



**NEUTRAL ASSESSMENT REPORT
REGIONAL AND NATIONAL
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT
FOR**

**United States Forest Service
Region 2**

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BACKGROUND

The U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service) selected the Rio Grande National Forest as the first in Region 2 to undergo plan revision under the 2012 Forest Service Planning Rule. This new Planning Rule is distinctive in its focus on adaptive management and the use of monitoring, best available science, and public input to inform decisions.

“The new planning rule provides a process for planning that is adaptive and science-based, engages the public, and is designed to be efficient, effective, and within the Agency’s ability to implement (36 CFP Part 219).”¹ Under the proposed framework, planning will integrate the management of resources and incorporate a landscape-scale context for management.

Specific to engaging the public, the Planning Rule calls for “providing meaningful opportunities for public participation early and throughout the planning process, increases the transparency of decision-making, and provides a platform for the Agency to work with the public and across boundaries with other land managers to identify and share information and inform planning.” (36 CFR Part 219).

“The planning rule framework includes three phases: Assessment, plan development/ amendment/ revision, and monitoring. The framework supports an integrated approach to the management of resources and uses, incorporates the landscape-scale context for management, and will help the Agency to adapt to changing conditions and improve management based on new information and monitoring.”

36 CFR Part 219

In the 2012 Planning Rule Handbook, public participation is defined as “a general term that encompasses a variety of communications and levels of engagement. For the purposes of this Handbook, the term ‘public participation’ includes the full spectrum of public engagement, from informing the public to collaboration”² (see Appendix 1 for the Spectrum of Public Participation). In this report, the term public participation is intended to include this full spectrum of public engagement. Therefore, terms such as collaboration or public engagement may be used interchangeably with public participation.

The Rio Grande National Forest and the Forest Service Regional Office are committed to involving interested members of the public throughout the three-year planning process. They have involved the National Forest Foundation (NFF) to assist with the design and implementation of a collaborative stakeholder engagement process. During the summer of 2014, the NFF conducted interviews with key stakeholders in the San Luis Valley to help inform the design of a local public participation process. In October 2014, the NFF hosted eight Forest Plan Community Awareness meetings at four different

¹ Federal Register, Vol. 77, NO. 68/ Monday, April 9, 2012/Rules and Regulations. Posted on USDA website: http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5362537.pdf

² FSH 1909.12_Land Management Planning Handbook, Chapter 40_Public Participation, page 2 of 26.



locations within the San Luis Valley, and launched an interactive Forest Plan Revision website at <http://riograndeplanning.mindmixer.com/> to gather public input throughout the process by using polling questions and fostering two-way, online discussions about forest planning issues.

Given the high visibility of the Rio Grande National Forest's Plan Revision, many stakeholders at the regional and national level have shown interest in this process. Region 2 and the Rio Grande National Forest staff seek to design a process that incorporates regional and national input into the plan revision in concert with that of local stakeholders. They also want a process that simultaneously allows for region-wide engagement beyond the Rio Grande since many regional and national stakeholders want to continue being involved as other forests in the region begin their respective plan revisions.

The Forest Service Regional Office requested that the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution (U.S. Institute) conduct an independent, neutral assessment of regional and national stakeholders to inform the development of the regional and national engagement process for Region 2. The U.S. Institute's recommendations will complement the NFF's recommendations for designing Region 2's local public participation process.

The U.S. Institute developed the following report for the Forest Service and the NFF that outlines its findings and recommendations for an engagement process. The recommendations in this report represent a synthesis of what the authors heard. They expand on the recommendations for public participation in the 2012 Planning Rule Handbook, and where applicable, they incorporate similar recommendations from the University of Montana Lessons Learned Report.³ Each U.S. Institute recommendation hyperlinks back to examples in the document of specific recommendations from interviewees. The Forest Service will distribute the U.S. Institute's report to regional and national stakeholders for review. Comments received will be used to refine the broader engagement strategy.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this neutral situation assessment is to provide the Forest Service with an overview of perspectives on the design of regional and national stakeholder engagement for the Rio Grande National Forest and other forests in Region 2. Understanding the various perspectives is critical for designing a stakeholder engagement process that is effective, legitimate, and long-lasting.

It is important to note, these recommendations do not include the equally important inreach with forest staff or science staff at the Forest Service research stations, nor do they address engaging cooperating agencies or the critical role of consultation with tribes. Consideration should be given to all of these components of engagement.

³ University of Montana, Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy. February 2015. Public Participation: Lessons Learned Implementing the 2012 US Forest Service Planning Rule. An Early Review of Lessons Learned on 12 National Forests.



Additionally, the primary focus of this assessment is on process design, so this report does not address substantive issues. However, the authors thought it would be useful to include a list of topics that interviewees mentioned to indicate the range of issues discussed. The substantive topics that were identified in the interviews as having a high level of importance to stakeholders are listed in Appendix 2. In general, interviewees noted that topics were interconnected, so there were multiple substantive issues in which they wanted to be involved. The Forest Service will explore this further during the scoping phase.

Two staff members from the U.S. Institute interviewed sixteen regional and national stakeholders from industry, recreation, wildlife, and conservation groups. Interviewees were chosen from recommendations by lead staff in the Forest Service and from stakeholder suggestions. The information that was provided was confidential (but not anonymous), interviews were conducted over the phone, and discussions lasted for approximately one hour each. The list of interviewees is in Appendix 3.

During the interviews, stakeholders discussed ways in which they and their constituents would like to be engaged in both the Rio Grande National Forest plan revision and in other forest plan revisions in Region 2. The U.S. Institute also explored how regional and national input could best be incorporated into the plan revision in concert with that of local stakeholders. The input gathered shed light on how to achieve region-wide engagement beyond the Rio Grande planning process, since regional and national stakeholders also described ways in which they want to be involved as other forests begin plan revisions.

Interview Questions

- 1. Are you aware of the requirements for collaboration under the new Planning Rule? What are your expectations for collaboration in this and other Region 2 forest planning processes?**
- 2. Are there particular forest planning issues about which you would like to be engaged?**
- 3. How would you like to be engaged in the Rio Grande plan revision process generally or specifically?**
 - Assessment Phase
 - Plan Phase
 - EIS Phase
 - Monitoring Phase
- 4. How do you see public engagement of the regional/national groups being integrated with local engagement?**
- 5. How would you like to be engaged long-term in Rio Grande NF planning? In planning on other forest plan revisions, such as the GMUG?**
- 6. Are there other groups you feel need to be included in this assessment?**



STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The following report is structured in three sections. The first two sections present a synthesis of information gathered through the interviews. The U.S. Institute is not necessarily endorsing the recommendations in this section, but rather compiling input from participants. The final section presents recommendations from the U.S. Institute. They build on recommendations provided by interviewees, but are also grounded in best practices in environmental collaboration.

Section 1: Stakeholder Expectations and Recommendations for the Rio Grande National Forest Process

This section outlines feedback from regional and national stakeholders on how they want to be engaged in the Rio Grande National Forest plan revision. Specifically, this section addresses the following themes:

- [Awareness of 2012 Planning Rules Requirements for Collaboration](#)
- [Expectations for Collaboration on the Rio Grande National Forest](#)
- [Recommendations for Engagement on the Rio Grande National Forest](#)
- [Integrating National and Regional Input with Local Engagement](#)
- [Recommendations on Specific Planning Phases](#)
 - [Assessment](#)
 - [Plan](#)
 - [EIS](#)
 - [Monitoring](#)
- [Recommendations for Long Term Engagement](#)
- [Recommendations for Communication Mechanisms](#)

Section 2: Stakeholder Recommendations for other Region 2 Planning Processes:

This section outlines regional and national stakeholders recommendations for engagement in other Region 2 forest plan revisions.

Section 3: U.S. Institute Recommendations

This final section provides the U.S. Institute's summary of key factors or principles that contribute to effective stakeholder engagement. Based on these factors, recommendations are provided for designing a stakeholder engagement process.

