

# Research Request – Frequently Asked Questions

## 1. Why do researchers need to request to conduct research on National Forest Lands?

- Federal Regulations mandate that all commercial and non-commercial uses of Forest Lands be accounted for by special use permits. In many cases, research activities may occur without extensive review, but all research proposals require an assessment of whether the action is subject to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) or special use permit. If the action requires NEPA, coordination with the forest will be required and a NEPA decision signed before the actions can take place.
- Many activities occur on the forest that may conflict with other research or special use projects, such as group recreational events, routine utility corridor maintenance, tree thinning, Christmas tree cutting, prescribed burns, habitat restoration, new land designations, and proposed land exchanges. Knowledge of research activities by Forest Service staff and regular communication can help minimize undesirable impacts to research projects.
- The Forest Service has a wealth of information about its land and resources. Resource specialists can direct researchers to areas most appropriate for their needs, as well as offer information on management history or historical events, such as wildfires. Research permits facilitate this communication. Resources specialists such as wildlife biologists and archaeologists can also steer researchers away from sensitive areas that might be undermined by proposed research goals.
- The Forest Service benefits from data that researchers provide. New information from researchers can be incorporated into Forest Service databases and used to improve forest management. In many cases, Forest Service staff can provide ideas of needed research and locations for data collection that could benefit both researcher and the public. Consequently, a summary of findings (e.g., copies of theses, dissertations, papers) from research on the Rio Grande National Forest should be provided to the Forest Service upon completion of the study if at all possible.
- It is important to promote and facilitate integration and coordination of complementary research projects. Except in cases where sensitive data needs to be withheld (i.e., cultural or ESA locations), spatial data on the location of all permitted research projects will be maintained on a forest-wide GIS map. Efforts will be made to link complementary projects and promote interdisciplinary research.

## 2. Who should apply?

- Principal Investigators (PIs) of all research projects located on lands managed by the Rio Grande National Forest should inquire to see if a research special use permit is required. Research by graduate students must also list their major professor as a PI. When required, failure to obtain a special use permit for research violates Forest Service Policy and Federal environmental regulations, and may jeopardize completion of the research.

- Any archaeological research will require an ARPA permit administered by Region 2 of the USFS.

### 3. When do I apply?

- Proposals that do not require archaeological clearance or biological assessment/evaluation should be submitted by January 31 or July 31 in the year/season of planned implementation of the research, and should have an expected decision generally within four weeks after submission, depending on the complexity and volume of proposals received.
- Requests that require archaeological clearance or ESA Consultation (with FWS) should be submitted by July 15 in the year prior to planned implementation of the research, so the projects can be incorporated into the program of work for the following federal fiscal year, which begins in October. Moreover, large or complex, but currently unfunded research proposals should be submitted for review on this date to allow the Forest Service time to plan for additional analysis if the project receives grant funding in mid-year.
- Requests may be submitted at all times of year but those submitted at the times listed above will receive priority by Forest Service staff over proposals submitted at other times of the year.

### 4. How do I know if my proposal requires archaeological clearance, biological assessment, or other evaluations such as 401/404 permitting?

If your project meets the criteria below, archaeological clearance and biological assessment/evaluation are likely not needed, but circumstances vary. In this case, proposals can be submitted in either January or July of the year implementation is planned.

- Cumulative ground disturbance less than 1 m<sup>2</sup>
- No use of noisy, mechanized equipment
- No equipment, instruments, or sampling devices stored overnight at study area
- No live trapping or destructive sampling of animals
- Measurement and sampling of vegetation will not kill individual plants directly or indirectly
- A permit to collect plants is required by the Regional Office, through the Regional Botanist.

If your project meets the criteria below, archaeological clearance and biological assessment/evaluation may be needed; this need will be evaluated by Forest Service staff. In this case, proposals can be submitted only in July of the year prior to planned implementation of the research.

- Cumulative ground disturbance greater than 1 square meter
- Includes prescribed fire
- Occasional or continuous use of noisy, mechanized equipment
- Equipment, instruments, or sampling devices stored overnight (or longer) at study area in temporary containers (e.g., small enclosures, boxes)
- Live trapping or destructive sampling of animals
- Vegetation sampling or measurement that kills individual plants
- Construction of new or modification of existing buildings or other permanent structures at the research area
- Research personnel live or camp at the research area for more than two weeks per year

## 5. Can researchers arrange archaeological and biological surveys for their projects?

- The Forest Service must consider a variety of issues, including potential impacts to cultural resources. If an archaeologist reviews a proposal and it has the potential to impact to cultural resources, the Section 106 process in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act, must be completed prior to approval and implementation. The Rio Grande National Forest funds a limited number of days each year for their archaeologists to provide surveys, consultations with potentially affected tribes, and clearances in support of research permit proposals. However, this work must be scheduled into the existing workload, and timelines to complete this process can vary from a few days to months. If the timeline for the Forest Service to prepare a clearance is too long, the research applicant has the option of paying a R2 permitted archaeological consultant to conduct a survey and prepare an archaeological clearance for the proposal (if no significant places of traditional cultural importance are involved). A list of consultants permitted to conduct archaeological work on the forest is available upon request. This work will need to be coordinated with the Forest Service archaeologists well in advance, as they will need to review, accept, and submit any "out service" work to the State Historic Preservation Officer.
- Similarly, some projects may require biological surveys that cannot be quickly incorporated into planned workloads of Forest Service staff. To avoid delay in such projects, the research applicant can arrange for the required biological survey and analysis of project impacts to be completed by non-Forest Service personnel if approved by the Forest Service. In this case, survey and analysis information will be submitted to the Forest Service for review.

## 6. What information is needed to process your request?

- **PI name**, phone number, and email address; name and address of PI's research organization/department.
- Statement of the **Scope and Purpose** of the research: Please be concise and avoid non-essential jargon as several different resource specialists will review the proposal.
- **Exact** location of the project: We can't stress this requirement enough. GIS maps and topographic maps at a 1:24,000 scale are recommended. The location of your project needs to be compared with maps of archaeological sites and threatened and endangered species (TES). If you have large plots, the perimeter must be defined. If you have small plots or sites, place dots on the map.
- **Methods** used: Please provide specific information about how the research will be accomplished on the ground. This includes the following information: The **area** encompassed by the research, how it will be designated, laid out on the ground, and identified.
- **Activities** associated with the research: measurements, sampling methods, frequency and duration of entry into an area, equipment used, and the specific amount and nature of ground disturbance (depth, and dimensions). Providing detailed information about methods will facilitate review. Failure to provide sufficient details may result in a delay in review.
- **Time** of the year and **frequency** of site visits, including the number of visitors: This information is critical to evaluate potential research impacts to TES and other forest resources. If research is in the proximity of a known TES, consideration of the number of people in the area and the timing and frequency of their visits is important.
- **Duration** of research: Estimate the likely duration of the research activities.

## 7. What is the review process, and where do I submit proposals for review?

- Proposals are first reviewed by District Ranger(s). If additional input is required, they may consult with the Rio Grande National Forest Research Coordinator, and other specialists. The purpose of this review is to expedite the decision, check proposals for completeness, and place proposals into categories of potential impacts on Forest resources and uses (low, medium, high). Information from proposals will not be shared outside the Forest Service committee unless permission is given by the researcher. The decision maker(s) may recommend integration of small, similar projects into one proposal to facilitate Forest Service analysis.

You may find the request form at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/riogrande/passes-permits>

For email, fax, or hardcopy submissions: please see contact info for individual District Ranger office or submit to:

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