

USDA Forest Service National Advisory Committee for Implementation of the National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule
January 14-15, 2016
Sacramento, CA

Introduction

The National Advisory Committee for Implementation of the 2012 National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule (the Committee) held its fifth meeting of the new charter from January 14-15, 2016, in Sacramento, CA.

Objectives

The objectives of the meeting were to update the Committee on working group progress; engage with key US Forest Service personnel and other stakeholders active in Land Management Plan Revision processes; and continue to implement and refine the 2016 FACA work plan.

Meeting Participants

- Committee members present: Mike Anderson, Susan Jane Brown, Robert Cope, James Magagna, Peter Nelson, Martin Nie, Angela Sondenaa, Thomas Troxel, Lindsay Warness, Russ Ehnes, William Barquin, Chris Topik and Joan May (via conference call)
- Committee members absent: Adam Cramer, Daniel Dessecker, Rodney Stokes, Vickie Roberts, Candice Price, Greg Schaefer and Ray Vaughan
- Agency Staff: Chris French-DFO, Ann Acheson, Meryl Harrell, Annie Goode; Region 3 - Bob Davis; Region 5 – Al Olsen; Jamie Barbour (via conference call)
- Facilitators: Kathleen Rutherford and Pam Motley

Agreements and Actions

- 1. Key agency executive leadership will attend a 2016 Committee meeting to continue to explore key threads including efficiencies and strategic dilemmas.**
- 2. The Outreach working group will provide input to the agency on producing additional planning videos.**
- 3. Turnover and Assessment Recommendations -**
 - ***The agency will share the assessment and turnover recommendations with each new forest prior to commencing plan revision as a part of an orientation package during a pre-revision meeting between the planning team, Forest Supervisor and Washington Office (WO) Ecosystem Management Coordination (EMC) staff.***
 - ***The agency will further update the Committee on implementation of these recommendations at the March meeting.***
- 4. Wilderness Working Group –**
 - ***The group will develop a graphic description and timeline for the wilderness and NEPA processes at the March meeting.***
 - ***The group will develop draft recommendations for Committee review and deliberation on what is appropriate/possible in the pre-assessment phase.***
- 5. SCC Working Group -**
 - ***The group will conduct stakeholder interviews to compliment the agency internal review on SCCs.***
 - ***The Committee will have the opportunity to work with the agency on clarification of terms.***
 - ***The agency will present more in depth preliminary findings of the internal review in two weeks and a full summary by the March meeting.***

- ***The group and agency will continue discussions via learning calls prior to the March meeting (topics include: definition of terms, direction in the rule and directives; how to reconcile 2670 sensitive species direction with the SCC process; how to address SCCs in the monitoring transition; and the use and documentation of BASI).***
 - ***The group will find examples of effective and weak plan components addressing SCCs and discuss at the May 2016 FACA meeting.***
- 6. Adaptive Management Working Group -**
- ***The group will continue to explore the possibilities of mandatory guidelines and writing standards that allow for flexibility (Ex: setting sideboards but including provisions like “unless BASI indicates a change in management is needed for restoration purposes”).***
 - ***The group agreed that Committee members and Regional Planning Directors will find examples of effective and weak plan components. The group will discuss these examples and then work to craft effective suites of plan components for learning purposes at the July 2016 FACA meeting.***
- 7. Citizens’ and Government Guides –**
- ***The working group chairs will work with the agency to finalize the texts taking Meryl Harrel’s suggested edits into consideration.***
 - ***The draft guides will be posted to the agency FACA website as soon as the NRE clearance is complete (estimated date is mid-March). The final print date is estimated to be the end of April. The guides will be updated and refined on an on-going basis by the agency.***
- 8. Memo to the Chief/Secretary**
- ***The co-chair will draft and convey a memo to the Chief after each meeting to convey key issues, questions or concerns and outcomes with respect to the Chief’s challenge to the committee.***

Introductions and Updates

Co-Chair Susan Jane Brown welcomed the members and noted that the next nine months will be a critical time for the Committee to address several key issues and ensure there is a legacy of advice and recommendations beyond those already conveyed on the draft directives, turnover, outreach (video) and assessment recommendations. The agency noted that the Forest Service has been implementing the 2012 Rule for over three years and is now at a pivotal place to identify what is working and what challenges exist. The agency shared the Chief’s challenge to the Committee to develop recommendations on how to implement plan revisions in 2-3 years – including helping to identify efficiencies, partnership opportunities, a framework for more streamlined and strategic assessments and the appropriate balance between robust public involvement and the need for more expedient processes. Several members shared that they are involved with individual plan revisions on various early and mid-adopter forests.