Appendices:

- [Appendix 1: Spectrum of Public Participation](#)
- [Appendix 2: Substantive Forest Planning Issues of Interest](#)
- [Appendix 3: Participants](#)
- [Appendix 4: References](#)



SECTION 1: STAKEHOLDER EXPECTATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RIO GRANDE NATIONAL FOREST PROCESS

This first section presents a synthesis of information gathered through the interviews. It closely follows the structure of the interview questions (see methodology).

AWARENESS OF 2012 PLANNING RULE REQUIREMENTS FOR COLLABORATION

A few interviewees stated they had read the 2012 USFS Planning Rule and the Guidance and were familiar with the requirements for public engagement. Most interviewees were unclear whether the 2012 USFS Planning Rule required collaboration. Nevertheless, all interviewees were fairly certain the Rule at least encouraged effective public engagement at the local and regional level, if it did not require it. By effective engagement, they meant the Planning Rule encouraged public input earlier in the process (pre-NEPA or pre-scoping) and continued outreach at all stages of the planning process. The specifics on the type of engagement were left to the discretion of individual forests to allow for flexibility.

EXPECTATIONS FOR COLLABORATION ON THE RIO GRANDE NATIONAL FOREST

Two-way Communication: Interviewees' expectations for collaboration were fairly consistent with their understanding of what was called for in the 2012 Planning Rule. The majority favored an enhanced traditional NEPA engagement process in which the Forest Service took public feedback and comments and incorporated them into planning documents. The principal difference was they expected "meaningful engagement" with the Forest Service in the development of drafts. This meant the Forest Service should not develop information or draft documents internally at each stage and then send them out for comment. Interviewees expected "two way communication" with the Forest Service and engagement "early and often" in developing drafts.

"Two way discussion throughout the process, assessment, planning, development, implementation, monitoring, and amendments - with facilitated discussion - is the key."

Collaborative Learning and Shared Problem Solving: A critical component of this two way engagement was a focus on collaborative learning and shared problem solving. Many interviewees commented that the goal of this collaborative engagement should not be on reaching consensus or developing majority recommendations. Instead, they recommended the Forest Service focus its efforts on targeted discussions with interest groups about key issues prior to developing draft assessments, goals, and plan alternatives. This would help the Forest Service think through tough issues and identify areas of agreement and difference.

In fact, a few interviewees specifically noted that they wanted the Forest Service to take an open and collaborative stance and acknowledge the uncertainty around many of the issues they would be grappling



“Collaborative learning, reviewing, and making recommendations. Then as the plan is built, give the group a chance to review what’s been put to paper and discuss. This should be ongoing. It’s important to look for win-wins but also help guide the language in the document from the assessment through to monitoring.”

with in the plan. Interviewees wanted the discussions to reflect that uncertainty. They endorsed the idea of forums in which the Forest Service identified the key issues it was considering, were very specific about the questions it was addressing and the type of feedback it was soliciting, and then allowed participants to help it address those issues. They recommended the Forest Service use the feedback from these forums to develop drafts of planning documents, and then make these documents available for public comment.

For collaboration to be successful, interviewees also emphasized that the engagement process must be “democratic,” or viewed as transparent and inclusive of a wide variety of stakeholders. To that end, they provided numerous recommendations to enhance outreach and make public engagement more effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLABORATION ON THE RIO GRANDE NATIONAL FOREST

Provide a Roadmap of the Collaborative Engagement Process: A common recommendation was that the Forest Service make it easy for people to understand when and how to participate throughout the NEPA process. Interviewees recommended the Forest Service provide a type of “roadmap,” or an easily understandable overview of the planning process for the Rio Grande National Forest with timelines and specific points at which the public could be engaged. They suggested the Forest Service staff keep the public apprised of where it is on this roadmap throughout the planning process, for example through notices about key meetings, and how best to get involved. They also recommended widely distributing meeting summaries and other materials that would allow the public to track key discussions.

“Alert regional and national contacts to issues, topics, deadlines, and events far in advance so people can participate and provide input before decisions are made regarding each component of planning.”

Interviewees recommended this overview and other relevant material be made readily accessible through public notices or outreach such as mailings, emails to interested publics, or postings on websites. Many of the interviewees noted that as regional or national representatives, they would like to have this information pushed from websites or emailed to them, so they could share it with their constituents. They also wanted continued updates and reminders of critical dates, such as comment periods. Some recommended regular (quarterly) meetings or webinars to inform the public about the process or update them at key junctures in the planning process.



“A website that was easily navigable, simple, and straightforward, that could be a one-stop-shop for information, would be a useful platform. It could have relevant materials like maps and timelines.”

One interviewee recommended that the Forest Service have a “one-stop-shop” site with overview information on the planning processes for all the National Forests in Region 2 undergoing plan revision. This would allow the public to easily track when different phases of planning start for

individual forests across the Region and the various timelines and dates for public engagement. Here again, the recommendation was to have push notices and/or email updates with preliminary information, interim updates, and calendars of upcoming events and timelines for different forests in the region.

Provide a Guidebook on the Planning Process: Just as importantly, many of the interviewees noted the complexity of forest planning and strongly recommended the Forest Service provide an easily

“Forest Service land management has gotten so convoluted and burdensome. It’s like the average person needs to hire an attorney to get through these processes.”

understandable overview or guidebook written in “lay terms” of the planning process. They felt it was critical for the public to understand what each phase of the planning process entailed, such as the assessment or the plan, and how each phase fed into and fit with the others. This type of explanation would improve the public’s ability to participate in developing drafts and to evaluate the implications of Forest Service decisions.

Use Clear Goals, Framing, and Outcomes for Public Engagement: To enhance public engagement, many interviewees recommended that the Forest Service clearly spell out its goals and objectives for collaboration, its policy framework – e.g. the authorities and decision framework for the process, its science framework, and its expectations for public engagement. This recommendation applied to the overall process; several interviewees made recommendations about clarifying the Forest Service’s broad goals and objectives of collaboration, its policy and science framework, the relationship between and among cooperating agencies and partners, and how public input would be incorporated into planning.

“The Forest Service should include the policy framework, which would include who are the authorities, what’s the process, etc. and the scientific framework, like what’s known, what’s accepted, what’s uncertain.”

This recommendation also applied to specific public engagements. Interviewees also made recommendations about framing each engagement with an initial statement clarifying the Forest Service’s goals and its policy and science framework; clarifying everyone’s role and interest; stating that everyone’s input is important; and providing specific topics or key targeted questions on which the Forest Service would like feedback. Many cautioned that jumping into discussions with very broad or unclear objectives would make it difficult for the public to provide meaningful input or understand how their input would be used.



Make Decision Processes Transparent for Public Engagement: In addition to highlighting the importance of being clear about feedback sought by the Forest Service, many interviewees also recommended that the decision-making process be fully transparent. They expected the Forest Service to acknowledge and use input it received through comments or heard in discussions. Many also recommended that the Forest Service post its data sources.

Another common recommendation was that the Forest Service develop some type of compilation or summary of comments emerging from forums or submitted on blogs or during the comment period, along with a statement about how the Forest Service used this input along with science to inform decisions.

“The Forest Service should summarize comments into key themes and let people know how their input was used, how it helped them think about decisions, and where their input was used. This would legitimize the process.”

Be Targeted with Public Engagement: Some interviewees stressed it was not necessary for the Forest Service to collaborate on all issues. They cautioned that the Forest Service needs to set realistic expectations for collaboration, weighing its own time and resources so it does not over-promise and under-deliver. The Forest Service should also recognize that there are differences in the level at which people want to be involved and can be involved given their capacity and resources, so it needs to be targeted and effective with engagement to realistically balance limited resources with the need to meaningfully engage people.

“It’s interesting how we think about collaboration because the idea often is that you’ll form a group that will remain constant throughout the planning process. I think the Forest Service should be willing to collaborate or work at an intense level with a high degree of collaboration on specific issues. It doesn’t have to be with one collaborative group.”

