



National Forests in Alabama
Revised Land and Resource Management Plan
Administrative Change
2012 Planning Rule Monitoring Program Transition
May 2016



This Administrative Change – the 2012 Planning Rule Monitoring Program Transition – to the 2010 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) for the National Forests in Alabama, brings the plan monitoring program into conformance with the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule. The 2012 Planning Rule allows for corrections or adjustments to the Forest Plan using a process called “Administrative Changes.” “Administrative Changes” as defined by 36 CFR 219.13(c) in the 2012 Planning Rule is “... any change to a plan that is not a plan amendment or revision. Administrative Changes include corrections of clerical errors to any part of the plan, conformance of the plan to new statutory or regulatory requirements, or other content in the plan (219.7(f)).”

EVALUATION REPORTS

Monitoring Evaluation Reports will be produced on a biennial schedule. It is anticipated that the next Monitoring Evaluation Report will be available by September 30, 2017.

CLIMATE CHANGE

In meeting the requirement to monitor “measurable changes on the plan area related to climate change and other stressors that may be affecting the plan area” (36 CFR 219.12(a)(5)(vi)), the following monitoring questions and indicators will be added to the Forest’s Monitoring Program:

Monitoring Question #20 – How has climate variability changed and how is it projected to change across the region?

Monitoring Question #21 – How is climate variability and change influencing the ecological, social, and economic conditions and contributions provided by plan areas in the region?

Monitoring Question #22 – What effects do national forests in the region have on a changing climate?

Indicators and Procedures for these three Monitoring Questions:

These three monitoring questions will be addressed and evaluated through Region 8’s Broader-Scale Monitoring Strategy, which the Forest will incorporate into Forest Evaluation Reports. To see the indicators and procedures that will be used at the broader-scale for these monitoring questions, see Region 8’s Broader-Scale Monitoring Strategy at: www.fs.usda.gov/main/r8/landmanagement/planning.

In addition to including Monitoring Questions 20, 21, and 22, the following Monitoring Questions from the Monitoring Program in the existing Forest Plan provide monitoring information to evaluate “other stressors that may be affecting the plan area”. These Monitoring Questions and their Indicators are:

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MQ #2 - Are landscape-level and stand-level composition and structure of major forest communities within desirable ranges of variability?

Indicators - fire return interval, natural regeneration, non-native invasive species (NNIS), site preparation, timber harvest – regeneration/thinning, tree planting, tree release

MQ #3 - Are key successional stage habitats being provided?

Indicators - fire return interval, natural regeneration, non-native invasive species (NNIS), site preparation, timber harvest – regeneration/thinning, tree planting, tree release

MQ #6 - What are status and trends of forest health threats on the forest?

Indicators – air quality - feral hogs, hemlock woolly adelgid, non-native invasive species (NNIS), southern pine beetle (SPB), tornado or straight-line wind events

MQ #7 - What are the status and trends of federally listed species on the forest?

Indicators – listed bat population trends, biological evaluation and assessment, changes to listed species, indigo snake, listed mussel habitat and population trends, red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*)

SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

In meeting the requirement to monitor plan contributions to the social and economic sustainability of communities, which is a part of monitoring the progress toward meeting the desired conditions and objectives, including providing multiple use opportunities (see 36 CFR 219.12(a)(5)(vii)), the following monitoring questions and indicators will be added to the Forest's Monitoring Program:

Monitoring Question #23 – What changes are occurring in the social, cultural, and economic conditions in the areas influenced by national forests in the region?

Indicators and Procedures:

This monitoring question will be addressed and evaluated through the Region 8's Broader-Scale Monitoring Strategy, which the Forest will incorporate into the Forest Evaluation Reports. To see the indicators and procedures that will be used at the broader-scale for this monitoring question, see the Region 8's Broader-Scale Monitoring Strategy at:

www.fs.usda.gov/main/r8/landmanagement/planning.

In addition to including Monitoring Question 23, the following Monitoring Questions from the Monitoring Program in the existing Forest Plan will provide information to evaluate social, cultural, and economic sustainability. The premise of this monitoring question is that by producing or contributing to the ecosystem services that provide benefits to people and

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communities, social and economic sustainability will be enhanced. The following Monitoring Questions provide information needed to evaluate if ecosystem services are being produced or contributed to:

MQ-8. What are the trends for demand species and their use?

