

My name is Rachael Mondragon, and I am the owner of a small company in Taos, New Mexico called Urban Interface Solutions. I will be testifying on July 15, 2010 before the House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands on, "Locally Grown: Creating Rural Jobs with America's Public Lands."

Background:

With the exception of living in Wichita, Kansas for the first six months of my life, I am a life long resident of Taos. I attended public schools in Taos, and I graduated from Taos High School in 1997.

In 2000, the country experienced catastrophic wildfires in many of the western states. At the time, I was working as a financial consultant for a national investment firm. It was then that I began to develop an interest in wildland fire.

In 2001 I left my job at the investment firm, and began taking courses that were offered locally by the Forest Service, BLM, BIA, and State Forestry. Once I completed the required courses to become a Wildland Firefighter, I signed up with the Carson National Forest's SWFF Program (Southwest Forest Firefighter). I went out as a crewmember on several crews, and had the opportunity to fight fire in several states, and in various fuel types. I developed a strong working knowledge of fire suppression tactics, fire behavior, tactical suppression operations, and a solid understanding of the Incident Command System used by the various interagency resources and Incident Command Teams. Later that same year, I took the S-212 Wildland Fire Chainsaw training, and became certified to operate a chainsaw on the fireline. That winter I attended the S-217 Helicopter Crewmember training so that I may begin working towards that qualification the following fire season.

In 2002 I took the S-131 Advanced Firefighter Training. I also took the S-260 Interagency Incident Business Management class, and decisively charted a course to make this a career.

I applied for a position with the Red River Fire Department, and was hired as a sawyer on their thinning crew. I obtained my "B faller" certification, and worked daily with a highly skilled, and well trained thinning crew on various hazardous fuels reduction projects. While working on this crew, I maintained my wildfire qualifications, and responded to wildland fires with the crew.

By my second year on the thinning crew, the Fire Chief promoted me to Crew Boss for demonstrating initiative, and leadership skills. I was then responsible for the program of work, scheduling, organization, mobilization and all logistical considerations for the entire crew on a daily basis.

At this point, I was also working closely with the Asst. Fire Chief to perform more of the administrative tasks associated with the projects that we were implementing. I began to

understand the grant process, and many of the fiduciary responsibilities associated with the administration of these grants. This was a pivotal point in my career.

It was during my second year with the Red River Fire Department that I also began to look at the areas that we were treating more as ecosystems and landscapes, as opposed to “properties that we were thinning.” My background as a firefighter had allowed me to witness first hand the devastating effects that can and will occur when fire meets an unhealthy, overgrown, dense forest. We weren’t just thinning trees, we were improving forest health. By doing so, our work also restored watersheds, improved wildlife habitat, reduced diseases in stands, and reduced the risk of catastrophic wildfire. The benefits of the work we were doing were countless.

In 2002, I sustained an injury while on a training exercise with the Red River Fire Department. I was unable to work for some time after the accident. It was during the time that I was recovering from my injury that I began the business plan for “Urban Interface Solutions.”

In 2005 I began my business, and it is the countless, positive, rewarding experiences to date, that I will be basing my testimony to this committee on.

Socio-economic Benefits:

When small businesses, or fledgling contractors can collaborate or enter into any type of partnership with any of the various land management agencies, everybody wins! Jobs are created, local economies thrive, and sustainability is made possible for contractors or small businesses.

This is quantifiable, and my business is a textbook example of how these partnerships can benefit an entire region in ways that may not be apparent to those unfamiliar with the various programs and grants responsible for these successes.

In 2003, the Village of Questa, in Northern New Mexico applied for and received a CFRP (Collaborative Forest Restoration Program) grant. I, along with several other local contractors, was hired as a subcontractor to perform the thinning work. Not only were over 30 jobs created locally, but also large quantities of firewood were processed and distributed to elderly people in the community through the local “Ancianos” Program. Local businesses benefited as a result of the contract crews working daily in the community. When the project was complete, 150 acres had been thinned to prescription specifications, marking the beginning of the implementation of the Questa / Lama Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) project, a 5,000 acre project planned by the Questa Ranger District of the Carson National Forest, adjacent to the area that in 1996 was ravaged by the “Hondo Fire”, forcing the evacuation of three communities, and destroying several homes. The accomplishment of these critical acres cost the Forest Service little more than some technical and administrative support (maps, layout, site visits, etc.).

For those unfamiliar with the CFRP Program, it was established in 2001, and is unique to the State of New Mexico. It provides cost-share grants to stakeholders for forest restoration projects on public land designed through a collaborative process.

