

LAS HUMANAS COOPERATIVE

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While usually viewed as an obstacle, adversity and conflict are often an effective catalyst for partnership. Embroiled in decades of dispute and distrust over land ownership and access to the Cibola National Forest of New Mexico, the community of Manzano and the Forest Service recognized that the parties were better off working together than in opposition. By the late 1990's the climate was ripe for a partnership because the community needed jobs and the Forest Service needed laborers to help thin forest tracks and prevent catastrophic fire. Vicky Estrada, District Ranger for the Mountainair Ranger District noted, "[We realized] we [had] to get past our history and move on...the community wanted the material, we wanted the material out, we all said: 'Here's an opportunity to work together'." Working together has moved the parties from extreme polarization to greater trust and understanding. Today, the parties have built a successful partnership focused on meeting the economic needs of the community while addressing the region's pressing environmental problems.

Case Description

The Spanish land grant community of Manzano, New Mexico is located adjacent to the Mountainair Ranger District in the Cibola National Forest, which covers lands in New Mexico, western Oklahoma, and northwestern Texas. The arid and semi-arid climate of the region varies with elevation; desert vegetation thrives in lower elevations while juniper, pine, and spruce-fir forests exist at higher elevations reaching over 11,000 feet. Manzano is a small, agricultural community with a predominantly Hispanic population. The community lies within Torrance County, which is a rapidly growing but economically challenged area struggling to diversify its economy while maintaining a rural way of life.

Conflicts over land use and ownership between the community of Manzano and the Forest Service are powerful and deep rooted. Manzano and neighboring land grant communities were established prior to the Mexican-American War and were annexed as part of the United States in the 1846 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Historically, families in the region farmed private lands and collectively managed communal lands for other uses. In the Treaty, the US agreed to recognize any titles and ownership to lands honored by Mexico, however Manzano communal lands were not recognized and those lands became incorporated into the Cibola National Forest. Distrust and frustration persist between the community and the Forest Service because community members must pay fees and gain permission to log and graze on lands they believe belonged to their ancestors.

In addition to disputes over resources, the community is dealing with many other challenges that have strained relations with the Forest Service. Due to inadequate training and economic opportunity, youth are emigrating from the community at alarming rates. A Manzano community member noted, “We were losing a lot of our youth because there were no economic opportunities or training...The more intelligent kids would get jobs and travel and never come back...that’s our resource, we need them to come back, we need them to preserve our historical way of life here.” Plagued by economic adversity, community members are selling their ancestral lands to community newcomers, thereby changing the population’s values and needs. At the same time, dense growth of Ponderosa pine and pinon/juniper on National Forest lands surrounding the communities are creating a potentially catastrophic fire threat. Many community members are poor and uninsured so when fire destroys their homes they lose everything.

Tensions between community members and the Forest Service were exacerbated in the mid-1990s when the federal government listed the Mexican Spotted Owl as an endangered species and further restricted access to the national forest for firewood, medicinal herbs, hunting, and other uses. Desperate for income to feed their families and to pay bills, local residents went deep into the forest to poach large trees such as four and five hundred year-old Alligator Junipers to sell for firewood. At this point local Forest Service officials realized that they needed to build a new relationship with the community, one that recognized both community and agency needs.

Steps Towards Collaboration

To begin addressing the escalating conflicts between the Forest Service and the community, in 1995 the Forest Service contracted with Western Network – an organization that assists in community problem-solving processes – to facilitate meetings between community members and the Forest Service to better understand how the parties could work together to address local concerns.

Western Network’s first role was simply to listen. They provided a forum within which the community could freely discuss its views and concerns about the Forest Service and its management of the adjacent national forest. The agency was so distrusted by the community that communication between them was strained; community members felt that their concerns were falling on deaf ears and the arrival of Western Network provided an opening in this tense relationship. Western Network then helped facilitate a “community value mapping” process in Manzano structured to both identify community interests and needs in the forest, and to solicit ideas for how the community and the Forest Service might begin working together. In the value mapping process, community members identified areas of particular concern to them on maps of the forest.

They identified where important medicinal herbs and sacred sites were located; where community members cut wood, hunt and graze cattle; and areas that the community has attempted to preserve in order to protect water resources. Western Network served as a trusted source to relay these important mapped areas to the Forest Service.

By visually mapping their key areas of concern and specific needs, the community began refocusing their attention from a conflict with the Forest Service to dialogue about how best to manage the mapped areas in order to protect sacred areas and water resources and how to satisfy community resource needs. The mapping effort helped break the ice between the parties and provided a way for community members to communicate their traditional uses of the forest to the Forest Service. Through this process, some of the conflict between the parties subsided and the community realized that the agency was willing to openly discuss and listen to their concerns.

