



Understanding Collaboration



The Lakeview Stewardship Project in the Fremont-Winema National Forest, OR. (USDA Forest Service photo by Fremont-Winema National Forest)

Introduction

In her classic book, *Collaborating*, Barbara Gray defines collaboration as “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible.” The [2012 Planning Rule](#) provides a similar definition stating **collaboration** “... is a structured manner in which a collection of people with diverse interests share knowledge, ideas, and resources while working together in a cooperative manner toward a common purpose.”

Collaboration contributes significantly to effective and sustainable public land management. Understanding the expectations, opportunities, and challenges associated with collaboration is extremely important for land managers and for interested stakeholders. The purpose of this paper is to help people think strategically about the value of collaboration—what is it, when does it make sense to invest the time and energy in it, and how to begin to incorporate a collaborative approach?

This paper is based on lessons learned and written by the USDA Forest Service National Collaboration Cadre. They worked with national forests, collaborative groups, and interested stakeholders helping them to engage in effective collaboration. For more information on collaboration processes, contact Sharon Timko, Ecosystem Management Coordination Public Engagement Specialist, Washington Office, at sharon.timko@usda.gov.

Where Does Collaboration Fit in the Spectrum of Public Participation?

To help clarify the role of the public in any public participation process, the [International Association for Public Participation](#) (IAP2) developed the Spectrum of Public Participation (hereafter Spectrum; see fig. 1). This widely used Spectrum is designed to assist with the selection of the level or levels of participation that defines the role of the public in a public participation process. The Forest Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, uses an adaptation of the Spectrum, referencing it within the [2012 Planning Rule Directives](#) and the [Collaboration in NEPA: A Handbook for NEPA Practitioners](#).

Federal agencies have traditionally thought that public participation is driven by or limited to the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). As a result, the Forest Service’s public participation strategies have historically focused more towards the left side of the Spectrum such as “Inform” and “Consult.” These

two approaches put the public in the position of reacting to actions or decisions that have already been proposed or made.

In recent years, however, Forest Service leaders have been encouraged to be more collaborative with planning and project development. The legal and policy obligations to engage in collaboration are more recent such as the [2014 Farm Bill](#) (forest health/insect and disease provisions), the [2012 Planning Rule](#), [Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program](#), [Stewardship Contracting](#), and [Shared Stewardship](#). *This Is Who We Are*, a recent Forest Service guide speaks to the importance of working collaboratively with communities and stakeholders to achieve the Forest Service mission and purpose. “It’s about diverse groups of people coming together, learning from each other, and finding common ground.”

Moving to the right side of the Spectrum provides a more proactive approach. “Involve” and “Collaborate” strategies engage the public actively—early, often, and throughout—in a process to help shape a proposed action or decision. Collaboration or “to collaborate” represents the most intensive level of public participation. Collaboration may take different forms, sizes, timelines, and level of formality,

depending on the needs and desires of the agency and interested stakeholders for any given project or planning effort at any given time.

Is “Collaborative” a Group or a Behavior?

Across the United States—from Alaska to Puerto Rico—a number of formal and informal groups have formed to promote collaboration between the Forest Service and its partners. These groups have become so common, and in many cases so successful, that a mindset has emerged that they are essential for collaboration to occur. People often associate the term “collaboration” with an organized group, such as the Western Colorado Landscape Collaborative or the Blackfoot Challenge. But a formal group, with a board, organizational documents such as a charter, operations manual and/or code of conduct, and a membership roster, is not always necessary; a very focused or short-term process could function collaboratively without needing a formal group. **Collaborative** can accurately refer to an attitude or behavior that embraces principles of collaboration. Such principles include a willingness to bring diverse interests together, to openly share information and resources, and to work cooperatively towards a common purpose or outcome. Collaborative behavior may represent a paradigm shift within an agency and/or externally with a community of

