



Flathead National Forest Plan Revision Stakeholder Engagement Final Report Phase II

June 2017

I. Introduction

Phase II of the stakeholder engagement process for the Flathead National Forest's Plan revision focused on interagency engagement, which was a critical component of the stakeholder engagement process. The first two Interagency Group meetings were held during Phase I (in December 2013 and July 2014) and are referenced in the Phase I Final Report. Seven more Interagency Group meetings were held during phase II (between December 2014 and January 2017). This Phase II Final Report encompasses the whole interagency engagement effort. Meeting summaries for all the Interagency Group meetings are included in Appendix A, with the exception of the November 4, 2016 meeting which was facilitated and documented by Flathead National Forest staff.

II. Summary Information

A. Interagency Meeting Dates

The Interagency Group meetings were scheduled to coincide with important milestones in the Plan revision process. Following are the meeting dates:

Phase I:

December 6, 2013

July 15, 2014

Phase II:

December 3, 2014 (also included a separate, county specific consultation)

March 4, 2015

July 15, 2015

November 4, 2015

May 24, 2016

November 4, 2016 (Flathead National Forest facilitated)

January 24, 2017

B. Interagency Group Purposes

The Interagency Group was established by the Flathead National Forest (the Forest) at the very outset of the Forest Plan revision process as a forum for the Forest to provide updates about the revision process, answer questions, and obtain detailed input and feedback on the Draft Plan as it was under development. The process enabled the Forest to better evaluate whether each Interagency Group member's respective planning and land use documents were or were not consistent with the revised Plan. The Interagency Group meetings also provided an opportunity for the Forest and its interagency partners to exchange updates and information about an array of relevant policies, planning processes and other activities of general interest to jurisdictions around the Forest.

C. Interagency Group Members

The Flathead National Forest invited Federal, Tribal, State, and local entities from around the region to participate in the Interagency Group. These included the National Park Service (Glacier National Park); Bureau of Reclamation; US Fish and Wildlife Service; US Border Patrol; Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal representatives; Montana Department of Natural Resources; Montana State Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department; and numerous counties (Flathead, Missoula, Lake, Sanders (invited), Lincoln (invited)). Not all entities participated in every meeting, but there was a consistent core group of people who attended regularly. Refer to Appendix B for a list of all the Interagency Group members who participated in the process.

D. Meeting Procedures

The meetings were convened by Joe Krueger, the Flathead National Forest planning team leader, and usually attended by the Forest Supervisor, and several members of the Interdisciplinary Team responsible for drafting the Forest Plan. Connie Lewis from Meridian Institute developed meeting agendas, and facilitated and documented all but one meeting. Meridian also issued invitations and tracked RSVPs for the meetings.

The meetings, which were generally between two hours to half a day in length, were conducted at the Flathead National Forest Supervisor's Office in Kalispell, MT. Interagency Group members who were unable to attend in person were provided the option to participate via the USFS video-teleconferencing (VTC) system or by teleconference.

III. Outcomes

The Flathead National Forest invested significant time and resources into the interagency engagement process, and took the input from interagency partners very seriously. The process resulted in a number of important outcomes:

- First, and probably most importantly, the Forest received affirmation from its interagency partners about the overall direction of the revision process, and assurance from each Interagency Group member that their respective planning and land use documents were in almost every case consistent with the revised Plan.
- Interagency Group members offered useful, detailed input and feedback on the draft Forest Plan, and on the process of interagency engagement. The revised Plan was adjusted and improved thanks to the input received from the Interagency Group members on particular points of interest to their jurisdictions (e.g., the “front-country” designation). As a consequence, the revised Forest Plan will reflect the input of multiple interests in the region, and be more durable as a result.
- There was significant value in the general exchange of information among the Interagency Group members and the Forest. The information exchange resulted in closer cooperation on several important issues beyond the confines of the Forest Plan revision process (e.g., wildlife surveys, recreation planning, etc.).
- Through the interagency engagement process, the Forest established a platform for on-going communication among agencies across the region that will transcend the Forest Plan revision. This Interagency Group provides a unique forum for this opportunity.
- The Interagency Group members expressed appreciation for the Forest’s willingness to engage and for its responsiveness to input provided.

IV. Significant Lessons and Reflections from the Interagency Engagement Process

Following are a few lessons and reflections from Meridian Institute regarding the Flathead National Forest’s interagency engagement process.

- 1) In our experience, the level of investment (time and resources), and the priority given to the Forest in an interagency group process is somewhat unique. The Forest’s commitment was manifested in the number of Interagency Group meetings conducted; willingness to hire outside collaboration expertise to help manage the process; the fact that the Forest Supervisor and essentially the whole Inter-disciplinary Team made a point of attending the Interagency Group meetings; and the information and materials that were provided to the Group members so they could provide meaningful feedback.
- 2) The way in which this process was conducted - open, transparent, respectful, and with a tone of cooperation - was another important, and fairly unique characteristic of this process. This went a long way towards encouraging frank and constructive dialogue

among the Interagency Group members and with the Forest on issues that are often contentious in other settings.

- 3) Participation by the full Inter-disciplinary Team was appreciated and highly beneficial. Their involvement signaled the importance of the process, and gave the Interagency Group members a chance to ask, and get responses to, detailed substantive questions.
- 4) The Forest demonstrated a sincere interest in what the Interagency Group members had to offer, and used their input. We believe that this will serve the Forest, and the region, in good stead, as the revised Forest Plan is implemented, since inevitably there will be questions and challenges. The process set the stage for ongoing, mutually beneficial, interactions going forward.

There were also a few challenges in the process:

- 5) In spite of a concerted effort to encourage participation from all relevant land management and regulatory agencies in the region, there was limited attendance from other counties besides Flathead and Missoula, and from Tribes. That said, the two counties with the most direct connection to the Forest were regular attendees in the process, and the Tribes have another venue for input through the formal government to government consultative process. Although it was valuable to have the VTC access option, it might be helpful in the future to consider some additional targeted approaches to better enable other county and Tribal participation (starting by asking them individually if they would value involvement with the Interagency Group, and if so in what way).
- 6) The maintenance of an up-to-date contact list of potential Interagency Group members could have been improved, e.g. capturing the turn-over in agencies on a timely basis.

In summary, Meridian Institute believes that Forest's interagency engagement process was well worth the investment given the quality and amount of useful input obtained; the confidence the Forest can have as a result of the process that they are consistent with other jurisdictions' planning and land use documents; positive feedback from the Interagency Group members; and the foundation that was established for future interagency collaboration.

Appendix A

Meeting Summaries



FNF Plan Revision Interagency Group Meeting Summary

Date: December 6, 2013

Location: Flathead National Forest Supervisor's Office, 650 Wolfpack Way Kalispell, MT

Overview

This meeting was the first gathering of the Flathead National Forest (FNF) Interagency Group. The reason for convening the Interagency Group is ultimately to develop a revised FNF management plan that reflects the shared objectives and values of other land management and regulatory agencies in addition to those of the FNF. The objectives for the initial phase of engaging with other agencies are:

- obtain agency feedback on the proposed 2006 modified draft FNF plan (available [here](#)), which contains elements that may be included in the new plan revision;
- identify other agency plans, processes and activities that should be considered by the FNF during its plan revision process;

The specific purpose of this meeting was to provide:

- an overview of the FNF Management Plan revision process;
- an opportunity for participants to raise questions, concerns, and suggestions for the revision process;
- an opportunity for participants to contribute initial input on key issues in the FNF Management Plan revision topics.

Below are the discussion highlights and a list of resources suggested by attendees for the Flathead National Forest (FNF) to consider as part of its management plan revision process. A list of attendee is included in Appendix A.

FNF Plan Revision Process and Interagency Group Involvement

Joe Krueger, Forest Plan Revision Acting Team Leader for the FNF, presented an overview of the FNF plan revision context, schedule, and policy sideboards. The PowerPoint slides from his presentation are posted [here](#).

Discussion Highlights

- FNF staff explained that the goal of the collaborative stakeholder process is to develop a better, more creative management plan that reflects stakeholder's input. It was emphasized that comments collected during the collaborative stakeholder process do not replace or hold any more weight than comments collected during the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase of the plan revision process.
- The FNF 2006 modified draft plan is being offered as a starting point for discussions.
- The revised management plan will include detail about monitoring and adaptive management to account for changing conditions over time.
- The USFS 2012 National Planning Rule (which dictates how all national forests develop their management plans) requires interagency coordination. The Interagency Group may want to further discuss the potential benefits and responsibilities of "Cooperative Agency" Status, described on page 21262 of the USFS 2012 Planning rule under (iv).
- Several of the agency representatives mentioned forest access as a topic of significant interest.

Suggested Resources

Meridian Institute will contact agency representatives who attended the Interagency Group Meeting to request the resources below associated with their organization, as well as any other resource the representatives think could be helpful to USFS during the FNF plan revision process.

- All: Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy
- All: Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction
- BJ: Flathead County Growth Plan- includes trails plan; a variety of neighborhood plans, many of which have jurisdictional boundaries into national forest; zoning district plans, a number of which include some national forest lands; subdivision regulations which are related to the issue of access (ex. for fire response)
- BJ: Flathead County's Community Protection Plans
- BJ: Flathead County's Prioritization Levels of Fuel Reduction
- BJ: Flathead County's Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) maps
- Cal: Flathead County's Natural Resource Guide (updated version is available online)
- Dennis: The 1970 MOU between the Hungry Horse Dam and FNF
- Gary: Information on the historic boundary, called, "Middle of the North Fork" and "the North Bank of the Middle Fork", which becomes significant during hunting season and when discussing Wild and Scenic Rivers

- Jim: Bull trout Recovery Plan that will eventually come out
- Jim: the FNF's management plan with Tribes, particularly in regards to bull trout which is a work in progress
- Jim: the West Slope Cutthroat Trout Restoration Plan
- Joe asked about where in state DNRC plans recreation is discussed; Steve said areas of FNF impact and areas for potential cooperation are within site specific plans, where access is a big issue;
- Joe: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks's overall strategy (from Jim)
- Kali: Missoula county's up-to-date conservation easement maps
- Kali: the Place Project Database is an interactive web map with a lot of natural resource information
- Kali: Missoula County's property information system database includes information about conservation easements; Flathead County and Lake County might have one, too; (Kali mentioned this to Shannon after the meeting)
- Kali: the Missoula County Growth Policy, which includes land use designations
- Kali: the Swan's Comprehensive Plan which falls under the County's Growth Policy but is another land use designation document
- Kali: the Missoula County Subdivision Regulations, which are currently being revised; this includes sections on natural resources, WUI, and wildlife
- Mark: A conservation plan Glacier is working on?
- Mark: Glacier Park's Fire Management Plan
- Mark: Glacier Park's General Management Plan
- Mark: recent Director's Order 41, which will be changing some delineation of Glacier's proposed wilderness areas
- Mark: the Backcountry and Wilderness Plan that Glacier is working on at a lower-level process
- Mark: the Fisheries Management Plan that Glacier is working on
- Mark: Wild and Scenic Rivers
- Rob: NPS's Superintendent's Compendium, which focuses on how the park can enforce certain laws/regulations and provides more detail to the CFR, breaking broad regulations down into details
- Seeley-Swan Fire Protection Plan/Map
- Shannon: 7(a)1 refers to a section of the Endangered Species Act, which states, "All other Federal agencies shall, in consultation with the with the assistance of the Secretary [of Interior], utilize their authorities in furtherance of the purposes of this Act by carrying out programs for the conservation of endangered and threatened species pursuant to section 4 of this Act."
- Shannon: Conservation Easement Geographic Database; not everything is populated, but it's a start

- Shannon: DNRC Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs) for easement plans; one of the provisions is that easements will be held by different entities (USFWS, DNRC (maybe), Trust for Public Lands, Montana FWP)
 - Gary: The HCPs are confusing because the easement programs overlap, particularly in the Swan area; Gary said they may pull all that together—Joe said we'll want to look at the overarching strategy of the HCPs
- Shannon: The Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Lost Trail NWR was completed in 2005, but will be reinitiated when the National Bison Range starts its CCP process (because Lost Trail is now managed by the Bison Range)
- Shannon: The only other refuges and wildlife management areas in the vicinity of Flathead NF would be Nine Pipe and Pablo National Wildlife Refuges, and Northwest Montana Wetland Management District. These are all managed by the Bison Range and will have CCPs tied with that process.
- Shannon: State Cadastral Website (Shannon mentioned this to Kali after the meeting)
- Shannon: The conservation plan for Swan NWR it is contained within the Benton Lake NWR Complex's Comprehensive Conservation Plan completed in 2013. The latter also contains information for the Swan Valley Conservation Area. See: <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/ccp/mt/bnl/bnl.html>.
- Shannon: The USFS partnership agreement for stream restoration work on private land is with MT Watershed Coordination Council, and covers any land within the vicinity of NFS land in Montana (more than just Swan Valley)
- Steve: State Forest Management Plan
- Steve: Whitefish Neighborhood Management Plan (there is a guideline in this plan that outline recreation conditions on state trust lands what would be valuable to at least look at)
- Steve: Wildlife Protection Offset; *Need clarification: is this a set of information or is it part of a particular plan?*

Appendix A

FNF Plan Revision Interagency Group Meeting December 6, 2013

Interagency Group Members

Kali Becher, Missoula County Community and Planning Services
Mark Biel, Glacier National Park
Shannon Downey, US Fish & Wildlife Service
Steve Frye, Department of Natural Resource, Northwest Field Office
BJ Grieve, Flathead County Planning
Pam Holmquist, Flathead County Commissioner
Gary Krueger, Flathead County Commissioner
Dennis Philmon, Bureau of Reclamation
Jim Satterfield, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Region 1
Cal Scott, Flathead County Commissioner
Amy Secrest, Glacier National Park
Richard Stratton, US Border Patrol

Members of the Public

Clarence Taber, Montanans for Multiple Use

Flathead National Forest Staff

Rob Carlin, FNF Forest Planner
Reed Kuennen, FNF Wildlife Specialist
Joe Krueger, FNF Forest Plan Revision Team Leader
Dennis McCarthy, FNF Geospatial Program Manager
Chip Weber, FNF Supervisor

Meridian Institute Staff

Rianne BeCraft, Project Assistant and Fellow
Connie Lewis, Senior Partner



Flathead National Forest Plan Revision Interagency Meeting July 15, 2014 Summary

Meeting Purpose

The purposes of this meeting were to:

- Provide updates on the Flathead National Forest Plan revision process and an overview of the results of the stakeholder engagement process
- Give Interagency Group members an opportunity to raise questions, concerns, and suggestions for the next phase in the plan revision process
- Provide information on relevant policies, planning initiatives, or other activities that have been initiated or implemented by other jurisdictions since the previous Interagency Group meeting (December 2013)
- Identify any additional resource materials that should be exchanged

Attendees

Attending from other agencies:

- Francis Auld – Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribes
- Kali Becher – Missoula County Community and Planning Services
- Dwight Bergeron - MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks
- Pam Holmquist – Flathead County Commissioner
- Ralph Montano – Department of Homeland Security Border Patrol (for Kip Stratton)

Attending for the Forest Service:

- Stacey Allen
- Cynthia Manning – Regional Office
- Krista Gebert– Regional Office
- Joe Krueger
- Reed Kuennen
- Marsha Moore
- Chip Weber

Facilitator – Connie Lewis, Meridian Institute

Discussion Summary

What is the Intent of Interagency Coordination?

