



Swan Valley Workforce Assessment Executive Summary

Northwest Connections conducted an ecosystem workforce assessment in the Swan Valley in 2010 to collect information about the type and amount of forest and restoration work occurring in the Swan Valley as well as the businesses contracted to perform that work. The assessment also documents the demand and capacity to do different types of work, which can be used to develop ideas and recommendations to increase the ability of the local workforce to successfully secure natural resource work.

Many changes have occurred in the Swan Valley in the past decade, making this type of assessment timely. The Montana Legacy project put roughly 45,000 acres of former Plum Creek Timber Company (PCTC) lands under United States Forest Service (USFS) management, likely creating new opportunities for local contractors on federal lands. In addition, there are existing and new federal and state programs offering work opportunities on both public and private lands.



January Contractor Workshop Attendees. Photo by Marnie Criley.

The goal in conducting this assessment and following through on the recommendations that emerged was twofold. 1. Link contactors and contracting entities together so that the local workforce captures the economic benefits 2. Ensure that the contracting entities are getting the 'best value' for their projects by taking advantage of the skilled local workforce.

Over the course of several months in 2010, we conducted in-person interviews with 13 contractors and 6 contracting entities. Many specific recommendations are detailed in the report that follows. Our recommendations build on the ideas generated during these interviews as well as ideas developed at the contractor workshop held in January 2011 which was a direct product of this assessment. A total of 45 contractors and contracting entities attended this workshop, allowing for a great conversation and cross-pollination of ideas.

The assessment showed that there is significant capacity and interest to accomplish forest management and restoration objectives in the Swan and the local workforce has both the skill base and equipment to bid on much of this work. In general, work opportunities seem to have remained the same over the past five years and there is

some indication that work may increase for some contracting entities. All of the contracting entities expressed their desire to use the local workforce whenever the opportunity arose. However, many recommendations emerged that could help ensure that the local workforce can best take advantage of increasing work, especially on Forest Service lands. Key recommendations include:

- **Best Value Criteria:** Build in contract criteria that include factors other than price to ensure that the projects provide local benefits and value the expertise in the local workforce. Many of the entities we interviewed utilize best value contracting for at least some of their work, but each entity defines it differently. Each entity should make clear how they define and weight their best value criteria and share that information with contractors when soliciting bids.
- **Trainings/Certifications:** Provide future trainings/certifications that match the work demand. For contractors to invest time in trainings to gain new skills or purchase new equipment they need to see that the work will be available. The contracts and agreements will determine investment.
- **Outreach:** A diverse outreach strategy should continue to be used to advertise work on federal lands. The traditional means of mailings, e-mail and personal contact are helpful and should be continued. Federal contracting websites can be a deterrent unless understood better. Contractors should utilize the services of our local Procurement Technical Assistance Centers, especially when navigating the federal contracting process. Ask PTAC's to hold trainings in our local area specific to federal contracting, as needed.
- **Contractor Preparation:** Qualified Vendors Lists are widely used by contracting entities. Local contractors should make sure they are on these Qualified Vendors Lists and that their information is current.
- **Contract Size:** There is a wide variety of contracting businesses in the Swan Valley, so no one type or size of contract will match the entire workforce. Bidding out a wide variety of contracts, both small and large, in the form of service, timber and stewardship may be a useful strategy in matching work opportunities with the local workforce. There currently appears to be a diverse range in contract size within and amongst the contracting entities we interviewed. We recommend that local workforce capacity continues to be factored in when determining contract size and type.
- **Markets:** It will be increasingly important to work with the local workforce on strategies to expand local market and business opportunities, especially opportunities that can utilize material off of fuels reduction projects.
- **Role of Non-Profit Groups:** Non-profit groups, especially groups that offer contracts like the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Trout Unlimited, have been helpful in making their contracts less complex and by reducing financial risk for contractors. These groups should continue to explore ways to expand work opportunities on all lands, with a focus on Forest Service ownership.

Please visit <http://www.northwestconnections.org/publiclandprojects.html> to download the full report. Or contact Northwest Connections at info@northwestconnections.org.