

## **Draft Collaboration Approach for the Proposed Forest Service Planning Rule**

We heard loud and clear from the science forum and the regional and national roundtables that proactive, substantive dialogue and collaboration must be an integral part of the land management process. The many NFS units that are currently actively engaged in collaborative efforts, along with all of us in the Agency, know that our partners and publics have valuable ideas, knowledge, opinions and needs that inform and improve our processes and the management of our National Forests and Grasslands. The creation of the planning rule itself is actively being informed by our dialogue with the public: our efforts to ensure that the process of developing this rule is open, transparent and participatory—in keeping with the planning rule's status as one of the US Department of Agriculture's two Open Government initiatives—have again demonstrated how valuable open engagement and dialogue is, and we will take the principles we are modeling in this process and in many units across the country through to the proposed rule itself.

The proposed 2011 planning rule will require a planning process that engages the public early and often in an open, transparent, and substantive manner. The proposed rule will include direction to Forest and Grassland Supervisors that emphasizes our commitment to openness, public engagement, and collaborative principles and processes.

The process of partnering enables us all to work together more effectively in an open and transparent manner for the benefit of the resources we care for in common. By collaborating early in the planning process and reaching out to engage diverse partners and publics, we can enhance stewardship, improve land management at each unit, develop a shared understanding of existing conditions and management challenges, build an effective monitoring program, and make the NEPA process more efficient, effective and transparent. Through collaboration, the Agency hopes to develop long-lasting relationships that can support the new framework.

### **What kind of “collaboration” are we talking about?**

“Collaboration” in the context of development of plans would fall within the full spectrum of public engagement described in the Council on Environmental Quality's publication: Collaboration in NEPA - A Handbook for NEPA Practitioners (available online at [http://ceq.hss.doe.gov/ntf/Collaboration\\_in\\_NEPA\\_Oct\\_2007.pdf](http://ceq.hss.doe.gov/ntf/Collaboration_in_NEPA_Oct_2007.pdf)). This means that we will use a full suite of actions to engage the public in active and meaningful dialogue; share information and increase transparency; involve the public in a substantive way early and throughout the framework process; and actively support collaborative processes and groups. It is important to note, however, that the Forest Service retains final decision making authority and responsibility for decisions throughout the process. The Forest Service is also responsible for ensuring that local, national, and long-term needs are considered as decisions are made.

We envision collaboration, public engagement and dialogue as integral to each of the three proposed phases of the forest planning framework (Assess, Revise/Amend, Monitor). The responsible official will work jointly with interested entities, tribes, governments, and individuals, towards a common purpose by sharing knowledge, ideas, and resources.

(1) **Assess:** In the [assess phase](#), the responsible official will work with the public to review existing and predicted conditions and management needs on the ground, in the context of the broader landscape. One goal of this phase is to develop upfront collaborative relationships among the Forest Service, other government entities, tribes, private landowners, and other partners and interested parties in order to develop a shared understanding of the context for management. Therefore, the responsible official will reach out early to engage other interested federal, state and local government agencies, tribes, local landowners, citizen groups, and the public in proactive dialogue and collaboration to:

- Assess and consider existing and predicted ecological, social and economic conditions and trends relevant to a plan area and to the resiliency of the unit;
- Develop mutual understanding of the unique role and contribution of the forest or grassland in the context of the broader ecological, economic and social landscape;
- Jointly identify the need for changes to the land management plan and determine how a new plan should be proposed;
- Bring diverse parties together to forge common understanding of what is needed from the unit and from management.

(2) **Revise:** After evaluating information provided by assessments, NFS units will work with interested publics and partners and appropriate Federal agencies, States, Tribes, local governments, and other entities to assist the Agency in preparing a proposed plan [revision, or amendment](#) based on the need for change. This phase would include the creation of proposed actions and alternatives in accordance with NEPA. Responsible officials will be expected to reach out early and often to support and facilitate collaborative groups and processes, share information and engage with interested parties on the front end of the revision/amendment process, and engage the public in substantive dialogue throughout the process of developing, completing, and implementing the plan revision or amendment. In this phase, responsible officials would identify unit and management goals, objectives, and requirements, working with the public and using input provided throughout the process. We will expect responsible officials to go beyond formal notice-and-comment in order to make the process open, transparent and participatory.

(3) **Monitor:** We would expect managers to engage the public in designing and implementing programs for both unit-level and landscape scale [monitoring](#). Monitoring will be designed to detect changes on the unit and across the broader landscape and to evaluate the ability of management actions to produce desired conditions and outcomes identified in the plan. Collaborative processes could be used to: select specific outcomes or conditions to test, identify what to monitor, design the monitoring program, implement the monitoring program, evaluate the data, and determine what to feed back into the adaptive management loop envisioned in the planning framework, triggered by new information or changing conditions or needs. Unit managers will also be expected to collaborate extensively with one or more forest or grassland supervisors, regional foresters, research station directors, tribes and other government entities, private landowners, and other stakeholders to determine how monitoring on the unit can

contribute to landscape-scale monitoring programs. Data will often be collected by and always shared with partners and the public. The Forest Service will conduct periodic evaluations and share those results with partners and the public as well.

### **Is there a catch?**

We know that partnering and collaboration take time, effort, commitment, and energy to be successful over the long term, and that there are many barriers to effective collaboration. But we are committed to ensuring that responsible officials actively and substantively engage the public in each stage of the planning framework. We want each part of the framework to be open, transparent and participatory. We will ask over and over again: Are we communicating and following through? Are we keeping commitments to make collaboration work? Are we keeping issues and relationships alive as conditions and expectations change? Are we staying accountable? We think it's worth the effort and investment to share different kinds of experience, expertise, enthusiasm, and resources with partners and stakeholders in order to achieve shared goals for the landscape.