

Reflections from Mexican-American Owned Restoration and Wildland Fire Business Leaders

BEF's Julia Jaquery and Jean-Paul Zagarola sat down with Oregon-based restoration and wildland fire contractors Rosario Franco and Leo Rocha to talk about how they see the workforce evolving, and how this field can better honor and support the contributions of the Mexican and Mexican-American community. This interview was conducted as a part of the Oregon Fire Resilience Network.

JULIA JAQUERY: Can you start by telling us what kind of work you do, and what drew you to it?

LEO ROCHA: I started in forestry right out of high school, planting and doing pre-commercial thinning. A lot of the work in the forestry world dwindled in the early 2000's because of changes in the industry. But, at that time, restoration work was starting to take off in the Portland area. The same set of skills

were needed, so it seemed like a very good opportunity to transition. I spent maybe six years doing restoration work with crews in the Portland area.

The company that I used to work with, which was owned by Rosario's dad, was involved in forestry, restoration, and wildland firefighting. I had a knack for wildland firefighting so I ended up going in that direction and eventually took over that side of the company starting in 2007.

ROSARIO FRANCO: I also started in the mid 90's doing reforestation with my dad, then I started running reforestation crews in early 2000, and after that I moved into restoration. I still do some fire fighting but now my work is mostly

focused on restoration. Leo and I still work together on all kinds of jobs.

JJ: Rosario, your father had a long career in reforestation. Can you talk about the history that brought your family to this field? And what do you think about multigenerational efforts to steward the landscape?

RF: My grandpa was a part of the Bracero program in the early 1960's, where he came to the U.S. and picked fruit, and I think he did a little bit of reforestation too. In the mid 70s, my dad came to Oregon to do reforestation, and he opened his business in 1986. I came here in 1990 and started to really get involved in the work in the late 90's. My brothers and I all got into this field, and



Crew gathers at the Mitting Site Planting in the Willamette Valley. Photo Credit: Rosario Franco

now our kids, the fourth generation, are getting involved too.

JJ: How do you see climate change impacting your work?

RF: Climate change has made some things more challenging. Recently we've been doing more fuel reduction and fire prevention. We've been moving toward planting some species that can handle drier conditions better. It's definitely impacting our work; the overall kind of work we do hasn't changed, but the ways we do it have.

LR: In wildland firefighting, climate change is having a huge effect. Climate change is taking place regardless of the reasons behind it, and wildland fires are one of the primary visual side effects of it. We have massive fires nowadays that we didn't see 20 years ago. The severity is caused by different weather patterns that occur not just year by year, but over decades of drought.

Our role in it is different from most industries; if you talk to automakers or other big companies, they're thinking about how to reduce their carbon footprint and for us, it's more about how we address the effects of climate change, in this case wildland fire. There has been a massive increase in the need for personnel to fight fires. There's been quite a bit of federal funding allocated to forest

fire prevention, and it's taken a while for that to translate to work on the ground. Agencies are utilizing wildland fire crews not only to fight fires but also to work on fuel reduction projects and wildfire preparedness. We're starting to tap into those other resources to do preventive work and hopefully minimize the severity and size of those fires when they do occur.

JJ: What is the background of the folks on your crews? Do you find there are many Latino people working in this field?

LR: We have a mix of people with different backgrounds who work with us but the vast majority of them are Mexican or Mexican-American. I feel fortunate in the sense that I'm able to see different sides of the stories out there nowadays. When it comes to the labor force for the work that we do, I think about what the kids in my life want to do when they grow up. They want to be astronauts, they want to be firefighters, they want to be policemen. As a parent, or as the adult in the room, you envision them doing something great, changing the world. When I encourage my kids to go to school, it's not so that they can join a reforestation crew. That kind of thinking creates a big void in our industry.

When you're an immigrant, the challenges are: how do you survive here? How do you put food on the table? In

that mindset, all you're looking for is an opportunity to earn a living for your family. There is a major unemployment issue south of our border. The job opportunities are very limited throughout Latin America; therefore, there is a workforce there that would love to have the opportunity to work on the projects that we do. The fact that there is a constant labor shortage locally to fill the labor intensive job openings that come up in our industry gives the opportunity for a perfect match — immigrants looking for work and work that we have that needs to be done. For us to be able to build on the needs of the labor force, taking those two realities into account, lead to what we have today. The reforestation and restoration crews are primarily made up of Mexican and Mexican-American employees. It is a good job to have. It provides for families.

RF: I'd like to add to what Leo was saying about us growing and our goals. When we started out, we were hungry to work. Our kids have more opportunities, they have more freedom to choose what they want to do. I'm bringing people from Mexico here on H2B visas and they see it as a big opportunity to make a better life for their families. This year, we were able to bring on a crew of women with the H2B visa program, and they've been doing really well. I'm focusing on bringing on single moms because in Mexico it is very difficult for them



The Franco Restoration Crew installs cuttings at a restoration site. Photo Credit: Rosario Franco

to make a living. It's a good chance to help families and also to teach them the importance of taking care of our nature, our forests.