“Within its legislative authority, the Act provides Federal appropriations of up to \$5 million annually towards cost share grants to stakeholders for experimental forest restoration projects designed through a collaborative process. These projects may be entirely on, or any combination of, Federal, Tribal, State, County or municipal forest lands and must include a diverse and balanced group of stakeholders in their design and implementation. Each project must also address specific restoration objectives, including: wildfire threat reduction; reestablishment of historic fire regimes; reforestation; preservation of old and large trees; and increased utilization of small diameter trees. Projects must also include a multiparty assessment and efforts to create local forest-related employment or training opportunities.”

This program helps small businesses. Not just by giving them a project to work on for a while to earn money, but also by helping them purchase equipment, provide crucial trainings for employees, increase and enhance their workforce, and develop the necessary experience to become and remain competitive in their respective industry. Sustainability, in the truest sense of the word.

This program helps rural communities. The emphasis this program places on core value objectives ensures benefits to the surrounding community. It requires applicants to include an education component, and a youth component. Schools and Boy Scout Troops become involved in these projects. Small diameter forest product utilization is required and monitored. Socio-economic monitoring reports are required periodically throughout the project, quantifying the number of jobs created, and revenue being generated by the project.

The socio-economic benefits of this program are undeniable. Coupled with the biological benefits of restoration, CFRP has been a success. That success is leading to expansion and adaptation. I have recently learned of a new program of the Forest Service that seems to be modeled on the CFRP. This national program, the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP), has many of the same components that the CFRP has. Like the CFRP, the CFLRP requires the organizations that want to do restoration on federal land to collaborate with others in their community, to the extent that preference is given to projects that span ownerships. Like CFRP, CFLRP projects are evaluated by a panel; the first CFLRP panel will meet next week in Washington. The biggest differences are the CFLRP targets large landscapes - greater than 40,000 acres - with a strong emphasis on Forest Service land, and not just in New Mexico but anywhere in the US. The similarities are so great that people in New Mexico that are familiar with the CFLRP call it “CFRP on steroids.” I trust it will be as successful as the CFRP.

Forest Health Benefits:

Each year Federal land managers spend a considerable amount of time and money to plan projects that once approved, they may not have the time, money, or resources to implement. This is a reality of declining budgets, reductions in workforce, or possibility shifting priorities.

Allowing contractors to work with our land managers through programs like the CFRP program, enables the work to get done sooner than it would have otherwise. Project oversight is still provided by the agency, so quality work is assured. As with any other contract, the scope of work is clearly outlined, and the contract is administered by agency personnel.

There are multiple benefits associated with this method of implementing these projects. The most notable is the fact that land managers are able to move forward with implementation of their projects before NEPA gets stale, and collectively we move towards improving forest health one project at a time.

On July 6, 2010 I met with Kendall Clark (Forest Supervisor, Carson National Forest) to discuss the CFRP projects that have been implemented on her forest, as well as her thoughts on the connection between rural economics, and the principal land management agencies in those areas. She felt that the CFRP Program created “capacity” that would otherwise not exist for implementing these projects in the region. She also felt strongly about agencies creating opportunities through collaboration with rural resources that would both meet the needs of the agency, and provide contract and job opportunities in these communities.

Partnerships and Collaboration:

Any program, project or process that allows multiple parties to combine resources and ideas, has a greater chance of success than any one entity working independently to accomplish the same goal.

My personal experience as a business owner is that the measure of success comes not with high profits, but with the quality of work that is produced. High quality work is easier to accomplish when you have the proper mix of skill sets involved. Often times that means collaboration and partnerships with others who share a common goal.

Fortunately for businesses like mine, there are many local groups and organizations who share the same desire to see quality work being performed on the ground, by people who care about the land. I feel that the resources available to me locally have played a significant role in the success of my business. In turn, I feel that they are able to consult with me and request assistance when they need it. The result is a strong, mutually beneficial working relationship, and the benefactor of this cohesiveness is the project or client.

The following are groups or organizations who I have had the pleasure of working with in various capacities on local projects. These are the people who contribute to the

tremendous success of local projects, and actively seek out partnership opportunities to better serve the people of the Southwest Region:

New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute (NMFWRI):

“The New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute (NMFWRI), which is located at New Mexico Highlands University, is a statewide effort that engages government agencies, academic and research institutions, land managers, and the interested public in the areas of forest and watershed management.

The New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute is one of three Institutes formed by the Federal Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2004. Their partner institutions are the ecological Restoration Institute, located at Northern Arizona University, and the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, located at Colorado State University.”

