

FORESTRY NOTES SPECIAL REPORT



National Association of
Conservation Districts

Shared Stewardship

No one agency is equipped to meet the needs of the forest, nor do the challenges forests face stop at any one boundary. Solutions require a multitude of partners assessing the needs of the forest at landscape scale. The U.S. Forest Service and other agency partners have relied on cross-boundary programs for years to meet this challenge, but more recently USDA has contained it to one strategy: Shared Stewardship.

Since its inception, close to 20 states have signed a Shared Stewardship agreement, bringing together the Forest Service and their state forestry agency to cast a vision, much of it relying heavily on that state's Forest Action Plan. The Shared Stewardship Strategy builds on a foundation of collaborative work, such as the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration



Partnership, the National Cohesive Strategy for Wildland Fire Management, and the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program. It also builds on authorities created or expanded in the 2018 Omnibus Bill and the 2018 Farm Bill, such as Good Neighbor Authority. Agreements consolidate previous efforts under one umbrella, helping to simplify the mission, while also expanding the number of partners engaged in the effort.

"Shared Stewardship is all about working together. It is built on the strong foundation of partnerships and relationships we have

developed over many years, and leverages advancements in science, technology, and regulatory authority to ensure we are able to plan and manage with our partners to address critical challenges we all face," said Erin Connelly of the U.S. Forest Service, National Point of Contact for Shared Stewardship.

Conservation districts are among the partners state forestry agencies will call on to deliver the objectives set within Shared Stewardship agreements. Most of that work is undetermined, but conservation districts are assured of filling a role in achieving these outcomes.

Shared Stewardship brings diverse partners together

We share a commitment to conservation. The mission of the U.S. Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. Our ability to fulfill our conservation mission faces unprecedented challenges. Challenges to the health, diversity and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands include regional drought, catastrophic wildfires, and epidem-

ics of insects and disease.

The solutions will come from Shared Stewardship. Shared Stewardship is about us working together to set mutual goals, coming together to reach shared decisions, working together across public and private lands, and seeking outcomes that improve forests, grasslands and watersheds at scale.

Shared Stewardship is a national movement with 19 state agreements spanning from Massachusetts to Oregon to Arkansas, as well as multi-state agreements such as the Northeast Midwest State Foresters Alliance. Conservation districts play a key role in these cross-boundary efforts at the state and local level by working with farmers, ranchers and private forest landowners to implement conservation practices

that reduce wildfire risk, improve wildlife habitat, and maintain healthy forests and grasslands at a scale that makes a difference.

We encourage you to participate in your State Shared Stewardship committees to determine where the best opportunities are right now. We want to have conversations about bringing diverse partners together to do more work on the ground; the right work at the right time at the right place at the right scale.



Vicki Christiansen
Chief, U.S. Forest Service



Washington agreement continues a long tradition of working together

The state of Washington became the second in the country to sign a Shared Stewardship agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to address land management collaboratively by improving forest conditions through projects in wildfire response, habitat improvement and vegetation management. The memorandum of understanding (MOU) ensures that local, state and federal agencies will all have a voice in how and where those projects will take place.

"We realize that wildfire, forest health and habitat loss issues transcend property lines, and to truly tackle these issues at the pace and scale necessary, we need a strong partnership between the state and the U.S. Forest Service," said Jen Watkins, Planning, Science and Monitoring Assistant Division Manager for the Washington Department of Natural Resources Forest Health and Resiliency Division.

"The MOU builds on a strong history of collaboration," she said. "It provides a clearer pathway for working together on statewide plans to decide where our shared priorities are on the landscape to focus work and un-

derscores the need to think outside the box on how we leverage one another for better landscape-scale outcomes."

The MOU formalizes the long tradition of working together and partnering on projects through a leadership commitment that "this is how we will do business."

"Since its signing, I've enjoyed being a part of conversations that have put this creativity into action with real results, including state dollars being invested onto federal lands for projects with multiple benefits. One example is a project on the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest that resulted in priority fuels reduction and bighorn sheep habitat restoration," Watkins said.

Planning for the project was led by the Forest Service, and tribal and private funds leveraged state investments toward the implementation.

