

Gila National Forest Forest Plan Revision Community Meetings Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

The Gila National Forest is currently in the process of updating its forest plan. The forest plan is the document that guides forest management and implementation actions on the ground. As part of the plan revision process, the US Forest Service is engaged in a series of public participation efforts to ensure that the views and preferences of the communities in and around the Forest are considered in the plan revision. In June 2017, the Gila National Forest staff held 5 community meetings to solicit input on 3 important topics for the plan revision: desired future conditions, “substantially noticeable” improvements as they relate to assessment of wilderness characteristics, and the ecosystem services provided by the Forest. These community meetings occurred the week of June 12, 2017, in the following New Mexico towns: Quemado, Reserve, Silver City, Truth or Consequences, and Las Cruces. This document provides a high-level summary of the format of the meetings and the input that was received. A more detailed meeting summary is available for each meeting as well.

PLANNING PROCESS OVERVIEW

The current forest plan, which was last revised in 1986, provides management guidance for all the resources on the Gila National Forest.

- Components of the revised Forest Plan will be developed to meet desired conditions. The Forest Plan will also include:
 - Objectives
 - Standards
 - Guidelines
 - Suitability
 - Management approaches
 - Geographical areas
 - A monitoring plan
 - Timber suitability
 - Priority watersheds
 - An inventory of lands that may have potential wilderness characteristics
 - A wild and scenic river eligibility study
 - A list of significant issues and alternatives
 - An environmental analysis.
- For this phase of the plan, the Gila National Forest is planning to hold community meetings, technical meetings, field trips, desired conditions workshops, and review/comment periods.
- For more information, visit the Gila National Forest Plan website: <http://go.usa.gov/h88k> or e-mail gilaplan@fs.fed.us.

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COMMUNITY MEETING PROCESS HIGHLIGHTS

The Gila National Forest planning team convened five community meetings: Quemado, Reserve, Silver City, Truth or Consequences, and Las Cruces. Each meeting had the same structure.

- Participants in the community meetings rotated through three “stations,” each with a different focus related to the Forest Plan Revision.
 1. **Desired Conditions** asked participants to write desired conditions for the Forest related to different topics (e.g., wildlife, infrastructure, vegetation, etc.).
 2. **Inventory of Lands with Potential Wilderness Characteristics** asked participants to assess visual improvements based on whether they were “substantially noticeable.” “Substantially noticeable” is an important term for the Gila National Forest planners to define during the inventory of lands that may have potential wilderness characteristics.
 3. **Values and Priorities** asked participants to prioritize the benefits from the forest that are most important to them.

KEY THEMES

Below are the key themes that emerged from each station across all five community meetings.

A. DESIRED CONDITIONS

Desired conditions will be the drivers of the Forest Plan. They are outcomes, not actions. They must be achievable. This means they must be within the inherent capability of the land and within the US Forest Service’s (USFS) ability and authority to affect. Below are the key themes across the five meetings in the topic areas that had the most responses from participants.

Infrastructure

- Road access and maintenance were discussed during each meeting. In Quemado, Reserve, and Silver City, participants articulated a need for strategic use of funds and identification of high-priority road systems so that roads remain open and accessible.
- Safe and well-maintained trails were also raised at each meeting. Unsafe conditions created by erosion were mentioned specifically in Quemado and Silver City. Trail connectivity and better signage were key issues in Las Cruces.

Vegetation

- Invasive species and juniper encroachment were discussed at each meeting. Participants in Reserve encouraged the USFS to identify, monitor, prioritize, and treat invasive species.
- Participants in Quemado, Truth or Consequences, Silver City, and Las Cruces also encouraged the USFS to manage non-native species and preserve native vegetation.
- Quemado participants were particularly concerned about pine and juniper encroachment.

Livestock Grazing

- Livestock grazing was discussed in Las Cruces, Silver City, and Truth or Consequences. Many participants in Truth or Consequences articulated the importance of grazing to the

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local economy and spoke specifically about grazing's ability to maintain healthy forests and manage fuel.

- In Silver City, participants discussed the need for more cooperation between ranchers and the USFS.
- In Las Cruces, participants discussed monitoring and restricting grazing to ensure that certain areas are protected, such as timberlands, riparian areas, and wildlife conservation areas. They specifically discussed rotating ranch allotment leases so that permits do not stay in the same family for generations.

Wildlife

- Wildlife abundance (for game species and threatened or endangered species) was discussed in Silver City, Reserve, Las Cruces, and Truth or Consequences.
- Wolf introduction was discussed at the Truth or Consequences meeting and the Las Cruces meeting. Participants in Truth or Consequences articulated the impact of wolf introduction on the hunting and ranching economy, and other wildlife species. While some spoke to the need for predators, others were unsupportive of wolf releases. In Las Cruces, participants discussed the promotion of wolf recovery for a healthy wildlife population.

B. INVENTORY OF LANDS WITH POTENTIAL WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

As part of the inventory of lands with potential wilderness characteristics process, the Gila National Forest must determine what existing structures and improvements are “substantially noticeable” and exclude them from the inventoried areas. Participants were asked to write their responses to the following 3 questions on a sticky note for each of 11 pictures with a manmade structure or improvement in it:

- Do you think the structure or improvement in this picture is substantially noticeable?
- Why or why not?
- Can you think of any change in circumstance that would change your answer to question number one?

THEMES ACROSS MEETINGS

- Most participants indicated that the visual improvements were substantially noticeable. Participants articulated that their decision regarding a structure's noticeability depended on the following components of the structure:
 - The materials
 - The localized impact
 - The purpose or intent
 - The size and height
 - The frequency
 - The required maintenance
 - The impact on vegetation or wildlife distribution
- Some participants indicated that several of the visual improvements were not substantially noticeable. Most frequently, these responses corresponded to agricultural support improvements such as aging range fences or cattle/wildlife guzzlers. People who responded

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this way typically indicated that agriculture was such an integral part of their community's landscape that these types of improvements were effectively invisible to them.

- Some participants also indicated that several improvements (an aging cabin and aging corral) were not substantially noticeable because they would deteriorate over time.
- One picture focused on an improvement (a fish barrier) that was constructed to blend into the natural environment; this item was not substantially noticeable to most participants.

C. VALUES AND PRIORITIES

Findings from this exercise prioritizing benefits from the forest are forthcoming. Chris Armatas and Bill Borrie from the University of Montana will publish a report with the diversity of opinions as well as the similarities among participants across all meetings.