Process for Developing Preliminary Draft Forest Plan Monitoring Programs

The U.S. Forest Service uses monitoring as the basis for continuous improvement of a land and resource management plan (forest plan). Monitoring provides information for adaptive management of the area and resources within the planning area. The objectives for a forest plan monitoring program in an adaptive management framework include:

- Creating a learning environment to support decisions.
- Evaluating progress toward achieving desired conditions.
- Enabling us to determine where changes may be needed in forest plan components, other plan content, and plan implementation strategies, including changes to the monitoring program.

The monitoring program is part of the forest plan -- it is plan content, but it is not a plan component. The monitoring program is laid out in forest plans as a set of monitoring questions and indicators, and we conduct monitoring throughout the life of the forest plan. Monitoring questions and indicators measure effectiveness of the forest plan and assess progress toward achieving or maintaining the forest plan’s desired conditions and objectives. However, a monitoring question is not required for every plan component. In this document, “monitoring program” refers to the monitoring questions and indicators that will be included in the forest plans. After completion of the forest planning phase, “monitoring program” refers to the monitoring conducted during implementation of the forest plans.

The Process for Developing the Monitoring Programs

The 2012 Planning Rule and directives do not specify a detailed process for developing the monitoring programs, other than a few considerations:

- Public participation.
- Partnership with other entities like state and other federal agencies.
- Plan components, particularly desired conditions and objectives, are the basis for monitoring.
- Fiscal and technical capabilities of the unit.
- Using best available scientific information.
The process for developing the monitoring program is integrated across all phases of forest planning: assessment, planning, and implementation. For the Inyo, Sequoia and Sierra National Forests, the monitoring programs started with several groundwork stages:

- Science synthesis in 2012.
- Forest Plan assessments in 2013 with public engagement as part of the process.
- Development of the Proposed Action as part of the Notice of Intent in August 2014.
- January 2015 Sierra Cascades Dialog kick-off of the monitoring program and public involvement.
- Outlined requirements for monitoring under the 2012 Planning Rule.
- Solicited ideas from attendees for meeting monitoring requirements.

Just prior to the January 2015 Sierra Cascades Dialog, we identified several forest service staff to help develop the monitoring program. These individuals attended the dialog and participated in the group discussions.

Following the dialog, the Forest Service held an internal working meeting to discuss requirements for the monitoring program and assigned individuals to each of the eight required topics for monitoring. Team members worked individually or in small groups to formulate draft monitoring questions and indicators. Several points may be made about the work of the team:

- Consisted of experts who conducted the assessments, developed plan components, and had knowledge of best available scientific information.
- Consulted with other resource experts as needed for specific monitoring questions.
- Focused monitoring on priority management questions that had emerged during assessment and plan development.
- Incorporated existing monitoring programs, including national and regional programs like the Forest Inventory and Analysis Program and the National Visitor Use Monitoring Program and monitoring conducted in collaboration with other agencies.
- Aligned monitoring questions and indicators with the analyses that were done for the assessments.
- Consulted notes from the Sierra Cascades Dialog in January 2015.

We developed the monitoring program concurrently with later stages of forest plan development and the development of the draft environmental impact statement. We assembled and reviewed monitoring questions and indicators internally for applicability to plan components, measurability or observability, and capability of the region and forests to conduct the monitoring. Where possible, we identified and cross-listed monitoring questions and indicators that might address more than one topic to achieve integration in the monitoring program.

Full documentation of the monitoring program is still under development. This information will be available in the project record, including:
• Documentation of best available scientific information to support the monitoring program.

• A separate monitoring guide that outlines methods for collection and analysis of monitoring data, which we cannot include in the plan monitoring program.

At this stage, we are interested in sharing with the public what we currently have in our draft monitoring programs. The monitoring programs are not complete, and we expect changes between now and the time when the draft plans and monitoring programs are released late in 2015. Some changes may result from public feedback we receive now. Between the draft and final plans, further changes may result from comments received.

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