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USDA Forest Service Planning Rule
First National Roundtable: Meeting Summary

Introduction

On April 1 and 2, 2010, stakeholders met with the US Forest Service in the first of three National Roundtables aimed at creating collaboration and dialogue around the revision of the Forest Service planning rule. This first National Roundtable focused on substantive topics including restoration, watershed health, plant and animal diversity, use and enjoyment of federal lands, contributions to vibrant economies, and climate change. The second National Roundtable will focus on process topics; the third Roundtable will synthesize results of all previous meetings. Transcripts and links for the videocasts of the Roundtable plenary discussions are available at http://fs.usda.gov/planningrule.

This report provides a summary of the diversity of ideas presented during the meeting. For those interested in a more detailed record of these discussions, a more complete account of the proceedings will be posted to this website soon.

Please note that the National Roundtables were designed to encourage dialogue and generate substantive input for the Forest Service as it revises its planning rule. Comments below are synthesized from these discussions, and do not in any way seek to represent agreement among meeting participants. If you were a participant in the meeting and note that your idea was not fully or accurately captured, please contact Justin Henceroth at **jhenceroth@merid.org**.

Participation

There were approximately 120 participants in the Roundtable from a broad diversity of interests including: recreational interests (e.g., motorcyclists, snowmobilers, pilots, and hiking groups); youth organizations; environmental NGOs; private sector representatives (e.g., coal, agricultural, and timber); state and local government; and academia. Forest Service staff, including the rule writing team, representatives from each region, and senior management from a number of offices, were also well represented in the Roundtable. A list of attendees is included as Appendix A.

Below are a few of the key takeaways and broad themes from the meeting. Overall, a few common themes recurred across topic areas, although none of the outcomes can be characterized as consensus.

- The rule should be simple.
- The rule should establish a framework, provide guidance, set priorities, and in some cases

even identify appropriate outcomes; however, it should not be prescriptive in how efforts should be undertaken at the plan level.
- The rule needs to be flexible and adaptable, so that forests can react to changing conditions and find solutions to new management challenges.
- Our nation's forest resources are perhaps more important now than ever. They need to be actively and sustainably managed to provide economic benefits, recreational opportunities, and such ecosystem services as biodiversity, clean water, and carbon mitigation.
- Many of the challenges and solutions of sustainable forest management occur across scales and landscapes that transcend jurisdictional boundaries. An "all-lands" or landscape approach should be further explored, without jeopardizing private property values.

The remainder of this document summarizes in broad terms the presentations and discussions from each segment of the Roundtable:

- Opening Remarks
- Background Information about the Planning Rule
- Panel Discussion
- Science Forum Results
- Table Top Discussions
- Breakout Groups related to the substantive topics noted above
- Final Reflections

Opening Remarks

Senior leaders from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Forest Service provided opening remarks:

- Joel Holtrop, Deputy Chief of the National Forest System;
- Tom Tidwell, Chief of the Forest Service; and
- Harris Sherman, Under Secretary of Natural Resources and Environment, USDA.

Each of these leaders stressed the importance of this collaborative effort; it is a top priority for the Forest Service and the Department. Key areas of emphasis include: restoration, water quality, climate change, diversity of species, recreation, and the relationship of forests to jobs—particularly in rural communities. They underscored the necessity of grounding the new planning rule in science and in relying heavily on collaboration in the rule development process. Each noted the critical importance of the national and regional roundtables, and expressed appreciation for the willingness of so many stakeholders to give their time and ideas to the effort.

Background Information about the Rule Planning Process

Tony Tooke, Director of Ecosystem Management Coordination for the Forest Service, laid out the timeline for the rule writing process and described the various elements of the public involvement approach. The rule development timeline is expected to result in a final rule by November of 2011.

The process was initiated with a Notice of Intent (NOI) published on December 18, 2009. The Forest Service received approximately 30,000 comments on the NOI. The expanded stakeholder collaboration effort includes: three national roundtables; Tribal collaboration and formal consultation; regional roundtables across the country; interagency consultation; internal Forest Service collaboration; and, a web-based blog.

