

Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative

Steering Committee Meeting Notes

Erwin Senior Adults Center

Thursday, July 1, 2010

Steering Committee Members Attending:

Mark Shelley, Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition; Joe McGuinness, Cherokee National Forest; Steve Henson, Southern Multiple Use Council; Alex Wyss (for Katherine Medlock), The Nature Conservancy; Steve Novak, Wildlaw; Parker Street, Ruffed Grouse Society; Dwight King, Volunteer Logging Company/Sullivan County Commissioner; Catherine Murray, Cherokee Forest Voices; John Gregory, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, Region 4; and Danny Osborne, Tennessee Division of Forestry. Facilitators: Karen Firehock and Melinda Holland, E2 Inc.

Members not attending:

Terry Porter, Tennessee Forestry Association; and Dennis Daniel, National Wild Turkey Federation

Observers Attending:

Greg Lowe, The Nature Conservancy; Susan Shaw, Cherokee National Forest (CNF); Josh Kelly, Wildlaw; Monte Williams, CNF; Tom Speaks, Forest Supervisor, CNF; Don Palmer, CNF; Terry Bowerman CNF; Geoff Call, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and Mike Giles.

Introductions:

The meeting began with opening remarks from project facilitator Karen Firehock, followed by the introduction of the Steering Committee members, observers and an opportunity for observer comments. There were no observer comments.

General Committee Business:

The May 7, 2010 meeting notes were approved by the Steering Committee without any changes. Ms. Firehock suggested that, in the future, minute approval would be achieved by email within two weeks following the meeting to allow for more timely distribution and posting. There were no objections, so in the future, committee members will be asked to comment on minutes within two weeks of their receipt. If there are strong disagreements concerning content, the minutes can be brought to the meeting for committee review.

Situation Assessment

Facilitator Karen Firehock gave an update on the situation assessment process. Ms. Firehock shared her preliminary thoughts on what the facilitators have been hearing during the assessment interviews and she noted that these are not yet conclusions. There are still several interviews remaining due to difficulties in locating people and scheduling around participants summer vacation schedules.

- People's perspectives have been largely interest driven -- foresters concerned about level of harvest, biologists concerned about habitat -- no real surprises there. Large clear cuts -- likely in the past and less likely to be a part of the Cherokee's future.
- Many people recognized that times have changed; wood harvest has become secondary to other uses. As a multi-use forest serving a diverse population, the Cherokee has to meet multiple needs.
- Most everyone agreed that some form of active management and maintenance is very much needed. People do not necessarily agree on **how** to do it. Also a key point raised is 'how will the projects be funded?'
- A few noted that there is an issue in terms of the difficulty in getting projects through, even if they are seemingly noncontroversial. A project can take up to four years or never start. Only about two projects per year are conducted. The hope is that this process will create projects that have broader support.
- Better data are needed for making management decisions and knowing whether or not they are effective. Several interviewees noted the lack of adequate data about existing conditions. While people may not yet agree on criteria for decisions, they agreed that we need to have science-based decision making.
- Public education is very much needed -- some people think no trees should be cut ever. People need to understand the more complex issues of the forests and why forests need to be managed. People do not understand why multi-aged stands and species diversity is needed or that different forests types and ages equal greater diversity.
- There were mixed views on past public involvement -- some people liked the expert tables, open house format used in the past, while others suggested a lot more education and understanding are needed before we can get to informed participation. Several noted there needs to be a clearer understanding for how input is used by the Forest Service now and in this process.
- People want this process to succeed. Many said they were encouraged by the effort and agreed we need a new way of doing business in the Cherokee -- most agreed that doing nothing is not an option.

In response to a Steering Committee Member question, Ms. Firehock explained that the issues the Committee will focus upon will be narrowed based on analysis of the data and information on conditions at CNF. The findings of the assessment will help the group understand what the stakeholders who were interviewed suggest and are concerned about.

Presentation of Enhanced Conservation Action Planning

Ms. Firehock explained that Greg Lowe, Director, Northern Sierra and Great Basin Programs, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), was present to give a presentation about TNC's Enhanced Conservation Action Planning (ECAP) process as a proposal for a structured planning process which could be used by the committee. Alex Wyss, TNC North Carolina, introduced Mr. Lowe as the father of TNC's Conservation Action Planning processes and noted his 35 years of experience with TNC.

