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Transcript of Collaborative conservation in local landscapes

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BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION

[00:00:04] NILS CHRISTOFFERSEN:

Thank you, Robin. It is a real honor and a pleasure to be here this morning. And I trust you, Robin, Tony, and everyone else here at the Center for Collaborative Conservation in Colorado State University know that I greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak to you about collaborative conservation and local landscapes.

It's a field of work and study that is a real passion of mine. I've been working in the field of community-based natural resource management for about two decades now. The last ten of which I've been with Wallowa Resources in Northeast Oregon.

This morning I'm going to draw mostly from my work in Oregon and also from my partnerships and the mentoring I've received from multiple organizations and individuals across the US, including those at Sustainable Northwest, the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition, the Hayfork Watershed Research and Training Center in California, Northwest Connections and Blackfoot Challenge in Montana, National Forest Foundation, American Forests, OSU, and even the faculty here at Colorado State University. My story, I probably could have told a very similar story to Bill and I'm glad I'm not going to. In that, I've also been involved in a lot of different types of collaboration and could endorse all of the points that Bill made. I prepared to talk less about the past history of collaboration in the United States and to focus more on the particular model that has emerged at Wallowa Resources and that we're seeing emerge across many areas of the United States although still too scarce and too rare.

And that's a model of local institutional-led collaboration with a very broad integrated mission. So we're not talking about convening different groups of stakeholders or interest groups. We're talking about a community organization truly with a triple bottom line approach or mission that then helps convene the different interest groups that solve problems and move forward.

So that's what I'm going to try to talk about today. And I didn't mean any slight to Bill in saying I'm glad I'm not going to say what he said, I just didn't want to repeat it. Before I get started, just a quick introduction to Wallowa Resources.

Wallowa Resources was started by citizens of Wallowa County working with the Wallowa County Board of Commissioners to regroup in the aftermath of dramatic social, economic, and environmental adjustments catalyzed by the listing of Chinook salmon under the Endangered Species Act in 1992. This listing and the subsequent listings of steelhead, bull trout, lynx, and other species native to our landscape, fundamentally altered the local community's access to and benefit

from the National Forest System lands that occupy nearly 60% of our county. Over time, these changes have increasingly affected our private lands as well.

Prior to 1992, the forestry and forest products were the dominant economic driver in the county, generating over 25% of their total revenues and supporting an equal percentage of our work force. With the loss of the mills, there was considerable social disruption, fear, and polarization across the community. In the midst of this crisis, the local community, under a proactive county government, united to explore options to regain hope and influence over our future. Eventually, local citizens with the assistance from Sustainable Northwest and the USDA's Rural Communities Assistance Program formed Wallowa Resources in 1996.

The founding mission was a clear commitment to sustainability, providing equal weight to forest, watershed, and community health, job and business creation and increased social understanding of the links between the health of our lands and water and the health of our community. In 1997, the county government officially recognized Wallowa Resources as a lead agency promoting the natural resources sector of the county's strategic plan.

We recognize and honor the responsibility of this designation. Wallowa County has actually a longer history of collaboration starting back in the late 1980s as environmental issues became increasingly complex and challenging to our county government. The county government formed a natural resources advisory committee.

The natural resources advisory committee had specific representation from diverse parts of our community, representing the ranching and farming interests, the forestry interests, environmental interests, art interests, job interests, a whole range of issues that are represented there, to help them establish some local capacity and a local forum to discuss these challenges and generate recommendations to the county government. The biggest initial product from this collaborative was the Wallowa County Nez Perce Tribe Salmon Habitat Recovery Plan, which was formulated prior to the listing of Chinook under the ESA in the hopes that with an officially endorsed local plan in place, we would be given a little bit more or special consideration with the federal government in responding to that listing and that we could have more influence over the impact of that listing on our community and our response to that without abdicating our responsibility to that listed species.

But to do it in a way that better suited the local context which many local stakeholders had participated in defining, including as the title suggests, the Nez Perce tribe. Unfortunately, we never got any special standing.

