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## Tapping local woodcutters could build grassroots support for large-scale thinning

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Henry Lopez moved to Penasco in 1972 after marrying a local girl. The rural mountain valley in Northern New Mexico was only a drive of a few hours from where he grew up south of Albuquerque. But culturally speaking, it was another planet.

"I didn't even know how to run a chainsaw when I got here," Lopez says, chuckling at his youthful ignorance. That kind of mechanical illiteracy is a cardinal sin in the area, where wood gathering is a basic part of most people's lives.

In the mid-'80s, Lopez joined the U.S. Forest Service and got assigned to the office in Penasco. Locals had the instinctual habit of giving the finger to anyone driving a green government truck. They didn't trust the feds. They had no faith that they were acting in the community's best interest.

Lopez managed to get past some of that wariness and used his understanding of local culture and needs to create a nationally recognized program now known as "Collaborative Stewardship." Instead of offering big timber sales to outside contractors, Lopez helped craft a program to offer small plots of forest — a couple acres called a "stewardship block" — from which locals could gather wood and feel a sense of forest ownership. At the same time, the Forest Service was being paid a small fee to get some much-needed tree thinning finished.

Today, with the Rio Grande Water Fund aiming to restore hundreds of thousands of acres of forest while benefiting local communities, Lopez's program could be a useful tool in building grassroots support.

The innate distrust of outsiders among Penasqueros comes from a long, sordid history of chicanery and exploitation.

Most of these tiny hamlets in the rolling foothills of the southern Sangre de Cristos were settled hundreds of years ago. Hispano pioneers relied on land grants — vast tracts of land presented by the Spanish crown — for their survival. Rivers for irrigation. Valleys for farming. And the mountains for firewood and building materials. In many cases, residents shared common access to these resources.

But when the territory became part of the U.S., many land grants were cut up and sold off. Anglo outsiders often logged the best timber off the mountains. By the early 1900s, much of the land had been absorbed by the Forest Service, which strictly regulated access to resources.

Local Hispanos still feel a deep sense of betrayal for the loss. That lingering animosity informed Lopez's stewardship block program. Almost everyone in the dozens of communities

near Penasco heats their homes with wood, and some still use it to cook. Wood is a necessity.

But the Forest Service has struggled to meet the demand. What's worse, when Lopez joined the Carson National Forest, most of the logging was done by big, out-of-town contractors who swept in, hauled off huge quantities of timber and left locals sifting through scraps.

"It got to the point where the communities were very opposed to big operations coming in," Lopez says. "They have to be part of it. They don't want somebody to just come in from Idaho or somewhere and do the job and take off."

After several large timber projects were halted in the early '90s by opposition from locals and environmental groups, Lopez and his boss revamped their approach. The stewardship block program was developed as a way to connect wood-hungry, chainsaw-wielding locals with forests that were in bad need of some tidying up.

When the Forest Service identifies an area it wants to thin, it can choose from a number of methods to get the work done.

Lopez says the most efficient way is to hire a big thinning contractor. There's less paperwork and administrative cost, and these companies are set up to do the work quickly and in a cost-effective manner. But in Northern New Mexico, this approach is also the least popular among the communities. Sometimes wood is left for locals to gather, but most jobs go to outsiders, and there's a sense that locals could do the work better.

Another approach to get thinning done has been to set up a "green fuelwood area." The Forest Service marks the trees that can be cut down, and they open the area to anyone lucky enough to get one of the limited permits. The trouble is these areas get chaotic and outright dangerous as wood hunters scramble to get to the best wood first and get as much as they can.

The Collaborative Stewardship program resolves a lot of those issues. The Forest Service divides a thinning area into 2- or 3-acre plots, then sells those plots to an individual or family. Experts mark the trees they want left standing to maintain a healthy forest, and the block owner has a year to clear out the rest.

Lopez says stewardship blocks — now dubbed "partnership blocks" — could never be the only tool the agency uses for thinning. But he does think the program could be scaled up significantly.

Local woodcutters like the blocks because there's no rush and no competition, and they're assured that they'll have wood. Plus, many block owners end up feeling like they're keepers of the forest, not just visitors.

"It gives us a huge amount of ownership," says Douglas North, 65, who lives in the village of Las Trampas. "When I cut down my block and I go back and look at it, I take pride in that I did the job for the Forest Service and I got to keep all the wood."

North married a local woman and moved to Las Trampas decades ago. He says he needs 10 cords of wood each winter to heat his house and his son's house next door. He says he's relieved to have another block this year. It means he won't have to scrounge.

On early mornings this summer, North's brother-in-law, Alex Lopez (no relation to Henry Lopez), will go off with his brothers and nephews to work on his block, too. Over the coming months, they'll haul out pi-on and ponderosa pine for firewood and juniper for fence posts.

In all, Lopez expects to get as much as 25 cords of wood by the time he's done.

Lopez is exactly the kind of person the Forest Service and Rio Grande Water Fund need to get on their side if they hope to build community support around large-scale thinning projects. He's an active member of the acequia and domestic water users association, and he's also helping reorganize the Trampas Land Grant board to lobby for more control of former land grant acres now managed by the federal government.

"We feel hurt when it comes to discussing how our ancestors lost this land," Lopez says. But he says the stewardship block program helps heal some of those wounds.

"We feel like we're helping manage our forests," Lopez says. "It seems like we have to train these district rangers as to our culture and what we really need. It's in the baby stages now, but we're working in the right direction." Expanding the block program would help sustain that momentum, he says.

For 40 years, Nancy Buechley and her husband, Larry, have also gathered wood to heat their home in nearby El Valle. She says their love of the annual tradition goes beyond just the practical need for firewood. "I like the connection between doing the work and receiving the benefit," Buechley says. "I like the feeling of being out in the woods and feeling like you're doing something valuable."

Buechley says skeptics of the program have also come around after seeing the results. In places where blocks were cut years ago, grasses have rebounded. Scrawny trees have grown robust. The forest looks healthier.

Despite the support, the block program is far from perfect. People sometimes help themselves to the bigger trees that were supposed to stay standing. Others refuse to pile slash, meaning the Forest Service has to clean up after them. Some parts of the forest simply aren't appropriate; there might be limited access, or the existing wood might not be of much use.

The need for oversight of dozens of block holders also means the program requires more staff and more paperwork. It's a big reason the program has struggled to expand. The waiting list for people wanting to buy a block sometimes has as many as 100 people. The Forest Service says it hasn't had the manpower to support all the demand, though some locals wonder if that has more to do with a lack of willingness rather than resources.

If the Rio Grande Water Fund does manage to gain traction and much larger swaths of the Carson National Forest are marked for thinning, there's a small army of locals in southern Taos County with pickups and chainsaws who'd get behind the work if it means more blocks.