

Gila National Forest Plan Revision

Inventory Process for Identifying Lands with Potential Wilderness Characteristics

FINAL Process Paper, September 2017



Front Cover Photo: Little Dry Creek, Gila Wilderness

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Introduction

The Gila National Forest is in the process of revising a land and resource management plan that has been in place since 1986. The 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219) provides the framework to create local land management plans for national forests and grasslands across the nation. The 2012 Planning Rule is intended to create a plan that guides resource management on the Gila National Forest within the context of the broader landscape. It takes an integrated and holistic approach that recognizes the interdependence of ecological, social, cultural and economic systems. Collaboration with stakeholders and process transparency are key components of this approach.

Each national forest undertaking Forest Plan Revision under the 2012 Planning Rule must complete a process of identifying and evaluating lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (hereafter referred to as process), and determine whether to recommend any of the evaluated lands to Congress for wilderness designation. Congress reserves the authority to designate wilderness through legislation. Forest Service Handbook 1909.12 Chapter 70 provides direction and guidance for the four-step process to be completed as one part of the larger Plan Revision effort:

1. **Inventory** to identify all National Forest Lands in the plan area that may have wilderness characteristics as defined in the Wilderness Act
2. **Evaluation** of the wilderness characteristics possessed by the lands identified in the Inventory step of the process
3. **Analysis** of evaluated areas determined to be suitable for inclusion in one or more alternatives as part of the Forest Plan Revision National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process
4. **Recommendation** of any lands determined by the Forest Supervisor (Responsible Official) that should be included in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Only Congress may designate wilderness

This Document outlines the process employed to accomplish the Inventory. The primary function of the Inventory step is to efficiently, effectively, and transparently narrow down and identify all lands in the plan area that may have wilderness characteristics as defined in the Wilderness Act. An Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team) has been selected and assigned by the Forest Supervisor for this purpose.

The product resulting from the Inventory process is a series of maps that will be made available for public review and feedback, and included as part of the Forest Plan Revision official documentation. The Inventory Maps will include all National Forest System areas that are identified to move on to the next step of the process, which is the evaluation of the inventoried lands.

Lands shown on this preliminary series of inventory maps do not imply designation or convey or require a particular kind of management, and inclusion or removal of any of these lands will continue to be open to consideration throughout the process until the Forest Supervisor signs the Record of Decision for the Forest Plan EIS. Copies of the DRAFT and FINAL Inventory Maps will be made available in both electronic and hardcopy form.

Steps in the Gila NF Inventory Process:

1. **Because there is no definition provided in FSH 1909.12, Chapter 70, and for the purposes of undertaking a reasonably broad, inclusive, and transparent Inventory of lands with potential wilderness characteristics, the Gila National Forest has developed a definition of “substantially noticeable” for use in Inventory process:**

In June 2017, the Gila National Forest staff held 5 community meetings and 1 technical meeting for the forest plan revision process. These meetings occurred the week of June 12, 2017, in the following New Mexico towns: Quemado, Reserve, Silver City, Truth or Consequences, and Las Cruces. Among the topics included was defining “substantially noticeable” improvements as they relate to inclusion in the inventory of lands with potential wilderness characteristics.

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?

Common themes that were identified across a range of participants throughout the meetings were considered when developing the Gila National Forest definition of “substantially noticeable”:



Rain Creek Trail, Gila Wilderness

Substantially Noticeable improvements

are judged to negatively affect the predominantly natural appearance of the surrounding landscape to an average, reasonable person due to any single or combination of the following traits:

- They are not of a relatively small size or of an inconspicuous height compared to surrounding features on the landscape;
- They are numerous within the area and are located close by to each other rather than scattered broadly across the landscape;
- They are not unobtrusive in shape or contour, and consist of straight lines and right angles;
- They are highly reflective or not of natural coloration, and cannot be made non-reflective or altered to be a more natural coloration;
- They appear to be of modern, human construction, and are not made of natural or natural appearing materials;