For that reason, the majority of the interviewees did not favor a series of face-to-face public meetings or round tables for the overall process, nor did most interviewees favor engaging a dedicated collaborative group (such as an advisory group) to develop recommendations. Some noted that the expense and time to travel to multiple meetings would exclude a large segment of the public. This was

particularly true for the Grand Mesa Uncompahgre, Gunnison (GMUG) National Forest, where the local communities are very dispersed, making travel to any meeting burdensome for the majority of the public. Others were concerned with an advisory group developing a parallel track with recommendations that were not developed or vetted through a public process. They also cautioned that any type of engagement focused on soliciting general feedback would not be an effective use of people’s time. Many interviewees argued that to be meaningful, engagement should be focused on critical issues at hand, not general topics such as values or desired conditions.



Address Substantive Issues: In general, interviewees recommended focused interactions around substantive issues, particularly in the pre-NEPA, pre-scoping, and assessment phases. Several interviewees specifically noted they expected engagement to focus on substantive issues not process issues. Webinars were most often recommended as the optimal forum, primarily because having webinars on specific topics that allow for dialogue was considered less time consuming than other models and would not require travel.

“Webinars on specific topics are less time consuming and allow more voices to participate since some interested parties are not local. They also provide shared learning and the opportunity to engage. Make them interactive webinars with people chatting and asking questions. You could see if there’s a need to do more after the webinar. You could integrate the NEPA process into this collaborative process so there aren’t parallel tracks.”

However, interviewees also noted the importance of local and regional face-to-face meetings around key issues at various junctures of the process, if the meetings were well-structured and neutrally facilitated. A few interviewees offered to host forums on key topics. Others recommended facilitated, interactive field trips and site visits with Forest Service staff and specialists during which discussion on key management concerns would take place. This approach would help people to understand issues and build relationships through shared learning around different topics.

Remain Adaptable and Flexible: Interviewees suggested tailoring the outreach and engagement to each phase and stakeholder group, and keeping the process adaptable and flexible based on public feedback and opportunities as they arise in the planning process. Most interviewees favored more engagement in the pre-NEPA, pre-scoping, and assessment phases. At the same time, some interviewees suggested that

“There might be new information, new science, several groups who weren’t included that have something to say, and there’s a danger that with the collaborative group the agency has less likelihood to change even if they get new information that should change the process.”

various interest groups hold quarterly one-on-one meetings with top deputies of the Forest Service and other federal agencies throughout the planning process, with the goal of sharing information, understanding the big picture, and identifying areas of common or conflicting interests. A few interviewees also suggested forming

technical working groups or local chapters of stakeholders (such as water users). Such groups would be comprised of representatives from federal, state, and local groups engaged in resource management, and they would provide input on local goals throughout the planning process.

A few interviewees expressed concern that by using a select collaborative group, the Forest Service ran the risk of excluding valuable information or becoming inflexible in the face of new and important information. They recommended that the Forest Service keep all stakeholders abreast of key issues and



allow stakeholders to assess when there is a need for change, and then be open to new information and have a process in place for making necessary changes.

Remain Timely: While interviewees felt the planning process should be adaptable and flexible, they also recommended it remain timely. In general, the recommendation was to have realistic timeframes that recognized the tradeoff between the need to complete the plan in a timely manner and the need to honor commitments to collaboration. Stakeholders noted that it was important to provide time to engage in meaningful discussions around critical issues. For example, a few interviewees expressed concern that a compressed time frame could limit the amount of collaboration, which could diminish the relationship building, collaborative learning, and problem solving needed to address complex issues. Others were more concerned that drawing out the planning process risked losing momentum through leadership turnover and stakeholder burn out.

“Collaborative capacity that’s meaningful and lasts is important. That means collaboration for implementation, not just planning.”

Build Collaborative Capacity and Lasting Relationships: A few interviewees noted the importance of focusing collaboration on building better relationships between stakeholders and improving capacity for collaborative learning to last throughout the life of the plan. Since adaptive

management and monitoring are fundamental to the new planning framework, they noted the importance of building and maintaining relationships that would support monitoring through the 15 year life-span of the average plan.

Ensure Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement: Many interviewees recommended a wide variety of outreach and engagement techniques to allow for participation by a broad range of stakeholders. The general concern was that a one-size-fits-all approach would favor some groups and exclude others. Interviewees recommended emphasis on public participation from the beginning and continued throughout the process, however, the Forest Service should recognize that there are differences in the level at which people want to be involved and can be involved given their capacity and resources.

“The Forest Service should use workshops for people in person, and webinars for others – have a wide variety of outreach techniques.”

Interviewees recommended a range of targeted outreach. Face-to-face meetings, webinars, and one-on-one meetings with the Forest Service would be helpful. They advised the Forest Service use social media and websites where appropriate, but cautioned that the Forest Service should consider accessibility. Using a variety of mechanisms to distribute information, providing advance notice on events and timelines, and providing meeting summaries for stakeholders unable to attend could help address issues of access and reach a wider audience.



Ensure Neutral and Objective Engagement: In the spirit of being open and welcoming of all voices, many interviewees recommended that the Forest Service also remain neutral and objective in its interactions with the public. A few interviewees noted that at times, Forest Service staff can appear partial to certain interests or closed to particular points of view. They recommended that the Forest Service engage a third-party neutral facilitator for contentious issues or when multiple stakeholders are involved in a process to ensure neutrality and objectivity. This approach could also be useful in breaking people out of “silos” and helping to foster mutual understanding.

Ensure Fair and Balanced Engagement:

Many interviewees spoke to the need for the Forest Service to remain fair and balanced in engaging the public. They recommended equal representation on work groups or in face-to-face meetings.

“Balance the input by having key representatives from major interest groups come together to discuss an issue so it’s not weighted one way or another.”

They also recommended giving equal weight to all input.

Interviewees thought it was important to be balanced and democratic between issue-specific interest groups, as well as between national/regional and local interest groups. To maintain balance between issue-specific interests, one recommendation was to have key representatives from major interest groups come together to discuss an issue so the plan is not weighted one way or another. Discussions could also take place around conflicting science, and the Forest Service could explain the rationale behind choosing one scientific report over another.

INTEGRATING NATIONAL AND REGIONAL WITH LOCAL ENGAGEMENT

While interviewees generally supported the need for fair and balanced engagement, they struggled with how best to integrate national and regional input with local input.

Weighting Stakeholder Input: Some interviewees recommended that input from local stakeholders be given greater weight, reasoning that local stakeholders were disproportionately impacted by decisions about local forests. These interviewees also felt written comments that were “canned” such as form letters should not be considered individually. Several interviewees highlighted the importance of transparency to ensure that local input was being taken into account in national policy decisions.

Other interviewees argued the Forest Service should not give preference to local stakeholders; instead it should equally weigh input from all stakeholders. They argued these plans were for federal lands; and as such, all stakeholders should have an equal voice in their management. They also felt that all written comments should be considered individually, since people took the time to comment.

Integrating Regional, National, and Local Engagement: A number of interviewees recommended integrating the regional and national input with local engagement through webinars or weekend meetings. In fact, interviewees who called for a collaborative learning and a shared problem-solving



approach argued that encouraging a range of perspectives would better inform the discussions. In designing this collaborative engagement, some interviewees expressed a preference for engaging "communities of interest" rather than "communities of place." This approach would involve integrating place-based groups with issue-specific networks in substantive discussions relevant to their interests.

Many interviewees noted that in their role as a regional or national representative, they worked to integrate the regional and local perspectives. They often sent information and updates to local constituents and held webinars or sent out draft comments to engage the local constituents in discussions around relevant issues. Conversely, some interviewees pointed to local groups as important conveners for discussions that involved regional and national stakeholders. In some cases, these local and regional stakeholders were working together to develop recommendations or plan alternatives. They encouraged the Forest Service to capitalize on existing meetings hosted by local groups to address critical issues and answer questions about the process and substance of the plan.

“Engage local groups who are hosting meetings already. The more the Forest Service can incorporate its meetings into events already happening, the better turnout they will have from regional and national representatives.”

“National and regional groups should be able to provide input to the broad level goals, and roundtables and discussion groups should be formed with livestock users, water commissioners, and the like to discuss local goals.”