And so the initial goal for that effort has not really been achieved, but it was still seen as a positive experience that brought a lot of people together, got them used to working with each other. And since then, there's been a series of other collaborative efforts culminating right now in an effort to revisit our land use plan because of some of the same pressures that Bill spoke about earlier today. With the loss of our natural resource sector, with declining income and jobs in forestry, agr, and farming, and an increasing real estate value relative to the productive value of that land, we're beginning to see some fairly dramatic changes in the county in terms of ownership, land use, the ability to collaborate across fence boundaries addressing noxious weeds, a number of other issues that are coming up.

So we're looking at how can we address some of those issues through a revision to our land use plan. So Wallowa Resources is trying to respond to some of this work, some of these challenges in the county. And we have a four-tiered program.

To the best of our ability, we try to integrate things. We have a division focused specifically on watershed, stewardship and restoration.

That started with very small projects in Aspen and Wetland Restoration and now leads a collaborative at the fifth watershed scale. So encompassing watersheds about 170 to 200,000 acres including both public and private land to do forest restoration, range restoration, riparian restoration, wildlife habitat improvement, road system rationalization, however you want to call it, trail and recreation development, the whole gambit of work that needs to be done within the watershed.

We also have a research and education program that has a K through 12 education program that supports our public schools with the loss in mills, with the loss in basically a massive decline in working families in our county. Our school enrollment declined by over 50%. We lost many teachers.

We offer about 40% of the course programming that Metro Portland offers and and so many nonprofits, not just Wallowa Resources, have begun to partner with the school districts to provide supplemental elective courses to them and supplemental instruction. We do that both during the school week, which is now a four-day school week, Monday to Thursday, but also on free day, on Friday, that helps relieve some of the families that don't have child care on Fridays, but also provides us an opportunity because they're not in school to do more field-based learning. That research and education program though has also expanded to include undergraduate and graduate courses, including one that starts again next week with OSU called Communities and Natural Resources. And more exciting to me is some graduate research partnerships, working with graduate students who are truly interested in applied practical research and are willing to commit their time and effort to questions of highest importance to our own community and our county commissioners and Wallowa Resources And help us really generate new knowledge and understanding of some of the conditions and trends and what our options might be.

We also created a for-profit subsidiary that initially invested in a small mill and the investment failed. It then started a smaller wood products company, basically a post and pole company, firewood company, and is now supporting the emergence of other biomass energy companies and renewable energy investments more broadly. And our for-profit subsidiary has a strong cash plan, is not quite as profitable as we want they're not losing money, but they're not generating the kinds of profits we'd hope that they could pass dividends back to the non-profits so we could reinvest in our work.

But they are supporting the equivalent of about 18 jobs, through five different companies in the county today. So that's exciting to us. Since 2000, Wallowa Resources has invested over \$8 million in forest range stewardship in Wallowa County.

So let me take a step back now a little bit. I described my passion as community-based natural resource management. And I define that as the management of landscapes for community benefit. Community benefit is an aggregation of local, social, economic, and ecological values.

Where public lands, listed species, or larger ecological services and function are involved, community benefit must also reflect larger national and sometimes international values. Some level of local community participation and management decision is a central operating principle.

With information from the Forest Service, from Sustainable Northwest, from other communities in the west that visits from the folks in Hayfork, California, there was the decision made to form or create the non-profit, the institution that would then lead some of this work in partnership with county government and others in Wallowa County. Formation then leads to demonstrations of pivotal activities aimed at not only demonstrating the value of this approach and that it truly could be successful, but more importantly, at developing the relationships and the trust that is needed to be able to scale up and tackle more complex, more meaningful challenges within the community. That then leads to, ideally, and here again, as we move up the slope, and note also that it is truly a slope and it is a slippery slope.

And that as you're moving, there is a lot of, you gotta pay attention so you don't slide back down to the beginning. And a lot of that's about relationships and trust as you move along.

