

File Code: 1920
Date: February 12, 2016

Dear Interested Party,

I am writing to inform you about an upcoming proposed change that the Superior National Forest will be making to its monitoring program. The Superior National Forest (SNF) will modify its Forest Plan monitoring program to comply with the Forest Service's 2012 Planning Rule. The current monitoring program can be found in Chapter 4 of the SNF 2004 Land and Resource Management Plan. We would like to hear your comments and concerns about the proposed changes.

The 2012 Planning Rule, found in the Code of Federal Regulations at 36 CFR 219, guides Forest Plan monitoring across the Forest Service. The 2012 Planning Rule requires that plans be modified to meet new monitoring requirements (219.12) by May 9, 2016. This modification is an administrative change to the Plan, not a Plan amendment or revision.

The approach the SNF will take to complete this monitoring transition focuses on addressing the purpose of the Forest Plan monitoring program as described in 36 CFR 219.12(a)(1). Our Forest Plan monitoring program must contain one or more monitoring questions and associated indicators addressing each of the following eight requirements, which are noted at 36 CFR 219.12(a)(5):

1. The status of select watershed conditions.
2. The status of select ecological conditions including key characteristics of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.
3. The status of focal species to assess the ecological conditions required under 36 CFR 219.9.
4. The status of a select set of the ecological conditions required under 36 CFR 219.9 to contribute to the recovery of federally listed threatened and endangered species, conserve proposed and candidate species, and maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern.
5. The status of visitor use, visitor satisfaction, and progress toward meeting recreation objectives.
6. Measurable changes on the plan area related to climate change and other stressors that may be affecting the plan area.
7. Progress toward meeting the desired conditions and objectives in the plan, including for providing multiple use opportunities.
8. The effects of each management system to determine that they do not substantially and permanently impair the productivity of the land (16 U.S.C. 1604(g)(3)(C)).

The SNF already includes seven of the above requirements in the existing Forest Plan monitoring program (numbers 1, 2, 3¹, 4², 5, 7 and 8). We propose to supplement, rather than replace entirely, the monitoring elements found in the current Forest Plan monitoring program. Our strategy is to:

¹ While 'focal species' is a new term introduced in the 2012 Planning Rule, the SNF has identified a species in the existing monitoring program that meets this requirement, thus this requirement would be met.

² At this time, species of conservation concern have not been identified for the SNF therefore the Forest Plan monitoring program transition will not address species of conservation concern.



- Retain existing monitoring elements that are providing useful information about implementation of the Forest Plan and many aspects of the eight requirements of the 2012 Planning rule,
- Develop new monitoring elements needed to meet requirement number 6³.
- Delete monitoring elements that either have not provided useful information or do not address the eight requirements.

The monitoring program defines the Forest Plan monitoring questions and the associated indicators. Monitoring questions and associated indicators must be designed to inform the management of resources on the Plan area, including the testing of relevant assumptions, tracking relevant changes, and measuring management effectiveness and progress toward achieving or maintaining the Plan's desired conditions or objectives. Questions and indicators should be based on one or more desired conditions or objectives, or other components described in the Plan, but not every Plan component needs to have a corresponding monitoring question.

Under the 2012 Planning Rule, the Forest Plan monitoring program will consist of only monitoring questions and associated indicators that evaluate whether Plan components are effective and appropriate and if management is effective in maintaining or achieving progress toward desired conditions and objectives for the Plan area. Additional information for implementing the Forest Plan monitoring program will be documented in the biennial Monitoring and Evaluation report; and will identify methods for data collection, how the data are stored, and responsibilities for managing monitoring information.

The Forest Plan monitoring information will be evaluated every two years in a Monitoring and Evaluation report. The Monitoring and Evaluation report will indicate whether or not a change to the Plan, management activities, or the monitoring program is warranted based on the new information. The Monitoring and Evaluation report must be used to inform adaptive management of the Plan area.

Current Forest Plan Monitoring Program

The Monitoring Program was developed for the SNF to assess the effectiveness in meeting goals, desired conditions, standards and guidelines, and management objectives stated in the Forest Plan. It monitoring questions and monitoring indicators that evaluate key components of the Forest Plans within an adaptive management framework. The current Forest Plan monitoring program for the SNF can be found at:

http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fsm91_050603.pdf

Modifications to the Forest Plan Monitoring Program

We have developed a proposed monitoring program for the Forest Plan that would meet the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule. The proposed monitoring program (proposed Chapter 4 of the Forest Plan) can be found at the following website and available in hard copy by request:

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/superior/monitoring>

In summary, the changes to the existing monitoring program are as follows:

³ The SNF currently measures numerous 'other stressors' including insects, diseases, invasive species, wildfire, and more; the SNF has proposed new monitoring questions that specifically address 'climate change stressors' pertinent to the lakes region in collaboration with neighboring forests.

