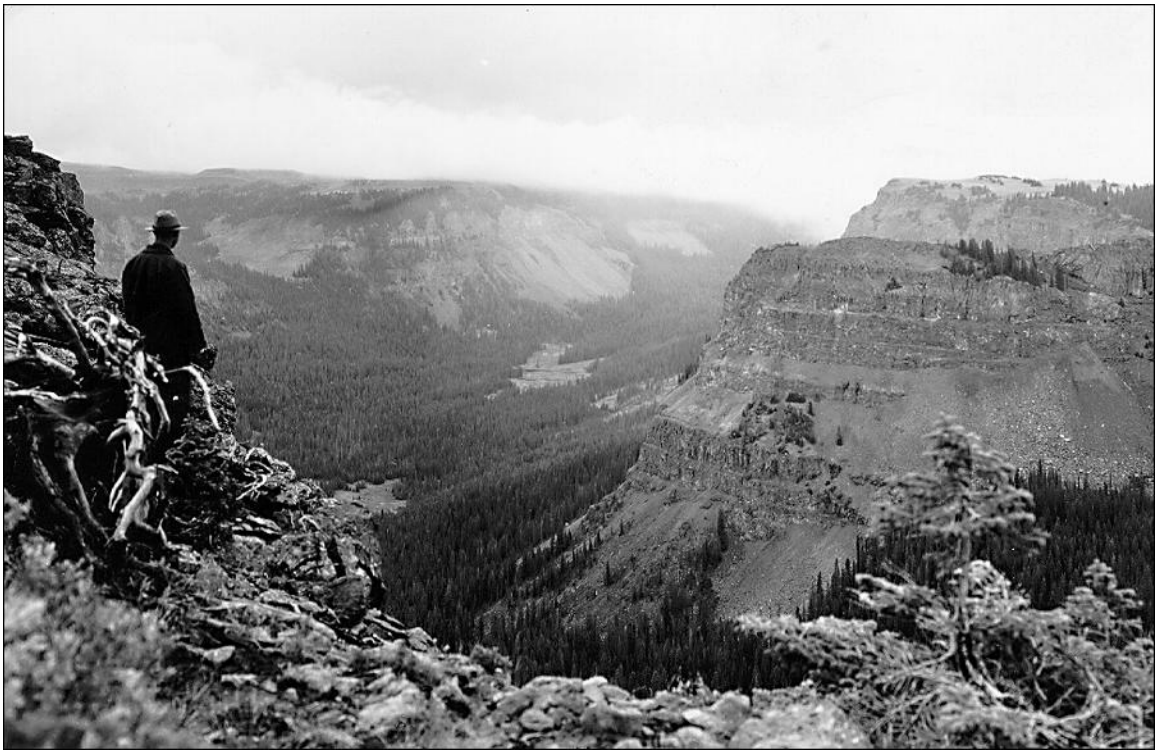
CHAPTER ONE

Purpose, Need and Significant Issues



Flat Tops Wilderness

Chapter 1

Purpose, need, and significant issues

The proposed action

The Forest Service proposes to revise the 1984 Land and Resource Management Plan (forest plan) for the White River National Forest. The 2002 Land and Resource Management Plan (2002 Forest Plan) will be used to guide all natural resource management activities on the forest to meet the objectives of federal law, regulations, and policy.

Purpose of the proposed action

The development of the revised plan and this accompanying final environmental impact statement is intended to satisfy regulatory requirements and to address new and changing information about the forest and its uses.

The forest plan embodies the provisions of the National Forest Management Act, the implementing regulations, and other guiding documents. Multiple-use goals and objectives, management area prescriptions, and standards and guidelines all define the White River National Forest's management direction. However, successful implementation of this direction depends on the annual budget process and other factors.

In 1982, instructions to revise forest plans were formulated in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) at 36 CFR 219.10(g):

> A forest plan shall ordinarily be revised on a 10-year cycle or at least every 15 years. It also may be revised whenever the Forest Supervisor determines that conditions or demands in the area covered by the plan have changed significantly or when changes in RPA policies, goals, or objectives would have a significant effect on forest level programs. In the monitoring and evaluation process, the interdisciplinary team may recommend a revision of the forest plan at any time. Revisions are not effective until considered and approved in accordance with the requirements for the development and approval of a forest plan. The Forest Supervisor shall review the conditions on the land covered by the plan at least every five years to determine whether conditions or demands of the public have changed significantly.

