



CLERE Inc.

California Law Empowering Renewable Energy

Workforce Solutions for Biomass Removal from US Forest Service Lands in North East California

Prepared for:

Fall River Resource Conservation District

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Introduction

This report presents a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and solutions related to workforce capacity in the context of the ambitious goal set by the US Forest Service and the State of California for extensive forest treatment by 2025. First we will review the recent activities of several functioning partner organizations that have been supplying support to their National Forests and actualizing several fuel reduction projects in their respective regions. Then, this paper reviews information from several sources, including the USFS Wildfire Crisis Strategy 10-Year Implementation Plan, the Partnerships on Every Forest (PEF) program, The Interpersonnel Act and its associated IPA Mobility program, and the associated non-profit that works with this law, called the Partnership for Public Service. Lastly we will make recommendations on how to apply this information to improve workforce availability in the region.

The insights within this report include summaries of numerous roundtable discussions, convened to support the development of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy 10-Year Implementation Plan. A central theme that emerged from these dialogues is the urgent need to strengthen our workforce capacity. This involves not just the recruitment and retention of skilled personnel, but also the effective utilization of partnership mechanisms that are currently underused. We also reviewed the Partnerships on Every Forest (PEF) program, and specifically the associated Shasta Trinity Project. These initiatives are playing a pivotal role in addressing workforce challenges in the forestry sector. The PEF program is a groundbreaking initiative that aims to equip every Forest Service employee with the ability to capitalize on partnership opportunities that yield cross-boundary conservation results, foster shared leadership by collaborating with diverse communities, and cultivate relationships founded on respect and trust.

Last, we will examine the Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) Mobility Program, a federal initiative that enables the temporary exchange of personnel between federal government agencies and non-federal entities such as universities, state and local governments, tribal governments, and federally funded research and development centers. Administered by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the IPA seeks to tackle workforce capacity issues and fill difficult-to-fill positions with competent staff. Despite its potential, the IPA is underutilized due to factors such as lack of awareness, limited resources, perceived complexity, and regulatory barriers. This discussion highlights the barriers that prevent the full exploitation of these mechanisms, such as a lack of awareness and burdensome administrative procedures. It proposes a range of workforce solutions to address these issues, alongside strategies to attract top-tier candidates, enhance the attractiveness of staff positions through benefits, and invest in specialized training opportunities. It also underscores the need for innovative methods, such as the employment of novel contractual and legal mechanisms to simplify partnership agreements and facilitate skill labor sharing in land management projects.

Part One: Existing Partner Organizations

California includes eighteen different National Forests, which all have different geography, staffing needs and budgets. Each of these forests has one thing in common, however, and that is the need to increase forest health improvement projects. In order to tackle this challenge, federal leadership has indicated a need for nonprofit organizations to help support the tasks. In some locations in the State there have been such groups who have been stood up and have been successful. Listed below are five such examples which exemplify good working practices in this space, as well as one example from outside of California that is worth noting. Reliance on nonprofit partner organizations will continue to be an important tool in federal lands management well into the future.

Great Basin Institute

The Great Basin Institute is an incredibly robust and productive organization with a number of different programs that are aimed at using applied research to support science-based adaptive management of public lands. The Institute was founded at the University of Nevada in 1998 and is dedicated to the promotion of science through field studies programs, conservation practices and public outreach. They mobilize University faculty, students, volunteers and staff in direct service to support the conservation of public lands. GBI has supported over 7,000 conservationists on hundreds of projects over the western US. GBI works in collaboration with a wide range of partners and boasts a highly effective organizational method of partnering with various stakeholders through many different partnership mechanisms outlined below. CLERE Inc. spoke with founder Jerry Keir about the specific agreements that GBI utilizes to get effective work done within the jurisdiction of the USFS.

Among the many programs it houses and directly supports, GBI has a NEPA services program dedicated to increasing the pace and scale of public land management by providing skilled teams to streamline the NEPA process for crucial environmental projects at a landscape scale. To accomplish these important collaborations, GBI utilizes agency cooperative agreements, subcontracting and also general service agreements for non-federal entities to most effectively execute deliverables. In 2022-2023, Sequoia, Inyo, Eldorado, Plumas, and Lassen National Forests have all entered into agreements with GBI for specialist support and scoping services to meet NEPA requirements for projects addressing post-fire land-management needs after wildfire in each of their territories. GBI assists by preparing environmental documents required for State and Federal NEPA and CEQA including Environmental Assessments and Environmental Impact Reports. NEPA policy and the workforce capacity required of it can be one of the greatest hindrances to getting timely and efficient work done to manage public lands and this is one of the most discussed areas in the

realm of forestry and fuels management where third-party contracting and collaborations can make the biggest impact.

GBI's Basin and Range Forestry program also supports vital forest health work in the West. The program provides a wide range of services to both private and public land managers. Some of these services include forest and biological surveys and inventories, USFS Forest Stand Exam Inventories, USFS healthy forest timber sale preparation, GPS data collection and analysis, GIS mapping and data services, and hand crew support for implementation of fuels reduction, hazardous tree removal and noxious weed treatment. Through this program GBI also offers leadership in collaborative partnership for the management of forest health initiatives at the landscape scale. The program has treated over 50,000 acres across their service region and works closely with RCD's, CA Fire Safe Councils, and individual land trusts to implement these projects.

One example of these collaborative partnerships can be found in GBI's work in the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit of the USFS. GBI offers services to support the Unit in implementing the restoration goals laid forth by their Multi-Jurisdictional Fuel Reduction and Wildfire Prevention Strategy. As for specific contracting mechanisms, among several others, GBI shared with CLERE in our interview that they most commonly employ Master Stewardship Agreements and Supplemental Project Agreements to contract these collaborative efforts with the USFS.

GBI is an outstanding example of an organization filling the need for large landscape-scale collaborative projects by offering services to directly aid and advance the successfulness of their implementation and permitting processes. In addition to direct science and monitoring services as well as hand crew services, GBI directly offers NEPA assistance (mostly done in-house), which can be a significant lift on agency staff that are burdened by the requirements of NEPA on top of other project permitting requirements. Bringing in partners to accomplish these tasks can have a major positive effect on getting projects underway to support forest health in the West.

Relevant Links:

<https://www.thegreatbasininstitute.org/>

White Bark Institute

The White Bark Institute is a non-profit organization dedicated to interdisciplinary environmental problem-solving aimed to improve the communities and ecosystems in the Eastern Sierra. Their mission is "to take action, cultivate partnerships, and empower communities to create and sustain resilient landscapes for future generations."

A significant portion of WBI's current work is centered around the Eastern Sierra Climate and Communities Resilience Project (ESCCRP). WBI is the lead partner on the project in collaboration with the Inyo National Forest. This project is intended to implement crucial landscape-scale forest restoration and strategic prescribed fire over approximately 56,000 acres of Inyo NF lands surrounding the area of Mammoth Lakes, CA. The focus of the project is to

restore the surrounding forest lands to more historic densities and safeguard the Town of Mammoth Lakes from catastrophic fire events. Among these priorities, the project also aims to invest in partnerships and technology to help increase pace and scale of restoration through creative biomass and workforce solutions that contribute to a sustainable wood products market. This portion of the project is considered Phase 1 Implementation and is funded by CAL FIRE.

