November 2013 Nantahala Pisgah Forest Plan Revision Update

Primary November 2013 Updates:

- We are hosting six **public open houses** in November and December to gather information on what needs to change in the revised forest plan. We are also hosting employee meetings on all districts.
    - The open houses are informal, not facilitated, and designed for people to drop by and share ideas.
    - We will share feedback from these meetings on our website, and we will use this input to craft a "Need for Change" statement. We will share that back with the public, likely in February.
- On Sept 20, we posted a draft work-in-progress **Assessment** that assesses current condition and trend on the landscape for a full range of ecological, social and economic topics.
    - This Assessment, along with feedback from 8 public meetings that involved more than 500 people have led us to the point in the process where we begin inviting ideas about need for change.
    - We are continuing to work on some elements of the Assessment and will be finalizing it in late January.
    - There is no formal comment period on the Assessment, but we are considering feedback until it is finalized.
- Will continue to **involve the public** throughout the Plan Revision process and information will be considered for all of the stages along the way.
    - There will be opportunities to participate in the development of the draft forest plan and alternatives in the spring and beyond.

FAQ about our Public Open Houses

What are the objectives for the Nov and Dec open houses?
At six open houses across the forest, we are gathering input about what needs to change in the revised forest plan. Then we will use that information to build a Need for Change Statement.

How will the meetings be structured?
Each open house will be structured the same way. We will have stations around 8 different resource topics. At each station, we will provide some facts on that topic that came out of the Assessment; we will also share information about how that topic is addressed in the current forest plan. We will have district and forest specialists staffing each table, asking the public for their ideas about what needs to change in the new plan. The public will have a chance to write their ideas for each of the topic areas and leave them with us.

The open house style will not have facilitated dialogue and is meant to accommodate schedules by allowing folks to drop in for the time and duration that is convenient for them.

FAQ about Next Steps

What will you do with the ideas you receive at the meeting?
Just like we are asking the public for input on Need for Change ideas, we are also asking all of our employees across the forest what they think needs to change about the current plan. We are giving our employees the same opportunity to provide input as the public is getting.

The Plan Revision interdisciplinary team of specialists will look at all of the ideas that came from the public open houses, and the internal meetings, and begin to synthesize what we heard. It's important to note that we are not eliminating ideas at this point (unless an idea clearly goes against law, regulation or policy). We are just acknowledging them and articulating what we heard; some will be similar and some will be in opposition, and that is okay. We will synthesize them to understand what we have heard. Then we will use that information to craft a Need for Change Statement.

What is a Need for Change statement?

The Need for Change statement gives us information about what needs to change in the revised forest plan. For example, the need for change statement might say we need more direction in the plan on topic X or Y. For example, it might say "The revised Plan should update desired conditions and plan components for soil resources" or “The revised Plan should address non-native invasive animals" - but it won't say HOW the plan will do that. Figuring out the HOW comes later, during plan development.

We will share the Need for Change Statement as part of our Notice of Intent to revise the forest plan. That Notice of Intent will be published in the Federal Register and will serve as our proposed action and need for change and will initiate a formal "scoping" or comment period for 30 days.

What are the plans for future public engagement?

We expect that the public involvement process will take different forms along the way. While the November/December open houses are informal and not facilitated, there will be other opportunities to have a facilitated dialogue with stakeholders.

Around February, we will have a formal comment period on the Notice of Intent to revise the forest plan. Information we receive during the formal comment period will help us as we begin to generate a draft forest plan and alternatives, but we won't do these things without additional public engagement.

We are planning to do additional public involvement in the spring as we begin developing a draft forest plan and alternatives. We will do an Environmental Impact Statement before deciding on our final forest plan. There will be public involvement throughout the multi-year process.

What is our timeline for forest plan revision?

We are currently in the assessment phase and beginning to identifying the needs for change from the current forest plan. A draft forest plan is expected by the end of 2014, with a final plan in winter 2016. Collaboration with the public will occur throughout the process.

How can I stay involved?

Attend one of our upcoming open houses, or if you are not able to attend, send back the mailer form identifying what you think are the Needs for Change. Check the Plan Revision website for updated information on meetings and ways to engage in the process and send us your email address or postal address and we will add you to our mailing list.

Where is the draft Forest Plan?

The planning process has three phases: the assessment phase, the plan development or revision phase, and the monitoring phase. The Nantahala and Pisgah NFs are currently in the assessment phase of forest plan revision.

We are not at the stage of the process to have a draft Forest Plan. Before we begin compiling a Plan we put together an Assessment of current conditions across the landscape. We are sharing our draft Assessment as a work in progress and expect to have it finalized in early 2014. We anticipate releasing a draft forest plan in 2014. We will collaborate with the public on the development of the draft Forest Plan.