Separating Regional, National, and Local Engagement: Some interviewees recommended separating regional and national engagement from local engagement. They felt regional and national stakeholders should be engaged in discussions of broad-level management questions and goals for region-wide issues

spanning multiple forests, such as migratory wildlife management, travel management, or watershed management. These broad-level goals would provide structure for meaningful progress toward specific goals related to regional resources.

They favored more place-based, interest-specific meetings to address local-level management questions and goals specific to individual forests. They specified that public meetings at the local level should be interactive, focused on key issues, and well facilitated. More often, interviewees preferred local discussion groups or technical working groups formed around topic areas, such as livestock users or water users, to discuss local goals. These local groups were viewed as a type of “filtering

“The place-based component is key. You need an active way for members to get involved--dynamic conversation about specific issues that involves mapping or a hands on activity. It could be a public meeting format. Maps are good as a starting point, but some interactive maps online are difficult to use.”



mechanism” because of their technical expertise.

Identifying Critical Issues for Discussion: Interviewees were split over the issue of who should identify key issues for discussion. Some felt discussions with the general public or more focused group discussions should daylight critical issues that the Forest Service would address. Others recommended that the Forest Service identify the issues it wanted to discuss and be specific about the key questions it was grappling with.

STAKEHOLDER RECOMMENDATIONS ON SPECIFIC PLANNING PHASES

Many of the interviewees had very specific recommendations for engagement at the various stages of plan development. Taken in total, these recommendations provide a good foundation for the overall design of an engagement strategy.

ASSESSMENT PHASE

The assessment phase drew a lot of discussion because interviewees considered it critical to the overall design and effectiveness of the forest plan. Many stated that the assessment lays the foundation for what comes after in the planning process, so the assessment needs to be done well. The assessment is intended to inform the need to change the existing plan and inform what the agency will do.

“The public needs to understand to whole framework of the planning process and how the assessment– the way it is structured and the data used - will affect the development of the plan, EIS, and monitoring plan. If people don’t understand the assessment, they won’t understand subsequent phases.”

Provide a Guidebook on the Assessment Phase: As noted earlier, interviewees strongly recommended that the Forest Service make the overall planning process more understandable to the average person.

“It would be good to have broader participation and public discussion in developing the need for change. For example, hold community of interest dialogues or webinars between agency and interest groups to provide input on the fundamental architecture of the assessment, instead of the traditional call for information and then the agency develops a draft assessment and puts it out for review.”

For that reason, many interviewees stressed the importance of making the assessment phase accessible and transparent to the public. They recommended that the Forest Service provide information on the purpose of the assessment and how it fits into the overall plan. This information should explain how the assessment is the foundation for setting up the need for change and show how it is linked to every other part of the planning process.

Engage Interest Groups in Developing the Architecture of the Assessment: Because of the



importance of the assessment, one interviewee recommended the Forest Service engage interest groups early in developing the fundamental architecture of the assessment; that is, what the assessment would look like and how it would address key management questions. The goal of this engagement would be to clarify differences in perception early and to help the Forest Service think through the overall structure in a meaningful way. This type of interaction would also help interest groups understand Forest Service decisions.

Establish Clear Expectations when Soliciting Assessment Information: Some interviewees were concerned about how the Forest Service collected the data for the assessment. They did not want the data collection process or the assessment to become what they termed a “data dump.” They felt it is critical that assessments are focused and information is relevant. To ensure that the Forest Service identifies relevant information useful in the planning process, interviewees recommended that the agency establish clear expectations about the purpose of the assessment in its data calls and establish guidelines on the types of information being solicited. The Forest Service should communicate to the public that the purpose of an assessment is not to include everyone’s information. Assessment data needs to be relevant to the issues identified for consideration in the plan, and contain key information for assessing the need for change. Interviewees noted earlier forest planning processes where the Forest Service had openly solicited information and pulled together information the interviewees considered irrelevant. They felt that this did little to help clarify the need for change or future direction for the forest. They noted the Forest Service has competing demands for having information included in assessments, but not all data is useful.

“The more data that’s relevant and understandable, the better. Make information easy to find and provide enough information, but not too much. Provide what’s relevant to the substantive requirements of the Rule. Assessments typically seem to be all over the place, but the Cibola Forest did it online and separated the data sets by category. All of it should be relevant to substantive requirements.”

Make Data Readily Available: Data should be made readily available to the public in a clear way.

Work with Groups to Collect Critical Information: Some interviewees recommended the Forest Service work with groups who had critical information it did not have, such as those with data on special use areas or recreational use. Further, a few supported keeping the assessment phase informed and dynamic. They recommended the Forest Service post the data sources used in the assessment as well as changes as they are made, so the public can more effectively engage in the process.

Engage Issue-based Teams to Develop the Assessment: One interviewee raised the concern that assessments have traditionally been developed in a stove-piped manner. Different issues are authored by people from different disciplines. Many of the issues have a high degree of interaction, such as multiple use and ecological issues. If the interrelationships among issues are not addressed in the assessment, there could be sustainability problems. To address this concern, the interviewee recommended the Forest



Service engage issue-based teams to work with the planning team to develop the assessment. The teams would work with the planning team members on that piece of the assessment relevant to them to discuss

“Collaboration at that stage could be invaluable. Some initial discussions on how to integrate topic areas in the assessment would be helpful, so issue-based groups are able to contribute to the design of the assessment. Users of the assessment will then find it more useful for informing the next phase.”

how the information is presented in that particular chapter. The issue-based teams could also help the planning team think through how to address the interactions.

Engage Groups to Identify Monitoring Questions: Some interviewees also noted that the Planning Rule is based on an adaptive management framework, so

they argued it is important to keep the monitoring phase in mind from the very beginning. The assessment should help identify information gaps and uncertainties. Not everything will be known; therefore, they reasoned that monitoring questions should be identified during the assessment phase. Framing important monitoring questions in the assessment could help address contentious management questions during the monitoring phase.

Some interviewees recommended the Forest Service use dialogue and discussion with various interest groups in the assessment phase to develop or refine monitoring questions.

Others recommended involving scientists or technical specialists from other agencies to help shape the monitoring questions.

“Developing monitoring questions in the assessment phase could be used as a place to stave off conflict. Dialogue and discussion are effective ways to continue to refine monitoring questions throughout.”

PLAN PHASE

Continue Engagement Through the Plan Phase: The greatest concern voiced about the planning process was that the Forest Service would go into what some called a “dark hole” and not engage the public after the assessment. Many interviewees commented that the Forest Service traditionally has not engaged the public in the planning phase until it has produced a draft plan. They recommended the Forest Service continue with its engagement throughout the plan phase to let people know what issues are being addressed and where the Forest Service is in the process. They also wanted the Forest Service to remain transparent as it develops the draft alternatives and be clear about the science framework being used.

Updates and Draft Alternatives: To that end, interviewees recommended the Forest Service provide periodic updates when plan components are being developed and how it is using information in drafting the plan. They recommended the Forest Service also consider posting key questions on the blog or hosting webinars to discuss critical issues. Some interviewees recommended the Forest Service check in with the public on conceptual alternatives before drafting the final plan. These could be draft concepts of the



various alternatives with enough information about the core components to get a sense of what differentiates them. The Forest Service could provide these for public comment.

Make the Plan Readily Available: In keeping with earlier recommendations, interviewees called for the Forest Service to make the plan and EIS readily available and accessible. They recommended posting it on the web, with notices through multiple channels about how and when to comment, which they could forward to their constituents. In addition to notices and emails, interviewees also recommended distributing information through other agencies, like the BLM or Colorado Parks and Recreation, as well as in shops that might be frequented by interested publics.

“Make access to all relevant information about a topic easy. Provide an index that tells me where to go for information about a particular issue and a reference telling me I need to read other sections. Perhaps a hyperlink at the end that would direct me to anything related to my area of interest would be good.”

Make the Plan Easily Accessible: Interviewees also recommended the Forest Service give enough detail about the potential on-the-ground impacts of each alternative so the public could evaluate the alternatives and provide useful feedback. At the same time, they cautioned that the plan should be streamlined, with no extraneous information, because people could become overwhelmed reading these weighty documents. They recommended making the online version easy to navigate, for example, with indexes and cross-references that would allow them to see linkages across sections.

