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Carson National Forest's Needs to Change Management Direction of Its Existing 1986 Forest Plan

Carson National Forest

The Needs to Change the Carson National Forest's Existing 1986 Forest Plan

The Carson National Forest's current land and resource management plan (forest plan) is nearly 30 years old. The forest is in the process of developing a new plan that guides how the Carson National Forest will be managed over the next 10 to 15 years. An assessment report has been prepared, which provides information on the "state of the forest", including conditions, trends, and risks to sustainability. Using the assessment, the forest's planning team has analyzed what needs to change in order to create sustainable resources, goods, and services.

A need to change paints a picture of the strategic changes necessary to address issues identified by the assessment and present a vision for future management of the Carson National Forest. The overarching question to be answered in developing needs to change statements is:

♦ What strategic current plan direction needs to be revised (added, modified, or deleted) to address the conditions, trends, and risks?

The needs to change statements developed by the Carson National Forest were presented to forest users and interested citizens for feedback and input in June 2015. The forest held 14 public meetings at communities around the forest, and engaged the public through the Carson National Forest's website. The public was presented with the key risk findings from the assessment and the needs to change statements, and asked to provide new or alternative management solutions. Public input was utilized to inform what parts of the forest plan need to be changed, which will ultimately be summarized in the *Federal Register*, when the forest publishes a notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement to develop a revised forest plan this fall. This announcement will convey the Carson NF's intent to develop a revised forest plan (and alternatives) based on identified needs to change and analyze their respective effects on the environment.

A description of what is a forest plan can be found at the end of this document. The plan need to change statements developed after public input and comment are described below.

A. Changes Needed Throughout the Plan

1. There is a need within the revised plan to better recognize and enhance the Carson National Forest's role in contributing to local economies, including service-based sectors such as recreation and tourism, timber and forest products, livestock grazing, and other multiple-use related activities and products.

2. There is a need to reevaluate the number, arrangement, boundaries, and plan direction related to the current forest plan management areas, to minimize complexity and allow more flexibility for restoration and habitat treatments. Language in the plan should be more strategic than prescriptive, identifying quantifiable objectives and project standards and guidelines that will move toward desired conditions.

3. There is a need to include plan direction that allows for adaptive management, to address potential climate change effects.

4. There is need to include management approaches within the revised plan that will allow for adapting to fluctuations in forest budgets over the life of the plan when planning towards desired conditions.

5. There is a need to include management approaches within the revised plan that considers the capacity of local infrastructure, contractors, and markets, when planning towards desired conditions.

6. There is a need to include management approaches within the revised plan that utilize partnership and volunteer opportunities as a management option, to promote movement toward desired conditions.

7. There is a need to develop plan direction related to Forest Service acquisitions, disposals, and exchanges that are not covered by the existing forest plan.

B. Ecological Changes

Vegetation

1. There is a need to develop desired conditions regarding forest, woodland, and shrubland structure, composition, and function, as well as objectives, standards, and guidelines that will promote restoration and achievement of desired conditions, support resiliency and sustainability, and minimize risks to ecosystem integrity.

2. There is a need to update plan direction that promotes the restoration and maintenance of grass productivity, particularly native bunchgrass species, and limits woody species encroachment and invasive plant establishment, both in grasslands and non-grasslands.

3. There is a need to update plan direction that supports integrated pest (weed) management.

4. There is a need to update plan direction that allows for an integrated resource approach to prescribed fire activity, as well as the flexibility for restoration and maintenance of ecosystems.

5. There is a need to update plan direction that promotes the use of wildland fire (management of wildfire and prescribed fire) in fire adapted ecosystems, while addressing public safety and health concerns, especially in the Wildland Urban Interface.

6. There is a need to update plan direction to promote aspen health and resilience through managing regeneration (i.e. the use wildland fire or other disturbance) and existing stands.

Soils

7. There is a need to update plan direction to promote the maintenance and restoration of soil condition and function (i.e., soil hydrology, soil stability, nutrient cycling), particularly in lower elevation systems. Plan management approaches should focus on reducing the amount of exposed soil by restoring and maintaining sufficient vegetative cover, including downed woody material.

Riparian and Wetlands

8. There is a need to provide plan direction that promotes the protection, restoration and maintenance of appropriate composition and amount of riparian vegetation.

9. There is a need to provide plan direction regarding management of riparian areas around all lakes, perennial and intermittent streams, and wetlands.

10. There is a need to provide plan direction that promotes the protection, restoration, and maintenance of wetland condition and function.

