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Proposed Administrative Changes to the Fishlake National Forest Plan Monitoring Program

Dear Interested Party:

This posting is to inform the public about planned administrative changes to the Fishlake National Forest (Forest) Plan Monitoring Program and to request input for these changes from the public. This is not a formal comment period, but we will consider your feedback for the next 21 days. Please send feedback to comments-intermtn-fishlake@usda.gov. All input received by January 30, 2026 will be considered.

Forest monitoring plans are a required component of forest plans and facilitate periodic reporting of forest conditions. Monitoring reports are published every two years and help the responsible official determine whether changes are needed for the monitoring program, management activities, or forest plan components. Changes to monitoring plans may be necessary to comply with new regulations or to update questions and indicators to allow better reporting of ecosystem conditions and trends. The Fishlake National Forest's monitoring plan was last updated in 2017 for consistency with the Forest Service's 2012 planning rule. Modifications to existing monitoring plans are made by administrative change (Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.12, chapter 30, section 32.4).

In response to findings and recommendations from recent monitoring reports, the Fishlake National Forest proposes to update the focal species, monitoring questions, and indicators used for fish and wildlife monitoring.

All other components of the current monitoring plan would remain the same. These changes are explained in Attachment 1, and Attachment 2 shows the proposed monitoring plan in full.

Following review of public input received, the final changes to the monitoring plan will be posted to the Fishlake National Forest website planning page: https://www.fs.usda.gov/r04/fishlake/planning.

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Attachment 1. Explanation of Proposed Administrative Changes to the Fishlake National Forest Plan Monitoring Program

Need for Change

The need for change in the Fishlake National Forest (Forest) monitoring plan is driven by the insufficiency of the current monitoring questions, indicators, and/or metrics within the wildlife program area. Currently, there are 16 monitoring questions, and 19 focal species used to monitor effects of forest actions on wildlife resources or the stability of ecological conditions that impact them (Tables 1 and 2). Of the 16 questions, only 4 are adequately addressed by current monitoring activities or focal species, and of the 19 focal species listed in the monitoring plan, only 9 are monitored regularly and only 2 are monitored regularly by the Forest Service.

It was determined that Focal Species and wildlife monitoring questions and indicators should be changed to match the current needs and capacity of the Forest. These changes would not affect monitoring completed by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR). In addition, the Forest would continue annual and project-specific monitoring required by appropriate amendments to the Forest plan.

Table 1. Current Fishlake wildlife monitoring questions and their status (Green = Question currently addressed, Yellow = Partially addressed, Red = not addressed).

	Questions	Monitoring Indicator	Status
1	Is the diversity of wildlife habitat being maintained by managing Vegetative Structural Stage (VSS)?	Comprehensive Stand Exam (CSE) data	CSE data are inadequate to answer the question.
2	Are forest management activities and/or natural events affecting the structure and function of upland and riparian ecosystems?	Structure and function of forest and riparian ecosystems – CSE and Integrated Monitoring in Bird Conservation Regions (IMBCR) data	CSE and IMBCR data partially answer the question.
3	Is big game habitat maintained to meet Forest Plan desired conditions?	Big game habitat condition -Focal Species and VSS data	Focal species and VSS data are inadequate to answer the question.
4	Are Threatened, Endangered, Proposed, and Candidate (TEPC) plant habitats being protected from forest plan implementation?	Number of TEPC plant locations adversely impacted	Currently addressed by metrics and data.
5	Are TES animal habitats being protected from forest plan implementation activities?	TES habitat conditions retained – Utah Prairie Dog (UPD) numbers and CSE data	Data of current focal species partially addresses this question.
6	Are forest management activities and natural events affecting the ecological conditions indicated by the status of focal species?	Habitat across the planning area – Measured by focal species monitoring	Data of current focal species partially addresses this question.
7	Are snags in condition to meet needs of cavity nesters?	Snag condition – CSE data and cavity nesting focal species	CSE Snag and focal species data partially address this question.