Indicators - Bobwhite quail, eastern wild turkey, white-tailed deer

MQ-9. Are high quality, nature-based recreation experiences being provided and what are the trends?

Indicators - Recreation/special uses projects

MQ-11. What is the status and trend of wilderness character?

Indicators - Air monitoring station

MQ-12. What are the status and trend of Wild and Scenic River conditions?

Indicators – Wild and scenic rivers

MQ-13. Are the scenery and recreation settings changing and why?

Indicators - Transportation infrastructure

MQ-14. Are heritage sites being protected?

Indicators - Heritage resources surveys/reports

MQ-15. Are watersheds maintained (and where necessary restored) to provide resilient and stable conditions to support the quality and quantity of water necessary to protect ecological functions and support intended beneficial uses?

Indicators - Soil inventory, watershed action plans, watershed assessments

MQ #17 - How do actual outputs and services compare with projected?

Indicators - fire return interval, mineral resource development, timber harvest – regeneration/thinning

MQ #19 - Are Forest Plan objectives and standards being applied and accomplishing their intended purpose?

Indicators – Forest plan objectives and standards

FOCAL SPECIES

Another requirement is that the plan monitoring program must include monitoring questions and indicators on the status of a select set of focal species to assess ecological conditions (see 36 CFR 219.12(a)(5)(iii)). A “focal species” is defined as a “species whose status permits inference to the integrity of the larger ecological system to which it belongs and provides meaningful information regarding the effectiveness of the plan in maintaining or restoring the ecological conditions to maintain the diversity of plant and animal communities in the plan area” (36 CFR 219.19).

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The following table shows the species that are being identified as “focal species” for this plan’s monitoring program, along with ecological system/ecological conditions that each focal species will serve as an indicator of:

Focal Species	Ecological System/Conditions
Red Cockaded Woodpecker (RCW)	Longleaf Woodland Habitat Restoration across the Landscape
Brown Headed Nuthatch	Restored Upland Pine Dominated Woodland on the Landscape in absence of RCW
Longleaf Pine	Longleaf Forest Restoration and associated native communities across the landscape

These species were already being monitored in the existing monitoring program and they will continue to be monitored according to the protocols already established. However, the evaluation of the information gathered from the monitoring of these species will now be used within the context of evaluating the integrity of the ecological system the species is a part of, along with the effectiveness of the plan in maintaining or restoring those ecological conditions.

The following is a list of the existing species-related monitoring questions and indicators that will now serve to meet the requirement of monitoring species identified as “focal species”:

MQ #2 - Are landscape-level and stand-level composition and structure of major forest communities within desirable ranges of variability?

Indicators - fire return interval, natural regeneration, non-native invasive species (NNIS), site preparation, timber harvest – regeneration/thinning, tree planting, tree release

MQ #3 - Are key successional stage habitats being provided?

Indicators - fire return interval, natural regeneration, non-native invasive species (NNIS), site preparation, timber harvest – regeneration/thinning, tree planting, tree release

MQ #7 - What are the status and trends of federally listed species on the forest?

Indicators – listed bat population trends, biological evaluation and assessment, changes to listed species, indigo snake, listed mussel habitat and population trends, red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*)

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Approval and Effective Date

This Administrative Change becomes effective upon signature below, and being posted online at the Forest’s website. Administrative Changes are not subject to the objection process (36 CFR 219.50). This Administrative Change will remain in effect until the 2004 Revised LRMP is revised.