Stakeholder Panel

A stakeholder panel comprised of Lynn Jungwirth, Watershed Research and Training Center; Greg Mumm, Blue Ribbon Coalition; Peter Nelson, Defenders of Wildlife; Erica Rhoad, Society of American Foresters, and; Charles Wilkinson, University of Colorado identified critical issues and offered initial recommendations for consideration by the Roundtable participants. The intent of the panel was to set a constructive tone and get the discussion started. Key points from panelists' presentations included:

- Fill the void and get rid of the gridlock. The Forest Service needs to provide a better framework than currently exists to allow for both ecological sustainability and multiple-use.
- The rule should enable real collaboration at the national, forest, and local levels; and be more adaptable to local conditions.
- An effective rule will be simple and elegant. It will give clear guidelines for how to engage multiple constituencies and support sustainable forests, but not result in long and complex planning processes that stall forest management.
- By incorporating the newest research, science, monitoring techniques, and collaboration tactics, this rule can harness modern technologies and knowledge to guide advanced forest management.

Science Forum Update

To establish a strong scientific foundation for the rule development process, the Forest Service convened a Science Forum on March 29 and 30. Martha Twarkins, Ecosystem Management Staff in the Washington Office, presented an overview of the Forum for the benefit of the Roundtable attendees. The Forum summary is available on the Forest Service planning rule website at: http://fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5150104.pdf.

Table Top Discussions

Participants addressed the following questions in small group discussions:

1. What are your reactions to what you've heard so far?
2. What do you think should be in a great planning rule?
3. What do you think is working well, and what's feasible, that you would like to see preserved in the revised planning rule.

4. What do you think is NOT working well; what would you like changed and how?

A sampling of comments and suggestions from the discussions follows:

- The Forest Service seems genuinely committed to engaging stakeholders in the creation of a workable new planning rule.
- The rule needs to focus on core needs and processes, and prioritize objectives to guide budgeting.
- The Forest Service needs to decide where the majority of resources should be directed – the plan level or the project level.
- More and different constituencies (young people, minorities, etc.) need to be consulted in this process – they are the implementers of the future.
- Monitoring is critical, and must be adequately resourced.
- There needs to be consideration of biodiversity objectives and an ecosystem framework as well as recognition of commodity and recreational uses in the new rule.

Break-out Sessions

Meeting attendees were each able to participate in three break-out groups. There were a total of six substantive topics to choose from. The groups focused on questions developed by the Forest Service Rule Writing Team, suggested by Forest Service planning staff, and gleaned from the NOI and key stakeholder interviews. Discussions below are summarized by topic and theme and not necessarily in chronological order.

Restoration

The key themes in the discussions regarding restoration focused on:

- Definitions and baselines of restoration;
- Different approaches to restoration;
- The need to require needs assessment and set priorities; and
- How to set thresholds to trigger restoration activities.

Many participants focused on the need for clear definitions. First, what should be restored? Functional, ecological restoration could be one standard, which would increase the scope of restoration beyond one isolated spot. Second, to what point in time should an area or ecosystem be restored? For some, historical conditions are useful for providing a context or even a range of historical variability, including historical disturbance regimes. However, others noted that global climate change will change the baseline. Many suggested the need to account for the changing nature of forests, overall. Some suggested that the concept of resiliency may provide a better metric than restoration, but other participants noted that the concept of ecological restoration is still useful and, if nothing else, has funding opportunities tied to it. Regardless, it seems clear that any rule language will need detailed definitions of terms.

Some participants suggested that various approaches to restoration - such as requiring a needs assessment or institutionalizing various restoration activities such as data integration - could be promoted at the rule level. Others suggested focusing on design questions such as using experimental approaches with a precautionary underpinning or encouraging planners to consider more passive approaches. For example, the proactive concept of fire suppression turned out to have many unintended consequences.

