U.S. Forest Service – Rocky Mountain Region
Watershed Conservation Practices – A Summary

In 1996, the Rocky Mountain Region formally adopted a set of watershed conservation practices (WCPs) as official policy. They were revised in 1999 and 2004 to stay up with new knowledge and methods. The WCPs are based on relevant laws and scientific principles. They are used to protect soil, water, and riparian resources during any use of national forests and grasslands.

The heart of the WCPs is a set of standards and design criteria to be applied on the ground. Standards describe outcomes by which management actions comply with laws and regulations. Design criteria are specific ways to meet the standards using current knowledge and techniques. The WCPs contain a total of 17 standards and 74 design criteria organized in five topic areas:

- **Hydrologic function** is the capacity of a watershed to absorb, store, and filter snow and rain and deliver clean water to streams, lakes, and ground water. Two standards and four design criteria are used to maintain ground cover of plants and plant litter and to limit the amount of disturbed areas (like roads) that drain directly into streams and lakes.

- **Riparian areas** are the moist zones next to streams and lakes. Their more abundant vegetation sustains the quality of aquatic habitats. It provides shade and fish cover, strengthens banks, traps sediment, and supplies woody debris. Six standards and 32 design criteria are used to protect riparian vegetation, stream channel integrity, and free movement of fish.

- **Sediment control** from roads and other disturbed sites is crucial to protect water quality and aquatic habitats. Four standards and 24 design criteria are used to carefully build, locate, and drain roads and other disturbed sites and to reclaim them when their use ends.

- **Soil productivity** determines the capacity of all lands to grow vegetation and provide ground cover. Two standards and five design criteria are used to maintain soil organic matter and nutrients and to limit the amount of soil laid bare, compacted, or severely burned.

- **Water purity** is essential to support aquatic life and human uses of water. Three standards and nine design criteria are used to keep harmful chemicals and pathogens out of streams, lakes, and ground water.

Click here to access the complete text of the Rocky Mountain Region Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook.