

Case Study 2: Wallowa County, Oregon

2-1. The Community

Wallowa County consists of 3,153 square miles located in Northeastern Oregon in the beautiful Wallowa-Whitman National Forest area. The county is about 52 % forestland and 56% of the forests are owned by the federal government. Wallowa County has a population of about 7,200 people. Forest and watershed management activities in the county suffer from declining financial and human resources. This decline can be seen in the high unemployment rate (10.7% in the County compared to 6.3% in Oregon and 4.8% in U.S. in year 2001); the declining school enrollment; and the emigration of working families. The average annual pay per job in the year 2000 in the county was \$22,546 compared to \$35,296 in the U.S. In a recent statewide assessment the Oregon Progress Board ranked Wallowa County's economy as the 35th out of 36 counties in the state. Over the past several years, 14.3% of the county residents have had income below the federal poverty level. In addition, there is a clear trend toward increasing retiree and second homeownership.

The traditional forest-related industry sector in Wallowa has experienced significant decline over the past decade as a result of increased tree mortality, severe fire and pest impacts, a downturn in the market price for lumber, and increasing federal-level restrictions on wood and other natural resources such as anadromous salmonids (under the Endangered Species Act of 1992). All three of the remaining timber mills closed by 1995 – including the large Boise Cascade mill in Joseph, which had the highest (union) wage jobs. While the two smaller mills in Joseph and Wallowa reopened in 1996, supplies to these mills remains tenuous. As a result, the 123 jobs provided by these mills – and the over 100 other jobs linked to the lumber and wood products industry (contractors and workers, truckers, etc.) – are at risk. Over the past 10 years, the forest-related sector of the local economy lost over 220 jobs, which is greater than the jobs gained over the same period by all other sectors combined.

Despite the losses, the lumber and wood products sector remains the second largest employer in the County in terms of both job count and total payroll. Local government is the leading sector in both of these categories due in large part to the county hospital, while federal government places third in both categories.

2-2. How the project started

Several representatives from local, county, state, and federal agencies met in November 2000 in La Grande, Oregon to discuss current and ongoing assessments primarily related to social and economic conditions. The group was brought together by LUCID (Local Unit Criteria and Indicator Development Project) and shared a wide range of goals and objectives related to monitoring and reporting needs based on county, state and federal laws and policy initiatives. As a first step the group developed a list of current initiatives working in the field of sustainable forestry at different levels – local, regional, multi-state and national.

Following the meeting, the Northeast Oregon Community Assessment Workgroup (NEOCAW) was formed to design and implement a social and economic assessment framework and process for Union and Wallowa Counties. The Core Group of NEOCAW included:

- ◆ Regional Services Institute, Eastern Oregon University
- ◆ Grande Ronde Model Watershed (an intergovernmental agency covering Wallowa and Union counties)
- ◆ Wallowa Resources, a small local NGO
- ◆ USFS Wallowa-Whitman National Forest

Other parties who participated in this work included representatives of:

- ◆ Wallowa and Union Counties' Board of Commissioners
- ◆ Wallowa and Union Counties' School Districts
- ◆ Oregon Department of Forestry
- ◆ Oregon Economic and Community Development Department
- ◆ Oregon Progress Board
- ◆ Northeast Oregon Economic Development District
- ◆ Oregon Department of Employment
- ◆ USFS Pacific Northwest Research Station (INLAS)
- ◆ USFS Malheur, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests
- ◆ Blue Mountains Demonstration Area
- ◆ Ecosystem Workforce Program

The group recognized the need to do additional outreach to assess interest in participation amongst the tribes with ceded lands and treaty rights within the analysis area including the Nez Perce Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon. Participation from each County's Workforce Investment Boards and/or Economic Development Committees, and other parties was also considered important.

The key objectives for NEOCAW were:

- to provide an overall framework for assessing social and economic baseline conditions with common indicators, protocols and standards and to monitor meaningful and measurable changes over time.
- to facilitate and focus the project partners' limited resources on collaborative data collection and combined assessment efforts.
- to provide an effective feedback from the public of how the groups are progressing toward achieving the various goals and objectives.