It may be important to conduct a needs assessment across the landscape and to evaluate what restoration efforts are of greatest value. Some noted a need to encourage more complex assessments, such as a spatial assessment, to understand the upstream and downstream effects in a stream restoration project. And these assessments and priority setting need to occur across human and ecological needs—not in isolation. And participants noted that budgets need to be taken into consideration when establishing priorities.

Some participants asked what threshold should trigger restoration activities. Many suggested that such thresholds should be set at the local level—but that the threshold should be for a landscape and not just a small plot of land.

Climate Change

While there has been some legislation relating to the Forest Service and climate change, there is very little in previous planning rules that addresses this topic directly. The groups discussed what frameworks may be most appropriate to address climate change and tools for managing change and mitigation.

Participants discussed the role of the precautionary principle in regard to forest management. Some noted that climate change is the least understood issue facing forests and therefore management decisions should be very cautious. In addition to continued monitoring, this would require risk analysis to be performed on new and existing management decisions. Others noted that modeling may be a good tool to guide risk analysis and management decisions.

A wide diversity of opinions was expressed regarding the best rule framework that could address global climate change concerns. Some noted that the rule needs to require that plans address climate change proactively. Those supporting this view provided reasons such as the scale of the problem, the likely budgetary pressures to address other issues first, and the complexity of addressing climate change. They noted that it probably makes sense to keep the language flexible in regard to HOW climate change is addressed given changing climate science and effects of change—but that it must be addressed in order to ensure it is a priority.

Others suggested that the real issue is not climate change, specifically, but changing conditions generally, and that planning should occur in such a way that forests are sustainable and resilient enough to adapt to any changing conditions.

A third framework was proposed: that of the rule requiring that certain categories be addressed such as: economic impacts, projected ecosystem change, forest system services, water, etc. A fourth approach suggested that the rule ask planners to identify resources in their forest that are

more vulnerable to climate change than others. A fifth approach looked at the need to address planning for global climate change on a broader scale and not by individual forests. On a larger scale, climate effects could be better assessed and more easily measured. And finally, participants noted that a combination of some of the above frameworks might offer the best solution.

Participants discussed the role that adaptive management may have in making forests more resilient to climate change and other types of change. Adaptive management strategies could be flexible, built into the rule, and designed to last. For many, monitoring is viewed as a key aspect of adaptive management. Participants discussed whether national monitoring programs should be set up and required by the rule or whether these activities are best left to other federal agencies that already track on climate change. Most noted that adaptive management should be incorporated at the rule level, but that the approach to monitoring should be determined on a plan-by-plan level.

Participants discussed the role that outside stressors and lack of connectivity between forestlands can play in exacerbating the impacts of climate change. Some noted that adaptive management and an all-lands approach could aid in reducing these factors.

The effectiveness of being able to address climate change through a Forest Service planning rule was discussed. Some pointed to how state wildlife action plans are used to create climate adaptation plans. Another example was how elevation gradients can be used to determine the appropriate direction for connectivity. Participants discussed the role that forests and the Forest Service should play in the mitigation of carbon emissions as well as carbon storage, sinks, and fluxes. Some suggested that perhaps a threshold should be set in plans that require the Forest Service to take further action if these triggers are hit.

Finally, participants discussed the idea of using interim measures to address climate change impacts on Forest Service lands while the rule and plans are completed or updated. One approach would be for the rule to require that all forest plans be immediately amended to address climate change. The roadless rule amended every plan in the country, so there is already a precedent for this type of sweeping change.

Watershed Health

Many participants said that a key component of the rule should be protection and enhancement of water resources because water provides a foundational reflection of landscape health. Several participants recommended that the rule require analysis of water resources - as well as assessment of social, economic, and other ecological factors - but leave the scale at which this is done up to individual forest plans. Participants said that the rule should speak to the role of National Forests in addressing water quality and quantity both within National Forest lands and downstream. Noting the connections between several of the breakout group topics, several participants asked whether protecting water resources should be addressed under the topic of restoration in the rule.

