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Agriculture

Forest Service

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DRAFT PROGRAMMATIC ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

National Forest System Land Management Planning

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOREST SERVICE



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**National Forest System Land Management Planning
Draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement**

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Abstract: The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service (the Agency) is proposing a new rule at 36 CFR part 219 to guide development, revision, and amendment of land management plans for units of the National Forest System. The Agency is considering five alternatives in detail, including the proposed action. The proposed action and alternatives were developed through a nationwide collaborative effort. A host of individuals, organizations and agencies representing diverse perspectives and interests generously contributed their ideas for the proposed action and alternatives. More than 26,000 comments were received in response to the notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement. A science forum and a series of national and regional roundtable discussions were held to share ideas for this proposed planning rule.

Alternative A is the proposed action and preferred alternative. The draft programmatic environmental impact statement describes the effects of each alternative with respect to the purpose and need and significant issues. The draft programmatic environmental impact statement is available online at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/planningrule>. The final programmatic environmental impact statement, when completed, will be available on the same website.

While the Agency invites comments on all aspects of this draft programmatic environmental impact statement, responses concerning assumptions in this document and additional information to be considered would be appreciated. It is important that reviewers provide their comments at such times and in such a way that they are useful to the Agency's preparation of the final programmatic environmental impact statement. Therefore, comments should be provided prior to the close of the comment period and should clearly identify the reviewer's concerns. The submission of timely and specific comments can affect a reviewer's ability to participate in any subsequent administrative review.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be part of the public record for this proposed action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered.

Send Comments to: <http://www.govcomments.com> or to
<http://www.regulations.gov> or to
Forest Service Planning DEIS
C/O Bear West Company
132 E 500 S, Bountiful, Utah 84010
or via facsimile to 801-397-1605
Comment period closes May 16, 2011

The Forest Service planning process provides an important venue to integrate forest restoration, climate resilience, watershed protection, wildlife conservation, the need for vibrant local economies, and the collaboration necessary to manage our national forests. Our best opportunity to accomplish this is in the developing of a new forest planning rule for our national forests.

Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture



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SUMMARY



The Agency is seeking public comment on a proposed land management planning rule at 36 Code of Federal Regulations Part 219. The proposed planning rule, or alternative planning rules, would establish new administrative procedures whereby National Forest System (NFS) land management plans are developed, revised, and amended.

On June 30, 2009, the United States District Court for the Northern District of California invalidated the Forest Service's 2008 land management planning rule (2008 rule), holding that it was developed in violation of the National Environmental Planning Act (NEPA) and the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The district court vacated the 2008 rule, enjoined the USDA from further implementing it and remanded it to the USDA for further proceedings (*Citizens for Better Forestry v. USDA*, 632 F. Supp. 2d 968 (N.D. Cal. 2009)). With the 2008 rule set aside, the 2000 planning rule is once more in effect. The Agency has concerns with its ability to implement the 2000 rule and has consistently exercised the option in the 2000 rule's transition provision to use the 1982 planning rule procedures to develop, revise, and amend land management plans.

A new planning rule is needed to ensure that plans will be responsive to the challenges of climate change; the need for forest restoration and conservation, watershed protection, and wildlife conservation; and the sustainable use of NFS lands to support vibrant communities.

The Agency published a notice of intent (NOI) to prepare an environmental impact statement in the Federal Register on December 18, 2009 (74 FR 67165), to start the public involvement process for a new planning rule. Also, the Agency sent electronic correspondence to a number of organizations known to have an interest in the planning rule, giving notice of its intent to prepare an environmental impact statement to analyze and disclose potential consequences associated with a National Forest System land management planning rule.

A national science forum and four national roundtables were convened by the Forest Service aimed at creating collaboration and dialogue around development of the planning rule. Two national tribal roundtables were held by teleconference along with six regional tribal roundtable meetings. An additional 33 roundtables were held with the public throughout the country. The Deputy Chief for the National Forest System invited 564 federally recognized Tribes and 29 Alaska Native Corporations to formally consult on the proposed planning rule. While the initial, formal consultation period of 180 days will overlap with the public comment period for the proposed rule and draft programmatic environmental impact statement, the Forest Service will continue to conduct government-to-government consultation on the planning rule throughout the process as tribal

consultation is an ongoing, iterative process. The Agency held meetings across the country with designated tribal officials in November and December 2010.

SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations at 40 CFR 1501.7 direct agencies to “Determine the scope (§ 1508.25) and the significant issues to be analyzed in depth in the environmental impact statement” and to “identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review (§ 1506.3).” The Forest Service identified significant issues from diverging viewpoints and disagreements articulated in comments responding to the December 18, 2009 NOI and the roundtable meetings held throughout the country. The following significant issues were identified from comments received on the NOI and from the roundtables. These issues, along with the various aspects of the purpose and need, define the scope of the effects analysis.

Ecosystem Restoration — Some stakeholders have expressed the view that restoration should not be mentioned explicitly in the rule. Support for this perspective includes the points that the NFMA is silent on the concept of restoration; restoration is just one tool of many available to managers; and the concept of restoration will be implicitly addressed as part of habitat management. Others have expressed a desire for the rule to be explicit about restoration because the topic is simply too important to leave out.