Kent Reid and his staff have been instrumental in promoting training and supporting businesses like mine on several projects over the past few years. They have sent trainers and instructors out to project sites, and have supported my efforts both directly, and indirectly. Having resources like these available to businesses like mine can make the difference between success and failure for a business. It is a perfect example of why collaboration and partnerships are such an important part of land management.

Rocky Mountain Youth Corps:

“Rocky Mountain Youth Corps (RMYC) was created in 1995 to revitalize community, preserve and restore the environment, prepare young people for responsible and productive lives, and build civic spirit through service. Modeled after the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930’s, RMYC provides creative approaches to problems stemming from poverty, youth substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and violence. RMYC works with youth from various backgrounds, providing a strategy for young adults to better their communities and their own lives. With this in mind, they not only work to restore trails, watersheds, and fire safety corridors, they also use these activities as the means to positive youth development.

RMYC has hired more than 1,900 Taos youth, between the ages of 16-25, providing them with employment readiness programs, violence and substance abuse prevention education, GED attainment, and continuing educational scholarships. These youth have completed over 200,000 hours of meaningful community service that have benefited hundreds of school children, low-income families, elderly citizens, local government and non-profit agencies, and users of public land in Taos. RMYC members become heroes and heroines in the community, transforming negative images of youth into success stories about youth making a difference. By providing a safe, structured environment for learning that promotes citizenship, RMYC builds stronger communities in northern New Mexico.”

Local Culture:

In rural communities such as those found in Northern New Mexico, you will not find big, industrial or commercial operations working on forestry projects. With all due respect to

the big operations found in the Northwest, and in other parts of the country, many areas in the Southwest don't lend themselves well to the heavy equipment and industrial machinery used in areas where commercial timber is harvested by the millions of board feet.

The successful projects that I have been involved in were smaller, more manageable projects. The work was done by groups like the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, Boy Scout Troops working with volunteers, and small contractors like myself. The end result was a completed project with attention to detail, and aesthetics. Having a sense of ownership in the area, the same local contractors who performed the work take great pride in the finished product.

Many of the local contractors have families that date back several generations in these rural areas. To them, it isn't just about cutting trees, and making money. It epitomizes the term "caring for the land". These are families that belong or once belonged to land grants, ranchers and farmers who were raised here, and families who have hunted, fished and camped on these public lands for generations. When I met with Kendall Clark on July 6, she commented on the value of sharing the stewardship of our public lands with those who have a personal connection to the land.

Room for Improvement:

As with any program, there is always room for improvement. The concept is great, but it is not without its flaws.

As I have spoken to my peers in preparation for this hearing, two topics seem to surface repeatedly.

The first is the evaluation and selection process. Granted, if it was easy to get through this process, everybody would be submitting applications. I understand that it has to be a stringent process, but it does seem that it has become more of a technical review with subject matter experts dissecting specific language in the proposal, rather than an objective evaluation of a proposal that may have merit with a few changes.

I realize that every applicant thinks that their project should be funded, and that it is a great project. My comments are directed more towards applicants who have a great idea for a project, but that may not be able to afford a grant writer, or be able to articulate their idea in a manner that allows them to be competitive in the selection process.

There is a growing perception that the CFRP Program is developing into a "battle of the grant writers". Maybe there is a way to level the playing field for those who are more comfortable behind a chainsaw than a computer.

The second issue that surfaced repeatedly was the administration or oversight provided by the agency to the contractor. Several contractors mentioned that there is no formal opportunity to provide feedback relative to how they feel they were treated as contractors. In true collaboration there should never be a "take it or leave it" relationship. Most

contractors are acting in good faith, and deserve the opportunity to not only provide feedback, but to have that feedback heard, and acted upon in the interest of improving the program. Agency officials should be responsive to contractors, and accept feedback positively and productively as it was intended. It could potentially lead to changes that create efficiencies in how the projects are implemented.

The last item was shared with me by Kendall Clark, who felt that two phases of funding in the grant process may allow for some monies to be used for the planning of the proposed project, with a second phase to be used for implementation. I would offer that a third phase could be planned for follow up or “maintenance” treatment several years later. This would ensure that the effectiveness of the initial treatment could be restored in the future.

I respectfully ask that consideration be given to my testimony, as it is intended to provide the members of this committee with possibly a different prospective than they may have previously had.

There are many like me who take great pride in the work that they do, and consider it an honor to be a part of any effort that moves us closer to healthier forests, and helps our land managers reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Partnerships, collaboration and programs like the CFRP and CFRLP are instrumental in making that possible.

Thank you

Respectfully,

/s/ Rachael R. Mondragon
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