Conservation districts, while not formally signed onto the MOU, play an important role in meeting shared goals, she said. While the MOU supports plans like the DNR's 20-year Forest Health Strategic Plan to restore 1.25 million acres of federal, state, private and tribal forests, those projects could not move forward successfully without the local conservation districts, Watkins said.

"Districts help us prioritize where to work and what tools are available, so that we 'do the right thing in the right place at the right scale,'" she said.

"Conservation districts are tapped into the communities they serve, so they provide a vital connection by joining us in the forest collaboratives and fire adapted community discussions as well as providing the staff and capacity to deliver the work from landowner outreach to fuels reduction projects to habitat restoration," she said.

Three ways conservation districts can support Shared Stewardship

Conservation districts were not represented in photos taken of Shared Stewardship agreement signing ceremonies in recent years, but that doesn't mean they weren't at the table. In most states, conservation districts have an established relationship with their state forestry partners and are engaged in a variety of landscape-scale projects that demonstrate the spirit of Shared Stewardship's mission. Still, conservation districts are encouraged to take the following steps to ensure they remain engaged as Shared Stewardship evolves in their state:

1. Connect with your state forestry agency

Shared Stewardship agreements are guided through the state forester's office. Most conservation district state association leaders already have a relationship with their state forester, but local conservation districts are encouraged to make a connection with their local district forester. "The more local the relationship, the more likely there will be success," said National Association of State Foresters (NASF) President Joe Fox. "Conservation districts have a lot to offer, but connecting with their district forester's office is critical."

2. Study your State Forest Action Plan

Shared Stewardship agreements will rely heavily on State Forest Action Plans. Introduced through the 2008 Farm Bill, each state is responsible for developing a Forest Action Plan that analyzes forest conditions and sets priorities. Plans have a 10-year lifespan, with a review midway through. The first plans were released in 2010, and currently states are releasing their 2020 plans. Conservation districts can provide input during the planning and review phases, and are encouraged to study their state's plans, as they are viewed as the guiding document for forest management throughout the state.

3. Take inventory of your interest and capacity

Perhaps the most valuable thing a conservation district can bring to the discussion is an honest assessment for what the district's strengths are, and for its capacity to assist in future projects tied to Shared Stewardship goals.



Back row, standing from left: Joe Fox, Arkansas State Forester; Pat Fitts, Director of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission; Congressman Bruce Westerman; Congressman French Hill; Congressman Rick Crawford; USFS Chief Vicki Christiansen; Arkansas Department of Agriculture Secretary Wes Ward. Front row, seated: Governor Asa Hutchinson and USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue.

Finding common priorities in Arkansas

A year after formally agreeing to be part of the USDA's Shared Stewardship Strategy, Arkansas is in the middle stages of establishing just how that strategy and the role of each partner at the table will work on a landscape scale.

"We're not going to have the exact same priorities as the wildlife community or conservation districts, but there are overlapping priorities among these communities. We need a platform to share information and data and identify those priorities on multiple scales, so we can leverage resources and accomplish more conservation and restoration on the ground," said Daniel McInnis, Shared Stewardship Coordinator with the Southern Region of the U.S. Forest Service.

"Shared Stewardship is that platform," he said.

Through a memorandum of understanding (MOU), the State of Arkansas, Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will focus on landscape-scale forest restoration activities that protect at-risk communities and watersheds across all lands, along with restoring fire-adapted ecosystems,

reducing the risk of wildfire to communities, as well as identifying, managing and reducing threats to forest and ecosystem health.

Though partnering between different agencies is not a new practice, the MOU creates a way to set priorities with all the agencies at the table at the beginning of the process, identifying shared resources, building strategies, and developing priority locations and outcomes together.

With more than half of Arkansas' public and private land covered by forests, fostering economic development strategies that keep working forests productive will be a key focus, as it is vital in creating and maintaining a strong ecosystem that supports communities, watersheds and the economy, McInnis said.

One of the largest threats to Arkansas' privately-owned forestland is development, he said, so finding strategies that allow landowners to retain, maintain and earn income from their forestland will be a top focus as the Shared Stewardship agreement is implemented.

