

Framework for the Planning Rule

This post will lay out the overall framework that we are considering for the structure of the rule as well as for land management planning. This new framework was designed to address key themes we heard during our collaborative efforts, as well as incorporate lessons from our history of land management and past rules. Since we intend to organize the rule around this new framework, we will really be looking for your feedback to let us know we heard you and are on the right track. Subsequent posts will share our ideas for addressing specific topics through the framework, such as the all-lands approach, public involvement, and other critical issues discussed at the roundtables.

Please take a moment to provide us with your thoughts on:

- Whether the concepts are clear.
- What you like about them.
- If there are any major gaps or flaws in the approach.

During our collaborative effort to develop a new planning rule we've heard an incredible range of opinions. Within this range, we've identified areas of consistent agreement. People agree that the planning process needs to be simple but effective. There is agreement that the planning rule should be developed to persist through changing times. We heard that the new planning rule needs to build in up-front collaboration that focuses on national forest system units (NFS units) which includes national forests, grasslands and prairies taking into consideration the landscape beyond the boundaries of the NFS unit. We also clearly heard that the new rule needs to include a strong monitoring component that improves accountability and reinforces the need to work with cooperators and partners through a mutual learning process.

We are proposing a new planning framework that is responsive to what we've heard throughout the collaborative process. The framework we are suggesting represents a shift from how planning has been viewed in the past, and from the way past rules were constructed. This new framework will provide a blueprint for the land management process, creating a structure within which land managers and partners can work together to understand what is happening on the land, revise management plans to respond to existing and predicted conditions and needs, and monitor changing conditions and the effectiveness of management actions to provide a continuous feedback loop.

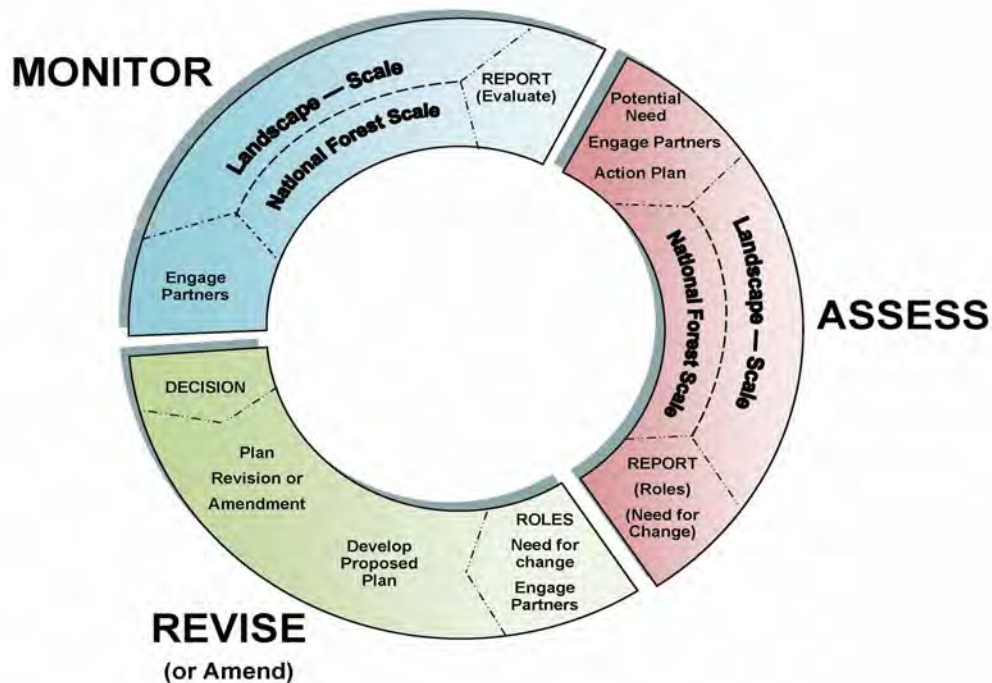
We believe the new framework will move us away from "once in a generation" planning toward a more responsive and agile process that allows the Agency to adapt management to changing conditions and improve management based on new information and monitoring. We also believe the framework will support a more integrated and holistic approach to management, recognizing the interdependence of each part of the ecosystem. This interdependence includes the communities (biotic and human) and systems (functions and values) that are part of each forest.

The Planning Framework:

The framework consists of a three-part planning cycle: 1) Assess, 2) Revise/Amend, 3) Monitor. Each responsible official would move through the planning cycle in a collaborative way, moving towards an adaptive loop that improves management and accountability, and is triggered by new information and changing conditions on the ground. Through the process, each responsible official would:

- (1) **Assess** conditions and stressors on the NFS unit and in the context of the broader landscape;
- (2) **Revise** or amend land management plans based on the need for change (identified through assessments); and
- (3) **Monitor** to detect changes on the unit and across the broader landscape and to evaluate the ability of management actions to produce desired outcomes.

Collaboration is a critical component throughout this three-part planning cycle. This framework would give our land managers guidance to engage the public and partners before, during and after plans are written.



Assess

In the assess phase, the responsible official would conduct a review of conditions on the ground and in the context of the broader landscape, using available ecological, social and economic data to the extent possible.

The purpose of assessments would be fourfold: (1) to develop upfront collaborative relationships among government entities, tribes, private landowners, and other partners and interested parties; (2) to develop an understanding of existing and predicted conditions and management needs on the ground; (3) to develop a mutual understanding of the complex issues across landscapes as well as roles and needs of various stakeholders; and (4) to enable each NFS unit to identify distinctive contributions or niches within the landscape and determine the need to change land management plans. The desired result is a shared vision of how to proceed with management actions within the broader landscape context. The scale of assessments would vary depending on the landscape and issues of concern. When critical gaps exist, the responsible official could work with partners and other interested parties to collaboratively prepare new assessments, some of which might encompass areas beyond NFS unit boundaries.

The assessment phase would build in collaboration and dialogue with partners and interested parties. This responds to stated desires for early collaboration—well before a proposed action—so that stakeholders can engage in joint fact-finding and develop a mutual understanding of the interconnections among social, economic, and ecological communities and systems.

Example 1 All- lands: We discussed the all-lands approach, which would lead to understanding each unit in the context of the broader landscape, in many of the roundtables. Building that approach into the new framework, in the assess phase, the rule could require that responsible officials review other relevant resource or land and water assessments, such as the State Forest Resource Assessments required by the 2008 Farm Bill or wildlife conservation plans.

Example 2 Water Resources and Watershed Health: We discussed understanding and protecting water and watersheds for humans and the environment at many roundtables. Building water concerns into the assess phase, the rule could require that responsible officials review what water resources are on the NFS unit and where water is flowing into and out of the unit, build understanding of what values that water is providing or supporting, and assess what positive or negative effects forest management or stressors are having on the resource.

**Please note: these examples are just snippets to spark your thinking and build understanding of how the framework would incorporate specific issue topics: later posts will focus on the major issues discussed at the roundtables.

Revise /Amend

In the revise or amend phase, the responsible official would work with government agencies, tribes and the public to use the information gathered in the assessment phase, including partnership roles and the need for change within a landscape context, to shape a proposed action that responds to the need for change on the NFS units. The responsible official would continue to work with the public through this phase, within NEPA requirements. This approach encourages

the development of a proposal that has fully engaged the public. As part of the formal revision/amendment process, the responsible official would initiate the notice to begin the NEPA process. Alternatives to the proposed action and environmental effects would be included in the NEPA document, and a decision document would approve revisions or changes to the plan. Plans would continue to include components required by NFMA, as well as requirements identified in the new planning rule.

The revise/amend component of the framework responds to the public desire to help develop proposals for land management plans. Additionally, this approach could make the NEPA process more efficient by using information developed during the upfront collaborative assessment.

Example 1 All-lands: Building on what was learned about habitat conditions and trends in the assess phase, land management plans could include desired conditions and objectives for how management actions on the NFS unit could contribute to reconnecting corridors for wide ranging species.

Example 2: Water Resources and Watershed Health: Building on what was learned in the assess phase about the conditions and trends for water, land management plans could include desired conditions and objectives for watershed health and public water supplies. A specific example of this might be riparian area restoration.

Monitor

In the monitoring phase, the responsible official would implement a monitoring plan to determine the level and effectiveness of implementation on the unit and changes across the broader landscape. This will give managers data to evaluate management actions and make adjustments to both projects and to the land management plan, where needed.

The planning rule would recommend that each planning unit develop a land management plan monitoring strategy using a two-tiered approach: (1) monitoring at the planning unit level, and (2) monitoring at the broader landscape scale. Unit-level monitoring would be focused on detecting changes on the unit and determining how well the land management plan is being implemented and how effective management actions are in achieving objectives and moving toward desired conditions. Each NFS unit would be responsible for creating and implementing the unit-level monitoring plan, in conjunction with partners and scientists. NFS unit supervisors would participate in landscape-scale monitoring plans and strategies developed collaboratively by one or more regional foresters, Forest Service research station directors, other government entities, private landowners, and others, and would be designed to detect changes caused by stressors outside the control of an individual NFS units. Landscape level and unit level monitoring would compliment each other and would be focused on questions related to land management plan implementation.

The monitoring component of the framework responds to stakeholders' desire for a systematic, unified, monitoring approach rather than "random acts of monitoring." They want a system that will track issues that transcend national NFS unit, such as wide-ranging wildlife species at risk. Both stakeholders and the agency recognize the potential efficiencies of a unified monitoring approach and hope to increase information sharing and learning opportunities.

Example 1 All-lands: Monitoring for habitat connectivity may occur at the both the regional and unit level and may answer questions about the conditions and trends of wildlife corridors across the landscape and about how well the NFS unit is doing in meeting objectives for habitat connectivity within the unit.

Example 2 Water Resources and Watershed Health: Based on a Plan objective for riparian restoration, we could monitor how much restoration had been accomplished and how effective the treatments are for meeting objectives like improving stream bank stability, reducing water temperatures or improving habitat.