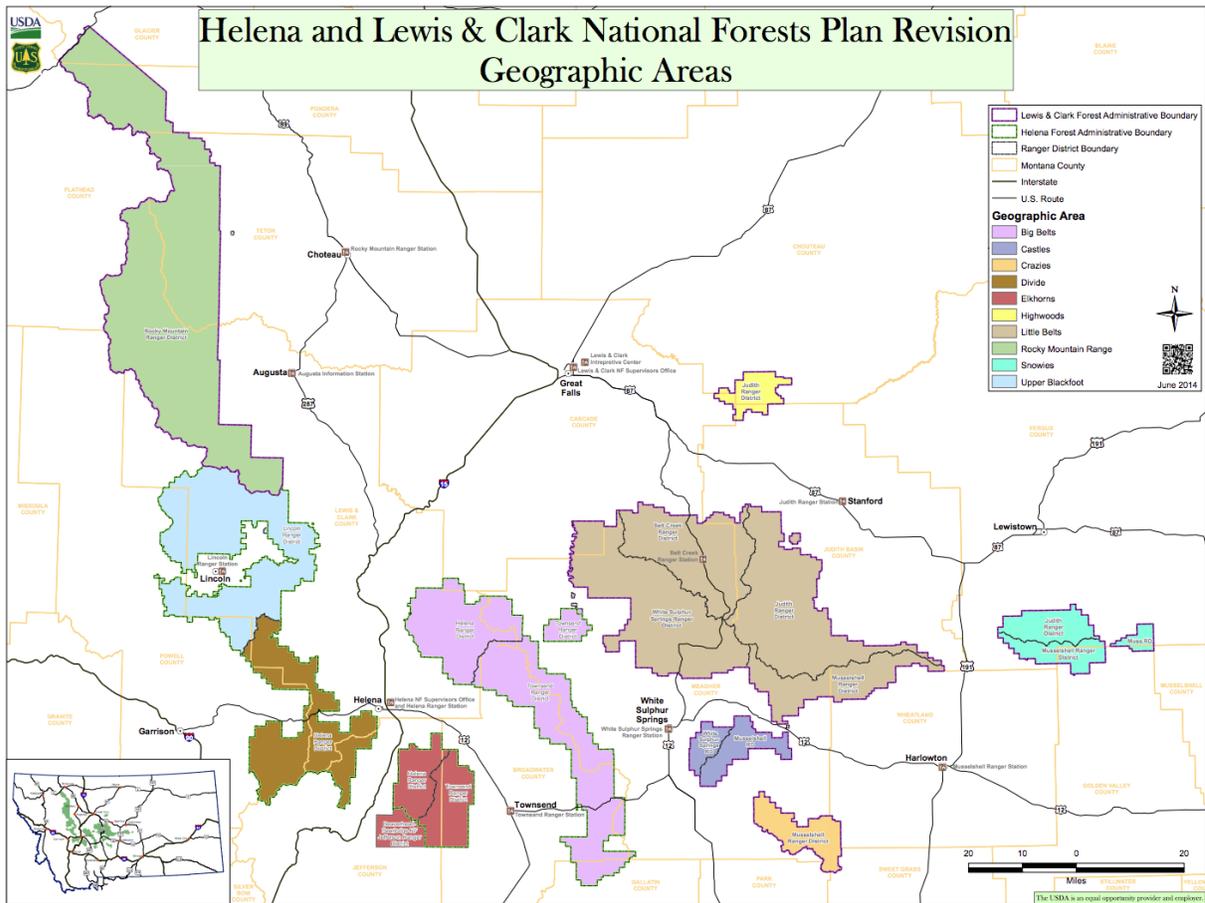


Stakeholder Listening Sessions Summary

Developing a Public Participation Plan for Forest Planning on the Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forests



Prepared by:
Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy
The University of Montana

February 13, 2015

About this Report

Beginning in the summer of 2014, the Helena and Lewis & Clark (H-LC) National Forests in Montana started the process to revise and update its forest plan consistent with the 2012 planning rule. As part of this effort, the H-LC engaged the Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy (CNREP) at The University of Montana to help design and facilitate a fair, effective, and efficient public participation process.