The participants agreed that they needed to focus on key questions to guide the development of a *Collaborative Assessment Framework*. As a result, the following six key questions were developed to guide NEOCAW's work in the first year (2001):

1. What is the baseline condition of the economy, social well-being, and the quality of life in Union and Wallowa Counties, and what factors and trends (natural resource management, economic development, agricultural production, etc.) are affecting these conditions?
2. What key assets and business and workforce capacity are available for ecologically sustainable natural resource management, economic development, agriculture production, etc.?
3. What opportunities exist or are forthcoming to utilize local skills, businesses, and resources to address ecosystem restoration needs and create by-products or value-added opportunities?
4. How can investments in community-based watershed restoration lead to improvement in the natural resource management of landscapes, generate economically viable local employment and income, or improve the socio-economic conditions?
5. Where and how can investments in high priority watersheds for conservation and restoration be most effective in providing a high probability of benefits to local communities?
6. What are the tradeoffs between alternative choices for ecosystem restoration management activities and what is the distribution of impacts to local communities, other individuals and future users of the area?

Although most of these questions focus on the socio-economic aspects of natural resource management, the Group acknowledged that the framework developed should be based on the concept that social, ecological and economic systems interact with each other as elements of the ecosystem. Moreover, multiple temporal and spatial scales are important to linking changes in the system, therefore identifying indicators that assess such changes at different scales would be critical.

The first draft of the *Collaborative Assessment Framework* focused on the relationships between the forested landscapes and the resulting community conditions. The Montreal Process Criteria and Indicators and the Oregon Department of Forestry's Core Indicator Data Matrix were used as the initial basis for developing the local draft framework. The main objective of the Core Group was to focus on indicators that were already being assessed at the state and national levels to maximize efficiency in data collection and assessment efforts.

The Core Group screened a partial list of useful resources and frameworks identified at the November 28, 2000. Criteria and indicators were modified to provide a meaningful and measurable set of local criteria and indicators.

The first fundamental change was to expand the framework to capture information and provide for the analysis of community conditions with the entire landscape of both counties, including forested, agricultural and urban lands. The Group agreed to retain the

criteria and indicators from the Montreal set at this time, and noted that the State of Oregon set is based on a narrower range of Montreal Criteria and Indicators that help to focus the discussion.

NEOCAW agreed that incorporating standards for assessing progress of the indicators was necessary, but deferred the discussion and development of standards until the core criteria and indicators framework was finalized.

Due to funding limitations, the participants agreed that each entity conducting an assessment would be responsible for archiving the information gathered and sharing it with the others whenever it becomes available. Several different groups have been collecting various elements of the data but no collaborative data gathering and analysis had been undertaken. The short-term objective of the group was to establish a collaborative effort for identifying multiple plans and policies, criteria and indicators, collect multiple data sets among the various entities and produce analysis of results in comprehensive format using the framework for communicating to the public.

2-3. Using the Montreal Process Criteria and Indicators (MP C&I)

NEOCAW was particularly interested in using the MP C&I to help expand their indicator set beyond the socio-economic indicators to include some ecological indicators for assessing baseline conditions and trends in local natural resources.

In a workshop held in May 2002 NEOCAW brought together representatives from Wallowa, Union and Grant Counties to introduce them to the concept of sustainability, Montreal Process C&I, and the work done so far. The main objective of the workshop was to refine and expand Wallowa County's indicators for sustainable forest management and sustainable community, and develop a common vision of what natural resource management can or should mean in the context of community-based needs, desires, and economic well-being.

During the first day of the workshop Wallowa County participants were first introduced to the work done by NEOCAW. Then, using Round Robin exercise the group selected indicators from a long list of sustainable community/sustainable forestry indicators organized within the MP C&I framework.

The second day of the workshop brought together NEOCAW, Blue Mountains group and the Tech Team to address specific challenges to indicator development, such as data availability, issues of scale, data interpretation, etc. Participants further discussed the six key Wallowa County questions.

2-4. Next steps

The workshop faced some skepticism toward the process and a real fear of loss of local control over the natural resources. However, this problem was resolved in the following months. The Natural Resource Advisory Committee (NRAC) was charged with the task

of moving the process ahead. People wanted to meet and brainstorm indicators. Over 70 people were involved in setting the community values. NEOCAW members presented their work and the larger group liked it. This work naturally built on a previous effort in the County called “Future Search” – a process that involved a wide group of people from Wallowa County who got together and developed a common vision and agreed on key initiatives to move toward this vision.

