

Nantahala and Pisgah Forest Plan Revision

Common Q&A during the 2020 comment period

The Forest Service has received questions and requests for information about the proposed plan and DEIS and is providing answers here. Note there are also technical webinars and associated written Q&As provided on the plan revision website for the following topics: [Wildlife and Plant Species Analysis](#), [Fire Analysis](#), and [Recreation and Access](#). Additional Q&As will be added as the comment period unfolds.

Process

Why is the comment period only talked about as 90 days rather than giving a due date for comments?

The comment period has been extended an additional 45 days beyond the original 90 days in consideration of the impacts of the coronavirus. Comments must be received by June 29th, though we prefer people not wait until the last day to submit their comments.

A collaborative plan takes longer than the 90-day period that worked for past plan models.

The Forest Service has been developing the proposed plan and alternatives through a collaborative process with the public, state and local governments, Tribes, and collaborative groups over the last eight years. This engagement has included over 40 public meetings, extensive participation with collaborative groups, and meetings with state and local governments and Tribes. The 90-day comment period has been extended an additional 45 days and is just one component of the public involvement process that will help develop the revised forest plan.

In terms of budgeted allocations of money for specific resources (ex. recreation, access/roads) – do those change between Management Areas? For example, does Interface MA get more allocated funds for recreation than the Matrix MA?

No, budget is not based on plan components, Management Areas, or monitoring. Forest Service budget is established by Congress.

Alternatives

Why does Alternative A not have a Tier 2?

Alternative A does not have a Tier 2 like the other alternatives. Alternative A is the current (1994) forest plan as amended. This alternative is analyzed as a comparison, demonstrating the effects of continuing on the current path, so objectives and plan direction were not modified. This alternative does not address many 2012 planning rule requirements or concerns identified in the Need for Change but is included in the range of alternatives to ensure that effects are analyzed. When the objectives for Alternative A were developed, they were not constrained to ensure that objective were fiscally realistic, therefore many of the numbers in the current plan could be considered Tier 2 if compared to other action alternatives that are analyzed in the DEIS.

Are Tier 1 and Tier 2 objectives more difficult to achieve in various alternatives?

Yes, that was analyzed and some Tier 2 objectives are more difficult to achieve under some alternatives. More information can be found in the comparison tables of Chapter 2 of the DEIS.

How did you pick issues that would vary by alternative? Is there room for adding issues, such as around the Natural Heritage Natural Areas (NHNAS)?

Issues are identified as points of contention or disagreement regarding the effects of the proposed plan on natural resources and were identified early in the plan revision process through input from public comments

and discussions with collaborative groups. Special designations were identified as an issue early in the revision process and address the inclusion of NHNAs as special interest areas. While special interest areas do not vary by alternative, the inclusion of NHNAs within recommended wilderness, backcountry, and EIAs does vary by alternative.

Climate Change

Is climate change addressed in the proposed plan and DEIS?

Climate change is discussed in the Proposed Plan on pages 27-28, and in the draft Environmental Impact Statement, pages 51-64, including information on historical data and trends.

Fire

How will prescribed fires be monitored?

The Forest Service tracks each prescribed fire that we conduct, and we will sample to see how effective they have been at creating desired conditions. The precise methodology for use in the plan monitoring program is still being determined.

Can prescribed fire be introduced within the designated old growth area network?

Yes, the proposed plan allows for prescribed burns for specific purposes to enhance old growth values and characteristics or to improve forest health or prevent the spread of disease when the integrity of the old growth patch or adjacent lands are threatened from conditions in the path. More information about the specific purposes where prescribed fire in designated old growth would be allowed can be described in standard ECO-S-27. Prescribed fire prescription parameters would ensure that we can achieve objectives without unintended consequences.

Are places on the NF where fire management has to consider tribal or cultural values?

