is probable consensus among the stakeholders that these themes are important influencers of public-private cooperative fire management. As would be expected, within the themes there is tremendous variability as to where compatibility and incompatibility exists and where opportunities exist. The themes identify the presence of trusting relationships and core values as the most intractable hindrances to cooperation. Still, there remain opportunities for building these relationships and developing mutual understandings among the various stakeholders.

Power

This theme encompasses stakeholder perspectives related the distribution of power among potential cooperative partners. My analysis of power centers around the perceptions of differential power among public and private landowners, within the Forest Service as an agency, as well as between urban centers and rural peripheral communities like John Day. In addition, the theme considers knowledge as power and the role of power for opportunities to develop productive relationships necessary for cooperative management. Power is closely related all of the other themes, but it is probably most central to the themes of land tenure and trust. Questions important for exploring the theme of power include: Who is perceived to have disproportionate decision-making power? In what ways are power differentials expressed? What opportunities may exist for working with or overcoming the perceptions of unequally distributed power?

Land Tenure

This theme has emerged from the observations of informants that public and private landowners are subject to distinct land tenure arrangements. Differential land tenure is expressed in a variety of ways, including the perception of differential levels of

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[3] I am currently exploring these themes; descriptions of the themes are tentative.

accountability, personal investment, and the relative influence of regulatory demands on the decisions that a land manager faces. As the literature suggests, the existence of this theme may reflect the tradition in this country of dichotomizing landownership into public and private sectors. One way to overcome issues related to this theme may be to broaden our conception of landownership to include the full range of tenure categories. Important questions addressed in this theme include: Who is perceived to have a greater personal stake in the resources they manage? What might be some of the implications of a sense of differential personal investment for cooperation? What opportunities may exist for working through the perception of differential tenure, emerging with a greater mutual understanding that may benefit cooperation among landowners?

Trust

The third theme revolves around trust. Social trust among stakeholders is expressed in a number of ways including general distrust of government, the lack of trust among the various agency hierarchies, as well as trust among community members within the local John Day community. Central to this theme are the various perspectives surrounding the credibility of stakeholders and the effect of historical events (e.g., escaped fires) on the trust levels among the stakeholders.

As conceptualized in the literature, trust and social capital are intimately linked. There cannot be much social capital without a certain level of social trust, and vice versa. Therefore, when exploring opportunities for building on the social capacity to work together that could benefit local cooperative efforts, the trust levels among important stakeholders becomes an important consideration. As some stakeholders have suggested, cooperative burns themselves might be a way to develop the trust among public and private land managers that would pay dividends in the form of successful cross-boundary projects in the future. Questions that help guide this theme comprise: Among which stakeholders does significant distrust exist? How is trust and distrust expressed? What might be some of the underlying causes of the sense of differential trust among stakeholders? In what ways have trust levels affected past efforts at cooperation? What are some of the opportunities for dealing with or working through issues involving trust?

Ideology

The fourth theme involves personal ideologies. This theme has emerged from the wide array of expressions suggesting some of the underlying values which may be influencing the perspectives of stakeholders. I divide this theme into several sub-themes: (a) human-nature relationship; (b) fire management; and (c) social mores.

The human-nature relationship relates to ideologies about what is natural and what is the proper role of humans in the environment. As might be expected, the human-nature relationship reflects values ranging from extractionist to preservationist ideologies about the purpose of forests.

Ideologies about fire management encompass the range of viewpoints about the role of fire and fire management in the woods. The stakeholders I interviewed expressed differential notions about the utility of using fire in the woods, including prescribed fire and wildfire. A culture of fire management, closely linked to the human-nature relationship, is a significant layer to the complexity that appears to underlie the ideologies regarding fire management.

Ideologies also surround local social mores, myths, and stories. This is perhaps the most abstract aspect of the ideological theme, but I believe that it serves as a strong cultural component for cooperative fire management. Social mores were expressed of individuals, the local community, and of the Forest Service as an agency. Some of the social mores may be unique to rural community life. Others, such as individualism, are arguably American ideals that the experience and culture of isolated life may reinforce

Community and Agency Change

The last theme revolves around the context of community and agency change in the John Day area. Demographic change and landowner turnover are both perceived by stakeholders to be important issues for the community and the agency. Cultural components of this theme include the ideological paradigm shift within the agency and the local industry, as well as a resistance to change detected in all stakeholder groups.

Indeed, cooperation is viewed as a change that is bringing with it threatening new ideas. This represents a challenge for cooperative fire management in the John Day area.

CONCLUSION

My experiences as a community forestry fellow have proved rich and rewarding. My attraction to the John Day Valley and the people who live there is what initially drew my attention to issues in the area. By supporting place-based and participatory research, the CFRF program further encouraged me to pursue this project. The program has opened my eyes to a pragmatic way of conducting meaningful research that is relevant to real people in real places. I share in the enthusiasm of community members who themselves have become excited by this project.

In October, one community leader, Eva Harris, and myself presented this research at the CFRF workshop in New Mexico. Since the workshop, Eva has integrated notions of community forestry into her campaign for County Commissioner. In January, she made the front page of the county newspaper because of her speech about community forestry at a meeting sponsored by the Forest Service. Eva continues to be excited about what she sees as the potential role that this research and community forestry can play in the John Day community. I also look forward to seeing where the ideas nourished by this research may lead.