- They are not shielded from general view by their location, by being sheltered by landscape features, or by being hidden by surrounding vegetation;
- They are not temporary in nature, and cannot be removed or restored without unreasonable expense or difficulty, or without inflicting unreasonable impacts to a valid existing forest use, existing essential service, essential infrastructure, valid existing right, or a valid existing permitted use expected to continue for the foreseeable future;
- They will not either decompose or naturalize by vegetation growth, and will continue to affect the natural appearance of the area for more than 20 years into the future;
- They do not contribute significantly to the historical character and cultural context of the area by their presence and preservation;
- They that are not a range improvement allowed to be maintained under the Congressional Grazing Guidelines for Wilderness, or they are not similar to improvements that currently exist in Gila National Forest Wilderness areas.

2. Application of a GIS analysis of existing roads and motorized routes across all Gila NF lands is the first step in development of the Inventory Maps. Apply all appropriate Roads layers and identified motorized routes included in the public use Gila NF Motorized Vehicle Use Maps (MVUM) that were developed as part of the Gila NF Travel Management Process.

- Identify any existing roads that are to be included in the inventory according the Planning Handbook Chapter 70, by the following criteria:
 - Areas that contain forest roads maintained to level 1 (see Definitions section for a detailed description of the maintenance levels 1 through 5);
 - Areas with any routes that are decommissioned, unauthorized or temporary, or forest roads that are identified for decommissioning by a previous decision or in a travel management plan or analysis;
 - Areas with forest roads that will be reclassified to level 1 through a previous decision or in a travel management plan or analysis;
 - Areas may be included that (although they contain roads) were through some previous planning effort identified as potentially being a candidate for consideration as recommended wilderness.
 - The Forest Supervisor may also decide to include some areas identified by comments or another government agency recommendation, even if they may currently contain roads;
 - Areas with historical wagon routes, historical mining routes, or other settlement era transportation features considered part of the historical and cultural landscape of the area;
 - Areas with maintenance level 2 roads that do not meet the criteria for exclusion in subsection 2(c) below
- Identify all roads to be excluded from the inventory according to the following criteria from the Planning Handbook Chapter 70:
 - Roads permanently authorized for a valid easement or other interest;
 - Forest roads maintained to levels 3, 4, or 5;
 - Level 2 (or higher level roads that will be reclassified to level 2 through a previous decision) that meet one or more of the following criteria and are not in proposed areas for cultural or historical significance;

- They have been improved and are maintained by mechanical means to ensure relatively regular and continued use;
 - They have cumulatively degraded wilderness character or precluded future preservation of the area as wilderness;
 - They have been identified for continued public access and use in a project level or travel planning decision supported by NEPA analysis; or
 - If for any other reason, they disqualify the area for evaluation and as potentially suitable for wilderness, based on assessment information or on-the-ground knowledge
- The ID Team agreed to set inventoried area boundaries to an initial buffer of 300 feet from level II and higher roads to be consistent with Travel Management dispersed camping corridors in effect on many Forest roads. However, throughout the Inventory, Evaluation, and Analysis steps of the process, buffers will be adjusted to a distance that aligns to the context of individual circumstances.

As some areas are carried forward into the next steps of the process, further refinements in boundaries and buffers may be necessary to account for conflicts and unique individual circumstances, such as administrative access, rights of way, and other valid existing rights.

3. Identify, by use of GIS, INFRA database, on-the-ground knowledge, and any other appropriate sources of information (including information from public/stakeholder comments), all areas containing improvements that meet the definition of “substantially noticeable”.

