

A Brief History of the Revision Topics

Four major topic areas were identified to be included in the revision of the 1986 Forest Plans. The revision issues are those areas of Forest management that were determined to need change as a result of more information about resource conditions, changed resource conditions, new scientific and/or technical information, improved understanding of the results of the previous management direction due to monitoring and evaluation, and changes in public perceptions about what constitutes maximum public benefit relative to national forests. The four major topics are as follows: Access and Recreation Opportunities, Biological Diversity, Special Land Allocations, and Timber Production (including Special Forest Products). These revision topics function as broad headings for 10 important sub-topics or issues listed for their associated major revision topic. Problem statements were developed for each of the 10 sub-topics. The FEIS also examines the social and economic aspects of the counties and communities linked to the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forests.

The four revision topics and their related problem statements, described below, are the focus of the forest plan revision process. They address the central issues to which future management of the Forest must respond. Each of the nine alternatives described later in this document represents a different set of answers to questions raised by the revision topics.

Access and Recreation Opportunities

Problem # 1 – All-Terrain (ATV) and Off-Road Vehicle (ORV) Use/ Motorized Access

Areas on the Forests open to motorized access are generally extensively roaded. Motorized uses on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forests have a long history. People have been accustomed to utilizing roads for traveling most parts of the Forests. The current Forest Plans are inconsistent in road descriptions, total road density designations, and Management Area Prescriptions. For instance, the Chequamegon Plan inventoried only “system” roads, while the Nicolet Plan included all roads and was more detailed in its descriptions.

Total and open road density guidelines need to be designed and applied to the Forests in a consistent manner. They need to be based on Recreation Opportunity Spectrum inventories and roads analysis, such that the Forests have safe, effective, and economically efficient transportation and provide recreational experiences desired by the forest users. The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) classification system was used to apply road density goals on various areas of the forest. Maps in the map packet labeled “Recreation Management Emphasis, Open Road Density and Special Land Allocations” for Alternatives 1-9 display locations of open road density zones. The map labeled Road Density displays locations of open road density zones in the Selected Alternative.

ORV use in general, and ATV use specifically have risen steadily over the past two decades. The increased use created new user conflicts. For example, some four-wheel drive enthusiasts prefer rugged roads or trails that are infrequently maintained. Others who prefer a non-motorized experience don’t want to hear the sound of motors.

The Chequamegon and Nicolet Forest Plans provide very different policies regarding access for off-road vehicles. The Chequamegon provides for liberal ATV access to national forest land; most of the forest is open for this use unless areas, roads and/or trails are posted closed. In the Nicolet ATV policy, all areas, roads and/or trails are closed to

ATV use unless they are posted open; there are no areas, and very few routes posted open. ATV use on the Chequamegon has resulted in unacceptable resource damage and occasional conflicts with other recreation activities. Illegal ATV use on the Nicolet is an increasingly prevalent problem. A consistent policy between forests, as well as coordination with State regulation, is needed to provide for off-road use, and new direction is needed to address impacts to resources. Consideration also needs to be given to the expressed desire for designated four-wheel drive vehicle trails.

The 2004 Forest Plan provides options for consistent, enforceable Forestwide policy that addresses the needs of Off Road Vehicle users, prevents unacceptable resource damage, and minimizes conflicts with other recreation activities.

Problem # 9 – Wilderness and Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized Areas

Designated Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized (SPNM) areas and Congressionally designated Wilderness are intended to provide visitors with a remote experience free from the presence and sounds of motorized vehicles. The Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forests provide one of the few places in Wisconsin with a land area large enough to provide some seclusion for quality non-motorized experiences. The 1984 Wisconsin Wilderness Act designated several areas as Wilderness and also directed the Department of Agriculture to “review the wilderness option when the plans are revised, which revisions will ordinarily occur on a 10-year cycle, or at least every 15 years” [Section 5 (b) (2)].

Feedback from the recreating public suggests that the existing Forest Plans underestimated the quality of non-motorized recreational opportunities necessary to meet user demands (End of Decade Report 1998a), especially given the current increase in ATV use. Comments from the public indicated they had difficulty finding areas free of mechanized sights and sounds. In addition, the 1986 plans allowed timber harvest within SPNM areas with some restrictions. New direction is needed to provide a range of quality non-motorized recreation opportunities, including those that emphasize remoteness, solitude, and wild character.