As a next step the larger community group charged NEOCAW and NRAC to develop some county specific criteria and indicators that focus on the unique attributes of the County. The goal was to come up with indicators which are highly valued by the residents. A final list of indicators has been developed but due to the pressures of other projects, the final report is not expected to become available until 2004.

2-5. Lessons learned

NEOCAW project provided the following key lessons that other communities may find valuable:

- The MP C&I approach focuses primarily on forest sustainability and leaves out other important natural resources such as agricultural and range land. Other important community issues such as education, public health, safety, etc. are also left out of the framework. Therefore, the MP C&I is best suited as a framework for communities particularly interested in forest-related issues.
- Having long lists of indicators to choose from can be overwhelming and frustrating for the participants. It might be better to take a few key issues and have participants develop their own indicators.
- It is overly ambitious to try to develop a final list of indicators in one day-long meeting. It takes a long time to review and discuss each indicator; therefore a better approach would be to have a series of one-day meetings to finalize the indicators.
- Before beginning a process to develop sustainability indicators it is very important that there be clarity about a) the purpose that the indicators will serve; and b) the common vision and set of goals that will guide indicator development and related action. The indicators are only a tool and they cannot help promote sustainable forest management unless they are part of a process of goal-setting, decision-making and acting upon results.
- There is no one set of indicators that will apply to every community (one-size-fits-all). Depending on their resources and key issues, communities should be able to select the most relevant indicators to measure their sustainable forestry efforts.
- There is a strong interest in developing sustainable resource management indicators because indicators are information and information is power. In a community like Wallowa County, the greatest fear is the loss of local control over the local resources.

Having comprehensive information on the baseline of natural resources and trends would allow the community to participate in national-level discussions and help change national policies. An example of such participation is the NEOCAW's recent involvement in revising the National Fire Plan.

- Related to the fear of loss of control mentioned above, the MP C&I framework can initially be seen in a negative light by community members because it was developed by an international group to address national level forest management. This can cause misunderstanding that using the MP C&I will result in decisions that reflect national or international concerns rather than local concerns. This is not the case, since the MP C&I is only a framework for organizing information and addressing issues. Therefore, if the process is locally driven, the results will reflect local concerns and solutions. However, organizers of a community process should be aware of this potential concern and be careful how the MP C&I is introduced to the community.
- Involving a wide group of community members is critical for gaining credibility, building consensus and creating ownership of the indicators, which paves the way for moving ahead. It further helps raise awareness and educate the public about key community issues related to natural resource management. The Wallowa case demonstrated the importance of preparing the larger group before the actual launching of the indicators project in order to avoid some difficulties related to local cultural and political issues.
- The Wallowa County pilot demonstrated that the process of developing indicators is not an easy one. Frustration at some points is natural; it should not discourage the participants. Developing goals and indicators for sustainable resource management is a cyclical, evolving process. Even if a community decides to go back and start from a blank sheet, it has benefited from the cumulative learning. The process of indicator development is as important as the actual indicators because it promotes understanding of and buy-in to the overall objectives.
- Involving more than one community can be challenging when developing vision, goals and indicators for sustainable resource management. Even though Wallowa and Union Counties are very similar they have enough differences to approach the process and the indicators differently.
- Some of the Montreal Process C&I are not meaningful at local level. There is clearly a need for upscaling and downscaling the indicators, or identifying which indicators at national level can be used locally and which ones at local level can be integrated up to the national scale (this was a common finding from all three pilots). Creating a tiered system of indicators at different scales (local, regional, multi-state, and national) is particularly important both for improving data collection and decision-making at all these levels in order to promote sustainable forestry.

- In some cases using the Montreal Process Criteria appears to be more useful than the Montreal Process Indicators themselves because the Criteria ensure a comprehensive coverage of forest issues but leave more freedom to communities in selecting the most appropriate measures for their circumstances. Other frameworks for developing the actual indicators may turn out to be more useful (e.g., Community Capital Framework, Input-Output-Outcome, Pressure-State-Response).
- It is very difficult for a community with limited resources to attempt to use all 67 indicators laid out in the MP C&I. A better approach might be to select and use a small number of core indicators covering key issues of concern (e.g., 10-20).