

FIRE & WATER: LIVING IN THE AMERICAN WEST IN THE TIME OF A CHANGING CLIMATE

The Healthy Headwaters Alliance has adopted the following criteria to assess state and federal public policy proposals that address forest health and watershed protection and restoration. While the Alliance does not advocate for specific legislation, as opportunities arise we do use our criteria to provide thoughtful commentary to interested parties.

Over the past six years of the Alliance's work, we have determined that headwaters protection and restoration are highly effective when: (1) carried out by broad-based, collaborative partnerships at the community level, (2) conducted in accordance with comprehensive, evidence- and science-based watershed plans developed with public input, and (3) are broadly funded by land managers, businesses, and other water users.

Without funding, most proposed policies will not be effective. While it is not the job of this Alliance to provide budget direction to lawmakers, we call on them to ensure that there is adequate funding to carry out new policies and legislation. Finally, we want to note that studies conducted by the Government Accounting Office, the Congressional Budget Office, and a number of universities and research institutions have all shown that investment in headwaters restoration provides considerable savings over rapidly increasing firefighting and water treatment costs over the long term.

The following provides additional detail:

Collaborative, Community-Based Partnerships

The American West's headwaters provide water security and other benefits – including flood control, groundwater recharge, recreation, and source water for fish and wildlife – that are important to all segments of western communities. For this reason headwaters restoration and protection programs are best designed through collaborative processes that engage a full range of stakeholders including utilities, conservationists, the business community, elected officials, agency personnel, scientists, tribes, and citizens. Effective public-private collaborations are a proven way to develop headwaters programs that are responsive to community priorities and that attract broad-based public support and diverse funding streams.

Comprehensive Watershed Plans

Headwaters protection and restoration should be guided by comprehensive watershed plans that address all sources of impairment to the quality and quantity of water on both public and private lands. Watershed plans, regularly revised and updated, are the best means of identifying the most effective protection and restoration measures, prioritizing actions based on public values, and engaging affected landowners, agencies, and the public. These plans are also a critical tool for attracting the investment necessary to carry out headwaters work.

Science- and Evidence-Based Approach

Successful headwaters restoration and protection are built on a solid foundation of both science and evidence, including local knowledge based on observation of conditions over time. Ecosystems, forest types, climate, and other factors vary widely across the geography of the American West; one-size-fits-all prescriptions are to be avoided, as measures will be most successful when tailored to local conditions. Because knowledge and experience are gained over time, adaptive management is a key component of effective watershed plans.

Long-Term Resilience

In an era dominated by an uncertain climate, volatility and change are the new norm. Resilience in the face of uncertainty requires adaptive management and monitoring. The most effective focus of headwaters protection and restoration is not simply to address immediate threats, but rather to promote watersheds that are resilient to disturbance over the long term. This means that the goal of restoration and protection cannot be to establish a desired set of conditions, but rather to establish functioning systems capable of evolving in response to the unpredictable conditions that will occur in coming decades, and to manage systems adaptively as new information is gained over time.

Broadly Shared Investment

The cost of headwaters restoration and protection should be broadly shared on an equitable basis by federal land management agencies, local ratepayers, the business community, state programs, and other funding sources. This mix of funding sources will vary from community to community depending upon factors such as the relative acreage of public and private land and the size of the local ratepayer base.

Public Lands Management

Public lands within municipal source watersheds should be managed in a way that gives high priority to protecting downstream water quality and quantity. Likewise, public land restoration activities should be prioritized in a manner that recognizes the importance of watersheds to downstream municipal use. In addition, public land acquisitions should be prioritized to reflect their value for municipal watershed protection.