



Sustainable Northwest Site Visit Summary Report

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Visit Dates: July 31-August 2, 2019

Interviewees:

Greg Block, President, Sustainable Northwest (Portland, OR)

Vernita Ediger, Natural Resources & Environmental Program Administrator, Central Oregon
Intergovernmental Council (Bend, OR)

Marla Harvey, Energy Coordinator, Mid-Columbia Economic Development District (Hood River, OR)

Jenna Knobloch, Forest Program Manager, Sustainable Northwest ((Portland, OR)

Dylan Kruse, Director of Governmental Affairs & Program Strategy (Portland, OR)

Jay McLaughlin, Executive Director, Mt. Adams Resource Stewards (Glenwood WA)

Background

- Sustainable Northwest operates at the intersection of community, ecology, and economy, focusing on working lands (not parks or protected areas) specifically forestry, ranching, and farming, and on issues of water and energy.
- Sustainable Northwest was created as a response to the often-violent conflict and acrimony between the timber industry, environmental advocates, and the government resulting from court rulings in the 1990s that stopped logging on Federal lands. The conflict was widely portrayed as “Jobs vs. The Environment” and represented a major crisis over the management of natural resources in the Pacific Northwest. Sustainable Northwest’s founder promoted the then contentious idea that collaboration and community-based conservation efforts were the way to create jobs, strengthen rural communities, and restore the environment. These early bridge-building efforts led to the formation of Forest Collaboratives, of which there are now 31 still active in Oregon and Washington.
- Today, Sustainable Northwest describes itself as being at “the radical middle of economy, environment, and community” envisioning “a prosperous Northwest where rural and urban areas are united by sustainably produced goods and services, healthy natural systems and strong communities.” The organization pursues this vision through “wise partnerships, policies, and investments”. Sustainable Northwest’s contribution is through facilitation, conflict resolution, and negotiation of multi-party agreements, through the crafting of state and federal policies that balance environmental and community needs, and through offering expertise in science, law, energy, and other technical knowledge.
- Sustainable Northwest was selected for a site visit because the organization’s very existence is predicated on collaboration, boundary-crossing, and achieving regional impact.

Organization

- Sustainable Northwest is a 501(c)(3) organization based in Portland, Oregon. It is governed by a 14-member Board of Directors, providing a range of legal, capital, forestry, ranching, and business expertise, as well as representation from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. The organization has a staff of 14 (an equal split of women and men).



- Sustainable Northwest Wood is a wholly owned subsidiary of Sustainable Northwest. Consolidated annual revenues amount to approximately \$2.5 million (2016) of which the subsidiary accounts for about 30 percent.

Context

- Both Oregon and Washington are defined by their geography and history. The Cascades divide the states between the western region with its relatively modest temperatures and abundant rainfall, and the eastern region with its hot summers, cold winters, and much lower rainfall. The forestlands reflect these climatic differences – rich, dense forest of Douglas fir, hemlock, cedar and spruce in the west, sparser forests of ponderosa and lodgepole pine in the east. The main population centers are clustered to the west of the Cascades – Portland-Eugene in Oregon and Seattle-Tacoma in Washington, together with the state capitals of Salem and Olympia. The metropolitan areas are characterized by rapid growth, new economy jobs, and increasing challenges of congestion, affordability, and gentrification, in contrast to the slower paced, economically struggling more rural regions. There is growing inequity in incomes, wealth, economic opportunities, and educational attainment between these regions, highlighting deep social, economic, cultural, and political rifts. The bitter conflicts over logging on public lands, ‘jobs vs. environment’, communities vs. the Federal government are both symptoms of, and reinforcers of these rifts.
- The rural economy of the Pacific Northwest is going through a long and painful transition brought about by global economic forces, shifts in Federal natural resources policies and practices, growing environmental awareness, and long-term threats from climate change and immediate threats from wildfires, diseases, and urban expansion. Forests cover half of Oregon’s land area, and 60 percent of those are owned by the Federal government, and most of the private forests are owned by outside corporate interests. This contributes greatly to the sense of lack of control over regional and community destiny felt by many rural communities.
- Nevertheless, making progress on any of the major issues of the day, whether climate change, education, or the economy, require policymakers, policy advocates, practitioners, and communities to seek common ground for the good of the whole state. Sustainable Northwest is one of many organizations active in this endeavor seeing the goal of healthy forests and healthy communities as only being possible through policies and practices that build bridges between urban and rural interests.
- Greg Block, Sustainable Northwest’s president, identifies four enabling conditions for their work – social and economic stressors and conflicts that make people open to change, to doing things differently; local leaders, whether organizations or individuals, willing to commit time and energy to make things better; patience, a willingness to accept that positive change takes time often over many years; and institutional capacity to provide ongoing historical and technical knowledge to guide decision making.