LR: Regardless of where you're at, you want your kids to be a step ahead of you. I've always felt the road that I've taken has only been a footstep for them to start on. I remember as a child, my dad was a planter on a reforestation crew. When I struggled to get out of bed to go to school, he would say, "you need to go to school because you're not going to be a planter like me, you're going to be a foreman." We always want our kids to take the next step. I think Rosario is a good testament to that. He's trying to get his kids to take over his business and continue the legacy that started with his dad. I would love to see my daughters or my son involved in the work that I've done. But, I picture them in the role of a project manager, dreaming up and implementing the big ideas.

JJ: Do you find that there are a lot of opportunities for the Mexican and Mexican-American community to grow in this field?

LR: I think so, and we're examples of that. For us, having family members that have been engaged in this type of work for generations makes it a known path that is easy for us to follow. I also understand that if somebody doesn't

know about the work that we do, it's more difficult for them to get into it, or even know which doors to knock on. I believe that there are opportunities not only to engage in the work but also to grow within it. Rosario has achieved great things from where he started to where he's at now.

As Rosario mentioned, it's not only about the economic incentive these jobs provide for immigrant workers, but also the knowledge that is taken back with them. We grew up in a semi-arid area that doesn't get a lot of rain. Yet historically, the main industry there was agriculture, specifically growing corn, squash and beans. Despite having very limited rainfall, we didn't have irrigation or water sources other than the rain. Most, if not all of the parcels that were used to grow food were on steep ground. One of the things that I notice now when I go back is that there weren't efforts made to prevent erosion. And so nowadays, after about a century, the topsoil is probably an inch or two thick. When we see all the efforts here to avoid soil loss, it's amazing. It's a lot to digest for someone that has depended on agriculture, and yet, totally missed that very important side of it.

JJ: Do you think that there's a lot of opportunity to expand these programs back home?

LR: There is definitely a need. I think the biggest obstacle to it is the funding. When I go back to communities in central Mexico, to me, the financial needs seem grave in every direction that you look. And then even when funding does come around, there's a lot of corruption so very little of the money actually gets to the program. So I think that the need is there, but the financial aspect of it is a big challenge.

RF: I think one of the hardest parts has to do with how the money flows between the U.S. and Mexico. Because of bureaucratic processes, it can be really hard to apply money that comes from the U.S. to the work that needs to happen in Mexico. I was part of a project between the Rio Laja Basin in Mexico and the Willamette Valley in Oregon to facilitate information exchange about restoration between the two places. Because of these rules, regulations and practices between the U.S. and Mexico, very little money is actually getting to the community in Laja.

Growing up in my community, we didn't get any education about nature and things like that. I've been talking about it with people in my town about funding a program in our schools to teach the kids about the work we do here. I think it's important because I bet those kids are thinking about how they're going to come to the United States, so if we start



The crew works on underplanting a site in the Willamette Valley. Photo Credit: J.P. Zagarola

educating them, it could give them some ideas. In Mexico there's less attention paid to climate change, so if we start having these conversations, we can make a big difference. In the program we're doing with Laja we're involved with five schools in Mexico and five schools here in Oregon where we share information with the kids about our work. My goal is that in the future, I can get the schools from my town involved in this too.

JJ: It's important to introduce that early and get people thinking about connecting to their landscape and how it impacts all elements of their life. I'm curious if there's a region or a watershed that you both feel the most connected to?

RF: We've been working mostly in the Willamette, that's our big connection.

LR: I come from a very arid place. It comes alive in the rainy season, and then the rest of the year it's pretty much a desert. Because of that lack of green in our environment, water and green are symbols of life. It's a phrase that we use in Spanish: "aquí hay vida." I remember fighting fires early in my career in Montana where the scenery is amazing. When you're in the mountains it's green as far as the eye can see — endless forests, and the landscape is dotted with blue. There are lakes and ponds all over

the place. I remember being very young seeing this and feeling really fortunate to have those landscapes.

Another place that did that for me was New Mexico. I had driven through the southwest various times and all I ever saw was desert on both sides of the highway. But in 2001 I went to fight a fire in the mountains of New Mexico and saw an entire forest that I had no idea existed. An image that stuck with me was seeing trees popping out of the rocks. There's not a lot of topsoil, there's not a lot of water, yet this forest somehow thrives on top of rocks. At that moment I realized fighting fire is very important. If a fire raced through the forest I don't even know how long it would take for another seed to grow into a tree the size of the ones I was seeing. Different situations like that made me realize that containing wildland fires was very important.