Water and Watersheds

11. There is a need to provide plan direction for the restoration of watersheds.

12. There is a need to provide plan direction for the sustainable management of water resources (e.g. groundwater, springs, wetlands, riparian areas, perennial waters) and their interconnections.

13. There is a need to update plan direction on managing for sustainable watersheds for multiple uses (e.g. wildlife, livestock, recreation, and mining) and public water supplies.

14. There is a need to update plan direction to promote desired watershed conditions that maintain water quality and quantity, as well as enhance retention.

Wildlife, Fish, and Plants

15. There is a need to update plan direction to promote the recovery and conservation of federally recognized species, maintenance of viable populations of the species of conservation concern, and maintenance of common and abundant species within the plan area.

16. There is a need to provide plan direction to address sustainability of habitat(s) for plant and animal species important to tribes and traditional communities.

17. There is a need to provide plan direction for managing towards terrestrial, riparian, and aquatic habitat connectivity for species movement across the landscape.

18. There is a need to provide plan direction that allows for improving aquatic passage in streams where it has been compromised. Plan direction should promote the restoration and expansion of the range of native aquatic species and connectivity of fragmented populations.

19. There is a need to provide plan direction that allows for an assortment of management approaches, including timber harvest, thinning, prescribed burning, and other vegetation management methods to provide wildlife habitat for species that need a variety of forest habitats, such as interior, edge, young, and old forest.

C. Socio-Economic (Multiple Uses and Human Influences) Changes

Cultural and Historic Resources and Uses

1. There is a need to update plan direction for Native American traditional cultural properties and sacred sites and places, and non-Native American traditional cultural properties.

2. There is a need to provide plan direction addressing management of historic and contemporary cultural and traditional uses, including both economic and non-economic uses for tribes and for traditional communities not considered under tribal relations (i.e. traditional Hispanic and Anglo communities).

Areas of Tribal Importance

3. There is a need to update plan direction addressing consistency of activities with legally mandated trust responsibilities to tribes.

4. There is a need to update plan direction orders, to ensure privacy for tribes engaged in cultural and ceremonial activities.

5. There is a need to update plan direction on design, location, installation, maintenance, and abandonment of towers, facilities, and alternative infrastructure within electronic communication sites, while giving due consideration to the value and importance of areas that may be identified as a sacred site or part of an important cultural landscape by tribes.

Timber and Special Forest Products

6. There is a need to provide plan direction for the management of commercial and noncommercial use of forest products.

Range and Grazing

7. There is a need to provide plan direction for the livestock grazing program that incorporates adaptive management to move toward ecosystem-based desired conditions.

8. There is a need to update plan direction to promote the sustainable management of wild horses.

Recreation

9. There is a need to provide plan direction that promotes sustainable recreation.

10. There is a need to provide guidance for recreation activities that occur in areas sensitive to resource degradation or at risk, due to high visitation.

11. There is a need to update plan direction for the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail.

12. There is a need to include management approaches within the revised plan to address user conflicts and demands when planning towards recreation desired conditions.

13. There is a need to update plan direction and guidance for incorporating the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum classifications across all programs areas.

14. There is a need to update plan direction and guidance for incorporating the Scenery Management System integrity objectives across all program areas

15. There is a need to update plan direction for over-snow vehicle use.

16. There is a need to update plan direction for the recreation special uses program.

Designated Areas

17. There is a need to update plan direction for managing existing designated areas, including designated wilderness, research natural areas, and designated and eligible wild and scenic rivers, that promotes the maintenance of desired values and characteristics unique to each area.

18. There is a need to provide plan direction for newly designated or potential designated areas that promotes the maintenance of desired values and characteristics unique to each area.

Infrastructure

19. There is a need to provide plan direction for maintenance of transportation systems in watersheds identified as impaired or at-risk.

20. There is a need to update plan direction for reclamation of non-system roads.

Land Status and Ownership, Use and Access

21. There is a need to update plan direction to address legal access for public, private landowner, and tribal needs.

22. There is a need to update plan direction to promote the contiguity of the land base and the reduction of small unmanageable tracts of National Forest System lands.

Energy and Minerals

23. There is a need to update plan direction for recreational mining-related activities.

24. There is a need to update plan direction for the removal of common mineral materials, such as personal use rock permits, commercial contracts, ceremonial use and free use permits.

25. There is a need to update plan direction for existing or proposed transmission corridors and renewable energy generation, including solar, biomass, and geothermal, and to provide guidance for protecting natural resources, heritage and sacred sites, tribal traditional activities, and scenery.

What is a forest plan?

