



United States Department of Agriculture

Monitoring & Evaluation Report for the National Forests in Mississippi FY 2020-2023



Forest Service

National Forests in Mississippi

June 2024

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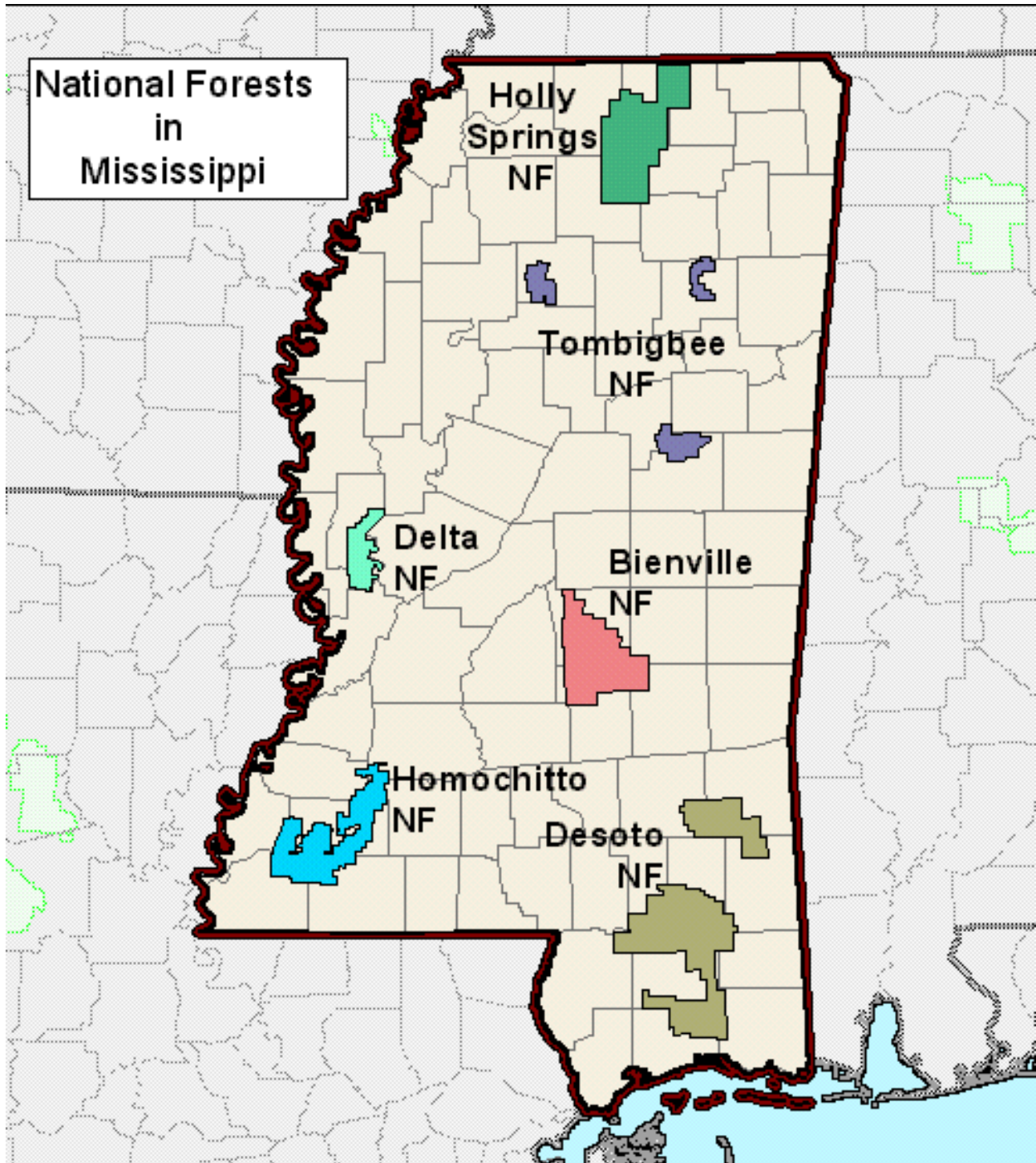
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General vicinity map of the National Forests in Mississippi

