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Part 1: Introduction and Summary

Public participation, collaboration and notification are important steps in the land management plan revision process. The Bitterroot, Flathead, and Lolo National Forests have used a variety of approaches to engage the public during the revision of their land management plans. This report summarizes the comments received on the Proposed Land Management Plans during the required formal public comment period.

The comment period began May 5, 2006, when the notice of availability was published in the newspapers of record. Copies of the Proposed Land Management Plans were available for public review on our plan revision web site, and on compact discs (CDs) sent to approximately 4,000 people and organizations on our mailing list. The required 90-day comment period was extended for an additional 30 days, to September 7, 2006. This allowed reviewers additional time to become familiar with plan format and style under the new 2005 planning rule.

This document, the Content Analysis Report on Proposed Land Management Plans for the Bitterroot, Lolo, and Flathead National Forests, is a synthesis of the many comments and concerns we heard during the comment period. It is organized into two parts:

- **Part 1: Introduction and Summary.** This part provides broad overviews of the public participation process; the process used to evaluate comments; and a summary of major public concerns.
- **Part 2: Statements of Public Concerns.** This part is compiled of public concern statements and sample statements organized by resource area. Public concern statements summarize the key concepts and context of comments gleaned from the nearly 2,000 individual letters received.

Summary of Public Participation

Following is an overview of the public participation activities to date.

Need for change listening sessions

In 2003, the Western Montana Planning Zone team spent many hours meeting with forest employees and interested publics about the three current land management plans, which were approved in 1986-1987. The purpose of those meetings was to identify what needed to be changed in each forest's land management plan and to provide people with interest in national forest management, information about the upcoming plan revision process.

Proposed Action and Notice of Intent

In January 2004, the Bitterroot, Flathead, and Lolo National Forests issued their Notice of Intent to revise the land and resource management plans and released a Proposed Action for public comment. A 90-day comment period ran from January 23, to April 22, 2004. We received over 2,800 responses, including letters, e-mails, faxes, and verbal comments. The team analyzed the comments and summarized them

in a Content Analysis Report which was posted on our plan revision web site in October 2004. Information gathered during this process was used to formulate the Proposed Land Management Plans.

Proposed Forest Land Management Plans

In January 2005, a new planning rule was published which changed the requirements for developing forest land management plans. Each forest used the 2004 scoping comments, and other information previously gathered, to describe a starting option which became the basis for a series of collaborative meetings or open houses during the summer of 2005. The purpose of those meetings was to refine the starting option to arrive at the Proposed Land Management Plans that were released for public comment in May of 2006.

Process Used To Evaluate Comments

The plan revision team used the following approach to analyzing public comments received on the Proposed Land Management Plans.

Step 1: Letters were sent to a central collection point on the Bitterroot National Forest where they were given a number that uniquely identified each letter to allow for tracking substantive comments back to their original letter. All letters were logged into a database.

Step 2: The planning team read each letter and coded substantive comments. Substantive comments were those comments that were within the scope and specific to, the proposed land management plans. For example, a comment regarding vegetative desired conditions might be coded as:

Comment Number: 2
VEGET (vegetation)
40100 (desired condition)

Step 3: Form letters were identified and filed in the planning record. One copy of each form letter was analyzed for substantive comments.

Step 4: Each of the more than 6,000 substantive comments was typed into a database.

Step 5: The team grouped similar comments, and then wrote a summary statement for each group that typified what we were hearing from that group of comments. This summary statement is referred to as a public concern statement (PC statement). Each PC statement is supported by one or more sample statements which were taken directly from similarly coded comments.

Step 6: The Forest leadership teams (District Rangers, Supervisors and Program Officers) from each forest were provided a report of the PC statements and sample comments to assist them in discussing changes in the final land management plans.

The leadership teams also had access to all 6,000 comments, and to the original comment letters.

Step 7: After reviewing the comments, the Forest leadership teams instruct the planning team regarding changes to be made in the Final Forest Land Management Plans.

Broad Summaries of Public Concerns

The public commented on a wide variety of topics related to the Proposed Land Management Plans. Most comments were focused on the following broad topic areas:

Access:

Access to public lands is important to many people. We received many general comments regarding motorized access versus non-motorized access. Other comments were more site specific, mentioning roads or places in the national forest that should be opened or closed to motorized use. We also received comments asking that we allow mountain biking in recommended wilderness.

Roadless Lands:

The Bitterroot, Flathead, and Lolo National Forests contain areas that have been classified as inventoried roadless lands. Some people commented that all roadless lands should be designated as recommended wilderness or backcountry, while others commented that some of the roadless lands should be managed for multiple use including motorized recreation and vegetation management.

Recommended Wilderness:

The amount and location of recommended wilderness in the Proposed Land Management Plans was of high interest. Many people expressed a desire for more wilderness, while others felt that these three forests already have enough land designated as wilderness and want the remaining lands to be more actively managed.

Recreation:

Most commenters want a variety of recreation opportunities to continue to be available on their forests. Many motorized users feel that their opportunities for motorized use are being decreased and would like more opportunities open for motorized use. Conversely, many non-motorized recreational users feel that we should protect the resources from degradation (noise, weeds, and erosion) and provide more non-motorized opportunities.

Resource Protection:

A lot of comments were received expressing concerns that soil, water, and wildlife resources be well protected from damage by management or other human uses.

Vegetation Management:

Most comments reflected on the appropriate desired conditions for vegetation and the amount of active vegetation management proposed in the land management plans.

Lolo Peak/Carlton Ridge Recreation Use:

During the development of the Proposed Land Management Plans, there was a great deal of public interest in the appropriate intensity of recreation use in the vicinity of Lolo Peak and Carlton Ridge, on the boundary between the Bitterroot and Lolo National Forests. Many of those comments were outside the scope of forest plan revision; however, because of this unusually high level of interest in a relatively small area of National Forest lands, we have chosen to prepare and post a separate, supplemental analysis of those comments.

Plan Components and Supporting Documentation:

We received comments expressing concern about differences between the existing and new forest plans, such as the shift away from standards, and toward more strategic desired conditions. Some people also felt that the absence of supporting analysis and documentation typically found in the environmental impact statements (EIS) with the existing plans made it harder for them to evaluate and comment on the new proposed plans.

Following in Part 2 are the specific statements of public concern (PC) and their supporting comments. These statements were developed by taking similar comments and writing a statement that typified what we were hearing from that group of comments. About 700 of these PC statements were written and are listed in Part 2 along with 1 to 4 sample statements for each. The PC statements are categorized by resource areas and include all three forests in the Western Montana Planning Zone.