

Land Management Planning 101

A white paper prepared by Forest Serviceⁱ

Every Forest Service Unit Must Maintain a Plan

Every national forest or grassland managed by the Forest Service has a land management plan prepared consistent with the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 (16 U.S.C. 1604) and other laws. The NFMA requires that these plans be amended as necessary and revised no later than every 15 years. The process for the development and revision of the plans, along with prescribed content, is outlined in the planning regulations, or planning rule.

Currently the Agency is using the 2000 rule provisions to develop, amend, or revise plans until the U.S. Department of Agriculture approves a new planning rule. However, the 2000 rule contains transition provisions that permit the use of the 1982 rule provisions. No national forest or grassland has ever used the 2000 rule to amend or revise a plan because of its complexity. Therefore, the Agency's expectation, based upon its experience with the 2000 rule, is that national forests and grasslands will use the 1982 rule provisions, as permitted by the transition provisions of the 2000 rule, to revise and amend plans until a new planning rule is approved. The 1982 rule and the 2000 rule is available online at http://www.fs.fed.us/emc/nfma/2000_planning_rule.html.

Further instructions about planning are contained in the Forest Service Manual 1920 and Handbook 1909.12. Both are available online at <http://www.fs.fed.us/im/directives/>.

Every existing plan in the country was developed using the provisions of the 1982 planning rule. The procedures of the 1982 regulations (or rule) are also currently being used to revise plans. While there are 70 plans now older than 15 years, the number of plans currently being revised is dependent upon funding.

Plans Contain General Guidance

Under the 1982 rule, the regional forester approves each plan or plan revision, making the following decisions:

- Establishment of forest multiple-use goals and objectives, including desired future conditions.
- Establishment of forest-wide management requirements (standards and guidelines) for resources and activities such as vegetation management, timber, wilderness, fish and wildlife habitat, grazing, recreation, mineral exploration and development, water and soils, cultural and historic resources, research natural areas, and diversity of plant and animal communities.
- Establishment of management areas and management area direction (management area prescriptions) applying to future activities in that management area. The activities

described in a management area prescription might include motorized recreation, non-motorized recreation, ski areas, timber harvest, livestock grazing, mineral exploration and development, roads and trails, buildings, fire and fuels management, invasive species control, research activities, and protection of resources such as air, water, riparian areas, soils, wildlife habitat, species diversity, or cultural and historic resources.

- Specific limitations on timber harvest in accordance with NFMA.
- Recommendations to Congress for wilderness, or other special areas, such as wild and scenic rivers.
- Establishment of monitoring and evaluation requirements.

These plan decisions provide broad guidance for planning of specific projects and activities. The plan itself does not compel any action or authorize any use. However, the NFMA requires all projects and activities to be consistent with the plan. If a proposed project is not consistent with the plan, the project cannot proceed as proposed unless the plan is amended so that the project is consistent with the plan.

The National Environmental Policy Act and Land Management Planning

The 1982 regulations require the preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS) for all plan revisions and significant amendments. These EISs are in a general class of EISs that have sometimes been called “programmatic EISs” because they describe broad general effects and often do not contain project or activity details.

The details about project and activity effects will be analyzed and disclosed in subsequent NEPA documents developed in project planning. Some examples of possible projects and activities that may be authorized under a plan include a developed recreation construction project, an individual timber sale, a livestock grazing allotment plan, or something forest-wide, like a travel management plan or an oil and gas leasing availability decision. The subsequent NEPA document would be an EIS if there are significant effects, and if not, an environmental assessment and finding of no significant impact (EA/FONSI), or documentation that the project is within one of the categories that have previously been found to have no significant effects (categorical exclusion).

A recent California district court ruling also concluded that the planning rule itself must also be developed in conjunction with an EIS or EA/FONSI. Thus, information about some Forest Service activities will appear in three levels of environmental documentation—the planning rule document, an individual plan document, and a project or activity level document.

The Planning Process Requires Public Participation

The NFMA requires public participation in land management planning. Furthermore, the NEPA process also requires public participation. The NEPA process is outlined in regulations currently found at 40 CFR parts 1500 and 1508, and the Forest Service has supplemented these regulations at 36 CFR part 220.

Plans are prepared by an interdisciplinary team, and the public is encouraged to participate throughout the planning process. Public involvement can broaden the information base, ensure that the Forest Service understands the needs, concerns, and values of the public, inform the public of planning activities, and provide an understanding of Forest Service programs and proposed actions. Key steps in the planning process under the 1982 rule provisions include:

- An early and open process for determining the scope of issues and for identifying significant issues.
- An assessment or evaluation of the current situation.
- Development of a proposed plan.
- Public review of the proposed plan and the draft environmental impact statement.
- After release of a final EIS, either a process to allow objections (prior to a final decision), or an appeal after the decision.
- Ongoing review of monitoring information and assessments.

Plans Must Meet Certain Requirements

The NFMA and the 1982 provisions establish specific requirements that the Forest Service must meet during land management planning. The most notable requirements are to:

- Provide for multiple use and sustained yield of products and services consistent with the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act.
- Insure consideration of economic and environmental aspects of various systems of renewable resource management. The 1982 rule requires calculation of maximum supply benchmarks, and an identification of the most economic efficient ways to meet uses and values.
- Provide for diversity of plant and animal communities. The 1982 rule established an additional requirement to provide for adequate fish and wildlife habitat to maintain viable populations of existing native vertebrate species.
- Insure that timber only be harvested where protections exist for soils, watersheds, reforestation, fish and wildlife, recreation, aesthetics, and other resources. The 1982 rule requires a calculation of a long-term sustained yield level of timber harvest, the establishment of an allowable sale quantity that can be sustained, and an identification of what lands are suitable or not suitable for timber harvest.

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