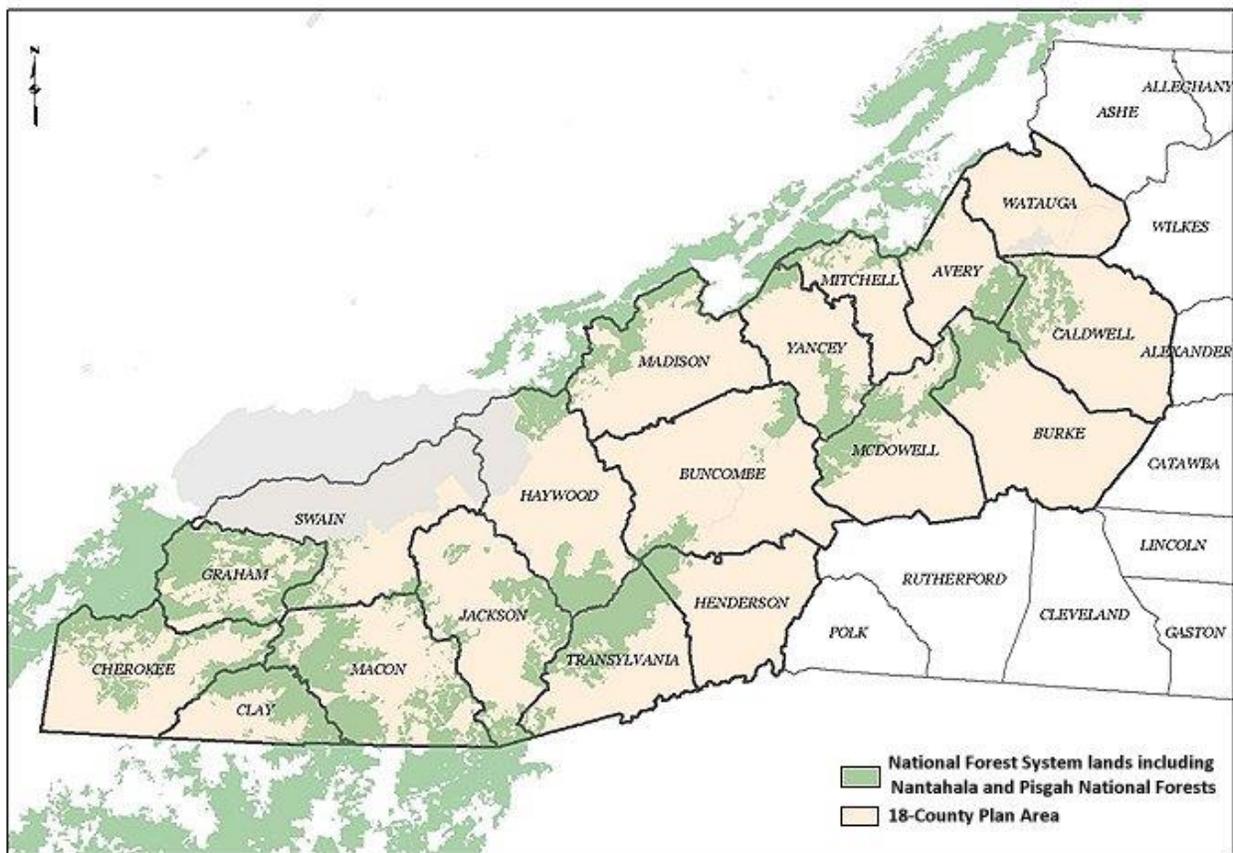




Public Participation Strategy

Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan Revision 2012-2016



National Forests in North Carolina
U.S. Forest Service
160A Zillicoa St.
Asheville, N.C. 28801
Online: www.fs.usda.gov/nfsnc

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Introduction

The Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests are enjoyed by millions of people every year. Encompassing more than 1 million acres in western North Carolina, these natural areas provide a wide array of benefits including clean air and water, recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat, scenic vistas, solitude, forest products such as timber, and much more. The Nantahala and Pisgah NFs extend along the Appalachian Mountains of 18 counties in western North Carolina. Pisgah National Forest was established in 1916 and Nantahala National Forest in 1920. These two national forests attract more visitors annually than most other national forests in the country and include the heavily used Appalachian National Scenic Trail as well as six federally designated wilderness acres totaling approximately 66,550 acres.

Every national forest and grassland has a management plan. The U.S. Forest Service's National Forests in North Carolina (NFsNC) are in the process of revising the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (the Plan) which will direct the management of the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests for the next 15- 20 years.