In addition to spearheading Phase 1 Implementation of the fuels reduction treatment for the project, WBI has been retained by the Eastern Sierra Council of Governments (ESCOG- a local JPA focused on regional planning and economic development efforts throughout the Eastern Sierra) to conduct crucial NEPA planning project management so that ESCCRP can advance the project through the planning and approval process. This contracting relationship is related to WBI's involvement in the Eastern Sierra Pace and Scale Accelerator, a program housed under and managed by ESCOG's and funded through the CA Department of Fish and Wildlife. The goals of the accelerator are to complete NEPA for ESCCRP and to build regional capacity to support pace and scale environmental planning needs of ESCCRP and subsequent projects of regional importance. This accelerator is the result of four non-profits in the area requesting ESCOG support a program dedicated to enhancing forest health and recreation in the Eastern Sierra. By sourcing environmental planning needs from the local workforce- WBI and other organizations- the accelerator successfully works to address known delay factors in implementing large landscape scale projects such as this.

As demonstrated through the successfulness of this collaboration between WBI, ESCOG, and many other stakeholders, ESCCRP in conjunction with the Accelerator is another excellent example of how effective partnerships between private, public, federal and local government entities can be leveraged to accomplish much needed large-scale forest health projects in the region.

Relevant Links:

[WBI Projects](#)

[ESCCRP Summary](#)

The Sierra Institute

The Sierra Institute began as Forest Community Research in 1993. It gained non-profit status in 1997 and became the Sierra Institute for Community and Environment in order to reflect the breadth of work it conducts. The organization is focused on bringing research, education, and community collaboration to rural communities. Its projects are centralized around community based natural resource management, rural community development, wood utilization advancement, and youth stewardship coordination. Their mission is "promoting healthy and sustainable forests and watersheds by investing in the well-being of diverse rural communities and strengthening their participation in natural resource decision-making and programs."

The Institute has several successful partnerships with the USFS that are beneficial to highlight for the purpose of the study:

To begin, the Institute's Sierra to California All-Lands Enhancement (SCALE) project facilitates collaboration among groups working on landscape-scale forest restoration and community improvement in California. The project promotes successful collaboration at the community level, restoring forest resilience, supporting local economies, and building strong communities. The project includes a peer-learning network for forest collaboratives via bi-annual meetings to share lessons learned and promote awareness of policies and funding and collectively identify strategies to optimize landscape-scale collaboration on restoration and resilience projects. The Sierra Institute also addresses such barriers and develops systematic solutions in close partnership with the USFS Pacific Southwest Region and other collaborators. Many effective collaborations are housed under this project, a few of which will be expanded upon below.

One particular collaboration supported by the Institute's SCALE project is the Burney-Hat Creek Community Forest and Watershed Group. This project is a community-based collaborative of many different local and regional stakeholders to improve social, environmental, and economic conditions in the Burney and Hat Creek watersheds. The project area spans 364,250 acres of public, private, and Tribal lands and encompasses five different local communities. The Institute currently facilitates this collaboration and has been involved in its work since 2009. One project of this collaboration to highlight is the Lower Hat Creek Restoration project, working to assess, plan and design restoration for the aquatic habitat of the creek. The forward motion of this project slowed due to the COVID Pandemic and is currently experiencing capacity issues relating to the turn-over of USFS partners but is nonetheless an example of multi-jurisdictional collaborative restoration in the Sierra region.

Another collaboration the Institute is a member of is the Lake Almanor Watershed Group. This group was created in 2005 by the Plumas County Board of Supervisors with the purpose of addressing water quality, land use, and critical habitat issues in the Lake Almanor Basin and to make policy recommendations to the BOS. Since 2013, the group has ended their official relationship to the county and now works independently to pursue its mission to maintain and improve the health of the watershed. The key responsibility of the group is to manage water quality sampling and monitoring for the Lake and its tributaries. The Institute staff and volunteers conduct these monitoring activities. Each year the group hires an independent contractor to analyze results which are used to inform the watershed management plan which is published as a collaboration of the Group and the Sierra Institute.

Finally, the Institute's collaboration with the South Lassen Watershed Group encapsulates the tremendous potential for success and effectiveness that well managed collaboratives may offer to communities and landscapes. The group began in 2017 and includes members from the Upper Feather River Integrated Regional Watershed Management planners as well as representatives from local, state, and federal agencies along with nonprofits and community groups. The group focuses on high-priority, large-scale, multi-jurisdictional projects to improve ecosystem health, reduce wildfire risk, protect critical habitat and support local contractors and industry. This project recently received a \$3 million grant from the Cal Fire California Climate

Investments Forest Health program to support restoration work in the North Fork Feather River and Deer Creek watersheds. The grant will provide funding for defensible space fuels reduction, meadow restoration, and the assistance in NEPA planning for these activities for more than 7,000 acres.

To conclude, the Sierra Institute houses and facilitates many successful collaborations between multiple stakeholders to achieve “all-lands” restoration and forest health projects that simultaneously bolster community and economic resilience in rural communities.

Relevant links:

[Sierra Institute Collaborative Groups](#)

Rural Voices Coalition

The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition is a collaborative organization that consists of over 80 nonprofit, public, and private entities. Their partners include advocates for rural communities, conservation groups at regional and national levels, environmentalists, government agencies responsible for land management, researchers, and more. The coalition is guided by a Leadership Team, composed of organizations and rural leaders who are dedicated to the long-term success of the coalition. Their approach focuses on empowering rural leaders and amplifying their voices on various issues, such as collaborative stewardship of all lands, renewable energy, climate change, and local workforce development. By facilitating the sharing of knowledge and experiences among rural leaders, they establish a valuable network for peer learning and capacity building, which accelerates the practice of land stewardship and fosters aligned economic development.

RVCC tackles multiple issues across various states, both short-term and long-term policy barriers. Working together, they have achieved positive outcomes in addressing issues that impact rural communities, public and private land management, and the sustainability of natural resource-based economies in the western region. They have been instrumental in supporting policies and legislation, including stewardship contracting, the USFS Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRp), the Community Wood Energy Program, and other initiatives, advocating for the comprehensive inclusion of community interests.

RVCC has published multiple robust guidance documents on increasing the efficiency of key forest health improvement projects across the Western US. Of particular relevance to our interests, their “*Governance Strategies for Large Landscape Partnerships in the West*” (2022) offers a wealth of insight on how the USFS and partners might harness existing governance strategies to better manage “all-lands” partnership approaches to managing our forests in this time. Because of the vast scale of this type of emerging land management, many partners share questions and needs around their governance and processes. As stated in the document, the main challenges lie in designing partnerships to accommodate these larger landscape scales while maintaining the autonomy and individual needs of local-scale partners and their efforts.

The document is a summary of four virtual peer-learning discussions that took place in 2021 from five all-lands partnerships in Oregon, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. At the time of its publication, all the partnerships highlighted in the report were at different stages along the 10-year funding timeline of the Forest Service's Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program- the principal partnership mechanism that governs these projects. This collaborative case-study project, the peer-learning discussions as well as the report, was funded by the USDA Forest Service- Pacific Northwest Region through a partnership agreement.