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

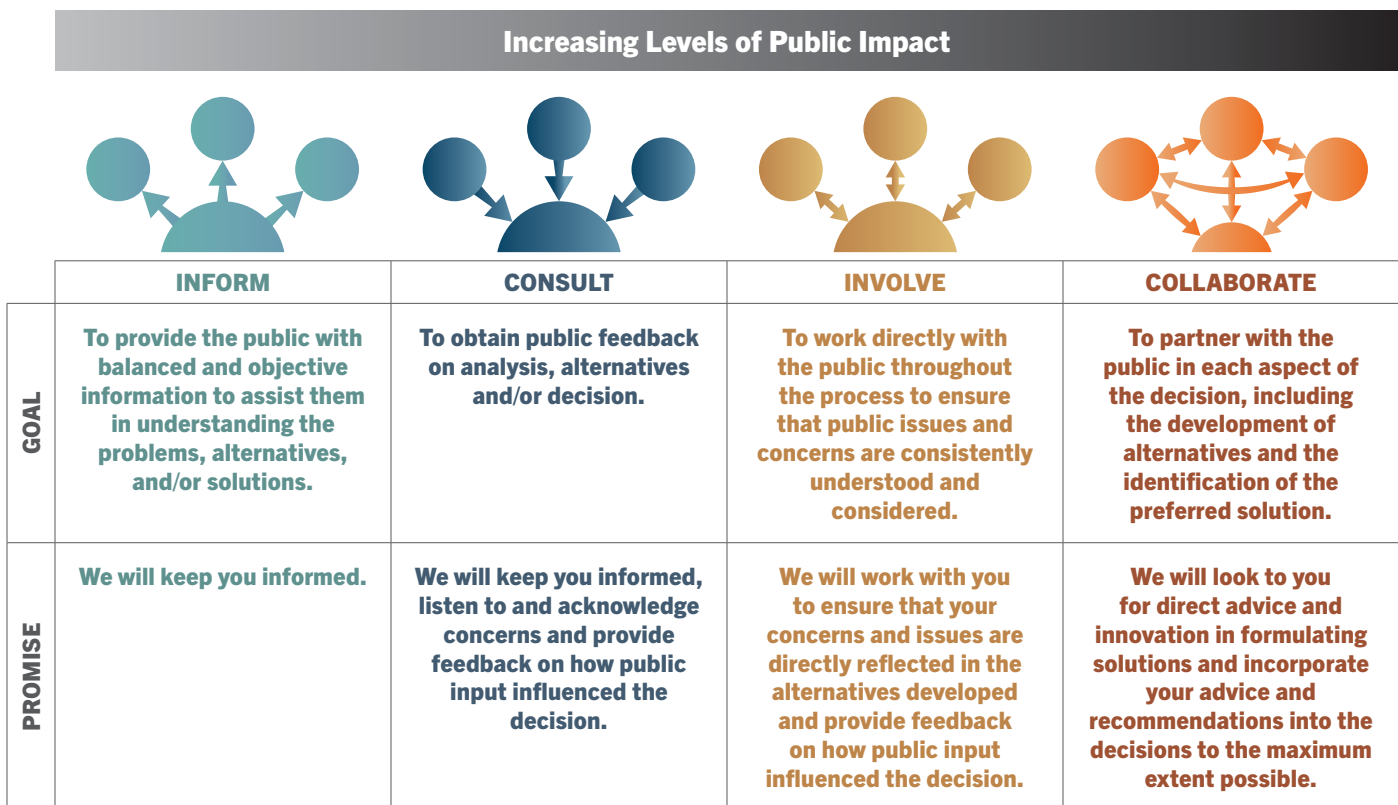


Figure 1. IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation. (Adapted from the IAP2 International Association for Public Participation, [https://iap2usa.org/Resources/Documents/IAP2%20Federation%20-%20P2%20Pillars%20\(2\)%20\(1\).pdf](https://iap2usa.org/Resources/Documents/IAP2%20Federation%20-%20P2%20Pillars%20(2)%20(1).pdf))

diverse interests, all of whom may be more familiar with more competitive or adversarial tactics to influence agency decision making.

Whether a formal group exists or not, everyone involved should view the behavior of collaboration similarly. Sharing what “collaboration” means to one another at the beginning of the effort is important in terms of meeting expectations.

“Collaboration requires hard work, focused attention, adequate time, and considerable dedication of staff and funding resources by all participants.”

*—Council on Environmental Quality,
Collaboration in NEPA: A Handbook for NEPA Practitioners*

When Is Collaboration Worthwhile?

Given the extra effort collaboration may require to work toward common expectations and understanding between participants, when does the investment make sense? Surely some situations are so minor or the outcomes so predictable and uncontroversial that they do not warrant a large investment in collaboration. The parties may not see the need to collaborate on every issue or project and would rarely have the capacity to do so. Being strategic in choosing when and where to be collaborative focuses everyone’s effort where it will yield substantial progress, while minimizing the effort required of everyone involved.

Prior to engaging in collaboration, it is important to determine the **collaborative potential**, which can be looked at as the prospects for parties to work together in earnest to make meaningful progress in the management of complex and potentially conflict-laden situations. This perception is based on three factors:

1. The extent to which the situation is **complex** and/or **controversial**, and the effectiveness of possible management actions is uncertain. Complex and controversial situations typically involve a wide range of interests and issues.
2. There is a possibility for meaningful, respectful communication and **interaction** between the stakeholders.
3. A **mutual gain or integrative outcome** is possible, in that the fundamental structure of the situation offers the potential for both or all sides to achieve more of their objectives than could be likely in some other process, such as legal action.



Colorado Front Range Project in the Arapaho-Roosevelt and Pike-San Isabel National Forests. Photo was taken at a field trip in summer 2018. (USDA Forest Service photo by Eileen Kitayama)

When considering a collaborative approach, everyone’s best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA) should be considered. Roger Fisher and William Ury coined the concept in their bestselling book on negotiation, *Getting to Yes*. Every potential participant in a collaborative effort should compare their likely outcome with what they would likely accomplish by pursuing their goals through other means and should choose the alternative that best meets their needs. The BATNA concept is important because it highlights alternatives that parties may pursue if the collaborative effort is not as beneficial or productive as other means of engagement. All parties need to work together to ensure that collaboration is the *best* alternative.

What Can Be Influenced in the Decision Space?