Collaboration

- Sustainable Northwest is a pioneer in fostering collaboration on land management models in watersheds, forests, and rangelands. Since 1994, it has supported grassroots efforts that have brought together disparate partners to forge agreements and continue to advance collaborative practices across the region.
- Forest collaboratives are the signature program for Sustainable Northwest, the first of which was established in 1992. These are place-based groups that emphasize inclusive planning processes to achieve balanced social, ecological, and economic objectives. They aim to achieve a variety of outcomes, such as reduction of the risk of wildfire, protection of drinking water sources, spurring



rural economic development, enhancing recreation opportunities, and conserving flora and fauna. It can be challenging to manage for these diverse benefits while incorporating extensive stakeholder involvement, but given the history of forest management conflicts, they represent a better alternative to using the courts to resolve disputes.

- There are 23 collaboratives in Oregon and eight in Washington. Their composition varies from place to place but typically they include environmental groups (both local and national), local timber industry and lobbyists, county commissioners, recreational groups, homeowners' associations, local economic development groups, watershed councils, plus representation from state and federal agencies.
- The role of Sustainable Northwest has evolved over the years as the collaboratives have become part of the established practice of the Forest Service and other federal agencies. It is transitioning from direct action as catalyst, convener, and coordinator to more of a network builder. Sustainable Northwest has supported the development of the Oregon Forest Collaborative Network and the Washington Forest Collaborative Network. These are intended to foster a community of practice for sharing among the collaboratives and for building support for collaborative forest work at the state level. Sustainable Northwest helps to facilitate annual summits of these networks, bringing them together with agency partners, state and federal officials, and scientists and practitioners to share success stories and discuss lessons learned. In addition, Sustainable Northwest hosts a workshop for all the collaboratives within the U.S. Forest Service Region 6 (Washington and Oregon) to share their experiences and practices.
- The U.S. Forest Service is implementing the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) to restore ecosystem health and create jobs in forest restoration in five National Forests in Washington and Oregon. CFLRP brings together public and private land managers, conservation interests, and tribes to engage in ten-year projects that take a landscape scale approach to forest restoration. Benefits that are already being seen include job creation and job stability, reliable wood supplies for local mills and market infrastructure, restored forest health, improved community safety, and reduced fire suppression costs. Sustainable Northwest is coordinating the Region 6 CFLRP network to connect the participants from the five projects for learning and sharing, identifying core needs, challenges and successes in CFLRP planning and implementation, and sharing successful practices to enhance wildlife habitat, reduce the risk of wildfire, combat invasive species and restore watershed health.
- Sustainable Northwest operates within a complex ecosystem of organizations concerned with environmental and rural development issues. In 2000, it formed Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC) and organized its efforts for ten years before it became self-sustaining. RVCC describes itself as an inclusive movement that seeks common ground between diverse interests. It comprises more than 80 nonprofit, public, and private organizations, including rural community advocates, regional and national conservation organizations, environmentalists, business owners, federal and state land managers, researchers, county and state government, and foundations. RVCC focuses on land stewardship, renewable energy, climate change, and local workforce development. By bringing rural leaders together to share their work, it promotes peer learning and capacity building, and supports critical legislation such as the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program. Sustainable Northwest remains as a member of the RVCC leadership team that draws from organizations across Alaska, California, Idaho, New Mexico, Montana, Oregon, and Washington.