Watershed Protection — Many people concur with the general notion that, because water quality provides a foundational reflection of landscape health, a key element of the rule should be protection and enhancement of water resources. There is less agreement about what exactly the rule should require, although there seems to be support for some kind of accountability for forests to protect and enhance water resources balanced with the need for flexibility. There is a divergence of opinions on whether to include specific standards for watershed health in the rule. Some people suggest that the planning rule should require plans to determine standards or provisions for watershed health rather than including those standards in the rule itself. Others have expressed a belief that to ensure that the responsible official is held accountable, the rule should have standards and guidelines to protect and enhance water resources and overall watershed health.

Diversity of Plant and Animal Communities — People have differing opinions about the most appropriate way for the rule to provide guidance for maintaining plant and animal diversity, contributing to the recovery of threatened and endangered species, and maintaining the viability of native species within the plan area. Some people believe the planning rule should include requirements that are focused on wildlife, fish, and plant species and populations like the 1982 rule requirements are. Others suggest the planning rule should consider an ecological condition or habitat-based approach to maintaining viability by focusing on maintenance or restoration of the structure, composition, processes, connectivity, and diversity of healthy and resilient terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems in the plan area.

Climate Change — Two general perspectives have been expressed about how the issue of climate change should be addressed in the rule. The first perspective is that climate change does not need to be mentioned in the rule. The second is that climate change is such a fundamental ecosystem stressor that it must be addressed explicitly in the rule. Subscribers to the first viewpoint have said there is too much uncertainty about the causes and effects of climate change (particularly at the forest level) to address in a planning rule. Others suggest that the rule should require a thorough consideration of climate change in the planning process including an acknowledgement of the local climate conditions and uncertainties.

Multiple Uses — Generally, people have said that the best way for the Forest Service to contribute to social and economic sustainability is to maintain a focus in the rule on ensuring healthy forest ecosystems. Many people note that the Forest Service does not really have much ability to influence economies, and should focus instead on the land management business it knows best. Others suggest that the Forest Service needs to elevate the importance of vibrant local communities through effective involvement of and collaboration with representatives of the local communities that are impacted by Forest Service land management. People point out that a substantial amount of jobs and income in some communities depend on the multiple uses of NFS lands, particularly from outdoor recreation, timber harvest, and livestock grazing. There is broad agreement that recreation is a sustainable use of NFS lands that contributes significantly to local economies. People generally agree the rule should reflect recreation as a core value, although views vary about how this core value should be reconciled with other core values and legal requirements.

Efficiency and Effectiveness — Some people argue for a simple planning process because planning has taken too much funding away from important resource management projects and has taken too much of people's time. Others agree with keeping the rule simple, but advocate for prescriptive rule provisions which would establish specific, detailed requirements to address a particular resource or use of NFS lands. Throughout discussions on the other issues, there was amicable tension between those who desire a prescriptive planning rule and those who want flexibility to address local concerns.

Transparency and Collaboration — People recognize that there are many stakeholders involved in these issues and all should have the opportunity to be engaged in the collaboration process. Many have expressed frustration with traditional input mechanisms, where input was gathered but not necessarily used – a feeling intensified by a less-than-transparent processes. Some people suggest the planning rule should establish a structured public involvement and collaboration process for plan development, revision, and amendment.

Coordination and Cooperation Beyond NFS Boundaries — People note that boundaries are permeable and that an “all lands” approach could be useful for achieving many different management objectives, including protecting at-risk species, creating resilient ecosystems, protecting watersheds, historic preservation, supporting trails that cross jurisdictions, and providing recreational access.

PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

These issues led the Agency to develop a proposed action and alternatives. In response to the significant issues, the Forest Service developed five alternatives for detailed study, including the No Action and Proposed Action alternatives.

Alternative A (Proposed Action)

The proposed planning rule is developed around a framework within which land managers and partners would work together to understand conditions on the land, develop management plans to respond to existing and predicted conditions and needs, and monitor changing conditions and the effectiveness of management actions to provide a continuous feedback loop. The framework consists of a three-part learning and planning cycle:

1. Assess conditions and stressors, including climate change, on the NFS unit and in the context of the broader landscape;
2. Revise or Amend land management plans based on the need for change; and
3. Monitor to detect changes on the unit and across the broader landscape and to evaluate whether management actions produce desired outcomes.

Based on public comment and past experience, the proposed rule would require the consideration and integration of the management of physical, biological, social, and cultural resources, given a unit's distinctive roles and contributions of ecosystem services and multiple uses to the local area, region, and Nation. The roles and contributions are developed through the public participation process.

The proposed rule would require preparation of an environmental impact statement and a record of decision for new plans and plan revisions. The proposed rule would provide guidance for plans to require meaningful and accountable monitoring through a structured public process that evaluates changes on the unit and across the broader landscape. Monitoring would be used to assess progress toward achieving desired conditions in plans, and for evaluating whether there is a need for re-assessment and plan revision or amendment.