Joe Krueger explained that the intent of these interagency coordination meetings is not to diminish the need for regular communication between individuals at different agencies (i.e., specialist to specialist interaction that are already occurring on a regular basis), but rather to provide an opportunity to explore mutual interests and update one-another on issues and activities that cross multiple jurisdictions and can impact other agencies. It is also a more efficient way to provide information about the Forest Plan revision process to several entities at once. The Forest wants to understand and address other agencies' interests and concerns as the Forest plan is developed, not to wait until they arise during the objections process. Ultimately the hope is to make sure that what is working well continues to work well, and that some things work better in the future.

There will continue to be multiple ways for coordination and communication to take place outside of these meetings. For example, the Forest Service will conduct Government to Government consultation with the Tribes, and invite agencies to stakeholder meetings conducted as part of the plan revision process.

Update on the Flathead National Forest Plan Revision Process

Joe Krueger provided a brief overview of the Flathead National Forest Management Plan revision process. The process is multi-faceted and on a tight timeframe. Field trips last summer and fall provided stakeholders an opportunity to learn about a variety of planning issues and to share information relevant to the assessment of current conditions on the Forest. The field trips were followed by a total of 15 meetings between December 2013 and May 2014 at which stakeholders were asked for input regarding desired conditions, objectives, and standards and guides regarding vegetation management, recreation, access, wildlife, wilderness, and other critical planning considerations as well as about management area designations on the Forest. The stakeholder meetings were open to all who were interested, as contrasted with a "closed collaborative" which is only for invited participants. The meetings involved a lot of mutual learning and resulted in recommendations from a wide range of perspectives. During this time, the Forest also completed the assessment of current Forest conditions - available in hard copy, on CDs, and on line.

There is a separate, parallel process underway for wilderness inventory. Guidance for how to conduct the inventory is somewhat of a moving target. The Forest is currently working on wilderness evaluation criteria which it hopes to have out in a couple of weeks, and is gathering public input with an on-line mapping tool.

The next step in the Forest Plan revision process is to develop a proposed action, which will be used to initiate the NEPA process. There will be a workshop on August 12, 2014 for the

Forest to explain and gather input about the modeling assumptions that will be used in the development of the proposed action. An example would be assumptions about how historical vegetation patterns and future climate change are incorporated into the vegetation models.

The Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy, which moves the grizzly towards eventual delisting under the Endangered Species Act, is also integral to the Flathead National Forest Plan revision. It will be incorporated into the proposed action for the Flathead NF Plan Revision, with proposed amendments for the other four national forests in the NCDE grizzly bear ecosystem.. The Flathead Forest is coordinating the development of the strategy with Tribes and the other national Forests covered by the Strategy (Kootenai, Lolo, and Lewis and Clark Forests).

October 31, 2014 is the anticipated date for an internal draft of the proposed action for all the plan components, with the intention of being able to publish the draft proposed action by the end of the calendar year. Once the proposed action is published, then alternatives will be developed and evaluated through the NEPA process. If everything goes as planned, the draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) will be released in December 2015 followed by a 90 day public comment, and the Final EIS will be published in December 2016. The Forest will hold public meetings during the NEPA phase, but they will be structured around answering questions about the proposed action and soliciting comments rather than as collaborative discussions. The final stage is the objection period. The hope is that objections will be minimal because concerns will have been raised and already addressed earlier in the process.

Every plan revision step requires public involvement. The Forest is committed to being as transparent as possible and will conduct stakeholder meetings at each critical juncture in the process. All input received – including from the collaboration meetings, written submissions, web tools, and from all other sources – is being considered.

Interagency Considerations

Everyone in attendance was asked: Are there considerations that are important to your jurisdiction that the Forest might forget or not give enough attention in the planning process? Following are the suggestions from the attendees,:

Flathead County (Pam Holmquist)

- Review the list of resources from the last meeting to make sure nothing missed.
- Take the county's natural resource policy into consideration. The Forest has reviewed the policy, but has specific questions about how best to align the policy with the Forest plan. There was a suggestion to have workshop at which the Forest

and the county talk about how to make sure all the relevant parts of the county policy are covered in the Forest plan process; to explore the interests that are behind the county policy; to look at constraints that may preclude the Forest from meeting all the expectations established by the county plan; and to jointly explore possibilities for partnerships and potential revenue streams that could help expand the “pie” (of timber, recreation, water quality, trails, motorized access, and other resources and amenities coming from the Forest) for everyone.

Missoula County (Kali Becher)

- Consider development in the Wild land Urban Interface (WUI), making sure that land use designations in the Forest Plan account for adjacent development on private lands and that fuels reduction near developed areas is emphasized. This means taking a landscape level view with an “all-lands” approach. The Forest might consider holding meeting(s) in the Swan district as well as in Kalispell to make sure that county and Forest goals and policies are aligning.
- The county will be updating its growth policy soon, which will help inform these discussions.

Counties considerations from the perspective of the Forest:

- The Forest wants to make sure it understands the role of the Forest Management Plan in helping to implement Community wildfire protection plans.
- The Forest recognizes the need to better understand county land use designations.

Border Patrol (Ralph Montano)

- Immediate concerns regarding wilderness management and communications sites are already being dealt with.

Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribes (Francis Auld)

- In general the Tribe wants to make sure that NEPA, the Historical Preservation Act and treaty rights are carefully adhered to in the Forest planning process.
- Take into consideration the fact that Tribes do hunting/gathering and bring elders to the border area for customary activities, and that there is a potential that the border patrol may infringe on some of those practices and activities through constraints on road access and camping, and the use of unmanned aircraft, etc. There is an effort underway to develop an MOA at the national level to address these concerns.
- The Forest would like to understand how best to reflect Tribal interests in the Plan, e.g., with regard to the desired condition regarding hunting. The best way to ensure that Tribal interests are protected will be to pay attention to Tribal treaty rights.
- The Forest wants to take advantage of traditional knowledge and has a particular question about historical burning of ponderosa pines by native peoples.

- It was suggested that the Forest review studies conducted by Glacier National Park and Tim Light regarding the significance of cambian peel trees. Also, be in touch with Tribal natural resources and cultural committees (Patricia Hewonkoin in Elmo?)
- The Forest mentioned that they are interested in the detailed feedback they hope to receive from the Tribe regarding the 2006 Proposed Plan, since that Plan is serving as part of the basis for the current Plan revision.

MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks (Dwight Bergeron)

- The Department has a special interest in travel planning and species of concern (SOC). The Forest has provided FWP R1 biologists with the FNF assessment, listing draft species of conservation concern (SCC), and would welcome input from FWP. The criteria for USFS SCC are not the same as SOC. Alpine/sub-alpine habitat and wildlife corridors are priorities. Information found in the FWP SWAP document will also be useful to the Forest. The Forest is expecting to largely adopt the Northern Rockies management plan direction for lynx, but may want to suggest some modifications. As noted above, the Forest's expects to incorporate the Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy into the Management Plan.
- It was noted that staff transitions in the Department mean the Forest and the Department will need to determine who will be in the consultative discussions in the next six months while the position is vacant, and beyond once the position is filled.
- The Parks Division might be concerned about increased over-snow uses in some areas. Dave Landstrum is the Parks person for Marsha to connect with regarding those concerns.
- The Forest is interested in talking about possible partnerships to expand recreational opportunities across jurisdictions, including State lands, e.g., with "rails to trails" as one example. It would be useful to think proactively about a "grand design" for recreational use in the area that the Forest Plan could help to support.
- The Forest would like to get input from other agencies about habitats of concern - e.g., riparian, and intensively burned areas, as well as about vegetation species of concern such as cottonwood, birch and aspen – which were probably more prevalent in the past. It was noted that the State has an intensive modeling effort for riparian areas underway.

Resources

- Kali will provide a GIS layer of all the county conservation easements.
- The Forest will obtain a copy of the MOA between Tribes and Border Patrol.
- The Forest will ask for conservation easements list from the State.
- Marsha will talk to Rich Jensen about a consolidation of several plans.

Next Steps

The next interagency meeting will tentatively take place towards the end of October 2014, exact time and place TBD. Efforts will be made to provide an opportunity to participate via VTC. Thereafter meetings will occur approximately every three months.



Flathead National Forest Interagency Group December 3, 2014 Meeting Summary

Meeting Purposes

The purposes of this meeting were to make the Flathead National Forest Management Plan as responsive as possible to all the different partners by:

- Providing updates on the Forest Plan revision process
- Providing Interagency Group members an opportunity to raise questions, concerns and suggestions for the next phase in the Plan revision process
- Sharing information and updates about relevant policies, planning processes or other activities that have been initiated or implemented by various jurisdictions since the previous Interagency Group meeting (July 15, 2014)
- Identifying any additional resource materials that should be exchanged

Attendees

Interagency Group Members:

- Kali Becher - Missoula County
- Dave Landstrom - Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
- Larry Lockard - USFWS
- Jeff Meow - Glacier National Park
- Tim Thier - Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Flathead National Forest Staff:

- Kathy Ake
- Rob Carlin
- Krista Gebert
- Joe Krueger
- Reed Kuennen
- Dennis McCarthy
- Marsha Moore
- Heidi Trechsel
- Chip Weber

- Pat Van Eimeren
- Rick Connell
- Heather Seals

Facilitator: Connie Lewis

Forest Plan Updates and Discussion

Forest Plan Revision Update

After reiterating that the goal of the Interagency Group is to help everyone understand other agencies' plans, Joe Krueger provided the following update on the Flathead National Forest Plan revision process:

The Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) has been busy developing a draft proposed Plan. Started September 2013 and through June 2014, the Forest conducted public engagement meetings to collect concerns and suggestions for the Plan revision. By January 31, 2015 the Forest anticipates having a draft Plan ready. At that time, a Notice of Intent (NOI) will be issued to start the formal 45 day scoping process, starting about mid-February. There will probably be a request to extend the scoping period, but the Forest has to be sensitive to the Plan revision timeframe because funding for the process is authorized only for a certain length of time. Open houses will be conducted across the region during the scoping period, and work will begin on developing alternatives and effects analysis. The Forest expects to produce the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) about this time next year, and then it will be about another year for the final Plan. The release of the Final Plan will initiate an objections process. Objections, which are permitted under the 2012 National Forest Planning Rule, have taken the place of appeals.

Timber

Key messages the Forest heard from previous Interagency Group meetings were to grow the pie of benefits as much as possible and to provide flexibility in the Forest Plan to meet multiple needs. Joe noted that the Flathead County natural resource policy sets higher expectations for timber output than is actually being produced by the Forest. The Forest recognizes county concerns about revenue streams and wants to provide them and others a reliable timber base, but is limited because of what can and cannot occur due to constraints. The Forest is looking at how to ensure we are being as flexible in determining the suitable timber base while not compromising grizzly security core or other values, e.g., by looking at harvest opportunities in management areas that are still part of the suitable base within security core. Of the total 2.4 million acres on the Forest, about one million is designated wilderness. Other constraints include roadless area designations, riparian conservation areas, and special permitted areas like Whitefish ski area and Tally Lake Campground. Some places that have lots recreation may still accommodate some timber production, e.g., portions of the Island Unit.

Recreation:

The Forest is also looking at enhancing recreation opportunities. The emphasis for snowmobiling is on improving the quality of opportunity, so the Plan will not necessarily expand the open acres. The Forest also wants to be responsive to users' concerns about foreclosed opportunities – e.g., by trying to ensure a new area is opened if one is closed. Another concept that has emerged is of a “front country” designation, which is an attempt to respond to requests for more recreational access (e.g., mountain biking) close to urban areas. The Forest is looking carefully at possible wilderness recommendations and is going to pay particular attention when there is agreement coming out of a diverse group of stakeholders about how to balance uses.

Discussion

Question: Does the Forest Plan address integration of legacy lands?

Response: The Plan will include desired conditions and objectives for legacy lands. Also, they are mentioned in the Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy. The approach for management areas mirrors the approach in the Kootenai Forest, but the general forest MA breaks them out into three different classes:

- 6A – general forest, not suitable for scheduled timber harvest, but can allow some types of restoration harvest
- 6B – has a variety of overlay constraints on timber harvest, e.g., for species of conservation concern (like the Swan legacy lands).
- 6C – general forest (e.g., Island unit).

The Plan will also have a section on partnership and cooperation, e.g., leveraging opportunities for coordinating with other lands around trails.

Question: How does the Forest Plan revision relate to travel planning?

Response: Travel management is somewhat distinct from the Forest Plan process in that it is very site specific, although informed by the larger context. The Forest just did a travel plan exercise. The Forest is challenged to afford the road system it has now, and into the future, even though there are publics that say they will help find the money. The travel section of the Plan will basically say here is how much money the Forest will have for roads, what can be done with that amount of money, and what the analysis shows. It is not an actual decision. Chip Weber (the Forest Supervisor) finds it preferable to “store” roads with little maintenance cost rather than decommissioning them totally - and then having to rebuild them later – in areas where future management is anticipated. The Forest understands that counties hear a lot about favorite roads being closed – but cannot maintain everything. Refer to the glossary in the Travel Management Plan for information about terms such as “hydrologically stable” and “decommissioning”.

Question: What about the heavy use of county roads to access forest areas, and having the Forest working jointly with counties regarding maintenance?