The document features key takeaways from the peer learning discussions as well as three case-studies of how individual partnerships have developed their governance structures and processes. As mentioned, each of the featured partnerships are similar in having an association with projects selected for funding through the USFS' CFLR program. Following their initial funding award for their restoration project proposal, each partnership has adapted their governance structures to meet their needs and to effectively collaborate with the USFS. Each case study highlights individual aspects of each project that structure their governance such as the inclusion of executive committees, working groups, being built around watershed boundaries, tribal partnerships, and regional task division. The overarching governance structure, however, and the guidance therein should be found in these successful examples of the USFS CFLR program. The Coalition is currently planning a peer-learning workshop focused on partner-supported NEPA and will likely develop a similar summary document to share takeaways with the public. Be sure to be on the lookout for that project in the coming year.

Relevant Links:

[RVCC Website](#)

[Governance Strategies for Large Landscape Projects in the West](#)

North Yuba Partnership

The North Yuba Forest Partnership comprises a diverse coalition of nine organizations deeply committed to promoting forest health and ensuring the resilience of the North Yuba River watershed. The partnership includes: Yuba Water Agency, the U.S. Forest Service, The Nature Conservancy, South Yuba River Citizens League, Camptonville Community Partnership, Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan Tribe, National Forest Foundation, Sierra County, and Blue Forest Conservation. Their joint efforts are unprecedented, focusing on collaborative planning, analysis, financing, and implementation of forest restoration across a vast area of 275,000 acres within the watershed. The primary objective of the partnership is to safeguard the North Yuba communities from the looming threat of catastrophic wildfires and to revitalize the overall health of the watershed.

Their restoration approach involves ecologically-based thinning and controlled burns to foster a more robust and resilient ecosystem. This strategy focuses on mitigating the risk of intense

wildfires that deviate from the natural patterns while simultaneously safeguarding and restoring the health of the watershed and its native biodiversity. This ecologically-based forest management strategy aims to enhance forest stand diversity tailored to each specific site, taking into account the unique topographic features of the landscape. Emphasizing the significance of controlled, low-to-moderate intensity fires and thinning targeting smaller trees and shrubs, while minimizing the disturbance in the Sierra Nevada's conifer forests, this approach seeks to establish a more balanced and sustainable forest structure with the goal of promoting forest conditions that are resilient to drought, climate change, and other disturbances.

To ensure the project's effectiveness, the partnership has engaged two science efforts already underway to serve as the foundation of the project design. The Historic Range of Variability study led by the Forest Service and the Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative Science Enterprise co-led by the Forest Service and The Nature Conservancy are collaborating to ensure the proposed restoration work is based on the latest science on fire risk, forest structure, biodiversity, drought stress, and more. The on-the-ground implementation will be monitored and tracked by researchers to quantify the benefits of the restoration, informing future restoration work both here in the North Yuba watershed and beyond.

The final highlight of this unique partnership is their innovative financing tool developed by non-profit Blue Forest Conservation. This Forest Resilience Bond enables private investors to finance forest restoration projects on public lands. By engaging investor capital to cover upfront project costs, the FRB increases the pace and scale of needed restoration work, thereby improving forest health and reducing wildfire risks

Relevant Links:

[North Yuba Foundation Partnership](#)

Non-California Example: Four Forest Restoration Initiative:

Another interesting partnership example worth examining is the USFS Four Forest Restoration Initiative on the Kaibab, Coconino, Apache-Sitgreaves and Tonto National Forests of the Southwestern Region. These forests have undertaken an active collaborative landscape scale initiative aimed at restoring fire-adapted ecosystems in the region. Through the engagement of a diverse stakeholder group, the forests are planning to carry out large landscape-scale restoration of the ponderosa pine forests in northern Arizona. The goals of the initiative are to “restore the structure, pattern, composition, and health of fire adapted ponderosa pine ecosystems, reduce fuels and the risk of unnaturally severe wildfires, and provide for wildlife and plant diversity.” Accomplishing these goals will involve a wide array of various restoration projects in the region which will be performed by the USFS staff, partners, volunteers and contractors.

In 2010, the Four Forest Restoration Initiative (4FRI) was selected for funding under the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP), aimed at promoting science-based restoration of key forest landscapes. To assess the impact of management actions on ecology, society, and the economy, the 4FRI Stakeholder Group established the Multiparty Monitoring Board (MPMB). The board, which consists of members from various interest groups and partners, is responsible for implementing and communicating monitoring activities. The monitoring is designed to foster adaptive management by correlating land management actions with outcomes. The Forest Service and the stakeholder group collaboratively developed two monitoring and adaptive management plans, one for the first 4FRI Environmental Impact Statement and an updated one for the Rim Country Project, to describe how the Forest Service and its partners will monitor effects of 4FRI restoration treatments and, based on changing conditions and new information, how future actions will be adapted to achieve desired results.

In pursuit of its objectives, the FFRI has been exploring innovative methods incorporating technology. One notable initiative involved the Nature Conservancy, which conducted a trial on the Bob Fry Fuel Reduction Project to aid in forest biodiversity. In this experiment, cutting-edge technology was employed to mark tree stands and guide harvesting operations. The method involved "digital marking" of trees, where GPS-enabled computer tablets and advanced Geographic Information Software were utilized over a vast area of 114 acres. A key observation was the delineations between tree groups and openings/interspaces were more readily distinguished in digitally-marked areas, while traditional methods appeared to leave more trees in areas designated for interspace/openings. Through the implementation of technology, these endeavors aimed to enhance forest management and promote ecological diversity.

Concurrent with its ecosystem health and sustainability goals, the program also hopes to create and develop sustainable industries for wood products which will in turn create a variety of forest related jobs across the project region. This is a new and developing pilot collaboration so be sure to follow its progress for more details on contracting mechanisms and wood products market development.

Relevant Links:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/4fri>

Part Two: Programs that have Addressed USFS WorkForce Development

While there are excellent examples of nonprofit partnerships working to improve forest management on federal lands, there continues to be a significant lack of forest health projects

on federal lands. Several efforts have recently gotten underway to address this problem, which will now be discussed.

FS Roundtable Workforce Capacity Roundtables

The USFS and the State of California recently committed to collectively treating 1 million acres of forested land annually by the year 2025. During 2022-2023, approximately 43,000 acres have been treated for fuels reduction projects. In the national discourse around accomplishing crucial fuels reduction goals, the primary barrier to accomplishing these ambitious yet necessary targets is workforce capacity.

In the year 2022, the Forest Service and the National Forest Foundation hosted a series of roundtable discussions to collect partner and employee input on the Wildfire Crisis Strategy 10-Year Implementation Plan (the Plan). Individual sessions were hosted for each of the Forest Service regions and at the national level for a total of ten roundtables. The two agencies published a report to synthesize the findings and discussion themes that emerged from the roundtable discussions and then hosted a national webinar to discuss the report with the public (the Synthesis Report). One of the outstanding themes that emerged from this series of conversations was the urgent need to recruit and retain trained staff and to utilize more partnership mechanisms to increase workforce capacity to implement the Plan. In the region-specific roundtable notes, discussion was generally focused on how to increase workforce capacity by hiring *into* the USFS, without notable mention of sharing workforce within and between agencies. In the national presentation on the Synthesis Report, it was stated that “there is no greater barrier to achieving the goals of the Wildfire Strategy and Implementation Plan than a steadily diminishing and overburdened workforce.” Two relevant themes that emerged from the Synthesis include “Theme 3: Recruit and maintain a workforce capable of meeting the necessary pace and scale of restoration” and “Theme 4: Update Partnership mechanisms and requirements for cross-boundary funding and implementation”.

