Upper Stony Creek Watershed Restoration

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Many watersheds throughout the United States have been affected by farming and ranching activity that has degraded streams and land systems. In the Upper Stony Creek Watershed, the Natural Resource Conservation Service has taken the lead in building a productive network of relationships and restoration projects between ranchers, scientists, and experts in several state and federal agencies. Their collaboration has enhanced understanding of the ecosystem and the stresses upon it, and has fostered commitment to sustained efforts to restore and manage lands in this watershed in economically and ecologically viable ways.

Case Description

The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) has established a technical oversight group of other government agencies to assist in its efforts to change ranching practices on private lands in the Upper Stony Creek Watershed, located in and around Mendocino National Forest in Northern California. The Project, which is largely funded through PL 566 Small Watershed Project Program, works with local private landowners to promote changes to range land management to improve soil, water, and habitat quality in the watershed. About 30 local ranchers, who own about half of the private land in the watershed, have signed long-term contracts with NRCS to follow specific management practices on their land to protect environmental resources.

A Network of Partners and Projects

An important part of the group’s success in restoring groundwater recharge and riparian habitat in the area has been the “cooperation from not only the landowners, but also the agency people that are involved in that part of the county,” notes Wendell Gilgert, the project’s former coordinator. The group has stretched its limited resources by relying on outside agency personnel for specialized expertise. For instance, the project has “borrowed” staff time of a local Forest Service archaeologist to conduct required cultural resource assessments on project sites. Local Forest Service personnel and the California State Department of Forestry and Fire Protection handle the group’s prescribed burns. A local staff member from the Department of Fish and Game participates in the group’s wildlife protection projects, such as fencing riparian corridors and ponds.

In addition, the group uses local University of California Cooperative Extension Farm Advisors to teach a watershed education program for local landowners. (The education is funded through a $500,000 grant from PL 566 Small Watershed Project
Using the farm advisors to run the education effort builds on existing networks in the county. In the Upper Stony Creek area, the extension agent involved in the effort has been working in the county for over 30 years and has “a lot of trust” from the ranchers, which has improved the effectiveness of the education program.

The local NRCS office has also formed a partnership with the State Wildlife Conservation Board and the California Waterfowl Association to protect sensitive areas from the impacts of cattle grazing by fencing riparian areas and livestock ponds and providing drinking troughs to keep cattle out of the ponds and streams. The State Wildlife Conservation Board typically buys land for wildlife refuges that it transfers to the State Department of Fish and Game. Such actions have generated local opposition because they take land off the county tax rolls and because the Department of Fish and Game does not have adequate resources to deal with trespassing, fire threats, and other problems that arise on its land holdings. To address these concerns, Gilgert and his staff helped the State Wildlife Conservation Board acquire conservation easements on ranches that allow the ranches to continue their operations. According to Gilgert, the Wildlife Conservation Board is able to achieve its goals of protecting important riparian habitats by funding restoration efforts in riparian areas, funding fencing projects, and buying easements for far less money than it would cost to buy the land outright.

In addition to engaging in partnerships to protect and enhance riparian areas, NRCS has also begun to form partnerships with organizations like the Audubon Society to conduct scientific studies in areas where they direct their management and restoration efforts. According to Dennis Nay, the program’s current Range Specialist, one study done with the Audubon Society compared the program’s grazing strategies with more traditional range management strategies in order to assess their relative impacts on migratory birds. This study found that the program’s strategies had a positive influence on the population and diversity of migratory birds. These studies have helped the program to better understand its impacts and realize some of its accomplishments. Nay noted that, “being able to show some of the positive results from a change in management got people really excited.”

**What has Fostered Progress?**

Gilgert believes that the project has been successful because he and his staff have been able to gain ranchers’ trust over time. He said his staff has been lucky enough to find ranchers who are willing to reach for a common goal and to take risks to do so. In addition, Gilgert said that the best way to get staff from different agencies and ranchers to all work
together is to “find common ground.” He continued, “That’s not hard to do. We all like to breathe clean air. We all like to be around our families. We all like uncontaminated food. [When] we start talking about the similarities, the differences kind of melt away, so we can concentrate on the kinds of things we all agree on and we try to work our way a little at a time on the differences.”

Gilgert also believes that the educational component of the project is a very important part of its success. He emphasized that merely providing cost-sharing for projects is not enough, and that educational outreach is necessary to help provide people with guidance and information. Nay emphasizes, “In the end the thing that really makes a difference is what people learned in the process. Did we really change their behaviors and their beliefs about how large landscapes should be managed?”

**What challenges were faced and how were they overcome?**

The first major challenge Gilgert identified was obtaining the trust of ranchers. He notes that it is difficult asking people to change and adopt new ways of doing things. To overcome this obstacle, NRCS staff sought to involve key landowners who were willing to build trust and try new things. The projects of these landowners were then used as demonstration models to gain credibility among other members of the ranching community. Another challenge has been finding ways to encourage new landowners to be active members of the project. As Nay explained, “The biggest challenge is the turnover of land ownership…What we don’t have a handle on is the fact that we can’t force the new landowner or grazer into a new, prescribed grazing plan. They may have agreed to put in the fences, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they are going to be as aggressive in their grazing plan as the prior owner or manager had been.” Another major hurdle that Gilgert identified that is more difficult to overcome is a lack of staff to go into the field. The local NRCS office has three field staff to cover an area totaling four million acres. Gilgert noted that his small staff “simply cannot provide the level of service that is needed…there’s just not enough of us.”

**What lessons were learned?**

Gilgert identified several lessons from his experience with the Upper Stony Creek Watershed Project for building effective partnerships. First, he cautioned that change tends to be incremental, and that anyone working to promote change needs to be patient and help people ease into the new program or approach. He recommended finding and involving the...
innovators in the community, the people willing to do things first. Those people can provide a model for others to follow. Although he said early successes were important in gaining trust and building support, he also emphasized the importance of learning from failures. He said, “You cannot be afraid of failures. Don’t try to hide them. One, because other people will find out about them. Two, you learn critical things from them and allow other people to learn from them.” He noted, “Anybody who has worked in natural resources has had a train wreck, but nobody wants to talk about it. We waste money, resources and time because we don’t learn the valuable lessons that failure teaches us.”

Nay highlighted two additional lessons from the Upper Stony Creek Watershed Project. First, like Gilgert, Nay suggested that trust takes a long time to build. Therefore, he believes in the need to commit and maintain long-term staff on projects, stating that, “You can’t be turning over staff every 2-3 years. People aren’t going to get into long-term agreements with the government when the staff keeps rolling over.” Nay’s second lesson concerns monitoring. He explained that monitoring “is something we always said we were going to do, yet we’ve never staffed people to do it. We went right into contracts as if we knew what we were doing was the right thing, and we’ve only done monitoring when we’ve had the extra time to do it.” Consequently, there is no substantive way to evaluate the progress or success of the project. Nay stated that, “While we have people that feel really good about the project and have anecdotal evidence that says we’re doing some really neat stuff, we don’t have any strong measures to quantify the success of our projects. Now we’re twelve years into our project and people are asking us, ‘What was it like when you started?” Recognizing the shortcomings in monitoring, the NRCS has committed to initiate a monitoring program and has identified funding through the Bureau of Reclamation to establish some monitoring in the watershed.

For more information

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