Rural-Urban Relationships



- Rural-urban relationships for Sustainable Northwest are complex and have several dimensions. They can be seen for instance in supply chains, statewide policy alliances, environmental spillovers, and resource and investment flows.
- **Supply Chains.** Sustainable Northwest Wood (SNW Wood) is a for-profit subsidiary of Sustainable Northwest founded in 2008. It is a wholesaler based in Portland with a mission to support small mills in rural communities to bolster sustainable economic development and job creation. It only carries wood from the Pacific Northwest, grown in forests managed to the standards of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) or as part of stewardship programs restoring native ecosystems.
- SNW Wood grew out of the *Healthy Forests Healthy Communities Partnership* – an initiative to create a network to build awareness of, and demand for responsibly produced wood products and builds capacity in rural communities to produce and market goods that benefit both local businesses and forest ecosystems. At one time, 70 companies in four states (OR, WA, CA, MT) were in the network. SNW Wood emerged as SNW’s entrepreneurial response – a “purpose-driven” lumber company offering locally-sourced wood products from well-managed forests and ecosystem restoration projects in the Pacific Northwest, “supporting small mills, fostering conservation-based economic development in rural areas, and bridging the rural-urban divide.”
- Services include Forest Stewardship Council Chain of Custody Certification, connections to policy advocacy, supply management (providing technical assistance from forests to customers), market opportunities, such as juniper wood (now much sought-after but challenging to harvest and process), and “telling the story” about responsible forest management (equivalent to Farm to Table).
- Here, rural-urban relationships are commercial transactions, connecting architects, contractors, and environmentally aware technology companies who are constructing green buildings in Seattle and Portland to certified suppliers in the region. SNW Wood in this context operates as a rural-to-urban supply chain intermediary.
- **Statewide Policy Alliances.** Sustainable Northwest was an active member of Renew Oregon, a coalition of businesses, nonprofits, and community organizations that supported proposed legislation to introduce a cap-and-trade system in Oregon to limit greenhouse gas emissions, similar to one already in operation in California. The bill, among other things, would have promoted adaptation and resilience by natural and working lands, fish and wildlife resources, communities, and the economy, and provided assistance to households, businesses, and workers impacted by climate change or climate change policies. The proposal was calibrated to ensure broad-based support for both urban and rural interests, and would have brought substantial investment to rural Oregon; however, the bill was not enacted in 2019 partly because the opposition used urban vs. rural rhetoric to present it as an urban-centric, environmentalism measure that would damage rural interests. This had echoes of the narratives that led to the founding of Sustainable Northwest 25 years ago.
- **Environmental Spillovers.** 2018 saw wildfires burn 1.3 million acres of forest and grasslands in Oregon and Washington because of drought, heat, lightning storms, and human actions. Smoke from these fires and others in British Columbia led to the cities of Vancouver and Seattle being ranked #1 and #4 for the world’s worst air quality during August. This highlighted the ongoing need to reduce the fuel load in the region’s forests – as Jay McLaughlin of Mt. Adams Resource Stewards commented, “a teaching moment for the proper management of the forests” and why urban residents should care.
- **Resource and Investment Flows.** A challenge that was mentioned in the interviews was how best to “make rural matter to urban”, particularly to the new generation of younger, urban funders. Two inter-related approaches were mentioned. The first was bringing to life the urban-rural connection



in the areas of food, water, energy, and forest products. The Pacific Northwest is already very sophisticated in valuing farm-to-table food systems and local wines and beers, and this awareness makes it possible to explore similar approaches in protecting water supplies through effective watershed management practices, and in sourcing wood from sustainably managed forests.

- The other approach is to offer a value proposition linked to the ethic of natural resource stewardship. This might mean showing how public and private investments at scale in rural places and sectors, not only in food, water, energy, and forests, but also in carbon sequestration and carbon offset projects, workforce and business development, healthcare, education, broadband and other infrastructure, would produce sizeable returns in long-term urban and rural resilience.