Many of the “opportunities for action” formulated around these themes focus on how to attract better candidates for staff positions, and one section in the notes mentions increasing non-profit partnership hiring. The notes talk about how to make USFS and nonprofit positions more attractive through the offering of benefits and investment into more specific training opportunities. This discussion was primarily around cross-boundary land management partnerships; not specifically workforce mobilization. There was scarce mention of how to employ people through other innovative contractual or legal mechanisms that could streamline forest health projects that could bring more skilled labor-sharing into federal land management.

With regards to Theme 4 the report lists many of the existing partnership mechanisms that are used by the USFS, but these mechanisms are underutilized due to a lack of awareness and “the heavy administrative burdens for application, management and reporting.” Some examples include the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership, the Good Neighbor Authority, the Tribal Forest Protection Act, and Shared Stewardship Agreements. In every roundtable discussion, the partnership financial

match requirements and the other high costs of these partnership mechanisms present a major perceived barrier to their greater use. The report recommended the USFS re-evaluate match requirements for partners given the accelerated need for more collaborative efforts on meeting these ambitious targets for fuels treatments. Participants aligned on the need for more place-based collaboratives as a crucial resource for navigating the complexities of accomplishing these goals while also keeping locally specific challenges and solutions at the center of the discussion. Overall, discussions surrounding increasing the use of partnership mechanisms to accomplish the plan involve making it easier and more feasible for small, local partners to enter into collaboration with the USFS to meet the needs of the Implementation Plan.

While there is clearly and expressly a long way to go to meet these targets, it is encouraging to see such a wide-scale and nationalized conversation around the need for increased workforce capacity and the utilization of innovative partnership mechanisms to structure the collaborative efforts that are vital to accomplishing forest and fuels treatment work on the required scale.

Relevant Links:

[Synthesis Report](#)

[Executive Summary](#)

[Roundtables Landing Page](#)

Partnerships on Every Forest Program

The Forest Service's National Partnership Office (NPO) has been working with various partners for nearly 20 years to build a nationwide partnership program. Recently, the NPO has focused on training, education, and stakeholder engagement at the forest level through the "Partnerships on Every Forest" (PEF) program. This initiative aims to provide tools, expertise, and agency-wide support to strengthen partnerships and address challenges. The National Forest Foundation (NFF) is the USDA Forest Service's Congressionally chartered nonprofit partner and plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between nonprofit and community-based organizations and the Agency. Together, the NPO and NFF are visiting different regions and forests across the country to develop partnership strategies that enhance land management and stewardship capacity. They seek to "empower every Forest Service employee to seize partnership opportunities that achieve cross-boundary conservation outcomes, embrace shared leadership by collaborating with diverse communities, and build inclusive relationships based on respect and trust." The program strives to identify barriers to developing partnerships and to help address those barriers to increase the use of collaborations throughout the Service. One outstanding goal of the program is to help develop partnership strategies that support the units' and partners' preferred projects and outcomes. The PEF team has documented and shared this collective learning around partnership challenges, lessons, and opportunities to create a national network of shared resources. There are several case studies of the program on different National Forests throughout the country and from each, the program developed an

analysis and report to document outcomes and takeaways from these pilot partnerships. One highlighted example is the Shasta-Trinity National Forest which will be explored in greater detail below.

The program also published a general resource guide to give potential partners information and tools to facilitate greater awareness of the benefits and uses of partnerships with the USFS. The guide goes through each of the common partnership agreements used by the Forest Service as well as detailing best practices and challenges to partnering with a federal agency. It also outlines the advantages and policy directives associated with partnering directly with organizations that achieve Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Justice partnerships, bringing in rich community experiences and resources to accomplish more responsive and beneficial projects for community needs. The guide is well detailed in regards to information pertaining to each type of common partnership mechanism and includes links to their enabling legislation and other relevant information and examples.

In sum, this program highlights the increasing momentum in the conversation surrounding the need for partnership mechanisms within the USFS and centralizes much of the key information in easy to interpret literature and examples with the goal of lessening the confusion and lack of awareness around these avenues for accelerating the pace and scale of crucially needed work in our forests.

Big Horn National Forest “PEF Pilot Forest”

The "Partnerships on Every Forest" (PEF) program initiated by the NFF, NPO, Regional, and Forest level staff identified Region 2 and Bighorn National as the “Pilot” forest for this unique program. Commencing in early 2020, the NFF and NPO conducted interviews and discussions with Forest Service personnel and partners to assess the strengths, challenges, and potential opportunities related to partnerships in this region. Drawing insights from these interactions, the NFF and NPO collaborated with the Bighorn staff to determine the key outcomes of the interviews and discussions, which will serve as the foundation for a comprehensive partnership action plan. Additionally, the NFF and NPO planned to conduct further report-out conversations with Forest Service staff and arrange a round table event with partners to bolster and advance their partnership initiatives.

The project's initial conversations took place with the staff of Bighorn National Forest, serving as an introduction to the initiative and facilitating discussions to gain an understanding of the overall partnership environment. Subsequent meetings involved collaboration between Bighorn staff and NFF staff to identify suitable interviewees. Using a snowball sampling approach, NFF conducted interviews, where interviewees were asked to recommend others for interviews, resulting in a total of 14 interviewees. During these interviews, participants were asked about their relationship with the forest, their roles in partnerships, their involvement in various projects, and the effectiveness of their partnerships with the forest staff. Additionally, interviewees were questioned about any concerns they had, untapped partnership opportunities, unengaged

parties, and were given the opportunity to share any additional insights they believed were pertinent.

Strengths: In interviews, partners praised their successful partnerships with Bighorn National Forest, crediting strong relationships with forest staff. Communication played a vital role, as forest staff remained accessible and engaged even during controversial projects. The Forest Plan Revision process and cooperator agency meetings facilitated effective project development, trust-building, and bridging the gap between local and federal agencies. Interviews also highlighted a focus on creativity in public outreach and engagement efforts, showing promising developments in this area.

Challenges: Interviews revealed two main barriers to successful partnerships: capacity constraints and a lack of communication regarding priorities. Partners faced challenges due to the Forest's limited staff and financial resources, often taking on more responsibility to ensure project success. However, partners acknowledged that federal agency constraints may limit exploring creative solutions. Another hindrance was the difficulty in knowing the Forest's top priorities, impacting their ability to provide relevant help. Improved coordination with other agencies was suggested to prioritize projects effectively. Additional barriers included hesitancy to collaborate with the private sector, issues with volunteer involvement, office closures affecting visibility, uncertainty about staff replacements, and limited communication beyond NEPA project schedules.

Opportunities: During interviews, partners showed enthusiasm for exploring new areas of partnership and collaboration. They cited successful projects like the Buffalo Municipal Watershed Project and dispersed camping strategy meetings as models for addressing other issues. Interviewees emphasized shared interests with the Forest and believed that creativity, flexibility, and clear communication on priorities could overcome capacity limitations. Ideas included sharing interpretation staff, bringing in outdoor educators, and cost-sharing with local governments for mutual benefit. Early identification of Forest needs and priorities was seen as crucial for effective partner assistance. The National Forest Foundation (NFF) also expressed the ability to facilitate corporate sponsorships and contracts to boost the Forest's financial capacity.

