United States Department of Agriculture

Preliminary Need to Change the Forest Plan

Chugach National Forest, Alaska

Meandering stream on the Kenai Peninsula, Chugach National Forest

In developing a proposed revised plan, the responsible official *"shall review relevant information from the assessment and monitoring to identify a preliminary need to change the existing plan and to inform the development of plan components and other plan content"*
(36 CFR 219.7 (c)(2)(i)).

Forest Service | Alaska Region | Chugach National Forest | April 2015

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Lead Agency: **USDA Forest Service**

Responsible Official: **Terri Marceron, Forest Supervisor**
16 E. First Avenue, Door 8
Anchorage, AK 99502
907-743-9500

For Information Contact: **Mary C. Rasmussen, Planning Team Leader**
16 E. First Avenue, Door 8
Anchorage, AK 99502
907-743-9426

Email Comments or Questions to: **chugachplanrevision@fs.fed.us**

Documents are posted at: **http://www.fs.usda.gov/main/chugach**

Abstract: The Forest Service has identified the preliminary need to change the 2002 Chugach National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (as amended) in accordance with the 2012 National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule adopted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. We evaluated existing information about relevant ecological, economic, and social conditions, trends, and sustainability and their relationship to the land management plan within the context of the broader landscape, and we published that assessment in November 2014 (USDA Forest Service 2014). Relevant information from the assessment, applicable laws and policies, and public comment were considered in determining the preliminary need to change.

Introduction

The National Forest Management Act of 1976 requires each national forest to develop a land and resource management plan (commonly referred to as a forest plan) and amend or revise the plan every 10 to 15 years. Forest personnel are revising the 2002 Chugach National Forest Land Management Plan (USDA Forest Service 2002) under guidance of the 2012 National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule (36 CFR Part 219). Land management planning is an iterative process that includes three phases:

1. Assessment (§ 219.6)
2. Developing or revising a forest plan (§ 219.7), which includes evaluating the effects of the proposed action and any alternatives
3. Monitoring (§ 219.12)

The steps involved with completing Phase 1 and the remaining steps in Phase 2 of the plan revision process follow:

- Early engagement activities (pre-assessment): *completed* 2012-2013
- Assessment of ecological and socio-economic conditions: *completed* November 2014
- Preliminary need to change report: *completed* April 2015
- Proposed revised forest plan (proposed action) and NEPA analysis: fall and winter 2015
- Draft environmental impact statement: late spring 2016
- Final environmental impact statement/proposed record of decision/objection period: 2017

The assessment, completed in November 2014, is available on the Chugach National Forest Web site at http://www.fs.usda.gov/chugach/. The assessment documents changes that have occurred since 2002 using the best available scientific information, forest plan amendments and annual monitoring reports. Outcomes from public and targeted stakeholder meetings and other outreach efforts were captured in the report. These sources provided relevant information to define the scope of the changes needed to revise the 2002 forest plan (as amended).

The purpose of this document is to identify the *preliminary need to change* topics for the 2002 forest plan when new or revised plan components and other required plan content are developed.

The preliminary need to change topics are based on the requirements outlined in the 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives; and considers the changing conditions identified in the assessment, including the public values associated with the Chugach National Forest. The Chugach National Forest planning team intends to use the preliminary need to change topics to inform the development of new plan components and a proposed revised forest plan.

The public is invited to provide feedback on the list of preliminary needs to change in order to improve or engage in the development of the proposed plan and to help define the scope of the analyses and the decision to be made. Public comments on these preliminary needs to change are being accepted until June 15, 2015. See the Chugach National Forest plan revision Web site for details on how to comment.

Need to Change the 2002 Forest Plan

What is the Preliminary Need to Change?

The *Need to Change* is a process for determining future plan direction based on the existing 2002 forest plan, as amended. It establishes a framework for the development of plan components and other plan content, including a monitoring program. In this way, the framework builds on existing information as well as information developed during each phase of the planning process (i.e., assessment, plan revision, and monitoring) and supports adaptive management for informed and efficient planning. From this process, the Forest Service has identified several broad "need to change" themes that are expected to be addressed as the 2002 forest plan is revised.

