

**Disciplinary Research Report**  
**THE STATE OF INTERIOR NORTHWEST FOREST-BASED COMMUNITIES:**  
**A RAPID SOCIAL ASSESSMENT OF WALLOWA COUNTY, OREGON; CLEARWATER**  
**COUNTY, IDAHO; AND LINCOLN COUNTY, MONTANA.**  
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## **Introduction**

The United States Forest Service (USFS) substantially changed its forest management strategy over a decade ago. In 1992 then USFS Chief Dale Robertson issued a directive to forests in the national forest system to adopt ecosystem management as a forest management strategy. Chief Robertson's directive has shifted forest management away from a historic focus on timber production and towards a focus on maintaining ecosystems within their historic range of variability (Greg Kujawa, USFS Kootenai National Forest, personal communication). Although many predictions were made about how changes in timber harvests would effect communities in the Interior Northwest, the actual effects of ecosystem management on communities in the region are unknown. Furthermore, the effects of ecosystem management by the USFS – the region's major landowner – on the management strategies of other landowners, including trends in fragmentation on non-USFS land, are unknown as well. The effects of ecosystem management on the sustainability of local communities and on the trends in forest fragmentation in the region are therefore an import focus for current research.

## **Summary of Current Research: Study Area and Methods**

During the summer of 2003, we began some exploratory research into the current state of and changes in rural natural resource based communities in the Interior Northwest. Between June 21 and July 16, 2003 we conducted a rapid social assessment of three counties in the Interior Northwest: Wallowa County, Oregon; Clearwater County, Idaho; and Lincoln County, Montana. Although we collected data on the counties as a whole, we focused on three communities, each the county seat: Enterprise, Oregon; Orofino, Idaho; and Libby, Montana. In each community we collected primary qualitative data as well as secondary data from published sources and archived records. The goal of the assessment was to provide an overview of the current state and trends of each community's social structure with respect to natural resource issues. From these assessments we plan to develop and hone further research questions.

Each social assessment collected data from five sources. First, in each community we systematically interviewed between 15 and 20 people in informal interviews, for a total of approximately 50 interviews. We selected informants from quickly derived snowball samples that began with the city clerk. Informants included mayors, county commissioners, school district administrators, USFS personnel, local economic development specialists, local business persons, local NGO executives, and other active community members. Second, we conducted a visual survey of main street business that included occupancy, business type, and spatial context on "Main Street" in each community. Third, we reviewed archived county newspapers, city council records, and county planning records. Fourth, we collected copies of recent relevant published research that were available in each county. Fifth, we retrieved 1990 and 2000 census data for the three largest communities in each county and for county data as well. These

five data sources provide us with a diverse set of data to use to make assessments of the current state of the communities in the study area.

### **Summary of Current Research: Preliminary Findings**

Federal ownership of forest land in each county is high, ranging from approximately 50% to 80%; while population is relatively low in each county, ranging from 7,226 to 18,837. Enterprise, Orofino, and Libby range in population between 1,887 and 3,337. Informants in each study site overwhelmingly perceive their respective communities in a state of decline. This “decline” is represented consistently by a decline in family wage jobs and consistently high unemployment, a decline in earned income, an increase in transfer payments, a decline in school enrollment and budgets, a decline in county budgets and services, a demographic shift towards older and retired residents, and only a modest increase in service sector jobs. Furthermore, informants generally attribute many of these trends to a decreasing supply of federal natural resources, most notably timber. United States Forest Service personnel validate declines in timber supply over the past decade and point out that since the late 1980s Forest Service land management strategies have changed from focusing on maximizing timber production to focusing on restoring ecosystems to their natural range of variability. Forest Service personnel also note that the increase in successful litigation against offered timber sales and service contracts has seriously inhibited the Forest Service’s ability to sell timber to local mills and to conduct forest health treatments. Whether the changes in local communities are directly related to ecosystem management is yet unknown; however, we find that local communities perceive ecosystem management and the environmental movement more generally as major contributors to the “decline” of local community.

Each community we visited has experienced a different course of events in the process of natural resource policy change and more general societal changes. The response of each community to these changes has been different as well. The “decline” was portrayed as most severe in Libby, Montana and least severe in Enterprise, Oregon. We find that the outlook of informants – whether positive or negative – appears influenced by the amount of time existing between the present and the most recent major structural change in the community such as a mill closing or a major dispute between the local community and the Forest Service. The greater amount of time between major event and the present, the better the community outlook is in these three communities. The findings presented above are preliminary findings and will require further research and analysis to validate or reject them, or to lead us to more fundamental questions.

### **Future Directions**

We plan to fully review the data collected this summer in the fall of 2003. Furthermore, from this data we will be developing further and more pointed research questions. For instance: 1) What effects has ecosystem management had on local communities? 2) How has ecosystem management been implemented on forests within the study area? 3) How has the adoption of ecosystem management by the Forest Service affected the actions of other landowners in the study area? We plan to develop methods and instruments to answer questions similar to these as well as others. We are also working to link this disciplinary topic in relevant ways to other disciplines to develop interdisciplinary questions related to the social factors leading to forest fragmentation.