CARL PETRICK
Forest Supervisor

5/3/2010

Date

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Comments and Responses**

#	Comment	FS Response
Comments from SELC/Defenders of Wildlife/Wild South		
1	<i>We are concerned, however, that the documentation provided for public review – the letter and attached crosswalk – does not demonstrate how the four new monitoring questions and addition of focal species achieves full compliance with the monitoring requirements of the 2012 rules.</i>	As stated in the cover letter, an interdisciplinary team of resource professionals reviewed the current monitoring plan to determine compliance with the 2012 Planning Rule. The review determined that the current monitoring plan met the requirements of the planning rule with the exception of the items listed in the cover letter. The four new monitoring questions and the addition of focal species constitute a proposed modification to the current monitoring plan. With the proposed modification, the monitoring plan will then be in compliance with the new rule.
2	<i>The connections between some of the NFA’s existing monitoring questions (MQs) and their indicators and the new rules’ eight monitoring requirements are not clearly and specifically explained.</i>	During the interdisciplinary review of the monitoring plan, resource professionals determined that at least one of the monitoring questions and elements addressed each of the eight monitoring requirements as written in the 2012 Planning Rule, and documented this in the crosswalk. Those areas where monitoring questions did not adequately address the monitoring requirements resulted in the proposed administrative change.
3	<i>There is also no discussion of how the best available scientific information (BASI) was used to determine whether existing MQs met new monitoring requirements.</i>	The Best Available Science Information, for the existing monitoring questions has been established and validated in the annual Monitoring and Evaluation Reports since 2005.
4	<i><u>The status of select watershed conditions</u> –the NFA should consider and explain how the existing watershed condition</i>	As shown on the crosswalk monitoring questions 15 and 16 address watershed conditions. Appendix F of the Revised Forest Plan lists the different elements of the

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	<p><i>framework fits into this monitoring item. As the Region 8 Guidance explains, “[t]his monitoring item is related to the Watershed Condition Framework,” yet the NFA do not discuss the WCF at all.</i></p>	<p>watersheds that are monitoring and reported in the Annual Monitoring & Evaluation Report. Specifically Monitoring question 15 “Are watersheds maintained (and where necessary restored) to provide resilient and stable conditions to support the quality and quantity of water necessary to protect ecological function and support intended beneficial uses?” speaks directly to watersheds and monitoring question 16 “What are the condition and trends of riparian area, wetland and floodplain functions and values?” indirectly addresses watersheds through the riparian, wetland and floodplain components. The watershed Condition Framework, while not a component of the Monitoring plan does provide up-to-date information that directly informs the current condition of our watersheds. For the NFsAL all watersheds were determined to be functioning normally and therefore we have no priority watersheds for restoration.</p>
5	<p><i><u>The status of select ecological conditions including key characteristics of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems</u> – Under the 2012 rules, ecological conditions are described in terms of structure, composition, function, and connectivity. The crosswalk lists several existing MQs, which address certain characteristics. But it is unclear whether these MQs address all ecosystems.</i></p>	<p>As the commenter points out the regulation requires at least one monitoring question that addresses “the status of select ecological conditions including key characteristics of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.” The interdisciplinary team reviewed the current monitoring plan and determined that there were several monitoring questions that address these conditions (1,3,4,5,6,7,8). The crosswalk provided documents this review. The Revised Forest Plan and current monitoring plan includes detailed descriptions of these terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and the monitoring is documented in the Monitoring and Evaluation reports.</p>

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6	<p><u><i>The status of focal species to assess ecological conditions</i></u> – Focal species are used to assess the plan’s effectiveness in providing the ecological conditions needed to maintain diverse plant and animal communities and native species. The NFA should clarify that existing MIS will continue to be monitored and evaluated. Again, it is unclear how existing MIS and proposed focal species assess the various ecological conditions needed to support diversity.</p>	See #7 below.
7	<p><u><i>The status of ecological conditions that contribute to the conservation, recovery, and viability of certain listed species or species of concern</i></u> – The rules require MQs and indicators to address the status of the ecological conditions that contribute to the recovery of federally threatened and endangered species (T&E), conserve proposed and candidate species, and maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern (SCC). This requirement may overlap with monitoring of select ecological conditions (discussed above) and those requirements should be considered together.</p> <p><i>Additionally, how do these viability species relate to the new category of SCC under the new rule? SCC is a new category of</i></p>	<p>The monitoring transition regulations do not specifically address (Management Indicator (MIS) and this administrative change will not change the monitoring of the MIS species identified in the existing plan. However, for this monitoring transition, some of the MIS have been identified as being species that can serve as “focal species”. As “focal species” they will continue to be monitored, however, the evaluation of that monitoring information will be within the context of evaluating the health of the ecosystems to which those species belong.</p> <p>The monitoring transition also does not require the identification of Species of Conservation Concern (SCC). SCCs will be identified during the next Plan Revision process. However the current monitoring plan does address Regional Foresters Sensitive Species (sensitive species). These will most likely be the starting point for selecting SCC during the revision process and</p>