Alternative B (No Action)

Under this alternative, the planning provisions of the 1982 rule, last included in the Code of Federal Regulations at 36 CFR part 219 (2000) would guide development, revision, and amendment of land management plans for the National Forest System. Use of the 1982 rule planning provisions is allowed under the transition language of the 2000 planning rule currently in effect (36 CFR part 219.35).

Alternative C

This alternative was developed to address concerns that land management planning has greatly exceeded the scope and intent of National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and in so doing taken an excessive toll in cost and time invested, by both Forest Service employees and the public. This alternative requires the land management planning process and resulting plans be limited to the minimum requirements of NFMA, with the

addition of minimal requirements to meet the purpose and need for a new rule set out in this draft programmatic environmental impact statement.

Alternative D

This alternative was designed to evaluate additional protections for watersheds and an alternative approach to diversity of plant and animal communities. These approaches were addressed together because they both involve requirements for plan content for resource protection, as opposed to other issues that are concerned with procedural requirements. This alternative consists of the proposed rule (Alternative A) with additional and replacement direction focused on coordination requirements at § 219.4, assessment requirements at § 219.6, sustainability requirements at § 219.8, species requirements at § 219.9, monitoring requirements at § 219.12, and some additional and alternative definitions at § 219.19.

Alternative E

This alternative was developed in response to concerns and suggestions for prescriptive monitoring and assessment questions and requirements to establish signals for each question to identify the need for plan amendment or revision. Additionally, this alternative responds to the desires of some people to see specific requirements for collaboration in the planning rule in order to ensure consistency and accountability across NFS units. This alternative consists of the proposed rule (Alternative A) with additional and replacement direction focused on prescriptive requirements for public notification at § 219.4, assessment requirements at § 219.6, monitoring requirements at § 219.12, and public notification requirements at § 219.16.

Alternatives Eliminated from Detailed Study

The following alternatives were considered but eliminated from further study once they were found not to meet the purpose and need for action.

- The land management plan development, revision, and amendment provisions of the 2000 planning rule;
- An alternative requiring the land management planning process and resulting plans to be limited to the minimum requirements of NFMA;
- An alternative requiring the responsible official to give more consideration to comments from members of local communities than comments provided by individuals or special interest groups who are not part of the local community;
- An alternative consisting of a highly prescriptive planning rule that set national standards for all aspects of land management plans. This alternative would essentially constitute a national land management plan;
- An alternative planning rule that would only allow timber harvest for restoration purposes;
- An alternative that would require plans to give recreation the greatest value among the various multiple uses of NFS lands; and

- An alternative that would require regional planning and regional guides such as was included in the 1982 planning rule.

MAJOR CONCLUSIONS OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

Ecosystem Restoration

Alternative A

Plan assessments would determine what plan components and management activities would be appropriate to maintain and restore composition structure, function and connectivity (ecological integrity) of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and watersheds. Plans would include components related to restoration activities. As plans are implemented over time, restoration activities that improve composition, structure, function and connectivity would increase or maintain ecological integrity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. Ecosystems with higher ecological integrity are expected to have increased resilience and resistance to stressors on and off NFS lands. Monitoring at the unit and the broad scale would provide more complete information on the implementation and effectiveness of restoration activities which would allow managers to assess the effects of management in the context or the larger landscape.

Alternative B

Plans would continue to include components to restore habitat conditions to support the viability requirements for vertebrate species. Implementation of the plans developed under this alternative would seek to restore conditions for the purpose of maintaining multiple uses and ecosystem services of interest to the public. The trends of increased restoration at both the site and larger landscape scales would likely continue. Absent specific requirements, there is greater uncertainty on what would be included in plans related to restoration, resilience and connectivity and a greater range of potential outcomes than under this alternative than under Alternatives A, C, D and E. Restoration would be driven by policy and direction other than the planning rule (Endangered Species act, Clean Water Act, Agency policy, social pressure). Degraded ecosystems on NFS lands are expected to be restored, but the rate and extent of restoration is more uncertain under this alternative than under other alternatives.

Alternative C

The flexibility provided by this alternative could increase efficiency and allow opportunity for units to tailor assessment, revision or amendment and monitoring to address only the critical or unique needs of the unit. Inherently, there would also be greater uncertainty as to whether restoration of ecosystem components not specifically required by the alternative would be considered and included in plan revision or amendment. Plans would include components that lead to restoration of terrestrial and aquatic systems. As plans are implemented over time, restoration activities would vary across the NFS in their ability to maintain or improve ecological integrity.

Alternative D

The effects of Alternative D would be similar in most respects to those of Alternative A except: landscape-level restoration strategies developed with multiple partners would be further informed by coordination with adjacent planning units, other land owners and land managers engaged in species conservation; watershed assessments and/or landscape assessments would be prepared for all NFS. (On some units it is possible that assessments at the watershed scale would provide the information necessary to meet requirements for maintaining or restoring ecological integrity and species viability. On most units, assessments at multiple ecological unit boundaries would be necessary.); plans would contain plan components to maintain or restore watersheds including a number of additional standard and guidelines for watershed and aquatic resource protection. Road removal and remediation in riparian conservation areas and key watersheds would be the highest restoration priority for all units.

