

**Forest Service Handbook
National Headquarters - Washington Office
Washington, DC**

**Forest Service Handbook 5609.11 – Boundary Management Handbook
Chapter 10 - Land Descriptions**

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Duration: This amendment is effective until superseded or removed.

Superseded Directive:

Approved by: Tina Terrell, Associate Deputy Chief, NFS

Date approved: August 17, 2020

Responsible Staff:

Explanation of changes: Following is an explanation of the changes throughout the directive by section.

10 - Establishes new chapter and sets forth codes, captions, and direction for Land Descriptions.

Table of Contents

10.1 - Authority	3
10.2 - Objective	3
10.3 - Policy	3
10.4 - Responsibility.....	3
10.41 - Washington Office, Director of Lands and Realty Management	3
10.42 - Washington Office, Director of Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers.....	4
10.43 - Regional Office, Director of Lands and Realty Management.....	4
10.44 - Forest Supervisor	4
10.9 - References	5
11 - Preparing Land Descriptions.....	5
11.1 - Metes and Bounds	5
11.11 - Preamble, Caption or Derivative of Title Statement.....	6
11.12 - Body.....	6
11.13 - Qualifying Clauses.....	7
11.14 - Public Land Survey System	8
11.15 - Portions of a Larger or Parent Parcel	8
11.16 - Reference to Another Recorded Document	8
11.17 - Lot and Block	8
11.18 - Strips	8

10.1 - Authority

See FSM 5601 for further direction. The authority comes primarily from State licensure, but is also received through special instructions issued by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to conduct cadastral surveys.

10.2 - Objective

To prepare, process, and maintain accurate records relating to land surveys, land descriptions, survey plats, special designated area boundary descriptions, and final maps affecting the public estate managed by the Forest Service as National Forest System lands.

10.3 - Policy

1. Ensure that legal land descriptions in support of land adjustment program activities on National Forest System lands are reviewed, approved, or prepared by or under the direction of a Forest Service State-licensed land surveyor, and are processed in accordance with generally accepted professional land survey standards and direction contained in this Handbook.
2. As required by law, regulation, or policy, prepare perimeter boundary descriptions and final maps for special designated areas listed in chapter 30 of this handbook.
3. Prepare perimeter boundary descriptions and final maps for special designated areas in conformance with the legislative maps cited in public law or approved authoritative maps for special designated areas not created by public law.
4. Provide the required number of copies of the final perimeter boundary narrative description and final map packages for special designated areas established by public law to the Washington Office Legislative Affairs Staff for transmittal to the appropriate Senate and House committees and subcommittees.
5. Maintain secured digital electronic records of the perimeter boundary descriptions and final maps of special designated areas at the Forest Service Geospatial Technology and Applications Center (GTAC) in Salt Lake City, Utah. Maintain hard copies and digital files at the local Forest Service offices and field locations for public review, as required and appropriate.

10.4 - Responsibility

10.41 - Washington Office, Director of Lands and Realty Management

The Washington Office Director of Lands and Realty Management is responsible for:

1. Establishing the Agency's land description standards when developing, writing, reviewing, or approving legal land descriptions and deeds affecting National Forest System lands.

2. Establishing the Agency's land survey standards when surveying and marking National Forest System property boundary lines and administrative management boundaries of special designated areas.

10.42 - Washington Office, Director of Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers

The Washington Office Director of Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers is responsible for:

1. Preparing transmittal letters to the appropriate Senate and House committees and subcommittees as specified in public laws and this Handbook, and coordinating with the Washington Office Legislative Affairs Staff on transmitting signed letters and copies of the special designated area boundary package to Congress.
2. Transmitting secured electronic digital copies or hardcopies of final perimeter boundary descriptions and final maps for special designated areas to the GSTC for posting on an appropriate website for public access.
3. Notifying the specific region where a special designated area is located to publish a Notice of Availability in the *Federal Register* of the special designated area boundary package.

10.43 - Regional Office, Director of Lands and Realty Management

The Regional Office Director of Lands and Realty Management is responsible for:

1. Reviewing and approving land descriptions, and other land title or survey-related documents, to be used or cited in the acquisition or disposal of National Forest System lands.
2. Preparing the legislative map to be cited by map name and map date for draft legislation, consistent with Congressional direction and/or Forest Service leadership and guidance.
3. Providing special designated area perimeter boundary descriptions, and final maps of special designated areas to the Regional Forester for signature and acceptance by the Forest Service.

