

Introduction

Purpose of this Land Management Plan

The purpose of the Bitterroot National Forest Land Management Plan (hereinafter referred to as “Plan” or “land management plan”) is to provide overall strategic guidance for the sustainable management of the Bitterroot National Forest (often referred to as the Forest) by guiding relevant resource management programs, practices, uses, and projects. This Plan sets the overall context for informed decision making by evaluating and addressing social, economic, and ecological considerations relevant to management of the forest. In particular, the Plan:

- Is strategic in nature. This Plan does not include decisions with on-the-ground effects that can be meaningfully evaluated through a site-specific NEPA process. Those decisions are made later, only after more detailed analysis and further public involvement.
- Describes the desired conditions of National Forest System (NFS) lands and resources.
- Identifies the strategies to maintain or achieve those conditions.
- Identifies land areas as generally suitable or unsuitable for various uses.
- Identifies the guidelines for projects and activities.
- Identifies areas with special or unique characteristics.
- Was developed through public involvement and collaboration, which started at the earliest stages of plan development. The Forest will continue to work with the public through plan completion, project planning, and monitoring.
- Emphasizes the role of best available science. New knowledge and information can be analyzed and added to this Plan at any time.
- Contributes to social, economic, and ecological sustainability. This Plan aspires to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

This Plan emphasizes an adaptive management approach which includes an open public process and results in a dynamic document that can be improved at any time. Such an informed and adaptive guide to land stewardship allows the Forest Supervisor to better utilize resources and

manage ecosystems. The adaptive management cycle includes (1) plan development, (2) plan implementation, (3) plan monitoring, inventory and assessment, and (4) plan review and evaluation. The findings of plan review and evaluation reveal any needs to change the Plan, which begins the adaptive cycle again.

Special Note to Reviewers of this Proposed Plan

While the monitoring program is not a plan component, it is a critical part of the adaptive management cycle. It is sufficiently important that the 2005 Planning Rule explicitly requires public involvement in development of the monitoring program. The final Land Management Plan will include monitoring questions that guide development of the monitoring program. As part of your comments on this Proposed Plan, we would like your feedback as to the kinds of monitoring questions you think we should use to assess our progress toward the desired conditions. Monitoring questions should address whether management within the Forest maintains or makes progress toward the desired conditions. The most helpful input you can give us would be your answers to the following questions:

- Which of the desired conditions do you think are most important to monitor?
- Why do you think these desired conditions are important to monitor?

Plan Components

The format of this Plan is different than plans issued in the first round of agency planning that occurred after the passage of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA). This Plan is designed to better communicate the concepts of strategic guidance and adaptive management for the Bitterroot National Forest. There is an important distinction between “plan components” and other sections of the Plan. No changes can be made to plan components without amending the Plan through an appropriate National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, including public involvement. Other plan sections, which contain information about the plan components or provide background on program emphases or forest conditions, can be changed without formally amending this Plan. Plan components are highlighted to make it clear which sections of this Plan cannot be changed without going through a formal amendment process.

There are five plan components:

Plan Components

[Desired Conditions](#)

[Suitability of Areas](#)

Desired Conditions: The social, economic, and ecological attributes toward which management of the land and resources of the plan area is to be directed. In some cases the desired conditions already exist and our intention is to maintain them; in other cases they may be achievable in the relatively near future, while in some cases the desired conditions may only be achievable over a long period of time.

To be consistent with the plan, a project or activity can:

- Maintain or achieve one or more desired conditions or objectives,
- Be neutral to relevant desired conditions or objectives, or
- Have negative short-term effects, but beneficial long-term effects on one or more desired conditions or objectives.

To the extent practicable, documentation for projects and activities will identify which desired conditions and objectives are being addressed, and whether these conditions and objectives are being advanced, not affected, or temporarily slowed. Project documentation is not required to speak to all the available opportunities to meet or work toward desired conditions in a project area, but will instead focus on the specific social, economic, or ecological conditions that prompted the need for the proposal.

Suitability of areas (36 CFR 219.7(a)(2)(iv)) – The plan identifies areas that are generally suitable for a variety of multiple-uses (36 CFR 219.12(a)). These identifications show where these uses are compatible or incompatible with the area’s desired conditions. The actual suitability for a particular use, even if an area is identified as generally suitable for a use, will not be determined until a project or activity is authorized. Moreover, it is not possible to anticipate every project or activity that could be proposed throughout the unit, throughout the life of a plan. An approved project or activity is considered to be consistent with the plan if the project or activity is consistent with the general suitability identification and is consistent with other relevant plan components. If the project or activity is not consistent with this identification, the Responsible Official should amend the plan.