There are a very high number of known cultural heritage sites across both Forests. For overall protection, specific site locations are only communicated on a need to know basis. In the event we have to construct new fireline, we obtain clearance thru the Forest Archeologist. They advise us on line location options to avoid specific site disturbance. The Trail of Tears / Unicoi Turnpike transects the Nantahala & Pisgah NFs. For this, in the spring of 2016, the Forest developed the Fire Suppression Planning and Operations Guide, Trail of Tears / Unicoi Turnpike Corridor. This was collaborative work with the Forest Cultural Heritage/Tribal Liaison and the Tribes. Additionally, we developed the GIS layer that responders can use for real time Geo reference when working near this corridor.

Recreation

Can hunting occur in the Interface management area?

The Interface Management Area is focused on concentrated recreation. It is important to note that hunting is allowed everywhere on the Forests, except where prohibited by local, State, or Federal law, regulation, or policy (including Forest Supervisor closure orders).

Vegetation

How was the upper end of the Tier 2 for young forest objectives determined?

The upper end on the Tier 2 objective for young forest, up to 37,000 acres over the life of the plan, was influenced by the acres in the current forest plan EIS. We did not want to exceed what was planned in the current plan, because it has not been able to be accomplished, so exceeding the expected mechanical treatment in the current plan wouldn't be realistic.

For that upper end for mechanical harvest, there is a typo in one Chapter 2 table that refers to the upper end as 3600 acres, but it's actually 3,800 acres in the plan and analysis, which equates to 3200 acre of regeneration harvest and 600 acres of intermediate thinnings.

Timber

Which management areas allow for timber harvest?

Management areas that allow for timber harvest for: Matrix, Interface, Backcountry, EIAs, SIAs, Administrative Sites, Experimental Forests, AT corridor, National Scenic Byways, Heritage Corridors, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Roan Mountain, Cradle of Forestry. In many of these management areas, timber harvest is confined to specific purposes as defined in management area direction.

What is the amount of forest that is available for timber management work?

This varies slightly alternative and is explained on pages 506-507 of the EIS. Spatial information (including tables) is available for download here on our spatial data request page (see the description of the data prior to downloading). An important caveat with this spatial dataset is that the operability maps were designed for land management planning analysis only and does not take the place of project specific analysis. This dataset is not expected to be directly used at the ground level.

Regarding 'Est acres of land for timber management (commercially viable currently' includes which management areas, why is the range between upper and lower limits so large?

Estimated acres of land operable for timber management is described in Appendix B on p. B-3. The range represents what could be accessed with the current road system (low #) vs. what could be accessed with new road construction (high #).

Please clarify whether Tables 5-7 in the Appendix B (Timber Calculations) if Tier 2 includes acres treated in Tier 1 (cumulative) or if it additional stand-alone acres?

For each alternative and for each tier a separate SPECTRUM model was built and run. The outputs that are presented in the tables are the model outputs based on the objectives and management area allocations for that alternative and tier. If an Alternative and Tier was selected, then we would work towards those objectives (Tier) and the numbers presented for that tier are estimates of what the outputs would be (i.e. you would not add tier 1 to tier 2 for a given alternative).

How acres for were stand improvement objectives determined and what activities are included?

For the stand improvement, those acres were set after internal discussion regarding additional treatments that may need to be complete on the landscape in areas that may not have access or be in areas where we would not want to build access. Several examples may include release treatments around red spruce, noncommercial slash down treatments in the backcountry or noncommercial thinning to create woodland structure in stands of timber with low commercial value. It was viewed that these types of treatments would need to occur and be above the normal stand improvement treatments that occur within our commercially treated stands. Additionally, it was determined that there may be a need to increase the frequency of entry into regenerated stands in order to meet the plan desired conditions regarding compositional restoration. This may include additional entries in stands that typically require those treatments or adding those treatments to stands may not have received a stand improvement treatment in the past.

Why does the species/product mix vary so much with alternatives? Considering the proposed acreages for timber harvest are so similar, where are those differences coming from?