The following five questions/items are proposed to be *deleted* from the monitoring program:

1. *How close are projected costs with actual costs?*

Justification for deletion: The initial rationale for this question was the 1982 Planning Rule, which has been replaced by the 2012 Planning Rule. Further, the Forest Plan does not contain ‘projected costs’ making the comparison of projections with actual costs impossible.

2. *To what extent does the Forest provide commodity resources and non-commodity opportunities in an environmentally acceptable manner that contributes to the social and economic sustainability and diversity of local communities?*

Justification for deletion: This question is duplicative and currently addressed by a number of other questions in the monitoring program. We propose to remove this question since it is too broad to have a specific set of indicators. Components of it are answered by the existing range of monitoring questions.

3. *Are forest management activities maintaining the desired characteristics of the areas and species of interest (traditionally and culturally) as identified in research and/or by interested communities and individuals?*

Justification for deletion: This question is duplicative and currently addressed by a number of other questions in the monitoring program. We are proposing to remove this question since it is too broad to have a specific set of indicators. Components of it are answered by the existing range of monitoring questions.

4. *Mercury concentration in water and zooplankton.*

Justification for deletion: While mercury contamination remains relevant, the methods for monitoring mercury have been refined and updated on the Forest. We therefore propose to rely upon several other mercury monitoring questions in our matrix that track mercury in the environment and in fish.

5. *Plant plots with known sensitivity to ozone, sulphur dioxide and fluoride to measure air pollutant-caused damage.*

Justification for deletion: These methods for measuring air pollution are outdated; we now have more direct methods for this type of monitoring. We therefore propose to rely upon several other air pollution monitoring questions in our matrix that track pollutant levels utilizing updated, direct measurement techniques.

The following two questions are proposed to be *added* in order to meet the monitoring requirement number 6: Measurable changes on the plan area related to climate change and other stressors that may be affecting the plan area:

1. How are timing and duration of winter weather conditions changing across the plan area on an annual basis? How is this affecting the plan area?
2. How are drought duration, severity, geographic extent and timing changing across the planning area on an annual basis? How is this affecting the plan area?

The 2012 Planning Rule requires that each plan monitoring program contain indicators associated with the monitoring questions in the Forest Plan Monitoring Matrix. A column has been added to the revised Monitoring Matrix (as found in the proposed changes for Chapter 4 of the Forest Plan) titled “Indicator” that identifies what is measured to answer each question.

The proposed changes also reflect the summary of the 2012 Planning Rule requirements (found on pages 4-3 and 4-4 in Chapter 4 of the Forest Plan). This Legal and Regulatory Requirements section replaces the 1982 Planning Rule summary table in the 2004 Forest Plan with an updated summary of the 2012 Planning Rule.

New Information and Approval Framework

The modifications to the Forest Plan monitoring program are being conducted under the administrative change procedures of 36 CFR 219.13(c). I am inviting you to comment on the

proposed changes. During this comment process, you may identify other monitoring and information needs.

As the responsible official for the proposal, I will work with the Forest interdisciplinary team to review public comments. I will then notify those who comment of my decision on the administrative change to modify the Forest Plan monitoring program. The decision on the administrative change is not subject to objection or appeal procedures.

How You Can Comment

This letter initiates the public participation comment period. Your comments will provide useful information as we determine what changes need to be made to the Forest Plan monitoring program. Comments are most useful if received by the end of 30-day comment period, on March 16, 2016. You may submit your comments as follows:

- Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), Word (.doc), portable document format (.pdf) or any software supported by Microsoft applications. Send **electronic** comments to: comments-eastern-superior@fs.fed.us with the subject line 'Monitoring Program Transition'
- Send **FAX** comments to: 218-626-4398
- **Oral** comments may be provided in person at the Forest Headquarters, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday or by calling 218-626-4354.
- Send **written** comments to: Brenda Halter, Forest Supervisor, Attn: Monitoring Program Transition, Forest Headquarters, 8901 Grand Avenue Place, Duluth, MN 55808

For more information about this project, please contact Pooja Kanwar at poojaskanwar@fs.fed.us or (218) 626-4354. Thank you for your interest in the management of the Superior National Forest.

Sincerely,


Brenda Halter
Forest Supervisor