Special area guidance (36 CFR 219.7(a)(2)(v)) - Special areas may have different management direction that represents their unique or special characteristics. For example, a botanical area may have desired conditions that differ from the larger landscape surrounding that special area.

Guidelines (36 CFR 219.7(a)(2)(iii)) - A project or activity will apply relevant guidelines, unless there is a documented reason to adjust the guideline for a specific project or activity. If adjustment would be neutral with regard to the relevant social, economic, or ecological condition or would be a more appropriate way to achieve or maintain desired conditions and objectives, the Responsible Official will describe the proposed adjustment and explain the relationship to desired conditions and objectives in the project-level environmental analysis and decision documents. In such cases, a land management plan amendment generally is not required.

Other Important Concepts

In addition to the Plan itself, adaptive management also relies on a number of other important concepts. The following topics are all integral to this planning process and are further addressed in a separate collection of supporting documentation called the “Plan Set of Documents”:

Assessments: The current social, economic, and ecological conditions and trends, and substantial changes from referenced conditions and trends are assessed, analyzed and used in this Plan. Assessments are contained in the Plan Set of Documents.

Sustainability: The definition of “sustainability,” is to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Sustainability is composed of desirable social, economic, and ecological conditions or trends interacting at varying spatial and temporal scales embodying the principles of multiple-use and sustained-yield.

The overall goal for social and economic sustainability for the Bitterroot National Forest is to contribute to sustaining cultural, social, and economic systems within the plan area. The overall goal for ecological sustainability for the Forest is to provide a framework to contribute to sustaining native ecological systems by providing ecological conditions to support diversity of native plant and animal species in the plan area. This Plan provides for these sustainability goals.

Role of Science: The Forest Service has a long history of science-based decision making. The use of science in planning provides the Responsible Official with knowledge, methods, and expert review in order to make an informed decision. To ensure the Bitterroot National Forest’s land management planning decisions take into account the best available science as well as other information and factors, the Forest Supervisor must:

- Document how the best available science was taken into account in the planning process within the context of the issues.
- Evaluate and disclose substantial uncertainties in that science.
- Evaluate and disclose substantial risks associated with plan components based on that science.
- Document that the science was appropriately interpreted and applied.

To ascertain the best available science, the Forest has worked with scientists and other professional peers in federal and state agencies, research institutions, and other agencies and organizations. Examples include but are not limited to:

- Forest Service. Inventory and Monitoring Institute
- Forest Service. Forest Management Service Center
- Mason, Bruce and Girard, Consulting Foresters
- Forest Service. Rocky Mountain Research Station
- Montana Natural Heritage Program
- Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
- Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
- Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
- Idaho Fish and Game Conservation Data Center
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- NatureServe Database
- Montana Natural Heritage Program

We will continue to work with these and other entities between publication of the proposed Plan and final Plan. It is not until the final publication of the Bitterroot National Forest Land Management Plan that the Forest Supervisor must document how science was taken into account.

Ecological Diversity: The NFMA requires that land management plans provide for diversity of plant and animal communities. According to NFMA, diversity is based on the suitability and capability of the specific land area. With an ecosystem approach, this Plan will provide the framework for maintaining and restoring desired conditions for plant and animal species. When necessary, additional provisions for federally listed threatened or endangered species, species of concern, and species of interest will be included.

Procedural Points

Changes between the Proposed and Final Plan: Based on analysis of public comments and the incorporation of any new information, changes will occur between the proposed and final versions of this Plan.

NEPA Compliance: Under the 2005 Planning Rule, land management plans are not required to have an accompanying environmental impact statement (EIS) or environmental assessment (EA) prior to adoption. A plan, plan amendment, or plan revision may be categorically excluded (CE) from documentation in an EIS or EA. Projects implemented to achieve plan objectives will continue to be documented in EISs, EAs, or CEs.

Transition from the 1982 Planning Rule to the 2005 Planning Rule: Because the Bitterroot National Forest had started revision of its land management plan before January 2005, we were not required to stop the process and start over when the new planning rule came into effect. Consequently, some of our supporting documentation, while it is fully adequate, is in a different format than that specified by the 2005 rule. For example, our Analysis of the Management Situation (AMS) documents conditions and trends that, under the 2005 rule, would be found in the Comprehensive Evaluation Report (CER). (36 CFR 219.14(e))

Final Authority on Travel Management: While this plan does include desired conditions, objectives, general suitability, and guidelines relevant to access and travel management, decisions regarding where and when motorized use is allowed are made at the site-specific, project level. This plan may express desired conditions or general suitability that differ from current access and travel management; however, current access and travel management will remain in place until such time as the Forest has completed site-specific NEPA documentation and public involvement to determine which, if any, changes to current management would be made. The Forest Visitor's Map and special orders reflect current travel management.

