



File Code: 1920
Date: March 2, 2016

Dear Forest User:

The Croatan National Forest is updating its monitoring program to ensure that it complies with new planning regulations, 36 CFR 219. These regulations require that each forest plan monitoring program must now contain one or more monitoring questions and associated indicators addressing each of the following requirements from 36 CFR 219.12(a)(5):

- (i) The status of select watershed conditions
- (ii) The status of select ecological conditions including key characteristics of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems
- (iii) The status of focal species to assess the ecological conditions under 36 CFR 219.9
- (iv) The status of a select set of ecological conditions required under 36 CFR 219.9 to contribute to the recovery of federally listed threatened or endangered species, conserve proposed and candidate species, and maintain a viable population of species of conservation concern.
- (v) The status of visitor use, visitor satisfaction, and progress toward meeting recreation objectives
- (vi) Measureable changes on the plan area related to climate change and other stressors that may be affecting the plan area
- (vii-a) Progress toward meeting the desired conditions and objectives in the plan, including providing for multiple use opportunities
- (vii-b) Social, economic, and cultural sustainability must also be addressed in the monitoring program
- (vii) The effects of each management system to determine that they do not substantially and permanently impair the productivity of the land (16 USC 1604(g)(3)(C)).

The planning rule further stipulates that all existing forest plans must be modified by May 9, 2016 to meet these eight requirements (see 36 CFR 219.12(c)(1)).

We have conducted a review of the monitoring program associated with the Croatan National Forest Plan, which was revised in December, 2002 (hereafter referred to as “current monitoring program”). We found that the current Croatan National Forest monitoring program, with a few modifications, meets the requirements of the 2012 Planning Regulations, as described below.

Proposed Administrative Change

Refer to the attachment: Croatan National Forest Monitoring Program, Administrative Change Proposal (02/20/2016). (Posted on the National Forests in NC website under Forest Plans – Croatan National Forest at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/land/nfsnc/landmanagement/planning>). A brief explanation of the changes to the monitoring program follows.



The text of the monitoring program was edited to be consistent with the 2012 Planning Regulations. The edits are highlighted in light gray.

Table 5.3.1 Monitoring Program has been updated, and the questions and indicators in the plan have been re-sorted according to which of the eight requirements is met by that question. A brief explanation of the proposed changes to the table follows.

First, the reporting frequency of evaluations has been changed from an annual to biennial reporting periods in the 2012 Planning Regulations. Therefore, the monitoring table shows the reporting frequency in multiples of two years. While the evaluation of the indicators may be at two, four, or six year reporting frequencies, the actual data will usually be collected more frequently than the reporting interval. The first report using this updated monitoring program will be available in September, 2018. Tasks for the monitoring program will reside on the website and be updated biennially. The monitoring tasks in Croatan Plan appendix L will be withdrawn.

Second, the Croatan NF monitoring program has five categories of questions. These question categories are broad and many indicators are identified under each question category. We found that more specific questions were needed to clarify the intent of the question category and indicator in the current monitoring program. Therefore, new questions are proposed that are more specific than the broad category question. Table 5.3.1 has the first column as the monitoring question category in the current program and the second column has the new specific question.

Third, question category 1a was changed from a focus on management indicator species to a focus on ecosystem or watershed conditions and restoration. We found that the Croatan NF Plan does have a focus on ecosystems and habitat conditions, but used management indicator species to indicate the condition of those ecosystems. Therefore, question category 1a has a proposed change for conditions of ecosystems and watersheds.

A brief explanation of the questions and indicators by requirement in Table 5.3.1 follows.

(i) The status of select watershed conditions.

Question 1 and the indicators measure key characteristics of watersheds that are important for assessing the sustainability of aquatic ecosystems. The question applies to tidal and non-tidal streams, as the Croatan NF is one of the few national forests affected by coastal tides. The indicators also show salinity as an important factor in the determining condition. These indicators are identified in the Watershed Condition Framework.

(ii) The status of select ecological conditions including key characteristics of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.

Questions 2-4 identify the key terrestrial ecosystems to monitor in the current monitoring program. The questions and indicators have been updated to guide monitoring efforts to track conditions and trends toward restoration of these ecosystems. The key

characteristics of these ecosystems are described in Chapter 2 of the Croatan NF Plan and discussed in Section 5.4 of the monitoring program. Inventories are updated annually but the evaluation of change will be reported in four years so that the system of integrating ecosystems into current information systems can be accomplished.

(iii) The status of focal species to assess the ecological conditions under 36 CFR 219.9.