Q&A on the Forest Plan Assessment

What is a Forest Plan Assessment?

The Assessment report evaluates the Forests' ecological, economic and social conditions, trends and sustainability, and the relationship of these conditions and trends to the current land resource management plan. This Assessment is done for the Nantahala and Pisgah NF plan area, in the context of the broader 18-county area. This assessment provides current information that can be used in developing the revised forest plan. It is not a decision making document. We are required to conduct this Assessment per the Forest Service's planning regulation, the 2012 Planning Rule.

The Assessment document is also intended to share with the public and other interested parties, existing information and trends in order to facilitate mutual understanding of the complex topics related to forest planning and management.

What is the process for finalizing the Assessment?

We shared the Sept 20 version of the Assessment because we wanted the public to see where we were with the assessment at that time, as it might inform the input they provide at this round of public meetings. We are aware that there were some gaps in that Sept 20 draft that still need to be addressed. For example, if you look at Appendix A of the 200 page document that covers all 15 requires topics, that Appendix identifies additional supplemental reports that we are working on finalizing. We are working to finalize the Assessment and the supplemental reports in January.

There is not a formal comment period on the Assessment, but any information or input we receive on the Assessment before finalization will be considered as we are able. It is important to note that even after the Assessment is finalized, we will continue to accept input throughout the Plan Revision process and information will be considered for all stages of the process.

What Assessment topics are evaluated?

The specific content of the report is based on the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule, with consideration of the 2012 Planning Rule Proposed Directives (Forest Service Handbook 1909.12), and with consideration of input from the public meetings and other interactions described above. This report explores the 15 content areas identified as Assessment topics in the 2012 Planning Rule. They cover ecological, social, and economic topics. The topics are summarized in the main document and additional detailed reports are available on several topics.

Specifically, the assessment addresses:

- Land status and ownership, use, and access patterns;
- Terrestrial ecosystems, aquatic ecosystems, and watersheds;
- Air, soil, and water resources and quality;
- System drivers, including dominant ecological processes, disturbance regimes, and stressors, such as natural succession, wildland fire, invasive species, and climate change; and the ability of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems on the plan area to adapt to change;
- Baseline assessment of carbon stocks;
- Threatened, endangered, proposed and candidate species, and potential species of conservation concern present in the plan area;
- Social, cultural, and economic conditions;
- Benefits people obtain from the NFS planning area (ecosystem services);
- Multiple uses and their contributions to local, regional, and national economies;

- Recreation settings, opportunities and access, and scenic character;
- Renewable and nonrenewable energy and mineral resources;
- Infrastructure, such as recreational facilities and transportation and utility corridors;
- Areas of tribal importance;
- Cultural and historic resources and uses; and
- Existing designated areas located in the plan area including wilderness and wild and scenic rivers and potential need and opportunity for additional designated areas.

How was the Assessment developed?
The Nantahala and Pisgah NFs began preparing information for this Assessment in Fall 2012. An Interdisciplinary team of specialists formed to gather information on all of the resource topics. To gather information for the assessment and ideas for assessment content, eight public meetings were held with over 500 people in attendance. Information and data was submitted by several members of the public, organizations, and partners for consideration in the Assessment process. The forest managers involved scientists at the USDA Forest Service Southern Research Station, and requested input from other Federal, State and local governments, and federally recognized Tribes.

More detail on collaboration
The first round of six public meetings took place in February and March of 2013. These meetings provided an overview of the plan revision process, shared information about existing condition of resources, and received input from the public on the benefits provided by the forests. Attendees included local residents, members of organized recreation groups, tribal members, county and city planners, government officials, local business owners, outfitter guides, and environmental advocates.

Two additional public meetings took place in late May to expand on three issues that were the focus of much discussion in the first round of meetings: wildlife habitat, recreation access, and designated areas.

How did you use information provided by the public?
Public input helped determine the questions that the assessment addressed. Information on current condition and trend of the resources was provided by members of the public and organizations on a variety of topics. Specialists considered information that was provided on their topic areas in each section of their report.

How was science considered in the process?
Forest Service specialists considered information from peer-reviewed literature, scientific assessments, and federal agency inventorying and monitoring data. Other sources of information included expert opinion and observational data, as well as information provided by the public, partners, and stakeholders. The source material for information in the report is considered to be Best Available Scientific Information because it is
- Relevant for the 15 required assessment topics at the spatial and temporal scales appropriate to the plan area and land management plan,
- Accurate in describing the true conditions of the subject matter, and
- Reliable in context of scientific principles.

Where information is uncertain or there are known data gaps, this is disclosed.

The Planning Rule is clear that the assessment should evaluate existing information that is currently available in the form useful for the planning process, without further data collection, modification or validation. The Assessment does not require the development of new information.