USFS Updates on Turnover, Video and Assessment Recommendations

The agency gave updates on the three Committee recommendations that have been conveyed to the agency to date. A few forests have produced planning videos. The agency is seeking further input from the Committee on producing additional videos. The outreach working group will work with the agency on this effort. The Chief has been briefed on the assessment recommendations which have also been distributed to the Regional Planning Directors. Additionally, these recommendations will be shared with each new forest as part of an orientation package for pre-revision meetings between the planning team of forests commencing the LMP revision process, Forest Supervisor and WO EMC staff. To address the challenges associated with turnover, the agency leadership acknowledges that cultural change is needed. Leadership requests that the Committee continue to assist the agency with this issue, and will update the committee again in the March meeting.

Dialogue with USFS personnel: Toward a Better Understanding of Adaptive Management Design including Plan Components, the Role of Desired Conditions, and Standards and Guidelines

The adaptive management working group has been exploring how plan components (desired conditions, objectives and standards and guidelines) should fit together within the adaptive management framework and how a plan can be structured to ensure accountability while also maintaining flexibility in the face of uncertainty. The group is interested in continuing to review draft plans as they are released.

Jamie Barbour, via conference call, shared some thinking on the relationship between monitoring, adaptive management and assessments. Key highlights include: monitoring is not research; the need to prioritize and make connections between monitoring and management decisions (i.e. only monitor those systems that management can address); understanding the temporal and spatial basis for monitoring – and the relationship between the two: if a forest is not careful, they may change management too soon or on too small of an area; assessments need to clearly and concisely lay out the current conditions and need for change of priority systems; standards work well for those systems where we know how things work; a forest should not have to rely on amendments to change management direction under adaptive management, flexibility should be built into the plan; decision makers need to understand how they will use monitoring data.

The agency observed that 219.7 was meant to be a shift in how plan components are written: desired conditions articulate future vision, objectives are measurable and concrete, guidelines are mandatory but allow for flexibility and standards are measurable and enforceable.

The group used a Samoan Circle¹ to further explore the issue of adaptive management and allow both agency and Committee members to share their perspectives. The exercise focused on two questions: ‘What are the up/down sides of a standard-light plan?’ and ‘How should plan components fit together in the context of adaptive management?’ The Committee expressed a broad range of views. Some believe that standards are vital because they are the only enforceable plan component that provide certainty and accountability and that forests will pay the price in the long run with standard-light plans (Ex: litigation, public distrust, and more work during NEPA at the project-level). These participants stated that the role of a forest plan is to set management sideboards and certainty. Conversely, others expressed concern, citing that oftentimes standards are not based in science, limit a forest’s flexibility, and prevent forests from effective management. They see that the shift from standards to desired conditions under the 2012 rule will allow forests to better adapt to change. Everyone acknowledged that there is a need to move beyond a binary conversation. There was agreement that forests need to be clear and transparent in the development of plan components; involve the public in the process; effective monitoring is imperative; standards need to be well constructed and have scientific basis (poorly written standards encumber a forest’s ability to manage and adapt) and the agency needs training on how to develop a suite of effective plan components.

Looking forward, the committee will continue to explore these key intersections, including: mandatory guidelines and writing standards that allow for flexibility (Ex: setting sideboards but including provisions like “unless BASI indicates a change in management is needed for restoration purposes”). The group agreed that Committee members and Regional Planning Directors (RPDs) will find examples of effective and weak plan components. Using these examples, the Committee and RPDs will participate in a workshop for developing effective suites of plan components at the July 2016 FACA meeting.