Continue One-on-One Engagement: In addition to general public outreach and engagement, some interviewees recommended that one-on-one engagement opportunities with the Forest Service continue in this phase as planning decisions are made.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT (EIS) PHASE

Continue Engagement Throughout the EIS Phase: Interviewees’ comments for the EIS phase mirrored those for the planning phase. They advised that the USFS continue with its engagement throughout the EIS phase as well. Here again, the recommendation was to let people know what issues with impacts were being addressed and where the Forest Service was in the process. As with the plan, some interviewees recommended clarification on the science framework being used and why the USFS chose that framework.

Make the EIS Readily Available: Interviewees also wanted the EIS readily available. They recommended posting the EIS to the web, with notices through multiple channels about how and when to comment, which they could forward to their constituents.



Make the EIS Easily Accessible: As with the Plan, interviewees recommended including substantive material that is relevant to understanding potential impacts, but streamlining the documents to be clear and understandable in lay terms. They also wanted the online version of the EIS to be easy to navigate.

MONITORING PHASE

In addressing engagement in the monitoring phase, many interviewees commented on the adaptive management framework of the plan and suggested that monitoring be included in plan development beginning with the assessment.

Develop the Monitoring Plan with the Forest Plan: Some interviewees recommended the Forest Service develop

the monitoring plan at the same time as the forest plan and keep them interrelated. For example, interviewees recommended demonstrating the alignment between monitoring and desired conditions. They also recommended including the monitoring questions in the standards and guidelines.

“I would like to see how the assessment informs monitoring and be able to see that at an earlier state in the planning process. It can be easy to tag on to the end and in some processes there has been no way to engage. You should be able track back to why you’re proposing a change within adaptive management.”

“I’d like to see the monitoring plan be part of the NEPA process and be included in the EIS, so the public has an opportunity in the standardized fashion to provide comments and help steer the direction of the monitoring program. The whole package should go through the NEPA process.”

Include the Monitoring Plan in the NEPA Process: In addition to developing the monitoring plan concurrent with the forest plan, interviewees also recommended that it go through the NEPA process, so there is opportunity for public engagement. Here again, interviewees wanted to see engaged discussions that would allow the public to

provide input on specific topics in the drafting phase, and the opportunity to provide written comments on the final draft. Some interviewees agreed that the monitoring plan should be informed through the public process, but they recommended having scientists involved in developing the plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LONG TERM ENGAGEMENT

Many interviewees said they want to be engaged long term in efforts related to forest planning in the Rio Grande. In general, they saw their engagement being limited to reviewing and commenting on project plans and monitoring data. However, they felt advisory groups would be valuable to oversee implementation of monitoring and evaluation. A few voiced an interest in being involved in conducting monitoring.



Establish an Advisory Body: While interviewees generally agreed the Forest Service should develop the monitoring plan, some felt they should establish an advisory committee to oversee the design and implementation of monitoring and potentially make recommendations on amending the plan. A few interviewees recommended the advisory body should be broadly representative of all stakeholders and,

“I’d see it as you’re bringing in a group of experts to do the monitoring and analysis, and provide it to the public. I don’t think that would require FACA. It’s more of having that method to process and distribute that data to the public in an unbiased way. The agency could develop the monitoring plan, but unbiased groups would analyze the data and come out with recommendations or reports.”

while less formal than a Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) committee, should operate in the spirit of FACA. One interviewee recommended a broadly representative group for implementing the larger, landscape-scale monitoring, but letting the Forest Service manage small-scale, project-specific monitoring.

Assure Monitoring Data is Unbiased: Other interviewees recommended the advisory body consist of members who can do monitoring and analysis and provide information to the public in an unbiased way. They suggested that scientists from outside the agency or from nongovernmental organizations be

“Post data sources along with monitoring reports. This is supposed to be a living assessment, and I’d like the Forest Service to make adjustments when it needs to. I’d like to be able to point out when there’s a need for change and get our members involved as appropriate.”

engaged for long term monitoring and to help identify trigger points, evaluate whether monitoring is being done well, make sure data gathering is up to date and useful, review Forest Service analyses or conduct its own analyses and make reports and recommendations on the implications of further revision available to the public. A few interviewees suggested using multi-party monitoring or involving schools in monitoring, if the agency has the time and resources.

Make Monitoring Data Readily Available: Many interviewees noted they would like the Forest Service to be clear about how it conceives of adaptive management and provide sufficient information to allow the public the opportunity to point out when there is a need for change. To that end, some interviewees recommended maintaining the assessment as a living document; that is, posting the data sources and the subsequent monitoring reports on the web. They noted that the assumptions and questions posed in the monitoring plan need to be addressed throughout the life of the plan. Therefore, they recommended the Forest Service make the information used to determine progress toward goals completely transparent and available to the public. That information would allow the public to track progress or help evaluate if there is a need for change.



Make Project Data Readily Available:

Interviewees also recommended that project notices be posted. They recommended the project descriptions demonstrate how the Forest Service is using adaptive management. For example, they want the project description to spell out how the project is tiered to the forest plan – e.g. how the goals set forth in desired conditions and the standards and guidelines relate to the project, and how the Forest Service would use the monitoring results to track progress toward goals.

“Monitoring reports should be made available on the website. We want notice on the projects and how they are tiered to the plan. We want to understand how the Forest Service is going to use adaptive management, and then we want to continue being involved in project level to see how the project or monitoring plan lines up with the plan components, desired conditions, and guidelines.”

“There’s a need to build collaborative relationships that live for the 15 years that the Plan lasts. Collaborative capacity that’s meaningful and lasts is important. That means collaboration for implementation, not just planning.”

Ongoing Public Engagement: Interviewees want constituent interests to continue being engaged meaningfully over the long term, using a variety of mechanisms to solicit input much like during the plan revision. In fact, some argued that a major goal of collaboration during planning should be to build collaborative capacity to last through implementation. Building lasting relationships and collaborative capacity would help with adaptive management.

Ongoing Communication and Transparency: The majority of interviewees said ongoing quarterly meetings, email alerts, and other public outreach should continue. The Forest Service should continue to make reports available to the public that show how long term monitoring fits with overall goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATON MECHANISMS

Interviewees emphasized the need for regular communication with a wide variety of stakeholders through multiple communication mechanisms. Mechanisms discussed include emails, websites, webinars, public notices, public meetings, press releases, blogs, the mindmixer tool, and various combinations. Most stakeholders considered all of the mechanisms to be valuable tools because different forms of communication serve different audiences. The majority of interviewees noted that sending email alerts with key information to stakeholders would have the greatest utility to them, along with a link to a website with more information. They also considered webinars and blogs as a helpful way to engage stakeholders who may not be able to easily travel to an area. Below are specific recommendations interviewees had about individual mechanisms.



Use Well-Structured Webinars to Improve Access: Many stakeholders said having webinars were useful to reach across geography and make it possible to include people who do not live in the area. Webinars could be valuable when finding a central meeting place is not feasible and time would be wasted traveling. They also allow people to be involved both synchronously and asynchronously. Some stakeholders felt that webinars were useful for providing information, but not necessarily for interaction to define problems and solutions. For these stakeholders, webinars could serve informational or educational purposes, but were limited in the ability to get beyond one-way conversations. Other interviewees noted examples of webinars that were very interactive and allowed for discussion of issues. Interviewees recommended that webinars be well-structured, solicit specific feedback, and have a window of response time to allow for comment. They also requested that any materials presented be sent to participants after the webinar. They suggested engaging neutral facilitators for discussion and collaboration around substantive and contentious issues (but not necessary for basic informational webinars).

Send Emails with Targeted Information, Along with Links to Websites: Interviewees were in agreement that the Forest Service should have an email list to send them information related to regional level work that can be forwarded to others. Emails should detail information such as where the Forest Service is in the planning process, what issues it is addressing, timelines, deadlines, how people can get involved, instructions for how to submit comments, and specific information about what input the Forest Service is seeking. The email should have a link to an easily navigable website with more information about deadlines, timelines, pertinent documents, and explanations of key issues for which the Forest Service wants input. Stakeholders also said they would like to receive an alert about updated information rather than having to seek it out themselves on a website.