To inform the design and facilitation of this public participation process, H-LC and CNREP agreed on the following steps: (1) harvest lessons learned from the 13 national forests that are in the process of revising and updating their forest plans consistent with the 2012 planning rule; (2) conduct “listening sessions” with key stakeholders in the H-LC region to seek input on issues of concern and advice on the public participation process; and (3) prepare a public participation plan based on these two bodies of information, along with best practices for public participation based on over 50 years of experience by CNREP staff.

This report represents the second deliverable – a summary of the input and advice obtained in 40 listening sessions with key stakeholders¹ to seek input on issues of concern and advice on the public participation process.

The listening sessions were conducted from November 2014 to January 2015 and offered an informal opportunity for stakeholders to share their thoughts on the issues of greatest concern on the H-LC and to provide input on the development of a public participation plan. The 40 viewpoints represented a wide cross section of individuals and organizations in the region surrounding H-LC, including eight county governments². Notably, the listening sessions did not include conversations with tribal governments, youth, or minority groups, all of which were specifically identified in the 2012 planning rule as important voices to include in forest plan revision.

Four questions were presented in the introductory letter and explored during the course of each listening session:

1. *Clarify your interests and concerns with respect to the Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forests’ forest plans;*
2. *Identify the 2-3 most important topics that the public participation process should focus on (e.g., forest health, recreational access, grazing, wildfire, wilderness, etc.);*
3. *Explain how you want to be involved in the forest plan revision process; and*
4. *Describe what a successful public participation process looks like to you.*

¹ A list of listening session participants is provided at the end of this report.

² Listening sessions were held with Broadwater, Cascade, Jefferson, Judith Basin, Lewis and Clark, Meagher, Powell and Wheatland Counties.

The synthesis that follows summarizes what we heard during the listening sessions. It is organized in two broad, general categories: (1) interests and concerns, and (2) guidance for public participation.

A copy of the introductory letter and a list of listening session participants are provided as appendices to the report. Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of the authors.

1. Interests and Concerns

The listening sessions yielded a wide range of interests and concerns about the Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forests (H-LC).

At a basic level, people recognize and appreciate the many natural resources and recreational opportunities provided by the H-LC and want to sustain and enhance these resources and opportunities. Moreover, there is a shared concern about the overall health of the forest, especially in the face of threats like climate change, fire, weeds, insects, disease, and the impacts of resource development and recreation.

There are divergent views on how to realize this overarching interest in providing multiple uses for multiple users and to maintain overall forest health -- including divergent views on and preferences for: (1) the relative scope and intensity of specific uses, (2) prioritization among the multiple uses, (3) approaches to management and enforcement, (4) the role of the courts, and (5) the role of various groups, including user groups, collaborative partnerships focused on forest health and management, local governments, tribal governments, and the public at large.

A. Resource Interests and Concerns

Specific resource-focused interests and concerns on the H-LC included the following, each of which are briefly described below. The purpose of this summary is not to provide an exact description of the nature or condition of each resource or issue, but rather to provide a sense of what we heard will be important issues for further discussion during the plan revision process:

- Fire mitigation
- Beetle kill timber
- Timber harvest
- Wilderness
- Wildland-urban interface
- Roads and recreational access
- Wildlife
- Weed control

- Watershed and ecosystem health
- Grazing/Grasslands
- Historical and cultural resources
- Large landscape stewardship
- Forest management and local economies.

Listening session participants' feedback regarding each of the above issues is summarized briefly below.

Fire Mitigation. Numerous concerns were expressed about a growing need for fuels reduction and other forms of fire mitigation, particularly in areas heavy with beetle kill timber and in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI). Some county government officials expressed frustration that available funding is spent on fighting fires instead of on harvesting beetle kill timber which could help to alleviate fire danger.