The current forest plan for the White River National Forest was approved on September 30, 1984. The Forest Supervisor determined that significant changes have taken place since the 1984 Forest Plan was approved and that a revised plan was needed to satisfy regulatory requirements and to address new information about the forest and its uses.

Revision of the 1984 plan was based on:

1. Improved information about National Forest System lands and resources;
2. Improved scientific knowledge and application;
3. Changing professional and public concern for social, economic, and environmental issues; and
4. New or revised laws and policies.

Need to change the forest plan

The forest plan establishes management standards and guidelines for the White River National Forest. It describes resource management practices, levels of resource production and management, and the availability and suitability of lands for different kinds of resource management.

Inventory information concerning land and water resources is more accurate than it was in 1984. The forest now has a **geographic information system** (GIS), which greatly enhances the plan revision process. The resource database in use for many years (RMRIS) has been replaced by an improved system called **integrated resource inventor***y* (IRI), which uses state-of-the-art inventory and computer techniques. The interdisciplinary team made extensive use of the new database to assess wildlife habitat and biological diversity, to develop an inventory of roadless areas, and to evaluate vegetation types.

Scientific knowledge of physical and biological processes has improved in recent years. New or emerging information and techniques in the areas of biological diversity and recreational trends have contributed to the need to revise the 1984 Forest Plan. Professional and public concern for the potential loss of species throughout the world is accelerating. This concern has been addressed in the 2002 Forest Plan, in part by considering how physical and biological conditions in region have changed since the onset of large-scale human settlement.

The public and forest managers alike are increasingly concerned with issues such as urbanization near the forest and the management of roadless areas. In addition, increasing levels and new types of recreational use on the White River National Forest call for new management approaches to address issues of public access, conflicts between uses, and protection of the environment.

Finally, newly created or changed laws and policies affect forest plan content and forest management. Examples include the Oil and Gas Leasing Reform Act of 1987, the 1987 Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Amendments of 1990, and the 1993 Colorado Wilderness Bill.

After assessing what new information and new strategies were needed to better manage forest lands and resources, the interdisciplinary team considered environmental conditions, historical use and occupation patterns, and past and current data inventories. Forest staff communicated with other agencies, American Indian tribes, and the public regarding the management and condition of forest lands and resources, then identified preliminary public issues, which served as the foundation for development of six **revision topics**: biodiversity, travel management, recreation, roadless areas, special areas, and timber suitability and allowable sale quantity.

The revision topics explained

The six revision topics are the focus of the forest plan revision process. They address the central issues to which future management of the White River National Forest must respond. Each of the seven forest management alternatives described in Chapter 2 of this document represents a different set of answers to questions raised by the revision topics.

Chapter 2 summarizes the essential elements of each alternative and provides a summary comparison of the alternatives by allocation to each management area, activity levels or outcomes, cost and environmental and economic impacts. Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive discussion of these impacts by describing the existing condition of each forest resource and by explaining in depth how each of the alternatives can be expected to affect each resource.

BIODIVERSITY

Biodiversity (biological diversity) refers to "the full variety of life in an area, including the ecosystems, plant and animal communities, species and genes, and the processes through which individual organisms interact with one another and their environments" (USDA Forest Service). Maintaining biodiversity is a key part of ecosystem management.

Land use decisions can change the biodiversity of the forest over time. Conserving biodiversity while managing the land for multiple uses is a balancing act. Goals for each action must be carefully assessed and trade-offs between resource needs and human needs must be made.

Recent policy and precedent have provided new guidance for maintaining biodiversity. Region 2 and White River National Forest staff have identified sensitive species at the regional and local level, and forest managers will help ensure viable populations of all native and desirable non-native species. Moreover, in 1992 the Chief of the Forest Service committed the agency to the practice of ecosystem management. Its goal is to produce diverse, healthy, productive, and sustainable ecosystems under an operating philosophy based on environmental sensitivity, social responsibility, economic feasibility, and scientific principles.

Many concepts of biological diversity are relatively new and were not addressed in the 1984 Forest Plan. The existing plan did not consider ecosystems as a whole and focused mainly on species that were economically important. Planners also did not have available our current base of information about forest vegetation, wildlife, and physical features. Although various goals, objectives, general direction, and standards and guidelines in the 1984 plan considered some elements of biodiversity, this plan revision process attempts to look at the forest in a more holistic manner.