Mr. Lowe explained that the National Forest Service, National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management have used this ECAP process for planning on 2.5 million acres in 8 areas; one of these was

a large multi-stakeholder process for 200,000 acres in California. ECAP utilizes the Vegetative Dynamics Development Tool (a computer model), LANDFIRE Biophysical Setting Models, and additional data sets provided by the users. ECAP allows land managers and stakeholders to develop and test alternative strategies to restore forest system health and abate future threats. He explained that the models work at 30 meter resolution and they compare what is "natural" to what is "existing" and the deviation from the normal range of variation. Expert opinion can be used to populate the models in terms of what is considered the "natural" range.

To acquaint the committee with the principles of how ECAP works, Mr. Lowe led the group through an exercise which allowed participants to recommend percentage application of different management strategies to be applied to a particular forest type to attain the restoration goals specified in the exercise. This exercise stimulated discussion within the group concerning the applicability to the Cherokee. In response to a question about how to decide how much restoration funding to assume, Mr. Lowe explained that they usually run ECAP with an unlimited budget scenario, a reasonable budget scenario and a lowered budget scenario, to allow for prediction and comparison of the restoration outcomes at each level of funding. One participant asked about the difficulty of ground truthing the assumptions. An observer from the CNF explained that reference conditions have already been established for the Cherokee Forest so he did not think it would be difficult to set up the model.

Next, Mr. Lowe explained the basics of how ECAP works. The National LANDFIRE Program has mapped the entire United States showing the various types/distribution of ecological systems which LANDFIRE calls "Bio-Physical Settings." This shows the dominant vegetation currently and what would be expected within undisturbed natural conditions (pre-human settlement conditions).¹ TNC estimates the accuracy of this information at around 50 percent (plus or minus several percentage points), especially in the east;² thus this data is acceptable for coarse-level analysis and large scale planning for areas of 75,000 to 100,000 acres. He noted that one can also acquire and apply remote sensing satellite imagery data to obtain greater levels of accuracy to fine tune restoration treatment planning. He noted that 70 percent accuracy is good, and with enough additional data, it may be possible to achieve 90 percent accuracy. In order to show specific restoration treatment areas on maps, a higher level of accuracy is needed for the data used. ECAP can incorporate the parameters of the existing CNF Forest Management Plan and what is allowed and not allowed in certain areas. He explained that the committee will need to decide what level of accuracy and what data are needed if utilizing ECAP in the Cherokee National Forest.

A committee member asked CNF staff observers how they view ECAP in comparison to the current watershed analysis used by CNF. The CNF staff observers responded that it seems that this model could supplant the current watershed assessment process or assist in doing the assessment faster. A concern for the Forest Service is how to obtain the ground truthed information. A CNF staff observer noted that restoration is their most contentious issue and he hopes this committee can help CNF identify **where** to do **what** types of restoration.

Mr. Lowe explained that ECAP can be used to predict outcomes on treatments for insects, disease, invasive plants; or any other strategies, assumptions, values, or management actions. The ECAP calculates return on investment as well. While any model is not totally accurate, it is transparent and explicit. He provided examples for when ECAP (with the off-the-shelf LANDFIRE data only) may not be

¹ For more information on peer review of this model and other information see: <http://www.landfire.gov/>

² Southern Blue Ridge Fire Learning Network analyzed the LANDFIRE model results for Southeastern forests and found approximately a 50% accuracy level.

useful including: small scale (less than 75,000 acres); aquatic ecosystems; areas of ecological departure (uncharacteristic classes). A committee member asked how ECAP could be used to determine the “where” for CNF restoration planning where smaller scale restoration may be used. Mr. Lowe explained that to do this, it would be necessary to (1) invest in high resolution imagery or (2) use expert opinion on how and where to treat.

Committee members discussed the sources and accuracy of data available for CNF and questioned if the model can be accurate enough to allow recommendation of particular restoration actions on smaller parcels. Ms. Firehock noted that for this process, it is important to remember that there is already a Cherokee Forest Management Plan and the committee is tasked with developing specific projects to help implement the plan. This may point to the necessity of having higher resolution imagery to use the ECAP process in the Cherokee Forest. Others noted that obtaining the high resolution data could help build buy-in by stakeholders if agreement could be reached on the data to be used and the ground truthing of the information. Another committee member asked whether the original TNC Conservation Action Planning (CAP) process which is driven entirely by expert opinion would be able to recommend “where” to do which restoration activities. Mr. Lowe suggested that the group could start with the CAP process and use local experts to see if the results are sufficient. A participant questioned whether or not the model could address forest structure. A participant noted that researcher Steve Simone had done some work to address data accuracy regarding forest type but not forest structure. It was noted that TNC would try to contact Mr. Simone to learn more about this.

