

Forest Collaboration Blooms Out of Tragedy

BY PAUL WAGNER

The scenic town of Darrington, Wash., is like many rural timber towns in the Pacific Northwest. It proudly celebrates a legacy of forestry, stewardship, and the economic benefits associated with such pursuits. Not surprisingly, the local high school mascot is a logger. Darrington and nearby communities like Oso, White Horse, and Swede Heaven also have a love for their community that is unique.



Never was that more on display than in March of 2014 when homes on Steelhead Lane near Oso were hit by a massive mudslide killing dozens of people, destroying 40 homes, and closing off the main highway to town for weeks. With the nation's eyes on them, locals showed their strength in the face of adversity with calls of "Oso Strong" and "Darrington Strong." Help came from unfamiliar places including national and statewide conservation groups that worked to preserve and boost that summer's recreational season for the area.

Finding common ground

Those relationships grew over the following months resulting in a bigger and more lasting partnership—the



PHOTO COURTESY OF TOM UNIACK

Members of the Darrington Collaborative update Congresswoman Suzan DelBene on the progress of their pilot Stewardship Project at Segelsen Ridge.

Darrington Collaborative. Since July 2015, the Darrington Collaborative has brought together local community leaders, environmental organizations, members of the local timber industry, and STEM youth educators to find common ground around sustainable forestry.

"The positive response to the slide was overwhelming and opened up new partnerships," said Dan Rankin, mayor of the town of Darrington and owner of a small milling operation. "While we don't all agree on many issues, we do all support sustainable forestry and healthier forests."

The collaborative works with the Forest Service, local elected officials, Tribes, and local stakeholders to simultaneously create a more ecologically resilient forest, provide for increased sustainable timber harvest on the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, deliver economic benefits to the community of Darrington, and create educational opportunities for Darrington's youth through the STEM program.

"We joined to take advantage of a win-win," said Tom Uniack, executive director of Washington Wild, a statewide conservation organization. "It allowed us to work with the Forest Service and local interests to add



PHOTO COURTESY OF OAK RANKIN

Oak Rankin instructs a student in use of a data logger for water quality measurements.

capacity to restoration thinning projects consistent with the Northwest Forest Plan, while investing timber receipts in additional aquatic restoration projects and providing local economic benefits to the community of Darrington."

Project development

Everyone agreed that producing a successful first project was important. Funds were secured from Pew Trusts and Governor Inslee's office to contract for layout and design of a forest and aquatics restoration project. Our area of interest and influence was defined as the Darrington School District.



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Our conservation partners were familiar with forester Derek Churchill from his work with the Olympic Collaborative and trusted him as a contractor. Local members chose a demonstration location in the Darrington Ranger District Adaptive Management Area (Northwest Forest Plan designation). Restoration involves partial cutting in dense second growth stands to encourage understory development and structural diversity more like legacy forests. A healthy, resilient forest has open early seral patches, dense cover patches, trees spaced for growth, and abundant ground cover. Developing these multiple attributes from single cohort stands is our goal.

Always in mind are opportunities for education. Through the collaborative, students from Tesla STEM High School (Redmond, Wash.) and Darrington Middle School participated in a series of education exchanges involving water sampling, forensics, coding, and other skills. Glacier Peak Institute is working with the collaborative to involve students in measuring baseline conditions and monitoring future conditions on collaborative projects.

Since the collaborative was imposed on a Forest Service workload already fully assigned and engaged, we used a Categorical Exclusion (CE) pathway of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for forest health restoration of 70 acres or less. With a CE, USFS time for input was minimized. Surveys for invasive plants, cultural resources, and road conditions, along with reports, were done by the collaborative. Contractors laid out units and prepared silvicultural prescriptions. USFS NEPA coordinator Phyllis Reed volunteered countless hours to keep requirements on track and make sure our work would result in a signed Decision Notice to proceed.

Stewardship Authority was used in offering the project. Aquatic restoration, a goal of the collaborative, was achieved by replacing or removing inadequate or damaged culverts, and improving water flows and road surfacing causing erosion and sediment. A road heavily used by hikers, rock climbers, and others was chosen so the project also supported Darrington area recreation.

Pilot project Segelsen 1.0 was sold 26 months after the Darrington Collaborative was formed. It generated 12,293 tons of saw logs and improved aquatic conditions along six miles of road. Treatment in the stand will be completed by October 15 of this year when the contract terminates.

Working for success

Technology played a role in our ability to execute rapidly. GIS should be part of most foresters' tool kit. We used USFS layers for stand year of origin, roads, and topography; and NAIP 2017 color imagery and LiDAR bare earth imagery to select our project area, map roads and streams, and layout draft unit boundaries. GPS was used to map thin, leave, and special areas. Dropbox file service was used to update and distribute project files. GPS was also used in road surveys to map culverts, streams, and points of interest, and to build a data table of items and condition. A UAV flight over Segelsen 1.0 is planned to show the diversity created by a restoration silvicultural prescription. The imagery will be used for monitoring, education, and promotion.

Another key to success is knowledge of laws and policy that pertain to USFS activities. We continue with CE projects to provide additional output benefiting the Darrington area. To be efficient we are focused on law requirements and policy direction rather than procedures that became cumbersome policy. We are in the process of setting up a meeting with the new regional forester for Region 6 to clarify and streamline what we do in the field.

There are opportunities for improvement and the collaborative will adapt as we learn. One example is in communicating to the local community. After receiving feedback, we started updating our website more frequently and reporting to a monthly local community group meeting to keep them updated on projects.

One original local member of the collaborative stepped down and the manager of Hampton Lumber's Darrington sawmill came onboard. Hampton has also hired a Darrington-based coordinator for other forest collaboratives they are involved in.

A grant received from Washington

State DNR for landscape restoration efforts will allow us to contract for providing condition surveys and reports for an Environmental Analysis (EA) of the North Fork Stillaguamish Watershed, which should reduce the time and expense of a USFS prepared EA. With an EA, we can do larger projects than under a CE, and it also creates an opportunity to use Good Neighbor Authority and involve the DNR. Seven additional project areas have been identified. Layout is underway on two of them as 70-acre CEs and an additional two will be larger projects under a N. Fork Stillaguamish EA.

Optimism is our path forward; one can complain about how things are or figure a way to get things done. ♦

Paul Wagner, an SAF member and last year's WSSAF chair, is president of Atterbury Consultants, Inc. He can be reached at pwagner@atterbury.com or 206-499-0080. Tom Uniack, executive director of Washington Wild, also contributed to this article.

Darrington Collaborative Members

Voting Members

Dan Rankin, Darrington Mayor
Paul Wagner, Washington State Society of American Foresters
Steve Skaglund, Three Rivers Contract Logging
Tim Johnson, Hampton Darrington Lumber Mill
Tom Uniack, Washington Wild
Megan Birzell, The Wilderness Society
Thomas O'Keefe, Ph.D., American Whitewater
Jon Owen, The Pew Charitable Trusts
Oak Rankin, Glacier Peak Institute
Mike Town, Tesla STEM High School

Non-Voting Members

Julia Terlinchamp, Office of WA Governor Jay Inslee
Shawn Bills, Office of Senator Patty Murray
Kelly Marquadt, Office of Congresswoman Suzan DelBene

Contractor

Paul Fischer, Resilient Forestry