

BRIEF GUIDE

# Partnership Learning Project



A REPORT FOR Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board

*In collaboration with Bonneville Environmental Foundation*



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# Why Partnerships?

Increasingly as people come together to tackle complex problems and initiate large-scale change, they seek to understand how best to structure their collective work.

## Understanding Partnership Fundamentals

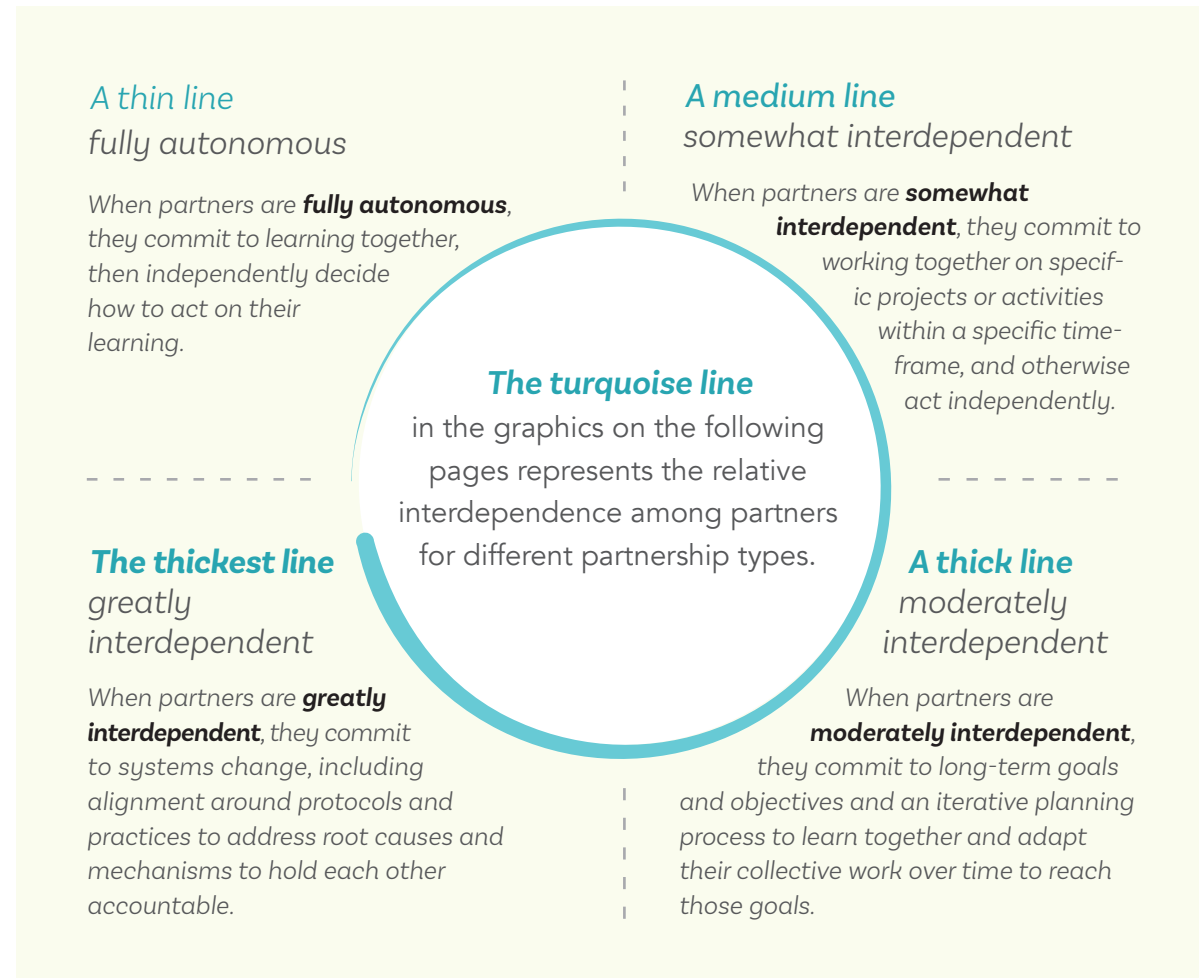
Partnerships can take on many different forms and can focus their efforts in different ways, which can make it challenging to determine how best to support success since there is not a single model to follow.

