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In wildfire-prone Washington, 'collaboration' on forest management gives way to timber interests

Forest collaboratives formed in the wake of the Pacific Northwest's "Timber Wars" have become major power players operating largely out of the public eye

By Moe K. Clark
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Large branches protrude from a ponderosa pine in the Northern Cascades near Twisp on July 20.

Throughout her two decades working on forestry issues, Jasmine Minbashian has often found herself at odds with the U.S. Forest Service and the timber industry. Her environmental activism started during the second wave of Pacific Northwest “Timber Wars” — an intense period of conflict between environmentalists and the timber industry that unfolded in the late 1980s and ‘90s over logging in old-growth forests.

Instead of camping out in century-old trees or destroying timber-felling equipment in protest of sweeping logging practices on public lands, Minbashian took a different approach. She worked to bring disparate groups together to restore old-growth forests, supporting rural economies and reducing wildfire risk at the same time.

So when she joined the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative in 2019, Minbashian felt cautiously optimistic. The organization — one of dozens of forest collaboratives that had sprung up across the West — brought together conservation groups, agency officials and timber companies to plan forest restoration projects in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. As the executive director of the small environmental nonprofit Methow Valley Citizens Council, she was excited to have a seat at the table to find common ground.

One of the group’s first major efforts focused on restoring 50,000 fire-prone acres near Twisp, the rural town where she lived. For years, the group collaborated closely with the U.S. Forest Service to design the Mission Restoration Project and garner community support. The plan included some commercial logging, but largely focused on thinning small trees, restoring habitat and decommissioning old roads — work Minbashian believed could protect communities without resorting to the kind of aggressive logging she had spent years fighting.

But when no timber companies bid on the commercial logging portion of the project, federal and state agencies quietly rewrote the plan to, as Minbashian put it, “sweeten the pot” by including more large trees — circumventing years of planning, environmental assessments and community outreach. The \$1.1 million contract was ultimately awarded in 2021 to Hampton Lumber, a member of the collaborative, which trucked the logs more than 100 miles to its mill on the other side of the Cascades.

“That started some of the questioning of, like, what’s going on here?” Minbashian said.

When she later visited logged areas near the Libby and Buttermilk creek drainages, she was stunned. Some sections looked as expected. Others had been stripped of trees she thought were protected by the restoration project plan — including old-growth trees that are key to the forest's health.

"When you're talking about restoring forests and climate-smart forestry, you want to retain those old or big trees," she said. "They're the most fire-resistant. They store water. They just serve so many important ecological functions."

Over the last decade, hundreds of millions of private, state and federal dollars have been funneled to forest restoration and wildfire mitigation projects spearheaded by the U.S. Forest Service and collaborative groups like the one in North Central Washington. The group is one of 19 forest collaboratives focused on public lands in Washington and Oregon that emerged in the wake of the "Timber Wars" in an attempt to find agreement around contentious forestry issues.

These forest collaboratives, touted as a model of consensus-driven conservation, have quietly become influential engines for federal forest management decisions across the West. But critics worry the groups are too aligned with timber interests that prioritize commercial logging, and that they helped pave the way for the Trump administration's latest effort to expand logging on public lands throughout the country by skirting environmental protection laws.

Some community groups and grassroots environmental organizations have become disenchanted with the arrangement, saying forest collaboratives offer a false sense of community engagement and transparency into forestry projects on public lands. Other mainstream environmental groups see timber's influence in the projects as a double-edged sword. While the commercial logging aspects of the projects are often the most controversial, the timber sale can help fund other aspects of the restoration plans — like improving fish spawning areas and decommissioning roads that fragment wildlife habitats — to help keep the momentum going. But those funds aren't always guaranteed.

"Everybody's at the table because they have their own interests," said Tiana Luke, the co-chair of the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative and the senior conservation manager for The Wilderness Society, a national environmental policy nonprofit. "In this climate, we can't do the important ecological forest restoration without that economic component."

Unlike some forest collaboratives, the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative is not classified formally as a federal advisory committee, meaning the group isn't required to follow accountability and transparency measures meant to limit the influence of special interest groups on public policy.

The collaborative insists that it wields the same influence as any other community member when making suggestions to the Forest Service. But years worth of internal documents and emails obtained by InvestigateWest show the group has worked closely with the U.S. Forest Service at nearly every step of the process to carefully craft public messaging around logging projects, placate community concerns, and keep projects on pace and out of the courts. For at least one project, records show that a bid was awarded to the same timber company that had previously led a discussion among collaborative members about how to make the project more attractive to buyers.