The 1984 Forest Plan made every effort to comply with laws and regulations of its time, but some standards and guidelines were too broad or general to ensure compliance. In contrast, the specific methods for maintaining biodiversity and monitoring management activities contained in this plan represent both a scientific and practical advance over the earlier plan.

TRAVEL MANAGEMENT

Travel management, which plays an important role in every forest resource program, remains one of the most controversial elements in forest management. Since the 1984 plan was developed, motorized and non-motorized forms of travel have both increased and become more diversified. The advent of mountain bikes and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), the growing popularity of four-wheel-drive vehicles and snowmobiles, and

increasing non-motorized uses such as hiking, backcountry skiing, and snowshoeing, all are competing for the same land base.

As travel on the forest increases, the impacts on resources become more pronounced, while conflicts among users occur more frequently. Forest managers need to determine the proper balance in the type, extent, and levels of forest transportation facilities and uses in order to resolve user conflicts and adequately protect resources. Other concerns addressed in the 2002 Forest Plan include evaluation of utility sites and corridors and improved monitoring of transportation facilities.

Many traditional travel management issues remain the same. The forest must continue to:

- Maintain road and trail facilities at a level that meets land management objectives and resource program needs;
- Acquire needed rights-of-way for management purposes and public access to National Forest System lands;
- Implement seasonal and permanent restrictions to protect wildlife or limit degradation of roads and trails;
- Provide a full range of trail opportunities in coordination with other jurisdictions and private landowners both on and off National Forest System lands.

RECREATION MANAGEMENT

Recreation has grown to become the predominant use of the White River National Forest. As the number of visitors to the forest has increased, so have the type and extent of uses. Mountain biking, snowshoeing, rafting and kayaking, rock climbing, caving, and the use of all-terrain vehicles are among recreation uses that have grown dramatically since development of the 1984 Forest Plan. Traditional pastimes such as hunting, fishing, and four-wheel-drive travel also have grown, with a parallel increase in the number of outfitters and guides that serve these activities.

In addition, the forest's popular downhill ski areas have evolved into internationally known four-season resorts that attract visitors throughout the year for a variety of pursuits. In the backcountry, nineteen mountain huts are frequented by more visitors each year. Additional huts have been proposed to accommodate increased demand in both winter and summer.

Based on recreation use reported by all national forests, the White River National Forest ranked fifth in the nation in 1995. Our forest managers oversee about 16 percent of National Forest System lands in Colorado but host about 30 percent of the recreation on these lands. Since the 1984 Forest Plan was prepared, overall recreation use on the forest has more than doubled. Visitors are coming from farther away, they visit more frequently, and their outdoor equipment has become more sophisticated. The aging of the population, meanwhile, has altered the types of recreational experiences being sought.

In the same period, local communities near the forest have seen rapid growth in their populations, with more residences being built along the forest boundary. This urbanization within the region does more than add to the total recreation use. It also closes off customary points of access and makes it harder to preserve scenic vistas.

Larger numbers of recreation users, the broader range of their activities, and increasing penetration of the backcountry have resulted in greater impacts to the environment, overuse of some recreational facilities, and an increase in user conflicts. The challenge facing us is to optimize the recreation experience while balancing it with the need to protect wildlife and other environmental values.

The 2002 Forest Plan includes the introduction of an improved scenery management system (SMS) that more accurately assesses scenic qualities desired by the public. This system provides the management tools to provide forest visitors with quality recreational experiences.

ROADLESS AREAS

About one-third of the White River National Forest has been placed in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Portions of the remaining two-thirds of the forest meet the definition of being **roadless areas** (see sidebar). During the revision process, the forest was inventoried to identify its roadless areas and assess whether they met criteria for inclusion in the wilderness system. Federal regulations direct national forests to consider such areas during the forest planning process for wilderness recommendation.

Under the 1964 Wilderness Act, a wilderness area must appear to be affected primarily by the forces of nature with little evidence of human impact, to have outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, and to be 5,000 or more acres in size or at least be large enough, in practical terms, to preserve its wilderness values. The inventory of roadless areas used a minimum size of 5,000 acres for areas that stand alone and a minimum of 500 acres for areas that border existing designated wilderness. Further evaluation of the initial roadless inventory applied several other criteria to determine eligibility of areas for wilderness recommendation.