"You wouldn't need to worry about fire-adapted ecosystems, forest and ecosystem health, wildlife and fish habitat for a parking lot, so it's critical that strong markets and supporting infrastructure are available," McInnis said.

"One of the most important things we can do to incentivize retention of forestland is to have strong markets for traditional forest products so private forestland owners can afford to keep their land in forest," he said.

An example would be how the Ouachita



"State foresters have advanced the concept of shared stewardship with many partners for more than a century. Building on a strong partnership foundation, the USDA Forest Service Shared Stewardship Strategy can enhance outcomes by enhancing shared priority setting and decision-making across boundaries."

Jay Farrell, Executive Director,
National Association of State Foresters



"Our forests are a checkerboard of millions of owners and managers. Some are private

and individual landowners, some are industrial and some are governments. To ensure that there is strategic, long-term, locally relevant and cross-boundary management, we need to ensure that we shape these policies in a shared way. Shared Stewardship is a pragmatic means to accomplish that end."

Tom Martin, President and CEO,
American Forest Foundation



"Shared Stewardship clears the way for the NWTf and our partners to work across boundaries,

and enables us to face the most pressing challenges. Collaboration across all jurisdictions will be necessary to increase forest health, forest management and to build resilient communities."

Mark Hatfield, Director of Conservation Services,
National Wild Turkey Federation

National Forest and the Arkansas Forestry Division are using Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) for a timber sale on National Forest System land. GNA allows the Arkansas Forestry Division to administer the sale of timber, which supports local infrastructure and rural economies and increases capacity for both the federal and state agencies.

That, in turn, allows local mills to have raw material to sustain operations, and logging crews and truckers to have work. Local businesses such as equipment manufacturers, restaurants and gas stations support that work, which betters the economy and translates into private forest landowners having a place to sell their wood. That results in the landowners being more likely to reforest instead of selling their land for development, McInnis said.

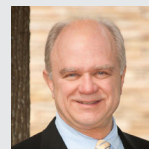
“Combine markets with government programs for reforestation and habitat conservation from the other MOU signatories, and you can see a clear public/private conservation strategy that will only benefit from increased coordination and collaboration,” he said.

With the partnerships Arkansas has formed for various projects over the years already,

the agreement solidifies the state and federal commitment to work hand-in-hand with more local and varied agencies across the state to assist landowners and land managers facing additional challenges as well, such as catastrophic storms, floods, droughts, wildfires, insect and disease outbreaks and invasive species.

“I think the exciting thing is we get to learn more about the partners and more about their priorities and objectives,” McInnis said. “That’s going to be critical. The information they have may be different than what we have, and their objectives may be different. Having that information available to all parties, that is something that will be really helpful as we develop strategies based on mutual priorities.

“We’re looking at it from a systems level, so we need to understand the economic, social and political systems at the state level; and by understanding the systems and sharing decision making, we’re going to get the on-the-ground results,” he said. “It’s about finding the common priorities among the agencies. I’m excited about that.”



“We are proud of our collaborative spirit here. We have worked together on forestry projects with

industry, conservation groups, NRCS, USFS and conservation districts for decades. We build healthy forests through strong relationships. We build strong relationships by doing projects together and sharing the credit with the partners. Shared Stewardship is a platform that will continue the relationships for decades more.”

Joe Fox, Arkansas State Forester
President, National Association of State Foresters

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS RELATED TO THIS SPECIAL REPORT



The U.S. Forest Service has a page dedicated to Shared Stewardship on its website under the ‘Managing the Land’ section.

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/shared-stewardship>



Does your state have a Shared Stewardship agreement? One way to find out is to visit a directory of agreements on the National Association of State Foresters’ website.

<https://www.stateforesters.org/shared-stewardship/>



NACD is one of four partners in the national Joint Forestry Team (JFT), along with the U.S. Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and National Association of State Foresters (NASF). The JFT website has a state partnership directory with contact information for key forestry partners in the state, as well as a link to a state-level forestry memorandum of understanding.

<https://www.jointforestryteam.com/resources/state-level-partnerships/>

