Elkhorn Mountains Cooperative Management Area

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Case Description

The Elkhorn Mountain Range is rather small and isolated by western standards, containing only 250,000 acres and surrounded by low-elevation flatlands. Though it contains several ecosystem types -- including mountain grasslands, various forest types and riparian zones -- the entire range is considered one contiguous landscape type, with similar features throughout. Despite this distinct nature, the mountain range is managed by a variety of landowners: the Forest Service oversees 160,000 acres in two National Forests and three Ranger Districts, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages 70,000 acres, and private landowners own the remaining 20,000 acres. Also, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) has jurisdiction over wildlife in the entire region.

According to Jodie Canfield, Elkhorn Coordinator for the Deerlodge and Helena National Forests, this mix of landownership had led to conflicting management practices, even within the Forest Service: “the three ranger districts all operated on their own, with little cooperation or even communication among them.” Communication between the other agencies was even less common, she added. Because of this lack of coordination, the agencies often worked at cross-purposes. The Forest Service’s primary goal, for instance, is the maintenance of wildlife habitat; the area is the agency’s only administratively-designated Wildlife Management Unit, meaning that wildlife and non-motorized recreation are emphasized, though limited mining, grazing, motorized recreation and timber harvesting may also occur. This goal fit fairly well with the FWP’s wildlife management goal, but the latter agency was much more concerned with increasing elk populations for hunting than any other species. The BLM, on the other hand, allows significant grazing and mining use, which can be detrimental to wildlife populations. Thus with each agency working toward different goals for the land, holistic and consistent management of the mountain range had been impossible.

The agencies made a bold attempt to change this situation, however, and their effort continues to be successful to this day. In August 1992, the Forest Service, BLM and FWP signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) titled “An Agreement on Working Together.” The MOU designated the entire Elkhorn Mountain Range as a “Cooperative Management Area,” and set forth a process for interagency cooperation and substantive management goals. The process was somewhat complex, and involved the creation of new positions in the Forest Service and several interagency teams and committees. These new entities, and their relationship to each other, are as follows:

**Elkhorn Steering Committee** - This committee is made up of line officers in each of the three agencies. It includes Forest Supervisors of the Helena and Deerlodge National Forests, BLM’s Butte District Manager, and the Wildlife Division Administrator and Regional Supervisor from FWP. The purpose of this committee, according to the MOU, is to “provide coordinated and cooperative management
direction, provide leadership for progressive resources management and development of policy, facilitate implementation of management activities and resolution of issues.” Essentially, the committee provides high-level leadership and oversight of Elkhorn management. At the time of convening, the committee met at least four times a year.

**Implementation Group** - This group is comprised of employees from the three agencies, representing a variety of professional disciplines. The group is responsible for overseeing on-the-ground management of the Elkhorn, as well as developing a landscape analysis, a land management implementation plan, and a program of work. In other words, they make specific plans for management based on the general directions and goals of the MOU and the Steering Committee.

**Extended Team** - The members of this team include employees from all the agencies; these people actually carry out the directions of the Implementation Group on the ground.

**Elkhorn Ranger/ Unit Manager Chair** - This position was newly created with the Forest Service as part of the agreement. This ranger was responsible only for the Elkhorn Mountains and served as a liaison between the Implementation Group and the Steering Committee. This position is now called the Unit Manager Chair, and in fall 2002 was held by Dave Pacioretty, a manager for renewable resources with the BLM.

**Elkhorn Coordinator** - The coordinator serves “as a public and internal contact person as well as staff to three district rangers.” Jodie Canfield has held this position since the formation of the Cooperative Management Area. She also serves as the chair of the Implementation Group and coordinates all activities of those involved in Elkhorn management. Canfield noted that as coordinator, “I work for all the agencies. The Forest Service pays my salary, but I consider all the agencies to be my employers.” Over time, this position has gone from full-time to part-time as the project itself has moved from the more time-intensive, planning stages into the implementation stages.

Though this scheme might sounds confusing, Canfield says it has continued to work well. “It works okay because everything goes through me, “ she noted.

The substantive goals of the MOU are based entirely on ecosystem management principles. The original MOU stated: “Sustaining ecological systems is the umbrella concept in the management of the Elkhorn.” The document further states that native species management will be emphasized, and that “wildlife values are a strong consideration in evaluating all land use proposals.” The MOU contains a vision statement as well, or a “picture of the desired future.” The vision statement reads:

The Elkhorn Cooperative Management Area is a unique, cooperatively administered geographic area, where management of all lands within public ownership emphasizes sustainable ecosystems... On public lands, a sense of “naturalness” is the pervasive
quality of the landscape. Mining, timber, grazing and other land use occur, but are mitigated such that they do not appear dominant... There is a diversity and abundance of wild animals.