Alternative E

The effects of Alternative E would be similar in most respects to those of Alternative A. Additionally, under this alternative: there would be more evaluation of ecological conditions and possible scenarios during assessment for plan revisions and more monitoring of specific conditions and response to restoration; the use of signal points could potentially make management more aware and responsive when monitoring results are outside of expected levels. The difficulty of establishing statistically and temporally significant signal points related to restoration, especially where there is insufficient data and where conditions are changing, will increase the complexity of planning. The prescriptive nature of the monitoring requirements could increase the ability to aggregate and compare data between units or at higher scales, but could also result in collection of data that is not necessarily relevant to the management of individual units or ecological conditions.

Watershed Protection

Alternative A

Assessment of existing and potential stressors on and off NFS lands could provide information related to water quality and quantity that could be used to develop plan components to ameliorate the impacts generated by stressors beyond NFS boundaries. New or revised plans would consistently include more direction for maintenance and restoration of watersheds composition, structure and function and protection for aquatic resources than existing plans. As plans developed to meet the requirements of Alternative A are implemented, watershed conditions would be expected to improve and resilience in the face of changing conditions would be increased. Healthy, resilient watersheds would provide a sustained flow of ecosystem services over time. Plans would be expected to include direction for managing road systems where roads are adversely impacting watershed condition. The trend toward a reduced road system is expected to continue. Fewer and better maintained roads would be expected to reduce the potential for sedimentation and other adverse effects to aquatic resources. Prioritization for where to decommission roads could be based on impacts to priority watersheds, habitat, or other

resources; or road density standards or other factors. Plans created or revised under this alternative would more consistently include plan components for riparian protection and restoration (§ 219.8) than is currently required. As plans are implemented, values of riparian areas such as temperature regulation, large woody debris recruitment, bank stabilization, sediment retention, and others would be expected to be maintained or restored. Plans would be expected to reflect a broader spectrum of public values concerning watershed condition, riparian areas, and water quality than under current requirements.

Alternative B

Under Alternative B, there would be less certainty in how or to what extent plans would provide guidance for restoring or protecting watershed conditions, riparian areas and water quality than there would be under Alternatives A, D and E, though all plans are expected to include guidance related to these resources. Plans under Alternative B would be highly variable in what guidance they include related to management of the road system. Alternative B allows plans to take a strictly mitigative approach rather than an active restoration approach to riparian area management. In times of changing climate, fire suppression and increasing stressors both on and off NFS lands, riparian area function could deteriorate under a strictly mitigation management approach. Current trends for decommissioning roads under Alternative B are expected to continue.

Alternative C

Plans would be written consistent with current agency policy and existing law but they would be expected to be highly variable in the degree to which they include guidance for water-related resources. The flexibility of Alternative C creates a wide range of potential outcomes and greater uncertainty in both in what guidance plans would include and what effect to the resources would occur as plans are implemented. The effects of this alternative would otherwise be similar to Alternative B.

Alternative D

The effects of Alternative D would be similar to Alternative A in that the restoration emphasis of this alternative would be expected to lead to plans that result in improved watershed condition and protection of aquatic resources. All plans would include standards and guidelines that require management activities within riparian areas be primarily for restoration; those that are not for restoration (construction of new facilities such as roads, trails, boat landings, etc.) would be designed so as not to impair riparian function. As plans developed under this alternative are implemented, the condition of riparian areas would be expected to improve and the values and function they provide in terms of habitat and water quality would be expected to increase. The prescriptive nature of this alternative might not allow the flexibility to develop plans that can best address resource concerns of a given unit and might not be efficient or effective across highly variable systems. Establishing national restoration priorities that must be included in every plan could lead to plans that are rapidly outdated and might focus staff resources on amending plans rather than on meeting the restoration needs of the unit. Identification of climate change vulnerability would be expected to result in the development of plan

components designed to protect areas especially sensitive to disturbance and changing conditions.

Alternative E

Monitoring plans, including signal points, developed under this alternative could provide a more effective mechanism for adaptive management than current monitoring plans, though the additional requirements might not be efficient or effective for all units. Resources shifted toward monitoring could be at the expense of other management activities. The process for public involvement would be more consistent across units and could result in plans that reflect a broader spectrum of public values concerning watershed condition, riparian areas, and water quality than currently occurs. The effects of Alternative E would otherwise be similar to Alternative A.

