



## INFORMING STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE USFS RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT DEPUTY AREA

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**We are investigating communication and partnership strategies of the US Forest Service (USFS) Research and Development (R&D) deputy area, with particular focus on the Rocky Mountain Research Station (RMRS). We conducted 58 interviews with USFS personnel and R&D partners to investigate perceptions around integrating R&D science into agency operations and improving R&D relationships within the Forest Service and with external partners and policy makers. The intent of this paper is to capture interviewees' perceptions and to identify differences in perceptions among actors. Herein we summarize our key findings and recommendations from this stage of our work.**

### **Key Findings**

**There was consensus among interviewees that the role of USFS R&D is to provide scientific expertise through the development of management tools, scientific support for land management and planning, inventory and analysis, science interpretation, and innovations.** Divergent perspectives were shared as to whether R&D appropriately balances applied, practitioner-oriented research and basic, exploratory research. Some said R&D's focus is to address USFS needs, while others mentioned how external partners within the US and globally are also part of R&D's purview. Some congressional staff members were unclear about how research is being used to inform USFS forest management. R&D staff members suggested that directing more research towards National Forest System (NFS) priorities would require clearer leadership direction, adequate resources, and incentives.

**Most interviewees said that R&D generally lacks a clear strategic direction. Within RMRS, there was a lack of clarity on national priorities and specific research directions associated with those priorities.** Most RMRS interviewees said they value the autonomy to set priorities but also were unclear about how national guidance connects to research at the station or project level. We also heard that research typically occurs over longer time frames than political and management cycles; therefore, interviewees said it is not easy or desirable to link R&D to shifting national priorities. RMRS interviewees desired more coordination with the Washington Office R&D staff to define high-priority research needs and to provide appropriate funding and incentives to meet those needs.

**National level interviewees explained that communication from research leaders about R&D's success and capacities was not effectively reaching congressional staff members.** RMRS scientists and program managers also agreed that actors in key political positions and R&D leadership are not fully aware of the station's success and capabilities. Interviewees suggested a need for more communication upward to the Washington Office and Congress.

**Other challenges include career incentives that affect R&D's capacity, trajectory, and reputation.** Some interviewees added that the current research evaluation system rewards scientific achievement, without clear incentives for internal agency partnerships. There were some discrepancies about this claim; for example, program managers said there is ample space within the evaluation system to report on partnership efforts. Alongside a decreasing budget, scientists are driven to seek funds from sources outside the agency, further causing a division between R&D and the other USFS deputy areas, interviewees explained. Challenges in part reflect internal dynamics within the agency, including tensions related to prioritizing funding among deputy areas. Some interviewees said it is problematic for R&D to operate as an independent research agency embedded within a land management organization, especially if the R&D mission is supposed to be broader than NFS. Some discussed possibly restructuring R&D as an independent research branch or the value of organizing by topical areas instead of by regions.

**Other USFS deputy areas (e.g., NFS) and partners external to the agency who interface with RMRS were generally positive about RMRS, focusing on R&D's standard of conducting independent and excellent science.** Partners internal and external to the USFS favored practitioner-oriented work but recognized scientists have little support and incentives to conduct applied research. Partners expressed that informal, ad-hoc interactions are the best practices for collaborating with RMRS. Most interviewees discussed the ongoing difficulty of limited in-person interactions following COVID-19. Success with former structured collaborative efforts (e.g., RMRS Regional Science Advisory Teams) was contingent on consistent leadership and funding for scientists.

**In general, USFS and external partners said they valued RMRS's continued investment in science communication efforts, management-oriented deliverables (e.g., Science You Can Use), dedicated RMRS involvement on student research committees and other co-developed projects, and the decision to co-locate some research scientists at Regional Offices.** To enhance relationships with RMRS, their partners encouraged: 1) Clearer direction from the agency about research priorities; 2) Informal networking opportunities, along with funding to attend professional conferences; 3) A system to help track practitioner needs and scientist capacity; 4) Recognition of the R&D mission to look beyond NFS needs; and 5) Suitable rewards or incentives for scientists to co-produce and disseminate research.

## **Recommendations**

Interviewees offered key recommendations that warrant attention going forward:

- Agency leaders should define a strategic plan to direct research priority areas and associated research needs, and clarify the scope and expectations of R&D.
- Diversify the range of R&D staff members who communicate with Congress (e.g., Station Directors, National Program Leads, Program Managers), identifying motivated communicators with strong advocacy and relationship-building skills.
- Invest in boundary-spanning or translator roles, such as science delivery specialists at the station level, who specialize in science communication with partners and can help agency leaders understand the scope and importance of research occurring in the field.
- Increase and maintain operational resources required to conduct science-based research along with appropriate incentives and recognition for scientists to address management priorities.
- Explore ways to create informal networks and connections (e.g., summits and conferences).

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## **More Information**

Find reports and other publications about this research at: <https://sites.warnercnr.colostate.edu/courtneyschultz/>  
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