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	<p><i>species – SCC are species which occur in the plan area and for which the regional forester has determined the BASI indicates substantial concern about the species' capability to persist there long-term. While the rules don't require SCC to be identified for these monitoring program changes, the Forest Service should identify and monitor species likely to be identified as SCC.</i></p>	<p>they will continue to be monitored under the current monitoring plan.</p>
<p>8</p>	<p><u><i>Measurable changes on the plan area related to climate change and other stressors that may be affecting the plan area – The NFA rely on the regional broad-scale monitoring strategy to satisfy this requirement, as well as existing monitoring of other stressors. First, the NFA's specific contributions to the regional strategy should be explained, i.e., the specific climate-related indicators for which the NFA are responsible for collecting data to feed into the regional monitoring strategy. Second, to the extent that the NFA rely upon existing monitoring of other stressors to address climate change monitoring as well, those stressors must actually be linked to climate change effects and that connection must be documented.</i></u></p>	<p>In making this comment, the commenter cites the Regional Guidance which states that “Forests may include a description of potential indicators, so as to establish the credibility of the question when collaborating with partners”. However, this statement in the Regional Guidance was meant to point out that it would be a good idea to not only include the Monitoring Questions that the Broad-Scale Monitoring Strategy is going to address, but to also include in the Forest's Administrative Change the Indicators from the Broad-Scale Monitoring Strategy associated with those Monitoring Questions. This was meant to further communicate to everyone what type of information is going to be gathered in addressing those Monitoring Questions at the Broad-Scale. It was not meant to imply that the Forests should be developing their own indicators to then “feed-up” to the Broad-Scale Monitoring effort. Rather the intention is that the applicable data will be gathered at the larger, broader-scale, and then that data will be made available to the Forests to include in their Monitoring Reports. The Forests can then evaluate what that</p>

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		<p>data/data trend implies for management at their level.</p> <p>As shown in the crosswalk, several of the current Management Questions (2,3,6,7) address “other stressors that may be affecting the plan area” , but as stated in the cover letter, climate change was not specifically addressed, thus the need to add monitoring questions for climate change. However there is no requirement that the other stressors being monitored to meet this requirement can only be “stressors” that are linked to climate change.</p>
9	<p><i>Progress towards meeting the forest plan’s desired conditions and objectives – None of the MQs listed in the crosswalk relate to monitoring progress towards desired conditions for ecosystems, although there are plan desired conditions for those ecosystems, or at least for some elements of some ecosystems. This monitoring item also relates to most items discussed above and should be considered in conjunction with them.</i></p> <p><i>There is also no rationale presented to justify transitioning from annual forest wide monitoring and evaluation reports to biennial.</i></p>	<p>Monitoring question #19 of the current monitoring plan specifically addresses objectives and standards of the forest plan and is reported in the M & E report.</p> <p>According to the regulations at 36 CFR 219.12(d)(1) “The responsible official shall conduct a biennial evaluation of new information ...and shall issue a written report of the evaluation and make it available to the public.”</p>
10	<p>Project-Level Monitoring - The relationship between plan-level or</p>	<p>The proposed administrative change addresses compliance with the 2012 Planning</p>

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	<i>forest-wide monitoring and project or activity monitoring is unclear. Project level monitoring can provide extremely valuable monitoring information that could feed into and inform forest-wide monitoring.</i>		regulations related to Forest Plan monitoring. While project level monitoring provides critical information for successful implementation of the Forest Plan this proposed Administrative Change does not change current project level monitoring. Current project level monitoring will continue and will be reported in monitoring and evaluation reports as appropriate.
11	<i>Comprehensive Review of Monitoring Program - More generally, this very limited review seems to be a missed opportunity to more comprehensively evaluate the current monitoring program and to consider whether additional changes or refinements are needed.</i>		The purpose of the proposed administrative change is to meet the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule. A comprehensive evaluation of the current monitoring program is not required at this time however, in September 2015 the NFsAL prepared Year 10 review of the Revised Forest Plan and that report is available online at: here . This report initiated the evaluation of the monitoring plan to determine if any changes were necessary to bring the monitoring plan into compliance with the new regulation. The proposed administrative change is the result of that evaluation.
Comments from James Jeter			
12	<i>I have no comments other than it reads like third party standards...</i>		Thank you for your comment.
Comments from Gene Quick			
13	<i>Surely the management of the USFS can find more productive ways to use its people and spend its money.</i>		This comment is outside of the scope of this decision.