Diversity of Plant and Animal Communities

Alternative A

All plans under Alternative A would incorporate a complementary coarse-filter and fine-filter strategy to conserve biological diversity within the plan area. This approach is more scientifically credible and supportable in maintaining biological diversity than the approach provided under the 1982 planning rule, and considers all native species, rather than focusing on vertebrates only. As plans are implemented under the provisions of Alternative A, NFS lands would be expected to consistently provide the ecological conditions necessary to maintain the diversity of plant and animal communities. Planning under Alternative A would assess ecosystem diversity characteristics and incorporate specific plan components that focus management activities on maintaining and restoring ecological composition, structure, and function. Over time, as management activities are implemented to achieve the desired ecological conditions, habitat quantity would be expected to increase and habitat quality would be expected to improve for native species within the plan area. Plans under Alternative A would emphasize ecosystem restoration and connectivity and, where necessary, provide species-specific plan components focused on species conservation. As future plans are implemented, habitat conditions for many federally listed species, candidates for federal listing, and species of conservation concern would be expected to improve within and among plan areas. Plans under Alternative A would include ecological monitoring elements (ecological conditions, ecosystem characteristics, and focal species) that would be more effective and efficient than those under the 1982 planning rule at assessing the diversity of plant and animal communities within the plan area. Reliable information from this monitoring would be expected to identify the need to change a plan in a timelier manner than monitoring under the 1982 planning rule. Planning under Alternative A would establish a two-tiered approach to monitoring, emphasize collaboration and coordination, and increase the role of science over that required under the 1982 planning rule. Increased emphasis on these procedures and processes allow for gathering, assessing, and incorporating information beyond national forest and grassland boundaries which should lead to more effective approaches to the conservation of all species within the region of a plan. Plans under Alternative A would include protection and restoration measures for riparian areas. The implementation of these measures would be expected to result in improved streamside, wetland, lakeside,

and aquatic habitats, especially for aquatic and riparian species. Planning under Alternative A would more actively engage in a collaborative, all lands approach to maintaining biological diversity than current procedures require. This approach could present the best opportunity for recovering threatened and endangered species, preventing the listing of candidates to federal listing, and maintaining the viability of species of conservation concern.

Alternative B

Plans under Alternative B would continue to rely primarily on selected management indicator species (MIS) as a means to assess the effects of management activities on other species or habitats, focused on managing for their habitat conditions and monitoring their population trends. Because Alternative B's species viability requirement is explicit to vertebrates, plans might not fully address the life requirements of invertebrates and plants. As plans are developed and implemented under Alternative B, NFS lands would be expected to vary in the extent to which they provide the ecological conditions necessary to maintain the diversity of plant and animal communities. Plans developed or revised under Alternative B would continue to provide explicit fish and wildlife conservation language, even though the population viability requirement is explicit to vertebrates, which has benefitted these resources in the past. Habitat management direction would primarily be based upon the needs of selected MIS. Many MIS are not biologically appropriate for representing other habitat associates, and do not explicitly address key ecosystem characteristics (composition, structure, function, and landscape connectivity) needed to maintain ecological conditions for all native species. The concept of MIS is largely unsupported in scientific literature. As plans are developed and implemented under Alternative B, NFS units would be expected to continue to be variable in their approaches to overall habitat management among plan areas. Planning under Alternative B would rely primarily on Forest Service directives for guidance on maintaining the viability of all species of conservation concern, as this is not explicitly required in the 1982 rule language. Plans would continue to rely on establishing population trends of selected MIS as a means of assessing vertebrate species viability under Alternative B. This would be expected to continue the inconsistency in a forest or grassland's ability to assess the viability of all native species within the plan area. Planning under Alternative B would allow more discretion to the responsible official with respect to collaborating and coordinating with other agencies and entities, and to taking a broader approach to gathering, assessing and utilizing other relevant information. This allows for inconsistency in the use of this information when addressing species viability issues that extend beyond national forest and grassland boundaries and could lead to less effective approaches to the conservation of all species within the region of a plan.

Alternative C

Plans developed, revised or amended under Alternative C allow for considerable discretion in addressing species diversity and viability, fish and wildlife habitat management, and monitoring because there are no specific requirements for addressing the diversity of plant and animal communities. How this NFMA requirement is to be met would be relatively open to the discretion of the responsible official under Alternative C.

Plans developed and implemented under Alternative C provisions would be expected to vary considerably in their approaches to maintaining species viability, managing ecological conditions, and monitoring. Thus, the ability for plan areas to provide the ecological conditions necessary to maintain the diversity of plant and animal communities would be expected to vary across the NFS. Plans developed under Alternative C would rely primarily on Forest Service directives and policy for guidance on how plans are to be developed or revised when it comes to providing diversity of plant and animal communities. This could lead to broader interpretations of what plans must contain and to inconsistencies from one unit to another as to how species diversity is to be maintained within a plan area. Planning under Alternative C would allow more discretion to the responsible official with respect to collaborating and coordinating with other agencies and entities, and to taking a broader approach to gathering, assessing, and utilizing other relevant information. This might lead to inconsistent use of this information when addressing species viability issues that extend beyond national forest and grassland boundaries and could lead to less effective approaches to the conservation of all species within the region of a plan. Overall, plans under Alternative C would allow for considerable variability in approaches to providing for diversity of plant and animal communities, which could lead to greater uncertainty regarding species viability on all NFS lands.

Alternative D

Plans under Alternative D would be similar to Alternative A in that they incorporate a complementary coarse-filter and fine-filter strategy, emphasize ecosystem restoration and connectivity, and incorporate additional species-specific plan components focused on species conservation. Thus, the effects related to these are also similar to those provided for Alternative A. Planning under Alternative D would include specific assessments of ecosystem diversity characteristics not specified in Alternative A, which would be expected to result in greater assurances that an effective coarse-filter for maintaining biological diversity would be designed. Alternative D places greater emphasis on species monitoring than Alternative A. Compared to Alternative A, plans would include added requirements specific to watershed and riparian protection and restoration that would be expected to result in greater emphasis being placed on ecosystem restoration within priority watersheds. Overtime, as plans are implemented, the resulting plan areas would be expected to yield habitat benefits, especially for aquatic and riparian species.