The landscape analysis document, completed in February 1993, is also based entirely on ecosystem management. Although the BLM and FWP do not normally emphasize ecosystem management to the extent that the Forest Service has begun to, Canfield says that “by virtue of the fact that they signed the MOU” and helped to develop the landscape analysis, they have proven their commitment to the concept in this situation. Merle Good, BLM's former Manager for the Headwaters Resource Area, agreed: “Landscape theory - that’s the wave of the future.” He said his agency is committed to it.

The interagency group has completed several major projects under the original MOU and updated the MOU in 1998 and again in 2002 to move the agencies out of the planning phase and into an implementation phase. Among the major joint initiatives completed under the original MOU are the following:

**Landscape Analysis.** The agencies completed a joint analysis of the Elkhorn Mountain Range that looks across agency boundaries. The analysis examines the existing condition of wildlife, water, soil, vegetation, and natural disturbance regimes in the three major watersheds in the Elkhorn Mountain Range. It also establishes goals for the desired future condition of resources in the three watersheds, compares existing conditions with these goals and identifies management opportunities for reaching the goals. The landscape analysis is used to develop an annual work plan that guides the three agencies’ management activities in the Elkhorn Range.

**Travel Plan.** The agencies developed a joint travel plan for the whole mountain range that determines which will be available for public motorized use and in what seasons the roads will be open.

**Bighorn Sheep Reintroduction.** The agencies worked cooperatively on two occasions, in 1996 and in 2000, to reintroduce bighorn sheep into the mountain range. Although the sheep were exterminated from the range around the turn of the century, today the population remains stable and there are no further plans for other reintroductions. In fact, the population has increased and stabilized to the point that it is classified as a “huntable” population, according to Mike Morn, biologist and big-game coordinator for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Furthermore, management steps have been taken to ensure continued success for bighorn sheep. For example, a series of prescribed burns have been planned for sometime during 2003/2004 to maintain the critical winter range habitat for these sheep, minimizing dense vegetation where predators can hide, according Sarah LaMarr, Wildlife Biologist at BLM.
Cut-throat Trout Restoration. The agencies continue to work together with efforts to restore the native species of cut-throat trout to the local rivers and eradicate invasive and introduced species. These projects, operating on two creeks in the Elkhorn (Muskrat and Staubach Creeks), utilize barriers in the creeks and shocking techniques to remove the invasive species.

Updated Forest Service Plan. The Forest Service released an updated forest plan for the entire Elkhorn area instead of developing individual plans for management areas scattered across national forests in the Elkhorn Range. BLM and FWP contributed to the analysis for the updated plan.

Ongoing Management. The three agencies are updating allotment management plans, grazing prescriptions, and vegetation treatments based on the management options identified in the joint landscape analysis. Moreover, large fires in the summer of 2000 have brought about many restoration efforts, including stream-bed restoration to counter heavy siltation and sedimentation due to lack of ground cover as well as decommissioning roads that contribute to run-off.

Canfield noted, “I’ve been in this job for 12 years and having the MOU is the difference between night and day in the way we are operating.” According to Canfield, “The MOU gave us the framework to work together across agency boundaries. [It] defines the roles of different groups and individuals that are involved in the Elkhorn and how communication and coordination will flow.” However, Canfield noted, “I don’t think it is so much the document as the ideas behind it that really make it work.” LaMarr concurs and adds that the dedication of the people involved from the field staff to “the Steering Committee, who have been very involved and committed from the start,” has been essential to the success of this effort.

What is fostering progress?

One reason that success in this situation was possible was that there were people throughout the agencies dedicated to the idea and willing to work towards its realization. The idea of the MOU began with a forest supervisor, but filtered all the way down in the agency. George Weldon, the first Elkhorn District Ranger, said this was important, “You’ve got to have a communicated direction and mission from the top all the way to the bottom - all the way through the organizational structure.” He felt this occurred in the Forest Service. The BLM’s Merle Good agreed that the MOU was a result of “a lot of work on a lot of people’s part” in all the agencies.

In addition, Weldon felt that getting an effective process in place was the most innovative aspect of the MOU: “The cooperative agreement…formalizes the processes.” He said this was important for integrative, ecosystem-oriented management to endure. The success of this process extends beyond just the Elkhorn in that it provides a model for action in other areas. Weldon sees it
“as a model in terms of how agencies can look across administrative boundaries and do better on-the-ground management. Those boundaries are just arbitrary.” Good concurred: “It’s the approach of working together - of not stopping at the boundary - that’s most successful. We feel like we’re really pioneers in this area.”