Equity

- Sustainable Northwest has a track record of working with tribes across the Pacific Northwest. The forest collaboratives have had mixed success in engaging with tribes because of issues of sovereignty, treaty rights, and a long, troubled history that has undermined trust. The Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, a signatory member of the Tapash Sustainable Forest Collaborative along with The Nature Conservancy and the State of Washington, provides a positive example of engagement; others have been involved in specific issues such as the implementation of the Tribal Forest Protection Act.
- Increasingly, the forest collaboratives have been paying attention to equity issues, particularly the growing Hispanic population in rural Oregon and Washington. Sustainable Northwest, through its facilitation of the collaborative networks, has offered workshops on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and is working with PCUN (Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste) a nonprofit public education and political action group focusing on marginalized Latinx farmworkers and working families. There are concerns about working conditions for workers particularly on private forest land.
- A specific example of how an equity focus has had an impact is the Deschutes Forest Collaborative. Prescribed burns are an essential approach to forest management and reduction in fuel loads, but smoke from these burns has had significant health effects on low-income communities in or next to the forests. The State of Oregon has placed limits on burning and requires communities to be fully informed of proposed burns and be issued HEPA filters. The collaborative has prepared a county response plan working with the health departments and local communities, who must sign-off before any burning can start.
- An important philanthropy in Oregon, the Meyer Memorial Trust, has been very active in requiring its grantees to pay attention to DEI in funding proposals and managing projects. This was one of the reasons why Sustainable Northwest introduced DEI workshops to the forest collaborative networks. Context is important when discussing DEI in the rural Pacific Northwest. Interviewees made the point that other than in the larger cities, racial diversity was limited in rural areas, other than the largely invisible migrant worker community. However, there are many other dimensions of diversity (and inequity) that need to be addressed, specifically poverty, poor education, unemployment and underemployment, health status, and aging.

Commentary

- Sustainable Northwest has been working at the interface of economic development and environmental conservation for 25 years. It has adopted a position of conflict resolution looking for ways in which wise stewardship of natural resources, particularly forestlands, can sustain economic opportunity in rural communities. The most visible outcome has been the networks of forest collaboratives that have been at least partly responsible for restarting productive and sustainable



forestry in Oregon and Washington and demonstrating a way of bringing diverse interests together and reducing litigation.

- Sustainable Northwest works regionally across jurisdictions in Oregon and Washington, and occasionally beyond, and through its subsidiary SNW Wood acts as a supply chain coordinator between rural producers and urban consumers.
- Its work has entailed building strong partnerships with Federal agencies, Tribal nations and councils, rural businesses and communities, and an array of environmental and resource-based nonprofits, and many of these have developed beyond the transactional to long-term relationships. Equity issues are expressed in terms of geography and culture and of making sure that Tribal and minority (especially Latinx forest workers and their families) communities are partners in the processes of creating healthy forests.
- There are, however, existential threats to the continuing success of Sustainable Northwest's activities. The first are the long-term cultural stresses in the region that feed into the current rural-urban divide narrative. These stem from the historic extraction of natural resources in ways that drained wealth from the region and rendered local interests powerless, from the fact that the Federal government owns and controls 60 percent of Oregon's forestlands, and from significant differences in income, wealth, and education between the rapidly growing metropolitan area in Portland and the Willamette Valley, and the rural areas on the coast and to the east of the Cascades. The court rulings that halted the timber industry in favor of environmental and stewardship considerations led to often violent clashes between economic and conservation, rural and urban, local and Federal interests. These grievances and lack of trust remain under the surface even though Sustainable Northwest and many other organizations and agencies have sought to find common ground and mutual interests. These efforts to build regional partnerships and collaborations remain fragile, as evidenced by the way the rural-urban divide was invoked to stop recent climate change legislation.
- Secondly, there are growing threats to forest systems from wildfire and pests and diseases. These result from not only long-term poor management practices and urban expansion into wildlands, but also from the effects of climate change on temperatures and rainfall. Confronting the drivers of climate change requires major changes in state and Federal policies and priorities, and this in turn leads organizations such as Sustainable Northwest to engage in policy advocacy for measures such as cap-and-trade legislation. Unfortunately, advocacy may not sit well with some of the interests with whom Sustainable Northwest must collaborate to advance sustainable forest practices.
- Thirdly, since Sustainable Northwest first began its work, other organizations have formed pursuing similar work and seeking funding support from the same sources that SNW has relied upon. This places Sustainable Northwest in the uncomfortable position of competing with its allies for resources or looking for new business models to further its activities. Interestingly, one approach may be to seek impact investments from private urban-based individuals, corporations, and foundations, who can see the value in promoting rural-urban interdependence.



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