Like other national forests and grasslands, the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests are public lands. These ecologically important, natural areas are owned by the public and managed for multiple uses by NFsNC. After development, the Revised Forest Plan will supersede the 1987 Forest Plan, as amended, and will provide direction to assure coordination of multiple-uses such as outdoor recreation, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish, and wilderness as well as sustained yield of products and services. Members of the public have a right to provide input on how the lands are managed, and Plan revision is one of the best opportunities.

This Public Participation Strategy (Strategy) for the Plan revision process details how NFsNC will work with members of the public so they have the opportunity to provide direct input at appropriate intervals on how the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests are managed in the future.

This Public Participation Strategy is a fluid, dynamic document that will be updated and enhanced as the Plan revision process evolves. It will be flexible so that it can be easily adapted to respond to public feedback and new ideas and information.

NFsNC managers expect the public engagement processes through Plan revision to:

- Be collaborative and build relationships, trust, capacity and commitment to the Plan;
- Allow for sharing, learning and understanding between the agency and the public;
- Promote a common understanding of the planning process;
- Encourage public feedback on alternatives and their effects, the best available scientific information and other important issues and topics;
- Support development of a Plan through a transparent process that increases the integrity of the Plan and adds clarity to the decision-making process and the rationale for decisions; and
- Be inclusive and include opportunities for participation in Plan development by Tribal governments and by youth, low-income populations, and minority populations.

Collaboration among members of the public is the key component of this Strategy and of the Plan revision process. The public can be defined as all members of society, including employees in local, state and federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, other organizations, recreationists and other individuals and citizens.

NFsNC managers view collaboration as the process whereby people with different perspectives, expectations and opinions come together to find common understanding and common ground, to share ideas, and ultimately create a sense of ownership in the final product. In order for collaboration to be most effective, people will need to engage directly with one another through a variety of venues including small group discussions, larger public meetings or other gatherings, and possibly using interactive electronic media.

Participation by a broad spectrum of stakeholders will provide a number of benefits. Such benefits include identifying or clarifying issues, conflicts, constraints, values, beliefs or expectations. Participation will help in gathering information and seeking common understanding of facts and issues. It will provide new information and help identify gaps in information, as well as areas of common ground and disagreement. Additionally, it will keep people informed and promote collective learning.

Overview of the Planning Process

The two key elements of Plan revision are: 1) using the best available science; 2) engaging with a broad spectrum of stakeholders throughout the planning process.

The Plan revision process began in late 2012 and is expected to conclude by the end of 2016. When revision is completed, the Plan will guide management of the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests for approximately 15 years. The Forest Service published the original Plan in 1987. A significant amendment was published in 1994, and smaller amendments occurred in subsequent years. Information on the current Plan (before revision) is posted online at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/nfsnc/landmanagement/planning>, click on “Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests.”

Each national forest and grassland is governed by a management plan in accordance with the National Forest Management Act. These plans set management, protection and use goals, objectives and guidelines.

The planning process occurs in three phases:

1. Assessment – During this phase, the Forest Service will collect and compile data and other information on the current state of the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests. The assessment phase will focus on what changes are needed to the national forests management plan. Numerous public meetings will take place to receive input from stakeholders during this period. NFsNC held 16 sessions open to the general public during this period and engaged recognized Tribes in eight other meetings specific to sovereign tribal governments.

2. Plan Development– During this phase the revision participants will work together to design alternatives and draft a revised Plan. The Forest Service will produce a draft environmental impact statement (EIS) outlining the expected effects of the revised Plan and alternatives. After a public review and comment period, the Forest Service will continue working with the public to review and respond to comments and potentially adjust the draft revised Plan, alternatives and/or effects analyses, finalize the EIS, and release the final Plan.
3. Monitoring – The monitoring phase begins after the final Plan is released and continues throughout the Plan period. This phase entails monitoring Plan implementation to ensure progress is made toward achieving goals and objectives.

Timeline for Plan Revision:

- Assessment (Phase 1) – November 2012 – March 2014
- Planning Period (Phase 2) – March 2014 – late Fall 2016
- Monitoring Phase (Phase 3) – 2016 and Beyond

Find more information about Plan revision online at: www.fs.usda.gov/goto/nfsnc/nprevision.

When will the public participate?

There are both formal and informal opportunities for public participation during Plan revision. Formal opportunities are initiated by letter or by notification in the newspaper of record. By law and regulation, there are some defined public notices required that inform the public of specific opportunities to participate in Plan revision. Below are the notices published to date and the general timeframe of other required public notifications.

