

Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) collaborative governance assessment: Summary of findings for the Common Monitoring Strategy

The Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERI) developed a program-wide, longitudinal collaborative governance assessment as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service (Forest Service) Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP)¹ Common Monitoring Strategy.² This assessment was designed to capture best practices for effective and inclusive collaborative governance, as well as to develop a monitoring indicator for existing and future collaborative efforts. This brief summarizes high-level findings from the CFLRP Collaborative Governance National Synthesis Report, including what is working well and recommendations to improve collaborative progress and performance.

Approach

The SWERI administered an online survey to members of all newly authorized or reauthorized CFLRP projects (n=15; Figure 1) between 2021 and 2023. The assessment asked:

- Do participants feel the collaborative exhibits characteristics generally associated with healthy, well-functioning, and resilient collaboratives?
- To what extent do participants feel the project is meeting process, socio-economic, and ecological goals?
- What challenges or disruptions affect collaborative performance and durability and how have participants responded to disruptions?
- What do participants need or recommend to improve the process?

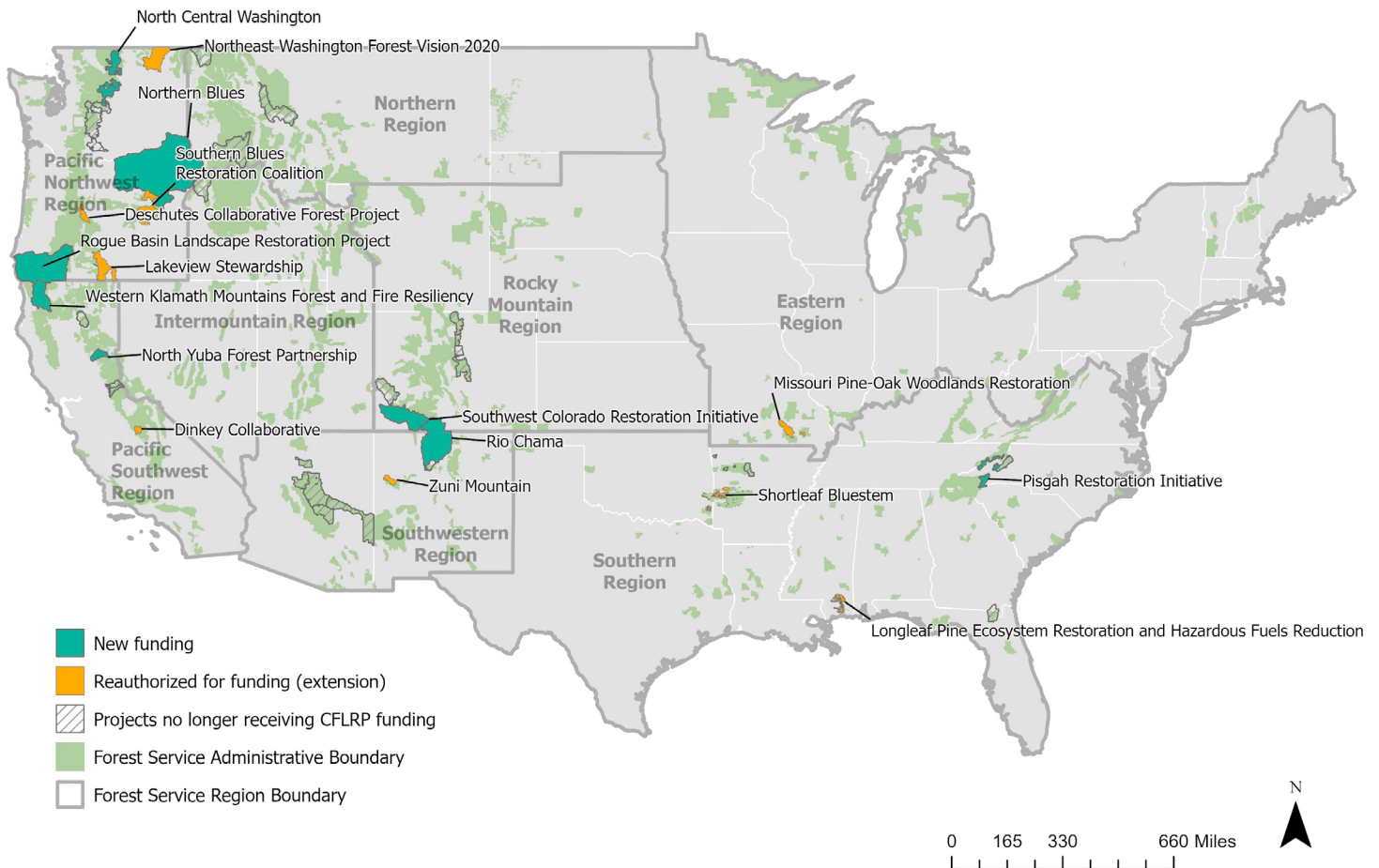


Figure 1. Map of authorized CFLRP projects.

