Rio Grande National Forest Plan Revision
Water and Soil Resources Meeting #3
April 28, 2015
Saguache, CO
Meeting Summary

Attendees

Forest Plan Revision Team

- *US Forest Service*: Mike Blakeman, Dan Dallas, Christine Ghormley, Dwight Irwin, Erin Minks
- *Peak Facilitation*: Kristin Barker, Heather Bergman, Katie Waller

Approximately 11 members of the public were present.

Meeting Overview

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) recently began revising the forest plan for the Rio Grande National Forest (RGNF). Members of the public attended this meeting to discuss water and soil resources on the RGNF; this was the third meeting held to discuss this topic in the San Luis Valley. Information gathered from this and previous discussions will help inform the initial assessment phase of the forest plan revision process.

Forest Plan and Revision Process

Mike Blakeman, RGNF Public Affairs Officer, explained that the forest plan guides every activity on the forest and is typically revised every 15-20 years. The last forest plan for the Rio Grande was finalized in 1996; the process of revising the plan recently began. The revision consists of three steps expected to be completed in 2017: a year-long assessment phase, a two-year National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase, and finally a monitoring phase. USFS is currently seeking public input to help inform the assessment phase, in which current conditions and trends are analyzed to determine which portions of the existing plan should be changed. After determining the need for change, USFS will develop and analyze multiple management options to determine the most beneficial options for inclusion in the final forest plan.

Mr. Blakeman explained that the RGNF holds the headwaters of the Rio Grande River and provides water for plants, animals, and people in the San Luis Valley and beyond. Since the last forest plan was created, changes to factors like forest health, wildfire regimes, forest uses, climate, and infrastructure have impacted the forest and could potentially affect water and soil resources. As the forest brings in roughly 55% of the area's gross regional product, Mr. Blakeman stressed the importance of public participation and noted that giving input at meetings is not the only way to participate in the plan revision process. Members of the public also can provide input by email at comments-rocky-mountain-rio-grande@fs.fed.us, on the interactive plan revision web site at http://riograndeplanning.mindmixer.com, or by sending mail to or stopping by the office at 1803 W. Highway 160, Monte Vista, CO 81144.

Community Discussions

Participants broke into small groups to discuss three main themes related to water and soil resources: resources in specific areas of the forest, assessment questions, and forest plan standards and guidelines. A summary of key themes from the discussion follows.

MAP-BASED DISCUSSION

-GREEN - Areas with good conditions that should be maintained	
Successful Range Health and Monitoring	• Saguache Park • Carnero Creek • Mill Creek
Riparian Areas	• Middle Creek • Saguache Park
-ORANGE- Areas of emerging/possible future concerns, or areas with potential for expansion/enhancement	
Excessive Standing Dead (fire, water quality, and agricultural concerns)	• High elevations in Saguache Park • Areas above water storage and delivery systems in Saguache Park • Areas around agricultural water delivery systems in Saguache Park
Wildlife	• Potential impact of elk on riparian areas in uplands of Forest Service-maintained Baca Mountain Tract • Potential impact of moose on riparian zones in Saguache Park
General Comments	• There is an opportunity for research to see how dead spruce and burned areas affect water quality and regrowth of vegetation on the forest. • Monitor water flow throughout the forest to find the age of water. • Increase beaver populations throughout the forest to slow water flow.

ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Is high water quality and soil productivity being maintained on the RGNF? What factors are impacting water quality and soil productivity?

Wildlife	• Moose will decimate riparian areas, affecting soil productivity and water quality, if population is not controlled. • Decreased beaver population affects water quality.
Fire	• Mitigate fire danger in areas of public safety (e.g., water diversions, power lines, homes) with strategic logging. • Use revenue from logging to regenerate the forest and improve water quality.
Human Impacts	• Recreation and improper use of resources negatively affects water quality. • Motorized vehicles, especially ATVs, impact water and soil quality. • Old mines introduce tailings and heavy metals into water and soil. • Pharmaceuticals and hormones from human waste impact water quality and harm wildlife - could be solved by a new water treatment plant at Wolf Creek. • All human uses can negatively impact resources if not done properly.
Natural Processes	• Earlier peak runoff season impacts water quality. • Timber, fire, and water all impact each other.

