

Public Participation Strategy

Introduction:

The Carson National Forest is revising its Land and Resource Management Plan in accordance with the 2012 Planning Rule. In revising its forest plan the Carson National Forest is committed to increased public participation and collaboration throughout the planning process. Public participation processes and opportunities should be a transparent and should:

- Indicate the types of feedback required from the public, when it is required, and clearly communicate how it will be used.
- Be accessible to interested and potentially affected parties and be structured to engage people with diverse skills sets and knowledge who can best inform the planning process.
- Be structured to elicit specific feedback and data at designated points in the plan revision process.
- Promote problem solving and creative solutions as well as constructive dialogue, debate, and deliberation.
- Be efficient and practical for forest service staff and the public.

Purpose:

This strategy is intended to serve as a guide to identify the best opportunities and uses of public engagement to serve the collective needs of the Forest Service and the public during the plan revision process. Specific opportunities to involve, inform, consult and collaborate with the public will be identified and carried out as necessary throughout the entire planning process.

Why Public Participation?

The intent of meaningful and proactive public participation throughout the entire planning process is to:

- Build and maintain working relationships, trust, capacity, and commitment to the plan.
- Allow for shared learning and understanding between and among the Forest Service and public participants.
- Promote a common understanding of the context for planning and the planning process.
- Encourage public feedback through the planning process.
- Support development of plans through an inclusive, transparent process that increases the integrity.

How do we Engage Public Participation?

The extent of public participation varies by stage of planning and unit-specific conditions as well as the scope and scale of the planning effort. In taking into consideration cost, time, and available staffing, the responsible official (Forest Supervisor) should strive to find the right balance of engaging the public and developing a planning process that is timely and within the fiscal capability of the local unit. Public engagement and participation methods utilized throughout the planning process should include a combination of the following tools: informing, consulting, involving, and utilizing collaboration processes.

Informing – Sufficient objective information provided to interested parties to understand intended actions, processes, and preliminary issues. Potential tools: fact sheet, newsletter, mailing, news release, website and public meetings.

Consulting – Interested parties are solicited for input about suggestions, issues, and concerns while continuing to be informed and updated. Potential tools: open house, public meetings, notice and comment, news release, website, survey.

Involving – Work closely with interested parties to address concerns and suggestions and provide feedback about how input is being considered. Potential tools: workshops, partnerships, and public meetings.

Collaborating – Directly engage parties to exchange information and work together on one or more issues at a given stage in the process. Identify where there is agreement and disagreement. Potential tools: Facilitated or mediated group discussion, Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) groups, non-FACA groups and partnerships.

Collaboration during the Planning Process:

Collaboration is one of several public involvement tools utilized during the planning process. It is generally a more deliberate and intensive level of public participation. The use of the collaboration process should be considered at critical points in the planning process or for issues that may be controversial.

Collaboration methods should be within the capacity and fiscal capability of the planning unit and the public. The use of external partners to lead collaborative groups will be considered by the Forest Service for formal collaborative processes. The development of a framework or set of ground rules will be utilized to help sustain collaborative efforts. Such a framework should be developed collaboratively and include:

- A statement of the issue at hand;
- Defined collaborative parameters in keeping with FACA and responsible official's legal responsibilities;
- A description of how often the parties will meet;

- A description of how the parties will communicate with each other outside of meetings; and
- Mutually agreed upon ground rules including common goals, shared values, realistic expectations, a decision making process, and clear roles and responsibilities.

In designing a collaborative planning process, the forest should:

- Explore potential interested and affected parties with whom the agency could collaborate.
- Determine the extent to which they are willing to involve different parties during each phase of the planning process, and avoid creating expectations that cannot be fulfilled.
- Where another form of public participation is more appropriate, determine whether and how to engage parties at the “inform,” “consult,” or “involve” levels of engagement.

Decision – making:

While the Forest Service is committed to public participation and encourages collaboration, the responsible official is accountable for all formal land management planning decisions affecting NFS lands (16 U.S.C. 1604, 36 CFR part 219) and may not relinquish that responsibility. The responsible official may consider the common ground agreements and recommendations of relevant collaborators but need not accept the recommendations in making a decision.

