

Executive Summary

The FY 2009 M&E (Monitoring and Evaluation) Report provides an evaluation of monitoring performed on the NFGT (National Forests and Grasslands in Texas), as required by the *Plan* (1996 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan). The report provides monitoring item descriptions, the variability that is allowed before additional action is required and the FY 09 Findings and Recommendations for Change. Based on these findings, a 2010 Action Plan was prepared. The Action Plan also includes a listing of actions from previous years that have not been completed to date. This process allows managers to adapt their plans to changing conditions, and helps focus monitoring and evaluation efforts for the coming year.

The following is a summary of monitoring findings and other noteworthy issues.

Issue A. Ecosystem Condition, Health and Sustainability

Sub-Issue 1. Biological Diversity

- The regeneration of longleaf pine continued in FY 09. Third-year stocking exams conducted in 2009 found that 29.6 percent of the seedlings have survived. First-year survival exams found that 54.9 percent of the seedlings had survived. Seedling survival was adversely impacted in 2009 by inadequate rainfall during the spring and early summer.
- The FS Veg age-class distribution report for the end of 2009 shows a continuing trend towards an older forest.
- In FY 09, the NFGT prescribed burned approximately 139,053 acres. The *Plan* set an annual objective of approximately 100,000 acres of prescribed burning per year.
- The majority of management indicators have indicated stable or increasing trends through the past five-to-ten years. The RCW (red-cockaded woodpecker) population is at 346 active clusters, a new milestone for the NFGT. Only the Acadian Flycatcher and the Wood Thrush appear to have a downward trends.
- Habitat for MIS (Management Indicator Species) is generally improving throughout the forests and grasslands. Increased prescribed fire efforts are revealing greater improvements in both the number of certain element occurrences and quality of each occurrence for fire-dependent plant species.
- Most resident T&E (Threatened and Endangered) and Sensitive Species populations are increasing. RCW populations are at an all-time high.

Sub-Issue 2. Forest and Range Health

- Air quality monitoring on the NFGT indicated units did not exceed the NAAQS (National Ambient Air Quality Standard) PM (Particulate Matter) 2.5 level.
- No SPB (southern pine beetle) infestations were detected on the NFT (National Forests in Texas) in FY 09. The NFT participated in the SPB survey and results from the survey predicted extremely low populations, as no SPB were captured.
- NNIPS surveys were conducted forest-wide. This survey focused on primary vectors for infestations such as utility right-of-ways, special use sites, recreation sites, and road right-of-ways.

Sub-Issue 3. Watershed Conditions

- No soil and water disturbances occurred that were identified by NFGT personnel as exceeding the soil loss tolerance levels set out in the *Plan*.
- As part of the NFGT's endeavors to protect soil and water resources in FY 09, the Caddo and LBJ NGs continued to implement an active Watershed Improvement Program.
- There were no identified adverse soil and water occurrences from activities on NFGT lands or to impaired stream segments identified in FY 09.
- In 2009, TFS (Texas Forest Service) did not conduct a BMP (Best Management Practices) compliance review on the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas. Hurricane Ike hit Texas in September 2008 and most of the work during 2009 was related to Hurricane Ike salvage.

Issue B. Sustainable Multiple Forest and Range Benefits

Sub-Issue 1. Outdoor Recreation Opportunities

- Law Enforcement Officials continued their patrols of OHV (off-highway vehicle) use areas and issued citations to users for violations of riding laws and for creating unacceptable resource damage.
- During FY 09 the NFGT continued the process to implement the TMR (Travel Management Rule) regulations (36 CFR Parts 212, 251, 261, and 295). The TMR was finalized and published on November 9, 2005 (70 FR 68264). The TMR requires that each unit of the NFGT (the Sam Houston, Davy Crockett, Sabine, and Angelina NFs as well as the Caddo/LBJ National Grasslands) determine which roads, trails, and areas would be open for motorized vehicle use in a

separate process and publish a Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) designating those roads, trails and areas open for motorized vehicle use on each unit. MVUM maps are updated annually by unit and distributed to Forest users.

Sub-Issue 2. Infrastructure

- All road construction in FY 09 was in compliance with contract specifications and the *Plan's* Standards and Guidelines.
- In FY 09, all maintenance Level 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 roads had condition surveys conducted and current or new data was entered into the INFRA data base.
- A total of 278.15 miles of road reconstruction was accomplished. All of these miles included wing ditches with appropriately designed J-hooks to mitigate potential erosion problems that were identified in previous M&E reports.
- Because of hurricane damage by storms, Rita and Ike and the amount of land line boundary re-survey work that has and will be accomplished under the hurricane contracts, the National Forests are catching up with the 10 year rotation criteria for landline maintenance in the Forest Plan.
- Ground was broken for the new NFGT Supervisor's Office at the old administrative site in Lufkin, Texas in November 2008. The 18,000 square-foot facility will be constructed using the agency's new "green" standards. The building should be ready for occupancy in early 2011.

Sub-Issue 3. Human Influences

- There is a constant rise in use of NFGT lands that are near large urban areas. This has also multiplied the creation of unauthorized trails and other resource damage to the forests.
- Law enforcement agents are still encountering an increased amount of controlled substance use activity on the NFGT.