But eventually, you're hoping you get to a point where your projects are actually generating not just real social and ecological value, but economic value and financial returns that then can be reinvested in this type of work and it becomes more transformative. We're beginning to see that in small ways.

When we decided to create the Smallwood products company that we created in six, seven years ago, which was designed specifically to help create a market for small diameter ponderosa pine and other products that the community at large agreed needed to be removed from the forest to address the conditions leading to increased wildfire. We had 16 members of our community collectively buy into a new LLC, put in about \$335,000 to help us capitalize that company.

Eventually we got that company to profitability and sold it off and paid off those investors and several of them have actually come to me just this summer and asked me if there are other businesses they could invest in and with a particular interest in some of the emerging renewable energy opportunities. But we're also looking at linking some of these investments together. So we've lost most of our mills in the region but Boise Cascade remains. And Boise Cascade, because they remain, they are critically important to sustaining the values of standing forests and helping us to move to our new future, which is a different future of forest management and forest jobs, but one which still obviously depends on the ability to generate money from forests, as opposed to purely from recreation or aesthetic purposes.

And one of the opportunities with the new company that we're looking at developing in Wallowa County will help be a brand new source of pine shavings and pine fiber to the particle board plant in Island City. That'll save hundreds of jobs in Union County and create an incredible amount of value for landowners in Wallowa County who currently have no markets or limited markets for small diameter pine. So what have been our biggest challenges? I mean this is the biggest one by far and it's said over and over.

And one of the things that has been striking to me over the past ten years at Wallowa resources, I think is how little it's appreciated that that's a continuing challenge every single day, of every single year of a collaborative. You get funds from the federal government, state government, foundations are often provided to start the collaborative. But they're rarely provided to continue the collaborative once it's started. And in reality, the challenges get more complex as you try to scale up and address more difficult issues.

And so the transaction costs involved in maintaining those relationships and those trusts just continue to increase. Figuring out some way to manage those costs and pay for those costs over the long term is going to be critical. Changing personnel adds to that cost. In Wallowa County, with the main ranger district that we partner with, in my ten years, there have been eight different district rangers there, three permanent, five temporary.

We've also seen three different executive directors at the main environmental group that is focused on environmental protection preservation of the Hells Canyon Blue Mountain ecosystem. More interestingly recently is some of the external political pressure that has created challenges for us. Through the Bush administration, and probably preceding that, but I'm not a scholar of some of the past history here, having spent most of the '90s overseas, there were a lot of policies and regulations placed that empowered local level collaboratives.

Some of those advocates for those policies have now questioned me personally, our county commissioners, our collaborative, whether the collaborative process is really working. And there's two issues there that strike me as somewhat interesting, challenging. One is they have a whole different set of goals for what they wanted to see achieved with our collaborative.

It wasn't our goals, it was their goals. The second thing is that it made it very obvious to me that while that political level of support, those new policies and regulations were critically important to our work, there weren't enough small groups around the country ready to take advantage of that and substantiate the value of those policies. And so until we can populate the landscape with more groups that have high capacity and can take advantage of enabling policies and framework, it's going to be difficult to maintain the support at the political level.

The second thing that was particularly daunting and to some completely disappointing to us were things new top-down initiatives like the travel management plan. Through our local collaborative we've been working at the watershed scale to address travel management plans in a more integrated holistic process of looking at the watershed conditions, as a whole. Through that process we had analyzed every single road segment within the watersheds that we're working in and identified opportunities for improvement, for closure, for permanent closure, and decommissioning, for temporary closure, et cetera. And we had actually done it without any specific target in mind.

We were just looking at costs and benefits. As a result, at the end of the day, we had broad community support to move from a matrix of roads that exceeded the forest standards of 2.5 miles per square mile down to a end solution that when fully implemented would fall far below that standard.