After discussing the importance of watershed health and the need for analysis, participants turned to three major questions:

- Should planning be done on a watershed basis?
- Should the rule include standards to address watershed health?
- Should the rule include guidance about protecting and enhancing water resources?

Participants discussed the idea of conducting planning at the watershed level. This approach is easily understood and can enable consideration of groundwater recharge and storage. Also, a watershed approach may enable coordination with other jurisdictions and adjacent landowners, possibly through collaboration or official memorandums of understanding.

Yet, some participants noted that watershed-scale planning is often not adequate in addressing plant and animal range connectivity, natural disturbances, or the way people organize themselves within a watershed. Planning at the sub-watershed scale may correlate better with where people live, and can facilitate working with members of the public to institute land use changes. Also, Forest Service units are currently not organized by watershed. As an alternative, monitoring alone could be done at a watershed level. Or planning could be organized based on the issues that are most important to a particular forest such as community uses, wilderness or water. Some suggested that the planning rule identify planning on a watershed basis as one option, but leave it up to the individual forests to determine the best way to organize planning.

Before turning to the second question, regarding approaches for addressing watershed health, participants clarified the difference between standards and provisions or guidelines, with the understanding that a standard is specific and prescriptive (e.g., activity must be 100 feet from a stream), whereas a provision or guideline requires that an issue be addressed while allowing some flexibility in how it is addressed (e.g., protect the riparian zone). Some suggested that the planning rule should require forest plans to determine standards or provisions for watershed health rather than including standards in the rule itself. Others felt that the rule should have standards that address watershed health as well as guidance to protect and enhance the watershed to ensure accountability. Still others noted the need for at least minimum standards for ensuring watershed health. Finally, some noted that the rule refer to best management practices (BMPs) that are based on the Clean Water Act. Generally, participants noted that standards and provisions should be outcome-based and that there needs to be a process whereby standards/guidelines could be revised if there were unintended consequences on the watershed.

In regard to the third question of providing guidance on protecting and enhancing water resources, most noted that the rule should require plans to be accountable in this way, but to allow for flexibility. Participants discussed how the process for implementing these guidelines should allow for iterative input from a diversity of non-governmental stakeholders.

Diversity of Plants and Animals

The discussions about plant and animal diversity revolved around a set of closely related issues: the kind of measurements and assessment necessary to determine what plant and animal diversity is present and to ascertain the status of threatened species, and whether viability is still a useful

construct; the scale at which assessments should be done and species protected; and flexibility in the face of changing conditions.

Many participants were struck by the dramatic increase in available monitoring technology coupled with the decreased cost of monitoring. It was suggested that these advances open up new opportunities for how plant and animal diversity is assessed and monitored. One suggestion that emerged was a multi-faceted approach to measure habitat diversity: a suite of focal species and at-risk species. It was noted that monitoring should occur at several scales, from molecular to ecosystem. Several participants said that perhaps indicator species are not necessarily the most useful way to monitor diversity and/or that the concept should be expanded to include indicator habitats. In addition, some suggested that viability should be reassessed as a framework for species diversity. There was concern about the extent to which monitoring protocols should be developed and mandated in the rule, especially in light of the continuing advances in monitoring technologies and capabilities. Some thought that the rule should generally promote the precautionary principle as a mechanism for ensuring protection of at risk species, rather than, or in addition to specifying monitoring approaches. It was further clarified that the precautionary principle can imply proactive action, not just prohibitive and limiting activities.

There was considerable discussion about the reality that management within Forest Service unit boundaries is not adequate to provide for plant and animal diversity, especially for wide ranging species. Many participants referenced an "all-lands" approach as a way to address this reality in collaboration with other agencies and adjacent private landowners, perhaps through explicit consideration of connectivity and corridors to facilitate species movement and migration. Others said management for diversity should occur "at the plan level" because this is the level over which National Forests can exert control. Another suggestion was for the rule to explicitly require forests to assess their role in protecting diversity within the larger ecosystem of which they are a part. Some also thought that the historic range of variability should inform, not dictate the consideration for how far to extend the boundaries of consideration.