Recognizing the opportunity to turn generations of conflict into collaboration, community leaders around Manzano formed Las Humanas Cooperative or “The Humanitarians,” to restore the local environment and watershed while providing economic opportunities for traditional communities. One of the founders of the Cooperative and its current President, George Ramirez, noted, “we learned that the Forest Service was [willing] to come into our community and talk to us and show an interest. We didn’t need a mediator; we could [build a partnership] ourselves.” The community had come to realize that working together to build capacity for economic development was the key to a more economically robust and environmentally healthy future. As Ramirez commented, “[Community members] realized that struggling with the government ... was not the answer.”

The First Partnership Projects

Capitalizing on the opportunity to ease tensions and address unemployment in the region, in 1996 the Forest Service partnered with Las Humanas to develop the first national Community Stewardship Project (CSP) to thin a sixteen-acre forest tract near the wildland/urban interface on the Cibola National Forest. What was started through this CSP has evolved into a strong partnership that has helped to alleviate conflicts over land use, bring more jobs to the community, and mitigate the severe threats of fire in the region. Today, the Cooperative employs 30 individuals on a mostly consistent basis, with the number of employees fluctuating with the seasonal workload.

Although the first CSP took over two years to complete, as the parties worked together their relationship improved considerably. District Ranger Estrada noted, “The critical aspect [of this project] was that people began working together and started trusting each other.” The learning that occurred and the relationships built while working on the CSP sowed the seeds for further

collaboration and in 1999 the Forest Service organized another thinning project with Las Humanas known as the Anderson Project. This project's goal was to provide community members with forest materials, while also developing the Cooperative's administrative and restoration skills. The parties set up a two-year, pilot contract to thin a 120-acre forest tract; the contract itself provided detailed specifications for thinning, the equipment to be used, as well as deadlines for completion. According to Estrada, "Anderson was about developing training and skills...some folks have gotten training on how to thin, how to use a chainsaw, how to select which trees to cut, but also what do we want the tract to look like when it's done." The project generated considerable goodwill between the parties, addressed a serious fire threat in the area, and also helped the Cooperative develop new administrative and technical skills associated with contracting and forest restoration.

Building Community Capacity

By the end of the Anderson Project, members of the Cooperative recognized the need to strengthen administrative skills and provide better training and compensation for locals to participate in agency contracts. The Cooperative applied for and was awarded \$350,000 through the USDA Forest Service's Collaborative Forest Restoration Program¹. This grant provided support to pay for low impact thinning equipment like chainsaws and safety equipment, as well as money for payroll and salaries. With this support, combined with the guidance of the Forest Service and the commitment of community members, Las Humanas has become a viable independent contractor; indeed, the group recently bid successfully on two local fuel break contracts - a true milestone.

Under these new contracts, Las Humanas is training its workers to follow detailed thinning prescriptions while also developing business skills to navigate contracting complexities such as workers compensation, liability insurance, federal requirements for wages and safety, and deadlines for completion. Moreover, the Cooperative has made significant progress in using the lumber they cut to diversify the economic base of the community – supplying wood chips to a local sign company and landscapers, Christmas trees in the winter, and constructing wood building supplies like Santa Fe-style house beams and posts. The parties are optimistic that these projects are only the beginning of a long-term, productive partnership to bring economic opportunity to the community and address growing forest restoration needs.

What Fostered Progress?

Partnerships can only occur when *personal connections* are made and shared interests are recognized. The Las Humanas case demonstrates how important it is to take the initiative to *identify*

¹ For more information about the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program, visit: www.fs.fed.us/r3/spf/cfrp/

leaders in the community or organization and to connect with them. Estrada stressed that opportunities become available if you can identify a leader in a community that you can see eye-to-eye and work with. She noted, “Within communities you have people that are leaders and when they come that’s when you have an opportunity for things to happen. [The Forest Service] can’t force partnerships on communities, but when there is someone who can be a driver [with] vision...that critical community leader is what it takes.” Ramirez summed up his vision for Las Humanas and the Partnership, “What we are trying to do is to not be part of the problem, but rather to be part of the solution and that’s exactly where we go forward...[After all,] our youth, our adults, our mountains, our water, it’s all one picture.”