"It's all because they want to rush the projects through," said Ric Bailey, a Winthrop resident and a longtime environmental activist. "They're showing the public, look, we are doing something to protect you from fire."

But he sees no difference in the current approach to what he witnessed in the '80s and '90s, when the Forest Service's main priority was meeting federally mandated timber quotas.

"I looked at the projects, and I said, 'These don't have anything to do with fire or fuel reductions,'" he recalled thinking, referring to the Mission Restoration Project. "It's just logging."

Public plans versus reality

In the wake of the Timber Wars, forest collaboratives emerged to bring lumber mill owners, environmentalists and local governments to the table to figure out how to move forward. Public perception had begun to move away from viewing national forests as "piggy banks" for economic benefit and resource extraction to treating them as ecological treasures worthy of protection, according to Steve Pedery, the conservation director at Oregon Wild, a Portland-based environmental organization that helped create some of the first collaboratives.

But over the last decade, the pendulum has swung back toward timber interests, according to Pedery.

"There are still places where you will find functional collaboratives and their citizens who come together with loggers and the Forest Service and counties and community groups to hash out a common vision," Pedery said. "But I would say that's the rarity these days."

Pedery feels mainstream environmental groups participating in forest collaboratives have compromised their values in exchange for access to funding and a seat at the decision-making table — a dynamic that's helped set the stage for the Trump administration's current efforts to expand and expedite logging in national forests by 25%.

"There are a lot of people who had a little too much hubris over the last decade who helped create this mess that we're in around losing what are really some of the existential environmental protections in the Pacific Northwest," he said.

The Trump administration claims that, in addition to reducing the country's reliance on domestic timber, recent actions to expedite logging operations will improve forest health and reduce the risk of catastrophic fire by thinning out overgrown forests. But some legal experts and environmental scientists warn that while some thinning could help, excessive logging could have the opposite effect by creating drier conditions, altering forest structures to make them less resilient and increasing flammable logging "debris" across the landscape.

While many of the restoration projects being spearheaded by the Forest Service and the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative call for ecological restoration efforts aside from logging, those aspects often lag behind — calling into question whether the restoration plans are simply commercial logging under a different name.

"Typically in the past, what would happen is that the commercial part would get done, but all the stuff that needed funding would not get done," Minbashian told InvestigateWest in February. "So even though they did the (environmental assessment) for it, it doesn't mean it necessarily happened."

That's been true for the Mission Project, where 95% of the commercial thinning outlined in the environmental assessment has been completed as of June 2025; 69% of noncommercial thinning has been completed; and less than 5% of the planned prescribed burning has occurred as of July 2025, according to a Forest Service spokesperson. Only a quarter of fish culverts have been replaced, though 80% of the planned habitat improvement plans for streams have occurred.

The collaborative, founded in 2013, gained momentum in the wake of two catastrophic wildfire seasons in North Central Washington — a time often cited in press releases and scientific reports as highlighting the need for restoration work.

On a windy, hot day in July 2014, lightning strikes ignited the Carlton Complex Fire, which went down in state history as the largest continuous wildfire, engulfing more than 250,000 acres, destroying over 350 homes, and leaving \$98 million worth of damage in its wake. The following year, another million acres burned in the area, leading to renewed public outcry from residents wanting to see more done to prevent wildfires.

“When people talk about the trauma of that fire event, and then the 2015 fires that devastated a huge area of Okanogan County, it's real,” said Susan Prichard, a fire ecologist for the University of Washington whose family lived through the fire. “I can still choke up about it.”

As wildfires in the Pacific Northwest have become more frequent and more devastating, collaboratives like those in Washington have become increasingly vocal about the urgency of improving the ecosystem and addressing the long legacy of fire suppression from the U.S. Forest Service, which led to a buildup of “wildfire fuels” across the landscape.

For centuries, Indigenous people stewarded forests by thinning and resetting the landscape using fire, which is critical to ecosystem health. But the U.S. Forest Service's longstanding practice of aggressive fire suppression led to a buildup of dense, dry forests, primed to burn. The resulting catastrophic wildfires triggered an influx of state and federal funds for “fuel reduction treatments” such as forest thinning — a broad term which can mean removing small branches and trees or conducting massive commercial logging projects — as well as prescribed burning.