The 2004 Forest Plan addresses a range of quality non-motorized recreation opportunities that emphasize remoteness, solitude, personal challenge (individually or in combination), and the absence of motorized vehicles.

Biological Diversity

Problem # 2 – Aquatic, Riparian, and Wetland Ecosystems

The existing Forest Plans do not describe a desired future condition for aquatic resources. Goals, Objectives, and Forestwide and Management Area Standards and Guidelines are needed to provide clearer direction on the management, protection, and restoration of watersheds and individual aquatic, riparian, and wetland ecosystems.

The existing Chequamegon and Nicolet Forest Plans would benefit from:

1. A more robust treatment of key issues associated with aquatic, riparian, and wetland ecosystems;
2. Increased reference to watershed management; riparian area, wetland, and water quality goals and objectives, and mitigation measures for other activities within these areas;

3. Improved direction for specific aquatic resources, issues, and management activities; and
4. Identification of Desired Conditions for aquatic, riparian, and wetland ecosystems.

Goals, Objectives, and Forestwide and Management Area Standards and Guidelines have been developed to work toward reaching the Desired Condition for watersheds and aquatic resources (found in Chapter 3 of the Plan).

Problem # 3 – Ecosystem Restoration

Current Chequamegon and Nicolet Forest Plans provide very little ecosystem restoration direction. Restoring deteriorated ecosystems is one of the primary goals of the Forest Service's "*Course to the Future*." The Forest Service's Strategic Plan (2000 revision) recognizes that maintaining or restoring sustainable forest ecosystems is an important mission element. In response to direction by the Chief of the Forest Service, a Scientific Roundtable on Biological Diversity was convened on September 20-23, 1992. Roundtable members provided advice for ongoing implementation of Forest Plans and for future forest plan revision. Maintenance and/or restoration of components of ecological composition, structure, and function are needed to increase the likelihood of sustaining local ecosystems and, in turn, providing for maintenance of the diversity of plant and animal communities native to this area. In some cases, the maintenance and restoration of these ecological characteristics are also contributors to maintaining viable populations of native and desired non-native wildlife, fish, and plant species. The 1986 Plans provided little explicit direction on ecosystem sustainability, and new information since 1986 demonstrates the need for heightened and/or changed direction. Alternatives provide varying allocations of Management Areas that provide for heightened emphasis on ecosystem restoration.

Problem # 4 – Landscape Pattern

Landscape pattern is the term most commonly used to describe the arrangement of species and communities in a natural setting. Landscapes have three structural components: a **matrix** - the most connected portion of similar vegetation within the landscape; **patches** - isolated portions of similar vegetation within the matrix; and **corridors** - relatively narrow areas that connect patches (Diaz and Apostol, 1992). Very small patches, such as the size of a tree canopy gap in a forest, provide important habitat components for some species such as magnolia warbler (Howe et al, 1995). Large patches can improve species viability by decreasing dispersal distance and increasing the likelihood of mating (Primack, 1993). Greater diversity of habitat-specific species occurs as patches become larger (Primack, 1993).

Current Standards and Guidelines for both Plans address biological diversity by increasing species variety through edge habitat creation and the strategic placement of forest vegetation types. The level of even-age management and emphasis on early successional forest types has resulted in a landscape pattern where small patches dominate. The emphasis on disconnected patches, affects many species that react negatively to large amounts of forest edge.

The Forest Plan describes desired future conditions that include landscape composition and structure as objectives, and modify long-term landscape patterns by:

1. Emphasizing areas that maintain interior forest conditions;
2. Restoring a pattern of large patches across the landscape;

3. Increasing mid to late successional forest habitat (forestwide or in concentrated blocks);
4. Decreasing the interspersed of large concentrated blocks of late-successional habitat with early successional habitat (where appropriate);
5. Increasing attention to connections between landscapes and/or patches; and
6. Restoring formerly dominant forest types such as white pine.

Alternatives vary in Management Area allocation to progress toward the desired condition.