Response: We can envision a “motherhood and apple pie” statement in the Plan about the Forest’s desire to work with counties, but actual agreements regarding cost sharing etc. are hammered out on a site specific basis. The Forest already does a lot with counties regarding roads but maintenance levels for Forest Service roads are outside of the Forest planning arena.

Road maintenance is also issue from the Forest side in that the Forest is being asked by private users to maintain roads to a higher standard than what the Forest needs for its limited resource management purposes. These kinds of issues are typically worked out between a district ranger and local residents. The Forest tries to deal with the highest priorities first, but realizes not all issues are necessarily addressed well.

Question: How does the Plan relate to the Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy?

Response: The Draft Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy and Forest are largely in agreement on habitat issues, and so we can build those into the Forest Plan in draft form even though the Conservation Strategy is not finalized. We are working on synchronizing language between the Draft Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy and the Forest Plan – there is a meeting next week to make sure we are meeting the intent of the Strategy.

Fire

Rick Connell, Forest Fire Officer, explained that most of lands in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) are categorized as 6B management area, and the focus there is to provide mitigation/protection around wildfire coming off of the Forest onto private lands. An “all lands approach” is part of the Forest’s day to day work and integral to its planning processes. In the vegetation section of the Plan, plant communities are described with regards to their fire characteristics (e.g., low intensity, regular, and high intensity).

The Forest is moving away from a parcel by parcel mitigation approach, trying instead to connect dots to provide a defense line for fire suppression purposes. The intent is to allow flexibility in how to respond to fires. There has been a big swing away from always suppressing fire to using fire actively as a management tool – although we seem to have jumped the “situational dependent” middle. The current Plan doesn’t allow enough flexibility in implementation for treatment purposes. In 2014, which was a low to average fire season, we could have taken better advantage of prescribed fire as a treatment tool. The revised Forest Plan should allow for flexibility along with risk management consideration for fire as a vegetation management strategy in concert with other resources. Nevertheless, we anticipate relatively limited amount of treatment for cost reasons, even though fire as a treatment tool is much less expensive than mechanical treatment.

We also talk about cooperation with counties and other partners regarding risk management and what kind of mitigation is appropriate, as well as how to maintain air quality. Some of risk mitigation is looking at where the risk is (e.g., west or east of the Flathead valley). We

also have fire management plans that describe specifics – e.g., what to do with a June “hot start” compared to a start in August when the risk might be lower. It is not always necessary to control every fire - this is something the public needs to understand. In late fall, we might let fire go. In North Fork this summer there were 14 starts that the Forest decided to suppress because of past fire history in the area. In the Bob Marshal Wilderness we have put out about 50% of starts, but most of the others do not get over 10 acres. Lots of money is being spent to put out fires that could go out on their own. A more flexible approach represents a big change compared to past management plans which limited the ability of managers to assess risk and be flexible.

Wildlife

Reed Kuennen, Forest Wildlife Biologist, explained that the 2012 National Planning Rule takes much more of an ecosystem approach than the previous Rule, and integrates terrestrial habitat, soils, fish, recreation, and infrastructure. It also includes some species requirements for when an ecosystem approach is not adequate. In its Plan revision, the Forest is carrying forward some features from past Plans, but is also moving into more of the ecosystem emphasis, including how to intersect with other plans (e.g., State and US Fish and Wildlife Service, (USFWS)). We are identifying places where we can work cooperatively on wildlife crossing structures over highways and highways. We are looking at fish considerations in riparian conservation areas and unique habitats such as grass forb communities, hardwood tree communities, and talus and persistent snow areas that support particular species (not just threatened and endangered species). The 2012 Rule requires Plans to address “species of conservation concern” (which are different than State “species of concern”), e.g., species with rare occurrence or disjunct habitat, etc. The Forest Plan also needs to address species of special interest, e.g., species that are hunted, trapped, or that the public cares about (e.g., such as bald eagles), or about which more information is needed.

Regarding lynx, the Forest would like to carry parts of the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Strategy forward, while making some updates and exceptions that take newer science into account. The Forest is not entirely settled yet about how exactly to propose modifications to the lynx Strategy because there are some concern that the whole thing will unravel if the Forest proposes a few changes (i.e., death by a thousand cuts). The Forest still has a lot of work with the Regional Office to hammer out any modifications, and the Forest knows it is essential to have the USFWS on board. It will be important to have the science and record to support any suggested modifications, and the Forest would anticipate challenges if changes are proposed to sections that were previously consulted on. The Lynx Conservation and Assessment Strategy published in 2013 is different than some previous direction. The Forest will be consulting on new exception acres for thinning because the old acres ended in 2017, and is also updating definitions. One new exception may be added for thinning young stands to develop multi-story snowshoe hare habitat.

Comment: Concern about single species focus management – (shared by everyone). It is frustrating to have to manage for a single species when it does not make sense.

Pat Van Eimeren, Forest Aquatic Biologist, talked about fish and “Infish”. He explained that the Forest Plan addresses recovery of threatened and endangered species as well as species of conservation concern. The Plan will tier to the bull trout conservation strategy and recovery plan. (Pat noted that there would be more information to share about bull trout after a meeting next week). In response to a comment about whether it might be preferable to consider what is best for bull trout specifically on this Forest instead of just tiering to the bull trout conservation strategy, it was explained that the intent is to craft a Forest Plan that allows flexibility for site specific considerations at the project level. Because the Flathead Forest was the first forest to have utilized “Infish” - in its 1995 Forest Plan updates – there is a need for discussions with the Regional Forester about how what the Flathead is proposing might impact other forests in the future.

Riparian Habitat conservation areas (RHCAs), which are not in the suitable timber base, represent a large percentage of overall forest acres. There are about 80,000 RCA acres within 6B and 6C suitable management areas. The Forest wants to keep riparian buffers the same in the Plan revision, (i.e., maintain riparian buffer widths), but with some flexibility to manage in those areas to help other resource values. RHCAs are not exclusion zones. The Forest would also like to get away from numerical specifications for the amount of woody debris per mile in streams, to a functionality approach instead. Instead of looking at a separate management area allocation for riparian zones, the Forest is looking at having riparian standards and guides in other management areas (e.g., 6B), but with flexibility for some management activity while protecting riparian function., and with a requirement to be able to show benefit to wildlife and/or hydrologic function. There has been limited flexibility in the past, e.g., for salvage logging in RHCAs.

The Forest can anticipate that there will be litigation to oppose the ability to do treatments in RHCAs without a very high paperwork bar. Forest Plan revision time is when to try to get that flexibility. The Forest has even been sued in the past on pre-commercial thinning which can benefit lynx.

Comment: The Forest can expect to be continually hammered from every side, but the problem is sometimes lack of transparency, i.e., not always laying everything out on the table. It would help if the Forest could explain timber expectations and history - what has happened on a unit by unit basis, and the relationship to neighboring lands – rather than just displaying the Forest-wide allocation by adding up all the smaller units. This could allow districts to work with what they have, and for the public to see what is happening in the neighborhood. The approach should be to try to benefit the largest number of species.

Response: It is important to remember that Forest Plan is a zoning document, not a site specific project document. It shows what could be done in different places. The intent is for

the Plan to provide better direction and flexibility to deal with what we think may be coming. For example, given climate change (with more frequent large fires) and the tendency on this Forest for getting a huge number of stems coming back after fire events, thinning may be necessary to increase diversity (multi-story hare habitat) to benefit lynx (although not necessarily the “old” plum Creek way in which the prescription is to thin to 20 foot spacing). Fire is the primary driver here; we need to recognize its influence and talk about how anticipate its effects.

Vegetation

Heidi Trechsel, Forest Silviculturist, explained that the Forest is setting up the Plan for flexibility to manage toward the desired condition, i.e., what we want, on landscape, by tree species and size classes. There are four vegetation habitat categories in the Plan (cool moist, cool dry, warm moist, and warm dry). The Forest anticipates carrying forward Amendment 21 from the current Plan, with modifications for clarification and some re-wording, and to increase the amount of old growth (recognizing that old growth does not last forever). Is some geographic components (e.g., Swan) there is a desire to retain the current old growth. Across the Forest we are trying to get more “large trees” in a variety of stand structures, which may not necessarily be exactly the same as old growth. Right now we don’t have a good way to monitor and track old growth. We do know that large tree classes are way below historical average natural range of variation. Early successional classes are also a little below historical levels while middle age classes are way over. The Forest is trying to get to older classes sooner, but it is a challenge given lynx direction etc., and it is tough to please everyone! The Forest’s approach is to move away from sanctity of old growth to habitat functions that are important. In some cases this may mean starting over with old small dbh trees, and / or thinning high density sapling stands. Fire is going to be a tool. Only 21 percent of land base in proposed plan is in suitable. The timber industry has already adjusted to harvesting medium diameter trees rather than the big ones (“old peelers”). Timber harvest is now much more a by-product of what comes out of restoration work. We need to provide flexibility to blend together different objectives, i.e., to accommodate objective driven management rather than output driven management. The Plan will also be explicit about things like: very low snag densities along roads, not old growth everywhere, and mitigate for fire in the WUI.

Recreation

Marsha Moore, Forest Recreation specialist, explained that there is a high demand for more and more recreation. The 2012 Planning Rule talks about sustainable recreation, and we have to consider the Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy constraints. The Plan has to address proposed wilderness and wild and scenic river designation recommendations. The Forest’s wild and scenic river eligibility study identified 10 wild and scenic segments. An outside organization provided suggestions for additional segments that are under review. The Forest is also assessing opportunities for more connectivity of trails, e.g., in Haskill Basin, Black Tail. Haskill is under active consideration with lots of interest from the community,

and Blacktail is essentially done (a good example of cooperation). The Forest is also considering classifying Crane Mt. in the Plan as a primary recreation area to accommodate mountain biking there. And, the Forest is looking at Nordic ski areas as primary recreation areas, e.g., blacktail, Round meadow, and the Cedar Flats area.

Chip Weber, Forest Supervisor, said he would like to initiate discussions around broad based recreational planning/connectivity, e.g. the Gateway to Glacier trail. He is thinking about convening players to talk about a broad based community approach. It was noted that the State Parks system strategic plan has identified this same need state wide. Dave Landstrom has a meeting tomorrow on trails, including a discussion about possibly having the State hold easements for private trails - mostly focused on non-motorized trails right now. The State's strategic plan identifies a huge need for more motorized trails, but the State does not have the land base to provide those opportunities. The Forest has identified Tally Lake as a potential possibility location for high elevation motorized loop trail. The Forest would like to work closely with other agencies on how to leverage opportunities, with the principle of flexibility to do things that have not been fully imagined yet – giving future managers the latitude to do the right thing based on site specific analysis, for all resources. Specifically we want some kind of forum – to include Glacier Park, the State, the Forest, counties, etc. (we also, need USDA at the table). It was noted that Missoula County recently passed a parks and trails bond – which will provide 2 million dollars for trails throughout the county – this presents a further opportunity to think about partnership.

Ecosystem Services

Kristi Gebert, Forest economist, explained that the revised Plan will have to account for ecosystem services, which are goods and services provided to people from the Forest. Examples include hunting, fishing, flood protection, scenery, and huckleberries. There will be Plan components to specifically address ecosystem services, and in some cases ecosystem services will be integrated into other sections of the Plan (e.g., municipal watersheds in the watershed section).

Unanticipated Threats and Issues

Question: What is the process for identifying new threats and issues that will be coming down the pike?

Response: The Forest has spent lots of time hearing from the public about their issues and concerns. Some issues still stay around into the future, e.g., late season snowmobiling and the Montana Wilderness Association's desire for a wilderness designation in an area that now has a mountain bike loop trail. In that instance, the Forest is trying to accommodate both – not take away the mountain bike opportunity and still have more wilderness up higher. We have to explain why we make those choices.

We are trying to keep enough flexibility to be able to accommodate new users and uses in the future. For example, we are getting requests for different special permits to conduct new kinds of races on the Forest, and we are seeing studded tires on mountain bikes that are

enabling them to venture into new places. We are also having to change definitions, e.g., “over snow vehicles” rather than just “snowmobiles”, and expect more requests for new uses to emerge (recreational helicopters and drones?). The whole new planning paradigm is to monitor and adapt, but it will be still be expensive, require NEPA and entail litigation.

Question: What about other emerging issues such as oil and gas, and gold?

Response: We cannot say these will never be issues on this Forest, especially after seeing what has happened elsewhere as a result of advances in fracking technology. Mineral development is dictated by the rights of the mineral industry. The Forest Service deals with potential impacts through surface constraints. Although there are lots of mineral leases held on the Forest, mineral development is not extensively deal with in the Plan because there is no new information to suggest a higher potential for fracking or oil and gas development on the Forest in the foreseeable future without additional new technology breakthroughs.

Next Steps

Interagency Group members are requested to:

- Let Connie Lewis know what kind of draft Plan they would like to receive (hard copy or CD).
- Let Connie know if they have any ideas about additional interagency partners. (It was noted that the Forest will be doing formal consultation with the CSKT, who were not represented in this meeting. Tribal consultation in the past has typically been with the Tribal cultural committee, but there needs to be better coordination around fire and natural resource considerations).

The next Interagency Group meeting will be scheduled in about March 2015.