We got two recommendations that would have left it at 1.52 miles per square mile. Then all of a sudden we get directive from the Washington office that the forest at large needs to do travel management planning and all of this relationship and trust and confidence is blown apart, as people now through this top down process, fight for their particular interest, in particular road segments and all these old battle lines start reemerging. That was challenging and we're still working our way through that. What other challenges do we have?

There's a lot of challenges, but I would say skipping probably to the bottom there, it's really critical that we invest more in collaboration to deal with larger landscape and more complex issues. We spent a lot of time on what people have called the low hanging fruit.

We need to really address things that have true significance, social, economic and ecological significance, and demonstrate the value of this. Because one of the dangers in collaborative processes is what we call it in Southern Africa participatory fatigue.

It's easy to burn out in a collaborative unless you see real value coming from it. So I think collaboration does work. It's difficult.

Some would say painful. One of the members of my collaborative coined a new definition, probably not found in Webster's. He said, 'Collaboration is an unnatural act between unconsenting adults.'

(audience laughing)

And the county commissioner, who when we started this journey, 12, 14 years ago, and they had half a foot in collaboration because they weren't sure it was really going to work. And on the other half, they were sticking to more interest group, political approaches, is now convinced that this is the right way, but he couches it this way. He said to my board this summer, "I hate collaboration, but I think it's the only way forward."

It allows us to integrate goals. It encourages collective learning and innovation. And really is I think the best way that we are going to achieve any kind of triple, bottom line. In our case, the county leadership has been very important to our success.

It's one of the things that attracted me to Wallowa Resources that this relationship with a democratic elected county government. We're not a freestanding non-profit that started with our own independent mission moving in our own directions. We are partnered with county government.

We have a strong commitment to transparency and inclusiveness. All of our meetings are open to the public. Anybody can participate.

We rarely resort to votes. We try to achieve consensus. Really critical that we achieve benefits that are meaningful to everybody to keep them motivated.

And one of the big ones, which is one of the more difficult ones probably, is whether or not there truly is shared risk and responsibility and accountability. There's always risk for the local landowners and the local communities in the outcomes of these decisions. There is not always true tangible risk to the other participants that would like to have a say in the outcomes of collaborative processes.

And that becomes a point of tension. If a permittee or a logger or somebody working in a mill stands to lose their job, lose their income for the year, those are real risks that everybody should respect and appreciate.

And everybody really needs to have a stake in the outcome and be committed to the outcomes of the collaborative that generate results and manage risks in a meaningful way. I think Martin Goble drew this up from Sustainable Northwest, but as we've seen in Northeast Oregon, we've seen the Forest Service staffing declined by half to the point that they now have two professional foresters managing 1.3 million acres of forest.

Well, 750,000 acres of that is forest. And in comparison to Boise Cascade or the Nature Conservancy, which is staffing for professional foresters, more on the line of one to 30,000, you see a decline in the state forestry capacity.

You see a very limited ability of county government to respond to more complex demands on their time and resources. And there's really the opportunity for the place-based response.

And we're dealing with wicked problems. We're dealing with problems that Rittel and Weber at UC Berkeley back in 1969 described as wicked problems in a very dryly titled paper called, 'Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning.' But it's a fascinating paper because he's talking about, they, the two of them are talking about the difficulty of using science or professionals to solve problems of social policy.

And they said that in a pluralistic society there is no undisputable public good. There's no objective definition of equity.

Policies that respond to social problems cannot be meaningfully correct or false, and it makes no sense to talk about optimal solutions to social problems unless severe qualifications are imposed. As a result, they concluded, science alone and professionals in various relevant fields cannot solve wicked problems. Every wicked problem is unique, and solutions designed for one location or one context will not solve the problem in any other context.

I think it's particularly apt as we think about collaborative conservation and the potential value of these bottom-up types of approaches, where we work hard at the social institutional and organizational level to find the balance that we need for a sustainable society that clearly has needs for products, goods, and services from our resource base while we maintain the integrity and health of those resources over the long term. Thanks.

(audience applauding)

END TRANSCRIPTION