1. CFLRP Collaborative Governance Assessment Project - <https://sweri.org/cflrp-collaborative-governance-assessments/>
 2. USDA Forest Service Common Monitoring Strategy - <https://www.fs.usda.gov/restoration/documents/cflrp/CMS-Fact-Sheet-final-20221013.pdf>

The SWERI collaborative governance assessment received 396 usable responses, representing a 27% response rate. More than half of the respondents represented non-governmental organizations or the Forest Service, but all groups included in the survey were represented to some degree (Figure 2).

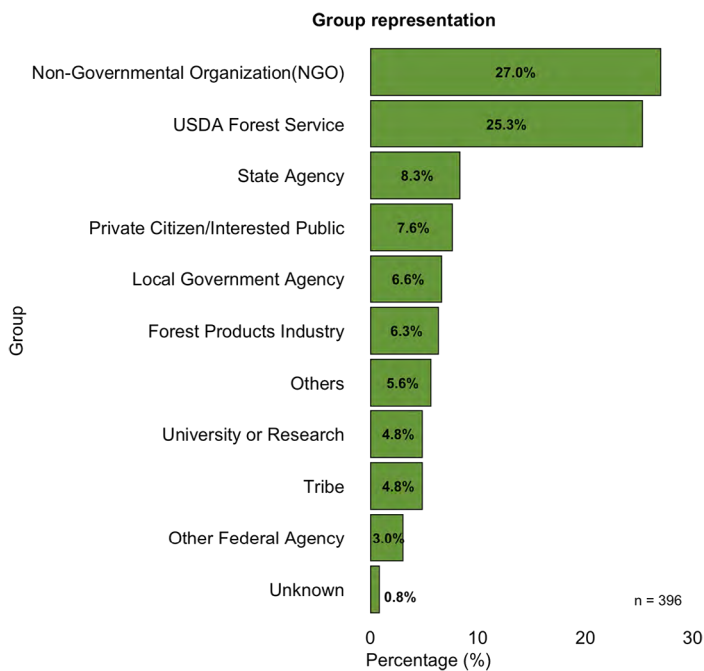


Figure 2. Respondents' self-identified representation with associated group type; three respondents did not answer this question and have therefore been categorized under "unknown" (n=396).

Findings

The findings reported in this brief represent the consolidation of results from respondents across all 15 CFLRP projects. However, results varied for each CFLRP. Project level summaries can be found [here](#).

Respondents' primary motivations for engaging in their CFLRP were to restore forest resiliency, reduce community wildfire risk, increase the pace and scale of restoration, and improve relationships and trust. A majority of respondents reported that their CFLRP was collaborative or very collaborative.

What is working well

Results indicated areas where collaboration seemed to be working across CFLRP projects. A notable majority ($\geq 60\%$) or a strong majority ($\geq 75\%$) of respondents indicated that they:

- Felt a representative cross-section of partners were included in their CFLRP project.
- Worked together to identify shared interests and concerns in neutral venues where a wide range of issues were discussed.
- Agreed about key problems affecting their respective CFLRP landscapes, strategies to address problems, and the purpose of the project.

- Agreed the collaborative processes had helped build trust, relationships, mutual respect, and legitimacy as they worked to achieve desired outcomes (Figure 3).
- Were committed to the collaborative process and felt their partners were, as well.
- Thought their CFLRP projects had key leaders who communicated a shared vision, motivated others to work together, and worked well across partners.
- Thought their CFLRP partners worked together to co-develop and share knowledge and information and were committed to adaptive management.
- Had sufficient technical expertise and facilitation in their collaborative.
- Had collaborative protocols that helped establish accountability within their CFLRP projects.
- Had collaborative protocols that were fair and equitable and used appropriately.
- Thought that the Forest Service was responsive to feedback from the collaborative.