About our Plan Monitoring Program

Purpose

The purpose of the biennial monitoring evaluation report is to help the responsible official determine whether a change is needed in forest plan direction, such as plan components or other plan content that guides the management of resources in the plan area. The biennial monitoring evaluation report represents one part of the Forest Service's overall monitoring program for this national forest unit. The biennial monitoring evaluation report is not a decision document – it evaluates monitoring questions and indicators presented in the Plan Monitoring Program chapter of the forest plan in relation to management actions carried out in the plan area.

Our monitoring plan covers these topics required under FSH 1909.12, in addition to social, economic, and cultural sustainability. Some of the topics required under FSH 1909.12 have been combined in this report for efficiency. You'll find each of the following categories addressed in this report:

1. The status of select watershed conditions.
2. The status of select ecological conditions including key characteristics of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.
3. The status of focal species to assess the ecological conditions required under § 219.9.
4. The status of visitor use, visitor satisfaction, and progress toward meeting recreation objectives.
5. Measurable changes in the plan area related to climate change and other stressors that may be affecting the plan area.
6. Progress toward meeting the desired conditions and objectives in the plan, including providing multiple-use opportunities.
7. Progress toward meeting the desired social, economic, and cultural sustainability.

How Our Plan Monitoring Program Works

Monitoring and evaluation requirements have been established through the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) at 36 CFR 219. Additional direction is provided by the Forest Service in Chapter 30 – Monitoring – of the Land Management Handbook (FSH 1909.12).

The National Forests in Mississippi monitoring program was updated in April 2016 for consistency with the 2012 planning regulations [36 CFR 219.12 (c)(1)]. It was administratively changed to include the updated monitoring program in Chapter 5. For a copy of the current monitoring program go to <https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/mississippi/landmanagement/planning>.

Monitoring questions and indicators were selected to inform the management of resources in the plan area and not every plan component was determined necessary to track [36 CFR 219.12(a)(2)]. See the Plan Monitoring Program at the above link for discussion on how the monitoring questions were selected to be consistent with the 2012 planning regulations 36 CFR 219.12. The Biennial Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist Report (BMESR) contains supplemental information for the development of this Biennial Monitoring and Evaluation Report (BMER).

Providing timely, accurate monitoring information to the responsible official and the public is a key requirement of the Plan Monitoring Program. This biennial monitoring evaluation report is the vehicle for disseminating this information.

Monitoring Objectives

The objectives of our monitoring plan include:

- Assess the current condition and trend of selected forest resources.
- Document implementation of the Plan Monitoring Program
- Evaluate relevant assumptions, changed conditions, management effectiveness, and progress towards achieving the selected desired conditions, objectives, and goals described in the Forest Plan.
- Assess the status of previously recommended options for change based on previous monitoring & evaluation reports.
- Document scheduled monitoring actions that have not been completed and the reasons and rationale why.
- Present any new information not outlined in the current plan monitoring program that is relevant to the evaluation of the selected monitoring questions.
- Incorporate broader scale monitoring information from the Regional Broader Scale Monitoring Strategy that is relevant to the understanding of the selected monitoring question.
- Present recommended change opportunities to the responsible official.

Monitoring Results Summary

The National Forests in Mississippi monitoring program considers 31 monitoring questions: 27 questions evaluated by the national forest staff (unit-level) and 4 questions evaluated by Region 8 staff (broad scale). Of the 27 unit-level questions, there were 80 performance measures or monitoring indicators evaluated. The results of those 80 evaluations spawned 23 recommendations for some type of change. Of the 4 broad scale questions, zero suggestions were from broad-scale monitoring. Results are shown in the below Table 1.

The following table summarizes current recommendations for consideration. For a complete report, please reference the Biennial Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist Report (BMESR) which contains supplemental information for the development of this Biennial Monitoring and Evaluation Report (BMER).