A fundamental way we can orient ourselves to the diversity of partnerships is to **understand the degree to which partners are more autonomous or more interdependent**, which speaks to:

- their level of commitment to each other,
- their ability to influence each other and
- the types of work they are well-suited to do collectively.

Describing partnership types on the basis of the interdependence between partners has a long history in the Public Administration literature (Mandell and Steelman 2003; Cigler 1999).

**A Partnership** refers to two or more organizations voluntarily working together to advance goals that cannot be accomplished independently. Their strength lies in their ability to focus their partners' diverse skills, capacities, perspectives and relationships to address shared interests.



Mandell, M.P. and T.A. Steelman. 2003. Understanding what can be accomplished through inter-organizational innovations: The importance of typologies, context and management strategies. Public Management Review 5 (2): 197-224.

Cigler, B. A. 1999. Pre-conditions for the emergence of multi-community collaborative organizations. Policy Studies Review 16 (1): 86-102.





Siuslaw Coho Partnership - Partners gather on haich ikt'at'tuu in preparation for implementing a large-scale restoration project.

PHOTO / ELIZABETH GOWARD

## A Deeper Understanding of Partnership Resilience and Performance

The framework presented on the following pages was developed from a seven-year study called The Partnership Learning Project involving 24 restoration-focused partnerships in Oregon, sponsored by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board to inform their partnership-focused investments. This study used qualitative, inductive analysis of survey and focus group data to develop a 'grounded theory' (Charmaz 2006) describing partnership function, resilience and performance.

In this framework, **the partnership types are oriented in a circular continuum to denote that there is no end-point or preferred type.** Each type has its own value proposition with different costs, benefits and relevance to what partners seek to accomplish together. The names of the different types denote the focus of a partnership's work - learning, projects, planning or systems change - which each require a different level of interdependence among partners. Individual partners may still engage in all of these categories of work, even if this is not the focus of the partnership.

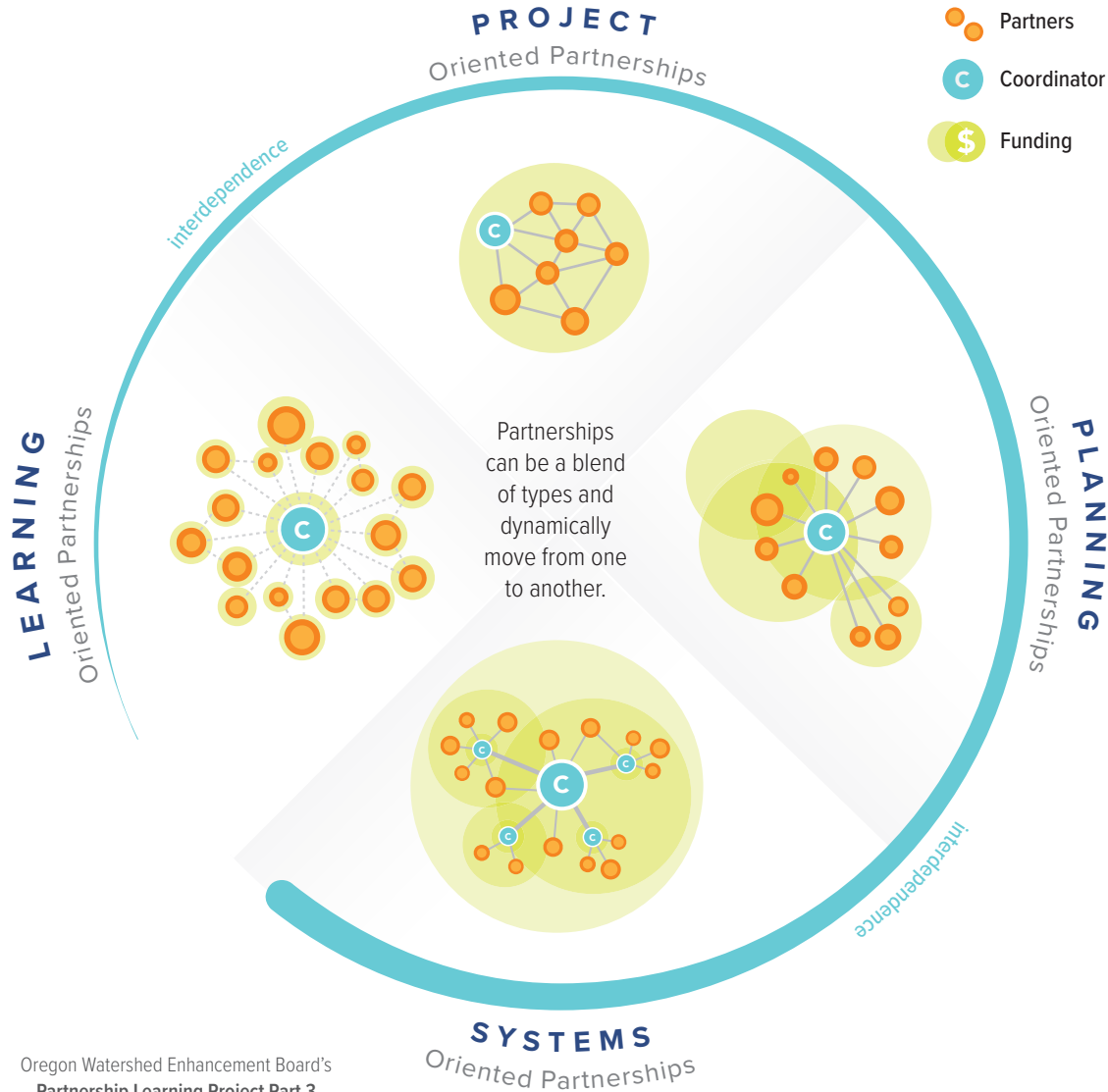
Charmaz, K. 2006. Constructing Grounded Theory. Sage: London.