- For consistency with buffers applied to roads, all substantially noticeable improvements will initially be excluded from inventoried areas by a buffer of 300 feet from the area boundaries;
- Gravel pits and areas of mining activity will initially be buffered for 1,000 feet from inventoried areas, to allow for potential future pit development and mine site restoration activity needs;
- Inventoried areas that are immediately adjacent to planned vegetative treatments will be buffered 100 feet from mechanical treatment activity areas indicated on GIS layers;
- As areas move forward in the process, buffers around substantially noticeable improvements will be re-examined and adjusted on a case by case basis to be an appropriate distance in the context of individual circumstances;
- In cases where singular and isolated, or multiple and widely dispersed substantially noticeable improvements are in the interior of a larger polygon area, it may prove difficult to exclude them with a buffer or by a making a simple boundary adjustment; in such cases, efforts will be made to include in the inventory the unaffected surrounding areas by means of dissecting the area into smaller inventoried areas, by use of a “cherry stem” exclusion from the boundary to the improvement, or by some other means;
- On a case-by-case basis, Forest Supervisor discretion may allow for substantially noticeable improvements to be included when use of boundary adjustment or “cherry stemming” is not possible and if the surrounding inventoried areas should be evaluated for wilderness characteristics in Step 2 of the process

4. Include all lands in the inventory with improvements or evidence of past human activities that are not found to be “substantially noticeable”. This may include (but is not necessarily limited to) the following types of improvements:

- Airstrips and heliports;

- Vegetation treatments that are not substantially noticeable;
- Timber harvest areas where logging and prior road construction are not substantially noticeable;
- Permanently installed vertical structures, such as electronic installations that support television, radio, telephone, or cellular communications, provided their impacts, as well as their maintenance and access needs, are minimal;
- Areas of mining activity where impacts are not substantially noticeable;
- Range improvement areas (FSM 2240.5), involving minor structural improvements (for example, fences or water troughs) and nonstructural improvements (such as chaining, burning, spraying, potholing, and so forth) that are not substantially noticeable;
- Recreation improvements, such as occupancy spots, or minor hunting or outfitter camps. As a general rule, developed sites should not be included. Areas with minor, easily removable recreation developments may be included;
- Ground-return telephone lines, electric lines, and powerlines if a right-of-way has not been cleared. Powerlines with cleared rights-of-way, pipelines, and other permanently installed linear right-of-way structures should not be included;
- Watershed treatment areas (such as contouring, diking, channeling) that are not substantially noticeable. Areas may include minor watershed treatments that have been accomplished manually such as small hand-constructed gully plugs;
- Lands adjacent to development or activities that impact opportunities for solitude. The fact that nonwilderness activities or uses can be seen or heard from within any portion of the area, must not, of itself, preclude inclusion in the inventory. It is appropriate to extend boundaries to the edges of development for purposes of inclusion in the inventory;
- Structures, dwellings, and other relics of past occupation when they are considered part of the historical and cultural landscape of the area;
- Areas with improvements that have been proposed by the Forest Service for consideration as recommended wilderness as a result of a previous Forest planning process or that the Forest Supervisor judges to deserve to be included in the inventory that were proposed for consideration through public or intergovernmental participation opportunities (sec. 70.61 of FSH 1909.12);

5. Adjust area boundaries where roads or private property boundaries are in relatively close proximity to each other, or excessively narrow areas are created between roads and/or private property boundaries

- In instances where inventoried area boundaries with private property or Level II or higher roads (including their 300-foot buffer) are located within a relatively short distance from each other (see figure 1 example), making them substantially noticeable to each other across the relatively short divide, the two may be joined together to form a new boundary excluding this smaller area;
- Examples may include “cherry stem” intrusions into the area that are closely oriented, relatively parallel, and at a close enough distance to be substantially noticeable to each other (compare changes from figure 1 to figure 2);
- The acceptable distance between roads and boundaries that are to be joined in this manner is variable on a case by case basis and site-specific circumstances as judged by the IDT;

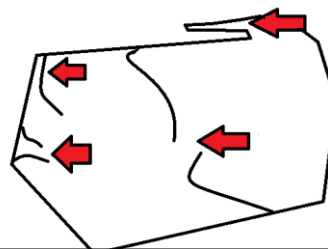


Figure 1: roads and boundaries substantially noticeable to each other within an inventoried area

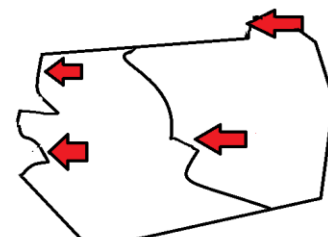


Figure 2: Inventoried area boundaries “cleaned up” of substantially noticeable roads and boundaries