Decisions Made in the Previous Forest Plan: In general, decisions made in the previous Forest Plan, such as resource management standards, will no longer be binding unless they have been explicitly carried forward by inclusion in this Proposed Plan. It is our intent that all necessary and effective resource protections in the old Plan have been carried forward in one or more of the components of this Proposed Plan; however, the strategies we propose to use for accomplishing those protections may have changed.

Plan Organization

This Plan is organized into this Introduction, three chapters entitled Vision, Strategy, and Design Criteria, and a Glossary of terms. Each chapter includes one or more plan components, plus additional information to help the reader understand the guidance included in plan components.

Chapter 1—Vision

This chapter describes the vision for the future of the Bitterroot National Forest through desired conditions that reflect the Forest's uniqueness on a national and regional level. It includes the **desired conditions** plan component.

Chapter 2—Strategy

Chapter 2 describes how the Forest intends to move toward the desired conditions. It includes a discussion of program emphases and the **objectives, suitability of areas, and special areas** plan components. While the program emphasis section is not a plan component, it describes the general framework for project planning on the Bitterroot National Forest.

Chapter 3—Design Criteria

Design criteria are the sideboards that guide our management activities. They ensure the protection of resources as we implement projects to help us move toward the desired conditions. This chapter includes the **guidelines** plan component. In addition to plan guidelines, the design criteria chapter also points the way to other existing direction outside this Plan. Management direction found in public laws, regulations, Forest Service manuals and handbooks is generally not repeated in this Plan.

Glossary

The Glossary defines terms used in this Plan that may not be familiar to the reader. In most cases, the entries are short definitions; however, in other instances, entries are expanded in order to clarify more complex concepts, such as “recreation opportunity spectrum” or “multiple use purposes.”

Relationship to Other Strategic Guidance

The Forest Service has defined a five-level strategic planning framework: Mission, Vision, Strategies, Tactics, and Projects. Several of these five levels are directly related to the 2005 Planning Rule's plan components. This connection is made through this Plan's Vision, Strategy, and Design Criteria. The following table demonstrates the linkage between the Forest Service's strategic planning framework and the 2005 Planning Rule's plan components.

Table 1: Strategic planning framework.

Forest Service's Strategic Planning Framework	Bitterroot Forest's Plan Format	2005 Rule Plan Components
Mission	Precedes the Plan	Not applicable
Vision	Vision	Desired Conditions
Strategies	Strategy	Objectives Suitable Uses Special Areas
Tactics	Design Criteria	Guidelines
Projects	Follow the Plan	Not applicable

Environmental Management System

The 2005 Planning Rule requires the Forest Service to establish an environmental management system (EMS) for each unit of the National Forest System. While not a part of the plan itself, the Bitterroot National Forest EMS will be an important successor to this Plan, aiding in its implementation.

What is an EMS?

An EMS is a system to manage environmental impacts. It focuses on how to improve our everyday work to reduce impacts to the environment. The expected outcome is a continual improvement of our management.

EMS identifies the major activities, products or services conducted on the Forest, and their associated impacts on the environment. The Forest Supervisor selects the activities, environmental impacts, and objectives deemed most important, and these become the focus of the EMS. EMS implementation reflects accepted quality management principles based on a "Plan, Do, Check, Act" model. The EMS is intended to help the Forest prevent adverse environmental impacts by planning carefully,

implementing our work on the ground with appropriate controls in place, monitoring the effectiveness of our controls, and adjusting our management to continually reduce undesirable environmental impacts.

The Bitterroot National Forest will develop an EMS using an international standard known as ISO 14001. The standard has 17 requirements, including an independent audit to assure that the system is working. More information about EMS and ISO 14001 is available on the Forest Service website at: www.fs.fed.us/emc/nepa/ems.

Why an EMS?

A basic framework for the Bitterroot National Forest's Land Management Plan is sustainability. EMS uses independent audits to display to the public how we conduct selected activities, measure the results, and improve our performance in meeting our commitments to the environment and to sustainability.

