Restoring Forests in a Complex Place through Collaboration:
The Applegate Partnership and Watershed Council, The Ecological Restoration Institute, and The Nature Conservancy Fire Learning Network

The 500,000-acre Applegate Watershed is embedded in the Klamath Mountains Geological Province of southwestern Oregon. Renowned for its phenomenal biodiversity, the region features dramatic topography, extensive watercourses, unusual and varied geologic substrata, and often-abrupt climatic variations. The dominant vegetation of the ecoregion is coniferous forest, but the environmental diversity, combined with a long history of prehistoric and historic disturbances (e.g., fire) have created more than 400 natural vegetation communities and associations. However, like all places where fire suppression has stopped the regulating influences of frequent, low-intensity fire, the landscape has experienced significant and unhealthy vegetation and structural changes—changes that now need our attention.

The views of the people who live in or influence what happens in this region are as diverse as the biotic community. Southwest Oregon was ground zero for the timber wars of the 1990s. Activists maintain an intense scrutiny and skepticism of federal land management agencies, such as the BLM and the Forest Service. As a result it has been a challenge to create consensus on how to restore this complex landscape.

The Applegate Partnership was born in the early 1990s to provide a collaborative framework to identify socially acceptable restoration options that would protect the forest, people, structures, and communities while providing jobs and economic opportunity in the watershed. The collaboration did motivate some action, but not at the pace and scale hoped for by many members of the community.

In 2004, the Ecological Restoration Institute (ERI), at the urging of the Bureau of Land Management and the United States Forest Service, provided funding to the Applegate Partnership to design and implement demonstration restoration treatments. By implementing demonstration projects, the collaborated hoped to show the community what restoration treatments look like, that the outcome would not resemble industrial logging of the past, and that restoration can be accomplished without causing long-term damage to the forest. It took four years for the community to reach agreement on the demonstration sites (a reflection of how hard it is to reach consensus). In 2009, the ERI provided funding to The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to help finish implementation of the demonstration projects. Following completion of the demonstration sites, the Forest Service and BLM are committed to re-measuring the plots using approaches developed by the ERI.

In 2006, TNC established a Fire Learning Network (FLN) site at the Applegate. The FLN is a national partnership between TNC, the United States Forest Service, and BLM with the goal of cooperating, working, and learning together to re-establish natural fire in fire-dependent ecosystems. The FLN network extends across the nation and strives to engage land management professionals and stakeholders in the design and application of restoration and prescribed burning. The long history of collaboration in the Applegate Watershed, combined with the desire to accomplish more treatments, made this a logical place to use the FLN framework.

The primary goal established by FLN participants in the Applegate Watershed is to create a landscape assessment that reflects the unique biophysical needs of the watershed and social values of the community, and identifies where to locate and prioritize restoration treatments. Funding from the ERI enabled the FLN to hire a coordinator to help facilitate the process. The first draft of a map identifying treatment priority areas was completed in June 2009. The map will be revised and finalized by fall of 2009. The completed map will show where the community believes high-priority, active management is needed on 200,000 acres. It is the hope of the Applegate FLN that this map will help guide out-year planning by the federal land management agencies.

Through collaboration, ecological restoration in the Applegate Watershed continues. It is a tribute to the diligence and commitment of the stakeholders and the public land management agencies in the watershed that slow, but steady, progress is moving this diverse, fire-adapted ecosystem toward a healthier and more resilient condition.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
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