Flathead National Forest Interagency Group and Missoula County Planning Documents Overview March 4, 2015 - Meeting Summary

Meeting Purposes

- Provide updates on the Flathead National Forest Plan revision process
- Provide Interagency Group members an opportunity to raise questions, concerns and suggestions regarding the Proposed Action and for the next phase in the revision process
- Share information and updates about relevant policies, planning processes or other activities that have been initiated or implemented by various jurisdictions since the previous Interagency Group meeting (December 3, 2014)
- Identify any additional resource materials that should be exchanged
- Allow Missoula County to provide an overview of relevant county planning documents

Attendees

Interagency Group Members:

- Kali Becher - Missoula County (via VTC)
- Mark Biel – Glacier National Park
- Matt Boyer – MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks
- BJ Grieve – Flathead County
- Nancy Heil – Missoula County (via VTC)
- Pam Holmquist – Flathead County
- Larry Lockard – USFWS
- Neil Anderson- MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Flathead National Forest Staff:

- Kathy Ake
- Rob Carlin
- Krista Gebert (via VTC)
- Joe Krueger

- Reed Kuennen
- Sharon LaBrecque (Acting Forest Supervisor)
- Dennis McCarthy
- Marsha Moore
- Heidi Trechsel
- Pat Van Eimeren
- Heather Seals
- Stacy Allen

Facilitator: Connie Lewis, Meridian Institute

Forest Plan Updates, Overview and Discussion

Proposed Action Release and Public Open Houses

The Flathead National Forest (Forest) will be releasing its [proposed action](#) for the Forest's Plan revision on Friday, March 6. Following the release of the document, there will be a 60 day public comment period and the Forest will be holding open houses regarding the Flathead Forest Plan revision and amendments to incorporate the Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy into four other national forest plans. The open houses will provide an opportunity for the public to meet with subject matter specialists (e.g., wildlife biologist, forester, recreation specialist, fish biologist) and to ask questions about the proposed management direction. There will not be any formal presentations so stopping by at any time between 5:30 and 7:30 is fine. The schedule of meetings is as follows:

- March 17 - Kalispell
- March 19 - Eureka
- April 7 - Seeley Lake
- April 8 - Missoula
- April 9 - Superior
- April 14 - Lincoln
- April 15 - Choteau

Planning Schedule

The Forest is going to strive to hold fast to the 60 day comment period so it does not slip on the planning schedule. Work on the Biological Assessment (BA) will be initiated between March and May. The target date to publish the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) is January 2016. Once the DEIS is released, there will be 90 day comment period. Then the Forest will respond to all of the comments and develop the final alternative and final EIS. The Record of Decision (ROD) is anticipated for release in January 2017. The final step is an "objection period", which is different than the old appeals process. Once finalized, the life of the Plan is 15 years.

The Forest is hopeful that transparency and a detailed proposed action will set the stage – so that issues are crystalized earlier (during the upcoming public comment period) and framed up in alternatives. The alternatives will include the 1986 Plan as the “no action” alternative, the proposed action, and additional alternatives that respond to the comments (typically with “more” and “less” options). In response to a question it was explained that there may not be a “preferred alternative”.

Overview of the Proposed Action

General Overview: The proposed action was informed through extensive input gathered during an 18 month collaborative process. The process did not result in actual agreements, but provided a lot of information about what stakeholders thought about the earlier 2008 Plan, e.g., about what they did and did not like in that Plan. The Forest also received great input regarding management in the “front country” and on many other issues.

This Plan revision process is complicated by having to comply with the new requirements of the 2012 National Forest Planning Rule, which, for example, places emphasis on recreation, collaboration, and partnerships, and requires an examination of possible Wild and Scenic river designations (although it does not require that any rivers are actually designated). The Forest is also adjusting to the fact that the focus is now on sustaining rather than recovering the grizzly population.

It is important to remember that this is a programmatic plan – it does not authorize or prohibit anything. Rather it is a 30,000 foot look at what is possible on the Forest – the only way it will hurt a user group is if it (the plan document) drops on your foot!

Timber: When grizzly core areas were identified during the 2006 planning cycle, few of the core acres were put into the “suitable timber” category. This time around, more of those acres are classified as suitable. There were about 670,000 suitable acres in the 1986 proposed plan; this proposed action has about 637,000 suitable acres; and after subtracting inclusions of lands within this area that are unsuitable due to technical/site reasons (e.g. rock, non-forest types) or are not compatible with desired conditions (riparian area buffers), the more realistic total of timber suitable area is about 500,000 acres. The proposed action does not include any scheduled timber harvest in inventoried roadless areas. To estimate actual timber production, the Forest is using an allocation model starting with the acres of suitable timber land – and then building in budget considerations, constraints from lynx, riparian buffers, etc. As of this morning the model was performing correctly – the Forest did not want to simply put out the number of what the Forest has been producing previously. The current estimate is about 28m mbf per year, but only in saw logs. The projected overall wood sale is higher (when non-saw material like fiber and firewood is included), totaling 30-34 mbf per year.

Wilderness: The Forest is proposing the new wilderness area recommended by the Whitefish Range Partnership, in addition to other areas. There is no on-going motorized use in any of those proposed areas.

Over Snow Designations: This is an issue the Forest expects controversy. The Whitefish Range Partnership reached agreement on recommending increased opportunities. The Forest is proposing extending areas suitable for snowmobiling from Canyon Creek up to Big Creek (consistent with Whitefish Range Partnership recommendations to an extent), but proposes to limit it to an area from the McGinnis drainage to the east in order to avoid areas of key wildlife habitat. The overall intent is to keep about the same amount of snowmobiling area available – so an area in the vicinity of Lid Creek and Soldier Creek is shown as no longer suitable. The Forest also added some small areas that are intended to increase access to key areas that were not part of the Whitefish Range Partnership agreement. The proposal also includes dropping an area past the end of the road in the Skyland drainage that accesses a closed area in the Badger Two Medicine portion of the Lewis and Clark National Forest, while adding a suitable snowmobile area in the West Fork of Skyland Creek. It is important to note that this a programmatic decision, so there will not be changes overnight—site specific NEPA would be required. Also, the proposed wilderness does not impact existing areas open to snowmobile use.

Wild and Scenic Rivers: The Forest has identified 22 rivers as eligible for wild and scenic designation.

Social and Economic: The proposed action increases the emphasis on the social and economic legs of the sustainability stool, for example by including objectives to increase motorized use on Tally Lake, and for a hut to hut system. There are limitations in what can be done to increase motorized use, but the Forest is trying to be responsive where possible.

Species of Conservation Concern (SCCs): The proposed action includes 9 wildlife, 2 aquatic, and 13 potential botanic SCCs. This is a small list compared to some national forests in the east and in California, which have SCC lists in the 100s. The Regional Forester is the final decision maker regarding the SCC list.

Lynx: The Forest's current lynx direction was developed based on the Lynx Conservation and Assessment Strategy, which covers all U.S. lynx populations. The Forest proposes carrying forward all lynx standards, including one for connectivity, and adding one exception category to the standard for pre-commercial thinning – to help grow more multi-story lynx habitat over the long term by using modified pre-commercial thinning practices. There is on-going research on thinning and lynx, and there is an updated map of potential lynx habitat in the Plan informed by input from telemetry data on lynx. The Forest believes there is good information backing the proposed approach, and lynx management direction will continue to evolve as the science evolves.

Inventoried Roadless: There are approximately 478,000 of inventoried roadless acres on the Forest, which are subject to prescriptive direction on what is and is not allowed. Those acres also generally contain smaller timber. So for the most part they are designated as backcountry or recommended wilderness.

Old Growth Forests: Old growth forests are covered by very specific standards that are mostly carried forward from Amendment 21. The proposal is to carry the previous direction forward with only slight modifications, which includes a greater emphasis on the development of future old growth through stand management.

Plan Components (Management Direction): The Forest Plan is organized in a tiered fashion, starting with “desired conditions” (hoped-for results), then “objectives” (what the Forest can do within the 15 year Plan horizon), and standards and guidelines (guidelines are not as binding as standards but still have to be followed). The Forest uses seven “Management Area” (MA) designations. These are mostly consistent with the MAs neighboring Forests, although in the past there were different MAs on different neighboring Forests. The MAs are:

1 – Existing wilderness

1b – Recommended wilderness

2 – Existing Wild and Scenic rivers

2b - Proposed as eligible for Wild and Scenic designation (which does not mean hands off, means have to preserve existing values, which could include recreation)

3 – Special designations – e.g., administrative areas

4a – Research natural areas (not proposing any additional)

4b - Experimental and demonstration forests

5 a, b, c, and d, - Backcountry, mostly in roadless areas. (Prior to having the sub-designations the Forest utilized exceptions to differentiate among uses. The sub-designations allow explicit recognition of different uses).

6a – Not very roaded, probably steep and inaccessible (tough ground on which to operate), but can do harvest, for example in response to insect infestations

6b and 6c - Differentiated by proximity to roads and game constraints – e.g., big game winter range. Yields in 6b areas will be less than other places characterized by fairly regular timber harvest.

7 - Focused recreation. This designation is a direct response to the public’s desire to see expanded recreational opportunities, e.g., near big campgrounds, ski areas, and mountain biking on Crane Mt., etc. There are lots of opportunities for partnerships in this arena.

Resource Overviews

Fisheries (Pat Van Eimeren)

Threatened Species and SCCs: Bull trout is the only threatened fish on the Forest. The Forest will prepare a biological assessment that will go to Fish and Wildlife Service, who then do the biological opinion. If they see impacts then they will suggest mitigation through Section 7 ESA consultation. Priority bull trout watersheds will have 100 foot instead of 50 foot buffers. The only aquatic SCC is the meltwater stone fly. The 2012 Planning Rule specifies that candidate species be carried forward as SCCs (as is the case with the meltwater stone fly). The pearl shell mussel is not being carried forward however because it is not found on the Forest, and there is no habitat to support it.

Inland fish strategy (INFISH): The Forest is moving away from calling the aquatic direction “INFISH” which has been the term used for the direction of the previous 20 years. While the Flathead will be the first national forest in Region 1 to do away with the name, it is carrying forward about 90% of the direction. 95% of the streams and riparian areas on the Forest have improved, so the Forest wants to carry forward the current direction on culvert standards, no helicopter landing zones and no fuel storage in riparian management areas, etc. The cornerstone riparian habitat conservation areas have 300 foot buffer protection, which tiers down to 200 and then 100 feet depending on the situation. The biggest change the Forest is proposing is to move away from riparian management objectives (RMOs) with their specific targets for temperature, bank angle, bank stability, etc. Rather than trying to hit specific numerical targets, the emphasis will be on ecosystem function and process protection. Instead of treating these areas as exclusion zones, the Forest wants to be able to manage in certain situations where it makes ecological sense e.g., for blow-downs. The Forest is also doing away with the requirements in INFISH for watershed analysis.

Watershed Protection: Three years ago, the Forest started using a watershed classification and condition framework which is in place for forests across the US. It takes stream conditions, vegetation, beetle outbreaks, invasives etc. into consideration. Of the 181 watersheds on the Forest only 5 are class 2 (at risk), on Tally and Swan. These will be emphasized for restoration – to get to class 1, e.g., on the legacy lands in the Swan that need work. Overall the Forest’s watersheds are in great shape. The Flathead is fortunate not to have the kinds of mining and grazing impacts that impact watersheds on some other forests.

Terrestrial Vegetation (Heidi Trechsel)

The vegetation section is structured around a number of Forest-wide components. In addition, the Forest landscape is divided into 4 biophysical settings, which are groups of habitat types (cool moist, warm moist, cool dry and warm dry). The warm dry and warm

moist areas represent only a small percentage of the Forest, but are important for certain vegetation types and the wildlife that depend upon them (e.g., the warm dry areas support ponderosa and warm moist supports cedar or grand fir). The cool moist component comprises 60 + % of the Forest.

The Plan deals extensively with forest composition and habitat for wildlife. The “desired conditions” for vegetation integrate preferred habitat conditions for lynx, grizzly and other species. Those desired conditions are based on the “natural range of variation” – i.e., what the natural range in these vegetative conditions has been over the past 1000 years. The belief is that maintaining or moving towards this natural range of variation in vegetation (i.e., maintaining the integrity of those systems) would help meet the needs of species that have been surviving in those ecosystems. Much of the Forest is not very far off on from those desired conditions, partly because much of the forest is wilderness. One of the concerns is the relatively low amount of forest in the larger tree size classes, which translates to a desire to manage forests in a way that develops larger tree sizes in the future.

Fire and harvest are both important tools for manipulating the landscape to achieve desired conditions. The reality is that the forest is extremely dynamic and that wildfire has always been a feature of this landscape because it is a fire-based ecosystem. We cannot avoid wildfires although we will manage fuels in the Wilderness Urban Interface (WUI) and other areas to reduce fuels and keep uncontrolled fires minimized. The Forest contains a lot of early successional (seedling and sapling) areas because of recent fires. That condition class has been somewhat under-represented on the Forest in the past, but recent fires have corrected that situation. Fire and timber harvest will be a factor in maintaining early successional forests as the current young forests grow out of the seedling/sapling stages. In this dynamic landscape, we also need to consider climate condition modelling.

The Plan has management objectives, including harvest, thinning, and prescribed fire, to get to and/or maintain desired conditions. Where appropriate, it includes thinning to accelerate the growth of big trees. It also has objectives for hardwoods and grasslands, which are not very prevalent on the Forest, but are key to diversity. And, it includes a program to deal with non-native invasives.

Wildlife (Reed Kuennen)

It is important to keep in mind that under previous planning rules, wildlife were dealt with in a single section, but the 2012 Rule takes an ecosystem approach, so wildlife is integrated throughout the proposed plan. So, for example, lynx management is integrated in the vegetation section, grizzly management is integrated into infrastructure, roads, recreation, etc. Species specific plan direction is only included if the species is not addressed under “coarse filter” ecosystem direction. Refer to Appendix A for a table that makes the tie between species and ecosystems. Appendix B has potential management actions (e.g., possible strategies for growing more old growth, or for creating multi-story hare and lynx

habitat). Appendix D lists drivers and stressors (climate change, human activities etc.) that are categorized and cross-walked with plan direction.

The Planning Rule also requires that Species of Concern (SCCs) be identified by the Regional Forester. The Forest worked with local biologists, birding groups etc. to come up with the potential SCC list (also included in Appendix A) using Forest-wide criteria identified in the 2012 planning rule. Standards and guidelines, such as timing of activities, are developed for species on the SCC list, as needed. It should be noted that Forest Service SCC criteria are not the same as State Species of Concern criteria, although there is some overlap so in some cases the Forest's standards and guides are based on the State's plans for those species (e.g., loons).

The Forest is also required to identify a few key species of public interest that are important to the public (e.g., for hunting, trapping, and viewing) and that are potentially impacted by management. For viewing, considerations are: a) picking species like the ptarmigan that we need more information on and that can be worked on with partners, and b) drawing on the list of species identified by State, such as those that may be sensitive to climate change. The Forest worked with Chris Hammond and Tim Thier (FWP) as well as two local bird experts to help narrow the list, taking into account Montana Natural Heritage Program data on up to 300 species.