Alternative E

Plans under Alternative E would be similar to Alternative A in that they incorporate a complementary coarse-filter and fine-filter strategy, emphasize ecosystem restoration and connectivity, and incorporate additional species-specific plan components focused on species conservation. Thus, the effects related to these are also similar to those provided for Alternative A. Planning under Alternative E would add specific requirements for collaboration and coordination that would be expected to result in greater assurances that responsible officials would gather, assess, and incorporate information from beyond national forest and grassland boundaries into the development or revision of a plan. These procedures and processes specifically emphasize gathering, assessing, and incorporating

information beyond national forest and grassland boundaries which should lead to more effective approaches to the conservation of all species within the region of a plan. Plans would also add specific monitoring elements that would be expected to assess the overall effectiveness of plan components toward maintaining biological diversity within the plan area in a more accurate and timely manner than under the other alternatives.

Climate Change

Alternative A

This alternative incorporates an adaptive framework designed to be responsive to climate change and other ecological, social, and economic changes. It includes requirements to consider climate change in assessments, revising or amending plans, and in monitoring. Plans components would be developed taking into account the best scientific information on where and how climate change would affect ecological conditions. Assessments and monitoring (unit level and broad scale) would provide information over time to detect changes to ecological conditions and potential shifts in location and timing of multiple uses and ecosystem services. This information is expected to provide opportunities to amend plans in response to changes influenced by climate change. Carbon stored in above-ground vegetation would be monitored during plan implementation. Uncertainties brought about by climate change would be addressed through a planning framework for adaptive management that includes 1) an iterative process of assessment, revising or amending plans, and monitoring, and 2) participation in all phases by managers, scientists, and the public.

Alternative B

The current trend of increased focus on climate change in planning would continue. There would be less certainty and consistency about inclusion of climate change in the planning process than in alternatives A, D or E. Implementation of plans would be informed by an awareness and understanding of climate change but there would be less information related to climate change for decisionmaking than in alternatives A, D, and E.

Alternative C

There is one specific reference to climate in this alternative. The effects of this alternative are similar to Alternative B. Climate change is expected to be considered in plans. However, the extent of that information and how it would be used in plan revisions or amendments would vary across the NFS. There are no requirement to use a planning framework with a systematic approach to assessment and monitoring. Therefore, less information and fewer opportunities to detect and respond to threats to ecological, social, and economic influenced by climate change would be available than in Alternative A.

Alternative D

The effects of this alternative are similar to Alternative A, except there are more requirements to address climate change in this alternative. The additional requirements

include developing strategies to address impacts to global climate change on plant and animal communities; conducting watershed-scale assessments that include an assessment of climate change vulnerability; and interagency coordination at the landscape level. It is expected that more information would be available to develop plan components than Alternative A. With additional information about climate change, opportunities to detect and respond to threats to ecological, social and economic conditions through plan amendments would be more available than Alternative A.

Alternative E

The effects of this alternative are similar to Alternative A, except there are additional requirements for more formal public participation, monitoring and assessment. In the Assessments would specifically address the risks and uncertainties associated with climate change. This information would be used to develop plan components. Additional questions and indicators associated with climate change would be addressed in unit and broad scale monitoring. Over time, there would be greater recognition of uncertainties, more information and opportunities to detect and respond to threats to ecological, social, and economic conditions influenced by climate change than Alternative A.

Multiple Uses

[Note: Outdoor recreation, range, and timber were highlighted in scoping comments as major contributors to community jobs and income. These three uses are discussed in this section. Effects of the alternative planning rules on management of the other multiple uses are discussed in the Ecosystem Restoration, Watershed Protection, and Diversity of Plant and Animal Communities sections. Ecosystem services are outcomes of providing for healthy ecosystems and for the purposes of this analysis, discussions of alternatives relevant to ecosystems are also found in the Ecosystem Restoration, Watershed Protection, and Diversity of Plant and Animal Communities sections.]

Alternative A

The proposed rule would specifically require plans to include components to provide for sustainable recreation. Through consideration of recreational values in a landscape context, NFS units would be expected to provide a mix of sustainable recreational opportunities that complement those of the surrounding area. Monitoring of recreation use trends would be more consistently implemented across NFS units than under current rule procedures due to requirements for plans to include questions concerning visitor use and progress toward meeting recreation objectives. Plans would include components to maintain or restore healthy rangeland conditions and allotment management plans would be expected to be modified, where needed, to achieve these objectives. Plans would include components to maintain or restore the structure, composition, processes, and connectivity of healthy ecosystems, which is consistent with the trend in forest management program objectives. Forest management program objectives currently include ecosystem restoration and protection, hazardous fuels reduction, and the maintenance of healthy forests – all of which contribute to a sustainable supply of forest products. With the focus on providing sustainable uses, a unit would be expected to contribute an element of stability to local economies.