“Fire is such a big component of the ecology of the forest here, and they have been historically fire-suppressed, and so we need to reintroduce fire,” Minbashian said. “But if you did that without some thinning first, it could lead to bigger fires than we want, which is what we're seeing because of climate change as well.”

“Some thinning prior to fire can be helpful, but thinning alone is not going to get you the results you need,” she added.

Tools meant to speed up the process

A major goal of the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative is to speed up the approval process for restoration projects, which is made easier if the project is proposed to help address wildfire risks.

To do so, the group pays private consultants to conduct environmental studies and surveys on behalf of the Forest Service in an attempt to circumvent federal bureaucracy. It also relies on condition-based management, a tool which allows the group to get planning approvals based on a broad-strokes outline of a decision, with the promise that the details will get hammered out later. But the practices also obfuscate the plans for the public and make it harder for environmental groups to sue, advocates say. And since the collaborative is part of the planning process so early on, it gives timber industry representatives who are part of the group a front-row seat to million-dollar timber sales they might ultimately bid on.

During the planning phase for the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative's first project, called the Upper Wenatchee Restoration project, Anjolene Price, the collaborative forestry manager for Hampton Lumber, led discussions within a subcommittee about how to design the project to entice buyers while remaining "cautious of anti-trust violations," according to meeting notes obtained by InvestigateWest. Anti-trust laws are meant to promote fair competition and prohibit activity like price-fixing, bid-rigging and monopolization.

Hampton Lumber ultimately received a \$1.5 million timber contract in 2024, the first commercial sale awarded for the Upper Wenatchee Pilot Project.

Price represents Hampton Lumber on several forest collaboratives in Washington, driving hundreds of miles each week to attend in-person meetings. In 2022, she became the co-chair of the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative.

With sawmills in Washington, Oregon and Canada, Hampton Lumber has the largest forestry footprint in Okanogan County and the second largest in the state of Washington. Over the last decade, the company has received \$443 million worth of timber contracts to conduct logging on state-managed lands throughout the state. The company has completed five timber sales in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest since 2021 – including at least three projects that Price helped to design – accounting for nearly 58% of all the timber removed from the federally-managed forest, according to data obtained from the Washington Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Forest Service.

"When it comes to collaboratives and forest health treatment projects, it would be more difficult, even inappropriate, if the local mills were not involved," Price, who declined numerous interview requests, wrote in a prepared statement.

"The success of these projects depends on finding markets for any wood fiber that is removed; ultimately, the forest health treatment must pencil out in order to be implemented," she wrote. "By participating, I can help inform what will work and what does not."

The collaborative doesn't define what would be considered a conflict of interest in its operating procedures, and some members within the group insist that no such conflict exists since all parties benefit in some way from the project.

The group also doesn't define what success looks like for the projects.

Luke, the co-chair of the collaborative and the senior conservation manager for the Wilderness Society, said it's challenging to quantify the group's successes over the last decade. The projects are complicated, span decades, and involve dozens of state and federal agencies and outside groups to pull off, she said.

Personally, she'd like to see more monitoring happening to help answer that million-dollar question: Are these projects actually helping the environment?

"Are we reducing the risk of crown fire in this stand or across the landscape as a whole?" said Luke, referring to wildfires that quickly spread through the "crown" or tops of trees.

"If you look at a broader scale, are we doing that?" she added. "And sometimes the forest has funding and capacity to do that (monitoring), and then sometimes they don't."

In the final environmental assessment for the Upper Wenatchee Pilot Project published in 2017, the Forest Service said it was working with partners to develop a "broad monitoring strategy" to evaluate the effectiveness of treatments and restoration actions. "While this strategy is still in development, it is expected to result in a monitoring partnership with collaborators and regular reporting of monitoring results," the plans read.

The North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative's website says it is spearheading that effort, but Luke said questions about monitoring should be directed to the Forest Service. In response, a Forest Service spokesperson wrote in an email that they are collecting data on

vegetation density and the size of trees within the areas that will be logged."The Forest Service is coordinating closely with NCWFHC to inform future implementation strategies and adaptive management," she said.

Still, the collaborative is celebrating the Upper Wenatchee Pilot Project as a success.

In May, a group of around 40 community members piled into two white Forest Service vans to visit a slice of the forest where the project took place, outside Leavenworth.