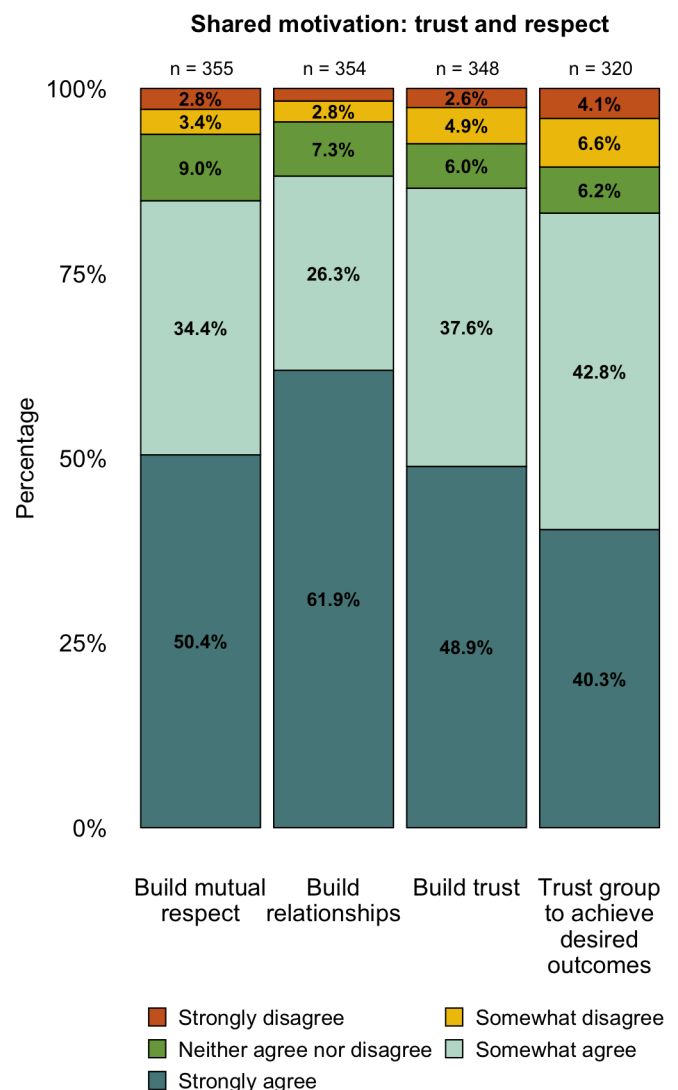


Figure 3. Percentage of all respondents who indicated whether they disagreed to agreed that the collaborative process contributed to relationships, trust, and respect. Percentage labels $\leq 2\%$ were removed.

What can be improved

Respondents suggested opportunities to improve the collaborative process. A notable minority ($\geq 15\%$) of respondents indicated:

- There is room for improvement in aligning expectations for collaborative engagement with the Forest Service throughout planning, implementation, and monitoring (Figure 4).
- Their projects did not have flexibility to adapt when collaborative (e.g., new people or priorities within the CFLRP project) or forest (e.g., effects of wildfire on a planning unit) conditions changed.
- They wanted to see jointly developed knowledge and information shared more equitably.
- A lack of funding and time to carry out work challenged their collaborative's progress and performance.
- There was a need to improve accountability and understanding of how Forest Service decision-making works, and how collaborative members can inform decisions.

