

Oregon Consensus—The Collaborative Way

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People don't often associate collaboration with land use disputes. Land use disputes are associated with litigation. Collaboration is a new way of thinking.

Malheur National Wildlife Refuge plan was developed by ranchers, environmentalists, and agencies that had been involved in a long-standing dispute. Through the collaborative process they came together to work through and develop the solution that can work for all.

There's a long history of contention between the refuge and the local community in Harney County. People have had differing opinions on how much commercial activity ought to be going on on the refuge and the number of cattle has diminished. Hay and grazing are a big part of the history of the Malheur refuge. For a refuge whose primary purpose is the care and maintenance of wildlife, that's a tough pill for environmentalists to swallow. That's had an impact on local ranches, our family being one of them.

Land related issues stir people's passions, and this process allows us to bring people together to work together, particularly where they're going to have a long-standing relationship with one another over time. We needed to do something different. We decided as staff to use the collaborative governance model. The essential difference between collaborative governance and traditional government is that collaborative governance provides a place for people to actually decide together, rather than asking a third party to decide for them.

Land management is extremely complex. Collaboration allows diversity to come into that discussion. Our big interest was just to be able to find out what they needed to have and, also, let them know what some of our needs were. It could be wildlife issues, could be range and domestic livestock issues, could be fish issues. We share common issues because we have common boundaries.

This ranch borders the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. We share the water that comes down Silver Creek. That makes us even more of a neighbor. Ranchers care immensely about the health of the landscape. That is the ranchers' livelihood.

Through discussions with Chad Kargers from the refuge, we needed to have a process in place that addressed and resolved these natural resource issues differently from the approach we've

taken in the past. As we started discussions about using the collaborative planning process, there were lots of ideas and lots of concerns. Could I afford to do this? Could I meet the prescribed timeline and benchmarks that I needed to meet in order to get the plan done on time. And could we get open and honest dialogue from this collaborative group? Bringing in a neutral third party such as Oregon Consensus was absolutely critical to the success of our collaborative process.

Often times it is very good to have some sort of a neutral party there to help people sort through those passions and actually see what the interests are that are behind those passions, in order to really develop solutions that address the real concerns that people have.

During one meeting, we had an exercise where we set four people in chairs opposing each other and circled them with all the other collaborators, and they were free to discuss the issues at hand. Frequently, we were set down at tables across from people that we knew didn't really agree with us at all. You had people with different perspectives. But I was just really impressed with how open they were. The candor was true and it leap-frogged our trust as a group, I think, forward and made this whole process.

The first area of agreement was that the lakes are in need of repair, and that is due to carp. Our aquatic health is poor. And to have everybody at the table sit there and agree to that was amazing. Everyone involved in this process recognized that dealing with the carp infestation was the most important thing that we could do to restore the health of the Malheur Refuge. One of the goals of our comprehensive conservation plan is to control carp. And, so, by mapping the bottom of the lake, that brings us one step closer to bringing the animals back.

Once you build those—what I'll call—trust relationships, then those diverse perspectives really become an asset. You spend enough time together that you get to know one another a little bit as individuals—that's people and not just somebody from another mindset or an organization with an agenda. The aftermath of collaboration is you have a shared investment in how this turns out from here on.

We did not just serve one special interest or one special organization. The outcome of litigation is one party won and one party lost. No question that a commitment to a good long term outcome is a much better solution to a problem. It's helped, you know, save time—both staff time and helped us keep more money going to the ground, instead of into the court system. This is an opportunity to really not only develop more cost efficient decisions, but also more timely decisions and more effective decisions. The staff feels good about themselves, like we've done something really good, but it's a good model to follow for some other issues.

Recently, we've had some large fires in the area. We used some of the things we learned and proceeded forward some. Whether it's BLM or the state of Oregon that have actually convened and worked through these kinds of processes, people are really willing to talk about the results. You have to go into it accepting that you don't know what the outcome's going to be. So you have people talking about that we thought, probably three years ago, that they probably

wouldn't talk to each other. At the same time, that outcome's probably going to be a better outcome than any one individual or any group of individuals by themselves could come up with.

A collaborative approach allows us to bring people together to develop more creative lasting solutions, and it also has the byproduct of building community among those people who work together. Using the collaborative planning process for our comprehensive plan was a perfect choice. A collaborative approach can be used on a very small dispute to a very large dispute, as we see with the refuge plan. There's a wide variety of small cases at the neighborhood level that can benefit from collaboration. It isn't more complex than just getting people to come together and talk to each other about what their various interests are, and by doing that, in the beginning, you really can save a lot of time and headache going forward if you can figure out what actually can be done on the ground to solve a problem.