“I’d like a high level of communication about regional and individual forests, and expectations of different timelines and when different phases start. We should have a heads up so we can make strategic choices about priorities and how members can engage. I’m on the Rio Grande mailing list but I’m not on the GMUG list. An email updating us in terms of timelines for the different planning processes across the region, as well as higher level Forest Service planning opportunities would be helpful.”

Create an Easily Navigable and Straightforward Website that Serves as a “One-Stop-Shop” for Information: All interviewees agreed that a website (to which stakeholders would be directed via email) should be simple, straightforward, and easily navigable. Interviewees emphasized that it should be easy for non-technical individuals to use. Websites should detail how participants can be engaged, who they can contact, where the Forest Service is in the process, what is coming up, and what to expect moving forward. The website should include robust search mechanisms and allow people to sign up for regular alerts. Hyperlinks should direct users to relevant information about particular topics within reports posted online. One suggestion regarding website structure was to have a national website with links to regions or individual forests for further information.

Use Blogs to Support Other Methods of Engagement, But Make Sure They Are Carefully Designed to Solicit Specific Input and Be Clear About How Information Will Be Used: Interviewees had mixed responses on

the utility of blogs, and specifically the mindmixer site. Some thought it could be good for issue-based collaboration and for facilitating conversation. Others thought it was not an effective vehicle for targeted discussions on topics, but rather collecting input in a one-way manner. Some thought the questions were too broad and difficult to navigate. Others said it was not clear how it

tied back to the process or what the Forest Service would do with it. Some thought it could be useful if it were designed well and if people were alerted to it, and that they would be willing to hold workshops to help their members understand how to engage with it.

“It seemed very canned to me. There were some questions about getting your ideas on management of the forest but they didn’t tie back to the process or what the Forest Service would do with it. There didn’t seem to be a purpose to it.”



SECTION 2: STAKEHOLDER RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER REGION 2 PLANNING PROCESSES

In addition to being engaged long-term in the Rio Grande National Forest, many interviewees expressed an interest in being involved in other Region 2 Planning processes and/or in discussions about management issues that spanned multiple forests, such as migratory wildlife management or the management of special use areas. They made the following specific recommendations for engagement in other Region 2 planning processes. The U.S. Institute is not necessarily endorsing the recommendations in this section, but rather presenting input from participants.

Tailor Public Engagement to the Forest: Interviewees' recommendations for engagement in other planning processes across Region 2 were generally not very different from those for the Rio Grande

“The size of the forest will inform how the process works. The issues are different and the geography is different for the GMUG.”

National Forest. They proposed using many of the same principles. Nevertheless, several interviewees pointed to the need to tailor engagement to the unique physical character and issues of the individual forest. This might require alternative engagement mechanisms because different forests have different characteristics, issues, and interested parties.

For example, since the GMUG National Forest is much larger than the Rio Grande National Forest and stakeholders are more dispersed, having regularly scheduled in-person meetings may not be feasible. A webinar approach was preferred by many of the interviewees due to the size and travel requirements for forest planning meetings on the GMUG. Also, the issues addressed might be different enough to require different degrees of discussion of issues. For example, one interviewee noted that because of the extensive beetle kill on the Rio Grande National Forest, restoration will be a dominant issue, where there are a wider range of issues on the GMUG.

Interviewees also commented that different forests could have different distributions of stakeholders. For example, the Rio Grande National Forest generally has more of a local and rural base of interested parties, while the GMUG National Forest is expected to garner more national involvement since it has a more diverse range of stakeholders. As a result, place-based meetings on the Rio Grande could be a valuable way to involve a greater number of interested parties.

Engage Regional and National Stakeholders in Discussions of Large-Scale Issues: Some interviewees recommended the Forest Service engage regional and national stakeholders in discussions concerning large-scale issues that transcend individual forests, such as migratory wildlife management, travel management, or watershed

“Anything that’s going to be part of a forest plan or initiative beyond the specific forest should have a regional and national conversation. If there are programmatic changes or strategies that the Forest Service wants to do in multiple forests, regional and national chapters should be able to weigh in.”

management, as well as climate change impacts. Because the 2012 Planning Rule requires forests to address the broader context within which individual forest plans are situated, many interviewees



recommended the Forest Service engage them in thinking through strategies to address those issues that span multiple forests. They also recommended the Forest Service convey how aspects of programmatic plans are implemented in different forests, and how different management plans in different forests relate to each other in addressing larger-scale processes.

Engage Regional and National Stakeholders in Discussions Regarding the Structure of the New Planning Process: Some interviewees remarked that they wanted to be involved in discussions concerning the overall structure of the planning process. They noted the new adaptive management framework, and were hopeful the Forest Service would remain open to input on the process. Many interviewees also recommended the Forest Service incorporate feedback from each planning effort to improve the process. They suggested sharing best practices and lessons learned from other forest planning processes by the early adopters to inform revisions.

One suggestion was to conduct surveys or host a webinar or meeting to discuss what worked and why it worked on the Rio Grande. This information could be hosted by the Forest Service on a national website with links to Regions and individual forests' web pages.

“We’d like to be engaged in the same way across Region 2. We want to work at regional level because it will shape how all the forests are managed, although we might not participate in each individual forest plan revision. We’ll have more direct involvement in the Rio Grande because it’s one of the first early adopters and it will set the tone for the other forests in Region 2.”

Address Special Use Management Planning that Spans Multiple Forests: A few interviewees provided recommendations on how to address special use management areas that span multiple forests, such as the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail. The general recommendation was that the Forest Service needed to ensure these special use areas were adequately addressed in the planning process. However, one interviewee recommended for those management areas that span multiple forests and involve contentious issues, it would be best to develop a separate, but parallel, unit plan that could be adopted into the respective forest plans. This would avoid delays in the overall forest planning process.



SECTION 3: U.S. INSTITUTE RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section outlines the U.S. Institute’s recommendations for developing a regional and national stakeholder engagement strategy. They build on interviewees’ recommendations, particularly those specific to the planning process. However, they are also grounded in principles and best practices for collaborative engagement in natural resource management and often mirror recommendations from the University of Montana Lessons Learned Report.

Many of these recommendations apply to an overall collaborative engagement strategy. Most interviewees noted that their role as regional and national stakeholders involved not only participating in processes themselves, but also encouraging participation by their members. Therefore, their recommendations were generally inclusive of local, regional, and national stakeholders and apply to the overall engagement process rather than being specific to regional and national stakeholders.

As a foundation, the first set of 12 recommendations are meant to be used as overarching guiding principles that should be considered in the design of the overall collaborative process, in individual stakeholder engagement, and in the presentation of substantive and process-related topics. The next set of 10 recommendations are intended to inform the design of the overall collaborative engagement process for the Rio Grande National Forest and other Region 2 forests. The third set of 10 recommendations are intended to inform the design of collaborative engagement in the specific planning phases, and the final set of 3 recommendation are intended to inform the design of long-term engagement.

GENERAL GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The following guiding principles for collaborative stakeholder engagement emerged from the interviews as the regional and national stakeholders identified multiple factors they considered critical to the integrity and success of this collaborative process. At the same time, these guiding principles are also identified as key factors that influence the success of collaborative engagement in published literature on collaboration and public participation (see Appendix 4). Much like the Principles of Public Participation in the 2012 Planning Handbook, these recommendations are meant to be used as a guide in developing public participation processes.

Trust is cited in literature on collaboration and public engagement as a cornerstone of effective engagement. In a public engagement process, such as the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) process in forest planning, key components of building trust are ensuring participants have a shared understanding of the purpose and objectives for collaboration; they view the engagement process as legitimate and believe the agency is acting in good faith in inviting their participation; they believe the agency is making a serious effort to broadly engage all interested parties; and participants believe their involvement is meaningful, that they are being engaged on substantive issues, and their input will be used in decision making.

Shared understanding of the purpose and objectives for collaboration:

1. **Clear Goals and Expectations for Collaboration:** Clarify goals and expectations for collaboration, including the broader collaborative effort as well as individual engagement. Clarify the Forest Service’s



legal authorities and mandates for decision making, the scientific framework being used, participants' roles in the collaborative process, how the Forest Service will engage the public, and how it will use public input.