Stakeholder Interest Groups

Throughout the planning process the Forest Service will strive to identify and engage a diverse set of stakeholders who have an interest in or who are affected by the management of the Carson National Forest. Outreach should be appropriate for target populations and should include:

- Interested individuals and entities at the local, regional and national level.
- Youth, low-income and minority populations.
- Private landowners adjacent to or who are affected by management actions.
- Federal agencies, states, counties, and local governments as well as relevant state agencies.
- Interested or affected federally recognized tribes.

When should we Engage Public Participation?

The 2012 Planning Rule requires public participation at specific stages in the planning process.

- During the assessment process.
- When developing a plan proposal.

- When providing an opportunity to comment on a draft proposal and accompanying NEPA documents.
- At the beginning of the objection period for a new plan, amendment, or revision.
- To approve the final plan.
- In reviewing the results of monitoring information.

Assessment Phase - The intent of public participation in the assessment phase is to gather as much relevant information as possible to inform the plan development process. Participation offers opportunities to share concerns about existing conditions and trends and perceptions of risks to social, economic, and ecological systems. Public participation in the assessment phase also supports the development of relationships with and among stakeholders and can begin to develop a joint understanding of current conditions and available data, and it offers an opportunity for feedback to support a strategic, efficient planning process.

Plan Revision Phase - The intent of public participation during plan development, revision, or amendment is to develop and identify zones of agreement relevant to plan components, where possible, acquire assistance in designing effective plan components, and obtain other feedback as needed. Topics that may be included in public participation include potential desired conditions, objectives, other plan components, and other plan content.

Monitoring Phase - The intent of public participation in this phase is to develop effective questions and indicators and the appropriate scale for each, identify key assumptions, identify where the monitoring program could build from existing efforts, identify where multi-party monitoring is possible or desired, and establish public support for monitoring questions and indicators. For broader-scale monitoring, public participation can support the development of strategies that are best addressed at a larger geographic scale. Consider growing the capacity of participants and partners to contribute to the monitoring program in meaningful ways, including opportunities for multi-party monitoring.

Public Participation and Outreach Opportunities

- During the Assessment Phase: Conduct public listening sessions and workshops to learn how and when the public wishes to engage and participate in the planning process. This will occur prior to the start of the assessment process.
- Provide opportunities for the public and interested stakeholders to provide local or scientific knowledge prior to the start of the assessment, through public meetings, email, mail, and the forests website.
- At start of phase utilize website and public forums to engage and inform interested and affected local communities, landowners, local and county governments, youths and minorities about the planning processes and solicit feedback on the local knowledge of

the forest landscape including how and to what extent the public uses and/or is affected by the Carson NF.

- Engage people with diverse skill sets and knowledge for feedback on the development of key ecosystem characteristics, potential list of species of conservation concern, and when planning unit contributions to social economic sustainability have been identified. The draft assessment will be made available to the public for comment and feedback through the forests website.
- Initiate tribal consultation with interested and affected tribes early and throughout the planning process.
- As the preliminary need for change is developed.

During the Development of Plan Proposal:

- Utilizing the information learned from the listening sessions gathered with collaborative partners and stakeholders during the assessment phase, potential individual or collective opportunities for public engagement and participation could include: To provide feedback on the best available scientific information used in plan development.
- To provide input and feedback on plan components and other plan content.
- To provide input and feedback on wilderness inventories.
- To provide input or feedback on species of conservation concern.
- Provide input or feedback on suitability of lands.
- To suggest or provide feedback on the planning unit's distinctive roles and contributions.
- Provide a 90 day comment period upon completion of draft proposed plan and draft Environmental impact statement (EIS).

Provide an objection period upon notification of the completion of the final plan and final EIS.

During development and implementation of the monitoring program, including:

To develop the plan monitoring program - This occurs during plan development. Opportunities may invite feedback on questions and indicators and may request design strategies that allow for multi-party monitoring or build on existing data sets.

In reviewing the results of monitoring information - The monitoring evaluation report must be made available. Public participation could be invited to:

- Help develop the report.
- Gather feedback on the monitoring evaluation results.
- Support the process of adaptive management.

Notification of Public Participation

- The public will be notified formally at the start of of the assessment, plan revision and EIS development, the objection period by a Federal Register Notice and publication in the Newspaper.
- The public will be notified of all opportunities to provide input, feedback or comment and of all public meetings by announcement in the newspaper, the forest’s website, and by email or mail of those publics who have provided same.

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotope, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA’s TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint_filing_cust.html and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: program.intake@usda.gov.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender.