



Background

The planning rule is required by the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA). It establishes direction for land and resource management plans (plans).

A planning rule may include specific requirements for utilization, protection, and conservation of resources. A planning rule requires certain plan content and plan components, some of which are required by NFMA. For example, NFMA requires plans to include a description of probable methods of timber harvest.

What Does The National Forest Management Act Do?

NFMA requires the Forest Service to develop a planning rule that sets requirements for land and resource management plan processes and content for forest or grassland units in the National Forest System (NFS).

In general, for land management planning, NFMA established:

1. Minimum standards for the harvest of trees on NFS lands.
2. Requirements for the process of developing plans.
3. Requirements for a planning rule that regulates the plan content, including the timber harvest standards.
4. Requirements for projects to be consistent with the relevant plan.

NFMA requires that when plans are developed, they take many factors into consideration (fig. 1).

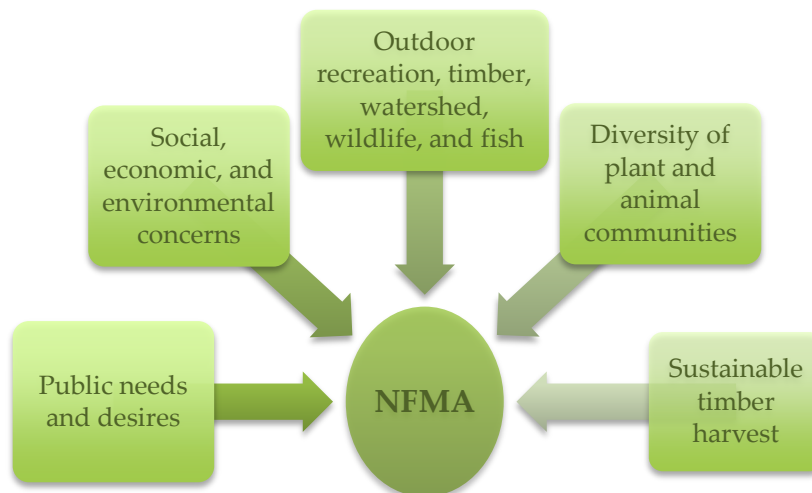


Fig. 1

What Does A Planning Rule Do?

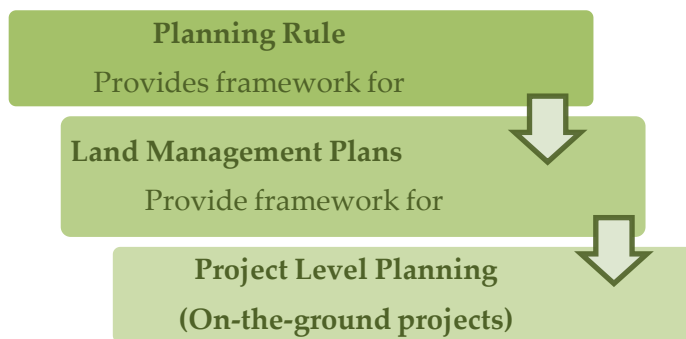
In general, a planning rule outlines the process for the development, revision, and amendment of plans, along with prescribed plan content. Forest and grassland planning teams are required to follow the planning rule, which sets a baseline for:

- Minimum content of plans
- When and how plans are revised
- When and how plans are amended
- Who makes the plan decisions
- How the public is involved
- Analysis, assessment, or evaluation requirements
- Relationship of plans to projects

The Forest Service Planning System

The Forest Service administers the NFS, which includes 193 million acres of land. The NFS contains different administrative units that are typically divided by a specific national forest, grassland, or prairie.

In addition to the Strategic Plan the Forest Service has two other levels of planning that are relevant to this discussion: land management planning and project-level planning. The planning rule informs how land management planning occurs at the program level, and land management planning informs what types of actions may be authorized through project-level planning.



Land Management Planning

Every administrative unit managed by the Forest Service has a land management plan prepared consistent with the NFMA 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 land management plans, along with prescribed content, is outlined in the planning rule.

The land management plan provides a framework for on-the-ground decision-making, for integrated resource management, and for guiding project and activity decision-making on a national forest, grassland, prairie, or other administrative unit. How each of these activities should be considered and may be provided by a particular unit is addressed in the plan.

Land management plans may include:

- Multiple use objectives and desired conditions
- Management requirements (standards and guidelines)
- Management areas
- Identification of lands not suitable for timber production
- Wilderness recommendations
- Monitoring requirements

Project-level Planning

While a plan may indicate the types of actions that may occur on the unit, project level planning decisions authorize actions to take place on the ground. All projects and activities are proposed, analyzed, and carried out within the framework set forth in the plan.

Generally, project proposals come from the different desired conditions and objectives of the plan. Some examples of possible projects and activities that may be authorized under a land management plan include:

- Burning and fuels reduction to improve the health of a forest
- Projects to increase food for livestock and wildlife
- Recreational trail projects to enhance visitor enjoyment and safety
- Streambed restoration
- Timber sales for restoration projects and to produce timber for a local economy

Projects may also arise from proposals from others, such as downhill ski areas and cell phone towers. Regardless of the project decisions, all actions Projects must also be consistent with land management plans, and must follow all applicable laws and regulations, including the National Environmental Policy Act, the NFMA, the Endangered Species Act, and other applicable laws for management of the NFS.