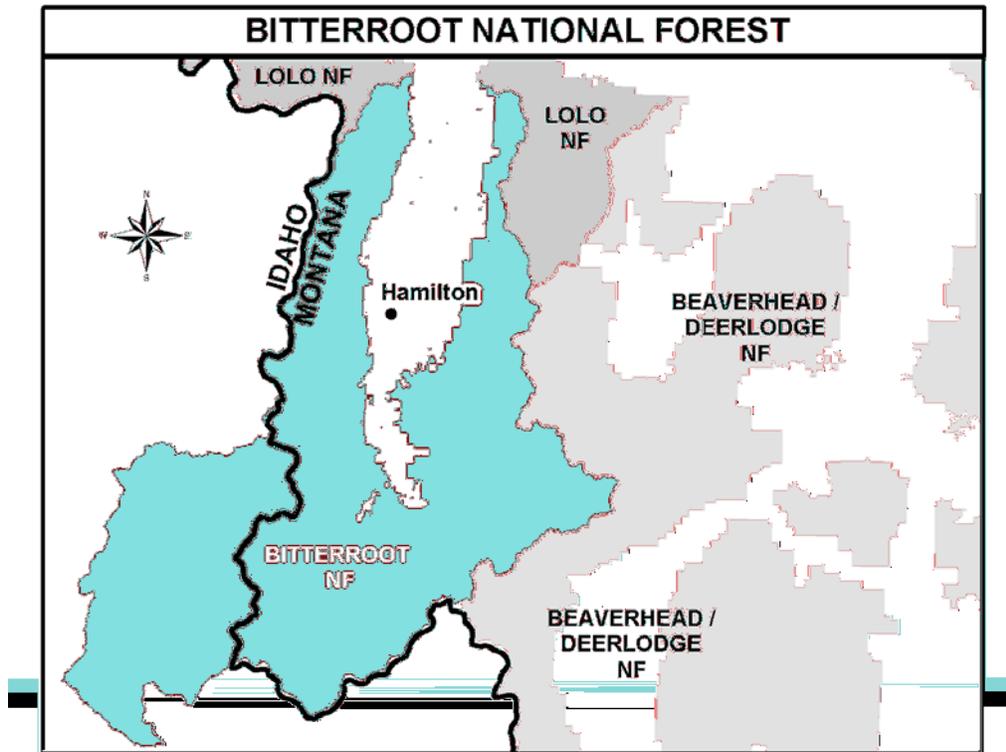
It is a more transparent way of improving our management. We will document our procedures for accomplishing certain activities, check our work performance, and make adjustments to improve our performance. The responsibility for implementing the EMS falls to all our employees, as well as contractors and permittees. Implementing our EMS includes helping visitors understand and reduce the impacts of their activities on the land. The following benefits of EMS should accrue quickly: (1) We will adjust for changing circumstances or to improve performance; (2) We will account for performance through required audits and assure the results of these audits are visible to the whole organization and the public; and (3) We will communicate with every employee so we all know our environmental commitments and what we are supposed to do to improve our management.

About the Bitterroot National Forest

The Bitterroot National Forest includes nearly 1.6 million acres of public land in west central Montana and east central Idaho (figure 1). It includes portions of Ravalli and Missoula counties in Montana, and part of Idaho County in Idaho. The Forest Supervisor's office is located in Hamilton, Montana, with Ranger District offices in Stevensville, Darby, Sula, and West Fork.

Bitterroot National Forest land begins above the foothills of the Bitterroot valley in two mountain ranges. The Bitterroot Mountains rise up on the west side and the Sapphire Mountains on the east side of the valley. Elevation ranges from 2,200 feet on the Salmon River in Idaho to peaks over 9,000 feet in the Bitterroot Mountains.

Figure 1: Vicinity Map of the Bitterroot National Forest.



In the drier valley floor and lower foothills there is an arid-lands mix of grasslands, shrublands, and ponderosa pine. Mid elevations receive more moisture where plant communities of Douglas-fir, lodgepole pine, and western larch grow. Higher elevations produce Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir, subalpine larch and whitebark pine.

The Bitterroot National Forest is home to many species of wildlife, from larger animals like mule deer, white-tailed deer, elk, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, black bear, wolf, mountain lion, and moose to many varieties of smaller animals and birds. Wildlife viewing areas offer people the opportunity to appreciate these animals in their natural habitat. Alpine lakes, mountain reservoirs, fast running streams, and the meandering Bitterroot River offer anglers the opportunity to fish for westslope cutthroat, brook, rainbow, and brown trout.

People have inhabited southwestern Montana for at least 10,000 years. The Bitterroot National Forest encompasses a rich and diverse cultural landscape, ranging from ancient Tribal trails and hunting camps to historic Forest Service lookouts. The Forest is part of the traditional homeland of the Bitterroot Salish people, who continue to exercise treaty rights on Forest lands.