Central to assessing a situation and its collaborative potential is **decision space**. What in the conflict or decision is open to discussion and influence? Which aspects of the situation are on the table and which are not? Let’s look at an example: A recreation management plan being developed for a Forest Service recreation area might include a public workshop. The workshop design could include a presentation from a forest supervisor who clarifies what is “inside” and “outside”

the decision space. She might advise that “inside” the decision space could be determinations regarding curfews for particular recreation activities. But ignoring relevant laws such as the Endangered Species Act would not be options and would be “outside” the decision space. Participants in the workshop need to know where the decision space is so that they can focus their attention on issues that matter, the space where their voices are relevant, and where their time can be spent most meaningfully.

How To Incorporate a Collaborative Approach?

The inform, consult, and involve levels of the Spectrum are generally conducted pursuant to requirements established by NEPA, National Forest Management Act, and other



The Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group Cornerstone Project in the Eldorado and Stanislaus National Forests, CA. Photo from a field trip in 2016. (USDA Forest Service photo by Eldorado National Forest)

applicable legislation. It is common for them to occur over a specific period of time—to end when the relevant decision has been reached. Collaboration, however, relies upon foundational relationship building. Therefore, collaboration can transcend individual projects and planning efforts and may endure for years. Some citizen collaborative groups that work with the Forest Service have done so for over a decade.

Strengthening Internal Capacity

Given that collaboration requires attitudes and behaviors that may be new for some people, learning to collaborate internally can be a springboard to successful collaboration with external partners. Forest Service units that practice collaborative behavior internally develop a collaborative culture. As collaboration becomes commonplace and comfortable within the unit, collaborating with external stakeholders becomes a natural extension of those behaviors. Generally speaking, forests, ranger districts, and other units are only as successful in their external collaborative relationships as they are in their internal collaborative relationships.

Experiencing the benefits of working collaboratively internally builds the confidence and skills needed to support collaborative interaction with external stakeholders. Several diagnostic questions illuminate ways to build the capacity of a Forest Service unit to engage in meaningful, internal collaboration:

- Do Forest Service leaders (i.e., line officers) advocate for, commit to, model, and reward collaboration within their units, and how can they be helped to do so?
- Within a Forest Service unit, are internal working relationships among employees collaborative? Is there open communication and dialogue among the people working together on project teams, or who might be tasked with implementing a decision? For example, within a national forest, how collaborative is an interdisciplinary team when working on an area assessment or landscape-scale project?
- What can improve internal relationships, build trust, and maximize efficiencies?

Establish or Enhance External Relationships

The first step in collaborating with external stakeholders is building relationships with them and fostering relationships among them. Such connections don't just create avenues for the sharing of information, but they also build trust. Relationships with key parties can be strengthened by communicating informally, often by one-on-one interaction, such as phone conversations, sharing a meal or simply a cup of coffee, and meeting with local elected officials and

other community leaders. Improved relationships are often a byproduct of field trips or community workshops around particular issues or projects. These informal activities or gatherings are opportunities for people to share their interests and concerns with each other. Such events build a foundation of familiarity and mutual respect that encourages parties to work together cooperatively towards a common purpose. Relationships are two-way. Helping others before seeking help sometimes builds immense trust.

Convening Collaborative Efforts

Once the potential participants commit to trying a collaborative approach, process and design issues should be jointly owned. Within each individual approach, there is considerable opportunity for innovation. A Forest Service unit may be invited to attend collaborative group meetings to provide updates and help identify areas of mutual interests. In some cases, the Forest Service unit identifies a desire to work collaboratively, turning to capacity within the community for such an effort is key. A local government or other community organization may have the capacity to host meetings, help with facilitation, and organize logistics for field trips or workshops. Think of it as a journey where the agency is sitting on a bus with the stakeholders, but it is not driving it. In fact, the agency ought not take the lead in convening a collaborative group. Collaborative efforts are optimal when community organizations share resources and responsibility.

But it's also important to note that the Forest Service has found success in designing and using collaborative processes in different types of planning efforts. For example, many land management plan revision efforts and landscape-scale projects include collaborative processes during the planning phase, and do not necessarily rely on more formal collaborative groups.

To sustain the interest and commitment to collaboration over the life of a project or planning effort, parties should consider multiple methods of communication to keep people regularly engaged. Posting periodic updates on a website, organizing field trips, publishing a newsletter or news release, sponsoring a science symposium, attending county commission meetings, or publishing an "annual report" of accomplishments can all be useful in maintaining commitment and recruiting new participants. Welcoming new members can also replenish energy, capacity, and creativity. Taking time to celebrate accomplishments with collaboration partners is also critical.

In Summary: Key Points

- Collaboration supplements traditional public participation with more focused activities that will typically allow more meaningful contributions.
- Collaboration requires considerable time and effort from everyone and should be undertaken when the collaborative potential is high.
- Collaboration can build and maintain productive working relationships and trust and capacity, both internally and externally, well beyond the immediate issue or situation.

Resources

National Forest Foundation: Collaboration Before During and After the NEPA Process. https://www.nationalforests.org/assets/files/Roadmap-for-Collaboration-Before-During-and-After-the-NEPA-Process_NFF.pdf

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