The inaugural implementation of the "Partnerships on Every Forest" (PEF) program by the NFF, NPO, and the Bighorn National Forest has led to successful partnerships driven by strong relationships and effective communication with forest staff. These invaluable perspectives served as a guide for future PEF implementations on other forests, fostering shared interests and facilitating continued success in conservation and stewardship efforts, establishing impactful partnerships nationwide.

Relevant links:

[PEF Partnering with the USFS Guide](#)

[PEF Website](#)

Flathead National Forest

In August 2021, conversations began between the National Forest Foundation (NFF) and the National Partnership Office (NPO) with the staff of Flathead National Forest. The Forest Leadership Team (FLT) was involved in discussions, and it was decided not to have a specific focal area for the assessment. To gather information, the Partnership Coordinator assisted in identifying partners and internal Flathead staff for interviews. A total of 46 partners were reached out to, and 38 partners were interviewed, resulting in an 83% response rate. The interviewed partners represented diverse fields such as aquatic, botany, education, engineering, fire management, recreation, silviculture, timber, wildlife, and community groups. Additionally, 36 Flathead employees were contacted, and 12 were interviewed, resulting in a 33% response rate. The employees represented various departments, including wildlife, aquatics, education, fire, recreation, silviculture, and timber. The interviews aimed to understand the strengths and challenges in partnerships with Flathead National Forest and explore future opportunities for collaboration. The questions covered various aspects of partnership, ongoing projects, what was working well, areas of concern, potential for improvement, any gaps in partners, and recommendations for further discussions.

Strengths: Interviewees had a positive outlook on partnerships with Flathead National Forest, highlighting strong relationships based on trust and open communication. People involved, including Forest Service employees and partners, were considered crucial to success. Embracing joint work and sharing goals led to successful partnerships. The Forest was praised for its inclusive approach, valuing, supporting, and empowering partners. Having a dedicated partnership position was seen as beneficial, and the Flathead National Forest could be a model for other forests' partnership success.

Challenges: The main challenges faced in partnerships on the Flathead include bureaucracy, capacity and communication issues, turnover and vacant positions, and the impact of COVID-19. Bureaucracy poses obstacles due to cumbersome processes and lack of flexibility, although some partners recognize that the Forest Service cannot entirely control these issues. Communication challenges stem from unclear decision-making processes and a lack of transparency. Capacity constraints, arising from staff vacancies and turnover, affect the ability to manage partnerships effectively and can lead to burnout among employees. They also expressed a disconnect between higher-level partnership strategies and the practical realities of managing partnerships on the ground. Partners desire clarity about the role of the Partnership Coordinator and more coordination at the district and field levels. Lastly, the lack of technological cohesion, the need for empowered field employees, and the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 also pose challenges.

Opportunities: The interviews showed excitement among partners and employees to build upon existing partnerships in the Flathead region. Improved coordination, especially in recreation, could take partnerships to new levels. Opportunities were identified to enhance capacity, particularly at the field level, and leverage funding effectively. Partners are eager to collaborate on messaging and public engagement, focusing on responsible recreation. The success of the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) and the potential for landscape-scale collaboration generated excitement. Formalizing informal relationships through structured communication and "unofficial" agreements can strengthen partnerships and reduce administrative burdens. While respondents praised the Flathead's engagement with partners, they highlighted a lack of awareness about activities beyond their own program areas. Conducting a comprehensive partner gap analysis across programs could uncover overlooked collaboration prospects.

Attendees welcomed assessment results resonating with their experiences during report-out sessions. They emphasized the need to strengthen partnership capacity at district and field levels, discussing the role of the Forest-level Partnership Coordinator. Concerns about top-down strategy disconnects and district-level support were raised, addressing challenges like vacancies and turnovers. Enthusiasm surrounded the National Forest Foundation's involvement in defining partnership roles on the Flathead, suggesting potential for NFF to facilitate district-level conversations. A community meeting addressing recreation issues and capacity needs was proposed. Overall, participants were optimistic about actionable changes from the assessment, stressing sharing findings for systemic changes at higher levels.

Relevant Links:

[Flathead National Forest Report](#)

Shasta-Trinity Case Study

In early 2022 the PEF began conversations with staff at the Shasta-Trinity National Forest to introduce the project and understand the current overall partnership environment on the Forest. Staff from the NFF and the NPO met with the Forest Leadership Team (FLT) to create a work plan that identified the goals of the assessment and outlined a timeline for completion. The Shasta-Trinity (FLT) identified focus areas of fire, recreation, and 3rd party NEPA assessments. They also identified Forest service employees and external partners to interview for the assessment.

NFF staff, acting as the neutral party between the Forest Service and external partners, conducted interviews in April and May 2022. In total, 6 Forest Service employees and 13 external partners were interviewed. The goals of the interviews were to gain an understanding of the strengths and challenges that exist in the current partnerships, and to identify future opportunities interviewees saw to build stronger partnerships within the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. Overall, participants had positive perceptions of their partnerships involving the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. Strengths of partnerships were effective communication, strong working relationships, completing on the ground projects, leveraging multiple funding sources, effective

agreements, shared vision for projects, holding training, and having a Forest Service partnership coordinator in place to help facilitate partnerships. Both Forest Service staff and external partners acknowledged that there are significant challenges in developing and maintaining effective partnerships. These challenges include staff turnover, administrative burdens, lack of capacity, lengthy processes, lack of funding, mistrust, lack of leadership visibility, and difficulty finding partners to help with unglamorous projects. The use of 3rd party NEPA was also identified as an issue with major concerns regarding a lack of trust from the Forest Service that the contractor will produce a satisfactory product and the necessity for Forest Service staff to perform significant oversight to support the contractors and review the reports.

Forest Service staff and external partners identified opportunities to help address some of the challenges outlined above, and to help strengthen the partnership culture within the Shasta-Trinity National Forest.

Acknowledgment that the Forest needs significantly more capacity in Grants and agreements, particularly at the district level, and that Districts should learn from one another in relation to how some work with partners by creating flexibility for project completion. A recommendation emerged that the USFS should place nationwide emphasis on the importance of partnerships that utilize forest-wide Master agreements with Supplemental Project Agreements for specific projects can create efficiencies and reduce administrative burdens in the agreements process as well as a desire to work in a more coordinated way from the district level up to the regional office.

Focus on the need to recruit and organize volunteers in training with the Forest Service to better understand how to complete projects and tasks at Forest Service standards. Through public outreach the forest service could also help to alleviate the mistrust and negative perceptions associated with the agency. In an effort to bridge some of these gaps, some suggested strategies include hosting general outreach and public engagements events, outreach to organizations that have a more adversarial relationship with the Forest or have not been engaged in the past, and holding meetings with local businesses.

Reliance on nonprofit partners and other experienced contractors that can provide 3rd party NEPA documents that meet Forest service standards, and still involve the Forest Service in the process. Establishment of clear roles and expectations between the Forest Service and the contractors would help facilitate effective 3rd party NEPA analyses and alleviate some of these challenges. Forest Service staff acknowledged that there are contractors that have a successful track record of completing NEPA assessments, and having a centralized database of those contractors would be helpful. An additional solution where new partners can complete smaller projects prior to completing a full NEPA assessment to show that they can be successful, create positive relationships with the Forest, and establish good communication. If a particular Forest does not think it is effective to have contractors perform a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) with a specific partner, they could contract out smaller projects such as CE's and EA's.