Here in Oregon in 2020 the Riverside and Lions Head Fires exploded overnight. There's a park near me in Mill City, that was a beautiful place with old timber and a river going through it. I saw the pictures of it after the fire, and realized that we will never see that scenery again in our lifetime.

JJ: Do you ever find hope walking through burned forest in the spring?

LR: I always tell myself that it's a natural phenomenon. Fires have come through to clear out old forest and bring new life. That brings a little bit of relief to my mind. But it's still sad to see them go.

RF: Those fires destroyed the town of Detroit, Oregon, and initially, I didn't want to go back to look at it after it. But I've been doing a lot of replanting for fire recovery and it's amazing how much germination we've seen after the fire. Unfortunately, we are not prepared for those big events. I think one of the problems is that there are so many weeds to control. After the fire, the first thing that explodes are the weeds. In fire recovery we always think about replanting, but it's really easy to do weed control immediately after a fire, and it gets much more difficult after a couple of years if you don't stay on top of it. We plant so that these forests will be healthy for our future generations, our grandkids and great grandkids and so on.

JJ: What are your perspectives on how the Mexican community is impacted by wildfire?

LR: Because we're the firefighters, we always experience more of those effects than the rest of the community. But one of the concerns is the loss of time with family as a firefighter, whether you're Mexican-American, a Mexican immigrant or an American fighting fires, there's a lot of time given to the profession. Anyone that is a wildland firefighter gives up their summer, whether there are fires or not. Last year we ran crews nonstop from mid June until mid November. Firefighters miss a lot with their families, especially in the summertime.

RF: That's one of the things I like about doing restoration in the Willamette Valley. I can come home to my family every day and be with them on the weekend. I enjoy fighting fires but I don't like to be away from home for so much time. Especially now that I have a little one, it's really important to spend time with her.

JPZ: Do you see a set of conditions or something that could occur where a firefighter doesn't necessarily have to sacrifice their family time to be a career firefighter?



Rosario instructs a crew member at a planting site in the South Santiam. Photo Credit: Hannah Buehler

LR: Unfortunately, I have come to accept that it's part of the profession. One of the main reasons for that is the unknown location of wildland fires. Most of the time they're out there in the middle of nowhere. Commuting back and forth between a fire assignment and home is just not practical. Even from fire camp it's still a good one to two hour drive to the fire itself. Under those circumstances, part of the job is being away from home for extended periods of time, and I really don't see a way around that.

JJ: What do you think could be done to better recognize or support the role that you and the Mexican community are playing in fire and restoration work?

LR: I think people can start by recognizing the difficulty of the job. There have been points in our history when the sentiments towards immigrants were really negative. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, there was a lot of rhetoric about immigrants taking American jobs. At that time I was harvesting blueberries here in the valley, and they would announce on the radio that they would be at the fields at five in the morning and there would be a limited number of openings. We'd go out there at three, four in the morning to get in line to be one of the first ones because there were only 100 or 200 openings. This job and others like it are very difficult; they're physically demanding, the environment that they're done in is often harsh. Yet folks are doing them with pride, and are very happy to do them. I think we should be happy that there are people out there that are willing to do these hard jobs, whether they're Mexican or American.

In wildland firefighting, when training new firefighters, I let them know right off the bat that this is not easy work. You have to wake up at five every morning and hike up and down hills for 12-16 hours, don't even factor in what you're going to be doing for those hours. I would love it if more people recognized that it's hard work and people sacrifice a lot to do it. Like I said earlier, there's a void in the labor force for that type of work, but there's this entire sector of our community that needs and is willing to do it, and we have work for those folks to do. I think that's a win-win situation for both sides.



Leonel Rocha was born in a rural community in Western Mexico in the early 80's and migrated to the U.S. when he was 9 years old. During the summer school breaks he would join his father in the fields in the Willamette valley harvesting cherries, blueberries, strawberries, pears, and other fruits. When he left school, he started working in reforestation, wildland firefighting, and land restoration jobs. By mid 2000 he shifted his focus away from reforestation and restoration work to focus specifically in the management and coordination of wildland firefighting resources. with a mission to expand on its impact on wildland firefighting efforts, In 2022 he started his business (Alpine Services LLC) which focuses in consulting new wildland firefighting ventures, training wildland firefighting personnel, and managing national wildland land firefighting crews.



Rosario Franco is R. Franco Reforestation's president and founder. Born in a small rural village in Western Mexico, he migrated to the United States when he was 12 years old. In 2006 Rosario established R. Franco Restoration, Inc., with a primary focus on habitat restoration and green space preservation. He has been able to establish long standing relationships with multiple agencies, municipalities, non-profits, and watersheds throughout the Willamette Valley, and continuously advocates for and works toward healthy greenspaces, youth education, and providing opportunities for underserved communities.



The Franco Restoration Crew works to reforest a site. Photo Credit: Rosario Franco