In practice, partnerships can function as a blend of different types and move dynamically from one type to another in response to internal and external changes. **When partnership performance is low, it might be more difficult to determine the partnership type as the level of interdependence may be in flux.** The categories of performance in this framework can help partnerships identify areas of performance they might want to focus on to work toward their ideal partnership type.

*Resilience refers to the ability of a partnership to maintain its focus and integrity even as it might experience stressors that cause it to shift in structure or function to a different partnership type.*

## Reflection on Partnership Types

- Which partnership type (or types) best describes how your partnership functions now?
- How has your partnership evolved over time?
- Are there ways you would like to shift or evolve? What would it take to get there?



# Partnership Types

\$ Funding for Coordination    🔗 Interdependence among partners

## Learning-Oriented

Partners are **fully autonomous** with **little interdependence**.

Partners come together for learning to tackle shared questions to improve strategies, practices or policies. Partners independently act on learning. A coordinator serves as convener.



## Project-Oriented

Partners are **mostly autonomous** with **some interdependence**.

Partners go through an initial period of collaborative planning and commit to a set of shared projects or actions. Their main focus is coordinating implementation, often with each partner leading their own projects. After projects are complete, the partnership may dissolve or reorganize around a new focus. A coordinator serves as a project manager, a role which may be rotated among partners.



## Planning-Oriented

Partners are **moderately interdependent**.

Partners engage in iterative cycles of collaborative long-term planning and work together to implement shared priorities. Individual partner organizations may have to shift how they operate to align with the partnership overall. A coordinator serves as a facilitator, planning coach and project manager, a role which is usually held by a partner organization who may also contract with an independent facilitator.



## Systems-Oriented

Partners are **greatly interdependent**.