Each of the forest management alternatives described in Chapter 2 features different proposals for recommending eligible roadless areas as wilderness. That is, some alternatives recommend more areas than others. This determination was made based on the overall theme of each alternative.

Roadless Area:
An area in a national forest or national grassland that (1) is larger than 5,000 acres or, if smaller, contiguous to a designated Wilderness or primitive area, or lies east of the 100th Meridian and therefore under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Wilderness Act, and (2) contains no roads and (3) has been inventoried by the Forest Service for possible inclusion in the Wilderness Preservation System.

SPECIAL AREAS

Some areas of the White River National Forest may be given formal recognition as special interest areas based on their unique or outstanding physical features, environmental values, or social significance. Such areas include wilderness, wild, scenic, and recreational rivers, scenic byways, significant caves, research natural areas (RNAs), segments of the national scenic trails system, and heritage resources. Research natural areas are part of a national network of ecological areas. Heritage resources are historic or

cultural sites that are afforded special protections. The 2002 Forest Plan includes specific management prescriptions for each type of designated special area.

In the 2002 Forest Plan, changes were made to accommodate the following developments:

- The finding that Deep Creek was eligible for designation as a wild and scenic river;
- A study indicating that the use of prescribed fire within wilderness areas might benefit ecosystem health;
- The new designations of research natural areas and significant caves that were not part of the 1984 Forest Plan;
- Establishment of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail segment across the forest and potential addition of other national trails;
- A comprehensive analysis that has identified several historical sites for designation as special interest areas emphasizing heritage cultural landscapes; and
- A separate analysis to identify special interest areas to emphasize biological or zoological resources.

TIMBER SUITABILITY AND ALLOWABLE SALE QUANTITY

The timber resources of the White River National Forest include pinyon pine and juniper trees in the lower elevations, cottonwoods along riparian zones, mixed conifer and aspen stands at middle elevations, and extensive stands of spruce and fir that dominate the higher elevations. These forest communities are important both as habitat for other plants and animals and for the production of wood products, from lumber, wood fiber, and fuelwood to transplants, posts and poles, and Christmas trees.

From 1984 to 1995, an average timber harvest of 24.7 million board feet (MMBF) was cut and removed annually, with harvests ranging from 10.8 MMBF to 46.2 MMBF. The peak harvest, in 1988, reflects the salvage of lodgepole pines killed by a mountain pine beetle epidemic as well as increased demand for dead spruce logs for home construction.

The **allowable sale quantity** (ASQ) is the quantity of live timber that may be offered from the area of suitable land covered by the forest plan. From 1984 to 1995, the projected ASQ was about 308 MMBF. The forest also projected a volume of about 250 MMBF in dead timber sales during this period, for a combined total of 565.8 MMBF. The actual total sale of 226.2 MMBF from 1984 to 1995 is only 40 percent of this projection.

The live conifer sale program reflects national and regional trends of declining sales volumes, declining volumes under contract, and higher prices. Although the forest has been a key supplier of dead spruce for house logs, the availability of this resource is declining.

Since 1984, less than 2 percent of the White River National Forest has been used for timber harvesting, or about 28,000 acres of its total expanse of 2.3 million acres. Records show that since 1909 less than 5 percent of total forest lands have been harvested. This relatively low level of timber management, combined with 60 years of fire suppression,

has caused large portions of the forest to be in older age classes, with few openings in the forest canopy and a high load of downed, dead or step-ladder fuels. These forest stands thus are susceptible to extensive wildfires or to major outbreaks of insects and disease.

Decisions made in forest plans

When a forest plan is adopted, it contains **six key decisions** for long-term management:

1. Establish forest-wide multiple-use **goals and objectives**, including a description of the desired future condition of the national forest, as required by 36 CFR 219.11 (b). These have been revised in the final 2002 Forest Plan to reflect the imperatives of ecosystem management.
2. Establish forest-wide **standards and guidelines**, as required by 36 CFR 219.13 to 219.27. These have been modified to accommodate growth in resource management knowledge and to remove inappropriate elements.
3. Establish **management areas** and **management area prescriptions**, as required by 36 CFR 219.11 (c). These have been updated to reflect the current multi-region prescription structure and to incorporate current resource management philosophies.
4. Establish **requirements for monitoring and evaluating** implementation of the revised plan, as required by 36 CFR 219.11(d).
5. Determine **suitability and potential capability of lands for resource production** (timber, grazing, and oil and gas leasing), as required by 36 CFR 219.14 through 219.26. The approaches used in each of these areas have been superseded by improved data gathering and analysis techniques.
6. Recommend to Congress **areas that are eligible for designation as Wilderness**, as required by 36 CFR 219.17(a), and **rivers eligible for inclusion in the Wild and Scenic River System,** 16 USC 1271-1287, 36 CFR 297, and 47 FR 39454. The 2002 Forest Plan uses a roadless area inventory to make wilderness recommendations and reflects public interest in the potential rivers on the forest to be classified as wild, scenic, or recreational.