Questions 5-8 are new questions that identify focal species. The focal species will provide information to help assess the functioning of ecosystems, which are identified in each question. The information systems for these data are currently functioning so that evaluation should occur biennially.

(iv) The status of a select set of ecological conditions required under 36 CFR 219.9 to contribute to the recovery of federally listed threatened or endangered species, conserve proposed and candidate species, and maintain a viable population of species of conservation concern.

Questions 9-12 clarify existing indicators in the current monitoring program. These questions are tracking selected species “at risk”, and conditions needed for the persistence of those species. Unique habitats and restoration of rare ecosystems are tracked through these questions. On-site surveys will be conducted and reported to address these questions.

(v) The status of visitor use, visitor satisfaction, and progress toward meeting recreation objectives.

Question 14 is in the current monitoring program. The information is tracked through a program (called the NVUM survey) of collecting visitor use and satisfaction data every five years on every national forest in the nation. The NVUM survey results will be used to address this question.

Questions 15 clarifies an existing indicator in the current monitoring program to assess progress for achieving recreation objectives related to recreation opportunities.

(vi) Measureable changes on the plan area related to climate change and other stressors that may be affecting the plan area.

Questions 15-17 are new questions related to climate change. Climate change creates stressors that should be tracked at scales larger than the forest. Therefore, the R8 Broad Scale Monitoring Strategy will address these questions throughout the region. To review these questions and associated indicators in more detail, a draft of the R8 Broad Scale Monitoring Strategy is located on the regional website:
www.fs.usda.gov/main/r8/landmanagement/planning.

Question 18 is a specific climate change question related to the Croatan NF's unique position as a national forest affected by coastal waters. Sea level rise will be tracked through studies with cooperating agencies and on-site observations.

(vii-a) Progress toward meeting the desired conditions and objectives in the plan, including providing for multiple use opportunities.

Questions 19- 22 clarify existing indicators in the current monitoring program. These questions are focused on tracking conditions supporting multiple uses. Tracking other multiple use opportunities are described under requirement (v) and (vii-b).

(vii-b) Social, economic, and cultural sustainability must also be addressed in the monitoring program.

Questions 23 and 24 are existing questions and indicators in the current monitoring program that are designed to track conditions of cultural and historic sites and the interactions with local communities.

Question 25 is a new question. Protecting local communities from wildfire is an important aspect of social sustainability. Community Wildfire Protection Plans identify risks to local communities and projects that reduce risks will be tracked in the monitoring program.

Question 26 is a new question that will be tracked through the R8 Broad Scale Monitoring Strategy that takes a look at social and economic conditions at regional and sub-regional scales. A draft of the R8 Broad Scale Monitoring Strategy is located on the regional website: www.fs.usda.gov/main/r8/landmanagement/planning.

(viii) The effects of each management system to determine that they do not substantially and permanently impair the productivity of the land (16 USC 1604(g)(3)(C)).

This is a legal requirement in the National Forest Management Act (1976) and will be monitored through on-site surveys at selected sites.

Administrative Change Process and Comment Period

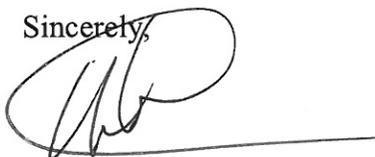
The 2012 Planning Rule allows for corrections or adjustments to Forest Plans using a process called "Administrative Changes." "Administrative changes" as defined by 36 CFR 219.13(c) is "... any change to a plan that is not a plan amendment or revision. Administrative changes include corrections of clerical errors to any part of the plan, conformance of the plan to new statutory or regulatory requirements, or other content in the plan (219.7(f))."

As described in 36 CFR 219.13(c)(1), "a substantive change to the monitoring program ... may be made only after notice to the public of the intended change and consideration of public comment." This letter is to notify you of the proposed changes and to provide you with the opportunity to comment on these proposed changes. Comments may be mailed to National

Forests in North Carolina, 160A Zillicoa St., Asheville, NC or emailed to comments-southern-north-carolina@fs.fed.us with the subject line "Croatan Monitoring". Comments will be accepted until April 2, 2016. This letter will also be posted on the National Forests in North Carolina website under Forest Plans – Croatan National Forest at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/land/nfsnc/landmanagement/planning>

This Administrative Change will become effective upon signature and being posted online at the Forest's website. Administrative changes are not subject to the objection process (36 CFR 219.50).

Should you have any comments or questions concerning this proposed change, please contact Michelle Aldridge, Forest Planning Staff Officer, at maldrige@fs.fed.us or 828-257-4259.

Sincerely,


HURSTON A. NICHOLAS
Forest Supervisor