10.44 - Forest Supervisor

The Forest Supervisor is responsible for coordinating the land survey and boundary management needs of the forest with the appropriate regional office, Zone office, or Forest-level land surveying and boundary management team. Boundary management needs include: land surveys; property line and administrative boundary line marking; and the preparation, review and approval of all land surveys and land descriptions created by a Forest Service State-licensed land surveyor. See section 50.3 of this Handbook for further explanation of boundary management needs for land adjustment activities.

10.9 - References

Forest Service State-licensed land surveyors who review and approve, or prepare legal land descriptions should have, at a minimum, the following reference library:

1. Brown, Curtis. (1957, 1969). "Boundary Control and Legal Principles," 2nd Edition or newer. New York. Wiley and Sons.
2. Robillard, Walter G. and Bouman, Lane J. 2012. "Clark on Surveying and Boundaries," 7th Edition. Charlottesville, VA. Lexis Law Publishing.
3. U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Cadastral Survey "Specifications for Descriptions of Tracts of Land: For Use in Land Orders, Executive Orders, Proclamations, Federal Register Documents, and Land Description Databases," revised 2017, Washington, D.C. <https://www.blm.gov/sites/blm.gov/files/SpecificationsForDescriptionsOfLand.pdf>
4. U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management. (2009). "Manual of Surveying Instructions for the Survey of the Public Lands of the United States." Washington, D.C.
5. Wattles, Gordon. (1976). "Writing Legal Descriptions," 1st Edition or newer. Orange, CA. Wattles Publications, Inc.

11 - Preparing Land Descriptions

Land descriptions shall conform to Federal, State, and recognized professional land surveying standards and guidelines as described in the reference material cited in section 10.9 of this chapter.

Prepare land descriptions using survey plats, title records, General Land Office and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) cadastral records, existing deed information, and legislative maps for special designated areas (see ch. 30). If possible, avoid changing the description method used in the parcel's chain of title. Forest land surveyors shall review all land descriptions prepared for use by the Forest Service (see sect. 10.3 of this ch.). The land description must be accurate, complete, free of patent or latent ambiguities, and written in a way that the area described can be located on the ground with certainty to the exclusion of all other lands. Regional land surveyors must review and approve all land descriptions prior to being used for land adjustment activities, or defining the boundary of special designated areas.

Land descriptions must employ one of the description methods described in section 11.1.

11.1 - Metes and Bounds

Generally, these descriptions are composed of a preamble, caption or derivative of title statement, and a general location description followed by the body of the description, usually cited as "more particularly described as follows..." The body of the description is composed of

measurement data consisting of line courses and descriptions (metes), and/or bounding calls of adjoiners or features, and qualifying clauses.

11.11 - Preamble, Caption or Derivative of Title Statement

The preamble describes the land's general location and links the parcel to previous surveys, maps, or chain-of-title conveyances. It may include the following: tract name, name of political subdivision (city, county, town, borough, State), previous owner's title documents, portions to be described, watershed, aliquot part, section, township, range, principle meridian, county, State coordinate system used, basis of bearing, horizontal and/or vertical datum, and a statement including the source map as part of the land description.

11.12 - Body

The body contains detailed information about the courses (bearings or azimuths and distances), bounding calls, and monuments that make up the boundary of the parcel. The body consists of the following elements:

1. Point of Beginning. The point of beginning (POB) is a location that must be described to the exclusion of all other positions and described in enough detail so as to be easily located. A monument set or called at the POB shall be durable, tied to other control, and referenced to other recorded instruments.

2. Descriptive Elements. Use one or more of the following descriptive elements in metes (measurement data) and bounds (containment) descriptions:

- a. Use natural features, including stream beds (dry and wet), sharp and well-defined ridges, mountain peaks, and well-defined canyon rims. Only three lines are legally acceptable for water boundaries: the thread (thalweg), the centerline as defined by median lines, and the bank along the mean water lines, according to the respective State law. Water boundary courses along the three acceptable river and stream calls that are susceptible to erosion, accretion, and avulsion shall carefully and clearly state, "thence with the meanders of the (thread, centerline as defined by median lines, or bank) of the river or stream."

- b. It is common to rely on parallel lines or setback lines when using natural features. Starting and ending points must be locatable on the map and ground when setback or parallel lines are used. For example: "along the thread of Rock Creek to the intersection with a line which is 200 feet westerly of and parallel to the center line of Road No. 208; thence along said line..." Setbacks or offsets greater than 300 feet must not be used as they are difficult to locate. Avoid using offsets when referring to a water boundary due to the confusion with the sinuosity of the watercourse.

3. Semi-Permanent and Man-made Features. Features must be locatable on the map and on the ground. Examples include: roads, trails, dams, power lines and pipelines, bridges, rock walls, and found or set boundary monuments.

4. Previously Surveyed Lines or Legally Described Lines. Examples include section or township lines; section subdivision lines; metes and bounds property lines; parcel boundaries of record; county (if surveyed) and State boundaries; and existent Federal estate, Indian, or other reservation and grant boundaries. The use of protraction blocks is allowed for mineral leasing; otherwise, do not use protracted and/or projected (un-surveyed) township, section, or other lines of the Public Land Survey System which have not been physically located and surveyed on the ground.

5. Bearings and Distances. This descriptive element, also known as “courses”, consists of a series of measured bearings and distances between locatable points. Bearings must be referenced to a known meridian such as geodetic, astronomic, a coordinate projection system, or previous public record document. Distances must be referenced to ground elevation. Both will be expressed with significant figures appropriate to the observation method and clearly state the units of measurement. Course calls with bearings and distances must include the phrase “a distance of” between the bearing or azimuth call, and the actual distance, so as to minimize blunder calls mixing or confusing bearings and distances.

6. Coordinate Projection Systems. A land description may contain supplemental references to the corner coordinate position. Many State laws restrict the use of coordinate positions as primary corner evidence. The horizontal datum must be referenced in the deed if coordinate positions are used.

7. Along Contour. Use of contour lines is discouraged. However, they may be used as boundaries when the end points of the boundary are definite and locatable, and the vertical datum has been clearly defined. It should be noted that the planimetric location of the contour on the map can be significantly different from its true location on the ground.

8. Notations. Describe the monumentation for each turning or angle point in the description, and give enough information about each course to clearly show the intent. For example: "Thence along the centerline of Highway 64."

9. Acreage. The acreage and its source should be stated at the end of the body of the description. In all cases where land is acquired or conveyed by section or aliquot part, the official acreage must be from the original patent unless a dependent resurvey or section subdivision has occurred, and new acreage returned. Reference may be to a boundary survey or, in the case of wilderness descriptions, to the digital acreage derived from the land information system. When more than one land parcel is described, the individual acreage for each parcel must be clearly stated, as well as the total aggregate acreage of all the descriptions.

11.13 - Qualifying Clauses

Note all exceptions and reservations after the tract description. Describe exceptions and reservations in clear and unambiguous terms.

11.14 - Public Land Survey System

This descriptive method references designated subdivisions of the Public Land Survey System contained in the official cadastral records of BLM. Use the current BLM “Manual of Surveying Instructions for the Survey of the Public Lands of the United States” and the most recent version of the BLM publication, “Specifications for Descriptions of Lands for Use in Land Orders, Executive Orders, Proclamations, Federal Register Documents, and Land Description Databases” for further guidance (available at: <https://www.blm.gov/sites/blm.gov/files/SpecificationsForDescriptionsOfLand.pdf>).

11.15 - Portions of a Larger or Parent Parcel

Descriptions that call for conveyance of a portion or part of a parent parcel are to be prepared by the Forest land surveyor in a manner that avoids latent or patent ambiguities.

11.16 - Reference to Another Recorded Document

For example: Being the same land described in the deed from Smoke E. Bear to W. S. Owl, recorded in the Fairfax County Deed Book, 251, page 3.

11.17 - Lot and Block

For example: Being Lot 1 of Block "A" of Green Forest subdivision.

11.18 - Strips

Used primarily for descriptions of rights-of-way. For example: A strip of land 100 feet on each side of the section or described line with the sidelines extended or shortened, as the case may be, at each angle point and at the Point of Beginning and Point of Ending so as to describe in its entirety the full width of the right-of-way at all angle points along the described line.