Goals and objectives, standards and guidelines, management area prescriptions, and monitoring and evaluation requirements are found in Chapters 1 through 4 of the accompanying the 2002 Forest Plan.

Identification of suitable timber lands is shown on the timber suitability map in the map packet and summarized in the timber management section in Chapter 3 of the FEIS.

Recommendations to Congress for establishing wilderness and other special designations will be made in the record of decision (ROD) for the 2002 Forest Plan and FEIS.

Tiered project-level decisions

Two project-level decisions were considered in the DEIS as part of this revision of the forest plan—**travel management** and **vacant grazing allotment***s*. However, only the vacant grazing allotment decision will be made in the ROD for the 2002 Forest Plan.

Travel management

Based on public comment indicating a desire for more time to review travel management plans on the ground, a need to improve the inventory of existing travelways, and the difficulty of simultaneously completing the travel management and forest plan decision, planners decided to separate the two decisions. At the forest plan level, new standards and guidelines will still be incorporated to provide forest-wide direction. However, a site-specific travel management plan will not be included in the forest plan decision.

This has led to a change in the level of detail of analysis of effects on forest access and the impacts of the transportation system on other resources. Whereas levels of outputs for road and trail construction, maintenance, and reconstruction were analyzed for each alternative in the DEIS, the FEIS analyzes levels of outputs for maintenance and reconstruction of the existing transportation system. The effects of travel restrictions or design criteria imposed by management area standards and guidelines on season of access and type of use are also analyzed in the FEIS. A separate planning process for the site-specific forest travel management plan will begin after the forest plan decision.

Vacant allotments

Currently, 54 percent of the White River National Forest is within active allotments. An additional 25 percent of the forest is within 51 vacant allotments. Analysis of the suitability of these vacant allotments was conducted to determine which allotments or portions of allotments have value for livestock grazing and should be retained as vacant until further site-specific analysis can be conducted. Conversely, allotments found to have limited value could be closed to future livestock grazing. The allotments recommended for retention or closure vary by alternative.

PERMITS, LEASE, AND OTHER AUTHORIZATIONS.

The management direction provided in the forest plan decision will apply to special use, lease, and other authorizations signed by Forest Service officials on or after the effective date of the 2002 Forest Plan. The management direction identified in the decision may also require adjustments to current permits, and other authorizations in those cases where statutory or regulatory authority exists, if the change is necessary to achieve overall desired conditions. Additionally, proposals or applications for use that have not been authorized may no longer be consistent with the plan. For example, lands recommended for wilderness designation in the forest plan decision, will no longer be available for oil and gas exploration or leasing.

Significant issues

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations define ‘significant issues’ as matters that are bound up in the nature of the proposed action and in the choice among alternative courses of action. In this document, the revision topics described earlier are essentially the same as the significant issues

The focus of this forest plan revision has been to carry out the Forest Service mandate to serve multiple-use, sustained-yield objectives. By design, each alternative emphasizes different land and resource uses and objectives. Because the alternatives reflect different preferences expressed by a diverse public, they contain a number of trade-offs between competing outcomes and desires. Identification of the **selected alternative** is based on the judgment that it provides the best resolution to the six revision topics as a whole.

Issues and topics raised but not addressed

Several topics and issues raised by members of the public and other agencies are not addressed by the alternatives described in this document. These issues are summarized in the *Identification of Purpose and Need* document that was released in 1996 and in Appendix A—*Response to Public Comment*. Some of the concerns that were raised—such as grazing fee levels, wolf reintroduction, and global warming—require a solution that is outside the scope of decisions made in a forest plan or is the responsibility of another agency. If an issue cannot be resolved as one of these decisions, it may be better handled by another channel—that is, through changes in national or regional policy, through changes in the law, or in decisions made by other agencies.