Our interpretation of the variation is that it occurs between Alt A and the Action Alts and then again between Tier1 and Tier2 of the action alts. We agree that the objectives are similar across all alternatives. The differences come from the FVS vegetation model and the Spectrum. For Alternative A we used historical sale information to connect actual product mixes to sale acres for different treatments and then used GIS to connect these numbers to management areas and geographic areas for example. This allowed the Alternative A Spectrum model to closely approximate what has been done on the forest in recent years. For the Action alternatives, there was an increase in the proposed harvest levels, these new harvest levels would be implemented under a restoration focused management plan that used NRV to guide early age class creation in a variety of ecozones, ones that may not have been sought out for harvest under the current plan. These approximations resulted in an increase in the harvest in the intermediate and dry oak types and a decrease in the harvest in the even aged harvest in the cove types. This is all in Tier 1. In Tier 2 with the increase in the harvest acres some of the restrictions placed on cove harvests in the Spectrum model for Tier 1 were relaxed. This along with the increase in overall harvest levels drove the species mix proportions back to ratios more closely approximating Alternative A. albeit at higher harvest levels overall. There are also some changes in management area allocation that occurs across alternative, that is harder to sleuth out but given the size of the forest changes in MA allocation is likely a lower level contributor to the product mixes estimated in the DEIS.

Scenery

When have the scenery portions of the plan been shared with the public?

The Scenic Class inventory process was presented at a public meeting in 2014, modified based on public and internal comments, and finalized late that year. The Scenic Class inventory maps have not changed since their creation in 2014 and were the basis of the presentation in October 2017. What is new is proposed management area desired SIOs and how they overlay with the Scenic Class inventory maps; which was thoroughly evaluated and disclosed in the draft Environmental Impact Statement, Chapter 3.

How is scenery considered in project design?

Project-level interdisciplinary teams made up of resource specialists from each discipline work together to design proposed actions which conform to law and meet Plan direction for each resource area. The National Forest Management Act and National Environmental Policy Act ensure that resources are managed equally, including scenery resources, and that none overrides the other. Scenery impact consideration does become part of project design, and sometimes effects must be avoided or mitigated. In this way, scenery is considered similarly to other resources (for example, impacts to endangered species, cultural resources, water quality, geological hazards, etc.). Just as when implementing the Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, Archeological Resources Protection Act, and other natural resource legislation, managers seek to balance management needs while ensuring protections required for specific resources.

How is scenery management compatible with prescribed fire?

The potential scenery impacts associated with prescribed fire are temporary. Unless the burn is too “hot” (out of prescription), the forest will typically recover in one growing season. By the end of two growing seasons, as required for Moderate SIO (Matrix/SC2), most viewers would not even know the forest had been burned. Over the three decades or so, there has not been a reduction in prescribed burn acres as mitigation for potential scenery impacts. As an example, about three years ago the Pisgah District did a burn starting on the edge of US276, which is a National Scenic Byway; their burn plan was not changed in any way for scenery concerns and the forest along that section of US276 looks far better now than before the burn. For some projects, proposed

construction of a new road to be used as a fire line could have scenery impacts, but most burn plans use existing features or temporary fire lines for containment.

Please explain why the legends on the pdf's give Scenic Classes 1 – 5, but the LMP Scenic Classes are 1 – 7?