Sustained commitment to the partnership and *relationship-building* has helped the parties tackle new, unexpected challenges. *Patience* on everyone’s part has been an important factor as well. The two organizations were willing to move beyond the animosity that characterized their past and to define a new future together. Ramirez noted, “[Estrada was] very patient. She understood the situation with the community of trying to build capacity...[to create] a sustainable opportunity for us.” Estrada stressed that one must expect the unexpected, “There has been a lot of learning on the fly...we are flexible and we problem solve as issues arise.” For example, some individuals working on the Anderson Project began issuing permits to clear wood to their friends in other parts of New Mexico. This issue was totally unexpected and would have jeopardized the project had, according to Estrada, the people who were involved not been “*problem solvers*” with creative energy who dealt with adversity head-on and remain committed to a process over the long-term.

Ramirez commented on the importance of the *community mapping experience* started by Western Network, “[The mapping] is a very valuable tool to not only map our resources and concerned medicinal herbs and traditional uses, but also our watershed and springs and the impacts of thinning practices [on the forest].” He stressed that the mapping process was ongoing and adaptive, “The mapping has never ended because we continue to learn from it...[More recently] we started mapping where the fire dollars were coming down to and who was getting the defensive [fire] spaces...[asking questions like:] Where are the federal dollars going? What types of thinning projects [are going on?] What types of fuel breaks? Are we putting defensive spaces around rural communities or around metropolitan areas?” With this information in hand, the Cooperative has been able to participate more fully in agency planning, providing valuable advice on proposed projects such as the impact of prescribed burns on medicinal herbs or groundwater recharge zones. Mapping community interests and uses has also helped the Forest Service better understand the community and identify projects that meet local subsistence and economic needs.

Shared monitoring and outreach projects have also strengthened ties between the community and the agency. In cooperation with the Forest Service, Las Humanas has set up photo-monitoring

points and taken before-and-after pictures of thinned stands, and prescribed burns. The Cooperative's photo monitoring has been an inexpensive way to monitor the results of its work and the photos have been useful as teaching tools. Indeed, Las Humanas and the Forest Service have used these photos in nearby schools to discuss fire, forest management, and watershed protection. Ramirez noted, "It is very important that communities understand how their forest impacts them and their way of life and not take it for granted." The parties recently began involving youth to photo-monitor changes in local forests and communities; some middle-school classes have also adopted individual juniper trees which they visit year-by-year to see if they are still standing. Estrada noted, "We are getting youth to think of them [junipers] as their trees, so they'll feel a personal loss when someone cuts it with a chainsaw." The Cooperative also set up photo-monitoring installations in local villages to develop a record with which to communicate to others what life is like in the villages and how they adapt to economic and ecological changes.

What Challenges were Faced and How were they Overcome?

Honoring commitments has been an ongoing challenge that at times has strained the Partnership. There have been times when laborers were supposed to be paid for their work but the Forest Service was not able to follow through on its commitment. Ramirez recalled, "One of the most serious things that hurt us in the process is that they would make a promise that dollars would be there on a certain day and they wouldn't be there. Well, when you have 30 people that have 30 families and they've worked already three weeks to a month and they are anticipating a check to pay those bills for electricity just to survive. The Federal government didn't have the money [to pay] and [this] became a serious problem with the communities and for the Cooperative." Estrada sympathized with the problem of delayed payments, "It's hard to have a credible relationship with people when you say what you believe but then you lose your funding. As a line officer, you put yourself out on the line, and that takes away your credibility if you try to do things and make promises and then don't have the money." She stressed that "Congress could support collaborative partnerships by having multi-year funding for communities so that the Forest Service can meet their commitments."

Despite improved relations between the Forest Service and the Cooperative and notable partnership accomplishments, there is still *significant poverty* in the area and *limited economic opportunities*. There are very *limited markets* for the forest products produced by the Cooperative and limited funds available to employ community members in forest restoration. Consequently, while progress has been made, many community members still illegally poach large trees and arguments over land use and access to the forest arise frequently. Fortunately, some of the poaching problems have subsided as a result of the partnership's work. Estrada noted, "Now that the locals are doing the work [on

Forest Service contracts], they are patrolling each other better, they are more invested, they are staying employed and they are having a legal source of wood.” Still, as Ramirez stressed, poaching and related problems will likely continue because “as long as a person’s stomach is hungry and his bills aren’t paid, you can preach all you want [about forest restoration] and they are going to sit there and nod...and then when you turn your head, they are going to go right back to doing what they are doing just to survive...But if you provide them with economic opportunity to provide for their family, that’s all they want.” In an effort to diversify the local economy, Las Humanas is attempting to balance intermittent forest restoration contracts with other activities utilizing forest resources such as Christmas tree and live tree sales as well as providing wood building supplies.