Alternative B

Planning would continue to include identification of recreation opportunities on NFS lands and their ability to meet present and future recreation demands. Plan monitoring programs related to recreation would vary across NFS units, although the current National Visitor Use Monitoring system would be expected to be maintained. Planning would continue to identify the suitability of NFS lands for producing forage for grazing animals and restoration would be planned for lands identified as being in less than satisfactory condition. As in all alternatives, plans would identify lands suitable for timber production, identify expected timber harvest levels, outline planned timber sale program, and describe the proportion of probable methods of forest vegetation management practices expected to be used, as required by NFMA. Units would continue to use their timber sale program and other forest management activities to enhance timber and other forest resource values and benefits over time.

Alternative C

Plans would include provisions for sustainable recreation, considering opportunities and access for a range of uses. Planning would vary widely from unit to unit in analysis of distinctive roles and contributions to recreation opportunities within the context of the broader landscape. Recreation would be expected to be monitored because of the current national visitor use monitoring system. There would be little assurance of consistency in the way plans respond to changes in recreation value and use trends. Where livestock grazing is currently authorized, lands would be expected to be identified as suitable for this use. Plans would acknowledge the unit's contribution to providing forage for livestock. However, there would be a low probability of consistency in assessment of the rangeland resource, plan components to guide its management, or monitoring across NFS units. Timber direction in plans would be expected to not exceed the minimum NFMA requirements to identify suitability of lands for timber production, expected timber harvest levels, planned timber sale program, and proportion of probable methods of forest vegetation management practices expected to be used, as required by NFMA. However, the trend in public and Agency values toward restoring and maintaining healthy ecological conditions would be expected to supplant the absence of prescriptive plan direction.

Alternative D

Collaboration would assure consideration of a full spectrum of recreational uses and values relevant to each NFS unit and identification of the distinctive roles and contributions of the unit within the context of the broader landscape. However, the mix of recreation opportunities might be shifted away from developed and motorized use in some areas to more undeveloped and non-motorized forms of recreation. Plans would include components to maintain or restore healthy rangeland conditions and allotment management plans would be expected to be modified to achieve these objectives. Plans would be expected to focus unit timber programs on restoration and protection of watersheds and riparian areas. The timber program level would be expected to remain near the current level with a probable shift toward smaller diameter material.

Alternative E

Collaboration would follow a prescribed process to assure consideration of a full spectrum of recreational uses and values relevant to each NFS unit and identification of the distinctive roles and contributions of the unit within the context of the broader landscape. Plans would include components to maintain or restore healthy rangeland conditions and allotment management plans would be expected to be developed to achieve these objectives. Rangeland monitoring would be conducted and signal points would identify when and if plan amendments are needed. As in all alternatives, plans would identify lands suitable for timber production, identify expected timber harvest levels, a planned timber sale program, and proportion of probable methods of forest vegetation management practices expected to be used, as required by NFMA. As in Alternative A, plans would include components to maintain or restore the structure, composition, processes, and connectivity of healthy ecosystems, which is consistent with the trend in forest management program objectives.

Efficiency and Effectiveness

Alternative A

Implementation of this rule would cost the Agency approximately \$102.5 million annually (\$1.5 million less than the current rule (Alternative B)). Considering and referencing existing assessments completed by States and other entities would improve planning efficiency by leveraging unit staff resources with those of other agencies. Compared with current rule procedures, more effort would be dedicated to collaboration, assessments, and monitoring. This shift in staff resources, along with requirements for specific monitoring questions and biennial evaluations, would contribute to the effectiveness of plans by helping plans remain current. As plans are implemented, their currency would ensure project and activity proposals are guided by the latest science, contemporary economic and social values, and current conditions on the landscape.

Alternative B

Implementation of this rule would continue to cost the Agency approximately \$104 million annually. This alternative represents current plan development, revision, and amendment procedures, which have been found to make for an unduly complex, costly, lengthy, and cumbersome planning process. Some recently revised plans incorporate concepts, if not actual requirements of the proposed rule even though not required. Under Alternative B, this trend is expected to continue albeit voluntarily. Consequently, there would be no assurance that plans would exhibit content beyond that which is required in the current rule procedures or that there would be consistency across NFS units.

Alternative C

Implementation of this rule would cost the Agency approximately \$80.2 million annually (\$23.8 million less than the current rule (Alternative B)). This alternative represents the minimum requirements of NFMA and would be expected to result in the widest variation in plans across NFS units. Consequently, the efficiency and effectiveness of this

alternative would be expected to range widely from one unit to the next. This alternative does not require a landscape perspective or as adaptive a framework as found in Alternative A that can facilitate adaptation to new information about risks and stressors. Consequently, planning efficiency would be expected to decrease because of the inability of management units to revise and maintain management plans that adequately address uncertainty and reflect current knowledge about social, economic, and ecological risks, stressors, and contingencies.

Alternative D

Implementation of this rule would cost the Agency approximately \$116.0 million annually (\$11.9 million more than the current rule (Alternative B)). This alternative's additional requirements for plan components to provide for maintenance and restoration of riparian and watershed health could bring consistency in maintenance and restoration of riparian and watershed health to some units while having little effect on other units where riparian and watershed health is already a priority. Unit expenditures on required species monitoring under this alternative could reduce a unit's flexibility to fund other monitoring priorities. The effects of this alternative would otherwise be similar to Alternative A.