The Scenic Class inventory is based on a process described in the USDA Handbook 701 “Landscape Aesthetics” (<https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML1224/ML12241A377.pdf>). Scenic Classes are a combination of “Scenic Attractiveness” (SA), viewer “Concern Level” (CL), and viewing “Distance Zone” (DZ). Table 4-1 on page 4-15 of the handbook identifies Scenic Classes for each combination of these three components, which are Scenic Classes 1-7. However, the inventory data for Nantahala-Pisgah only resulted in 5 Scenic Classes, because the Forest was not considered to have Scenic Attractiveness “C” landscapes; which are areas with “indistinctive” character. The 1987 EIS and Plan, and 1994 EIS and Amendment drew the same conclusion; then referred to in the “Visual Management System” as “Variety Class”. The proposed Plan is intended to allow flexibility to update the Scenic Class inventory without a Plan amendment, so the desired SIOs are identified for all potential Scenic Classes even though the new inventory did not result in a Scenic Class 6 or 7. If an update of the Scenic Class inventory occurred within the life of the proposed Plan, and that inventory identified Scenic Attractiveness “C” landscapes, there is a theoretical potential for having SC6 or SC7 in the inventory; so they were assigned a desired SIO in the proposed Plan. The Scenic Class inventory is not part of the Plan and can be updated without a Plan amendment, so the proposed Plan needs to accommodate any potential result of a future Scenic Class inventory.

Recreation

Why is there a need for separate special climbing management strategy? Would this be a written document with specific guidance? Do other recreational activities like mountain biking, hiking, hunting, or fishing pose complex management challenges that require a separate management strategy? Why not formulate Forest plan level climbing management directions for inclusion in the proposed plan instead?

The planning team felt a more in-depth collaboration with representatives of the climbing community was necessary to learn from their expertise, best represent their interests, and establish comprehensive guidance for climbing management. Hunting and fishing are regulated by State law in coordination with the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, which seeks public involvement in proposed regulation changes annually. The Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests have a non-motorized trail strategy which was developed collaboratively with users in multiple public meetings. The Uwharrie National Forest has conducted similar trail strategy public meetings. Both of these efforts have proven to be helpful in learning recreation user concerns, providing management guidance, and building collaborative relationships with recreation users and organizations. Climbing and related recreational activities should be managed similarly to gain a greater understanding of the use, how it can be most effectively managed to meet sustainable recreation goals, and to prevent unintentional resource damage.

Why is bouldering separated out from rock climbing, but not other kinds of climbing that exist on the Forest, like ice climbing or aid climbing?

There was no attempt to split or lump various types of recreational activities related to climbing. If the reference is too limited, it can be revised. The intent is to develop a climbing strategy that encompasses all types of recreational activities related to rock climbing.

How does the Forest see slack lining as similar or different from climbing and bouldering? Why does the Forest propose to consider slacklining--which is not climbing or bouldering, but a separate activity--in a climbing management strategy?

Like rock climbing, slacklining uses ropes or straps attached to rocks, trees, or possibly fixed anchors. Participants in slacklining presumably climb on rocks to attach their straps or ropes. The potential impacts to sensitive habitats or wilderness values may be similar. From a recreation management perspective, it makes sense to address all similar uses in a strategy, even if user groups don't identify themselves with the other.

Why was no management direction given in the plan to authorize use of fixed anchors in non-wilderness management areas?

The Plan is inherently permissive. If activities are legal and not prohibited by closure order, there is no need to identify them as allowed. The Plan does not say nature photography, wildflower viewing, or bushcrafting is allowed, but they are. If all allowed recreational activities were listed, it would have added many pages to the document and inevitably something would have been erroneously omitted causing consternation among that user group. It is unnecessary to list all allowed recreational activities and their myriad of variations.

Transportation

Which management areas have road access prioritized and which have road building not allowed?

Road access is prioritized in interface and matrix. Road construction is limited in Backcountry, the Appalachian Trail corridor, Heritage corridors, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Ecological Interest Areas, Roan Mtn, and Cradle of Forestry. No road construction is allowed in Research Natural Areas, wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas or recommended wilderness.

Map questions

Where can I find additional spatial data that is not part of the official proposed plan maps? I'm looking for maps used in the EIS analyses for timber, fire, old growth, recreation, scenery, etc.

We have posted additional geospatial datasets used in the EIS analysis on our webpage here:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/nfsnc/home/?cid=FSEPRD709554>