Beetle kill timber. The problems presented by beetle kill timber in the H-LC were raised in a significant number of listening sessions. A common concern is that many of the dead or dying lodgepole pine appear to be salvageable and that leaving them standing presents an unmitigated fire risk. Others voiced concerns that falling trees can damage property and cut off access to roads and trails.

Timber harvest. Some participants took issue with how long it takes to make decisions on proposed timber harvests. Among the specific items identified by these interests are: growth and potential volumes; quantitative data regarding suitable and tentative acreages; biological harvest; mortality; and sustained yield. For these timber interests, such information should be consolidated within one section of the new forest plan. Others focused on the impacts of timber harvests, including impacts to water quality and habitats.

Wilderness. There are "specific landscapes of interest" in the H-LC which have wilderness value for several listening session participants. Creation of special management designations in some areas should be considered. Furthermore, for these interests integrated forest restoration and integrated terrestrial and aquatic management should be emphasized. One interest, in particular, will submit an analysis identifying the most unique and rare areas that could be identified as underrepresented ecosystems. An opportunity to partner and "share the latest science" is desired.

Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI). In addition to the fire mitigation issues noted above, several county governments noted that they would like to see homeowners take greater responsibility for protecting their homes and managing the WUI.

Roads and recreational access. Roads, airstrips, and recreational access for diverse uses are topics of shared concern. However, specific perspectives on these items differ considerably. Some participants felt that more site-specific evaluation

needs to be done in some areas to identify if something is actually a road or just jeep tracks. They want roads that need to be taken out removed. Other interests voiced concerns about the number of roads that are being decommissioned and the money that is being spent to block roads rather than to maintain them. There are shared concerns among representatives from county government and some recreational users about lost access and road closures, which prevent popular motorized uses in some localities.

Wildlife. A number of interests would like to see guidelines and inventories for wildlife. Additionally, these interests would like to see management indicator species chosen effectively and strong language regarding wildlife management. Specific species of concern that were mentioned were: mountain goats, goshawks, martens, wolverine, lynx, grizzly, and several fish species -- particularly westslope cutthroat trout. Others expressed interest in and concern for wildlife corridors, connectivity, and a “central linkage area” for the Crown of the Continent. Furthermore, there was a shared interest in coordination with wildlife management agencies such as Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. Finally, there is interest in devising an effective management plan for sage grouse in part to avoid more stringent federal protections.

Weed Control. Weed control was a widely shared concern. Some interests would like to see a comprehensive weed control plan with teeth in it that looks at prevention, not just treatment. Many recognized there are budget limitations but acknowledged the importance of a weed management plan within the forest plan. Suggestions for mitigation of weeds included completing an analysis when new infrastructure is developed and examining the impact that livestock have on the spread of noxious weeds. A suggestion made was to add noxious weeds as a component to other budget items (roads, trails, fuels, wildlife).

Watershed and Ecosystem Health. A number of listening session participants discussed the importance of keeping “big picture” connections in mind as forest planning proceeds. They see many more specific issues of concern linked within broad categories like watershed and ecosystem health. More specifically, some interests suggested that watershed-based analysis be done on a predictable schedule (as with the BLM model). From this perspective, a model that defines watersheds and tries to get all projects on the same schedule is desired so cumulative impacts can be assessed at the same time. This approach would provide better analysis of what’s going on within the landscape, and allow diverse interests to work and learn from one another. Another suggestion was that better planning and scheduling is needed to help with future-oriented planning and public participation (e.g. each watershed will be analyzed every 10 years, based on grazing permit schedule). Additionally, some interests would like to see in-fish standards for sensitive fish species (bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout). Forest plans should ensure watershed health in perpetuity.

Grazing / Grasslands: Agricultural interests and county government officials shared an interest in the maintenance of existing grazing allotments. These interests acknowledged there are challenges with beetle kill, conifer encroachment, and places where open grazing areas have been covered with new growth. Allotments should take into account new guidelines for grazing and riparian areas that reflect new ideas and approaches. More cooperative weed control monitoring that demonstrates that individuals are doing a good job with livestock is needed. There is also interest in and concern that the Forest Service is retiring vacant allotments and waived permits. Several people also expressed a specific interest in restoration of grasslands in the H-LC and protection of riparian areas through improvements to fencing and other management techniques.