Recreation opportunities abound on the Bitterroot National Forest. Activities such as camping at developed campgrounds, hiking or riding on trails, fishing, hunting, rafting, boating, rock climbing, horseback riding, wildlife watching, downhill skiing, Nordic skiing, and snowmobiling are available on the Forest.

The large wilderness and inventoried roadless areas of the Bitterroot National Forest provide high quality wilderness, primitive and wild river experiences in close proximity to the well-populated Bitterroot valley. Local residents can leave their homes to hike or ride horseback in pristine wilderness within a few miles.

The Bitterroot National Forest was the birthplace of wildland fire use. In the early 1970s, forest managers realized that aggressive fire suppression was causing our forests to become denser and less resilient to fire. They initiated a wildland fire use policy in the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness with the goal of restoring fire to its more natural role in the ecosystem. That policy continues to be successfully implemented and expanded to other areas.

Agricultural development in the Bitterroot valley near the turn of the 20th century stimulated the construction of more than 20 dams and water storage reservoirs in the canyons along the west side of the Bitterroot valley. The 1964 Wilderness Act included most of these dams inside the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness. This requires the Bitterroot National Forest to balance the non-motorized travel and primitive use requirements of the Wilderness Act with requirements for dam maintenance and public safety.

In 2000, several, large wildfires burned across the southern end of the Bitterroot National Forest, impacting over 300,000 acres of vegetation. Rehabilitation and restoration activities were initiated immediately after the fires and will continue. Additional forest and watershed restoration work is planned for the foreseeable future.

Invasive plants have extensive and persistent populations on the Bitterroot National Forest. The Forest recognizes that invasive plants are causing undesirable changes in the productivity and sustainability of native plant communities. The Forest has carried out an aggressive integrated pest management program for many years in order to reduce invasive plant populations, stop their spread, and prevent new invaders from becoming established.

Changes and Trends

Much has changed since the adoption of the 1987 Land and Resource Management Plan. The Bitterroot National Forest has monitored changing conditions across the Forest, which guides us in preparing this Plan. The public has helped us identify concerns about these changes especially related to access and travel management, vegetation, biodiversity, ecosystem integrity, inventoried roadless area management, and recreation. This section describes the most pressing types of change we currently face in managing the Bitterroot National Forest and offers a few examples of each.

Demographic Changes

Over the last 10 to 15 years, the population of Ravalli County has been among the fastest growing in Montana. Population increase and other demographic changes greatly affect land management. Demographic change has caused: a greater demand for recreation opportunities, an increase in private land developments adjacent to National Forest System lands, and a growing number of people with a range of personal values and different levels of natural resource experience taking part in land management issues.

Economic Changes

Local communities and the Forest have experienced much economic change in the past two decades. Examples include the decrease in forest product manufacturing jobs, the increase in service-oriented businesses, the decline in the Forest budget, and reduced numbers of employees to carry out land management activities.

Technological Changes

Changes in technology can prompt new demands or create new options for managing the land. An example of this is the production of more efficient helicopters that offer new possibilities in logging. Examples of new demands are cellular and electronic company requests to place towers on National Forest System lands and new capabilities in recreational equipment like mountain bikes, off-highway vehicles (OHVs), and global positioning systems (GPS) that allow people to experience the outdoors in new ways.

Ecological Changes

Natural resources are dynamic and we are experiencing trends that have developed over the past many decades, as well as shorter-term changes.

The long-term ecological trends include changes in forest, grassland, and shrubland vegetation composition and structure, an increase in invasive species populations, increasing fragmentation of wildlife habitat, and increases in threatened and endangered fish and animal species. Watersheds have also been impacted with a resultant decline in aquatic habitat and species. Short-term changes caused by recent forest fires and a subsequent insect outbreak have dramatically changed resource conditions on the southern end of the Forest.

Summary

Change in the world is inevitable. Sometimes changes progress at a steady, predictable, slow pace, such as growing forests from young trees to complex old growth structures. Other times changes happen rapidly, such as the death of trees during a severe fire. People and their ideas change too. Sometimes people change in response to changes in their environment. Other times, people cause their environment to change.

The Bitterroot National Forest considers people to be an integral part of the forest environment. Forest managers are committed to balancing the need to conserve and sustain natural resources with providing for people's desire for products and services now and in the future. It is appropriate that forest management direction changes in response to changes in people and their environment. The following chapters describe the Bitterroot National Forest's **vision** for the future, its **strategy** for achieving the vision, and the design criteria that will guide projects and activities across the Forest.