This could alleviate some of the capacity issues within that region, and give them more time to focus on the larger assessments.

In summary, the early conversations and assessments conducted by the Partnerships on Every Forest (PEF) in collaboration with the Shasta-Trinity National Forest have shed light on the existing partnerships and their strengths and challenges. The interviews conducted with the Forest Service staff and external partners provided valuable insights into the perceptions and opportunities for building stronger partnerships with the forest. By implementing these identified opportunities, the Shasta-Trinity National Forest can streamline processes and improve communication and collaboration with external entities. This will ultimately contribute to the effective management and stewardship of the forest's resources and strengthen the support and engagement of the local community.

Relevant Links:

[Shasta-Trinity Partnership Assessment](#)

Part Three: Bringing the Workforce to the Table: USFS Personnel Options

Clearly the use of nonprofit partners and collaboratives are key aspects of forest health management on federal lands, the third leg of the stool needed is the hiring of positions that work within the offices of the National Forests. Currently, in California, the USFS has 232 job openings encompassing diverse roles such as Supply Technicians, District and Deputy Park Rangers, Facility Operations Specialists, Forestry Technicians, as well as specialized positions like Biologists and Geologists. The Northern California Forests including Lassen, Shasta-Trinity and Modoc have specific needs for Forest Technicians, Deputy Park Rangers, Supply technicians for timber sales, Biologists (Wildlife and aquatic), Silviculturist, Environmental Engineers and Funding and Contracts Coordinator. There are also a number of remote jobs including Data Scientist, Fire Management Specialist(Prescribed Fire and Fuels), Civil Engineers, Forest Fire ORM specialists, HR specialists, Social Scientists, National Resource and Public Affairs specialists which could be beneficial for these forests.

Direct-Hire Authority [5 U.S. Code § 3304](#)

Filling these positions has proven to be difficult in recent years. The positions are often posted in remote locations where housing is challenging, and the pay is not often high enough to support long commutes from more populated areas. Also, the

Direct-Hire Authority (DHA) is granted to federal agencies by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) in the United States. The process for granting DHA involves a formal request from an agency to OPM, outlining the specific positions or circumstances for which they are seeking direct hiring authority.

When an agency identifies a critical need to expedite the hiring process or a shortage of qualified candidates in the labor market, they can submit a request to OPM for DHA consideration. The agency needs to provide a rationale and justification for the requested authority, explaining why traditional competitive selection procedures may not be sufficient or timely in meeting their workforce needs. OPM reviews each request on a case-by-case basis, evaluating the agency's justification and determining whether granting DHA is appropriate. OPM considers factors such as the urgency of the hiring need, the scarcity of qualified candidates, and the potential impact on the agency's mission if positions remain vacant for an extended period.

If OPM approves the request, they grant the agency the authority to use DHA for specific positions or circumstances as outlined in the request. OPM may also provide guidelines and criteria to ensure that the authority is used in a fair and appropriate manner. It's important to note that DHA is not a blanket authority and is granted for specific positions or circumstances identified by the agency and approved by OPM. Agencies must adhere to the guidelines and criteria set by OPM when utilizing DHA to ensure that the hiring process remains fair, transparent, and based on merit.

On July 19th, 2023, the US Forest Service identified a critical need for Archeologists and Biological Science technicians. With approval from the OPM, they authorized the use of the Direct Hire Authority with the assessment highlighting an immediate demand for specialized Bio technicians in the field of fish and wildlife, particularly focusing on fisheries and the wildlife program. Moreover, experts specializing in Insects and disease are sought to play a crucial role in safeguarding the well-being of National Forests and Grasslands. The pressing need for close to thirty Archeologists throughout the State arises from the presence of significant cultural resources, such as Indian burial grounds, artifacts, and fossils. These valuable cultural resources necessitate careful investigation and identification to ensure their proper conservation and management. Additionally, promoting public awareness about these resources adds further importance to the critical nature of this position.

Since 2016, the USFS has also used the DHA to engage with over 500 highly qualified resource assistants into their Resource Assistant Program. The program engages students, recent graduates, and underrepresented populations helping the Forest service to attract and retain a diverse and inclusive workforce and carry out mission-critical work. The Direct Hire Authority allows the agency to respond effectively and timely to position vacancies by considering resource assistants who have already gained experience with the agency, have demonstrated solid performance, have completed higher education requirements, and who have a strong interest and commitment to careers in natural and cultural resources. Of the 300 who have completed an RA experience to date, 20% have been permanently hired in the Forest Service and many others have moved on to careers in conservation, natural and cultural resources, and

environmental equity in other land management and federal agencies as well as positions in the non-governmental sector.

[USFS - DHA issuance: Archeologists/Biologists](#)

[DHA Resource Assistant Program](#)

The Interpersonnel Act

Introduction

Despite its robust potential to increase workforce capacity, one key federal tool that remains vastly underutilized is the Intergovernmental Personnel Act Mobility Program (hereafter, IPA or IPA program). Its enabling legislation- The Intergovernmental Personnel Act- was originally passed in 1970 and revised in 1997. The mobility program it enables (5 CFR part 334) is designed to facilitate temporary assignments of personnel between federal government agencies and various non-federal entities such as state and local governments, colleges and universities, tribal governments, and federally funded research and development centers. The program is managed by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and aims to alleviate workforce capacity issues within agencies and the need for skilled staffing in hard-to-fill positions.

The revised Act allows the agencies themselves to certify the eligibility of the “other organizations” they seek to partner with for the exchange of personnel. Previously, this responsibility was held by the OPM, and this change in the regulations seeks to facilitate greater use of the program. The only requirement for a partnership is that it must be of mutual benefit to the two partnering entities. Each assignment must be carefully considered to ensure its use is of “sound public purposes and furthers the goals and objectives of the participating organizations.” Such assignments may be used to achieve objectives such as strengthening the management capabilities of federal agencies and other eligible organizations, facilitating the transfer and use of new technologies, involving state and local officials in developing and implementing federal policies and programs, and providing program and developmental experiences for the assignees. Once an “other organization” has been certified by a federal agency, that certification is permanent and may apply throughout the Federal Government for future partnership opportunities.

The program allows employees of federal agencies to serve roles in non-federal organizations without a loss of their employee rights and benefits, and for non-federal employees to serve in federal agencies for similar periods with the same maintenance of their benefits and rights from their home organizations. A common example of the exchange of employees using this legal

mechanism is to loan researchers from universities to government agencies to fulfill roles with high-education requirements and research expertise. Another common use of the Act is to move nurses and medical professionals in and out of research settings, such as lending federal nurses to colleges and universities to serve as instructors or staff on research studies and trials.

The language of the Act provides for what types of employees are eligible and excluded from the program, as well as detailed guidelines for assignment requirements and term limits. The Act also contains provisions for cost sharing arrangements which are to be negotiated between participating entities, as well as travel and relocation expense guidelines, conduct and conflict of interest provisions, and guidelines for employee oversight during the reassignment period. Agencies do not need official approval from the OPM to enter into IPA agreements, they need only enter a written agreement between the partnering entities. OPM operates to track and oversee the use of the program and not to limit or veto potential partnership opportunities.

