A Celebration of Collaboration in the Gifford Pinchot

Representatives from the Pinchot Partners Board of Directors, community members and Forest Service administration members pose for a portrait provided by the Pinchot Partners after a tour of an area of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. In August 2014, Pictured in back row, from left, are Dave Bombeck, Gene Zander, Paul Homan, Bob Gueuthe, Kevin Sendeck, Carl Abbas, and Linda Swarts. In the front row, from left, are Alix Aquila, John Squires, Erik Tanderen and Felicia Bennecke.

HONOR: Group of Stakeholders Work With Forest Service to Create Jobs, Promote Health of Forest

By Christopher Banner c.banner@chronicle.com

When Congress gave the U.S. Forest Service authority to better manage its forests, a key provision was finding local stakeholders to work with.

Enter the Pinchot Partners, an ideologically diverse group of people mostly from Lewis County who have worked since 2002 to push for projects that preserve the health of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest while creating local forestry jobs.

The two ideas might sound mutually exclusive, but the Pinchot Partners have been able to make it work — so well, in fact, that the group on Thursday evening will be awarded the annual Russ Mohney Recreation Resource Stewardship Award by the Lewis Economic Development Council and The Chronicle at the EDC’s annual banquet.

“1’m thrilled to see them getting this award because they help us as the Forest Service achieve what we’re trying to do,” Geret Abbau, Cowitz Valley Ranger District ranger for the U.S. Forest Service, said. “They’re getting these stands healthy and helping make Lewis healthier, which is huge for the stewardship of the forest in general.”

The Pinchot Partners came together in 2002, during a time when controversies were splinters regarding timber sales and logging in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. The group brought together the Cowitz Tribe, conservationists, economic and labor interests, and loggers together to figure out ways to not only preserve the health of the forest, but create jobs opportunitites at a time the timber industry was being hit hard economically and timber production in the forest was essentially halted.

“When the people get together, they all took a field trip and found out there were more commonalities than concerns,” group coordinator Jamie Tollee said. “They’re since worked on projects such as road improvements, meadow enhancement, buckthorne habitat and improving stewardship timber sales.”

Perhaps no project the Pinchot Partners teams up with the Forest Service is more important to Lewis County’s economic interests than the stewardship sales. The sales, according to the Forest Service, are designed to thin areas of the forest that are overstocked — essentially growing too close together creating hazards to the health of the trees and increasing fire danger. The Forest Service puts up for bid and uses a system of preference points based on a variety of criteria, an important one being whether or not the company will utilize local labor, in determining who gets the job.

The monetary benefit, Abbau said, are more immediate in that the companies doing the work are paid for the project, putting the money into the local communities immediately, rather than the county needing to wait for a percentage of the money from the federal government as in the traditional timber sale programs. Pinchot Partners have added in three stewardship sales by finding funding for and contracting with companies to do survey work, pinpointing areas that need to be thinned first.

The group has also worked with the Cowitz Tribe to help improve buckthorne production through the forest by controlling and cutting growth of young trees in areas where buckthorne bushes are abundant. By allowing the areas such as Burley Mountain to naturally produce more buckthorn, both the tribe and Pinchot Partners hope that the wildlife that feed on buckthorne will become more abundant, in effect enhancing their habitat also.

“It’s all part of a combined mission statement of improving forest health and economic capabilities of the forest,” Tollee said. “We continue to have a lot of conversations about how we can continue to work on projects like this.”

Other projects the Pinchot Partners are involved in include an updated inventory of the Forest Service’s vegetation database in the Gifford Pinchot, watershed restoration at Iron Creek and maintenance of several roads in the Cowitz Valley District.

From a Forest Service perspective, Abbau considers the advocacy and the direct help of the Pinchot Partners invaluable. In previous assignments before coming to Rainier in 2012, Abbau said the norm was to listen to different advocacy groups come to him with issues without first speaking to each other on ways the issues could be brought up to solutions that could more easily be figured between seemingly competing groups.

With the Pinchot Partners, Abbau has seen first-hand the collaborative spirit that can provide when people choose to work together for a common goal.

“A lot of groups just didn’t communicate with each other. The typical model was that I had to spend so much time with each one of those groups, then go back and produce a solution that really couldn’t meet all their needs,” Abbau said. “This group comes to the table with diverse views and they’ll debate and discuss, but at the end of the day, they work toward a common goal and see common ground. They have done that successfully here on several projects.”

Tollee said the group is humbled to be recognized by both the Lewis EDC and The Chronicle for efforts that, a dozen years after the Pinchot Partners’ founding, are more plentiful than ever.

“It’s really an honor. The group is excited, and to have some recognition is wonderful,” Tollee said. “We all really appreciate it.”

ABOUT THE AWARD

The Russ Mohney Recreation Resource Stewardship Award is given annually by The Chronicle and the Lewis County Economic Development Council to recognize individuals or groups who advocate for the conservation of natural resources and enjoyment of the outdoors.

Notably, in 2011 Russ Mohney won the award named after him, just months after he died.

The award has been given since 2007 to the following:

2007 — Friends of the Cowitz, for work advocating for recreational fishing

2008 — Gary Loeber, for fighting for fishing resources via “Fish First”

2009 — Backcountry Hikers of Washington, for work on forest trails

2010 — Dan Ayres, for stewardship of resources at Bitterroot

2011 — Russ Mohney, for lifelong contributions to improvement of the outdoors

2012 — Friends of Lewis Lick Hill, for work on preserving the hills’ natural area

2013 — Centrella College, for work on NISSI project and salmon restoration

2014 — Centrella Stream Team, for dedication to reviving Chico Creek

2015 — Pinchot Partners, for collaboration in Gifford Pinchot National Forest

WHO ARE THE PINCHOT PARTNERS?

The Pinchot Partners bring together people representing a variety of interests into one collaborative group with a goal of stimulating the economy and around the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, preserving and enhancing habitat, and advocating for policies that benefit the forest and surrounding areas.

The Pinchot Partners’ Board of Directors is made up of the following people: Chairperson Taylor Ask, Director of Natural Resources for the Cowitz Tribe; vice Chairperson Beth Ogden, Southwest Regional Manager for the Washington Conservation Commission; treasurer Bill Little, former elected representative for the Lumber and Sawmill Workers union; secretary Miki Geneterra, Ph.D., student at the University of Washington; John Squires, member of the board of the National Network of Forest Practitioners; Larry Smith, co-founder of the Cowitz Basin Off-Highway Vehicle club and lifelong timber industry worker; Fred Rogers, past president of a local chapter of the Lumber and Sawmill Workers Union; Lisa Moskwa, Deputy Director of the Gifford Pinchot Task Force; and Bob Gueuthe, board member of the Pacific Mountain Workforce Development Council.

For a list of all the funds the Pinchot Partners are involved in, check out their website at www.pinchotpartners.org.