Completed

- Project Initiation Letter (Oct. 3, 2013)
- Preliminary Need to Change the Existing Land Management Plan (March 4, 2014)
- Notice of Intent (Scoping letter -March 11, 2014)
- Notice of Intent in the Federal Register (March 12, 2014)

Remaining

- Notice of 90-day comment period for Draft Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement (May 2015)
- Notice of Availability of the Forest Plan and the Final Environmental Impact Statement (April 2016)

Because there are many more opportunities for public engagement than are prescribed in law or regulation, additional information on times when NFsNC will engage the public during the Assessment and Planning phases of Plan revision follows.

Assessment Phase

February – March 2013: Six meetings to explain revision process and receive input on benefits received from the national forests.

Completed

- Feb. 21, 2013 - Robbinsville, N.C. (Cheoah Ranger District)
- Feb. 25 - Mars Hill (Appalachian Ranger District)
- March 5 - Murphy (Tusquitee Ranger District)
- March 12 - Marion (Grandfather Ranger District)
- March 18 - Brevard (Pisgah Ranger District)
- March 19 - Franklin (Nantahala Ranger District)

May 2013 Two meetings focused on three main topics: young forests and wildlife habitat; recreational settings, access and scenery; and designated areas.

Completed

- May 23, 2013 – Franklin
- May 30, 2013 – Asheville

September 2013

Completed

Draft Assessment Report released and public input received.

November – December 2013

Six open houses on eight topic areas to help frame the Need for Change. Public provides input on topic areas.

- November 18 – Marion
- November 19 - Brevard
- December 3 (two locations) – Murphy and at Appalachian District Office in Mars Hill
- December 5 - Robbinsville
- December 17– Franklin

Planning Phase

2014

Notice of Intent with Need for Change statements. Public comment period of 45 days. Notice of Intent in the Federal Register (March 12, 2014)

Spring 2014 – Winter 2015

- Meeting(s) to address key issues and seek input on those issues.
 - April 17 – Meeting in Asheville on Wilderness, designated areas, and scenery
 - July 10 – Meeting in Asheville on young forests, ecosystem integrity and diversity, and Wild and Scenic Rivers
- Meetings to present proposed management area framework and preliminary Plan components.
- Develop alternative approaches to management to address public issues and concerns.
 - Identify criteria for evaluating proposals.
- Develop proposed Plan.

- Analyze effects and complete draft environmental impact statement (EIS).
- Additional meetings will be held as needed to clarify issues.

Winter 2015 – Spring 2016

- Formal public comment period on draft Plan and draft EIS. Comment period is 90 days.

Who should participate?

All members of the public are invited to participate in the Plan revision process. NFsNC is committed to ensuring that stakeholders know about and have the opportunity to participate in the process. The agency will reach out to a wide array of stakeholders and encourage their participation.

American Indian Tribes or their representatives located near the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests will be contacted and included throughout the process. NFsNC is encouraging participation from minority communities as well as students and youth. Representatives from local, state and federal agencies will be encouraged to participate in the process. All other members of the public will be encouraged to participate, ranging from business owners to recreationists, local homeowners to Members of Congress, industry to nonprofit organizations, chambers of commerce to departments of tourism, as well as scientists, researchers and many more. As American citizens, Forest Service employees may also participate in the process.

Meeting Ground Rules

To ensure productive discussions, participants in public planning meetings will be asked to adhere to the following meeting participation guidelines.

- Use common conversational courtesy – Avoid third-party conversations at the table, do not interrupt others.
- Be comfortable – Please help yourself to refreshments or take personal breaks. If you have other needs, please inform the meeting organizer.
- Honor time and share the air – Help everyone stay on track and on time, and achieve the meeting goals. Stay aware of the balance between how much other people are speaking and you are speaking.
- Be honest and candid while treating each other with respect – Help everyone to clearly understand your comment. Recognize that everyone cares about the forest, brings different experiences, expertise and insights to the conversation, and deserves respect.
- All ideas and points of view have value – All ideas have value in this setting. If you hear someone else say something that you do not agree with, that's okay. The goal is to better understand each other and better communicate.
- Avoid editorials – It will be tempting to analyze the motives of others or pass judgment on their actions. Please talk about YOUR ideas and recommendations.
- Humor is welcome – It just should not be at another person's expense.
- Think innovatively and welcome new ideas – Creative thinking and problem solving are welcome when the situation calls for it.

