



Mark Twain National Forest

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ANNUAL REPORT & MONITORING REPORT

Every year Mark Twain National Forest prepares an Annual Report (enclosed). The Annual Report provides an overview of the past year's accomplishments, and compares them to previous years' accomplishments.

Mark Twain National Forest also prepares a monitoring report, documenting our monitoring activities and findings for the previous year. Monitoring and evaluation is a continuous process done to determine if our resource management activities are meeting the goals, objectives, and management direction described in the Forest Plan.

Monitoring activities are conducted by interdisciplinary teams. Mark Twain National Forest professionals in all resource areas participate in collecting pertinent information. In addition to using existing data, field trips are conducted on all Ranger Districts to observe and record the results of implemented projects. These results are used in a variety of ways, from tracking specific project progress to monitoring what changes need to be made to the Forest Plan.

The monitoring report will be available soon. If you would like a copy, please contact us at 401 Fairgrounds Road, Rolla, MO 65401, or by phone at (573) 364-4621.

REVISION OF PLANNING REGULATIONS

Revised Forest Planning regulations are close at hand. The Committee of Scientists, formed in December 1997 to recommend improvements to National Forest planning processes, released its report on March 15, 1999.

The scientists said in their report that sustainability -- meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs -- should be the first priority in managing natural resources on National Forest lands. They also recommended more partnerships with interest groups, local governments and other agencies when developing Forest Plans.

While many of these recommendations are already Forest Service policy. The Forest Service intends to use the scientists' report as a framework for new forest planning regulations, which are expected to be proposed this summer. These regulations will specify the process that Mark Twain National Forest will use to revise its Forest Plan. The Forest Plan affects only national forest lands of Mark Twain National Forest and does not apply to private lands.

BIOLOGICAL OPINION

During the summer of 1998, the Forest prepared a Biological Assessment evaluating the effects of ongoing and anticipated management practices on national forest lands of Mark Twain National Forest. It was determined that implementing some activities in Mark Twain's Forest Plan could have adverse effects on the Indiana bat and gray bat -- both listed as endangered -- and the bald eagle and Mead's milkweed, which are designated as threatened species. It was also determined that implementation of the Forest Plan would not adversely affect six other federally endangered or threatened plants and animals on the Mark Twain. Those species are the Topeka shiner, Hall's bulrush, running buffalo clover, Tumbling Creek cavesnail, Curtis' pearly mussel and pink mucket pearly mussel.

Major activities identified in Mark Twain National Forest's management plan that are likely to adversely affect the four species include human disturbance of bat hibernation caves or roosting sites for bats and eagles; removal of roosting trees for Indiana bats and bald eagles; and disturbance of hibernation and roosting sites due to smoke from prescribed burns. Mead's milkweed populations could be affected by foot and horse traffic and by suppression of prescribed fires, which are needed by the plant for reproduction.

On October 5, 1998, the completed Biological Assessment was presented to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Fish and Wildlife Service reviewed the Biological Assessment, and issued a Biological Opinion on June 23, 1999.

The Biological Opinion states that while forest management and other activities authorized, funded or carried out on Mark Twain National Forest are likely to adversely affect the four species, they are not likely to jeopardize their continued existence. The Biological Opinion also identifies steps agreed to by the Fish and Wildlife Service and Mark Twain National Forest to ensure that current populations will not be affected. These actions, along with the current management direction in the Forest Plan for threatened and endangered species, will help continue the conservation and restoration of threatened and endangered species on Mark Twain National Forest in Missouri.

"With the proposed delisting of the bald eagle, we know that taking this cooperative approach can be successful, and we look forward to having similar results with the plans we have to conserve and restore the four species on the Mark Twain," said Randy Moore, Forest Supervisor of Mark Twain National Forest.

Additional information about the Biological Opinion can be obtained from the Columbia Office of the USFWS, 608 Cherry Street, Room 200, Columbia MO, 65201-7712, or by phone at (573) 876-1911.

SCHEDULE OF PROPOSED PROJECTS

We recently began work on two amendments to the Mark Twain's Forest Plan. This issue of the Planning Journal gives a brief description of the two amendments, plus the anticipated schedule for conducting and completing the environmental analyses. We will be mailing updates on the status of these amendments approximately every three months to assist you in tracking their progress. You can expect to see the next update in October, 1999.

These amendments will apply to all national forest system lands (Mark Twain National Forest) in Missouri. They will not apply to private lands, or lands managed by any other state or federal agency, and will not have any effect on private property rights.

Threatened and Endangered Species Management Amendment.

This proposal will amend the Forest Plan standards and guidelines for habitat management for three threatened and endangered species (gray bat, bald eagle, Indiana bat).

The purpose of this amendment is to incorporate the requirements in the Fish and Wildlife Service's Biological Opinion (see previous story.) These requirements, along with the existing Forest Plan standards and guidelines for threatened and endangered species, will assist Mark Twain National Forest in improving and carrying out programs for the conservation of these species, as required by Sections 2(c)(1) and 7(a)(1) of the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The public scoping period for this amendment began on July 13, 1999 and will run until August 15, 1999. During scoping the Forest is asking for concerns and comments from the public on the proposal. Those comments and concerns will be used to determine what issues need to be considered in the environmental assessment, as well as what alternatives to the proposed action need to be analyzed. A decision on this amendment is expected this winter. For more information, contact Laura Watts at Mark Twain National Forest, 401 Fairgrounds Road, Rolla, MO 65401, or by phone at (573) 364-4621 ext. 471.

Recreation, Heritage Resources, Visual Resources, And Fisheries Amendment.

This proposed amendment would change the recreation, heritage resources (historical and prehistoric sites on national forest lands), visual resources (making forest management visually pleasing), and fisheries management portions of the Forest Plan.

This amendment will allow Mark Twain National Forest to consider adding or renovating facilities such as new water distribution lines, flush toilets, showers, electrical outlets at campsites, or areas for sports and games (such as a ballfield or basketball hoop) in National Forest recreation areas. Obviously, not all of these facilities would be considered for any given site, and many of our recreation areas will still have vault toilets and basic campsites.

The amendment would add a new Management Prescription to emphasize intensive recreation in certain existing recreation areas, and better define the desired future condition and management expectations for those areas. This prescription would be applied to the more highly developed recreation areas on the forest which are currently being managed under prescriptions that do not provide guidance and objectives for developed recreation areas.

In Heritage Resources, the proposed amendment would expand management of heritage resources from simply locating and protecting sites to include interpreting sites, public education activities, using volunteer programs, and site restoration. These changes are in response to new national direction for the heritage resources program.

The amendment also proposes that Mark Twain National Forest adopt the new Scenery Management System in place of the Visual Management System. The Scenery Management System was developed by the Forest Service to provide for improved integration of aesthetics with other biological, physical, and social resources in the land management planning process.

The changes proposed for fisheries management include additional direction and emphasis to protect aquatic ecosystems and riparian habitats along streams and rivers. In the long term, this will help sustain viable populations of fish and improve the fishing experience. Stocking of catchable size fish, and put, grow, and take would continue in some areas. Habitat improvements will help to improve self-sustaining populations.

The public scoping period for this amendment began on May 28, 1999 and closed on July 15, 1999. During scoping the Forest asks for concerns and comments from the public on the proposal. Those comments and concerns will now be used to determine what issues need to be considered in the environmental assessment, as well as what alternatives to the proposed action will be analyzed. A decision on this amendment is expected by the end of 1999. For more information, contact Enid Erickson at Mark Twain National Forest, 401 Fairgrounds Road, Rolla, MO 65401, or by phone at (573) 364-4621 ext. 442.