Principles for developing a National Forest Plan

The passage of the National Forest Management Act began a new era in the Forest Service in which most of the activities managed by the agency were governed through National Forest Land and Resource Management Plans. After a quarter century of experience invested in forest planning and managing forests and grasslands under programmatic plans, a number of key principles can be identified for forest plans and the planning process. Under the mantle of the Forest Service mission of "to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations", forest plans are the primary documents that define how individual forests and grasslands will be managed to achieve this mission. The process of revising or amending a forest plan is only one step in a continuous adaptive management process that includes assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

A Forest Plan is:

A Forest Plan has three parts.

- Vision. The vision provides a direction for management and describes the niche of these National Forest System lands. It describes the *desired conditions* of the landscape, disturbance processes, and the benefits and experiences that these lands can supply. It contains *monitoring measures* to assess progress toward desired conditions.

- Strategy. The strategy is how the Forest Service intends to move the Forest toward desired conditions. The strategy describes *suitable uses* and how the strategy will be monitored. It contains a prospectus of key *objectives* for anticipated levels of conditions, uses and activities. It contains *monitoring measures* of implementation. Optionally, it can include recommendations for *special area designations.*

- Design Criteria. The design criteria bounds the strategy and the subsequent projects designed to implement the strategy. The design criteria includes *standards* and related *monitoring measures* as well as a reference to *other applicable guidance*.

The plan does not include every decision or analysis that affects forest management. The Forest Service directives system provides a substantial component of the "how to" direction of forest management. Assessments at both broad and watershed scales provide context for both forest plan and project decisions. Other planning efforts (Fire plans, roads analysis) build on the direction contained in forest plans to provide more direction for specific agency operations. Project planning is the final process for determining what is done on the ground consistent with the decisions of the forest plan.

Measures of a Successful Forest Plan

A successful forest or grassland plan is one that can provide appropriate relevant direction that will be constantly used during the plan period. To succeed in this, the plan must:

- Provide a strategy for reaching desired conditions and meeting objectives that includes a framework relevant to forest managers in planning site-specific activities. This strategy contains only appropriate programmatic direction needed to achieve the desired conditions and objectives of the plan.
- Recognize the specific niche that the national forests provide both to the nation and to the surrounding community. A successful plan will be one that is responsive to both national needs and community needs.
- Be understandable to the public that participated in its creation. It must be organized and use language that is accessible to the general public, so they can be involved and understand how their forest is being managed.
- Contain an adaptive framework that incorporates regular monitoring and evaluation to adjust forest management within the direction of the existing plan; or when that is not possible, with a focused plan amendment process.
- Have realistic desired conditions and achievable objectives consistent with likely budgets and the design criteria.
- Meet the specific legal requirements and expectations contained in the laws and regulations governing the national forests.

Principles of Planning for National Forests and Grasslands

Successful forest and grassland plans depend upon a planning process focused on the key decisions of the forest plan. Experience in developing the initial set of forest

and grassland plans has led to a greater understanding of how these plans can be developed with better scientific and public participation. Success in the planning process will depend upon the following:

- Focus the planning process on the need to change the plan. Focus collaborative participation on the elements of the plan that merit change. Assume that the current plan is adequate and appropriate unless demonstrated otherwise.
- Collaborate and build relationships with tribes, state and local governments, federal agencies, local stakeholders and others in the community of interest of the plan as normal business. Collaborators are regularly informed and offered timely and meaningful opportunities to participate in the planning process. Forest Supervisors and Planners skillfully manage the collaborative process to find a common vision and strategy for the forest plan.
- Consider science appropriately in the planning process, acknowledging risk and uncertainty.
- Analyze problems at the appropriate scale. Decisions are made at the forest level but with knowledge and understanding of the multi-scale context of those decisions.
- Monitor conditions and trends on a continuous basis at the appropriate scale, with published evaluations at regular intervals. Evaluations examine the adequacy of the current plan direction and may lead to adjustments of implementation or changes in the plan direction.
- Complete the planning work on time and on budget. Focus the collaborative effort so that the collaborators can see that they make a difference, within a timeframe that is reasonable and achievable.