



U.S. Forest Service
Pacific Southwest Region

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Monitoring Program

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the monitoring program?

The monitoring program is one of three phases in the forest planning cycle, which includes assessment, plan development or revision, and monitoring. The monitoring program is proposed in the forest plan, implemented during the life of the forest plan, and informs the next forest assessment. Monitoring helps us determine if a change to the forest plan may be needed to improve forest management. The monitoring program includes a set of monitoring questions and associated indicators.

Monitoring is a systematic process of collecting information to evaluate effects of actions or changes in conditions or relationships. The monitoring program found in a forest plan includes only some of the monitoring conducted by a forest or region.

Is the forest plan monitoring program a new requirement under the 2012 Planning Rule?

No, monitoring was required by the 1982 Planning Rule, and monitoring was included in forest plans created under that rule. In fact, monitoring productivity of the land is required by the 1976 National Forest Management Act. What is new is that the 2012 Planning Rule includes more specific instructions for monitoring, including eight topics that must be addressed by a monitoring program.

Are there specific monitoring questions and indicators that all forest plans must have?

No, but each monitoring program must contain at least one monitoring question and associated indicators for each of the following eight topics:

- watershed conditions
- ecological conditions of terrestrial (land) and aquatic (water) ecosystems
- focal species (plants or animals) that are indicators of ecological integrity

- ecological conditions that are needed by at-risk species -- federally recognized threatened, endangered, proposed, and candidate species, and Forest Service species of conservation concern
- visitor use, visitor satisfaction, and progress toward meeting recreation objectives
- changes related to climate change and other stressors
- meeting desired conditions and forest plan objectives, including providing multiple-use opportunities and social, cultural, and economic sustainability
- productivity of the land (required by 1976 National Forest Management Act)

How do monitoring programs influence forest plan revisions?

The forest plan monitoring program help us determine whether the current forest plan is effective in achieving the desired conditions and objectives laid out in the plan. Every two years after completion of the forest plan, the forest produces a monitoring evaluation report. During evaluation, we determine whether or not a change to forest plan components, requiring a plan amendment, is need. Monitoring may show that a new assessment is needed, potentially leading to a forest plan revision.

What are monitoring questions and indicators?

Monitoring questions and indicators measure forest plan effectiveness and assess whether we are meeting the desired conditions and objectives for the plan area. Thus, monitoring questions are linked to desired conditions and objectives outlined in a forest plan; however, a monitoring question is not needed for every desired condition, objective, or other plan component.

Monitoring questions are stated in a way that allows us to observe whether we are maintaining or making progress toward the desired condition or objective. Questions may only be posed if there is a measurable or observable indicator for the question. Indicators are quantitative or qualitative variables that can be measured, observed, or described. When observed periodically, indicators may show trends that are relevant to the monitoring questions.

An example of a monitoring question is: *Are black oaks stable or increasing?*

The associated indicator for this example question would be: *Oak spatial extent; canopy cover; density; regeneration; and tree health (e.g., mortality rates, insects, etc.)*

What is the difference between project-level and forest plan monitoring?

The difference between project-level and forest plan monitoring is a difference in perspective and scale.

Projects and activities on the forests are proposed and implemented under the guidance in the forest plan, but are not part of the forest plan. Project monitoring helps us understand the effectiveness of projects and documents implementation of forest plan standards and guidelines in carrying out projects. Project-level monitoring is part of project development and implementation, and is not included in the forest plan monitoring program. Project monitoring can provide useful information to adapt future projects and improve resource protection and restoration.

Forest plan monitoring is intended to tell us how effective the forest plan is at guiding overall management of the forest to achieve or maintain desired conditions.

Project and activity monitoring may be used to gather information for the plan monitoring program, and plan monitoring information may inform the development of specific projects and activities. Project and activity monitoring is not included in the plan monitoring program, although information collected with such monitoring may inform the plan monitoring program and adaptive management of the plan.

Are monitoring methods included in the monitoring program that will appear in the forest plan?

No, the planning rule final directives instruct us to only include monitoring questions and indicators in the forest plan. Protocols for collecting and analyzing monitoring data are to be documented in a separate monitoring guide that will be developed later in the process.

What about monitoring of California spotted owls and Pacific fisher?

We currently monitor California spotted owl populations at three sites in the Sierra Nevada. One of the sites is on the Sierra National Forest. This monitoring is at the site level, smaller than the forest level expected for forest plan monitoring. We also monitor presence of Pacific fisher throughout its range on the Sierra and Sequoia National Forests.

We are not including these monitoring studies in the forest plan monitoring programs because they do not fit the guidelines for plan monitoring programs. We expect that monitoring these species will continue as part of the broader-scale monitoring strategy and will continue to inform forest management. Monitoring California spotted owls and Pacific fisher are examples of monitoring we do that is not part of a forest plan monitoring program.

In the preliminary draft monitoring program we have monitoring questions and indicators related to ecological conditions necessary for these two at-risk species. We are still developing desired conditions for Pacific fisher and California spotted owl habitat. Prior to release of the draft forest plans, we will determine what additional monitoring may be appropriate for the plan monitoring programs.

Will the monitoring program remain the same throughout the life of the forest plan?

The monitoring program is generally expected to last the lifetime of the forest plan (about 10 to 15 years). However, the monitoring program can be changed with an administrative process that allows for public comment. Thus, we can make changes without a forest plan amendment if we discover that monitoring questions or indicators should be changed. We can be particularly nimble if we need to change the methods we use for monitoring, which sometimes happens when research and development improve monitoring and analysis methods.

Are these the final versions of the forest plan monitoring programs?

No, these are preliminary draft monitoring programs for each forest. We are continuing to develop the draft plans, so these monitoring programs may change before we release the draft forest plans later this year. We may make some changes as a result of the feedback you provide prior to release of the draft forest plans. The monitoring programs may also change between the draft forest plans and the final forest plans based on the information we gather now and during upcoming public comment periods.

If you think we should change the monitoring questions or indicators that we included in our monitoring programs, let us know. Please provide scientific evidence to support your reasoning, and identify where in our programs we should include any of your suggested new monitoring questions and indicators.

Your feedback is most useful if submitted by October 23, 2015, and can be provided via web-form: <http://tinyurl.com/earlyadoptersfpr>. If you have questions or concerns about the monitoring programs, please contact Mike Dietl at 707-562-9121. You will also have an opportunity to review and provide feedback when the draft forest plans are released.

How is the Forest Service collaborating with the public?

This is our first opportunity to use the 2012 Planning Rule, so many of its requirements are new to us. Like you, we're learning as we move through our first attempt at implementing this new rule. We appreciate your patience and participation; we are sharing information and engaging with the public as we can. In the past year, we've convened public discussions on several plan revision topics as we have information available, including:

- *June 2014*: Preliminary wilderness inventory, step one of the wilderness evaluation process
- *August 2014*: Began National Environmental Policy Act process for forest plan revisions
- *November 2014*: Shared issues and concerns heard during public scoping
- *January 2015*: Sierra Cascade Dialog session about monitoring programs
- *May 2015*: Update on our wilderness evaluation progress

- *June 2015*: Inyo National Forest hosted a wilderness evaluation public workshop
- *July 2015*: Draft proposed species of conservation concern lists
- *September 2015*: Shared process for evaluating and identifying potential areas for wilderness recommendations

How can I obtain more information about forest plan revisions?

There are several ways you can find more information about forest plan revision efforts, including:

- Visit our Web site: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/r5/FPR>
- Join our mailing list:
https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/USDAFS/subscriber/new?topic_id=NEPA_3375_S
- Contact your local Forest Service office

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