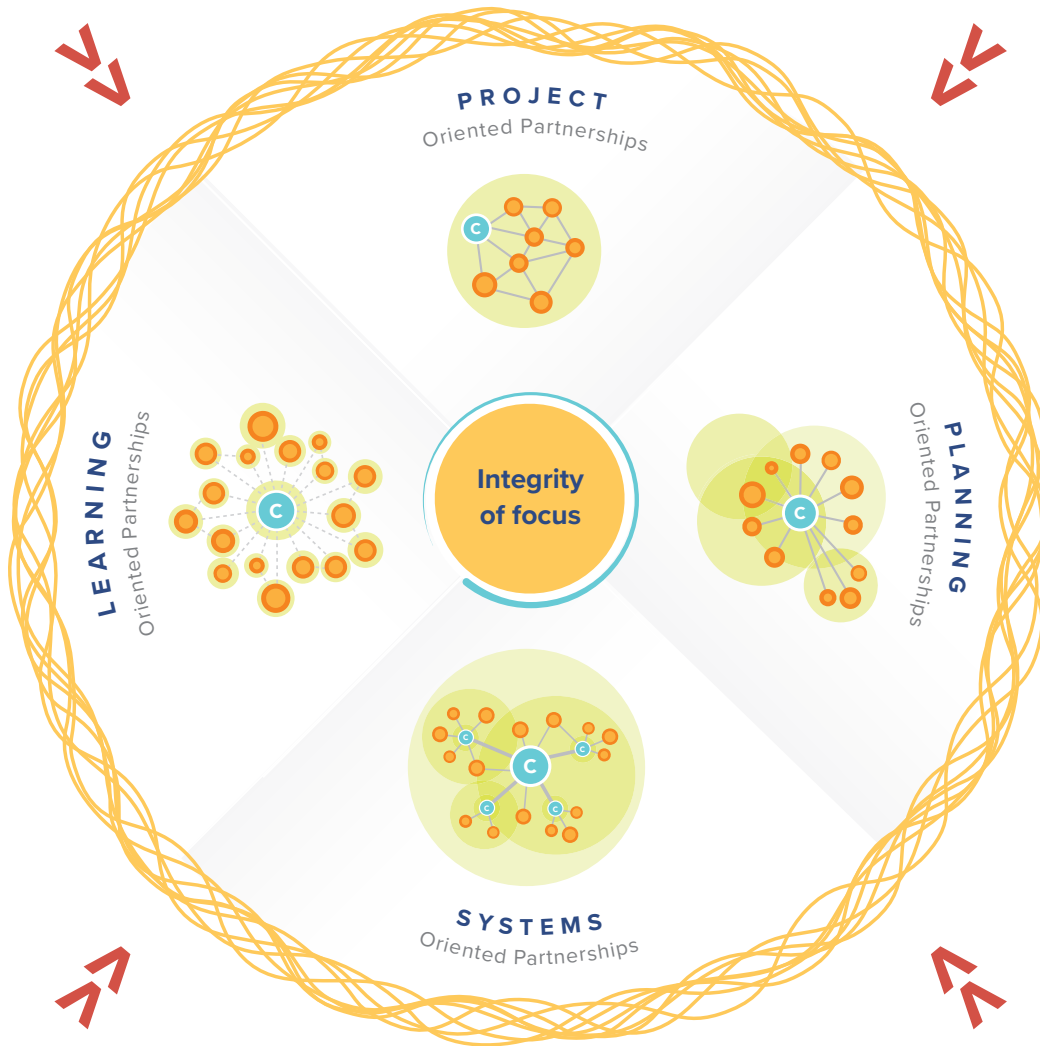
Partners engage in iterative cycles of collaborative long-term planning and establish shared standards, practices and systems to hold each other accountable to systems change. They work through differences, achieve alignment and coordinate for implementation. A coordinator serves as collaborative leader, facilitator and project manager, a role which may be held by a partner or host organization who may also contract with independent facilitators.



As partnerships experience stressors, they may change from one partnership type to another while maintaining their focus and core members - or they may dissolve, merge with another partnership or shift in purpose, scope and structure to form a new partnership.

**Examples of stressors:**

- >> Loss of a coordinator and/or key leaders
- >> Catastrophic events like fire or drought
- >> Loss or gain of substantial funding
- >> Inaccurate assumptions in the theory of change
- >> Strong critiques and/or opposition



Partners
  Coordinator
  Funding

## THREADS OF Partnership Resilience

**Resilience** refers to the ability to withstand changes and stressors and still maintain the integrity of a partnership.

The following threads, or elements, contribute to a partnership's resilience with multiple threads reinforcing each other.

- **Camaraderie**  
Partners like each other and pitch in to help.
- **Success**  
Success creates more opportunities for success.
- **Formalized commitments**  
Partners document agreements and plans.
- **Consistent funding**  
Partnership coordination is consistently funded.
- **Organizational anchors**  
Fiscally strong partner organizations add stability and capacity.
- **Shared leadership**  
Leadership is shared among partners, both structurally and in the culture of how partners work together.
- **Openness**  
Leaders and partners are open to learning and change.
- **External relationships**  
Partners connect with individuals and organizations who can be a source for new ideas and resources.