Historical and cultural resources. A smaller number of participants noted the opportunity to expand efforts focused on the management of historical and cultural resources in the H-LC, including interpretation and stewardship efforts.

Large landscape stewardship. Listening session participants recognize that the forest is multifaceted. A significant number of participants stated that the Forest Service should focus on the “big picture” and manage for overall ecosystem sustainability to create a healthy forest while working with local stakeholders. This perspective adheres to the belief that everything is interconnected and that all facets of forest management should be integrated.

Forest management and local economies. County government officials expressed shared concerns regarding the negative effects, historically, of forest management (i.e. declining timber harvest) on local economies and the loss of federal programs to mitigate these effects. In particular, Congress’s failure to reauthorize continued funding for “Secure Rural Schools” and the need for continued Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PLT) are causes of concern since counties have come to rely on these monies.

B. Management, Administration, and Coordination Issues and Concerns

A variety of management and administration issues and concerns also surfaced during the listening sessions. Some of these were closely related to the above resource issues, such as the capacity of the Forest Service, both in work force and in budget, to successfully address all of the issues of concern. Specific concerns were raised about staff turnover and the administrative challenges related to combining the two forests. Others were concerns that specific requirements and processes set forth in the 2012 planning rule be adhered to rigorously. Specifically, these included requirements for wild and scenic rivers inventory; wilderness inventory, evaluation and recommendations; and demonstration of conservation of wildlife (e.g. species of concern).

Many of the individuals and groups interviewed would like to see the Forest Service coordinate more with local counties, state agencies, the Governor's office, existing and future collaborative groups, and others that live within the H-LC and that have valuable local knowledge to share. For example, the Sun River Watershed group was interested in but unable to engage the Forest Service as a member of their Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), in contrast to other federal agencies who did become TAC members.

Many are frustrated with the bureaucratic regulations and procedures (i.e. "red tape") that accompany many forest management activities and expressed a desire for more flexibility in management prescriptions and protocols, especially in instances where timely action or outside-the-box thinking is needed to adequately address a specific resource need or threat.

Many believe litigation should be used when necessary but would like to see incentives for lawsuits removed. In contrast, county government officials, in particular, expressed concern that the Forest Service is continually tied up in litigation, causing a loss of both money and the capacity to get things done in the forests.

Several individuals/groups would also like to see strong enforcement and accountability measures built into the Forest Plan as well as clear standards to guide future decisions of the Forest Service. They believe these components would alleviate the amount of litigation that occurs. These standards should be science-based with quantitative data that allows for long-term analysis of trends.

A few people suggested there were opportunities to consolidate or swap land holdings under certain conditions, such as where checkerboard land ownership exists.

In addition to these concerns, several people noted positive attributes of the H-LC management style, including the open and direct style of the current forest supervisor and the technical expertise provided to several working groups by forest service staff.

C. Additional Items of Importance

Some items of interest defy simple categorization and cannot be clustered with like items. Some of these that merit attention in their own right are listed below.

- One stakeholder group's top priority is "ensuring that the H-LC wilderness inventory, evaluation, and recommendation is a national model." Second, this interest wants to make sure that the ID team looks at the climate adaptation language in the new planning rule and at what other forests are doing.
- Another stakeholder was concerned that the inventory process for wild and scenic eligible rivers be accomplished, as required. For this stakeholder group, the most important topics for planning are protective designations, like wild and

scenic rivers and broader concepts of a recreation-based economy, ecosystem services, and climate adaptation.