For non-federal employees to be assigned to federal agencies the non-federal agency must meet the eligibility requirements to become certified. The participating federal agency will determine an organization's eligibility by reviewing (1) the organization's articles of incorporation, (2) bylaws, (3) Internal Revenue Service letter of nonprofit status or government status, and (4) any other information describing the organization's activities as they relate to the public management concerns of governments or universities. Each federal agency may certify a non-federal organization for participation, and all federal agencies maintain a list of eligible organizations. Once one agency has certified a nonfederal organization, that organization does not need to be recertified, according to OPM's guidance.

As it pertains to its potential and recorded use in the USFS, there is scarce record on the USDA website and Partnership pages on specifically employing the IPA as a tool for increased workforce capacity. Despite its promise as a legally established and federally facilitated program, the Act has not been utilized to its full potential or the intended scale of its conception. Below are four reports that contain case studies demonstrating both positive and adverse findings of using the IPA:

IPA Synthesis Reports

The National Science Foundation Example: For almost 40 years, the National Science Foundation has brought career scientists and academic professionals temporarily into its ranks through the Intergovernmental Personnel Act. These Visiting Scientists, Engineers and Educators are known in the NSF as "rotators". The NSF was an early adopter of the IPA program because it recognized three benefits in participating. First, IPA assignees bring a fresh perspective to the agency. Given the dynamic nature of scientific discovery, knowledge of ongoing research is imperative to the success of NSF's mission. Bill Malyszka, deputy chief human capital officer at NSF, noted that the IPA program enables the agency to be "more agile in looking at emerging sciences and bringing people in, evolving [its] grant programs as the science evolves." Most importantly, NSF rotators, with appropriate approval, can continue to conduct their professional research, creating a direct link between NSF and the scientific

community. According to NSF, rotators who join one of the agency's directorates get the chance to "make recommendations about which proposals to fund, influence new directions in the fields of science, engineering and education, support cutting-edge interdisciplinary research, and mentor junior research members." After a "rotator" returns to their non-federal organizations, they use their newfound knowledge to inform future research. These non-federal organizations benefit from the IPA Program as well. When IPA placements return home, they bring with them a wealth of first-hand knowledge about the federal research funding process. In addition, NSF requires that institutions provide just a minimum 10% cost share for every full time agreement—a small price to cover relative to the benefits received. Non-federal organizations also develop a relationship with NSF by coordinating with the agency to place IPA candidates, along the way gaining NSF recognition as a respected part of the scientific community.

A Personal Story: A Department of House and Urban Development

Case Study: When Salin Geevarghese began serving under an Intergovernmental Personnel Act placement at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, he had already spent almost 15 years working to understand and implement the policy and program interventions that give vulnerable children and families—and the places they live—the capacity and resources needed to thrive. At the time, Geevarghese was a senior associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private philanthropic organization that focused on the well-being of vulnerable children and families in the United States. Upon his appointment through the IPA, Geevarghese was part of the leadership team supporting a collaboration between HUD, the Department of Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency called the Partnership for Sustainable Communities. He played a significant role in establishing the Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities within HUD and was instrumental in creating the Sustainable Communities Initiative, a six-year program that involved comprehensive, integrated planning across multiple agencies. This initiative, which received significant federal investment, impacted a substantial portion of the U.S. population through 143 grants and planning efforts. Geevarghese's contributions were made possible by a reimbursable IPA agreement between HUD and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Geevarghese ultimately converted from an temporary IPA employee, to a senior political appointee, serving over seven years in the Obama administration—first as senior advisor, then as acting director of the Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities, and ultimately as deputy assistant secretary in the Office of Policy Development and Research. Geevarghese's application also helped certify the Annie E. Casey Foundation as an eligible organization, thus opening the doors for dozens of other Casey Foundation employees to serve as placements as well. The perspectives he brought to the federal space as an expert and thought leader on the outside prompted HUD to innovate in other ways, including allowing foundation program officers to serve on review panels—a change that has made the agency's grant-making process more impactful and outcomes-driven. For Geevarghese, It was also a "transformational chance to understand how federal capacity, policy and investment can both erect barriers to change and be mobilized to solve problems with local leaders."

A Formal Sector Report: Nursing and the IPA Mobility Program: The Office of Personnel Management- published an internal report on the use of the IPA Mobility

program in the field of professional nursing. This report was conducted by the OPM as a means of capturing statistics on the use of the IPA program and exploring possible explanations for its underuse. The report specifically looks at the mobilization of the nursing workforce but includes general statistics on the program as a whole. After a detailed analysis of the statistics of nursing staff placements completed using the IPA and other mechanisms, the report lists these reasons to explain the underutilization of the IPA mobility program: (1) A lack of awareness of the program and outreach to promote its use. The program is not linked to career progression and therefore does not incentivize agencies or their employees to pursue placements using the program.. (2) Agencies already have limited personnel resources and therefore can often not afford to lend employees to outside organizations for long periods of time and would need to find replacements for any loaned staff while they're on assignment, further straining the participating agency resources. (3) The two-year time commitment for the IPA and the post-assignment return-to-service requirement creates a complex and often unattractive situation for employees who would need to make arrangements for their families to move to new assignments with them and to uproot their lives, with the requirement of returning to their home-agency after the IPA time commitment has been fulfilled. (4) There is perceived complexity around the IPA application and approval process which deters agencies from pursuing this program as a mechanism for workforce mobilization. (5) There are regulatory barriers and intricacies associated with bringing non-federal staff into a government agency with regards to duties they may and may not perform as non-agency staff, their access to documents and resources required to fulfill their role, as well as the professional difficulty of adapting to federal work culture.

In response, the report offers the following recommendations to improve the program and facilitate its use: (1) to develop and promote incentives for entity participation, such as using the IPA as a recruitment tool (i.e. having federal medical researchers serve as academic staff at a university and recruiting students to become nurses and doctors). (2) For the OPM to consider waiving the service agreement altogether to facilitate more informal participation and entry into partnership agreements, reducing the perceived complexity associated with the application process. (3) For OPM to consider extending the maximum service time beyond four years (the current limit on assignment length) to promote more family-friendly exchanges of staff and to improve the outlook of staff commitments and moving requirements. (4) To consider avenues for increased pay and improved benefit sharing for non-federal employees serving in public agencies to improve the incentive of career development prospects while on assignment with the IPA program.

This report, taken in sum, offers astute internal observations by the OPM on the underutilization of a program that ostensibly offers an excellent avenue for workforce mobilization. The recommendations for improvement should be weighed by federal agencies looking to utilize this program to increase workforce capacity and to leverage incentives to increase its use.

A Comprehensive Review: The GAO Report: The Government Accountability Office recently (Jan 2022) published a report on the use/underuse of the IPA mobility program, specifically OPM's administration of the program. They reviewed four agencies' use of the program: the Departments of Defense and Energy, General Services Administration and

National Aeronautics and Space Administration. They found that the most common use of the IPA in these agencies was bringing top scientists, researchers, and professors from universities and other entities *into* federal agencies to lead complex and highly technical projects and address emerging issues. It is crucial to note that the IPA Mobility Program is a *bi-directional* program that is intended to work reciprocally yet historically favors bringing non-federal workers *into* agencies rather than outsourcing federal workers to non-governmental organizations.

