

Partnerships Are Key to Public Lands – But How?

With fanfare in mid-April, President Obama launched the *America's Great Outdoors Initiative* in an attempt to reinvigorate conservation policy at a time when the nation is facing the twin concerns of rising environmental challenges and declining interest in nature among Americans. On this latter point, new studies show an alarming downward trend in a variety of outdoor activities, so the Initiative's timing is great. But it is on the first point that I'd like to raise a question.

One of the Initiative's goals is to build effective coalitions with state agencies and the private sector, and the President directed Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to lead the charge.

As someone who has been personally involved in coalition work for many years, often working with ranchers, sportsmen, agencies, and others, I applaud this goal and add two observations from my direct experience: (1) partnerships are essential to effective and substantive progress in conservation today, especially on public lands; and (2) the federal agencies are making the collaborative process increasingly difficult.

Our experience includes a fruitful partnership between the BLM, local chapters of Navajo Nation, state agencies and others on a range restoration project near Cuba, New Mexico. We have also directed a long-running habitat restoration project on behalf of the Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout, located on the Carson National Forest in northern New Mexico, and managed a 'grassbank' on a National Forest grazing allotment in support of an array of land health improvement work in the region.

In each case, we found the employees of the federal agencies to be hardworking, dedicated, and skilled. But we also found the system to be increasingly dysfunctional – the bureaucracy, policies, regulations, budget cuts, staff shortages, conflicting priorities, personnel turnover, and institutional inertia frequently combine to gridlock our public land agencies to the point of frustration for many partners.

This is important because, as Secretaries Salazar and Vilsack have both pointed out, we face momentous challenges in the 21st century. Take climate change. Speaking at the U.N. Summit in Copenhagen last December, Secretary Salazar said Interior's 70,000 employees will begin to focus their work on tackling the effects of global warming. "We must manage our lands and oceans for three new functions," he announced, "renewable energy production, carbon capture and storage, and climate adaptation."

He went on to say that by restoring ecosystems, using best management practices, and protecting key areas from development, "U.S. lands can store more carbon in ways that enhance our stewardship of land and natural resources while reducing our contribution to global warming."

I couldn't agree more. And there's plenty of good news. I know first-hand that the toolbox for restoration is well developed, including methods that increase the capacity for soils to

absorb atmospheric CO2. The array of best management practices is wide and diverse. And the key to their implementation is partnerships. In a coalition, everyone brings a different idea or tool to the table and by working together we can implement effective change. I know because I've seen it work.

But on federal lands, partnerships are becoming more difficult. Recently, for example, we've been told by the Forest Service that any NEPA cost (an environmental analysis required by law) associated with a proposed restoration project will now be carried by the *partner* (us, in other words). This cost used to be carried by the federal agency. NEPA is not cheap and it is hard to find this money. If the Forest Service goes through with this plan and passes these costs on to nonprofits, wildlife groups, state agencies or other partners, I predict future 'partnerships' will become increasingly scarce.

In contrast, here are some suggestions to improve partnerships on public lands: (1) create a pool of funding for planning and regulatory compliance to which nonprofits and other partners could apply; (2) create a Memorandum-of-Understanding-type process which will withstand repeated turnover in federal personnel; and (3) create more incentives for enterprising organizations that want to improve land health and ecological resilience.

I applaud the President's leadership in this very important endeavor. But it's crucial to match words with deeds. I encourage the Secretaries to examine the various obstacles that are impeding effective partnerships, especially with the private sector, and help remove them so that we can all work together to address the critical challenges confronting our public lands.