A forest plan provides guidance for projects and activities. There are requirements for what content must be included as well as specific terms that are used. Plan components are the core elements of forest plans and all projects and activities should be consistent with plan components. Plan components are:

- Desired conditions
- Objectives
- Standards
- Guidelines
- Suitability of lands and where these plan components apply

Other required plan content includes descriptions of the plan area's distinctive roles and contributions, identification of priority watersheds, and monitoring requirements. These are not plan components but they are important parts of a plan. A monitoring program is intended to assess effectiveness of other plan components in meeting desired conditions and objectives. Monitoring helps to provide the flexibility to change strategies or approaches in order to respond to new information.

The Process for Determining the Preliminary Need to Change

The planning team considered more than 660 comments derived from the assessment information, public comments, changes in applicable laws and regulations, and the requirements for a land management plan as specified in the 2012 Planning Rule.

Comments were first sorted into one of 35 categories based on their content. Each comment was then evaluated as to whether or not it was plan revision related. Comments determined to be outside the authority of the Forest Service or outside the scope of the plan revision framework were flagged for follow-up with the appropriate Forest Service program manager. Remaining comments were then filtered against existing forest plan content. Comments that could not be aligned with or were different from existing plan content were flagged as a potential need to change. The comments were then grouped for similar content into need to change statements.

Forest staff then reviewed a draft list of 60 potential need to change statements. We considered the nature of the proposed change, its relative management importance over the next 10 to 15 years, fiscal feasibility, partnership opportunities, and other factors, as follows.

Preliminary Need to Change Topics by Theme

Access

Remove site-specific travel management direction from the forest plan to be consistent with the directives associated with the 2005 Travel Management Rule (36 CFR Part 212). Forest plans are strategic in nature, and by design they do not authorize site-specific activities or uses. The 2002 forest plan currently includes site-specific management direction for summer and winter motor vehicle access including an Access Management Plan in Appendix B that was developed prior to promulgation of the 2005 Travel Management Rule.

As a concurrent process, develop a separate Access Management Plan that identifies the road system necessary for safe and efficient travel and for administration, utilization, and protection of National Forest System lands. Travel analysis associated with a separate Access Management Plan would identify areas, roads, and routes and trails open and closed to motor vehicle use (other than for subsistence uses) and would include opportunities for public involvement.

Areas of Tribal Importance

Acknowledge tribal values to better integrate traditional and cultural properties. The importance of the land and features of the Chugach National Forest to first nations (e.g,. the Chugach, Eyak, Ahtna and Dena'ina) should be included in the distinctive roles and contributions section.

Designated Areas

The 2012 Planning Rule requires identification of Inventoried Roadless Areas and development of applicable plan components. The 2012 Planning Rule directives require the establishment of plan components for National Scenic and Historic Trails.

Develop plan components for the portion of the Iditarod National Historic Trail that crosses the Chugach National Forest. Currently, 186 miles of trail are managed under the Comprehensive Management Plan for the Iditarod National Historic Trail developed by the Bureau of Land Management.

Clarify language in the 2002 forest plan regarding the Nellie-Juan-College Fiord Wilderness Study Area. Current language is confusing or vague as it relates to applicable laws, regulations and policy including the 1980 Alaska Native Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), the 1964 Wilderness Act, and Forest Service Alaska Region policy.

Ecosystems and Habitats

Protecting and managing for ecosystem diversity and key ecosystem characteristics of the Chugach National Forest is a cornerstone requirement of the 2012 Planning Rule.

Develop plan components for key ecosystem characteristics (e.g., air, soil, water, and carbon), including new plan components for water quality best management practices, riparian areas, and priority watersheds in need of restoration.

Develop plan components to maintain landscape scale connectivity across mixed ownerships where natural systems, such as watersheds and wildlife corridors are shared.

Maintain the diversity of plant and animal communities and the persistence of native species in the plan area. For example, re-evaluate habitat objectives for moose.

Human use within the plan area is increasing, including hunting, motor vehicle and non-motorized recreation, and facilities development. Identify thresholds where increased use may threaten species and develop species-specific plan components.