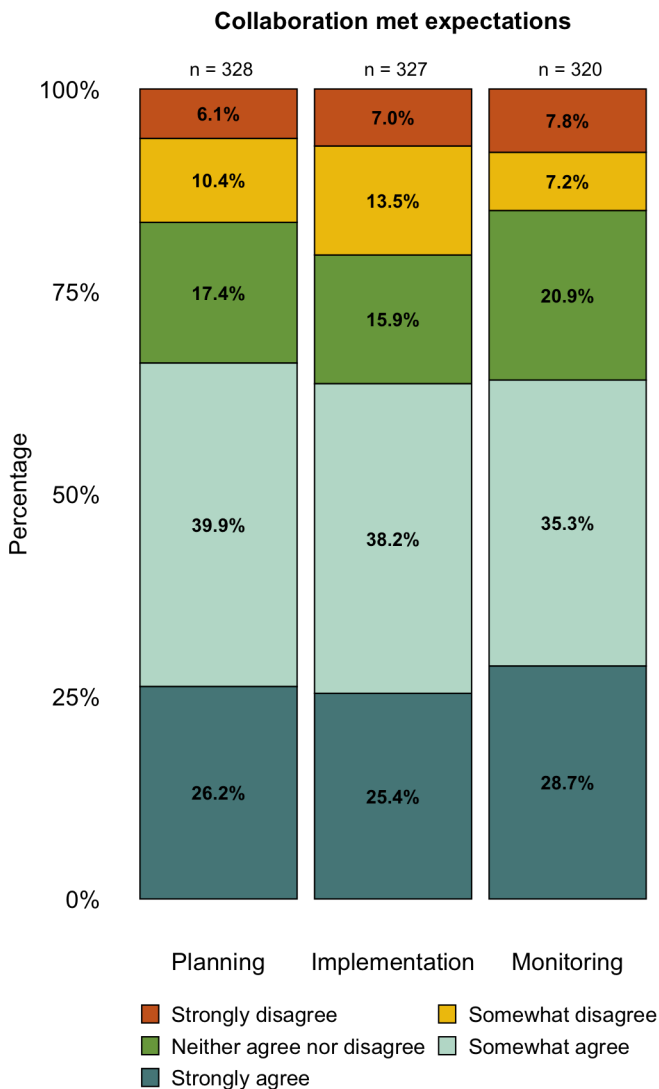


Figure 4. Percentage of all respondents who indicated whether they disagreed to agreed that collaboration between CFLRP participants and the Forest Service had met their expectations during restoration process stages.

Several disruptions also impacted collaborative progress and performance. Personnel turnover, limited agency capacity, biophysical disruptions, limited industry capacity, and the timing and availability of financial resources presented the greatest challenges across CFLRPs. Responses to open-ended questions indicated that other disruptions, like conflict, were particularly challenging to overcome.

Outcomes

Many respondents reported that their CFLRP project had made progress on perceived collaborative process, ecological, and socio-economic outcomes. Respondents indicated that collaboration within the CFLRP enhanced communication, increased landscape-scale and cross boundary planning, and enhanced decision-making between collaborative members (Figure 5). Respondents also reported progress on ecological outcomes, including reduced fuel hazards, increased restoration pace and scale, and improved fish and wildlife habitat. Finally, respondents reported progress on the socio-economic outcomes of reduced community wildfire risk and support for local employment or training opportunities. Of note, the survey was administered during the first year of funding for newly authorized projects, and several outcomes may take years to realize.

Recommendations to maintain collaborative progress and improve performance

Broad inclusion is necessary and requires adaptive management. Collaborative process and performance benefits from inclusion of diverse perspectives and interests. A key finding from the assessment was the desire for increased participation and engagement among Tribes, land grants, environmental groups, and other interest-based organizations. Yet, there are many factors that determine whether an entity engages, so work to increase partner participation should keep in mind local context, collaborative history, current and expected needs, and objectives.

Early and frequent collaborative engagement from direction setting to implementation is needed to align decision space, authority, and objectives. A key challenge noted in the assessment was that decision rationale and decision space were not well understood or articulated, which made efficient and meaningful engagement difficult. However, taking early and frequent action for collaborative engagement can build trust and shared understanding around management goals, help participants understand how and when to inform decisions, and articulate what decisions are made and why.

Developing the ability to anticipate, plan for, and respond to inevitable change is necessary for collaborative durability and resilience. Disruptions and changes are fundamental and recurring aspects of collaboration. As such, CFLRPs

should develop transition strategies, contingency plans, and other collaboratively developed documents. These should be periodically revisited to ensure governance processes continue to meet collaborative needs and achieve desired outcomes over time.

Supplemental funding is needed to support the collaborative capacity building that is critical for collaborative durability and resilience. Although the CFLRP mandated collaboration, these funds can only be used for a portion of treatment implementation and monitoring. Respondents consistently indicated that insufficient funds disrupted their ability to achieve collaborative goals. Specifically, there is a need to invest in third-party facilitators, technical assistance, researchers, and leaders to help coordinate activities, manage communication and conflict among participants, and facilitate social learning and collaborative adaptive management processes.

Promoting an agency culture of collaboration is critical to successful cross-boundary forest management. Developing a culture of collaboration in the Forest Service where agency staff have the capacity, direction, and incentives to commit

to the collaborative process may help sustain productive forest and fire management across boundaries and over time. Training in collaboration, providing promote-in-place opportunities, hiring partnership liaisons, and including collaborative activities in job requirements and evaluations are a few ways to promote the requisite competencies and commitment to collaboration.