Standing in a semi-circle in the middle of a recently logged area of the forest, the tour group was a mix of forestry experts and retirees — many of whom live along Lake Wenatchee, one of the most wildfire-prone areas in the country. Those involved in the project celebrated their decade-long collaboration, declaring that the nearby community was better protected from wildfire because of the work done.

"We did it," said Lloyd McGee, a founding member of the collaborative and the Washington forests program manager for the nonprofit The Nature Conservancy, as the crowd clapped. "We didn't increase the pace, but we're still learning from that."

The project originally listed many of the same ecological goals as the Mission Project, such as decommissioning roads, restoring fish habitat and conducting prescribed burning — but much of the work remains incomplete, apart from two timber sales. Approximately 2,300 acres have been sold for commercial logging, with about 30% of the logging having been completed as of July 2025, according to a Forest Service spokesperson. Only a small fraction of the noncommercial thinning has occurred, and no prescribed burning or road decommissioning has taken place.

"Maybe that's step two or three," Andrew Lakota, a staff member with the Wenatchee River Ranger District who helped steward the logging operations for the project, told the crowd. "I don't know what step that is, but now we're generating receipts from the timber, and we can start doing a lot of other (restoration) activities we identified."



Ric Bailey stands near the burn scar, also known as a “cat face,” of a large ponderosa, in the Northern Cascades near Twisp on July 20.

InvestigateWest/Emree Weaver

Public cut out of the process

When Ric Bailey moved to North Central Washington’s Methow Valley in 2014, tucked in the eastern foothills of the Cascade Range, he was hoping to retire.

With the help of a local carpenter, he built a small yurt-style home just outside downtown Winthrop — 12 minutes from the edge of the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. After decades of environmental activism to stop logging in old-growth forests and wilderness areas throughout the Pacific Northwest, Bailey was burned out and yearned for some stillness. But it wasn’t long before he found himself fighting the same fights.

Bailey, alongside a small but mighty group of neighbors, has been critical of the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative’s behind-the-scenes role in crafting Forest Service projects, often years before community members have a chance to weigh in. They see the

setup as nothing more than a mirage, offering the illusion of transparency and community engagement into plans that do nothing more than pad the profits of powerful timber companies.

"All we can do is document how they have cut the public out of the process," Bailey said. "Once these (environmental assessments) are signed, all you got is litigation."

The Forest Service isn't required to listen to the collaborative's recommendations, but they often do. Any citizen can submit a proposal for consideration during the agency's environmental review, but the collaborative knows months — and even years — before the public knows what the project might look like, including how much timber companies might get. Unlike members of the public, collaboratives also work hand and hand with the federal agency to iron out the details.

For example, in 2020, the Forest Service gave collaborative members a three-week "sneak peek" of a final environmental assessment for a contentious restoration project before it was released to the public for a 30-day comment period, according to emails obtained by InvestigateWest.

"They get a front-row seat," Bailey said.

While the group's quarterly meetings are open to the public, community members are not permitted in steering committee meetings or a project working group, where collaborative members discuss pending Forest Service projects and current collaborations on public lands.

Meeting notes are also only sporadically posted online. The most recent quarterly meeting minutes available are from November 2024, the only notes posted since 2021 — though the new facilitator of the group said the lag is due to website issues.

Bailey and other community members have criticized the group for being insular, saying it contradicts their publicly stated goals of engaging the community on public projects.

"There's sensitivity on how we talk about work of the collaborative," Price, the co-chair of the collaborative and Hampton Lumber representative, told members during a meeting in February in which she reiterated the group's policy of directing media inquiries to the co-chairs. "We don't want to be knocking ourselves."

Bailey is also critical of the ways the Forest Service, with help from the collaborative, is trying to expedite "restoration" projects by speeding up the environmental review process using tools now openly championed by the Trump administration under the guise of wildfire mitigation. The tools include finding "flexible ways" to write environmental assessments that leave ample room for different interpretations on the ground. Those strategies also make it more difficult to sue, he said.

Each project must be reviewed under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), a landmark 1970 environmental law that requires federal agencies to assess whether an action will have a significant impact on the environment before a project is approved. But there are various levels of review, and the agency gets to determine which is the most appropriate. The Forest Service determined that the second-narrowest environmental review — for projects they consider to have no significant impact on the environment — sufficed for over 200,000 acres encompassed in for the four major restoration projects unfolding in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.

