

# REPORT ON EI YUNQUE NATIONAL FOREST COLLABORATION WORKSHOP

## Executive Summary

The El Yunque National Forest (EYNF) was selected as one of eight “early adopter” forests within the National Forest System to revise the strategic plan that guides the management of the EYNF under the new National Forest System Planning Rule (2012). Forest plan revision provides a rare opportunity to influence how a National Forest is managed, resulting in direct impact on everyday management decisions as well as desired long-term outcomes.

On December 5 and 6, 2012, the EYNF hosted a two-day workshop to help the EYNF staff and its key community stakeholders organize for a multi-year public involvement effort during forest plan revision. Forest Supervisor Pablo Cruz invited the National Collaboration Cadre (Cadre) of the USDA Forest Service to assist the agency in the development of a collaborative strategy to engage the public early on in the revision process. The agenda for the two-day workshop was designed around several key components of a successful collaborative effort as well as information that was gleaned from community stakeholders, EYNF and International Institute of Tropical Forestry (IITF) staff during “listening sessions” conducted in September 2012.

One of the most significant outcomes of the “listening sessions” on the EYNF was the conclusion that the workshop be conducted in Spanish in order to be as inclusive to local citizens as possible. This presented a unique challenge for it meant that workshop materials developed by the Cadre had to be translated into Spanish well before the actual workshop. EYNF secured a team from Environmental Policy Solutions, Inc. (EPS) to assume the primary role of facilitating the workshop in Spanish while the Cadre provided the role of coaching/consultation throughout the workshop.

## Workshop Desired Outcomes

- Enhance the ability and likelihood that the EYNF will be successful throughout the plan revision effort and beyond into implementation and monitoring;
- Use the forest planning revision process to increase linkages between the EYNF and the Forest’s diverse stakeholders; and
- Identify means and commitments for working stakeholder concerns that are not properly addressed through a 3-4 year strategic planning effort

## Workshop Achievements

- Setting the Tone: Four individuals representing three different generations and perspectives gave brief presentations addressing the question “What the El Yunque National Forest means to me?” at the start of the workshop each day. The two student presenters were the winners of a local school contest that was sponsored by the EYNF. Forest Supervisor Pablo Cruz and well-known researcher and former Forest Supervisor Frank Wadsworth offered their perspectives. Engaging the local schools was valuable on a number of levels, not the least of which is that it responded directly to a requirement of the planning rule to outreach to youth.
- Broad Community Participation: During the September “listening sessions”, the Cadre team and EPS team met with about 125 individuals representing local, state and federal agencies and community groups, EYNF and IITF staff members. People shared their interest in fostering stronger relationships with the EYNF in order to better understand resource management and conservation practices. This interest was further demonstrated with 90 plus people representing a diverse cross section of local, state and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations and community stakeholders attending the collaboration workshop. The large and diverse turn out of community stakeholders demonstrated the public’s interest in becoming actively engaged in the revision process.

- Emergence of a “Coordinating Committee”: This was a significant outcome of the workshop as it represents a diverse group of stakeholders who have committed to work with the EYNF staff throughout the forest plan revision process and guide and monitor the public participation process. The “coordinating committee” will serve an important role in maintaining positive relationships with community stakeholders throughout the multi-year process, promoting organizational continuity as participants enter and leave the process, and serve as a “sounding board” for the EYNF as it gathers new information and/or is ready to release information to the public.
- Establish a Means to Deal with Urgent Issues: In response to earlier listening session indications that workshop participants may want to focus on their urgent issues (i.e., issues outside the context of forest plan revision), the EYNF Forest Supervisor identified one of his senior staff to serve as an immediate contact for workshop participants. This was done so that the Forest Supervisor and the other EYNF staff could remain focused on workshop participation. The senior staff person was introduced at the beginning of the workshop. Interestingly enough, there was little to no demand for this opportunity at this time.

### Next Steps

- EYNF facilitates the formation of the “Coordinating Committee,” which it neither controls or selects members.
- “Coordinating Committee”:
  - Develops operational guidelines and finishes the organizational structure in a collaborative manner that promotes ownership and participation
  - Considers completing several workshop exercises such as the capacity/commitment matrix
  - Learns more about forest plan revision
  - Follows through on the expectations and commitments delineated in the group exercise
  - Works with EYNF staff to design a public involvement strategy
  - Monitors and guides the EYNF public involvement efforts and makes recommendations as needed

The staff of the EYNF should be both excited and challenged by the outcome of this workshop. As a step of getting organized for forest plan revision, the workshop was a very productive first step. There was a high level of participation, there was a constructive/engaged tone, there was meaningful progress in terms of creating a collaborative organization, and the participants’ evaluations were broadly positive. During the workshop, the EYNF made a series of commitments to its community partners, and meeting those commitments will be challenging but ultimately will build the working relationships that stakeholders seek.

The EYNF must keep the momentum going on the collaborative side of Forest Plan Revision as much as in the biophysical/technical realm. The former is more difficult than the latter because the participants lead busy lives and scheduling is more complex. A wide range of external partners are willing to help the Forest Service craft a vision for the management of El Yunque; the challenge is to create an open, efficient, meaningful process. In addition, EYNF recognizes that the participants of this workshop are the tip of the iceberg: there are a large number of people in the broader community whose voices will need to be added to the conversation and with the assist of the “Coordinating Committee” progress should be made in this area.

**Disclaimer: This report was written by the Cadre team of Susan Hansen, Carmine Lockwood, and Steve Daniels. It represents the views of no one else, and has not been vetted or approved by the El Yunque National Forest or the USDA-Forest Service more broadly.**