Canfield suggested that these processes have also been a success because they gave all parties equal ownership in management of the region, which was an important motivation. “There are not as many single personalities playing major roles,” she said. She also felt the processes were effective at “rebuilding trust” between groups that had sometimes had adversarial interactions in the past. Many of the same people have been involved in the management of the Elkhorn over the past 10 years, and this continuity has helped build trust. Canfield noted, “The fact that people aren’t moving around so much has helped establish trust, credibility and long-term relationships.”

What challenges were faced and how were they overcome?

Initially, there were several challenges to overcome: “Turf, ego the human elements - those are the real barriers,” said Weldon. Canfield agreed, “personalities are often a problem.” Both believed that the process they’ve developed for working together would solve these problems over time. “Outlining exactly how coordination works,” is the best answer said Canfield. Weldon said the best thing one can do about problems with “the human elements is to forget about them.” He believed the processes and the successes that will result will make these problems disappear. And, in fact, two years after the initial interviews were conducted in developing this case study, Canfield commented “some of the ‘bugs’ we noted then have virtually disappeared over time. We continue to develop mutual respect and the ‘habit’ of working together has become fairly routine.”

Canfield, LaMarr, and Mike Korn, Helena Area Coordinator for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), all noted the challenge in managing the land and the resources within a single ecosystem by three agencies that each have different mandates. “In general, the state (FWP) manages for wildlife and federal agencies (FS and BLM) manage the land, so it has always been difficult to satisfy everyone when decisions and plans are being made, “ said Canfield. Furthermore, even when agencies agree to priority projects, tightening budgets and shrinking staff numbers mean that these projects are still not always completed.

In the past, there had been some problems with “equality” between the agencies. “We have to be careful not to forget BLM,” Canfield said. Good says, however, that his agency has been forgotten several times. “The Forest Service has more of a dedicated group, more manpower,” Good explained. “I have a smaller group, and they’re spread all over heck. Sometimes the Forest Service would say, ‘we’ll go ahead with this, you catch up later.’“ Good said the answer, for him, is
simply not to allow them to do this: “I tell them, if you do this once, you’re going to keep doing it, and then we all may as well forget it.” Despite his efforts, however, he said “we keep doing this over and over.”

The effort has also faced some barriers in attempting to work with the general public. In the early 1990s, the Elkhorn group tried to establish a Coordinated Resources Management (CRM) Group to gain input from local interests. However, the group had difficulty finding people who truly represented different stakeholder interests and “the meetings were often contentious and angry,” said Korn. However, the agencies had better success gaining public input through what Canfield called “grassroots public involvement,” such as sending out mailing and holding open houses and meetings. Currently, a new working group has been convened to address growing conflicts between grazing and wildlife needs in the Elkhorn Mountains, and early efforts appear promising. In January 2002, representatives from the three major agencies invited a range of stakeholders -- permit holders, ranchers, hunters, conservation groups, private landowners -- to attend preliminary meetings. After 6 months of discussing the issues and options, the group has put together a series of viable recommendations for the three agencies. It is unclear whether a private citizen group can continue to legally function under the auspices of federal agencies due to FACA regulations, so the group is becoming an independent entity and will only receive logistical support from FWP.

What lessons can be drawn for future bridging?

Those involved with the management of the Elkhorn ecosystem stress that this type of cooperative management will have to occur more in the future. “It’s not even an option,” Weldon said, “it’s just necessary. We have to [cooperate] to do our jobs properly.” Good agreed that this is “...the wave of the future. We have fewer dollars and fewer people in our agencies now, and it’s not going to get any better.” Asked what advice he had for others trying to do similar things, Good said: “You must have total commitment to managing for the good of the resources and not the good of the agency.” When asked the same question, Korn pointed out that “the devil is in the details” and that it is essential to work out procedural details at the start and as you go along so that as much time and energy as possible can go towards accomplishing projects over time.

Canfield felt that similar management goals were also necessary, as well as a contiguous land base. One of Canfield's major pieces of advice to those involved in collaborative efforts is to “Hang in there. It takes time to work out all the bugs. This is not something you work out in a couple of weeks: it’s a commitment that takes years and years to bring to fruition.” In addition, Canfield emphasized the importance of having the right people: “to be successful, you need to have people who are involved and committed to making it work.” All individuals interviewed noted the
importance of having a coordinator specifically designated to coordinate the agencies’ activities. Canfield feels it is necessary to have someone with some sense of longevity in order to “maintain the flow and the enthusiasm this kind of project needs despite staff turnover and changes. It has been important to have a few of us involved over the long term.”

For further information

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