- One stakeholder felt it important that issues be integrated, across themes and topic areas, to avoid compartmentalization. From this perspective, all issues need to be given the same weight, as opposed to the example cited that “wildlife is often an afterthought rather than an equal.”
- One interest sees the new forest plan as the primary tool to protect species of concern. He hopes for a new forest plan that includes a conservation strategy for grizzly recovery and a climate-smart plan for wolverines.
- The primary concerns for forest planning expressed by two timber interests described were: providing predictable raw materials to Montana manufacturing facilities and making sure that landscape and future conditions are not based on budget but on growing stock and species mortality.
- One stakeholder who has a recreational special use permit would like the Forest Service to be a better partner, improve communications, and allow him to harvest dead and dying timber.

2. Public Participation Process

A. Key Themes

Listening session participants weighed in expansively on how they wanted to be involved in the public participation process and what a successful public participation process looked like to them. The most common theme was that listening session participants want to be involved in ways that are “meaningful” to them. Many noted that the most important thing was to establish working relationships built on trust and respect.

Nearly all participants said they seek open, inclusive conversations and a process that is transparent throughout. Clear communications are a necessity, and information about how to be involved, what participation means and what timeline/roadmap will be used to achieve desired outcomes should be readily available. Once a given public participation activity, such as a public meeting, is concluded, listening session participants want easy access to the resulting record of the event. Stakeholders want to see evidence that their voice was heard. Each of these themes and principles is expanded upon below.

Public participation that is “meaningful” provides genuine participation opportunities that are appropriate to the participants’ abilities, capacities, time, expertise, and decision-making level. And all interests recognized that not every format, venue, or time will work for every person or group. Therefore, to achieve meaningful involvement,

public participation needs to offer varied opportunities, formats, venues and time slots to meet multiple needs and interests. Among the suggestions that were heard were the following.

- Informational, written updates in a variety of forms, e.g. letters, newspaper articles, website posts, emails, monthly newsletters or summaries, some sent to groups to be posted in their own membership newsletters.
- Diverse meeting formats: open houses in small communities; issue specific dialogues and working groups; community presentations before County Commissions; one-on-one meetings with interest groups or collaboratives; and even assembly-style presentations at local schools.
- Use of maps and other visuals to inform the process.
- More than a single meeting in a number of smaller communities that are impacted by forest policy (e.g. White Sulphur Springs, Helmville, Elliston, Deer Lodge, Ovando, etc.).
- Coordination with and inclusion of local forest service personnel in all public participation meetings and activities.
- To bridge the distances included in the HLC, teleconferences and webinars were recommended to allow individuals and groups to participate without traveling long distances.
- Daytime, nighttime and possibly even weekend meetings will be needed.

According to the listening session participants, all of the above should use clear communication, established rules of engagement, and clearly defined roles.

Virtually all stakeholders want a public participation process that is open to all those wanting to be heard, transparent, and gives equal “weight” to all voices heard. Several county government officials voiced concerns that local people end up losing out to competing “voices” from national special interests or “higher-ups” in the Forest Service in Washington, D.C. They expressed concern that local voices, which offer firsthand knowledge, valuable expertise, and experience in a given forest landscape, sometimes seem undervalued or under-represented in forest decision-making outcomes. These county interests want all voices to be heard equitably.

Many of the listening session participants mentioned the importance of having a readily available record of every public participation activity. These could be made available on a website, online, or sent directly to individuals who sign-in at public events. The important point conveyed by those who mentioned this concern is that participants want to be able to see that their remarks were heard.

Many noted the broad geographic footprint of the H-LC and emphasized the need to devise strategies that meet the needs of specific communities and sub-regions. Relatedly, some suggested that using geographic management areas might present useful building blocks in developing an overall forest plan as long as there was consistency at the boundaries of the geographic management areas.

Several noted that there were ways to work effectively within the NEPA process and that public participation could extend in meaningful ways throughout the various stages of the process.

A few people identified specific people and organizations with expertise and resources that may be useful to invite to participate in the forest plan revision, including several professors at Montana State University and MSU extension.