The report analyzed the program and its use historically and pointed out the following benefits of the program: (1) The time commitments are flexible and may be made for up to 2 years, which allows for enough time to benefit from the assignment but short enough to not be too committed. (2) The ease and lower costs of administering the program assignments for participating entities compared with other means of sharing workforce (overlapping contracts and pay), as well as for staff who benefit from a “foot-in-the-door” and a unique opportunity to gain skills and expertise without having to “climb the ladder.” (3) The quick fulfillment of gaps in technical roles that require high-level education and experience, leading to less lag on projects and overall improvements to entity productivity. (4) Again, a temporary time commitment for agencies and staff leading to greater professional mobility and diversity in one’s role over the course of a career.

Despite these benefits, however, GAO’s analysis of the records of the implementation of this program found that the agencies under review used the program quite infrequently. Their analysis identified these potential barriers to greater use of the program: (1) A lack of public and industry program awareness. (2) Reluctance of the home agency/organization to temporarily lose employees while being required to hold their position for them upon their return from assignment. (3) Limits on salary and pay promotions for program participants and a consequent lack of outstanding incentive for participation. (4) A lack of clear written guidance on what supervisory activities non-federal program participants can engage in.

As a result, the GAO recommended in the report that OPM (1) update its guidance regarding participants supervising federal employees and (2) establish a process and guidance to obtain complete and accurate mobility program data. OPM agreed with the first recommendation and disagreed with the second. GAO maintains the recommendation is still warranted, as discussed in the report. Another crucial finding of the report was that OPM has poor and unreliable tracking data for the actual use of this program, which requires updates. Despite its recommendations, the GAO acknowledges and emphasizes that the IPA program holds promise as a tool to address gaps in employment, particularly in temporary and urgent near-term need.

Relevant Links:

[IPA Overview](#)

[OPM Nursing Report](#)

[GAO Oversight Report](#)

The Application of the IPA through the “Partnership for Public Service”

The Partnership for Public Service is a non-profit organization that aims to revitalize the federal government and improve its effectiveness. Founded in 2001, the Partnership works to attract top talent to government service, develop leaders within the federal workforce, and promote innovative and efficient practices in government operations. Due to factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic instability, systemic racial inequality, and the dire consequences of climate change, it becomes imperative for Federal agencies to tap into the expertise of individuals from various sectors. Through their IPA Talent program, their IPA placements help agencies fill talent gaps, using a “tour of duty” approach to public service. The IPA allows individuals from academia, nonprofit organizations, and state and local government to work in a federal agency for up to two years, focusing on priority programs and projects that require additional staff. This program prepares IPA placements to navigate the federal arena and enables agencies to quickly deploy external talent to meet urgent needs. By standardizing the process by which agencies recruit, onboard and manage IPA placements, this program also helps human resources professionals and general counsels improve their knowledge of regulatory concerns and best practices. The Federal agencies who are currently participating in the Partnership’s Talent program include AmeriCorps, The Department of Defense, Department of Commerce, Department of Energy, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Labor, Department of Transportation, Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.S. Office of Government Ethics. Currently, they have a broad range of workforce needs ranging from IT managers, Associate Directors, Equity Advisors, and consultants along with more specialized needs such as Scientists and Engineers.

The Partnership for Public Service has the potential to play a crucial role in connecting federal agencies with external entities through its IPA Talent program. With almost two decades of experience, their talent exchange program serves as a prime example of how private organizations can facilitate collaboration and excellence between federal agencies and external partners. By leveraging their expertise and connections in the IPA placement process, the Partnership could facilitate the swift exchange of key personnel, bolstering partnerships, and offer a solution to solve some of the workforce shortages in federal agencies.

Relevant Links:

[IPA Talent Exchange Program](#)

Conclusion

The case studies and reports on the Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) Mobility Program provide valuable insights into its potential as a tool for facilitating collaboration and enhancing workforce capacity in federal agencies. The success stories of the National Science Foundation (NSF) and Salin Geevarghese at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

demonstrate how the IPA can bring fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and specialized expertise to federal agencies, ultimately benefiting both the agencies and their partnering organizations. Despite its potential benefits, the IPA Mobility Program faces underutilization, as evidenced in the reports by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO). These reports identify barriers such as limited awareness, reluctance from home agencies to temporarily lose employees, and unclear guidance for non-federal participants. Addressing these challenges and promoting the program's advantages could enhance workforce capacity and diversity in government initiatives, making the IPA program a more effective tool for collaborative exchange between federal agencies and external organizations.

Part Four: DHA and IPA Applicability to US Forest Service

The IPA Mobility Program was designed to facilitate more efficient and fluid exchange of workforce capacity to mutually benefit partnering agencies and their goals. These case studies, while highlighting key benefits and drawbacks to the program, should be taken as a positive indication of federal belief in its efficacy and interest in expanding its use and exploring the reasons for its underutilization. The program has room for improvement and addressing the barriers to its adoption as well as greater promotion and awareness of its benefits and uses will hopefully lead to more widespread employment of the act and concurrent benefits to agencies and their projects.

The need for specialized services, particularly related to NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) and grants administration often leads to significant delays in project implementation. Roles like biologists, geologists, hydrologists, silviculturists, and Project coordinators could be effectively targeted for DHA hiring or through the IPA exchange program, as they could provide short-term or longer term solutions for imminent project implementation.

As described above, the DHA is a tool that the USFS has used in at least two instances in California in the past four years. This tool is helpful because all types of positions can be filled, including lower level general support positions (not just specialists as under the IPA). The program allows for the agency heads to get staff in critical times of need with minimal administrative difficulty, but at the same time, this process does not necessarily entice new people to apply, or help address the needs for more flexibility in federal positions related to remote work, promotion, or working for multiple entities at once.

The use of the IPA to partner with local government or nonprofits, who could easily become approved as "other organizations" under the Act, can lead to positions that would be easier to fill for several reasons. First, these "other organizations" have established practices to attract talent and can offer longer term options when they return from their two to four year USFS stint. Second, these positions could possibly be more easily fulfilled remotely, with existing forest service staff coordinating on-site work, while specialists handle analysis and preparation from a

distance. This collaboration could reduce the necessity of sourcing such positions locally and expand the pool of qualified candidates. Furthermore, there's potential for these individuals to simultaneously work on multiple projects, or for multiple employers, allowing for more flexibility and economic options. Finally, another attractive option for participants is that when the initial temporary period expires, there could be the opportunity for specialists to transition into permanent positions with the US Forest Service, if desired.

Conclusion

In order to assess how these processes could help California's National Forests, an assessment of staffing needs, beyond just listed positions, should be assessed each National Forest, as well as the Forest's readiness to work with third parties, assess third party partners and potential of local governments to provide staff, and third assess work force pool in the communities near the 18 forests, and which positions could be handled remotely. Funding made available for hiring at each forest is also a critical need that should be considered. Then, the needs could be compared to the benefits of (1) using partners, (2) using collaboratives, (3) applying the DHA, or (4) using the IPA to bring in staff from neighboring entities (which could include the State of California). Seeking staff support at California's National Forests is a critical step in meeting the forest health goals of the USFS and the state of California.