



File Code: 1920

Date: March 11, 2014

Dear Interested Parties:

Thank you for participating in the process of revising the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests' Land Management Plan (Nantahala and Pisgah NF Plan). This letter is to announce the start of the scoping process described by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The proposed action being scoped is revision of the Nantahala and Pisgah NF Plan to address the items described in the "Preliminary Need to Change the Existing Land Management Plan," included with this letter. Scoping is officially initiated with the publication of the Notice of Intent in the Federal Register and begins the second phase of the planning process described in the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219), called the plan development phase. Upon publication, the Notice of Intent will be posted on the Forest Plan Revision website at:

www.fs.usda.gov/goto/nfsnc/nprevision

Background

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 requires national forests to revise their management plans every 10 to 15 years or when conditions within the plan area have changed significantly. The Nantahala and Pisgah NFs Plan was written in 1987, and had a significant Forest Plan Amendment in 1995. The forests began the formal process of plan revision when the Notice of Initiation was published in the Federal Register on October 3, 2013. The products that were generated out of the first phase of the planning process are the Assessment Report and Preliminary Need to Change the Existing Land Management Plan. The updated Assessment Report, along with the Executive Summary and the Supplemental Reports, and the Preliminary Need to Change the Existing Land Management Plan will be posted on the Forest Plan Revision website. One assessment item, the list of potential species of conservation concern, is still under development and will be posted online when it is available. Any input regarding the list of species of conservation concern may be sent to NCPlanRevision@fs.fed.us.

Public Involvement

In 2013, the Forest Service hosted 14 public meetings to solicit comments, opinions, data and ideas from members of the public as well as representatives of other governmental and non-governmental organizations. Approximately 800 people attended the meetings, and more than 1,000 written comments were received at these meetings, as well as by mail and email. A series of open-house public meetings and Forest Service employee meetings were held in November and December to solicit ideas regarding what needs to change in the management of the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs. The need-for-change ideas that were generated at the meetings and received by mail were reviewed and categorized by the forest plan revision team, and synthesized into the 40-plus statements included in the "Preliminary Need to Change the Existing Land Management Plan." While most of the ideas are captured in this document, a small number of comments were determined to not be in line with the laws, regulations, or policies that provide management direction for the multiple uses of the national forests.



Proposed Action, Purpose and Need

The purpose for revising the current forest plan is (1) the forest plan is over 25 years old, (2) since the forest plan was approved in 1987, there have been changes in economic, social, and ecological conditions, new policies and priorities, and new information based on monitoring and scientific research, and (3) to address the preliminary identified needs to change the existing plan, which are summarized in the Notice of Intent. Extensive public and employee involvement, along with science-based evaluations, have helped to identify these preliminary needs to change the existing forest plan.

The Proposed Action is to revise the forest plan to address the identified needs to change the existing forest plan. Alternatives to the Proposed Action will be developed to address the significant issues that will be identified through scoping.

The Notice of Intent includes a summary of the “Preliminary Need to Change the Existing Land Management Plan.” In addition to describing what will be revised in the management plan, the Notice of Intent also identifies the types of decisions that will not be made within the revised forest plan. The authorization of project-level activities on the forests is not a decision made in the forest plan but occurs through subsequent project specific decision-making. Though some strategic guidance may be provided, the designation of routes and trails for motorized vehicle travel, equestrian and mountain bike use are not considered during plan revision, but will be addressed through subsequent planning processes. Some issues (*e.g.*, hunting regulations), although important, are beyond the authority or control of the National Forest System and will not be considered. No decision regarding oil and gas leasing availability will be made, though standards will be brought forward or developed that would serve as mitigations should an availability decision be necessary in the future. No decision will likely be made regarding the management of individual roads, such as might be associated with a Travel Management plan under 36 CFR Part 212.

Future Public Meetings

The forest plan revision team plans to hold a public session on April 17th regarding wilderness and other designated areas. We will be asking for those who are interested to RSVP for this session, as space may be limited. This is currently expected to be a focused day-long discussion in Asheville on the following topics:

- Identification and inventory of areas that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System
- The process for identifying designated areas
- The Scenery Management System and Recreation Opportunity Spectrum

More details regarding the format of the meeting, the agenda, and how to RSVP, will be posted on the forest website in the coming weeks. If you are interested in participating in the meeting, please check the plan revision website or contact Heather Luczak at 828-257-4817.

In addition to the April meeting, public meetings will be scheduled in the coming months to discuss other topics, including issues and alternatives and the development of plan components.

Estimated Process Timeline

- Plan Revision began in October 2012 with the Notice of Initiation.
- March 2014 – scoping begins with the publication of the Notice of Intent and the Preliminary Need for Change
- May 2014 – plan revision team considers scoping comments and identifies issues.
- Spring/Summer 2014 – public meetings to discuss issues, and develop the proposed plan and alternatives
- Fall/winter 2014 – effects to social, economic, and natural resources are analyzed for the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS)
- March 2015 – DEIS is released for public comment, public meetings held
- Summer 2015 – public comments are analyzed and changes to the DEIS are made
- March 2016 – final environmental impact statement (FEIS) is released to the public and objection period begins
- August 2016 – final decision signed


Comments on Proposed Action to Revise the Existing Land Management Plan

This proposal and your comments will provide a basis for the development of the proposed plan and evaluation of issues and alternatives in the EIS. The scoping period runs for 45 days from the date of publication of the Notice of Intent in the Federal Register. Although comments are welcome at any time, they are most helpful to us if received early. I encourage you to submit your comments by April 28, 2014. The final decision on this forest plan revision is subject to objection procedures at 36 CFR 219. Only those individuals and entities who submit substantive formal comments specific to the plan revision during the opportunities for public comment, may file an objection.

Comments which are most meaningful and will be of greatest help in developing the proposed plan are those which address strategic direction for the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs, or what the forests should look like or provide in the future. Comments that are directed towards very specific areas or projects may be outside the scope of plan revision process.

Comments may be submitted online at: <https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?Project=43545>, or by postal mail addressed to: Forest Plan Revision Team, 160 Zillicoa Street, Suite A, Asheville, NC, 28801. If you have any questions, additional information can be provided by Ruth Berner, Forest Planner, at 828-257-4862.

Sincerely,



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