Conclusions and next steps

Collaboration is a dynamic process which requires ongoing evaluation to maintain progress and meet performance objectives. Rigorous, systematic, and longitudinal assessments grounded in the science and practice of landscape-scale forest restoration are needed to support collaborative practice. The SWERI is committed to ongoing assessment to monitor progress and document what is working well and what could use improvement, the ultimate goal of which is to align capacity investments with local priorities and needs.

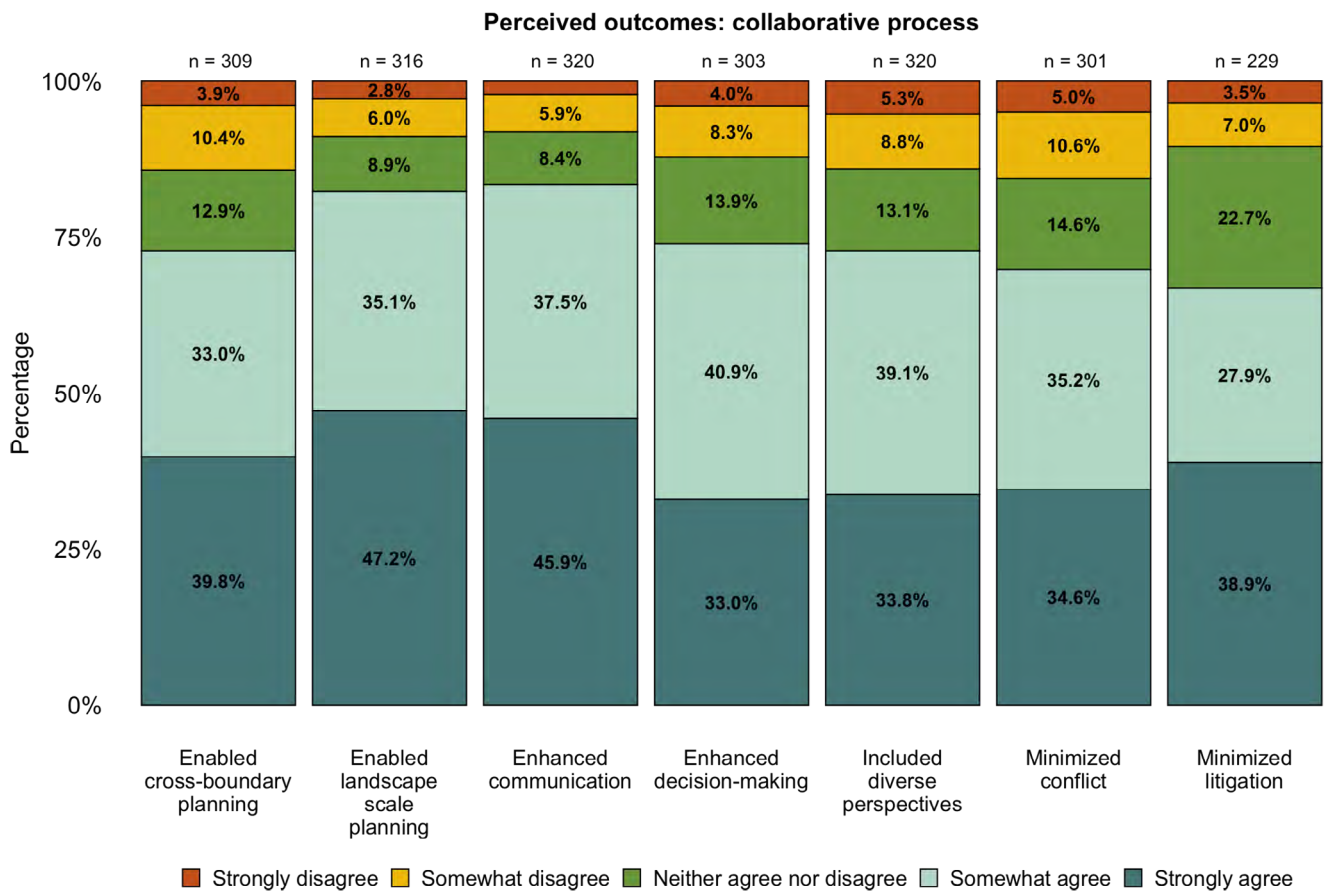


Figure 5. Percentage of all respondents who indicated whether they disagreed to agreed that the collaborative process has impacted the function and capacity of the collaborative. Percentage labels ≤2% were removed.