A very preliminary monitoring plan is covered in Appendix H. Much of the proposed monitoring for wildlife is habitat monitoring. For plan components there are monitoring questions and specifics about what will be monitored. The introduction talks about species monitoring, which will be handled cooperatively amongst agencies who manage land and wildlife in Northwest Montana. The monitoring program detailed in the Plan has to be something the Forest can afford, so the Forest will not do population counts, with the exception of "redd counts". The Forest cannot afford to count deer, elk, fisher, marten, etc. Instead the Forest will rely on information that the State and others are collecting and will utilize agreements with NGOs (such as the Swan Ecosystem Center and Defenders of Wildlife) to conduct cooperative monitoring. Bull trout is one of the proposed focal species that will be monitored (in addition to being a threatened species). There will also be monitoring of Amendment 19 grizzly core habitat. There may be monitoring of elk security areas except where those are covered by grizzly core habitat.

Air Quality and Fire (Heidi Trechsel)

Air quality and fire are closely tied together. The Forest recognizes fire will be present and will be managed across all forest lands, but there will be more burned areas in wilderness, less burned areas in the WUI and close to communities. The direction the Plan is taking is to provide flexibility for managers to respond in an appropriate way as conditions change through the summer, using a risk assessment approach.

Social/economic and Ecosystem Services (Krista Gebert)

According to the new Planning Rule, the Forest needs to look at components of sustainability without giving priority to any one of them. Social and economic considerations such as fire and species of public interest, are integrated throughout the document. The actual social-economic section is short - it addresses social and economic issues that are not adequately covered in other parts of Plan, for example ecosystem services (goods and services that come from nature, such as flood protection and solitude), research and education, hunting, forest products, huckleberries. The main point is that this is integrated throughout.

Recreation (Marsha Moore)

Overview: The 2012 planning rule emphasizes sustainable recreation. The Plan relies on a recreation opportunities spectrum (ROS), which provides a range of recreational opportunities from primitive to urban. Each recreational type on the ROS is mapped and a percentages given. Many of the Plan components emphasize front country and back country. They deal with both motorized and non-motorized uses and amenities like cabins and campgrounds. The Plan includes Forest wide recreation objectives, as well as objectives that are embedded in specific Geographic Areas (GAs), and standards. For example, objectives for the Swan Valley GA include constructing a mountain bike trail on Crane Mt, improving one to three campgrounds, and improving the hut system. The Forest does not really have funding to develop lots of new recreation sites, but the plan does provide direction to develop one new site in bear conservation areas each decade, which given anticipated funding levels is really the most can realistically accomplish in that time frame.

Scenery: The direction in the Plan is to maintain scenic values.

Roads: The Plan contains some objectives for decommissioning, maintaining, and improving roads on the Forest. In reality the Forest's road network is actually pretty stable. Compliance with the Grizzly Conservation Strategy is one of the main drivers of road management.

Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers: Existing non-conforming uses such as mountain biking and chain saws are permitted in recommended wilderness as long as they do not prevent protection and maintenance of social and ecological characteristics that are the basis for wilderness designation. For example, extensive mountain bike use - more than occurs now - that seriously degrading the trails could be disallowed. The new Plan proposes a total of 188,000 acres in recommended wilderness, including a portion of Jewell Basin (but less of the Basin than what was recommended in 1986). Some wilderness activists will probably say that the recommendations do not go far enough.

Regarding Wild and Scenic Rivers, the first step is to develop the eligibility list, i.e., which rivers are potentially eligible for Wild and Scenic designation, and therefore should get interim protection. The next step is to conduct a suitability study that reduces the list, and the final step is to go to Congress for actual recommendations.

Coordination: The Forest recognizes that coordination and partnerships with county, State, federal, and private entities are critically important. The hut system provides one example of a potential partnership between the Forest and the Office of Rural Development Assistance to jointly leverage resources for the system. Mountain biking is another example given the nexus between Forest and county trails.

Comments and Discussion

Matt Boyer noted that the planning time frame is very aggressive, and that State Fisheries and Wildlife may need more time than currently allotted to review the draft document. He also said that Rick Mace was involved in development of the Grizzly Conservation Strategy, consequently the State is already on board. He thought it was interesting that redd counts were the only bull trout monitoring. The State is also working on bull trout monitoring and will be looking at causes for any departures by the Forest from current protections.

BJ Grieve recalled the Forest talking to the Commission. His sense is that the Forest is eager to work in cooperation with other agencies – regardless of whether there is formal Cooperating Agency status, which is generally reserved for BLM. His understanding is that the document is drafted, and now ready to go out for public comment. He is somewhat confused about how this round of comment differs from the previous engagement by the counties that happened 6-8 months ago when the counties explained their planning documents to the Forest. What does the Forest need now?

Joe, in response to BJ's question: The Forest tried to be cognizant of county plans as it developed the draft Plan, but there is an additional need now to understand more about the counties' growth plans, natural resource plans, etc. for purposes of the Environmental Impact Statement (specifically how implementing plan alternatives would impact the counties). The Forest is also interested in seeing what has changed since the last interaction with counties (e.g., new recreation policy) - they want to hear more about what may or may not be consistent between county and other plans. It was also noted that Forest Service planning terminology is very different from county language.

BJ: What is the highest priority input being requested of counties NOW (in the next 60 days) given where the Forest is in its planning process?

Joe: It would be helpful to hear what the county sees as inconsistencies between county and Forest plans. For example, the Forest has looked at Flathead County's natural resources policy – but it appears to be very dated and focused almost exclusively on timber supply,

not really natural resources. None of the current commissioners were even in place when the natural resource plan resolutions were adopted. The Forest would like to be working proactively WITH the County on relevant natural resource issues, and it will be helpful to get input early rather than later. However, the Forest does not want to put the County in a place where it feels compelled to draft some huge new policy.

BJ: The issue for the County is that the natural resources plan is adopted public policy even if it is outdated. It represents a “ticket to get in the door”. The County’s growth policy states the role of the document is to educate other agencies about impacts of their policies on the County. At this stage, the interest of the County is to ensure that its input is helpful. The County will review the Forest plan for inconsistencies / impacts vis a vis the County natural resource and growth policies. An ancillary benefit may be to help the County identify outdated parts of its plans – and where reasons for any inconsistency are based on outdated stuff, erroneous assumptions, etc. It would also be helpful for counties to provide comments about what overall the Forest needs to improve on. The County’s natural resources plan was developed by a committee that signed it, and then the plan was tiered somehow to the growth policy.

BJ also mentioned a foundational miscommunication – BLM language is about coordination and Forest Service language is about consistency. Some have pushed the idea that the County can treat Forest Service planning the same as BLM planning – i.e., with an expectation of consistency. Instead, he suggested, both entities just need to be honest about where plans are or are not consistent, and should try to work together to achieve what the County wants and what public lands managers want / need, while recognizing that the counties do not have foresters on staff. There are probably inconsistencies between the growth policy and the natural resources policy because the growth policy is more general.

Joe: There is an internal inconsistency within the County’s natural resource policy because it specifies both high scenery standards and lots of timber harvest. County comments would be most useful if they take into account the many needs the Forest Service is trying to meet. It might be helpful in preparing those comments to look at the Assessment that was released last spring – it provides context and talks about what has changed since the 1986 Plan. There are instructions on the Forest website for submitting comments. However, the County should submit comments in whatever way makes most sense. Ultimately the hope is to have a constructive dialogue.

BJ: The County would like the Forest to interact with whoever from Flathead County reviews the Forest’s Plan document - to help them understand the Forest’s constraints.

Joe: The Forest will make themselves available in the next 60 days for that dialogue. The ideal would be a couple hour meeting initially – to talk about how the growth and natural resource policies are nested, with time after that for the county to prepare comments. It would be most helpful at this time to focus on those places where inconsistencies exist.

Missoula County Planning Documents Overview

Growth Policy

Overview - The growth policy represents a vision for the future of the County. It is not a regulatory document, but rather a road-map with high level goals and objectives for future land management decisions covering all lands in Missoula County. The policy, which was last updated in 2005, is currently undergoing a revision, due to be completed next year. The revision started in 2014 with an inventory of existing conditions. A set of new draft goals and objectives for the revision is available for review on the County website.

Chapter 3 – Community goals and objectives: This chapter is broken into different topic areas. The topic most relevant to the Forest Service is the natural environment. There is wide-spread support throughout the County for protection of natural resources, but there are some areas of controversy about the use of resources, and we are hearing a lot about trails. Also, it should be noted that the policy's treatment of cultural and historic resources applies to both public and private lands.

Chapter 4 – Implementation: The implementation list in the current growth plan lacks timelines and measurable milestones, but the new plan will have those, including success metrics. Also, there are some opportunities in this chapter for information sharing with the Forest, specifically regarding data gathering, monitoring and evaluation. In addition the County and Forest probably have shared goals regarding educating the public about natural resources and living with wildlife. The Forest could be a good resource on these topics. Note the Forest is particularly interested in the Southern Swan implementation section to tie into the Forest Plan revision. The County will notify Forest when it is available.

Chapters 7 and 9 – Inter-jurisdictional/Interagency Coordination: The County conducts quarterly meetings with other agencies, specifically with respect to water resources. The Forest participates by phone in their meetings, and has an MOU with the County (note the Bitterroot and Lolo Forests are also signatories to that MOU). Chapter 7 details the -going efforts at coordination, e.g., agency MOUs, and agency review lists for projects.

Process and Timeline for Developing the New Growth Policy: The County is aiming for public hearings on the policy in the fall, and commissioner adoption in winter, depending on how the hearings go. The draft goals and objectives are already out for review. The next step is updating the implementation strategy and action plan. The intent is to have a full draft out in August / September for discussion during the public hearings, while continuing to gather input as the draft evolves.

Swan Valley – Condon Comprehensive Plan Amendment: This Amendment is specific to the Swan, but is under the auspices of the overall growth plan. This is just one of 13 sub (neighborhood) plans). All the neighborhood plans are a bit different, covering a variety of

topics including natural resources. The proposed goals, actions and strategies detailed for the Swan would probably be of interest to Forest.

Question from Joe - What is the intent of number 4 "Strengthen coordination of land management activities between the US FS, Plum Creeketc"?

Response from Kali - That was written in the 90s, and is really just a generality. An example might be that the Forest will notify private land owners in an area where a controlled burn is to be conducted. Also, the Fire Hazard Mitigation and Services section would be a good one for the Forest to review. Number 10 in that section is specific to Forest, but was written very generally... it seems to talk about reducing fire hazard on all their respective lands.

Comment from Joe – It is important to consider the specific values that need to be protected. From what has been mentioned so far there does not appear to be any conflict with anything in the Forest's plan, especially since the County policy is not very prescriptive.

Comment from Reed – It would be useful to look at this [fire] section in the context of today's landscape and ownership patterns.

Comment from Kali - The Swan Valley section contains land use designation descriptions with a map at the end entitled "Grizzly linkage zone". The plan was developed during a time when there was lots of discussion about grizzly linkage zones, so that designation was suggested. There has been some discussion in the community about updating the plan and the land use designations – but that is stalled out right now, there is no update anticipated in the near future. It could be helpful to show some existing conservation easements and to include the updated ownership map that shows for example the recent TNC transfers. Note: Reed would like to get those layers because the Forest plan addresses connectivity issues.

Subdivision Regulations

The Forest has the ability to review subdivision proposals. District level staff have done so in the past, and anticipate such review in the future.

Seeley Swan fire plan

The Forest is involved in revising this Plan. There is no need for additional review.

Parks and Trails Master Plan

Overview: This is the guiding document for the Parks and Trails program. There are 91 parks and trails throughout the County, including three county parks within the Forest's jurisdiction, (e.g., the ball park in Condon). The Master Plan is not all just recreation facilities focused however. Connectivity and public lands also came up a lot. It reflects a lot of community input – and the high value placed on open space and trails. Some of the input

reflects not having the greatest access from some communities. An example is Mission Swan Park which comprises 12 ½ acres next to the Forest but without great access to the Forest. Page 12 contains a summary of community input. Page 57 contains recommendations, which are general and programmatic.

Regional Trails Initiative: One recommendation in the Parks and Trails Plan, which is to establish a regional trails district, would be especially relevant to the Forest because the trails would mostly be on public lands. Joe noted said he would like to consider how the Forest could support such an initiative in light of the fact that Forest's trails budget is not going up, and that the only way to "grow the pie for everyone" will mostly have to be in partnership with others, perhaps building off the \$3 million bond that was passed to support trails in the county. The Forest would like to explore this concept further.

Grizzly Conservation Strategy

Missoula County is very interested in how the Grizzly Conservation Strategy impacts Missoula and other counties. According to Joe, the impact in Missoula County will be minimal except around Seeley. There are still details to be worked out among the State, Fish and Wildlife Service and the Forest Service between now and delisting. The Forest's work on habitat management direction is one of the foundational issues. The Conservation Strategy is incorporated in the Forest's proposed Plan revision, and will amend other forest's plans. Volume 1 of the DEIS will describe effects to the Flathead National Forest, volume II effects to other forests.

Closing

In general Missoula county documents seem consistent with the Forest's direction. It is very helpful to be oriented to the documents so Forest staff can understand what to review most closely. There could be some fine-tuning, synching up.

Next Steps

- **Connie** will distribute information about the Forest's open house schedule to the Interagency Group members.
- **Missoula County** will notify the Forest when the Southern Swan implementation section of its growth policy is available.
- **Missoula County** will work with Reed to provide the Forest with access to: a) the County's GIS layers that show some existing conservation easements, and b) updated ownership maps that show recent TNC transfers.
- **Kali** will send the Forest a link to the County's on-going growth work.

- **The Forest** will work with Flathead County to schedule and conduct a meeting to talk about how the County's growth and natural resource policies, and to allow the Forest Service planners to explain their documents – with time after the meeting for the county to prepare comments.
- **Connie** will work with the Forest to schedule the next Interagency Group meeting in about late June.



Flathead National Forest Interagency Group Meeting Summary

July 15, 2015

Meeting Purposes

- Provide updates on the Flathead National Forest Plan revision process to date including a review and discussion of issues identified in scoping
- Share information and updates about relevant policies, planning processes or other activities that have been initiated or implemented by various jurisdictions since the previous Interagency Group meeting (March 4, 2014)
- Identify any additional resource materials that should be exchanged

Attendees

Interagency Group Members:

- Kevin Aceituno – US Fish and Wildlife Service (via teleconference)
- Neil Anderson – MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks
- Kali Becher - Missoula County (via VTC)
- Pam Holmquist – Flathead County
- Dave Landstrom – Fish, Wildlife and Parks
- Ira Matt – Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
- Jeff Mow – Glacier National Park

Flathead National Forest Staff:

- Stacy Allen
- Joe Krueger
- Marsha Moore
- Rebecca Rasch (via VTC)
- Julia Riber (via VTC)
- Heidi Trechsel
- Chip Weber

Facilitator: Connie Lewis, Meridian Institute

Introduction

Chip Weber, Flathead National Forest Supervisor opened the meeting by welcoming everyone, and emphasizing the value of the Interagency Group. The primary purposes of the Interagency Group meetings are to provide updates about the Forest Plan revision process and to discuss intersections between the Forest Plan and other jurisdictions' plans and policies. In addition, the meetings can be used as a venue for exploring new partnership and collaboration opportunities among agencies.