A member noted that if the planning goal is to make recommendations at the ecosystem level, rather than the stand level, then CAP, or ECAP with high resolution data, may be able to help. A member added that CAP baseline data would be useful for the committee to work towards its goal of recommending specific restoration projects as it would show the group used a scientific approach to obtain better information about the forest before designing solutions. The CAP process would show the public visually how a distribution of types was selected. Other members stated that it is too early to decide whether to use the ECAP approach until the committee obtains more information on the accuracy of data for CNF. A key question raised in the discussion was ‘Will the cost of ECAP in time and money be worth the results given the level of accuracy.’ Mr. Lowe noted that the CNF project would be the first application of ECAP in the east at this scale, for this more densely forested landscape with more diversity of forest types.

Specific committee requests for additional information included:

- Will the new FIA (Forest Inventory Analysis) data be available in time to use in this process?
- How to populate the models: remote sensing data or expert opinion, both?
- How accurate is satellite imagery for the east to establish forest types?
- Is the data tied to forest structure? Do we need to know structure?
- How many ecosystem types in CNF need to be studied?
- What data will be needed to use ECAP and what are the limitations and sources?

Mr. Wyss handed out copies of the 16 ecosystem models (entitled “LANDFIRE Biophysical Setting Model”) in the CNF Forest, and asked Committee members to review and provide feedback. He noted that TNC could help coordinate the review of these models by experts.

In response to comments and questions about the accuracy of the data inputs and model results, Alex Wyss said that TNC understands the group’s concerns about the accuracy of data and maps, the costs of better data, the sources of metrics about the forest, time limits to obtain data, etc. He noted that the model can be adjusted to correct for weaknesses. TNC will contact experts such as Jim Smith (LANDFIRE) and Steve Simone (remote sensing data), about the data soon and get back to the committee within

three weeks to answer questions and make recommendations on how to address the concerns about ECAP identified in this meeting. Committee members agreed on the need for a meeting to discuss the results of TNC's deeper investigation into data and accuracy issues. Ms. Firehock will schedule a date with the committee in late July (now scheduled for Tuesday July 27).

Steering Committee Draft Work Plan

In response to the draft Steering Committee work plan/time line handed out by Mr. Wyss, committee members noted that the time line also needs to reflect the on-line survey and committee field trip. Ms. Firehock stated that the committee needs to review and provide feedback on the on-line survey once it is drafted in August, so that it can be placed on-line in September/October. The committee agreed that it would be advisable to postpone the first public meetings until October to allow the group to develop information to present to the public.

The committee also agreed on the need to have a discussion about the definition of "restoration" for this initiative prior to the first public meetings in the fall. Ms. Firehock cautioned the committee not to expect to have a final decision on the specifics of what and where for restoration until later in this process; we only need a "50,000 foot level" of information for the initial public meetings. Committee members noted that the Case Statement's definition of restoration is not specific enough. A member commented that one of the purposes of the initial public meetings was to provide basic education and to obtain information on what the public wants to see restored, thus we do not need to have all the answers this fall. No decision was made on the timing of the Committee's field trip, but it was suggested to wait until after the public meetings when the committee could tour specific areas to ground truth information.

Mr. Lowe stated that the draft work plan anticipates the first ECAP (or CAP) workshop would be held in November and that these workshops usually take 1 ½ to 2 days. Ms. Firehock asked the committee to consider doing a Friday afternoon and all day Saturday workshop, noting that whatever processes the Committee selects for developing restoration recommendations, it will require a significant commitment of time. She asked whether the committee members could agree to hold some extended workshops to allow the completion of this work and all agreed that they were willing to do so.

Next Steps

Ms. Firehock asked the committee to provide her with feedback on the draft committee website within two weeks (by July 15) from the web link sent previously. Committee members were also encouraged to send additional questions regarding ECAP within a week of this meeting.

Action Items

- TNC to consult with experts to obtain answers to Committee questions regarding ECAP and data by July 22nd
- Committee members to provide feedback on the draft Committee website to Karen Firehock by July 15th
- Committee members to submit additional questions regarding ECAP to TNC by July 8th
- TNC to update the draft Committee Work Plan based on feedback from this meeting before next meeting.

Attachments (please refer to project web site: <http://www.communityplan.net/cherokee/>)

- Greg Lowe's ECAP presentation

- LANDFIRE Biophysical Setting Models for CNF

For more information or to suggest corrections to the minutes, contact karenfirehock@gmail.com