6. The ID Team shall assign each identified area on the Inventory Map(s) with an Identification Number, that shall consist of the following:

- Upper-case, or capital letter(s) for the district(s) upon which it is located: “Q” for Quemado District, “B” for Black Range District, “R” for Reserve District, G for Glenwood District, “W” for Wilderness District, and “S” for Silver City District;
- The letter(s) will be followed by a sequential number among the set of polygons within the district boundaries where it is located. For example: if the Glenwood District has 7 discrete polygons identified on that district, the assigned numbers should be G1 through G7;
- For polygons that cross district boundaries, they will be assigned the letters for each district, plus a sequential number separate from those assigned in each district. For example, if there were 3 polygons that cross the boundary between Silver City and Glenwood districts, they would be numbered SG-1 through SG-3. And, if a single polygon crossed the boundary between Quemado, Reserve and Glenwood districts it would be numbered QRG-1;

- All separate, inventoried area boundary polygons contiguous to the same existing wilderness, primitive areas, administratively recommended wilderness, or wilderness inventory of other federal ownership, shall be distinguished by using the same identifier number with a lower-case letter at the end – for example: two separate polygons on the Black Range District contiguous to the Aldo Leopold Wilderness may be numbered B-7a, and B-7b;



View of Southern Black Range, Aldo Leopold Wilderness

- 7. For ease in identification by the agency and the public, each area shall be assigned a unique Common Name Identifier in addition to its assigned Identification Number. The ID Team will consult with the ranger district where it is located to determine an appropriate informal name for a Common Name Identifier.**
- Assignment of a Common Name identifier is intended to aid in communication by making available for use by the IDT and stakeholders a simple, easily remembered identification for each area that the ID Team will evaluate and analyze during the next steps of the process
For example: If reference were made to the Aspen Mountain Area, both the public and agency employees will more easily orient to the area than if it were referred to as only area G-2;
 - The Common Name may be chosen to correspond with geographic location, a prominent geologic, natural, historic, or cultural feature within the area, a name previously assigned to an Inventoried Roadless Area or Wilderness Study Area that is part or entirely within the inventoried area boundary, by its association with a contiguous, existing wilderness, primitive area, or wilderness inventory of other federal ownership, or some other reason at the discretion of the ID Team (in consultation with the ranger district where the area is located);
 - In all official correspondence, inventoried areas will be referred to by both their Common Name and Identification Number

- 8. Prior to release of the DRAFT Inventory Map, release the DRAFT Inventory Process Paper for public review and feedback (30 days).**
 - Access to this DRAFT document will allow stakeholders to become familiar with the process used to develop the DRAFT Inventory, and to facilitate consideration of public feedback on the Gila National Forest inventory process and definition of substantially noticeable;
- 9. Following an internal Forest review, release the DRAFT Inventory Maps for public review and feedback (30 days).**
- 10. Include on the FINAL Inventory Maps boundary any additional areas to be included at the Forest Supervisor's discretion:**
 - Regardless of whether they meet the inventory criteria, the Planning Handbook gives the Forest Supervisor authority to include any additional lands along with those identified by the inventory to be included in the Evaluation step of the process (1909.12 Chapter 70 section 71.2);
 - Any such areas identified will be assigned an Identification Number and Common Name Identifier by the processes identified in steps 8) and 9);
- 11. Following the end of the stakeholder review period, release of the FINAL Inventory Map(s) and Inventory Process Paper after considering stakeholder comments and input from a continued internal review – Final step before beginning the Evaluation Process.**



Continental Divide National Scenic Trail in Rocky Canyon, Gila Wilderness

Inventory Process Documentation

The process used to identify Inventory areas is provided in the form of this document for the purpose of presenting a transparent description of how the inventory process will be conducted, and how the results of the Inventory Map(s) will be arrived upon.

This document, the Inventory Map(s), and any additional documents required under Forest Service Planning Handbook 1909.12 Chapter 70 section 71.3 shall be included in the applicable NEPA documents for the Gila NF Forest Plan Revision EIS.