	Questions	Monitoring Indicator	Status
8	Are Forest management activities and natural events affecting the ecological conditions indicated by the status of the focal species?	Bonneville Cutthroat trout Population Estimates	Focal species data is collected every 7 years and partially addresses this question.
9	Are Forest management activities and/or natural events affecting aquatic habitats?	Aquatic habitat condition – Macro-invertebrate focal species	Focal species data are no longer collected and do not address this question.
10	Is aquatic habitat maintained to meet Forest Plan Desired Conditions?	Aquatic and riparian condition; in-stream channel condition – Focal species, green Line and MIM surveys	Focal species, green-line and MIM data currently address this question.
11	Are known goshawk territories on NFS lands remaining occupied?	Goshawk territory occupancy	Currently addressed by focal species data.
12	Are goshawk territories remaining occupied following vegetation management?	Goshawk territory occupancy	Currently addressed by focal species data.
13	Is mature and old forest habitat connectivity being adequately maintained?	Percent and distribution of mature and old forest cover – CSE and Focal species data	Focal species and CSE data partially address this question.
14	Is snag habitat being maintained in desired spatial arrangement?	Density and distribution of snags – Focal species and CSE data	CSE and focal species data partially address this question.
15	Is downed wood being maintained in sufficient amount, size, and location?	Quantity of downed logs and woody debris – CSE data	Downed wood data are not collected in adequate numbers to answer the question.
16	Are appropriate adjustments to grazing practices being made where grazing is contributing to at-risk conditions?	Ungulate grazing practices in at-risk locations – Range utilization data	This question should be moved to the range resource section. Wildlife team does not collect these data.

Process for Selecting Monitoring Questions, Indicators, and Focal Species

The process used for selecting monitoring questions, indicators, and Focal Species included the following:

1. Identify ecosystems that are important to the Forest.
2. Select questions to monitor the status of these ecosystems.
3. Identify species or metrics that can be monitored through time that will represent these ecosystems. In cases where other indicators are more efficiently monitored and more indicative of ecological condition than a species, these indicators were identified instead of a Focal Species.
4. Create the indicators or metrics and methods that will be used to monitor the Focal Species and answer monitoring questions.
5. Make administrative changes to the Forest monitoring plan.

Table 2. Current Fishlake focal species and their status (Green = species monitored regularly, Yellow = irregularly monitored, Red = not monitored).

	Focal Species	Status	Notes
1	Rydberg's Milkvetch	Monitored by forest botanist	Irregular Monitoring
2	Mule Deer	Monitored by the UDWR	Annual Monitoring
3	Rocky Mountain Elk	Monitored by the UDWR	3-year Rotation
4	Northern Goshawk	Monitored by USFS	Annual monitoring
5	Brewers Sparrow	Monitored by IMBCR	Annual Monitoring
6	Vesper Sparrow	Monitored by IMBCR	Annual Monitoring
7	Sage Thrasher	Monitored by IMBCR	Annual Monitoring
8	Hairy Woodpecker	Monitored by IMBCR	Annual Monitoring
9	Western Bluebird	Monitored by IMBCR	Low Numbers
10	Mountain Bluebird	Monitored by IMBCR	Annual Monitoring
11	Lincoln's Sparrow	Monitored by IMBCR	Low Numbers
12	Yellow Warbler	Monitored by IMBCR	Annual Monitoring
13	Macgillvray's Warbler	Monitored by IMBCR	Annual Monitoring
14	Aquatic macroinvertebrates	Not Currently Monitored	No longer Monitored
15	Bonneville Cutthroat	Monitored by the UDWR	7-year rotation
16	Rainbow trout	Monitored by the UDWR	Irregular rotation
17	Brown trout	Monitored by the UDWR	Irregular rotation
18	Brook trout	Monitored by the UDWR	Irregular rotation
19	Lake trout	Monitored by the UDWR	Irregular rotation

Ecosystems and Monitoring Questions Selected for Fish and Wildlife Desired future conditions described in the Forest Plan include maintaining current habitat of threatened and endangered species; maintaining or increasing big game range capacity; and improving sensitive species habitat, fisheries habitat, and riparian ecosystems. The ecosystems identified below provide important habitat for threatened, endangered, sensitive, and proposed species as well as big game species on the Forest. Monitoring the health of these ecosystems will track whether the Forest Plan desired conditions for wildlife and wildlife habitat are being met or maintained.

1. **Riparian**: This habitat type has a limited distribution and is critical for a majority of wildlife species, including big game and numerous listed species.