Another discussion topic addressed the need to retain flexibility in how diversity is assessed and protected in light of possible changing conditions such as climatic variation. Participants noted the relationship to ecosystem resiliency as a means to mitigate the impacts of change on species diversity. An "all lands approach" promoting connectivity and corridors was cited as another possible approach.

Use and Enjoyment of NFS Lands

Participants of these break-outs began by noting that the NOI did not directly address use and recreation of Forest Service lands. Many felt this was a major omission in the document and expressed a desire to see the rule provide a clear framework and goals for these interests.

Participants began by discussing the need for including the concept of "sustainable recreation" at the rule level. Many participants suggested that the definition of sustainable recreation should be determined at the local level and should consider both traditional and potential new uses. When defining sustainable recreation, land, air and water uses, historic, cultural and indigenous uses, and environmental issues such as vegetation, soil, and resiliency should be considered.

Participants discussed how plans should aim for conscious design "for" recreation by identifying niches and suitable uses and active management "of" recreation to ensure sustainability. Many noted that with integrated analysis and proactive management, recreation does not need to present a choice between carrying capacity and ecosystem services.

Many participants requested that the planning rule should set broad recreational objectives that identify analysis, assessment, and evaluation tools (such as adaptive management) while empowering decision makers at the local level to make specific land use decisions.

Some discussed how suitable land uses should be determined based on environmental issues such as soil types, vegetation types, resistance to and response to different recreational uses. The rule should require that forest plans identify unique niches and suitable uses.

It was also noted that forest plans should consciously integrate and interact with travel management planning efforts.

Contributions to Vibrant Local Economies

In trying to frame this discussion, participants noted that it is critically important for the Forest Service to determine the role it is going to play in encouraging growth in local economies. The extent to which the Forest Service integrates with local communities and economies, encourages traditional industries, and aids with transition to new industries needs to be clarified. There was a perception that the Forest Service has withdrawn from rural communities to the detriment of those communities. It was also noted that economic use can take many forms, including timber, geological, other extractive, agricultural, recreational and tourism uses.

Many people noted that degraded forests were often accompanied by degraded economies and that restoration should occur at the "nexus" of forests and economies. A key ingredient towards this type of understanding was the idea of social equity as a concept that is integrated with ecological sustainability and is broader than just economic use. It encourages local participation in decision making, encourages and respects the contributions of local knowledge, and seeks to wed local knowledge of place with broader knowledge of economic and political processes. There was concern that knowledge and political connections that developed outside of the forests were driving decisions locally and excluding local groups.

To encourage local participation, there may be a need or possibility for the formalization of collaborative processes in the planning rule. This collaboration would be ongoing, integrated into the planning process, and would recognize that horizontal bridges among units, such as forests, communities, local officials, other agencies and tribes, are the basis of collaboration. It would be broad, proactive, seek to find common understanding and avoid compartmentalizing groups and uses. Collaborative groups could be convened by the Forest, and groups and agencies like the US Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution could be used to help forests develop appropriate collaborative processes.

Broadening the understanding of collaboration in forest management may encourage the implementation of adaptive/active management and forge partnerships that may lead to being able

to take an "all-lands" approach. These collaborative processes may also help identify the value that ecosystem services (a traditionally difficult concept to design) have for local communities when compared to other economic uses.

Final Reflections

Participants shared final reflections and ideas that provided "ah-ha" moments for them during the two days. Several mentioned the need for a simpler, more "elegant" rule that incorporates the core values of forest restoration and management. Some noted the difficulty of writing such a rule. Others commented on the new challenges the Forest Service faces and the need to seek new solutions on issues such as climate change, forests in urban areas, and the active management of recreation areas.