Table 1. Results Summary

| Category | Monitoring Questions | Recommended changes to Plan monitoring program | Recommended changes to management activities | Other recommended changes or suggestions |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| 1. Status of Select Watershed Conditions | A.2 Are wetland systems present on appropriate sites and functioning across the landscape? | None | None | None |
| | B.4 Are habitat conditions sufficient to allow aquatic and riparian-dependent species to complete all phases of their life cycles? | None | None | None |
| | C.1 Are conditions needed to sustain the ecological function and productivity of the land being maintained? | None | It is recommended that the forest continue implementing best smoke management practices to ensure PM2.5 from prescribed fire does not contribute to or cause a NAAQS exceedance. | Recommend the Soil Scientist position on the Holly Springs be converted to a Forest level position. Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |
| | C.2 Are stream mitigation and restoration measures being implemented? | None | None | Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |
| | G.1 Are appropriate and relevant design criteria (guidelines) applied and effective in projects? | None | None | Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |
| 2. Select Ecological Conditions | B.5 Are conditions needed for sustaining healthy populations of native plants and animals being maintained? | None | None | Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |
| | D.1 Are forests in healthy condition? | None | None | First thinning of pine stands should continue to be a priority. |

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| | | | | <p>The Forest may need to increase treatment across all Districts as needed to ensure eradication/control of NNIS, safeguard forest health, and meet plan objectives.</p> <p>The district managers will need to meet and identify old growth stands in FSVEG to meet at least the minimum requirements of the district.</p> <p>Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available.</p> |
| 3. Focal Species | B.1 Are threatened and endangered species recovered or moving toward recovery? | None | None | None |
| | B.2 Are populations of rare species robust and secure? | The NFMS shall continue to protect and manage these species, but this may not be the best performance measure to determine needed change in plan components. Performance measures based on management of current habitat, restoring native ecosystems, and following plan standards, guidelines, and best management practices are most important in the protection and management of these species. | None | None |

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| | G.5 Are the forest management activities in compliance with the terms and conditions of USDI F&WS Biological Opinion on Indiana bat and Dusky gopher frog? | None | None | None |
| 4. Visitor Use, Satisfaction, and Progress on Recreation Objectives | B.3 Are species diversity and game abundance supporting nature viewing and quality hunting opportunities? | None | None | None |
| | E.1 Is reasonable and safe access and use by the public and for resource management being provided? | None | None | Establish partnerships with local interest groups and communities to maintain trails. Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |
| | E.2 Are important road and trail maintenance, closure, and construction activities being accomplished to provide access, public safety, and resource protection? | None | None | Districts are encouraged to improve trails through alteration and expansion rather than building new trails. New construction must be consistent with sustainable recreation goals. Partnerships are key to sustainable trail systems. Districts are encouraged to establish long-term partnerships at a local community level. |
| | F.1 Do the National Forests in Mississippi provide forest visitors with safe and enjoyable developed and dispersed outdoor recreation experiences that are diverse | None | Focus on maintaining and improving sites that have the most value. Priority sites include Regional Priority Investment List sites and Forest priority sites. Reduce unnecessary | None |

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| | and responsive to their needs? | | infrastructure at non-priority sites. Decommission low value sites with high maintenance costs. Seek partnerships to manage sites more effectively. | |
| | F.2 Are important recreational, cultural resource, and forest setting opportunities being provided? | None | None | Since hiking/walking is a primary activity, attention should be placed on maintaining trails to standard. If hunters are also camping, campgrounds should remain open during hunting season. Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |
| 5. Climate Change and Other Stressors | D.2 Are disturbance events, including those that may be related to climate change, changing in frequency? | None | None | An emphasis on young plantation thinning by promoting weight scale sales and innovative authorities available to the Forest Service will help tremendously in increasing the overall health of the NFMS. |
| | D.3 Are disturbance events, including those that may be related to climate change, affecting desired conditions in the forest? | None | None | Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |
| | D.5 Are disturbance events impacting the accomplishment of forest plan objectives? | None | None | None |
| | D.6 How has climate variability changed and how is it projected to change across the region? | None | None | Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |
| | D.7 How are climate variability and change | None | None | Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for |