Finally, the possible use of a committee-approach for some planning tasks or activities was desired by some and resisted by others. For example, one interest recommended a multi-layered public participation approach with facilitated, sub-collaborative working groups based on issue areas. Similarly, one county government suggested there be regular monthly meetings of an intergovernmental advisory committee comprised of local, state, and federal government representatives. Others were skeptical of committees for fear that they could come to be perceived as exclusive.

B. An Emerging Set of Principles for a Successful Public Participation Process

Based on the feedback obtained in the listening sessions, a successful public participation process would be characterized by the following.

- Participants know in advance when and where issues and concerns of interest to them will be discussed.
- Thoughtful conversations occur at public gatherings rather than grandstanding.
- There is ample education throughout the process -- beginning with basics of the forest planning process and breaking it down further as is appropriate.
- Science informs community conversations and decision-making.
- The public participation process is open and transparent with clarity regarding how and why decisions are made.
- There is ongoing coordination with County Commissions so they understand and can work with locals for better understanding and plan acceptability.
- There is reasonable, advance notification of opportunities to comment.
- All voices are heard and on the record and there is a documented record of all public meetings, easily accessed (such as on a website) for all to see.
- There is direct outreach to existing (and future) collaborative groups to inform, educate, and involve them in the planning process.
- Public participation events in local communities need to involve and include local forest service personnel, those closest to the constituents who will be in attendance.
- Expectations are made clear, upfront and often, to prevent false or mistaken expectations during the forest planning process.
- There are varied, ongoing public participation opportunities that include information-sharing, consultation, involvement, and collaboration.

As mentioned above, some interests strongly recommended that public participation be sure to target, involve, and engage meetings with the growing number of collaborative groups throughout the HLC forest area. These groups have established working relationships among diverse interests and valuable local knowledge to share. Others felt that collaboratives can be unfair and exclusionary, leaving some interests on the “outside,” feeling ignored and unrepresented. And not everyone liked the idea of subgroups or committees being formed to accomplish specific objectives for fear some interests might be left out.

C. Specific Recommendations for Engagement

In addition to these guidelines, we heard several specific recommendations for how to implement the public participation plan, including:

- One participant suggested there be trainings early on to teach people how to talk to one another respectfully. “We need to develop new ways of working together by creating new models.”
- One timber interest had no desire to attend public meetings, but would prefer one-on-one meetings to discuss forest planning, directly, with the Forest Service.
- One participant suggested the facilitation team work to anticipate conflict around hot button issues like wilderness and make an effort to resolve these by facilitating parallel conversations or shuttle diplomacy.

Finally, participants provided input on some of the specific tools and methods that can facilitate an effective public participation strategy.

A regularly updated website will be particularly important as an information clearinghouse where all stakeholders can stay abreast of planning activities and phases. Monthly or periodic electronic (and hard copy?) newsletters directed to interested stakeholders and attendees at public participation events could provide a more proactive, outreach mechanism. Opportunities for collaborative, online participation used by other forest planning processes, such as Talking Points Collaborative Mapping (TPCM), should be investigated further for their possible utility.

Based on stakeholder input, the importance of face-to-face public participation opportunities at the grassroots cannot be overestimated. County governments, in particular, strongly advocated for “more than a single meeting” in small communities, so local forest users can attend. Open houses that mix information with small group discussions could be particularly useful in smaller community settings. And public meetings documented online and backed up by ongoing communications (on websites, e-newsletters, etc.) would provide diverse opportunities for public engagement.

Where issue specific conversations are in order, working groups or issue-specific meetings that tie in with local collaborative efforts could be a useful approach.

Co-sponsorship and coordination with local collaboratives can make the most of existing local capacity and relationships.

Public engagement strategies and tools need to be employed and advertised, as appropriate, in specific planning phases and stages that are known in advance. Hence, public participation activities need to be linked to a planning process timeline that lays out what techniques and approaches will be utilized when.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The listening sessions have begun to shape public expectations and set the stage for effective public participation in the forest plan revision process. With this listening session record, a sound information base regarding representative interests, concerns and priorities for public participation is established. The next step, to prepare an effective and rigorous public participation plan, is presently underway.