Legitimate Process:

2. Clear, Collaborative Process: Provide stakeholders with a clear overview of the collaboration process with details on when and how they can be engaged.
3. Adaptable and Flexible Process:
Tailor the outreach and engagement to each phase and stakeholder group, and keep the process adaptable and flexible based on public feedback and opportunities that arise in the planning process.

“The Forest Service should ask if the process it is using is working for the public and be open to adapting based upon the feedback it gets.”

4. Leadership Support and Commitment: Ensure leadership commits adequate time and resources to accomplish the goals and objectives set for collaboration. Also ensure leadership commits to using stakeholder input in decision processes.
5. Targeted Public Engagement: Be targeted and effective with engagement to balance the realities of resource and time constraints with meaningful engagement around substantive issues. That includes being realistic about Forest Service time and resources as well as those of the public. Do not overpromise and under deliver.

“Collaboration is very time intensive and as a small group, it’s difficult for us to make that commitment.”

6. Timely Process: Complete the process in a timely manner. Balance the need for and commitment to meaningful engagement with the need to complete the process within a reasonable timeline, so leadership turnover and participant burnout do not undermine the process.

All Interested Parties Engaged:

7. Inclusive: Ensure all voices are heard by actively soliciting engagement from all stakeholders and providing multiple mechanisms through which stakeholders can be involved. Emphasize the importance of wide representation, clarify each stakeholder’s role and interest, and highlight the importance of both local and national voices.
8. Neutral and Objective: Remain neutral and objective by not taking sides or showing preferences and by using a neutral facilitator for highly contentious issues.

“I expect the Forest Service not to be biased toward one interest group over another. That makes it difficult to have conversations.”



9. Fair and Balanced Engagement: Remain fair and balanced by ensuring equal representation on work groups or in face-to-face meetings, to the extent possible, and giving equal weight to all input.

Meaningful Engagement:

10. Substantive Public Engagement: Ensure that stakeholders are engaged in two-way discussions around substantive issues they view as relevant to their interests and the planning process rather than primarily focused on process issues or desired conditions. Ensure engagement increases shared learning and understanding of critical issues and the potential impacts of decisions to improve the agency's ability to address key issues and the public's capacity to provide informed input.

11. Transparent Decision Processes: Ensure decision-making processes are clear to the public by providing

“The Forest Service needs to make its requirements and its understanding of the science clear, so everyone understands what the decisions are based on.”

information about how scientific data and stakeholder input is being used in decision-making. Provide overviews or post data sources for science as well as summaries of comments or discussion points and illustrate how that information was used to inform decisions.

12. Collaborative Capacity and Lasting Relationships: Focus collaboration during the planning phase on building better relationships between stakeholders and improving capacity for collaborative learning to last throughout the life of the plan.

OVERALL COLLABORATIVE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

This next set of recommendations are intended to inform the design of the overall Rio Grande National Forest and other USFS Region 2 collaborative engagement processes. They reflect what the authors heard from regional and national interviewees, who placed high importance on providing the public with information on the planning process, informing the public on how and when they could be engaged, and on ensuring the integrity and legitimacy of the process. They expand on the directives in the 2012 Planning Rule Handbook and the University of Montana Lessons Learned Report.

13. U.S. Institute Regional and National Stakeholder Assessment Report: The Forest Service should distribute the U.S. Institute Regional and National Stakeholder Assessment Report to the interviewees and solicit their feedback on the recommendations.

14. Broad Collaborative Engagement Strategy: The Forest Service should develop a broad strategy for collaborative stakeholder engagement on the Rio Grande National Forest. This broad strategy should clarify how the Forest Service defines collaboration, and identify specific goals and objectives for the collaborative process. The strategy should also clarify the Forest Service's legal authorities and mandates for decision making, the scientific framework being used, participants' roles in the collaborative process, how the Forest Service will engage the public, and how it will use public input.



15. Roadmap of the Collaborative Engagement Process: Based on the goals and objectives identified in the broad strategy, the Forest Service should develop an easily understandable “roadmap” of the planning process. The design of this roadmap should take into consideration the findings and recommendations in this assessment report and the interviewees’ feedback, as well as the U.S. Institute’s internal Rio Grande National Forest engagement assessment, the NFF external Rio Grande National Forest local stakeholder engagement assessment, and the University of Montana Lessons Learned Report.
- a. Overview of strategy: This roadmap should include how the Forest Service defines collaboration or public participation in the context of this planning process, the Forest Service’s goals and objectives for collaboration, and how and when it anticipates engaging stakeholders.
 - b. Timeline: The roadmap should also include a timeline with key points in the process at which the Forest Service will engage stakeholders. For example, it should include dates for key meetings or webinars and for public comment periods.
 - c. Distribution: The roadmap should be made readily available throughout the planning process through notices, emails, web postings, mailings, and/or distribution of hard copies.
 - d. Feedback: The distribution process should also provide multiple mechanisms to solicit feedback from the public about what is working well or needs improvement in the process. For example, the Forest Service could use these feedback mechanisms to determine how well a meeting or webinar met its objectives. The Forest Service could also use these mechanisms to solicit ideas for critical topics for discussion or the preferred method of engagement such as meetings or webinars.
 - e. Updated and flexible: The roadmap should be flexible and responsive to public feedback and lessons learned. It should be kept updated with current status and updates about upcoming opportunities for engagement, such as meetings or comment periods.
 - f. Summary of progress: The roadmap should also allow the public to track the process. For example, key meeting or webinar summaries should be posted and widely distributed, or key planning milestones such as draft plan alternatives could be made easily available.
16. Lessons Learned: The Forest Service should continue to compile the lessons learned in collaborative engagement from other early adopter forests, or as the Rio Grande National Forest completes its process. This compilation of lessons learned could be a formal document, such as the University of Montana Lessons Learned Report, or a general summary of feedback from the public and the agency. It should address what worked well and why, both in the overall process and in the different phases of the planning process. Insights from the lessons learned should be used to inform the design of other Region 2 collaborative engagement strategies.



17. Guidebook to the Planning Process: The Forest Service should develop an easily understandable overview or basic “guidebook” that spells out in “lay terms” the different phases of the planning process, how they fit together, and how the planning process sets the foundation for adaptive management.

“The Forest Service should put things in lay terms so people can understand the process, what is at stake in the process, and how the planning process relates to them.”

- a. Overview of planning process: This basic guidebook should explain what the Forest Service means by adaptive management and how this planning process lays the foundation for managing adaptively throughout the implementation period.
- b. Distribution: The guidebooks should be made readily available through notices, emails, web postings, mailings, and/or distribution of hard copies.
- c. Feedback: The Forest Service should provide multiple mechanisms to solicit feedback from the public about its understanding of the planning process or any of the data made available throughout the planning process.

18. Structure of Engagement: The Forest Service should clearly frame all engagements so the public understands why they are being engaged, what they are being asked to do, and how the Forest Service will use their input. For example, in public meetings, the Forest Service should clarify up front its goals and objectives for the meeting and desired outcomes, any legal authorities and mandates for decision making that are relevant or the scientific framework being used. It should also clarify how it wants participants to be involved, what kind of feedback it is seeking, and how it will use the input received. Summaries of key themes or output should be made available to all.

19. Substantive Engagement: The Forest Service should provide opportunities throughout the planning process for discussion of key issues or science and management questions that are designed in a way that facilitates two-way communication, collaborative learning, and shared problem solving. Topics of discussion could emerge from the planning process. For example, the Forest Service could identify critical science or management questions under consideration in planning. Topics of discussion can also be identified through feedback from stakeholders about topics they consider critical and meaningful to them. (The U.S. Institute has included the list of interviewees’ topics of interest in Appendix 2. Because the sample size and representation of interviewees was limited in this assessment, the authors recommend a broader survey of internal and external stakeholders, tribes, cooperating agencies, and the science community to determine topics of discussion.)