How will participation occur?

The public will participate through a variety of ways and at various levels. The levels of participation and engagement will include: collaboration; involvement; consultation; and information, among others. Each level of participation is unique and important.

NFsNC will use a combination of contemporary and traditional communication methods, tools and materials to engage and receive input and information from the public. These methods and products will be tailored to meet a large number of stakeholders. To ensure inclusion and transparency, products or tools may be designed to meet the needs of certain groups.

Meetings, workshops, open houses and field trips are settings where collaboration with the public will occur. The location of these gatherings will vary throughout the planning area and will be open to the public. The meetings will be conducted by NFsNC employees or by a third-party contractor. NFsNC will also conduct specialized meetings, as necessary, to focus on a specific topic or topics. Additionally, NFsNC employees may participate in Plan revision-related meetings held by outside organizations or bodies such as county or city councils.

Electronic methods, including the Internet, will be used to inform the public and receive feedback from stakeholders. Such tools include the NFsNC Plan revision webpage, which serves as the primary portal through which all Plan revision information will be shared. Email news and alerts are being disseminated, and stakeholders can submit comments using the email address NCplanrevision@fs.fed.us. The public can receive updates to webpages via RSS Feeds. NFsNC may use an interactive Internet-based tool that allows stakeholders to post comments online and view other public comments. Another innovative tool is the online collaborative mapping tool, which would allow the public to make place-based comments.

NFsNC will develop and disseminate printed products to inform the public, as well as seek opinions and ideas from the public. These materials will include fact sheets, presentations, posters, maps, news stories, post cards, as well as infographics, photos and other media. In addition to comments that are submitted electronically, NFsNC will receive hard copy comments that are handed in during meetings or mailed.

The agency will use various media to share information with stakeholders and to solicit comments. Meeting times and locations, issuance of the draft Plan and other announcements will be made via the news media, including television, newspapers, magazines and radio in western North Carolina. When needed, announcements or notices will be published in the newspapers of record and in the Federal Register. In addition, the agency will directly contact those stakeholders that have given the agency their contact information. The agency may use radio public service announcements, and videos may be produced for use on the World Wide Web or television.

How public comments facilitate the planning process

An important part of forest planning is the opportunity to have others hear different opinions, including Forest Service employees. Sharing information creates a learning environment where all parties have the opportunity to understand each other. Collecting information from the public is a vital part of the Plan revision process.

Forest planning takes several years, and there will be conflicts that arise. New partnerships and relationships formed during the planning process will help in resolving future conflicts.

Different interests draw people to different places. Public comments can help determine where special places are and why they are important. The public can also comment on whether a place should have a special designation in the Plan, such as botanical areas or historic areas.

Public comments will help establish priorities, and priorities for future work are the objectives in a forest plan. Comments and interaction that lead toward common agreement would be considered for objectives in the Plan. Comments that focus on motorized access for some areas and nonmotorized access in other areas are examples. The Forest Service documents all comments received. Meeting notes are documented and summary reports are made available to the planning team and the public.

Conclusion

NFsNC managers and employees are committed to implementing this Strategy to ensure that area residents and interested stakeholders know about and are provided an opportunity to participate in the Plan revision process. Collaboration is vital to the success of Plan revision.

NFsNC managers and employees will take steps to reach out to all segments of western North Carolina's population and to sovereign Tribal governments. At the same time, the Forest Service will welcome input and participation from people across the United States who are interested in the management of the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests. NFsNC managers understand they cannot do it alone. Plan revision is a collaborative effort and, as such, the agency is relying on local residents and partners to help spread the word about Plan revision and to encourage people to participate. The goal is to ensure that the process is inclusive and transparent. Working together, we can make sure that the revised Plan considers the needs of all people and guides sustainable management of forest resources into the future. The final product must also be a Plan that can be implemented. The NFsNC Forest Supervisor is charged with overseeing the process and approving the final Forest Plan.

NFsNC thanks its partners, area residents and stakeholders for their involvement and dedication in this process.

Please send comments on this Strategy to NCplanrevision@fs.fed.us with the subject "Public Participation Strategy." Hard copies of comments can be mailed to: National Forests in North Carolina, Nantahala-Pisgah Plan Revision, 160A Zillicoa St., Asheville, NC 28801. Learn more about Plan revision online at: www.fs.usda.gov/goto/nfsnc/nprevision. The NFsNC website is: www.fs.usda.gov/nfsnc.

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