Invasive species pose one of the larger long term threats to ecological integrity. Effects of changing climate, increasing levels of disturbance (both natural and human caused), and increasing tourism and population growth make the plan area vulnerable to introduction and expansion of invasive species. Develop additional standards and guidelines associated with early detection and rapid response to invasive species.

Multiple Uses

The 2002 forest plan lacks a strategy and associated plan components that address wood harvest activities including community and personal use. Considering the highly unroaded nature of the national forest, review needs and opportunities for providing firewood during the next 10 to 15 years and develop corresponding plan components.

Clarify existing plan language regarding definitions, authorities and guidance for subsistence uses and access allowed under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). Existing plan components need to be reviewed for accuracy. Revise and strengthen subsistence desired conditions and objectives. Review plan direction regarding subsistence access to management areas managed for non-motorized recreation.

Review the types of renewable energy generated across the national forest and evaluate future energy needs and infrastructure with updates to Management Area 522 – Major Transportation/Utility Systems.

Harvest of fern fiddleheads and mushrooms within the national forest is increasing. Evaluate special forest products management and ensure plan components address sustainability.

Identify the maximum quantity of timber that may be removed from the plan area.

Recreation and Tourism

Revise the recreation use capacities and guided use allocation models used in the forest plan and develop a consistent approach for establishing capacities to use across the national forest.

Integrated plan components are needed to address the uncertainties associated with a changing climate and the timing and location of recreation opportunities and associated infrastructure.

Recommended Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers

The 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives require the Forest Service to undertake a process to identify and evaluate lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System and determine whether to recommend any such lands for wilderness designation.

The 2012 Planning Rule also requires the identification of rivers eligible and suitable for inclusion into the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

The outcomes of these evaluation processes are expected to result in revised plan components, including desired conditions, objectives, and standards and guidelines.

Social and Economic Sustainability

Forest plans are required to integrate components for social and economic sustainability, ecosystem services, and multiple uses with the plan components for ecological sustainability and species diversity. The outcomes of ecological sustainability create a foundation to support contributions for social and economic sustainability. The revised forest plan is expected to include new plan components, including standards or guidelines, which would guide the plan area's contributions to social and economic sustainability. This revised management direction is intended to provide people and communities with a range of social and economic benefits for both present and future generations.

Throughout the Plan

Better describe the plan area's distinctive roles and contributions to local communities and to southcentral Alaska.

Update the 2002 forest plan monitoring program to include monitoring questions and associated indicators that address the eight categories identified in the 2012 Planning Rule at § 219.12(5).

There may be a need to update geographic or management area specific plan components. This includes review of suitable uses and activities (e.g. recreation, resource development, forest products and firewood collection, habitat improvement projects, utility and energy corridors, and etc.).

Incorporate opportunities for working across boundaries to manage landscapes with adjacent land managers, such as municipal, state, and federal partners; federally recognized tribes and Alaska Native Corporations. An example is the coordination of large prescribed fire activities with the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Identify management approaches and partnership opportunities related to interpretation and education activities across all Forest Service program areas.

Next Steps

The Chugach National Forest planning team intends to use the preliminary need to change information to inform the development of a proposed revised plan (§219.5 (a) (2) (i)) over the next several months. All management direction will be examined and modified as necessary to ensure its compliance with the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives.

Other need to change topics may be identified as the planning process continues. We welcome feedback on the preliminary need to change topics identified so far. Comments will most useful if received by June 15, 2015 and if they address questions or concerns about the topics listed above.

References

36 C.F.R. Part 212 Travel Management (effective November 9, 2005).

36 C.F.R. Part 219 National Forest System Land Management Planning (effective April 9, 2012).

USDA Forest Service. 2002. Chugach National Forest. Revised Land and Resource Management Plan. R10-MB-480c. May 2002.

USDA Forest Service. 2014. Assessment of Ecological and Socio-economic Conditions and Trends. Chugach National Forest. USDA Forest Service, Alaska Region. R10-MB-787. November 2014.