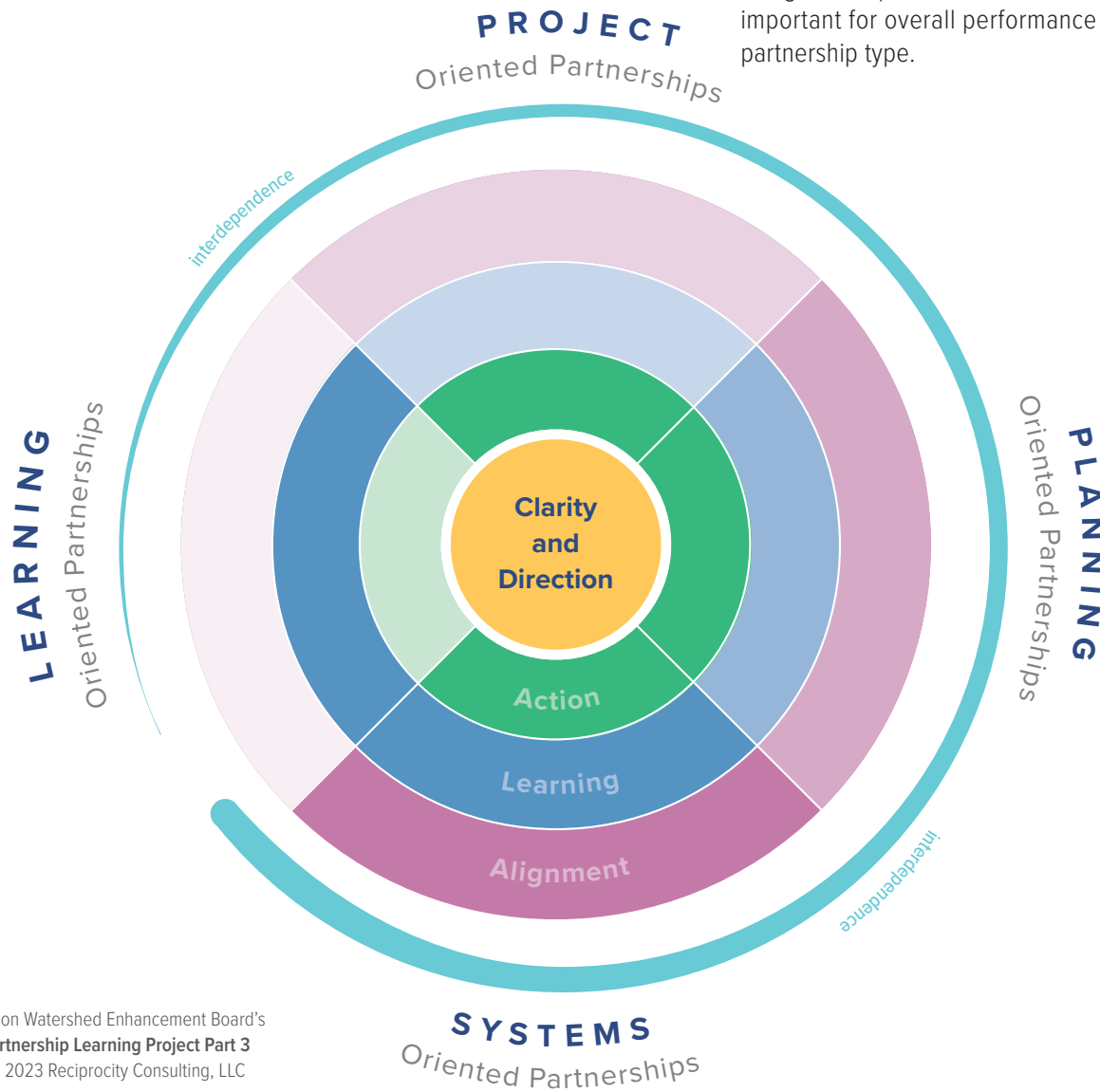
### Reflection on Partnership Resilience

- Which elements of resilience are strong in your partnership?
- Which could you strengthen?

**Performance** refers to the ability of a partnership to achieve their goals and make an impact.

LOW HIGH

**High performance** looks different for different partnership types. Greater color intensity denotes categories of performance that are highly important for overall performance for each partnership type.



Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board's  
Partnership Learning Project Part 3  
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## UNDERSTANDING High-Performing Partnerships

The following categories of performance were inductively developed from the data.

- **Clarity and Direction**
  - Leadership, dedicated partners, and funding
  - Clear purpose and scope
  - Clear roles and decision-making
  - Effective communication and coordination
- **Action**
  - Strategic plan with prioritized actions
  - Well-executed actions
  - Ability to track progress and make improvements
- **Learning**
  - Trust to work through hard questions
  - Incorporation of new learning and latest science
  - Dissemination of learning
- **Alignment**
  - Standardized practices and norms
  - Systems for feedback and accountability
  - Ability to tell the story of learning and impact

**Clarity and Direction** are important for all partnership types to perform well, while other categories may be more or less important for overall performance depending on the partnership type. Partnerships can be a blend of different types and dynamically move from one to another.

### Reflection on Partnership Types

Which aspects of partnership performance are going well? Which would you like to develop or improve?



## Examples of Higher and Lower Performance

When partnership performance is low, it can be more difficult to identify a partnership type as partnership commitments might be in flux. As partnerships transition from one type to another, partners might not have clarity about their roles, commitments to each other or changes to the partnership's focus and vision. **The following examples were created by merging descriptions from various partnerships as they reflected on high and low performance over their history.**

PARTNERSHIP TYPE	HIGHER PERFORMANCE	LOWER PERFORMANCE
<b>Learning-oriented partnership</b>	Partners identify questions that are highly interesting and relevant. They get creative with ways to engage, document their learning and disseminate it. Partners eagerly act on learning, individually or in groups. People have such a positive experience that participation and engagement stay consistently high.	Partners come together out of a sense of shared interest and curiosity about what others are doing. Discussions cover many topics broadly, over time devolving to mostly updates and announcements. Gradually partners prioritize other activities and attendance declines. Partners who do attend feel disappointed and unsure how to proceed.
<b>Project-oriented partnership</b>	Partners agree on a list of prioritized projects that are funded with clearly described roles and responsibilities. Trust is high. Partners come together regularly to share updates and talk through challenges, then do most of their work independently or in well-coordinated teams. Communications are efficient, people follow-through on their commitments and most of their time is dedicated to projects on the ground.	Partners agree on a list of prioritized projects and funding is secured from different sources. Projects are funded based on the criteria of different funders, not the partnership's prioritization. Trust is moderately high although fragile. With implementation, some partner roles are overlapping, and the overall vision is unclear. The partnership coordinator leaves for a better career opportunity, and partners are left implementing projects with limited coordination.
<b>Planning-oriented partnership</b>	Partners are clearly committed to long-term goals and objectives and have dedicated funding for implementation. Partners come together annually to reflect on progress, document their learning and adjust their plans for future years. They dedicate significant time to building relationships and understanding among partners and funders. They collaboratively develop tools, such as project trackers, outreach strategies, websites, monitoring databases and story maps, to support long-term coordination. Morale and performance remain high, and funders renew their investments.	Partners commit considerable time into developing long-term planning documents. However, with limited funding and lack of alignment on fundraising strategies, many partners stop participating. A few core partners continue looking for funding, but after some time, the plan becomes outdated. Core partners work to find an updated focus and fundraising strategy that motivates people to re-engage.
<b>Systems-oriented partnerships</b>	A very high level of trust has been developed as partners ask each other challenging questions about how their system works and how best to prioritize their resources. They align on 'best practices' and conduct training and quality control to hold each other accountable. Legislators and funders see results and dedicate significant resources over a long time horizon. Partners invest in annual learning summits and a monitoring and adaptive management program.	Partners have a high level of commitment and trust. Funding is available for the first few years to develop a long-term plan and internal systems for governance and accountability, but then funding lags. Annual meetings continue and are valued for networking and capacity building, but it is unclear where the partnership should focus its work.





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Willamette Mainstem Anchor Habitat Working Group.  
Early winter weather adds frost to the project at Green Island.

**BACK COVER** STEVE SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY  
Willamette Mainstem Anchor Habitat Working Group.  
An aerial view of the FIP III project at Green Island.

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