Problem # 5 – Old Growth

The 1986 Plans do not consistently define old growth, including the significance of old growth to ecological sustainability. There needs to be consistent criteria developed for old growth, including desired spatial and temporal arrangement of existing and future old growth, and the relevant characteristics needed to aid in the inventory and designation of old growth areas. The revised Plan reflects the ecological importance of old growth and allocates old growth areas based on present characteristics and spatial distribution.

Problem #10 – Wildlife

The existing Plans do not adequately ensure the distribution, abundance, and quality of desired habitat types and features needed to meet the requirements of some mature forest dependent wildlife species. Changes in social values regarding wildlife and wildlife-related recreation, and a new understanding about the suitability of some landscape habitat features is reflected in revised management direction.

The 1986 Forest Plans are inconsistent in direction for management of Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive species, as well as in direction for certain structural components, such as reserve trees. The existing Plans tend to focus on early successional species and habitats and do not sufficiently provide for area-sensitive or edge-sensitive species.

The Alternatives provide new or updated direction for:

1. Managing permanent openings;
2. Reserving adequate amounts of standing and downed dead woody material;
3. Expanding the Riley Lake Wildlife Management Areas to provide additional upland shrub/grassland habitat to meet sharp-tailed grouse population objectives;
4. Providing for the recovery and viability of “Regional Forester Sensitive Species;” and
5. Designing a landscape pattern that includes some large patches of vegetation to provide habitat for area sensitive species.

Special Land Allocations

Problem # 7 – Special Land Allocation: Candidate and Existing Research Natural Areas and Special Management Areas

Research Natural Areas (RNAs) are maintained in their natural condition and provide opportunities for monitoring natural processes, studying ecosystems and their component parts, and investigating successional and other long-term changes. Special Management Areas (SMAs) have outstanding natural, historical, or recreational features and are also

maintained in their natural condition. RNAs and SMAs identified for their ecological characteristics maintain and protect unique ecosystems, processes, and rare or sensitive plant and animal species and habitat.

Existing RNAs do not make use of the draft framework that the Eastern Region of the Forest Service is now using to establish a network of representative ecological reference areas. The existing and candidate RNAs and SMAs lack a wide range of representation of vegetative communities and thus provide limited value as reference areas. In addition, the existing areas are small, isolated, and are not integrated into a systematic network of reserves where proximity, continuity, and presence of connecting corridors are coordinated. Finally, current Plans do not provide for management area prescriptions or guidelines for most RNAs and SMAs and do not display locations on a map so that they can be easily identified for monitoring and evaluation purposes.

Alternatives 2-9 and the Selected Alternative identify specific candidate RNAs and designate SMAs by providing Management Area prescriptions 8E and 8F for RNAs and SMAs, respectively, including specific standards and guidelines to direct management.

Timber Production

Problem # 8 – Timber Production

Past assumptions used for identifying suitable lands for timber production, as well as estimation of growth and yield, need to be updated with new information to provide an accurate prediction of the long-term capabilities of the Forests to produce timber products. More nearly accurate assumptions are being used to estimate expected growth and yield of timber products as well as to identify acres suited for timber production.

Forest management methodologies need to be revised to provide for the diversity of plant and animal communities, and to maintain viability of species existing on the Forests. Needed changes include structural and compositional goals of forest stands, allocations of forest types across the Forests, and silvicultural prescriptions applicable to different land areas and forest types.

Silvicultural prescriptions were modified to provide a wider range of options for developing needed changes in forest structure and composition (Forest Plan, Chapter 2). Allocation of these various treatments across the landscape are proposed in ways to increase the representation of native ecosystems and reduce fragmentation of habitats, to provide biological community diversity and increase the likelihood of viability for the species found within the planning area.

Problem # 6 – Special Forest Products

Special Forest Products consist of items such as birch bark, birch stems, Christmas trees, cones, conifer boughs, firewood, maple sap, sheet moss, etc. that are gathered and intended for resale or are gathered on more than an incidental basis. There is demand for Special Forest Product gathering, but there is no specific management direction to monitor, manage, and control such gathering. The 2004 Forest Plan and other “revision” alternatives (2-9), establish special forest products goals, objectives, standards, guidelines, and monitoring direction.