USDA Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Planning for Species Diversity Webinar

Questions & Answers

April 10, 2024

1) Most of the forest is an island archipelago and this creates different risks for species relative to the lower 48. Darwin says to be careful of islands. How are you thinking about the uniqueness of island ecosystems?

Island ecosystems contribute to rarity, however in some cases, species can exist on an island and be stable. Whether a species is rare and facing threats is what we would consider. We recognize that the isolated nature of islands makes it harder for certain species to disperse adequately and less of an issue for others. The analysis will consider limiting factors associated with island archipelago geography on a species-by-species basis.

2) Will the 1997 conservation strategy be maintained in the new forest plan?

Assuming that you are referring to the 1997 old growth conservation strategy, that has been carried forward with the 2016 amendment and is still in place currently.

The Plan revision process evaluates all aspects of the current Plan and determines whether there is a need to change the current direction. As such everything is on the table and could be revised. One of the next steps will be to identify the need for change. We are very early on in the process and are just starting assessments so we don't know what the need for change is or what the proposed plan content may be just yet. As an example, the conservation strategy could be carried forward without much change, but it also may be adjusted in some way based on information collected during assessments, environmental analysis, and public feedback.

3) I disagree with the comment that rarity doesn't mean a species is at risk. Rare species, given factors such as genetic drift and inbreeding, will see a reduction in population viability over time. Island populations that are small are at risk regardless of whether the habitat has been modified at all. Additionally, what do you define as an ecosystem? Each island can represent an ecosystem - what is your definition of an ecosystem?

Ecosystems vary in size and scale based on several factors. The 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219.19) defines an ecosystem as a spatially explicit, relatively homogeneous unit of the Earth that includes all interacting organisms and elements of the abiotic environment within its boundaries. An ecosystem is commonly described in terms of its composition, structure, function, and connectivity.

We are just at the very start of this process – the start of assessments – so many things still haven't been decided. There will be a chance for the public to comment on draft assessment outlines and draft assessments (this summer and early next year) and this will provide more specific information about planned assessment content, including how ecosystems are defined and described. We encourage your feedback and thoughts on topics like this as we move through this process.

To clarify my comment regarding rarity, rarity is an important factor that is evaluated alongside other critical factors in determining if there is substantial concern regarding a species' ability to persist. However, rarity alone isn't equivalent to substantial concern. Evaluation and determination of substantial concern is made on a species-by-species basis.

4) One of the species on Prince of Wales island is the Alexander Archipelago Wolf. Recently there was a lot of data collected and analyzed as part of the third petition to list this wolf. How much of this data will be pulled into the plan? Also, do you anticipate that there would be additional data gaps in this case or would that assessment be adequate?

We use the best available scientific information. Certainly, data and information in the species status assessment report (as part of the petition to list a species) would be included, even if the species is not ultimately listed. This report would include information about trends associated with the species and its habitat.

This webinar is focused on the process for identification of species of conservation concern – SCC. Identification of SCC and creating plan components that provide for the needs of SCC is one of several ways we ensure species diversity is accomplished. Others include including plan direction that address ecological integrity overall, species-specific needs for at-risk species (both threatened and endangered species, and SCC), and plan direction for other species as desired.

We are early on in the process of evaluating species, and information on individual species and associated gaps will be published for public comment in the months to come. Any information you may have on species is welcome now and can be submitted through our website. Oftentimes, a species that has been through a "petition to list" process has up-to-date scientific information and having insufficient information isn't usually an issue with those species.

5) Can a species be added as an SCC once the plan is adopted? Climate change creates unanticipated change. Will the plan be flexible to address this? Does SCC evaluation occur regularly or only through plan revision?

SCC evaluation and identification by the regional forester can occur at the same time or independently of a Plan revision. However, because identification of SCC requires ensuring that the Plan maintains persistence of SCC, change to the Plan direction may be needed. This can be done through an amendment if a Plan revision is not occurring at the time new/revised SCC are identified.

The Tongass SCC process is occurring at the same time as Plan revision. During the plan revision process, we are evaluating all of the "must consider" and "should consider" species, as defined by the land management planning handbook, chapter 10 (FSH 1909.12.52d), to see if they meet the criteria for species of conservation concern. If new information becomes available or new species are detected on the forest in between Plan revisions, we evaluate that as the information comes in because species can be added to the SCC list outside of the plan revision process as described above.

6) Salmon are important to human uses, drive the distribution of large mammals, and feed smaller species. Will there be any changes to existing salmon management, such as protections on class 3 and class 4 streams or larger riparian buffers (I've seen 300 ft buffers in many PNW forests)?

The regulations describe an SCC as a species for which the best available science indicates there is a substantial concern about the species' capability to persist over the long-term in the plan area. An SCC is not a federally threatened, endangered, proposed or candidate species under the Endangered Species Act. We create an SCC list using the best available science in a proactive step intended to prevent species from becoming federally listed. There are other categories of species where there isn't a substantial concern for long term viability yet are important for other reasons such as important sustenance concerns called "other highlighted species". Salmon and other species commonly used by the public for hunting, fishing, and gathering may be considered and included in this category. We recognize the importance of salmon on the Tongass National Forest. Regardless of whether it is classified as an SCC or not, making sure the forest ecosystems support salmon will be important and considered as part of this plan revision.

The 2012 planning rule is focused on species diversity and ensuring the persistence of native species through both a broad ecosystem integrity mandate as well as a species-specific approach. The Plan revision will include a process to determine if any Plan components (desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines) need to be revised, added, or removed in order to provide the ecological conditions for native species diversity and persistence.

7) What is the criteria for which information is more reliable in determining SCC? What if there is conflicting information?

For any particular scientific subject relevant to the planning process, the Responsible Official shall evaluate the scientific information based on the three criteria (accuracy, reliability, relevancy). To the extent that a scientific consensus exists, it may be easy to identify the BASI. In other cases, the Responsible Official may recognize multiple sources and possibly conflicting scientific information as BASI where a clear scientific consensus does not exist. The Responsible Official does not have to identify a single source of scientific information that is "best" as BASI for a specific subject. If there is conflicting information, that would be considered on a species-by-species basis and documented in the species evaluations.

As described in the land management planning handbook (FSH 1909.12 - zero code), reliability reflects how appropriately the scientific methods have been applied and how consistent the resulting information is with established scientific principles. The scientific information is more reliable if it was resulted from an appropriate study design and well-developed scientific methods that are clearly described. The assumptions, analytical techniques, and conclusions are well referenced with citations to relevant, credible literature, and other pertinent existing information. The conclusions presented are based on reasonable assumptions supported by other studies and consistent with the general theory underlying those assumptions or are logically and reasonably derived from the data presented. Any gaps in information and inconsistencies with other pertinent scientific information are adequately explained.

Scientific information that describes statistical or other scientific methods used to determine both its accuracy and uncertainty can be considered to be more reliable. The use of quantitative analysis that has known (and quantifiable) rates of errors and results improves this reliability. An accuracy assessment of the data supports the reliability of the quantitative analysis.

The application of quality control to the scientific information also improves the reliability of the information. One form of quality control is peer review when scientific information has been critically reviewed by qualified scientific experts in that discipline and the criticism provided by the experts has been addressed by the proponents of the information. Publication in a refereed scientific journal usually indicates that the information has been appropriately peer reviewed.

For more information or to sign up for our email distribution list, please refer to the Tongass Revision Website: https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/tongass/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fseprd1105492