   Monitoring Question: Are healthy riparian ecosystems being maintained on Forest lands?

2. **Shrub-Steppe (primarily sage brush)**: Healthy shrub-steppe ecosystems are important to big game and other wildlife species including but not limited to the pygmy rabbit (sensitive), greater sage grouse (sensitive), Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee (proposed endangered), and monarch butterfly (proposed threatened).

   Monitoring Question: Are healthy shrub-steppe habitats being maintained on Forest lands?

3. **Aspen:** Aspen forests are in decline and are important to many wildlife species, including but not limited to the northern goshawk (sensitive), three-toed woodpecker (sensitive), and big game species.

   Monitoring Question: Are aspen forests being maintained or expanded on Forest lands?

Focal Species Selected for Fish and Wildlife Monitoring

Focal species are a small subset of plant or wildlife species whose status permits inference to the integrity of the larger ecological system to which the species belongs and provides meaningful information regarding the effectiveness of the Forest Plan in maintaining or restoring these conditions to sustain the diversity of plant and animal communities in the plan area. Focal Species are generally selected on the basis of their functional role in ecosystems or their ability to document change within that ecosystem.

The process of identifying and using Focal Species is described in the Forest Service Manual (FSM) 1909.12, chapter 30, section 32.13c. The following are guidelines for selecting Focal Species:

1. Every monitoring program must identify at least one Focal Species and one or more monitoring question and indicator to track the status of the identified Focal Species.
2. It is not expected that a Focal Species be selected for every ecological condition.
3. Focal Species should be selected for monitoring when doing so is feasible and they are the best way to track ecological integrity and ecosystem diversity.
4. Monitoring Focal Species is intended to address situations where they provide more useful information or are more efficiently monitored than other potential indicators.
5. Focal Species can be selected and monitored when key ecological indicators of composition, structure, function, and connectivity are unavailable or difficult to monitor.
6. Focal Species are selected because they are indicative of key characteristics of ecological integrity and are responsive to ecological conditions to inform plan decisions.
7. The requirement for the Responsible Official to monitor Focal Species allows discretion to determine the most appropriate method and geographic scale for monitoring, within the financial and technical capabilities of the unit.

Three focal species were selected to monitor riparian, sage brush, and aspen habitats. These species are:

1. **Trout** (for riparian habitat) – Trends in trout species reflect the quality of cold-water streams and lakes and will be used as an indicator for these types of riparian habitat.
2. **Brewer's Sparrow** (for sagebrush habitats) – Trends in Brewer's sparrow reflect the quality and quantity of sagebrush habitats.
3. **Aspen** (for aspen habitat) – Aspen forests provide habitat for many wildlife species. Monitoring the extent of aspen on the Forest provides direct information about the availability of this habitat-type for wildlife species.

Monitoring Indicators Selected for Fish and Wildlife

Five indicators, including the three Focal Species listed above, were selected to monitor the three priority ecosystems. These indicators are:

1. **Trend in trout populations** (for riparian habitat)
2. **Riparian vegetation condition, bank stability, and ground cover, as indicated by methods such as Riparian Greenline Surveys** (for riparian habitat)
3. **Brewer's Sparrow** populations (for sagebrush habitat)
4. **Trend in range condition** (for shrub-steppe habitat)

5. **Total acres of aspen cover type on Forest lands** (for aspen habitat)

Summary of Changes to the Fish and Wildlife Monitoring Program

Three monitoring questions representing riparian, shrub-steppe, and aspen habitats would replace the ten monitoring questions currently listed for the fish and wildlife monitoring program. Five monitoring indicators would be used to answer these questions, and three Focal Species (trout, Brewer's sparrow and aspen) would replace the nineteen Focal Species currently listed. These changes would simplify the monitoring program while still focusing on the most critical ecosystems for wildlife.

Proposed Reassignment of Goshawk Monitoring Question

The following monitoring question and indicator would be reassigned to the range monitoring program:

- Question: Are appropriate adjustments to grazing practices being made where grazing is contributing to at-risk conditions?
- Indicator: Ungulate grazing practices in at-risk locations.

Answering this question requires evaluating range utilization data and grazing practices, and reassigning it would facilitate the involvement of range staff. Both the range program manager and wildlife program manager would contribute to answering this monitoring question.