A forest plan provides broad, program-level direction for management of National Forest System lands and its resources. The purpose of a plan is to address the risks to sustainability of resources, goods, and services the forest produces and to provide a vision for the future management of the forest. Future projects carry out the direction in a forest plan. The forest plan does not contain a commitment to select any specific project. A plan:

1) Applies to only those lands within the National Forest System;

2) Is developed through an ongoing public process;

3) Uses the best available scientific, local, and native knowledge to inform the planning process;

4) Provides a framework for integrated resource management and for guiding project and activity decision making;

5) Does not authorize projects or activities, commit the Forest Service to take action, or regulate uses by the public (in other words, no site-specific decisions are expected to be made in a forest plan); and

6) Should not repeat laws, regulations, or program management policies, practices, and procedures that are in the Forest Service Directive System.

A forest plan consists of (1) plan components; (2) identification of where plan components apply; (3) other plan content, and (4) optional plan content. Each of these is discussed below:

1. Plan Components

Plan components will be developed from the needs to change statements and guide future project and activity decision-making. Plan components will apply forest-wide, to specific parcels of land (management areas), or to land of specific character (e.g. riparian areas, roads, seeps, springs).

Desired conditions are specific social, economic, and ecological characteristics of the plan area, or a portion of the plan area, that are described in terms specific enough to allow for progress toward their achievement. Desired conditions are what drive the plan. All project-level management activities should be aimed at the achievement of the desired conditions for those resources in the area where the project is located. Desired conditions can be thought of as goals that help define a collective vision for the National Forest in the future.

Objectives are concise, measurable, and time-specific statements of a desired rate of progress toward desired conditions and should be based on reasonably foreseeable budgets. Objectives, along with the strategies (from management approaches or Forest Service handbook direction) used to accomplish them, can be thought of as the tools we will use to prioritize project activities to reach desired conditions. Objectives are mileposts along the road toward desired conditions.

Standards can be thought of as the rules we will operate within as we develop projects to accomplish objectives and achieve desired conditions. These are mandatory constraints on project- and activity decision-making.

Guidelines describe constraints on project and activity decision-making that allow for departure from its terms, so long as the intent of the guidelines is met. In other words, guidelines are mandatory unless they are replaced by something that is equal, or better, in meeting the intent of the existing guideline.

Suitability of lands is identified in a plan as specific lands within a plan area that are suitable for various uses or activities based on the desired conditions applicable to those lands. The plan also identifies lands within the plan area as not suitable for uses that are not compatible with desired conditions for those lands. The suitability of lands need not be identified for every use or activity; however, every plan must identify those lands that are not suitable for timber production (required by the National Forest Management Act).

2. Where Plan Components Apply

Every plan must identify **management areas** or **geographic areas**. The plan may identify designated or recommended designated areas as management areas or geographic areas.

3. Other Plan Content

In addition to plan components the forest plan must include other plan contents. These are also linked to needs to change statements.

Priority watersheds: Every plan must identify watersheds that are impaired or at risk for priority maintenance or restoration.

Roles and contributions: Every plan must describe the roles and contributions of the plan area to ecological, social, and economic sustainability within the broader landscape.

Monitoring program: Every plan must include a monitoring program. Monitoring information enables the responsible official to determine if a change in plan components or other plan content that guide management of resources on the plan area may be needed.

Proposed and possible actions: Every plan must describe proposed and possible actions that may occur during the life of the plan on the plan area. Possible actions are not a commitment to do work, but possible actions which could be performed to move toward desired conditions and objectives.

4. Optional Plan Content

Forest plans may include other optional plan content, such as existing conditions, explanatory narrative, and management approaches. Optional plan content are not plan components.

Management approaches and associated information are not plan components. They do not offer plan direction, but describe an approach or strategy to manage the unit to achieve a desired condition. Management approaches often convey how plan components work together to achieve the desired condition. They may also describe context, intent, priorities, partnership opportunities or coordination activities, needs for surveys, inventories or assessments, or approaches to risk and uncertainty. Not every resource topic area requires an associated management approach heading. Changes to management approaches do not require plan amendments.

Background and description and associated information are not plan components. They do not offer plan direction, but give a brief sense of the history and/or description of the resource topic area being addressed, as of the writing of the plan. The background and description information also provide a context for the desired conditions identified as part of a plan component.

Other sources of information include existing laws, regulations, policies, memorandums of understanding and other guidance that will be incorporated into the plan as an appendix. These sources are important in designing projects and activities to achieve desired conditions. Most of these documents are available from Forest Service offices. Many are posted on the Carson National Forest Internet Web site.