Given the poor economic conditions in the area and the need to migrate in search of work, the group has confronted significant difficulties in *maintaining continuity* of a well-trained and committed group of workers. For example, while working on the Anderson Project, laborers for Las Humanas were given permission to keep the wood they cut instead of being paid cash. However, during the project some workers found paid jobs and left the job site, causing long delays in project completion. This challenge has been particularly acute when laborers on forest stewardship contracts are paid well after the work is done, making it difficult for cash-strapped people to make long-term commitments to a project. In short time, leaders of the Cooperative have had to learn the agency’s administrative processes, safety specifications, and detailed thinning prescriptions, and then communicate this information to laborers who have never worked with the agency. Ramirez remembered the group’s first sixteen-acre project with the Forest Service, “You can’t just hand a bunch of chainsaws [to people] and point them into an area to start thinning because they don’t understand the prescriptions, they were dropping trees on each other and doing a destructive type of thinning that was not really good for the land.”

What Lessons were Learned?

The partnership between the Forest Service and Las Humanas demonstrates how parties can turn divisive conflicts into economic opportunities that benefit forest health. Overcoming long-term conflict and building relationships depends on *leadership* and a *willingness to work together* in search of mutually beneficial opportunities. Partnerships do not just happen, but rather require leaders within communities and agencies to *take the initiative* to build and maintain bridges for effective collaboration. Estrada noted, “You have to have a *can-do attitude* of whatever it takes to make the partnership work.” Amidst all the demands on agency staff, she stressed, that “You have to want to see the success of the partnership on a personal level, beyond your job...You have to have personal

interests in making it work because there are enough rules and regulations that can prevent you from being successful.”

Dedication and determination are critical to building partnerships. Ramirez stressed that people need to “*look for the common ground*...if it’s a hostile relationship [between a community and an agency], it isn’t going to work,” unless directed steps are taken to change the relationship. According to Ramirez, there will always be stumbling points along the way to working in partnership, but, “you can’t fold up, there’s a lot of people depending on [you],...if your heart is in the right place...and the stars aligned,” things can be achieved that were never thought possible. To find common ground in the midst of social and environmental problems, it is important to *stop finger pointing at people*, accusing them of the problem, but instead to *recognize the need to collaborate* to fix problems. Commenting on the region’s scarce water resources, Ramirez noted, “When you have canopy evaporation that is tremendous, you have droughts in the equation, and then you have unhealthy forests. There are a lot of factors causing the drying up, and if we just stand there screaming that it is drying up and not do anything, [that’s a mistake]...That’s where we [must] take the initiative.” Together, Las Humanas and the Forest Service have taken that initiative to collectively address the region’s growing economic and environmental challenges.

It is also critical that those engaged in a collaborative partnership *recognize that learning is a two way process*. Ramirez emphasized, “the government learns from us and we learn from the government.” Referring to the Forest Service’s lengthy planning and decision-making processes, Estrada remarked that community members did not understand the complexity of project planning, believing the agency was “stone walling” and did not want to provide the community with jobs. Today, the community better understands agency decision-making processes like NEPA and willingly participates in these processes.

Short-term projects may be a necessary starting point to build capacity to work on federal projects, but once agencies have invested funds and time into training people and building management capacity, it is critical to *keep new projects on the horizon*. Ramirez noted, once contracts dry up, people go elsewhere to look for work, which “ends up undermining all the efforts that were done to put these communities back on the ground doing stewardship contracting.” He recommended one way to ensure that smaller contracts with longer time frames are made possible is to earmark funds for them directly in annual budgets. This may entail advocating for federal funds for small, starter or community capacity projects, while ensuring that when those funds do become available local organizations are in a position to intercept them.

To help communities develop and apply new skills in forest thinning and restoration, *smaller contracts with longer time frames are needed*. Ramirez noted, “You have to have contracts that are building

communities up. In other words, you need smaller contracts with a longer turn around time on them to complete the contract.” According to Ramirez, agencies cannot expect communities to have the skills to go onto a site and use equipment successfully. Moreover, he recommended that to build community capacity in forest restoration, contracts should be structured so people can work throughout a year as opposed to on intermittent, short-term projects. He argued, “you’ve got to have a dependable source of contract; you don’t give them a two month contract out of a twelve month period, because the other ten months they have to pay bills.”

For further information

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Vicky Estrada, District Ranger, Mountainair Ranger District, (505) 847-2990

Web sites

Mountaineer Ranger District Page

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/cibola/>

Cibola National Forest Fire Management Page

http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/cibola/natresrc_files/fmain.htm