Alternative E

Implementation of this rule would cost the Agency approximately \$134.4 million annually (\$30.3 million more than the current rule (Alternative B)). Requirements to identify possible scenarios in assessments would have short-term cost increases with possible long-term gains in efficiency. Additional requirements regarding coordination in the assessment and monitoring would increase initial costs. However, consistent coordination might also result in more cost-effective long-term planning efforts to meet viability objectives. Additional requirements for standardized collaboration methods might work well for some units, while other units might find that some required steps are not relevant to their local public involvement needs. A standardized process could also reduce the effectiveness of collaboration if people lose ownership in the process and its outcomes and reduce willingness to work collaboratively during subsequent planning efforts. The effects of this alternative would otherwise be similar to Alternative A.

Transparency and Collaboration

Alternative A

Responsible officials would continue to engage State and local governments, Tribes, private landowners, other federal agencies, and the public at large, but additionally would encourage participation by youth, low-income and minority populations, who have traditionally been underrepresented in the planning process so that it would be expected that the process would identify all the social, economic, or ecological factors of importance in the plan area. The forest or grassland supervisor would be the responsible official, thereby affording greater opportunity for people to interact directly with the decision maker than under current rule procedures. The current option to use either a post-decisional administrative appeal process or pre-decisional objection would be

replaced with a pre-decisional objection process as the sole means to administratively challenge a decision, resulting in more consistency than currently found in the administrative review process across all NFS units. Documents such as assessments, plans, monitoring reports, environmental analyses, and decision documents would be readily available to the public through posting on the Internet and other means.

Alternative B

The current trend of more transparent and collaborative public involvement in planning efforts would be expected to continue. Units would continue to engage private landowners, federal agencies, State and local governments and Tribes in the planning process. People not traditionally involved in the planning process might be overlooked and it is possible that the process would not identify all the social, economic, or ecological factors of importance in the plan area. Responsible officials would have considerable flexibility to design a collaborative process. Increased flexibility would allow responsible officials to change processes as best practices evolve and design collaborative processes that address the unique constituency of the unit. However, greater flexibility provides less assurance that all units would follow best practices. The regional forester, as responsible official, would not be expected to have an understanding of local concerns but would be expected to be aware of regional and national issues.

Alternative C

The current trend of more transparent and collaborative public involvement efforts would be expected to continue. Units would continue to engage private landowners, federal agencies, State and local governments and Tribes in the planning process. Responsible officials would have considerable flexibility to design a collaborative process. Increased flexibility would allow responsible officials to change processes as best practices evolve and design collaborative processes that address the unique constituency of the unit. However, greater flexibility provides less assurance that all units would follow best practices. The forest or grassland supervisor would be the responsible official, thereby affording greater opportunity for people to interact directly with the decision maker than under current rule procedures. The current option to use either a post-decisional administrative appeal process or pre-decisional objection would be replaced with a pre-decisional objection process as the sole means to administratively challenge a decision, resulting in more consistency than currently found in the administrative review process across all NFS units.

Alternative D

Alternative D contains the same requirements for collaboration and transparency as Alternative A and would, therefore, have the same effects with respect to those requirements.

Alternative E

The public involvement process for plan development or revision would be standardized resulting in more stakeholders potentially being identified who could add additional value

to the planning process. The process might work well for some units while other units might find that some required steps are not relevant to their local public involvement needs. A standardized process could reduce ownership in the process and its outcomes, disguise a lack of commitment in the process, and reduce willingness to work collaboratively during subsequent planning efforts. The effects of this alternative would otherwise be similar to Alternative A.

Coordination and Cooperation Beyond NFS Boundaries

Alternative A

The responsible official would consider all lands and look across boundaries throughout the assessment, plan development/revision, and monitoring phases of the planning process. The responsible official would engage other agencies, governments, and Tribes earlier in the process than currently practiced, inviting them to participate in the assessment process and the development of the proposed plan, plan amendment or plan revision, instead of waiting until the proposed plan is issued for comment. Units would be expected to leverage their resources and knowledge with those of other agencies to gain efficiency in planning and future implementation of their plans.

Alternative B

The responsible official would continue to coordinate planning activities with the planning efforts of other federal agencies, State and local governments and Indian Tribes and coordinate with adjacent private land owners. The general trend in the planning process for more coordination across all lands would continue, but there would be considerable variation across units in the amount of coordination and what specific plan content would result.

Alternative C

The general trend for more interagency coordination in the planning process would be expected to continue, but inconsistently across the NFS because much of it would be voluntary. Formal assessment or monitoring of lands outside of NFS boundaries would not be expected.

Alternative D

There would be substantially more coordination with other agencies than would occur under Alternative A or current rule procedures for purposes such as restoring watershed connectivity, reducing road density, and maintaining viable populations across jurisdictional boundaries. Planning would follow a more prescriptive approach to interagency coordination than Alternative A concerning issues of ecological conditions and species viability across the landscape. The effects of this alternative would otherwise be similar to Alternative A.

Alternative E

Several items related to lands outside of NFS boundaries would be monitored; however coordination and cooperation beyond NFS boundaries would be generally the same as in Alternative A.

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