	• Stable soil helps prevent over-sedimentation in water sources. • Sedimentation downstream indicates problems upstream. • Healthy soil improves watershed health and improves sedimentation/flooding.
Specific Locations	• Upper Rio Grande maintains water quality with proper cattle grazing techniques. • Saguache Park has bad water quality because of improper land use. • Areas below the fires have natural water quality issues. • Bonanza Mine has impacted water quality with heavy metals and tailings. • Road to Bear Town is widened and eroded by human activities.
Additional Comments	• "Quality" has different definitions depending on use of the water. • Measuring water quality must be objective and consistent. • Adaptive management is important for water quality and soil productivity.

Are watersheds and riparian ecosystems on the RGNF and surrounding areas healthy and properly functioning? What factors are impacting watershed or riparian health?

Human Impacts	• Braided roads from improper motorized vehicle usage impact soil productivity. • Water storage impacts watershed health. • Hunting camps and accompanying vehicle use are excessive and uncontrolled and harm water and soil by trampling vegetation, compacting soils, and eroding roads. • Ranchers using proper grazing techniques should be allowed to have more cattle if the land can support it. • Human-driven decrease in the beaver population negatively affects watershed and riparian health. (e.g., Middle Fork of Conejos Creek, Rio Grande). • Lowered water table in the San Luis Valley caused by over-pumping has dried soil. • Decreasing groundwater destroys riparian areas. • Roads and construction impact water flow.
Natural Impacts	• Dead trees use less water than live trees, which could impact the watershed. • Dead trees must be removed to preserve live trees. • Dead trees impact water runoff and erosion. • Climate change causes more flooding and earlier runoff. • Fire can wipe out entire riparian zones.
Management Impacts	• Timber harvest levels are inadequate to clear standing dead trees. • Logging requirements are working and do not need to be revisited. • Timber must be harvested while it is still economically viable. • Timber overharvest affects watershed health. • Ditches moving water across Continental Divide need maintenance. • Collaboration with other agencies is necessary since the Forest Service does not have autonomy over all issues (e.g., Weminuche Wilderness). • Private collaborations (e.g., RWEACT) help conditions post-fire. • Wilderness areas would be less impacted if resources were maintained by smaller groups of people with motorized access for shorter periods of time, rather than larger groups of people on foot for longer periods of time. • USFS range specialists should involve all impacted parties when making decisions regarding allotments and should give permit holders more input. • Ecosystem services should be incorporated into management (e.g., nutrients in decomposing trees, negative impacts of removing dead biomass). • USFS should use best management practices created by the Colorado State Forest Service. • Planned reforestation of burned areas is important to water and soil health.

	• USFS does not have autonomy to control wildlife (e.g., moose).
	• USFS high staff turnover harms the health of the RGNF.
	  o It fosters a perception of unreliability and distrust.
	  o It creates gaps in communication with the public.
	  o It impacts local livelihood of farmers and ranchers.
	  o It affects staff morale and creates internal communication issues.
	• USFS budget does not meet current needs or allow for pre-emptive fire measures.
	• Watershed management has improved and is working properly.
	• Management practices and plans are adaptable to current needs.
	• Management practices in Upper Rio Grande are good.
	• USFS must improve soil quality post-fire as a pre-emptive measure.
	• USFS needs to wait in line for water rights like everyone else.

How do water and soil resources on the RGNF contribute to social, cultural, and economic sustainability?

Economic Impacts	• The forest sustains recreation, logging, hunting, fishing, and agriculture. • Water is necessary to sustain the economy. • Different users are competing for limited amounts of water.
Water Supply	• Water supply is inadequate for current demand and future growth. • Ranchers' wells have dried up. • Decreasing ground water destroys riparian areas. • Future uses of the forest will differ from current uses due to less water.

STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

Standards and guidelines are the "rules of the forest" that are documented in a forest plan. Standards are requirements; they are things the Forest Service *must* do. Guidelines are things the Forest Service can or should do. During this meeting, participants reviewed and discussed several standards and guidelines that are in the current forest plan. Forest Service staff identified these standards and guidelines for discussion due to confusion regarding their meaning, difficulty implementing them, and/or changed context on the ground. Participants were invited to provide feedback about whether the standards and guidelines are working, whether they should be changed from standards to guidelines or vice versa, and whether they should be deleted altogether.

***Standard (Riparian #1)* – In the water influence zones next to perennial and intermittent streams, lakes, and wetlands, allow only those land treatments that maintain or improve long-term stream health.**

Keep Standard	• Keep as a standard. • Need to establish monitoring methods.
Change Standard	• Does not allow for adaptive management. • The phrase "land treatments" is unclear.

***Guideline (Riparian #8)* - Limit utilization of riparian woody plants to 15-20% of current annual growth, and of herbaceous plants to 40-45% of annual productions.**

Change Guideline	• Does not allow for adaptive management. • No way to differentiate between cattle and wildlife consumption. • The utilization amount should differ by location; provide some geographically based guidelines (e.g., high elevation, recreation).

	• Move from under Standard 1 to elsewhere in the Standards and Guidelines. • Remove the percentages.

***Standard (Riparian #6)* – Manage water-use facilities to prevent gully erosion of slopes and to prevent sediment and bank damage to streams**

Change Standard	• Timing of runoff is earlier due to loss of spruce. • Make this a guideline instead of a standard.

***Guideline (Riparian #1)* – Design all ditches, canals, and pipes with at least an 80% chance of passing high flows and remaining stable during their life.**

Change Guideline	• Specify which high flow this guideline is referencing. • Revisit cover type. • Revisit using 80% as the necessary number. • Remember warmer temperatures means increased runoff. • Install larger pipes instead of risking a blowout.

***Guideline (Riparian #2)* – Do not flush or deposit sediment from behind diversion structures into the stream below. Deposit sediment in a designated upland site.**

Change Guideline	• Define where or how disposal should occur upstream. • Design requirements for the least amount of water. • Add a bypass requirement.

***Guideline (Riparian #3)* - Mitigate water imports so that the extent of stable banks in each receiving stream reach is least at 80% of reference conditions.**

Change Guideline	• This guideline is hard to understand. • Meaning needs to be clarified.

***Standard (Soil Productivity #1)* – Manage land treatments to limit the sum of severely burned and detrimentally compacted, eroded, and displaced land to no more than 15% of any land unit.**

Change Standard	• Put a time frame on impacts. • 15% limits opportunity. • Define "land unit." • Incorporate land productivity. • Make this a guideline. • Use scientific classification instead of a specific percentage. • Incorporate different standards for different treatments and locations. • Allow for adaptive management. • Incorporate ecosystem services.

Additional Standards and Guidelines Discussion

New Guideline Ideas	• Add a guideline that designs roads to slow down water flow. • Add a new guideline to enhance riparian areas where possible.
General Comments	• Percentages and hard numbers should be avoided. • Best management practices must be integrated. • Beaver population helps to manage water flow. • A solid foundation of data is necessary in order to judge these standards. • Perhaps dredged sediment has value and could be used or sold.

Additional Comments

- Ask your congressman to approve different management practices and allocate more money to USFS.
- Unlicensed 4-wheeler drivers and reckless young drivers are a safety issue throughout the forest.
- Pre-build fire lines around beetle kill as a pre-emptive control measure.
- Prevention and pre-emptive control are cheaper than dealing with a wildfire.
- Funding from Rural School Act Title II has improve the innovation in range monitoring projects.