20. Multiple Methods to Engage: The Forest Service should engage the public through multiple venues and forums to allow for differences in time, resources, and levels of interest among the different stakeholders. To maintain continuity throughout the process, the Forest Service should periodically develop and widely distribute short summaries that synthesize key themes heard from these different venues and clarify how it will use the information to inform decisions.



21. Balancing representation across interests and geographies: To the extent possible, the Forest Service should balance representation among the different interest groups, as well as between regional and national groups and local stakeholders. It should actively seek participation from all groups, particularly groups who are traditionally underrepresented, and give serious consideration to a range of perspectives.
22. Regional-level issues and their relationship to forest-level issues. In addition to discussions of forest-level goals and issues, the Forest Service should provide the public opportunities to discuss issues that have a regional focus, such as migratory wildlife management and watershed management, and how this larger context is being integrated into forest planning.

DESIGN OF COLLABORATIVE ENGAGEMENT FOR SPECIFIC PLANNING PHASES

This following set of recommendations are intended to inform the design of collaborative engagement in the specific phases of the Rio Grande National Forest and other USFS Region 2 collaborative engagement processes. Again, these recommendations reflect general themes the authors heard from regional and national interviewees and are grounded in the guiding principles. For quick reference, hyperlinks to the interviewee recommendations for each planning phase are embedded in the headings.

ASSESSMENT

23. Developing the assessment: Given the importance of the assessment to the overall planning effort, the Forest Service should ensure the public has a clear understanding of what the assessment phase entails and provide opportunities for the public to be engaged in developing the assessment.
24. Soliciting Assessment Information: The Forest Service should be clear about the type of information it is soliciting, specifically clarifying what information it considers important in the assessment. It should also specify how the information will be used in determining the need for change, in developing the forest plan and EIS, and in developing the monitoring plan.
25. Making the assessment data available: The Forest Service should be transparent about what information it is using in the assessment phase to make decisions. It should post all the data it is using in the assessment and keep the assessment data updated as new information becomes available.

PLAN/EIS

26. Drafting the plan and EIS: The Forest Service should ensure the public understands what the plan and EIS phases entail and continue to engage the public and keep them updated on progress throughout the development to the plan and EIS.
27. Making the plan and EIS accessible: The Forest Service should make the plan and EIS easily accessible to the general public. It should write the plan and EIS in lay terms, include sufficient information to allow the public to evaluate alternatives or assess impacts, keep the documents as streamlined as



possible, and provide navigational tools such as indexes and cross-references in hard copy and on-line versions.

28. Making the plan and EIS available: The Forest Service should make the plan and EIS readily available, using multiple mechanisms to distribute the plan and EIS and solicit feedback.

MONITORING

29. Developing the Monitoring Plan: Given the importance of the monitoring plan to long term implementation of the forest plan, the Forest Service should ensure the public is clear about the linkages between the monitoring plan and the adaptive management framework in the forest plan and provide opportunities for the public to be engaged in developing the monitoring plan.
30. Making the monitoring plan accessible: The Forest Service should make the monitoring plan easily accessible to the general public. It should write the plan in lay terms, include sufficient information to allow the public to evaluate what is being monitored and how it relates to plan goals, keep the document as streamlined as possible, and provide navigational tools such as indexes and cross-references in hard copy and on-line versions.
31. Making the monitoring plan available: The Forest Service should make the monitoring plan readily available, using multiple mechanisms to distribute the plan and solicit feedback.
32. Make the monitoring data available: The Forest Service should be transparent about what information it is using to make decisions in developing the monitoring plan. It should post any updates to the assessment as new information becomes available.

LONG TERM

This following set of recommendations are intended to be used to inform the design of collaborative engagement long-term on the Rio Grande National Forest and other USFS Region 2 collaborative engagement processes. Here again, these recommendations reflect general themes the authors heard from regional and national interviewees and are also grounded in the guiding principles.

33. Assessing the monitoring: Because of the adaptive management framework, monitoring is a critical part of implementation. Over the long-term implementation of the plan, the Forest Service should continue to provide multiple opportunities for the public to evaluate and respond to monitoring.
34. Credible and unbiased monitoring data: The Forest Service should take measures to ensure monitoring data collection, analysis, and reporting are considered credible and unbiased.
35. Keep monitoring data available: The Forest Service should be transparent about what information it is using to make decisions in the monitoring phase. It should post any new data sources and updates on monitoring reports.



APPENDICES



APPENDIX 1: SPECTRUM OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Spectrum of Public Participation and Related Tools for Public Engagement

Level	Examples of Agency Activities and Tools
Collaborate	Directly engage the public to exchange information with each other and work together on one or more issues during the planning process. Identify where there is agreement and disagreement. Potential tools: Facilitated or mediated discussion among public participants, Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) groups, and partnerships.
Involve	Work closely with interested members of the public to clarify concerns and seek feedback on how to meet challenges presented by the planning process. Potential tools: workshops, partnerships, and public meetings.
Consult	Provide information to the public and seek suggestions as well as feedback on potential issues and concerns. Potential tools: open house, public meeting, notice and comment, news release, and website.
Inform	Provide sufficient objective information to the public to convey an understanding of intended actions, processes, and preliminary issues. Potential tools: fact sheet, newsletter, mailing, news release, and website.

Source: Based on “spectrum of public engagement” in the Council for Environmental Quality’s “Collaboration in NEPA: A Handbook for NEPA Practitioners” (see http://ceq.hss.doe.gov/nepa/nepapubs/Collaboration_in_NEPA_Oct2007.pdf)



APPENDIX 2: SUBSTANTIVE FOREST PLANNING ISSUES OF INTEREST

Interviewees highlighted the following issues as important to their interests. The authors thought it was important to include the list of issues that were mentioned to indicate the range of substantive topics people were interested in. However, since this report's purpose is to make recommendations for process design, and because the sample size is small and not equally representative, this report does not claim that the following issues should take precedence over others.

- Restoration and/or reforestation strategy
- Timber inventory and management
- Fish and wildlife management
- Species viability
- Trails
- Recreation
- Habitat management including riparian habitats
- Resource extraction (i.e. timber, mining, oil and gas).
- Recommended wilderness
- Wilderness management
- Wild and Scenic River
- CO Roadless Rule areas
- Continental Divide Scenic Trail as a special area.
- Implementation of the comprehensive plan
- Livestock management
- Water development and management
- Landscape scale watershed management
- Roads and logging
- Travel management
- Landscape-level scoping
- Endangered species
- Fire management
- Ecological Assessments
- Development of right of ways



APPENDIX 3: PARTICIPANTS

The U.S. Institute would like to thank the following individuals for their time and valuable insights on collaboration in forest planning. We hope this report accurately reflects those insights. Many others were recommended. We apologize to those who were not interviewed.

Jason Bertolacci, International Mountain Biking Association

Scott Braden, Conservation Colorado

Bonnie Brown, Colorado Wool Growers Association

Katherine Davis, Center for Biological Diversity

Scott Jones, Colorado Off Highway Vehicle Coalition

Paige Lewis, The Nature Conservancy

Julie Mach, Colorado Mountain Club

Teresa Martinez, Continental Divide Trail Coalition

Lauren McCain, Defenders of Wildlife

Ali Melton, High County Conservation Advocates

Pete Nelson, Defenders of Wildlife

Nick Payne, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

Rocky Smith, Independent

Vera Smith, Wilderness Society

Kevin Terry, Trout Unlimited

Tom Troxel, Intermountain Forest Association



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Additional Resources:

Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), *Collaboration in NEPA: A Handbook for NEPA Practitioners*
http://energy.gov/sites/prod/files/CEQ_Collaboration_in_NEPA_10-2007.pdf

US Environmental Protection Agency, *Public Participation Guide*
<http://www2.epa.gov/international-cooperation/public-participation-guide>

US Forest Service, Partnership Resource Center
<http://www.fs.usda.gov/prc>

University of Montana, Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy. *Public Participation: Lessons Learned Implementing the 2012 US Forest Service Planning Rule*.
<http://forestpolicypub.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Lesson-Learned-in-Public-Participation-and-Forest-Planning-under-the-2012-Planning-Rule-Final-Report-2.19.15.pdf>