"How can you say that you're going to reduce wildfire risk and reconstruct the forest, the whole forest ecosystem here, and not have a significant environmental impact?" Bailey said. "Are you kidding me?"

Restoration projects are also set to undergo even less review under the Trump administration. In an executive order issued in March, the Trump administration ordered agencies to expand the use of categorical exclusions, the least stringent type of environmental review, and to exempt timber thinning projects entirely to expedite logging throughout the country's national forests.

While Prichard, the forest ecologist with the University of Washington, sees commercial logging as a necessary tool to thin out the forest and reduce wildfire risks, she remains cautious. "I've become more comfortable with the idea that we need mills to take the material out and help defray the very expensive cost of fire exclusion," she said.

"Do I think that we should be really careful about next steps and provide a lot of oversight? Absolutely," she said, referring to Trump's executive orders regarding logging. "But the term commercial harvesting doesn't set my hackles up the way it might some of my neighbors."

Bailey isn't opposed to fuel reduction projects like noncommercial thinning or even logging, if done thoughtfully. He's worked on Forest Service projects and as a timber faller in the '80s, and later as a wildland firefighter. But he takes issue with the collaborative and the Forest Service offering false hope to people that the projects will protect them from fire without providing the evidence to support their claims.

"It's a big smoke screen," he said.

Bailey's small community group celebrated a win in May. A federal court partially ruled in favor of an environmental group that had challenged the environmental assessment for another project the collaborative is working on, the 24,000-acre Twisp Restoration Project.

The court didn't completely shut down the logging being done by Hampton Lumber, but paused it until the Forest Service could examine what cumulative effects the project might have on the landscape. The initial environmental assessment stated that the project would have "no substantial impact" on the environment.

"It's something," Bailey said. "We will take it."

But the timber industry also took it as a partial win. The ruling upheld "condition-based management," the tool that was used to justify the increased logging for the Mission Project, setting an "excellent precedent," Tom Partin, the president of the American Forest Resource Council, told fellow collaborative members during a meeting in June.



The stump of a large tree among debris, or “slash,” from a five-year-old logging unit in an area of the Northern Cascades near Twisp on July 20.

InvestigateWest/Emree Weaver

“That’s a whole new variable”

Minbashian hasn’t completely lost faith in the collaborative process or the Forest Service.

After her organization produced a monitoring report of the trees that were cut for the Mission Project, the Forest Service acknowledged that some of the logging didn’t go as planned and issued a statement in 2023 committing to making some changes going forward.

Minbashian said since the Mission Project, she’s seen modest improvements on the ground.

She’d still like more guardrails and transparency around the Forest Service's reliance on logging plans that allow companies to decide in real-time which trees to cut, and clearer expectations for when large trees will be removed.

"Consistently, the way that the project is described in public documents and then the way it's implemented is really different," she said.

The lack of details in the plans makes it hard to compare what unfolds on the ground. "All the Forest Service does is say, 'Oh, we'll do better next time,'" Bailey said. "There's nothing you can hold them to legally, that says you have to do something different than what you've been doing."

Minbashian's organization is now working with the Forest Service to do baseline monitoring for the upcoming Twisp restoration project, in hopes that large trees are kept on the landscape and history doesn't repeat itself. She still wants projects to succeed.

"There's a lot more components to it than just the commercial timber sale," she said. "There's road decommissioning and stream restoration, and understory thinning and all that to improve the damage that was done in the past."

Minbashian understands where Bailey's mistrust comes from. She feels it, too. But she thinks the people working locally with the Forest Service have good intentions, and she's choosing to focus on that.

"You can say, well, of course, they did that. They're the Forest Service; they're going to have bad intentions," she said, referring to the Mission Project. "Or you can say, well, there could be a variety of factors why it didn't get implemented in the way we envisioned. And let's look at that and what happened, and can we fix that going forward?"

"That's just the approach we've decided to take, and we will see how it goes," Minbashian said before pausing. "I think the folks who don't see it that way may just think that this is another timber grab, and maybe it could be going forward under this new administration. That's a whole new variable."

Moe K. Clark is a collaborative investigative reporter at InvestigateWest, covering Washington's criminal justice system and other topics. Her work is supported by the Murrow News Fellowship, a state-funded journalism initiative managed by Washington State University.