

The Ritter Land Management Team: A Community Collaborative

BY BOB PARKER AND
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Forestland owner collaborative and cooperative ventures are increasing in number across Oregon and the Northwest because they can be valuable tools enabling communities with shared interests and goals, and similar challenges, to leverage their combined strengths toward attaining those goals. This is the case for the Ritter Land Management Team (RLMT), a non-industrial private landowner collaborative formed in 2015.



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Many landowners in the rural Lower Middle Fork John Day River Basin of eastern Oregon near the Ritter area were united in their desire to enhance the health and productivity of their lands and sustain their community and way of life for future genera-



PHOTO COURTESY OF RITTER LAND MANAGEMENT TEAM

Over 30 landowners in the Lower Middle Fork John Day River Basin joined together to form the Ritter Land Management Team to solve land stewardship challenges.

tions. They recognized that to do this they needed increased access to technical assistance, funding for stewardship programs, forest product markets, contractors, invasive weed control, and other services. So when the Community for Family Forestlands approached the community about forming their own collaborative group, they found a receptive audience.

It should be noted here that the word “collaborative” is often used in

various contexts and can be confusing or misleading as to the structure, function, and goals of an organization. For example, the collaborative groups formed by the Forest Service bring together various and diverse stakeholders for the purpose of providing meaningful input to Forest Service land management decision processes. In contrast, the Ritter project is a group of local, non-industrial private landowners with many shared interests and goals who hope to expand the scope and scale of their land stewardship efforts.

The road to a collaborative

The problems confronting the Ritter area and other areas of eastern Oregon came to the attention of the Committee for Family Forestlands (CFF), which serves to advise the

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Oregon Board of Forestry and the State Forester about family forestland issues. In 2012, the CFF traveled to Grant County to study eastern Oregon issues and composed a white paper of recommendations including collaborative options. A core group of 10 Ritter landowners and 11 local and regional organizations expressed their support for the recommendations.

As a result, the CFF, Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), Oregon Forest Resources Institute (OFRI), and OSU Extension formed a grant writing team and applied for a USFS State and Private Forestry grant for education and technical assistance, with input from landowners and local organizations. They also applied to the American Forest Foundation for additional funds. Both grant applications were successful, providing a total of \$310,000.

A project coordinator was hired and helped the organization develop a Strategic Action Plan and an Operational Charter laying out the mission, vision, and goal statements developed and approved by the landowners. A consultant forester was hired to implement a plan for analyzing the forest, range, and water resources and individual landowner priorities and interests utilizing the Discovery Tools process. This process is a template used to identify a landowner's geographical location, their land management goals and objectives, project types, mapped project locations, and treatment descriptions. The resulting information provided the foundation for the Strategic Action Plan. As activity increased, so did landowner interest, and by 2014 the project included 30 landowners owning 68,000 acres. In July of 2016, the landowners met and approved formation of the Ritter Land Management Team (RLMT) as a non-profit corporation.

The RLMT was soon successful in securing a three-year \$135,000 capacity building grant from Meyer Memorial Trust. They were also awarded over \$511,000 for the Rush Creek and Walton restoration projects from Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB). These projects included juniper removal, noxious weed treat-

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PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB PARKER

A stand of open ponderosa pine, previously commercially thinned.



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Juniper trees felled and awaiting removal.



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ments, protecting anadromous fish bearing streams with fencing, and aspen restoration. An additional \$59,000 was awarded by Business Oregon for a juniper sawmill feasibility study.

One of the principal goals for the RLMT is that their experiences could be used as a model for other communities contemplating forming a collaborative type of organizational structure. Undoubtedly, the RLMT is fortunate to have a cohesive group of landowners and many supportive organizations, resulting in significant accomplishments in a short time. However, maintaining a sustained effort is a difficult task for any organization and RLMT is experiencing their share of challenges.

Following are some suggestions that may be valuable for others to consider before deciding to form a collaborative.

Lessons learned

Pick the place

- It is advantageous for the community to have a history of landowner interrelationships, especially across landowner type boundaries.

- A diversity of landowner types is fine, as long as there are bridges between them and that there is mutual respect and connection. Ritter has a blend of multigenerational landowners with deep knowledge of place and extensive hands-on land management experience, and relative newcomers with very different backgrounds. But there is strong level of respect for the skills and ideas each group brings to the community.

Start with early, diversified local leadership and ownership

- Begin engaging multiple landowners and organizations early to better understand them and get their sense of ownership in the organization.

- Immediately build an action-focused, locally based operations committee that is accessible to the group. Not all landowners need or want

to be involved with decision making and a smaller, diverse and trusted group is often preferred.

- Secure a flexible source of base funding that allows for early on-the-ground projects to show outcomes. Tangible outcomes help engage and motivate potential members and builds trust.

- Provide leadership that is patient with sorting through grant fund allocations and organizational arrangements.

Landowner and service provider relationships

- Help orient and organize landowners to understand potentially available resources and provide a list of possibilities.

- Also help orient agency service providers to the landowners. This intermediary work continues to be key. Agency personnel are typically very busy, already overstretched, serve large areas, and may not have the time and interest in catering to one sub-area within their region.