Joe: The forest wants to avoid the "jack in the box" syndrome – i.e., only popping up periodically to say what is happening in the planning process. Rather, the desire is for regular, meaningful involvement.

Forest Plan Update

Joe Krueger: The Flathead National Forest received over 20,000 public comments on the proposed action during the 70-day comment period that ended May 15. The Forest also held a number of open houses. The input included comments on the proposal to amend the Helena, Kootenai, Lewis and Clark, and Lolo National Forest plans to integrate the Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy. The Forest Service is preparing a single environmental impact statement for its revised Forest Plan and the amendments.

The attached document (*Highlights from Scoping Comment Period*) summarizes the types of comments that were submitted and the significant issues that were derived from the comments. The issues will be used to frame the range of alternatives, but there will not be detailed responses to all of the comments (although all of the comment letters will be made available in a reading room). There will be responses to the comments submitted during the 90 day comments following release of the DEIS.

The four big issue statements that emerged in scoping were:

- Vegetation management, timber, and fire
- Habitat
- Access and recreation
- Recommended wilderness.

The comments expressed a wide range of opinions - some people wanting more, some less (or none) - of whatever management the Forest might suggest for each issue. There were also a lot of comments that said the current proposed action is generally good, but can be improved upon.

To meet the NEPA requirement for an adequate range of alternatives, the Forest is tentatively proposing the following four alternatives to be included in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). This is a significantly smaller, and more

manageable, number of alternatives than was typical in 1980s, when a dozen or more alternatives were not unusual.

- A- No action alternative (1986 plan) including 26 amendments, plus non-discretionary terms and conditions.
- B- Modified proposed action.
- C- Emphasizes wilderness values and natural processes. This alternative responds to those commenters who said they wanted all inventoried roadless areas (IRAs) to go to wilderness.
- D- No recommended wilderness and maximize management flexibility with emphasis on mechanized and motorized use and management where possible. In this alternative, motorized access still has to be outside of primary grizzly conservation areas, except over the snow before denning (i.e., late season).

The range of alternatives is usually displayed by differentiating management areas, but not varying plan components. The reality is actually more complicated. The Forest is going to try to avoid mixing up plan components, but in some cases, e.g., recommended wilderness, will need to adjust the mechanized use allowed in a plan component.

With regards to the Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy, the intent is to ensure adequate regulatory mechanisms. The Fish and Wildlife Service is the agency responsible for the federal register notice regarding delisting. The Flathead National Forest intends to incorporate relevant direction regarding habitat (not hunting).

The Forest is on schedule to produce the DEIS for internal review by October 1, 2015, which means the Flathead is the “flagship” forest with regards to forest plan development, and therefore out ahead on the new 2012 planning rule requirements with regards to things like species of conservation concern, viability rule, and sustainable recreation. This timing means that the Flathead will be the “point of the spear” when the plan is inevitably litigated in the 9th circuit.

The planning team has already drafted the description of affected environment, and is starting work on consequences and the no action alternative. They are also engaging the region and other relevant Forest supervisors. The new regional forester is Leanne Martin. She is very familiar with oil and gas leasing, wilderness and the new requirements in the 2012 planning rule. The goal following internal review is to publish the DEIS for public comment by January 1, 2016.

The final decision about the preferred option will be made after all the alternatives are evaluated.

The Forest has not closed the door on future collaborations. Even some of the critics are saying there was value in the collaboration process that was conducted last year, because it

allowed stakeholders to develop and discuss an array of good ideas even though they did not achieve actual agreements on the tough issues. If it seems promising, the Forest may suggest convening a group of people willing to work together on mutually agreeable approaches within the range of alternatives that have already been staked out (perhaps in coordination with counties as co-conveners). Even without achieving an agreement, such a process could provide a gut check before reaching a final decision. Pam said she would be more than willing to be part of a further collaboration effort.

Discussion

General Feedback: The meeting attendees generally indicated they like the approach the Forest is taking on the DEIS, are excited to see the alternatives, and appreciate being so thoroughly briefed at this stage – so there won't be future surprises.

County Perspectives: The Forest is eager to hear from other counties besides just Flathead and Missoula (which are the two that have actively participated in the Interagency Group). Pam noted that the Flathead County Commissioner's had a meeting over a year ago with Lincoln County Commissioner's to discuss the Forest Service Plan process. Lake County only has about 60K acres of the Flathead National Forest – and therefore may not have a significant interest in participating.

Flathead County: Pam noted the prohibition about commissioners talking to one another outside of meetings, but suggested that the Forest reach out to Mark Mussman, the new Flathead County planner who came on board about a month ago to replace BJ Grieve who has moved into a different position.

Missoula County: Joe commented on the fact that a representative from the SW Crown Collaborative named Mitch Dillery identified himself on a recent field trip as having an affiliation with Missoula County. Kali clarified that Mitch and she are updating each other regularly. Also, Kali mentioned that the county is writing a new growth policy – a draft may be out in January. And, the Swan Valley growth planning document is being updated as well, but not sure when. There have been several neighborhood meetings – the feedback received in those meetings is similar to the scoping themes that were mentioned earlier. The new growth policy is unlikely to contradict anything in the Forest plan. Joe noted that some of the comments expressed concern about turning previous Plum Creek lands into recommended wilderness, but that is not the case. Joe: Given the timing of these very processes, it will be important for the Forest to pay particular attention to them between draft and final.

Park Service Perspective: Jeff mentioned how important it is for Glacier National Park and the Forest to work together year-round to improve visitor services, especially in light of new challenges such as those arising from drought (i.e., insufficient water for visitor needs). The

Forest Plan is being written as a permissive document to allow for flexibility and collaboration to help meet such challenges.

MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks Perspective: State Parks has recently completed a five year plan, and is eager to collaborate going forward. There are already good conversations underway regarding where it is appropriate to advocate for the front country concept/need given rapidly increasing use. The primary vehicle for partnering to date has been pass-through grants, e.g., for trails and snowmobile areas, etc. The agency is keen to explore further opportunities, and like the way the Forest is structuring alternatives because it allows for flexibility to explore partnerships. Joe noted that specific suggestions for future partnerships would be welcome.

Regarding timber and wildlife, there are places where timber management would improve habitat, and other places needing more protection. Two legislative sessions ago the agency was mandated to look at timber harvest and yield. Biologists agree that management is important, for example to address disease issues that could affect deer habitat, etc. It is necessary to look at long term issues, and how to integrate what is happening outside of just the State's jurisdiction.

Tribal Perspective: Ira emphasized the importance of protecting special places and wildlife, and of achieving balance. The Tribes have a long history of working closely with Glacier National Park, but would like to see other agencies synch up. He is happy to be part of the Interagency Group, and asks the Forest to let him know if there is anything in the cultural resources section of the Forest plan that he can help with. Joe commented that it is always very productive to meet with Tribal resource specialists, and noted that the Forest is also conducting formal intergovernmental Tribal consultations.

Balancing Recreation and Wildlife Considerations:

Question from Joe to Neil – How does the Fish Wildlife and Parks balance wildlife considerations with recreation demands? Answer: Some State lands were acquired specifically for wildlife, so that is what they managed for, instead of for trails. The public mostly understands and supports this approach, although the public often does not make the distinction between land ownerships. State parks do not have large footprints, which mitigates the demand for demand for all uses on the same acreage. There is a recreation staff person in the State DNRC. Joe: As with other topics, the Forest would appreciate specific suggestions regarding management adjacent to the State DNRC recreation focus areas.

Chip: The Forest would like to see a collective effort regarding sustainable recreation - to figure out principles, examine how to make all lands work together on recreation in ways that help the business environment (which is substantially benefited by recreational dollars). One example would be an interconnected trails system, building off of what has already been done. Another would be to investigate partners for a hut system. This kind of initiative

will require everyone at the same table (including Department of Agriculture rural development people).

Jeff: The Park is looking at what has blown the lid off of visitation numbers, which have far exceeded expectations, we are trying to figure out why.

Neil: State Park numbers are similar – also up substantially.

Joe: There is a perception that the Forest is trying to restrict dispersed recreation, and that grizzly bear management is having an impact, but that is not the case at all. There is just a lot more demand for dispersed recreation.

Closing and Next Steps

Closing: Chip thanked everyone for coming and for accomplishing so much in such a short time. He encouraged everyone to pick up the phone if anything comes up – do not wait for the next meeting. Also continue staff to staff conversations on a regular basis.

The next Interagency Group meeting will probably be scheduled in October or November (dates and details TBD). This timing will enable the Interagency Group to review the DEIS, which is scheduled to be released in January 2016.

Actions:

- Flathead National Forest connect with Mark Mussman, the new Flathead County planner.
- Pursue a collective effort regarding sustainable recreation.
- Flathead National Forest check in on Missoula County's growth policy and Swan Valley's growth planning document.



Flathead National Forest Interagency Group

November 4, 2015

Meeting Summary

Meeting Purposes

- Provide updates on the Flathead National Forest Plan revision
- Share brief updates about relevant policies, planning processes or other activities that have been initiated or implemented by various jurisdictions since the previous Interagency Group meeting (July 15, 2015)
- Identify any additional resource materials that should be exchanged

Attendees

Interagency Group Members:

Kevin Aceituno – US Fish and Wildlife Service
Kali Becher – Missoula County (via VTC)
Mark Biel - Glacier National Park
Matt Boyer – Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Pam Holmquist – Flathead County

Forest Service Staff

Kathy Ake
Stacy Allen
Kathryn Benz (via VTC)
Rob Carlin
Joe Krueger
Chip Weber

Meridian Institute

Connie Lewis

Summary

Updates on Flathead National Forest plan revision process:

The DEIS for the Flathead National Forest Plan Revision was originally scheduled to go to

the Regional Office (RO) on October 1. However, thanks to a 45-day extension, the due date is now November 15, 2015. Once the draft is delivered, the team will present an overview to the RO, which will include a 30-day review period.

The scheduling delay was largely caused by the intense fire season which resulted in a couple of areas being burned that then required supplemental analysis of the burn effects (e.g., Spotted Bear timber sale and lynx habitat that was burned). Also, according to Joe, this NEPA process is the most complex of his career – partly because of the nexus with the grizzly bear conservation strategy (GBCS). Getting all the partners to agree on grizzly regulatory language continues to be a significant challenge. Even with the delays, on-going field work in the burn areas, and all the complexity, the Forest is still trying to get through the plan revision process as quickly as possible. The planning team is extremely dedicated, and has been working overtime and weekends to get the work done.

The RO review will conclude in mid-December. It will then likely take through February to brief the Washington office, make sure they and the RO are aligned, and understand and work through the controversial aspects. The notice of availability for the draft DEIS will probably go out in March 2016, followed by a 90-day public comment period in which thousands of comments are expected.

The plan revision and DEIS are built around lettered alternatives for the revision, and numbered alternatives for the GBCS. There are several highly controversial issues in addition to the GBCS. One is the continuation of mechanized motorized use in recommended wilderness - as long as wilderness character is maintained. Many constituents do not like that approach, so there will be an alternative that precludes such use – which would have significance for snowmobiles.

The public will have ample opportunity for engagement during the 90-day public comment period starting (probably) in March 2016. There will be meetings around the region (e.g., in Kalispell, Missoula, Eureka, Sealey, Condon, Lincoln, and Superior) in which there will be maps and stations where stakeholders will have the ability to gain understanding into the alternatives.

The Forest may also consider convening a collaborative group - that is diverse and representative of Flathead as whole – to try to agree on a final alternative. It would be a tough exercise given the polarized nature of this community, but still worth considering.

Q&A

Q: Can the Forest Plan designate new wilderness?

A: No, the Forest plan can only recommend new wilderness; Congress has to actually do the designation. The 1986 Flathead Forest plan recommended new wilderness, but Congress did not act on the recommendation – so no new wilderness was designated at that time.

Comment (Joe): There are conversations happening among stakeholders in a few other places, e.g., Utah and Idaho, in which trade-offs are being explored (i.e., lumber companies indicating possible willingness to accept wilderness if they are allowed to log elsewhere). There are some people here who would like to engage in those kinds of collaborative problem solving discussion to try to achieve agreed upon solutions, but others who would not.

Comment (Pam): The Montana Association of Counties (MACo) recently drafted a resolution about recommended wilderness (attached).

Comment (Joe): The 2012 Forest Planning Rule specifies that potential wilderness be evaluated, but there is no requirement that it be selected. The Forest's wilderness recommendations are going to get lots of scrutiny, especially because the Flathead National Forest will be the first forest out of the gate with a plan that contains new wilderness recommendations. (The only other forest that is ahead of the Flathead in its plan revision process (in South Carolina) is not recommended any new wilderness).

Comment (Joe): Lynx is another one of the Forest's big ticket, contentious issues. The Flathead would like to change some of the lynx management direction that was established some time ago on a very broad scale (18 national forests). The intent is to achieve better on-the-ground conditions, but the Agency is struggling with how to enable departures by a single forest from the overall lynx direction. On the other hand, there appears to be more willingness for forests being allowed to tweak aquatic management direction regarding bull trout, perhaps because the relevant directives were only established on an interim basis in 1995. These are difficult issues for large planning efforts.

Updates

The meeting attendees provided updates regarding policies, plans and activities that are possibly relevant to the Forest plan revision process.

Kevin Aceituno, US Fish and Wildlife Service: There has been a lot of turnover in the Department recently. Consequently, some responsibilities are in a state of flux, but Kevin will be involved in consultation on the Forest Plan. He wants to make sure that consultation is conducted in a timely fashion. For that reason, clarity about the steps in the process and the timing with respect to consultation is extremely valuable.