The Interdisciplinary Team shall record all lands included in the inventory on a map or series of maps of the planning area, titled and referred throughout this document as the Inventory Map(s). As per FSH 1909.12 Chapter 70, the Team shall identify on the same map or series of maps the following lands:

- Existing designated wilderness and primitive areas;
- Congressionally designated wilderness study areas, and any wilderness proposals pending before Congress. Indicate relevant statutory dates, if any;
- Areas identified in the Forest Service Roadless Area Conservation Final Environmental Impact Statement (Volume 2, November 2000), or in a Forest Service State-specific roadless rule, or identified as undeveloped or for primitive nonmotorized management in the current land management plan;
- National Forest System lands statutorily designated for management for nonwilderness purposes. Indicate effective dates, if any;
- Other areas and features that the Forest Supervisor has determines would be useful to show on the map to facilitate effective and transparent stakeholder participation and input on this topic:
 - Area boundary polygons of all Inventoried areas, clearly labeled with the Identification Number and Common Name Identifier that was assigned to the area by the ID Team;
 - Any Federal, state, county, municipal, or Forest System Roads level 2-5 that are judged by the IDT to be of use to clarify location and orient map users;
 - Any additional improvements (substantially noticeable or not), features or locations that are judged as being of value to clarifying map locations and the results of the inventory by the ID Team
 - Each copy of the map or series of maps shall prominently display the following statement in a prominent and easily read font and location:

“Lands identified on this inventory map do not imply designation or convey or require a particular kind of management, and inclusion or removal of any of these lands will continue to be open to consideration throughout the process, which continues until the Forest Supervisor signs the Record of Decision for the Forest Plan EIS.”

Next Steps in the Process

Step Two: Evaluation

The next step following the inventory is to evaluate each area identified by the inventory for wilderness characteristics. A separate process paper will be developed for describing the Evaluation step, and will be submitted in DRAFT form for a 30-day public review and comment period prior to being finalized and implemented.

Evaluation of wilderness characteristics is conducted according to criteria developed from direction within the Wilderness Act of 1964 and Forest Service Planning Handbook FSH 1909.12, Chapter 70, Section 72.1:

- Evaluate the degree to which the area generally appears to be affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprints of man's work substantially unnoticeable (apparent naturalness);
- Evaluate the degree to which the area has outstanding opportunities for solitude or for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation. The word "or" means that an area only has to possess one or the other. The area does not have to possess outstanding opportunities for both elements, nor does it need to have outstanding opportunities on every acre;
- Evaluate how an area of less than 5,000 acres is of sufficient size to make its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition practicable;
- Evaluate the degree to which an area may contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value. These values are not required in an area to be present, but their presence should be identified and evaluated where they exist;
- Evaluate the degree to which the area may be managed to preserve its wilderness characteristics;

Areas may also be divided or consolidated, grouped for the purpose of evaluation, and the scope of the evaluation may be varied based on specific characteristics of each area or portions of the area, at the Forest Supervisor's discretion. Any such actions will be detailed within the Evaluation process documentation.

Step Three: Analysis

After the Evaluation step is accomplished, the completed evaluations will be used to inform the Forest Supervisor's selection of which areas, or modified areas, are to be analyzed in each of the forest plan revision EIS alternatives. Stakeholder comments will also be an important consideration for the analysis, modification, and inclusion of the areas in the preferred alternative prior to release of the DRAFT plan revision EIS. If any evaluated area is not analyzed in any of the alternatives, a justification must be documented and included in the EIS.

Step Four: Recommendation

In the signed Record of Decision, the Forest Supervisor may recommend for any of the lands analyzed through the process to be designated by Congress for inclusion in National Wilderness Preservation System. This is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President of the United States. Only Congress has the authority to designate wilderness through legislation. Also, the revised plan must include components that provide for managing recommended wilderness areas to protect and maintain the ecological and social characteristics that are the basis for each area's suitability for wilderness recommendation. Only if an area is included in the Forest Plan EIS Record of Decision as Recommended Wilderness to Congress for consideration as designated wilderness will it from that time be managed so as to protect these wilderness characteristics. This management direction will continue until Congress acts on the recommendation one way or another, or when the next planning cycle reevaluates any recommended areas.

