

Ecosystem Workforce Program

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SERVICE PROVISION FOR NATURAL RESOURCE-BASED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Over the last fifteen years, rural communities in the Pacific Northwest have been trying to redevelop their economies to meet new federal land management priorities. Numerous state and federal agencies and nonprofit organizations work to promote rural economic development. These entities offer grants and low-interest loans; they seek to recruit new businesses and retain existing ones; and they provide business development tools, worker training, and employment opportunities. However, the extent to which economic development and land management agencies work together to foster economic development associated with stewardship of natural resources and public lands is unclear. The purpose of this study was to understand how economic development service providers engage in natural resource-based economic development, and their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities that it presents.

Approach

During the fall of 2010, we conducted interviews with the personnel of economic development organizations in eastern and southern Oregon and northern California.

Findings

The connection between economic development providers and land managers has room to grow. Across eastern and southern Oregon and northern California, there tend to be strong networks between regional USDA Rural Development offices and economic development districts. In several areas, there are also robust connections between nonprofits, forest-based businesses, and the USDA Forest Service. However, economic development and land management networks are often only weakly connected.

County and regional economic development providers are interested in new forest products business opportunities. There is growing interest from county and regional economic development groups and the private sector in using woody biomass materials from forest thinning and restoration for heat, energy, small-diameter lumber, posts and poles, shavings, or densified fuels. However economic development groups and the private sector have tended to pursue large (greater than 10-megawatt) biomass electricity generation facilities, and have limited understanding of the potential benefits of integrated and smaller-scale models. Community-based organizations and collaborative groups in Trinity, Wallowa, and Deschutes counties have been looking at how to develop agreement around restoration, develop smaller integrated facilities, and build institutional and municipal end heat users. These organizations could share their innovations, such



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as methods for rapid feasibility assessments and financing, with economic development groups.

Workforce programs rarely include training for forest-based employment. Workforce providers and business assistance providers do not currently offer many forest-related training opportunities. Concern that the federal land management agencies will offer insufficient work on public lands, and thus a lack of markets for restoration jobs, may be inhibiting investment in these trainings. Efforts to train people to compete outside of the natural resource sector help diversify the local workforce, but there is still need for a well-trained workforce to perform land management and add value to the materials removed from restoration treatments.

In conclusion, natural resource-based economic development in public lands communities faces

interrelated management, workforce, and market challenges. However, the different skill sets and resources of various economic development entities means that they tend to pursue components of economic development such as workforce training, industry recruitment, or small business support in isolation. Strong networks between different types of economic development entities, government service providers, natural resource management agencies and community-based organizations may lead to new opportunities for rural employment and business growth, and produce broad community benefits.

More Information

The complete assessment of rural service provider provision in the Dry Forest Zone is available on the web at ewp.uoregon.edu.

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