- Develop a sense of the community before process development. Proceeding with a pre-prescribed organizational plan may lead to perceptions of



SOURCE: THE RITTER LAND MANAGEMENT TEAM

a top-down and restrictive effort.

- Landowners may be split in their interests. Some may be most interested in actions that improve the productivity of the land and the economic return while others are not. Balancing those diverse interests is important.

- Expect that landowner interest and focus will fluctuate over time. Part of that may be normal changes in opportunities, markets, or desires but the organization should be careful to not over-emphasize projects that may take energy away from main goals such as ground restoration work.

Pay attention to equity

Be sensitive to landowner differences and preferences. There may be big differences in ownership sizes, incomes, and willingness or ability to invest in stewardship. Not all opportunities that a collaborative can create are equally accessible to all.

- Plan for how the work will be conducted across the landscape to ensure more equitable outcomes, and be transparent with the process.

- Landowner or organizational viewpoints or priorities may vary widely. What one person sees as essential may be of little or no interest to someone else.

Foster peer learning and co-production of knowledge

- Prepare interactive learning experiences emphasizing peer learning over “expert” instruction for the sharing of knowledge and technical assistance.

- Provide information that is flexible and tailored to local needs. Don’t import “cookie cutter” ready-made information.



RLMT Partners

RLMT recognizes the following partner organizations whose enthusiastic support and assistance have made the collaborative possible:

- Grant Soil and Water Conservation District
- North Fork John Day Watershed Council
- Monument Soil and Water Conservation District
- Natural Resource Conservation Service
- Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs
- John Day Basin Partnership
- Oregon Forest Resources Institute
- Oregon Department of Forestry
- Oregon State University
- Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife
- Sustainable Northwest
- Oregon Department of Economic Development.
- RLMT provides special acknowledgement for OSU Extension Specialist Emily Jane Davis for many hours of hands-on work guiding the team through their formative process.

To learn more. For more information on the Ritter Land Management collaborative, visit www.ritterlmt.com.

Process

- Establish some process, even if there is resistance. Formal structures provide legal and insurance protection.
- Involvement in economic and market endeavors can rally interest but also carry a great deal of risk. Experience has shown that purchasing land and equipment in particular should be done cautiously with clear and documented arrangements.
- Lessons learned from public lands forest collaboratives may not be applicable and it's not necessarily useful to compare these groups.
- Give landowners the chance to name themselves. The term "collaboratives" may not reflect their vision of how they work together.

Hopefully this information will be of value for communities that are considering forming their own group. The Ritter Land Management Team enjoys many strengths that created an energetic and successful enterprise, and which will help sustain their vision and goals for outstanding landscape-scale natural resource stewardship over the long-term. ♦

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Solving the Juniper Problems

When asked what their highest stewardship priorities are, landowners in the Ritter area point to juniper encroachment as their single biggest concern. Juniper trees consume huge amounts of water and crowd out more desirable plants, which leads to reduced range and wildlife habitat quality and negative impacts to the ecological and economic viability of the land. Fixing the



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB PARKER

This Timber King portable sawmill is similar to the one purchased by the Ritter Land Management Team. A feasibility study showed at least a 20-year supply of juniper in Ritter, and longer if expanded beyond the area.

problem isn't easy. Removing juniper is difficult, and expensive, and there is little cost-share funding to help or manufacturing facilities to sell juniper logs to.

The RLMT decided owning and operating their own sawmill would effectively support stewardship efforts by utilizing juniper logs created as a byproduct of their forest and rangeland restoration work. With help received from the Western Juniper Alliance, Sustainable Northwest, and Business Oregon, in 2016 and 2017 RLMT contracted for a business feasibility study that showed a sawmill was a viable option. RLMT is a 501c3 non-profit, so they subsequently formed a for-profit subsidiary and purchased a portable sawmill with grant funding from Business Oregon and the Oregon Community Foundation. The mill is now operational and selling lumber through Sustainable Northwest Lumber in Portland, Ore.

However, purchasing a sawmill is only the first step in a sawmilling adventure. Around the country, many collaborative and cooperative landowner organizations have made similar investments. Some have been successful, but many have not. A landowner cooperative manager once made this suggestion about directly involving the organization in a manufacturing enterprise: "I have three words of advice. Do not invest in capital. Do not invest in capital. Do not invest in capital." In other words—think long and hard before buying machinery.

Just think about the challenges. A new sawmill venture must simultaneously, and successfully, leap numerous hurdles to survive: raw material supply, adequate manufacturing location, inventory cost, personnel, log and lumber handling equipment, milling machinery, and marketing, to name just a few. Failure with one leads to the failure of all.

Many landowner association members bring great energy, enthusiasm, and backgrounds rich in education, knowledge, and experience. But many do not have experience or knowledge with running a mill, and/or they do not have abundant time to lend to the project.

New business startups are often undercapitalized and have little leeway to accommodate normal financing and overhead costs, let alone equipment, personnel, or market problems. Access to new capital from lending institutions may be limited.

Finally, the organizational management and decision-making structure of the group may not fit well with the demands of running a business.

Fortunately, the RLMT as a group is strongly motivated to work together to solve land stewardship challenges. In just a few years' time they have a produced a good track record of success and there is much room for optimism. Stay tuned into the RLMT website (www.ritterlmt.com) for developments.