Appendix A: Letter of Introduction



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Memorandum

To: Friends of the Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forests

From: Shawn Johnson, Associate Director
Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy

Date: November 17, 2014

Subject: Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forests, Forest Planning Process

The Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forests (HLC) are preparing to start the public participation process to revise and update their existing forest plans, which were adopted in 1986. As part of this effort, the HLC have engaged the Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy (CNREP) to help design and facilitate a public participation process to meaningfully engage stakeholders, tribes, and local, state, and federal governments in the plan revision process.

The intent of the forest plan revision is to provide for the sustainability of ecosystems and resources; meet the need for forest restoration and conservation, watershed protection, and species diversity and conservation; and assist the Forest Service in providing a sustainable flow of benefits, services, and uses of National Forest System lands that provide jobs and contribute to the economic and social sustainability of communities. The planning process that is now getting under way will look at existing HLC policies and plans and explore how those policies and plans might be improved to meet the purposes identified above. The planning process will not, however, focus on project or site-specific planning efforts occurring on the forests. The overall process and timeline for the forest plan revision is provided on page 3 of this memorandum.

To inform the design and facilitation of the public participation process, the CNREP facilitation team is reaching out to roughly 50 people and organizations that reflect a diversity of interests in the HLC and have a demonstrated commitment to the forests.

This is an opportunity for us to listen and learn about the issues and concerns that are most important to you and to seek your input and advice on how to meaningfully involve the diversity of citizens, stakeholders, and officials in the forest plan revision process.

Your input will help inform the design of the forest plan public participation process. Importantly, this informal conversation is not a substitute for any of the formal public participation or government-to-government processes that will be incorporated into the plan revision process.

We have identified you as a single point of contact for a particular geographic place or organization. Our hope is that you can help us organize a meeting with you and your colleagues to explore the following topics:

1. *Clarify your interests and concerns with respect to the Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forests' forest plans;*
2. *Identify the 2-3 most important topics that the public participation process should focus on (e.g., forest health, recreational access, grazing, wildfire, wilderness, etc.);*
3. *Explain how you want to be involved in the forest plan revision process; and*
4. *Describe what a successful public participation process looks like to you.*

Our hope is to conduct as many of these listening sessions as possible in person. Please contact Carlyn Anderson (carlyn@cnrep.org or 406-465-4753) to schedule a time to visit with the CNREP facilitation team.

Thank you in advance for your time and input at this early stage of the forest plan revision process. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact us.

Facilitation Team

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Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forests Plan Revision Process and Timeframe

Phase	Activity	Estimated Time Period
Phase 1		
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Evaluate existing and relevant data/information on existing conditions, roles and contributions, and trends. ● Assess sustainability of social, economic and ecological resources within the plan area and a broader landscape. ● Prepare a Forest Assessment Report as the basis for determining needs-for-change to the 1985 plan. This will be made available for public review. 	Spring 2014 to Winter 2014
Phase 2		
Plan Revision and Scoping for Alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● With public involvement, identify needs for change to the current plan. ● Develop the Draft Plan that addresses potential desired conditions, management objectives, and other plan components based on identified needs-for-change. This includes developing alternatives that focus on issues where there are differing options or controversy. ● Develop a draft Environment Impact Statement (DEIS) that analyzes the effects upon the environment of each of the alternative plan proposals. 	Winter 2015-Fall 2016
Public review and comment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Distribute a Proposed Forest Plan and DEIS for public review and comment ● Receive feedback on Plan components and content ● Analyze and respond to comments 	Fall 2016-Summer 2017

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select a final Plan • Complete a Biological Assessment on the selected Plan • Prepare a final EIS 	
Objection Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior to approving the preferred alternative, the public may raise issues related to the plan revision and suggest ways to improve the plan decision 	Fall 2017
Decision	Final decision is made by the Helena and Lewis & Clark NF Supervisor	Spring 2018
Phase 3		
Implementation and Monitoring	Forest Service implements the Plan and begins on-going monitoring	Spring 2018 on