Attachment 2 shows this proposed change to the monitoring plan.

Attachment 2. Proposed Plan Monitoring Program

Table 1. Proposed Wildlife Monitoring Plan. Blue text indicates changes, including new questions and indicators or reassigned questions. Questions or indicators proposed for removal are indicated by ~~stricken text~~.

Program	Activity	Monitoring Question	Monitoring Indicator
Fish and Wildlife	Riparian Habitat	Are healthy riparian ecosystems being maintained on Forest lands?	1) Trend in trout populations from UDWR and FS surveys. 2) Riparian vegetation condition, bank stability, and ground cover, as indicated by methods such as Riparian Greenline Surveys and/or Multiple Indicator Monitoring.
	Shrub-Steppe Habitat	Are healthy shrub-steppe habitats being maintained on Forest lands?	1) Trend in Brewer's sparrow populations as indicated in the IMBCR. 2) Trend in range conditions from UDWR Range trend data and FS utilization data.
	Aspen Habitat	Are aspen forests being maintained or expanded on Forest lands?	Total acres of aspen cover type on Forest lands as estimated in FIA data.
~~Fish and Wildlife~~	~~Wildlife Habitat Diversity~~	~~Is the diversity of wildlife habitat being maintained by managing Vegetative Structural Stage (VSS) distribution across the planning area?~~	~~Diversity and stability of forest and rangeland vegetation.~~
	~~Modification of Ecosystem~~	~~Are forest management activities and/or natural events affecting the structure and function of upland and riparian ecosystems?~~	~~Structure (VSS) and function of forest and riparian ecosystems.~~ ~~Upland and riparian vegetation diversity, condition, trend, structure and ground cover.~~
	~~Big Game Habitat Condition~~	~~Is big game habitat maintained to meet Forest Plan desired conditions?~~	~~Big game habitat condition and/or VSS Distribution across the landscape and within projects.~~

Program	Activity	Monitoring Question	Monitoring Indicator
	~~Fish~~ ~~Quantity and Quality of Aquatic Habitats~~	~~Are forest management activities and natural events affecting the ecological conditions indicated by the status of focal species?~~ ~~Are management activities maintaining and improving the ability of lakes and streams on the Forest to maintain self-sustaining cold water fisheries?~~ ~~Are forest management activities and/or natural events maintaining aquatic habitat to meet Forest Plan desired conditions and objectives or improving habitat to move toward those conditions and objectives?~~	~~Occupied habitat and population structure of focal species.~~ ~~Riparian vegetation diversity, condition, trend, structure and ground cover.~~ ~~Stream channel condition, morphology, bank stability and substrate composition.~~ ~~Compliance with State water quality sediment, turbidity and temperature standards and maintenance of beneficial uses.~~ ~~Function and condition of lentic riparian areas.~~
	~~Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive Plant Species~~	~~Are TES plant habitats being protected from forest plan implementation activities and maintaining sufficient numbers and distribution to maintain viable populations across the Forest?~~	~~TES species have suitable habitat to sustain population numbers to maintain viability.~~
	~~Indicator and Special Status Species~~	~~Are forest management activities and natural events affecting the ecological conditions indicated by the status of focal species[1]?~~	~~Habitat conditions retained across the planning area in sufficient numbers and distribution to maintain species viability.~~
	~~Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive Animal Species~~	~~Are TES animal habitats being protected from forest plan implementation activities and maintaining sufficient numbers and distribution to maintain viable populations across the Forest?~~	~~TES species have suitable habitat to sustain population numbers to maintain viability.~~
	~~Snag Management~~	~~Is the spatial arrangement of snags in condition to meet needs of cavity nesters?~~	~~Snag species, density, size, height and condition.~~

~~[1] Mule deer, rocky mountain elk, wild turkey, Northern goshawk, Northern flicker, and sage-grouse, pygmy rabbit, spotted bat, Townsends Wester big-eared bat, bald eagle, sage-grouse, peregrine falcon, Flammulated owl, and three-toed woodpecker.~~