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| | influencing the ecological, social, and economic conditions and contributions provided by plan areas in the region? | | | indicators where data is not available. |
| | D.8 What effects do national forests in the region have on a changing climate? | None | None | Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |
| 6. Progress Toward Meeting Desired Conditions and Objectives | A.1 Has progress been made toward maintaining and restoring desired conditions so that native ecological systems occupy appropriate sites? | None | An increased focus on prairie restoration would be beneficial to the NFMS in achieving the desired objectives in these special ecological systems. | <p>The absence of consistent data to sufficiently analyze forest types and conditions is an issue that needs to be addressed to promote increased accuracy across the Forest.</p> <p>A forest-wide look at the geospatial ecosystem layer needs to be performed, this way we can accurately report and monitor the progress towards LRMP objectives.</p> <p>There is a need for better data management throughout the Forest in databases such as FSVEG and FACTS.</p> |
| | A.3 Are annual average forest wide and ecological system objectives being achieved? | None | Current management activities are restoring proper species as outlined and desired in the forest plan, just not a rate to meet the goals of the forest plan. The implementation of a strike team and further support for contracting work, where feasible, along with examining regulations that take away efficiencies in timber sale preparation (i.e. size restrictions for weight scale, | None |

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| | | | certification of cruisers/markers) could benefit the NFMS's ability to restore more land. | |
| | B.6 Are annual average T&E species recovery treatment objectives being accomplished? | None | None | None |
| | D.4 Are healthy forest objectives being achieved? | None | <p>The implementation of a strike team and further support for contracting work, where feasible, along with examining regulations that take away efficiencies in timber sale preparation (i.e. size restrictions for weight scale, certification of cruisers/markers) could benefit the NFMS's ability to restore more land.</p> <p>There also appears to be an issue with data input as plantations are certified and this needs to be emphasized to district staff as an important step in the regeneration process.</p> <p>Fire frequency targets on the landscape are not being achieved. With recent averages, priority needs to be assigned by ecosystem and an updated layer, like the good/fair/poor layer the districts have utilized in the past, would be beneficial for achieving objectives on the landscape. A prioritization with an increase in scale needs to be addressed to reach desired fire return interval goals set forth in the LRMP.</p> | Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |
| F.3 Are wilderness characters being preserved or enhanced? | None | None | Establish wilderness baseline character and increase scores each | None |

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| | | | year until it is managed to standard. | |
| | F.4 Are the free-flowing conditions, scenic and recreational values for the Wild and Scenic River and the Black Creek Corridor Scenic Area being protected or enhanced? | Recommend implementing the monitoring strategy developed in the CRMP. | None | None |
| | G.2 Are special area conditions and needs consistent with the land management plan? | None | None | Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |
| 7. Social, Economic, and Cultural Sustainability | F.5 What changes are occurring in the social, cultural, and economic conditions in the areas influenced by national forests in the region? | None | None | Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |
| | G.3 Are final project determinations of suitability of uses and activities in harmony with forest plan desired conditions and determinations of generally compatible? | None | None | Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |
| | G.4 Are the costs of implementing this Plan comparable to the estimated costs? | None | None | Evaluate applicability and/or available metrics for indicators where data is not available. |

Conclusion

This document helps the responsible official determine whether a change is needed to the 2014 Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) direction, such as plan components or other plan content that guide the management of resources in the plan area (36 CFR 219.12(a)(1)). The BMER represents one part of the Forest Service's overall monitoring program for the National Forests in Mississippi.

Forest Supervisor's Certification

This report documents the results of monitoring activities that occurred through Fiscal Year 2023 on the National Forests in Mississippi. Monitoring of some plan components is long-term, and evaluation of those data will occur at a later date. For more information see our [forest plan](#).

I have evaluated the monitoring and evaluation results presented in this report. I have examined the recommended changes to the 2014 Land Management Plan and consider it sufficient to continue to guide land and resource management of the National Forests in Mississippi. In the near future, a deeper examination of the recommended changes is planned through engagement with resource specialists and the public.

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June 6, 2024