Definitions

Forest road. A road wholly or partly within or adjacent to and serving the National Forest System (NFS) that the Forest Service determines is necessary for the protection, administration, and utilization of the NFS and the use and development of its resources (36 CFR 212.1).

Maintenance levels. The level of service provided by, and maintenance required for, a specific road (FSH 7709.59, ch. 60, sec. 62.3).

1. **Level 1.** These are roads that have been placed in storage between intermittent uses. The period of storage must exceed 1 year. Basic custodial maintenance is performed to prevent damage to adjacent resources and to perpetuate the road for future resource management needs. Emphasis is normally given to maintaining drainage facilities and runoff patterns. Planned road deterioration may occur at this level. Appropriate traffic management strategies are to “prohibit” and “eliminate” all traffic. These roads are not shown on motor vehicle use maps. Roads receiving level 1 maintenance may be of any type, class, or construction standard, and may be managed at any other maintenance level during the time they are open for traffic. However, while being maintained at level 1, they are closed to vehicular traffic but may be available and suitable for nonmotorized uses.
2. **Level 2.** This level is assigned to roads open for use by high-clearance vehicles. Passenger car traffic, user comfort, and user convenience are not considerations. Warning signs and traffic control devices are not provided with the exception that some signing, such as W-18-1 “No Traffic Signs,” may be posted at intersections. Motorists should have no expectations of being alerted to potential hazards while driving these roads. Traffic is normally minor, usually consisting of one or a combination of administrative, permitted, dispersed recreation, or other specialized uses. Log haul may occur at this level. Appropriate traffic management strategies are either to “discourage” or “prohibit” passenger cars. “Accept” or “discourage” strategies may be employed for high clearance vehicles.
3. **Level 3.** This level is assigned to roads open and maintained for travel by a prudent driver in a standard passenger car. User comfort and convenience are not considered priorities. The manual on uniform traffic control devices is applicable. Warning signs and traffic control devices are provided to alert motorists of situations that may violate expectations. Roads in this maintenance level are typically low speed with single lanes and turnouts. Appropriate traffic management strategies are either to “encourage” or “accept” passenger cars. “Discourage” or “prohibit” strategies may be employed for certain classes of vehicles or users.
4. **Level 4.** This level is assigned to roads that provide a moderate degree of user comfort and convenience at moderate travel speeds. Most roads are double lane and aggregate surfaced. However, some roads may be single lane. Some roads may be paved and/or dust abated. The manual on uniform traffic control devices is applicable. The most appropriate traffic management strategy is to “encourage” passenger cars. However, the “prohibit” strategy may apply to specific classes of vehicles or users at certain times.
5. **Level 5.** This level is assigned to roads that provide a high degree of user comfort and convenience. These roads are normally double lane, paved facilities. Some may be aggregate surfaced and dust abated. The manual on uniform traffic control devices is applicable. The appropriate traffic management strategy is to “encourage” passenger cars.

Definition of Wilderness, from the Wilderness Act of 1964

"...lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition..." Section 2(a)

DEFINITION OF WILDERNESS



"A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value." Section 2(c)

"...shall be devoted to the public purposes of recreation, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation and historic use." Section 4(b)

References:

USDA FS (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service). 2012. National Forest System Land Management Planning; Final Rule. 36 CFR Part 219.

USDA FS (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service). 2015. Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.12- Land Management Planning Handbook: Chapter 70- Wilderness.

USDA FS (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service). 2015. R3 Designated Areas, Wilderness, and Wild and Scenic Rivers Forest Plan Revision Process Guidance under the 2012 Planning Rule.

USDA FS (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service). 2015. R3 Wilderness Process Guidance (Timing/Public Engagement/Documentation) for Wilderness Inventory Evaluation, Analysis, and Recommendation under the 2012 Planning Rule.