Program	Activity	Monitoring Question	Monitoring Indicator
Goshawk	Goshawk territory occupancy at the forest level	12. Are known goshawk territories on NFS lands remaining occupied?	Goshawk territory occupancy.
	Goshawk territory occupancy following vegetative management treatments	13. Are goshawk territories remaining occupied following vegetation management?	Goshawk territory occupancy.
	Dispersion & patch size of mature/old forest groups	14. Is mature and old forest habitat connectivity being adequately maintained?	Percent and distribution of mature and old forest cover.
	Down log & woody debris amounts/sizes within a 10 acre treatment block	15. Is downed wood being maintained in sufficient amount, size, and location?	Quantity of downed logs and woody debris.
	~~Ungulate grazing practices in identified at-risk locations~~	~~Are appropriate adjustments to grazing practices being made where grazing is contributing to at-risk conditions?~~	~~Ungulate grazing practices in at-risk locations.~~
Range	Ungulate grazing practices in identified at-risk locations for goshawks	16. Are appropriate adjustments to grazing practices being made where grazing is contributing to at-risk conditions for goshawks?	Ungulate grazing practices in at-risk locations for goshawks as measured by utilization data.
	Permitted Animal Unit Months (AUMs)	17. Are goods and services being provided in accordance with Forest Plan goals and objectives?	Level of permitted livestock grazing.
	Range Condition and Trend	18. Are desired conditions for rangeland plant communities being met in regards to species composition, trend and ground cover?	Range condition, trend and ground cover.
	Invasive Species	19. What is the extent of the change of ecological conditions due to invasive species?	Estimated acres infested with invasive plants and noxious weeds.
Timber	Assure that vegetation manipulation will not favor an increase in forest pests (insects, diseases, etc.)	20. Are vegetation conditions stable or moving toward Forest Plan desired conditions?	Extent of insect and disease infestations.

Program	Activity	Monitoring Question	Monitoring Indicator
Water	Water Quality	21. Are beneficial uses, identified by the state of Utah, being maintained for all water bodies?	Impairment or degradation of water quality. Number of impaired or degraded water bodies.
	Changes in stream channels and riparian areas due to management	22. Are forest management activities affecting stream channels and riparian ecosystems?	Riparian ecosystem vegetation diversity, condition, trend, structure and ground cover. Riparian species occupied habitat and population structure. Stream channel condition, morphology, bank stability and substrate composition. Riparian species occupied habitat and population structure.
	Best Management Practices (BMP) effectiveness and compliance on land disturbing projects	23. Are appropriate BMPs being followed with forest management activities and are they meeting their intended effectiveness with respect to impacts to riparian ecosystems?	BMP compliance and effectiveness.
Soils	Accelerated Soil Loss	24. Are forest management activities impairing soil productivity of the land?	Changes in soil properties (physical, chemical, and/or biological) and ground cover that result in the loss of the inherent ecological capacity or hydrologic function of the soil resource.
Facilities	Transportation System Management	25. Is adequate road access and maintenance being provided?	Miles of classified road open for public use. Number and condition of deficient bridges.
	Road Maintenance	26. Are open roads maintained to standard?	Miles of road maintained to standard.
	Water Systems	27. Do potable and non-potable water systems meet Federal, State, and Local requirements?	Water quality monitoring results and condition surveys.
	Dams and Water Impoundments	28. Do dams on Forest Service lands meet State and Local safety requirements?	Critical safety items identified during dam inspections.

Program	Activity	Monitoring Question	Monitoring Indicator
Protection	Fuel Treatment	29. Are fuel treatment projects reducing risk to property, human health and safety, and reducing the potential for unwanted fire effects through reduction of total fuel loading to manageable levels?	Percent of projects where post-treatment total fuel load is reduced from pre-treatment levels.
	Fire Management	30. Are forest vegetation conditions trending towards safe and efficient fire response and restoring fire as a disturbance agent consistent with management area emphasis and historic fire return intervals?	Percent of fires suppressed during initial attack where that is the chosen strategy. Percent of natural ignition acres with resource benefit.
	Insect and Disease	31. Are forest vegetation conditions stable or moving toward Forest Plan desired conditions?	Extent of insect and disease infestations.
Education	Public Outreach	32. Education and information: Are we delivering key education/enforcement messages to forest employees and users? (Key focus areas are: OHV use, recreation user ethics, fire's role/hazardous fuels, noxious weeds, watershed health.)	Number of key messages.