Sub-Issue 4. Roadless Areas, Wilderness, Wild and Scenic Rivers

- A NVUM (National Visitor Use Monitoring) survey was performed in FY 09. Results of the survey should be available in early 2010.

Sub-Issue 5. Timber

- For the last ten years, an average of 19.0 percent of the *Plan* specified ASQ (Allowable Sale Quantity) has been sold. Since the probability of exceeding ASQ

is unlikely, this is not a real issue for the NFGT.

- The NFGT needs to identify areas of concern and develop associated project plans to build up the timber harvesting program in order to meet *Plan* target levels and meet resource-related needs.
- Project plans, prescriptions, environmental assessments and decision documents that were developed in FY 09 were reviewed and found to be in compliance with the *Plan*.
- Third-year stocking exams conducted in 2009 found that 29.6 percent of the stands exceeded the lower level of the FW-204-1 standard for the planted species. Stands that were below minimum survival levels (for planted seedlings) were checked for stocking. Enough natural seedlings were established to increase the total stand stocking levels (planted and natural seedlings) above the *Plan* minimum level for most of the deficient.
- No timber was harvested on unsuitable lands solely for timber management purposes.

Sub-Issue 6. Forage

- Grassland range allotments are being managed in a satisfactory condition of “fair to good.” In FY 09, the Caddo and LBJ NGs continued to implement a fundamental change in grazing schemes that began in 1998. The focus changed from year-round grazing to a seasonal grazing system.

Sub-Issue 7. Other Products

Mineral operations inspections in FY 09 indicated most activities were in compliance with the permit conditions and operating plans. There were no spills reported in FY 09.

Sub-Issue 8. Heritage Resources

- In FY 09, there were no projects which implemented *Plan* Standards and Guidelines that adversely affected historic properties.

Issue C. Organizational Effectiveness

Sub-Issue 1. Economics

- The NFGT is no longer allocated funds based on a percent of its need (as identified in the *Plan* as funds needed to accomplish its goals and objectives.) In

FY 09, the NFGT's expenditures were \$23,810,173 as compared to the *Plan's* projected average budget needs of \$26,657,400.

Sub-Issue 2. Evaluating New Information

- **2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule** –During 2009, national direction was issued to clarify how units should handle areas designated as roadless in the 2001 rule. This was done to respond to two conflicting rulings that were issued by the U.S. District Courts in Wyoming (2008) and California (2007). On May 28, 2009, Secretary Thomas J. Vilsack reserved final decision authority over certain forest management and road construction projects in inventoried roadless areas. The Secretary's Memorandum 1042-154 was intended to assure the careful evaluation of actions in inventoried roadless areas while long-term roadless policy continues to be developed and relevant court cases move forward.

This direction was modified in a letter dated August 3, 2009 and provided re-delegation of authority to the Forest Service to authorize —

Approval of any necessary timber cutting or removal or any road

- construction/reconstruction in emergency situations involving wildfire suppression, search and rescue operations, or other imminent threats to public health and safety in inventoried roadless areas. The local line officer is delegated authority to make these decisions.

Approval of any timber cutting, sale, or removal in inventoried roadless areas

- incidental to the implementation of an existing special use authorization. Road
- construction/reconstruction is not authorized through this re-delegation without further projectspecific review. The local line officer is delegated authority to make these decisions.

The Sam Houston NF has four areas that are being managed per the Secretary's direction. These areas are: Big Creek Scenic Area, Winters Bayou Scenic Area, a 200-acre track adjacent to Little Lake Creek Wilderness, and the Big Woods Areas in Compartment 80.

For the most up-to-date information about this issue, visit the Forest Service website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/> and look for a direct link to the Roadless Website.

- **American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (Recovery Act or AARA)** – The Recovery Act was signed into law on February 17, 2009. With funding from the AARA, the Forest Service has an opportunity to create jobs that support our mission of sustaining the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.

For an overview of the AARA and Forest Service projects, see the link found at <http://www.fs.fed.us/>.

- **National Forest System Land and Resources Management Planning Rule** – The U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California invalidated the 2008 Planning Rule on June 30, 2009, holding that it was developed in violation of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Endangered Species Act (ESA). The 2000 rule legally came back into effect when the 2008 rule was set aside. The 2000 rule allows the Forest Service to develop, revise, and amend forest plans using the provisions of the 1982 planning rule.

The Department of Agriculture decided not to seek further review of the latest court decision. It was determined that a new planning rule is the best way forward because the agency needs a stable planning rule to meet current and future needs of the National Forest System. Developing a new planning rule provides the opportunity to help protect, reconnect, and restore national forests and grasslands for the benefit of human communities and natural resources. The development of the new rule will provide new direction to help the Forest Service respond to modern challenges, including restoring and conserving forests, protecting watersheds, addressing climate change, sustaining local economies, improving collaboration, and working across landscapes.

As an interim measure, the Department will republish the 2000 planning rule, as amended, in order to make it available to the public in the Code of Federal Regulations. This action will facilitate its use by forests and grasslands in the National Forest System to revise and amend plans while a new rule is being developed.

The public can visit <http://www.fs.usda.gov/planningrule> to find out more about this ongoing process.

- In FY 09 the NFGT made a total of \$3,655,940 in payments to counties that contain NFGT lands.