Comment (Joe): Consultation will be requested on the preferred alternative. However, at this stage, the Forest has not identified a preferred option. It is hard to estimate the exact timing of the consultation, but it will probably take place in June-July 2016, after the 90-day public consultation period which will initiate after the DEIS is released (probably early March), and after the Forest digests the comments and produces a preferred alternative. The fire season could impact the timing, but Forest and Agency leadership will keep pushing for an aggressive schedule. To date the Flathead has done very well with its planning process timeline and has maintained an exceedingly high quality of work. However, the Forest needs to be realistic about the factors that could contribute to possible slippage, and may also want to allow time for a collaborative process.

Mark Biel, Glacier National Park: The NEPA process is underway for Sun road management – current expectations regarding timing are that a revised draft will be completed in late spring 2016, a final EIS in late summer 2016, and a signed Record of Decision sometime in 2017.

The larger issue impacting the relationship between the Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park is the dispersion of recreational use, for both economic and ecological reasons.

Comment (Chip): The Forest would like to play a constructive role in helping to address this issue. There may need to be more communication between the Park and the Forest (and the State) about what each entity is doing to reduce impacts by utilizing more of the landscape for recreational uses.

Comment (Mark): No one expects additional funding, so coordination and communication are going to be important. Paving the road up to Abbot Bay might be one way for the Forest to pull some of the public use to the reservoir, and could have significant economic value to that area.

Matt Boyer – Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP): Grizzly bear delisting could be a significant action impacting both the MFWP and the Forest. There is an upcoming meeting including the Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), MFWP, and the Forest Service regarding the delisting process.

Comment: (Joe): The draft Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy (GBCS) is out. It will undergo further tweaking based on public comment. It has already been a lengthy process – four to five years leading up to this point. One significant challenge is to craft regulatory language that is deemed sufficient to get to delisting - some people are standing on principle even when the effects are not very great. And, demographics and hunting are sticking points.

Yellowstone Park's delisting proposal represents a potential breakthrough in the process. The proposal is likely to move forward based on population numbers and the science of "minimum viable population". The USFWS could potentially issue a federal register notice regarding delisting even before the GBCS is finalized. The Flathead Forest's grizzly population is actually looking better than Yellowstone's, but the Forest plan revision effort is already being criticized for suggesting anything before the GBCS is finalized. On the other hand, ranchers on the east side who are upset about mortality on cattle are saying the Forest is not moving quickly enough. Ultimately the Forest plan and the GBCS will merge together.

Pam Holmquist – Flathead County: There is nothing new to report from Flathead County.

Comment (Chip): The Forest intends to cooperate with counties even without formal "cooperating agency" status.

Kali Becher – Missoula County: The County is working on rewriting its growth policy. November 13 is the target date for a notice to agencies that a draft growth policy is available, and adoption of a new policy is likely in early 2016. The Forest is encouraged to review the intergovernmental coordination chapter in particular. The draft will provide a good indication of where the County is heading. The Swan Valley Community is also working on a regional plan for the Swan. However, their draft Swan Valley regional plan is only about 75% complete and is unlikely to be finalized ahead of the Forest Plan, so the Forest should just reference the existing version of the regional plan.

Q: (Joe) Are there any emerging conflicts with respect to the Forest and County plans?

A: (Kali) Not for the growth policy. However, it is harder to say for the Swan regional plan, but unlikely since it looks like most of the major changes are focused on economics and community vitality.

Next Interagency Group Meeting

The next Flathead National Forest Interagency Group meeting will probably take place in late February or early March 2016, shortly before the next round of public engagement. Details will be forthcoming. In the meantime, Interagency Group members are encouraged to contact the Forest at any time with questions, updates, or further consultation.



Flathead National Forest Interagency Group

May 24, 2016

Meeting Summary

Meeting Purposes

The meeting of the Flathead National Forest Interagency Group was held May 24th at the Hungry Horse Ranger District. The meeting purposes were to:

- Provide updates on the pending release (May 26th 2016) of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Flathead National Forest Plan revision and discuss the stakeholder engagement process going forward;
- Share brief updates about relevant policies, planning processes or other activities that have been initiated or implemented by various jurisdictions since the previous Interagency Group meeting (November 4, 2015); and,
- Identify any additional resource materials that should be exchanged

Attendees

Interagency Group Members:

Kevin Aceituno – US Fish and Wildlife Service
Kali Becher – Missoula County (via VTC)
Mark Biel - Glacier National Park
David Lindstrom – MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Jim Williams – MT Fish Wildlife and Parks
Steve Frye– Mt. Department of Natural Resources

Forest Service Staff

Stacy Allen
Rob Carlin
Joe Krueger
Reed Kuennen
Timory Peel (via VTC)
Janette Turk
Pat Van Eimeren
Chip Weber
Marsha Moore

Meridian Institute

Connie Lewis

Summary**Updates on the Flathead National Forest Plan Revision Process:**

Joe Krueger and Chip Weber provided the following updates regarding the Flathead National Forest (Forest) Plan revision process. Their power point slides are attached.

- The intention has been to release the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on Friday, May 27, but the release could be delayed by as much as a week.
- The DEIS, has been a long time coming, in part because the Plan revision process has been vastly complicated by amendments covering more than seven million acres, including other national forests. The reason behind all the amendments is the need to sustain grizzly bear habitat. We have gotten to this point in the process thanks to a lot of hard work by many agencies.
- The Forest Plan revision is based on the 2012 Planning Rule.
- An important overall context for the Forest's Plan is that the Forest has a fairly intact, functional ecosystem, and is an important connector for lots of species. As a result, the Forest's approach to the Plan has been to strive to keep that critical ecological role intact.
- The "Need for Change" in the Plan was based in part on the dramatic increases we are seeing in recreational demand, the expectation that recreation is prominently featured in the revised Plan, and the rapid advance of new recreational technologies (e.g., mountain biking). The Forest needs a sustainable recreation strategy that meets these demands, reflects budget realities and protects resources.
- The Plan is fundamentally based on ecological sustainability. The Forest is mostly in good shape, but we want to sustain functional watersheds and habitats, and make a few places a little better. We also need to respond to climate change and other disturbance regimes.
- Essentially everything in the Plan is cross-walked with the grizzly bear conservation strategy. That strategy imposes significant constraints on management, but in the timber arena we still were able to examine a variety of different possible production levels. Some members of the public are concerned that the recovery strategy is not adequate, however we know that the grizzly bear is thriving, so we are struggling to understand the need for additional management requirements. We cannot do an alternative that is less than what the conservation strategy requires.

- To achieve social and economic sustainability, we looked at how to manage the ecosystem in a way that is ecologically sustainable and provides for the array of values that society wants. We think the range of alternatives reflects what people are looking for.
- There has been a tremendous amount of stakeholder engagement in the Revision process. The Forest Assessment, which was completed April 14, benefited from input derived from four field-trips. Stakeholder meetings did not result in consensus, but produced helpful suggestions and an enhanced appreciation for the difficult trade-offs facing the Forest. We received more than 20,000 comments on the Proposed Action.
- The Whitefish Collaborative produced outcomes that were incorporated into one of alternatives and all of the alternatives address the full array of interwoven issues.
- Among the issues that needed to be addressed in the alternatives was habitat for wildlife and fish. We have some of the “best of the best”, and a lot of support for our wildlife, but there is a range of views how much habitat to protect. There are also different values around how to protect/restore habitat, e.g., mechanical treatments versus fire.
- As already mentioned, access and recreation are critical issues facing the Forest – some people want more access, some want more protection. One of benefits of the stakeholder collaboration was that it helped the public understand that opportunities for additional motorized access are extremely limited because of the grizzly bear conservation strategy. Nevertheless, we are trying to satisfy demand while not raising unrealistic expectations. And, we are trying to deal with advances in recreational technology, for example in over-snow vehicles. Anything we decide is going to be controversial. The issue of allowing existing mechanized/motorized uses in recommended wilderness is creating lots of debate. Nationally the discussion is largely about mountain biking. Here there is a strong interest in the Hefty –Tuchuck areas, even though mechanized use there is very limited. And, we cannot open up the Bob Marshal Wilderness Area to motorized use – although some would like to. In the face of varying perspectives, Chip has insisted on a range of alternatives so we can fully analyze effects. Refer to the power point slides for detail about the alternatives.
- Wildlife issues are also critically important and of high interest to the public, although the Flathead National Forest is on the low end of numbers of Species of Conservation Concern (SCCs). The Regional Forester is scheduled to publish the draft list of SCCs at the same time we publish the DEIS. It is not the final list since we will be taking comments – particularly looking for scientific information that would change designations. It will be a dynamic list, able to adjust as new information comes in over time. For example, as of now the wolverine is listed as a Species of Interest; we will have to change that if appears headed to TES species.

- There are also minor changes in the DEIS regarding lynx. Under current lynx direction, thinning around White Bark Pine trees is prohibited with the exception of small saplings. The Proposed Plan would add an additional exception category to allow falling of larger trees to help promulgate the species. Also, different alternatives provide for a range of over snow use.
- The Inland Native Fish Strategy (Infish) goes away under this Plan. We believe the new approach is better because it builds in sustainability and resiliency, and will continue the improvement we have seen over time in our watersheds. However, the shift will be a source of controversy. Terminology has changed from Riparian Conservation Area (RCA) to Riparian Management Zone (RMZ). And there is a proposal to increase riparian and wetland buffers to protect ecological processes. In addition, we are proposing to move away from watershed analysis, and instead require multi-scale, multi resource analysis. This will enable us to consider context – e.g., how important are bull trout in a particular area. And, rather than relying on numerical standards that are not really very applicable and that can change, we are going to look at overall stream health instead, e.g., large woody debris, bank stability, etc.
- Also, we are setting up conservation watershed networks to deal proactively with the impacts of climate change. They will use climate change temperature models to develop scenarios that take into account current temperatures and fish distributions, and what changing water and air temperatures will mean for fish habitat (e.g., for bull trout). The networks will include priority watersheds and will address the need for refugia. The Flathead National Forest is the likely the only Forest in the lower 48 that will provide bull trout refugia into the future. We have the best of the best – and want to keep it that way.
- The Proposed Plan contributes to social and economic sustainability in many ways, e.g., by distributing recreation across the landscape and thereby trying to help alleviate stress on really popular areas (both within Glacier National Park and on the Forest); maintaining a timber program (roughly in the range of where it has been recently, about 30 mmbf/yr); supporting a range of ecosystem services (expecting that water will be bigger issue in 20 years than endangered species); and by offering a broad range of wilderness alternatives (from 0 to 506,900 new acres).
- The objection process is a new feature under the 2012 Planning Rule, and we certainly expect quite a few. However we like the objections process more than the old appeals process because it allows to us to try to address concerns that are raised. However, we are under no illusion that the process will make lawsuits go away.

Development of a Preferred Alternative:

One of objectives today is to discuss a possible role for this Interagency Group in getting to a preferred alternative, which is probably going to be a mix and match of alternatives. We do not already have a preferred alternative. Members of the public worked for nine months during the collaborative engagement process to come to agreement, but could not do it. However, this Interagency Group could be very helpful in making a recommendation about what a preferred alternative looks like. We are considering an Interagency Group meeting in about September, followed by a longer meeting (possibly around the week of Oct. 3) in which the Interagency Group would work together in an “all-lands approach” to alternative development. Our all-lands partners can help us make better decisions. Counties are critical, and we are missing some key people today, e.g., Pam Holmquist. (Kali commented that the commissioners in Missoula County would probably be very interested in this approach).

It needs to be understood that we will likely not be able to complete the development of responses to public comments until March or so (especially since the majority of comments usually come in towards the end of the comment period), and there is the potential that comments could take us in a different direction than that suggested by the Interagency Group. However, we will have the content analysis part done fairly quickly – possibly in time for an Interagency Group meeting in October.

Assuming we go ahead with this approach, we would want to focus on a handful of key issues, e.g., recommended wilderness; focused recreation areas; management of general forest areas, timber outputs and the potential for more timber management in the WUI; and, grizzly bear protections.

Comments, Questions and Reactions

Q: What is the plan for consultation with Fish and Wildlife Service?

A: There is a meeting set up in June. The intention is to start early with management agencies on bits and pieces, rather than waiting for the preferred alternative.

Comment: Mt. Fish and Wildlife. We think you have done a great job, e.g., wrapping the Forest Plan together with the grizzly bear conservation strategy. We are eager to help out. We are coming out with our own plan, and expect it to be very complementary.

Comments related to Recreation:

- Recreation is of keen interest and a critical issue for all of us. All the agencies are feeling the pressure. We need to create a cohesive partnership to address and distribute the use.
- The Forest is in on-going conversations with Glacier National Park about how to coordinate better. We are joined at hip with trails programs.

- It is apparent that recreation is huge driver, and we haven't seen anything yet! There has been a 30-40% use increase in recreational use in Glacier National Park in just the last five years, and there are new toys on the horizon (e.g., electric mountain bikes).
- Look at what is happening on State trust lands around Whitefish - that is an indicator of what is coming.
- The identification of focused recreation areas by the Forest represent an attempt to accommodate additional use where appropriate. But they are going to be controversial.
- Many of the use conflicts are value and social based, and about people's back yards. They are not really driven by science. One thing recreationists want is MORE; we see that every day and need to recognize that their reach is increasing. Forward thinking groups are looking at new toys, e.g., motorized stand up paddle boards that can go up creeks. Also, witness the recent battle about motor boats on the lake.
- We also have to continue investments in places like the Bob Marshal Wilderness, where there are internationally significant resources to protect.
- This discussion encapsulates what the Forest is facing. There is more attention going to the front country because that's where people are, but the Bob Marshal Wilderness is a priceless treasure. We have been struggling with this conundrum for years.
- There is a lot of potential and high interest in an interconnected trail system. Flathead County has already struck out in that direction. There are pieces already in place, and a number of new ones in the works. What we need now is a collective community vision. A major concern for all is funding.

Agency Updates

The Mt Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department is working on a new plan, but it is not public yet. It will be released within a month, and represents an opportunity for more alignment with the Forest.

Glacier National Park: has a draft EIS due out. We are also just scoping a fisheries management plan. We have other plans waiting for funding. We would like to encourage better coordinate on visitor use and how they are divided between Glacier National Park, the Forest Service, and the State. We need to develop improved mechanisms to keep one another abreast in addition to leaders getting together periodically.

Missoula County: The Growth Policy update is still underway. The Draft is posted on our website and there will be second public hearing with the county commissioners on June 1.

We anticipated adoption at that meeting – and expect to have the Plan fully in place within a few weeks. The Swan Valley Regional Plan is largely being worked on by the community council. They are going through comments now.

US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) – Consultation on the Forest plan is a high priority. Our goal is to be responsive and to stay in lockstep on scheduling. The Flathead Forest consultation is already on the table - we do not have to wait until we have the actual document in the door. There are also four other forests going through revisions that the USFWS needs to consult on as well. This will stretch USFWS consultative capacity, although we have staffed up considerably – there are more biologists on board so as not to have to triage consultations.

Flathead National Forest: During the week of June 20th there will be two open houses focusing on plan monitoring. (Decisions about what to monitor provide signals about what is really important). The format will be informal - no presentations or public comment, just stations. We would like to get the word out to encourage attendance from MTFWP, e.g., their biologists. If anyone needs individual presentations – please let Joe know. We have been holding meetings with districts and staff to get them up to speed prior to the open houses.

In closing Joe recognized that the Forest planning team has been doing great work in record time. It is much trickier and more complex than project level analysis. He also expressed thanks to other agencies!

Next Steps

Likely there will be an Interagency Group meet in September and a discussion with the Interagency Group in October about a preferred alternative.



Flathead National Forest Interagency Group January 24, 2017 Meeting Summary

Meeting Purposes

- Obtain feedback regarding development of the Flathead National Forest Plan Preferred Alternative – ascertain where there may be areas of agreement and disagreement
 - Share brief updates about relevant policies, planning processes or other activities since the previous meeting (November 4, 2016)
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Summary

Opening

Chip Weber and Joe Krueger welcomed the Interagency Group members, noting how helpful it is to be able to have the kind of productive dialogue afforded by the Interagency Group meetings. They hope that the dialogue will continue through the implementation phase, after the Forest Plan revision process concludes.

Update on the Forest Plan Revision Process

Joe Krueger provided a general update on the Flathead National Forest Plan revision process. The Interdisciplinary (ID) Team is developing responses to comments on the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Concurrently, the ID Team is at work on the Preferred Alternative, which is likely to be a combination of the alternatives that were analyzed in the draft EIS. They are taking into account the input that was provided through a lengthy and intensive public engagement process. And, although they are on track to release the Draft Final Environmental Impact Statement and associated Records of Decision by June 2017, and are especially eager to get a preliminary reaction from the Interagency Group members about the general anticipated direction of the Preferred Alternative.

After the Preferred Alternative and Final EIS are released, there will be a 60 day period in which objections can be filed (no extensions permitted). The Forest will then have 90 days to respond to any objections. The Forest expects a significant number of objections, given the high profile and controversial nature of the issues that will be under scrutiny, including grizzly bear management.

If it meets its June deadline, the Flathead National Forest will be the first large National

Forest in the country to release a Forest Plan under the 2012 Planning Rule. Only the Francis Marion Forest in South Carolina, which is much smaller than the Flathead National Forest, will have released its Plan sooner. If the Forest adheres to the anticipated timeline, the Forest Plan will be finalized in December 2017.

Preliminary Overview of the Preferred Alternative

Various Flathead National Forest resource specialists presented their current thinking about key sections of the preferred alternative.

Recreation, recommended wilderness and access (Joe Krueger for Marsha Moore): The preferred alternative will attempt to strike an equitable and responsible balance in how it addresses the interests of the various constituencies (motorized and non-motorized) who rely on the Forest's recreational values, while protecting wildlife and other Forest resources. The ID team is drawing upon a great deal of specific input from the public and groups such as the Whitefish Partnership (which provided consensus recommendations from a diverse membership) about what recreational uses and which areas of the Forest are most important to which groups. They are also looking carefully about how to enhance "front country" opportunities for people living in nearby communities.

In response to a question about whether access to the Pacific Northwest trail would be impacted by the Forest Plan it was clarified that it would not. In any case, most of the through riders utilize the road system to access the trail.

Vegetation management and timber program (Heidi Trechsel): Heidi provided an overview of the different levels of management intensity (A = low intensity, B = medium intensity, and C = high intensity), how those translate to sustainable timber output, how rotation age and Riparian Management Zones impacts are calculated, how budgetary impacts are accounted for, and how the preferred alternative will be displayed in the Plan. The ID team has engaged private sector expertise to ensure that their modeling is as accurate as possible. Based on the modeling results and current thinking about the preferred alternative, timber outputs would be very similar to recent levels. It was noted that analysis at a sub-Forest level (but greater than project level) would be very useful.

In response to a question about how wildlife needs (e.g., whitetail deer winter range cover) are being factored into this section, it was clarified that standards and guides will remain in place to ensure that habitat is protected. In addition, the Forest will work closely with State Fish, Wildlife, and Parks experts to determine project level approaches (e.g., patch sizes) to achieve desired conditions.

Fire management (Rick Connell): This section will be responsive to comments received about access for fuels reduction and suppression in the wildland-urban interface (WUI), concerns about smoke, and the importance of retaining flexibility in whether/how to respond to fire starts based on annual, seasonal, monthly and even daily considerations.

Aquatics (Pat Van Eimeren): Pat provided a detailed explanation about considerations that go into protecting Riparian Management Areas, e.g., making sure aquatic environments are protected from sedimentation, cold water refugia are maintained, topography is factored in, climate change impacts can be anticipated, etc. There is also a need to distinguish streams, ponds and wetlands – which need different types of protection.

There was a question about the impacts of grazing on the water resources. In response, it was explained that grazing on the Forest is limited (currently there are 9 active grazing allotments). Only one of the allotments is in bull trout habitat, and it only includes five cow-calf pairs. The most notable potential impact is on Lemonade Springs, but that is being closely monitored. There are also standards in place to protect resources from grazing impacts and a guideline in the Forest plan to phase out allotments if willing permittees want to relinquish them.

Wildlife management (Reed Kuennen): Reed noted that wildlife considerations are integrated throughout the Forest Plan, and that there is an emphasis on diversity, and on protecting threatened and endangered species and species of conservation concern.

In the discussion that followed, there was a comment about the importance of retaining flexibility in how wildlife are managed, keeping in mind there is another layer of process at the project level to ensure that protections are maintained. There was also some discussion about the extent to which our understanding of wildlife management is still evolving, e.g., regarding the potential interplay between lynx habitat and logging – some of the highest lynx densities can occur in areas where there has been extensive logging, which runs counter to what some had expected. Current lynx management, which was based on best available science at the time it was developed, is very difficult to change. This example illustrates the importance of retaining management flexibility so new information can be taken into account. It also helps demonstrate the value of multi-species (as contrasted with single-species) approaches based on processes such as disturbance ecology. We need a better model in the future to be really adaptive.

There was another comment about the importance of winter range cover for whitetail deer, especially in the WUI, where cover is decreasing as a result of fuels reduction.

In response to a question about mountain goats, it was clarified that neither helicopters or snowmobiles represent a concern because of dates of use and the fact that most of the goat population is in recommended wilderness.

Grizzly bear management (Nancy Warren): Nancy provided an update on the Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy (GBCS), and its relationship to the Flathead National Forest Plan revision. The GBCS will be codified through an amendment, which is smaller in scope than a revision. However the GBCS is complicated because it involves multiple forest plans. The Kootenai National Forest Plan was recently revised, so it is the most up to date, and therefore requires the least amount of change. The Lolo National Forest Plan dates to 1986

but has been amended far less than the Flathead National Forest's Plan (which has undergone 27 amendments since its last Plan revision). The Helena and Lewis and Clark National Forest plans (including incorporation of the GBCS) are now being revised jointly.

The draft GBCS for this ecosystem was put out in 2013. The original hope was to have the GBCS finalized concurrent with, or ahead of, the Flathead National Forest revision. Although that is not likely to happen, everyone is working diligently together to keep the two processes synched. There was an early exercise to identify elements from the GBCS that need to be integrated with the Forest plan. It has also been necessary to figure out how to craft common language that works.

Overall Feedback: The general sense of the Group was that the Forest is on the right track with the Forest Plan revision. Members expressed appreciation for the Forest's diligence in obtaining, and taking into account, input from the public and from its interagency partners.

Updates from Interagency Group Members

Flathead County (Pam Holmquist): Flathead County is updating its growth policy. The process is primarily focused on zoning, and may or may not include an update to the natural resources section. Pam is tracking the process, and will stay in touch with the Forest over the next couple of months regarding input relative to natural resources.

Glacier National Park (Mark Biel and Eric Smith): Glacier National Park is working on a Plan update, with a draft expected out in the spring. The Park will start working on backcountry and wilderness management plans next year. In response to a question about filling the open North Fork ranger position, it was noted that a potential hire has been identified from within the Park Service, but there is uncertainty given the federal agency hiring freeze about when/how the hiring process will proceed.

Missoula County (Kali Becher): There are no planning updates at this time; the county is currently focused on zoning. Dave Stromier has started his tenure as a new County commissioner. Kali looks forward to providing him with an opportunity to connect with the Forest.

US Fish and Wildlife Service (Wayne Kasworm and Jennifer Fortin-Noreus): There has been a transition in the recovery office, with the previous recovery coordinator retiring. The position is being filled by Hillary Cooley (sp?) who has an impressive resume, including serving in Alaska as the polar bear coordinator and in Idaho as the wolf coordinator, as well as having a Phd on mountain lion and deer interactions. Also, Jennifer Fortin-Noreus has transitioned from working at the university to joining the Service as an employee. Jennifer mentioned that habitat based criteria are being drafted as a supplement to the GBCS, and

that regardless of whether the GBCS is finalized before or after the Flathead National Forest Plan, the two processes are well integrated.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (Tim Thier and Neil Anderson): There is a study underway at three locations to try to determine the causes for mule deer decline. As part of that effort, deer will be collaring next week to help track their movements; mule deer have been shown capable of traveling much longer distances than previously thought (e.g., from just north of the border all the way to Alberta). Also, the Department is going through a planning process similar to the Flathead National Forest's plan revision, with a draft expected next year. They also have a new director, Martha Williams, starting soon. She was a Department of Interior solicitor, an environmental law professor at University of Montana, and a former employee of the Department.

Whitefish Border Patrol Station (Kip Stratton and Scott Ernsberger): The Border Patrol has received direction to conduct a threat assessment on the northern border, which is under increased scrutiny given evolving threat potential. While it is unknown at this time what the outcome will be, the assessment will include consideration of border fencing, roads etc. There are no current fences along the Flathead National Forest – Canadian border. Existing infrastructure (e.g., repeaters that are part of the communications network) will remain in place.

Flathead National Forest (Joe Krueger): Joe noted that the Forest continues to face a lot of litigation, including cases being brought at the project level, and should anticipate the continuation of project level litigation after the Forest Plan is adopted. He also underscored the willingness by Forest staff to discuss any remaining concerns or questions in individual meetings.

Next Interagency Group Meeting

The next Interagency Group meeting will probably be scheduled around the time of the Forest Plan release.

Appendix A Meeting Participants

Interagency Group Members

Kevin Aceituno, Creston Fish and Wildlife Center
Neil Anderson, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Kali Becher, Missoula County Community and Planning Services
Mark Biel, Glacier National Park, Natural Resources Program Manager
Ron Cutlett, US Senator Steve Danes Staff
Scott Ernsberger, Whitefish Border Patrol Station
Jennifer Fortin-Noreus, US Fish and Wildlife Service
Pam Holmquist, Flathead County Commissioner
Wayne Kasworm, US Fish and Wildlife Service
Eric Smith, Glacier National Park, Superintendent
Kip Stratton, Whitefish Border Patrol Station
Tim Thier, MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Flathead National Forest Staff

Kathy Ake
Stacy Allen
Joe Krueger
Reed Kuennen
Heidi Trechsel
Pat Vaneimeren
Nancy Warren
Chip Weber

Facilitator

Connie Lewis, Meridian Institute

Appendix B

Meeting Participants and Invitees

Interagency Group Meeting Participants

1. Kevin Aceituno, Creston Fish and Wildlife Center
2. Neil Anderson, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
3. Francis Auld, Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribes
4. Kali Becher, Missoula County Community and Planning Services
5. Dwight Bergeron, MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks
6. Mark Biel, Glacier National Park, Natural Resources Program Manager
7. Matt Boyer, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
8. Ron Cutlett, US Senator Steve Danes Staff
9. Shannon Downey, US Fish & Wildlife Service
10. Scott Ernsberger, Whitefish Border Patrol Station
11. Jennifer Fortin-Noreus, US Fish and Wildlife Service
12. Steve Frye, Mt. Department of Natural Resources
13. BJ Grieve, Flathead County
14. Nancy Heil, Missoula County (via VTC)
15. Pam Holmquist, Flathead County Commissioner
16. Wayne Kasworm, US Fish and Wildlife Service
17. Gary Krueger, Flathead County Commissioner
18. Larry Lockard, US Fish and Wildlife Service
19. Dave Landstrom, Fish, Wildlife and Parks
20. Ira Matt, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
21. Ralph Montano, Department of Homeland Security Border Patrol
22. Jeff Mow, Glacier National Park
23. Dennis Philmon, Bureau of Reclamation
24. Jim Satterfield, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Region 1
25. Cal Scott, Flathead County Commissioner
26. Amy Secrest, Glacier National Park
27. Eric Smith, Glacier National Park, Superintendent
28. Richard (Kip) Stratton, US Border Patrol
29. Tim Thier, MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks
30. Jim Williams, MT Fish Wildlife and Parks

Interagency Group Meeting Invitees

Bureau of Reclamation
Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribes (CSKT)
Creston Fish and Wildlife Center
Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC)
DEQ, Director
DHS Border Patrol
Flathead County Commissioner
Flathead County Planning
Glacier County Commissioner
Glacier National Park
Granite Co. Planner
Granite County Commissioner
Grizzly Bear Recovery Program
Lake County Commissioner
Lake County Planner
Lewis & Clark County Commissioner
Lewis & Clark County Planner
Lincoln County Commissioner
Lincoln County Planner
Mineral County Commissioner
Mineral County Planner
Missoula County Commissioner
Missoula County Community and Planning Services
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
MT Natural Heritage, Lead Program Manager
Pondera County Commissioner
Powell Co Planner, Planning Director
Powell County Commissioner
Region 8 EPA
Sanders County Commissioner
Teton County Commissioner
Teton County Planner
The Blackfeet Nation
US Fish & Wildlife Service
Whitefish Border Patrol Station