¹ <http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/effective-engagement/toolkit/tool-samoan-circles>

Public Comment

Pamela Flick, Defenders of Wildlife, shared that a coalition of twenty local, regional and national organizations continues to be highly engaged in region 5 revisions and has submitted eighteen comment letters to date. Sue Britting, Sierra Forest Legacy, appreciates the Committee's candid expression of concerns and voiced a desire for more accountability to maintain species viability.

Oversight- Preliminary Findings from USFS SCC and Wilderness Teams' Internal Reviews

The agency gave a brief update on preliminary findings from the USFS SCC and Wilderness Teams' internal reviews. Variation in implementation was seen among the regions. The WO will evaluate if and where this variation is acceptable or concerning. Nearly all regions highlighted a need for additional discussions on SCC-rated specific terms used in the Rule or directives (e.g. "substantial concern," "long-term," "sufficient information," and "capability to persist"). The WO will form an SCC Cadre to provide clarification and guidance; a technical guide is currently under development. The general consensus within the agency, at this time, is that there is no need to amend the directives. The Committee suggested that the agency engage the research stations in oversight efforts. With respect to wilderness, regions are challenged with how to integrate Chapter 70 with the NEPA process and how to best engage the public.

Working Group Breakout Report Outs

Wilderness – During the breakout session, the working group discussed what activities are appropriate to initiate pre-assessment, and concurred that activities should be limited to information gathering, relationship building and education. The public should be notified and invited to participate (at local, regional and national levels); Congressional involvement is also important. The inventory process should be concurrent with the assessment. No evaluation should occur prior to the assessment. Issues may arise if the public perceives that actions are being taken outside of the revision process. The group will develop a graphic description and timeline for the wilderness and NEPA processes and draft recommendations on pre-assessment work for Committee deliberations at the March meeting.

SCC – During the breakout session, the working group explored several topics including: sequencing, the balance between local discretion and national consistency; and the relationship between 2670 sensitive species direction with the SCC process. The group will conduct stakeholder interviews to compliment the agency internal review. The Committee will have the opportunity to work with the agency on clarification of terms. The agency will present more in depth preliminary findings of the review in two weeks and a full summary by the March meeting. The group and agency will continue discussions via learning calls prior to the March meeting (topics include: definition of terms, direction in the rule and directives; how to reconcile 2670 sensitive species direction with the SCC process; how to address SCCs in the monitoring transition; and the use and documentation of BASI). The group will find examples of effective and weak plan components addressing SCCs and discuss at the May 2016 FACA meeting. The group will work to develop advice regarding sequencing (Ex: The public needs to see the rationale of inclusion/exclusion prior to commenting on alternatives yet the group is cautious of requiring additional comment periods. A potential path forward may be a recommendation that the rationale be released as a part of scoping.)

Public Comment 2

Sue Britting, Sierra Forest Legacy, appreciates the Committee's attention to SCCs. Terminology is important. Many are concerned about the integration or deletion of sensitive species. She believes that the situation in region 5 would be greatly improved if the rationale were provided during scoping. They are seeing negative determinations dependent on on-going or future management and believe that this is against the direction laid

out in the directives. Ben Solvesky, Sierra Forest Legacy, shared several examples of inconsistency of SCCs determinations and the use of BASI.

Framing the Path Forward

The agency would like to focus on three key threads: 1) What are the things that we know enough now to make recommendations on? 2) What are the big picture process issues that the Committee sees – i.e. potential problems and opportunities? 3) Are there other ways that the agency could approach things – thinking outside the box? The agency requests Committee input on key issues including SCCs, wilderness, adaptive management, monitoring, efficiencies, the balance of discretion and consistency and how to effectively engage the public. The agency appreciates that the Committee was willing to drill down into tough issues at this meeting and is anxious to see these discussions translated into recommendations by September 2016. Key agency executive leadership will attend a 2016 Committee meeting to continue to explore these key threads.

The Committee agreed to accept the Chief's challenge to explore and formulate advice on how to complete plan revisions in a reduced timeframe. Ideas generated by members during the meeting include: developing surgical assessments that clearly layout what needs to change from the current plan; advice on how to avoid the NEPA 'black hole'; helping the agency improve information sharing with respect to lessons learned; better integration with local governments and tribes (including having partners on ID Teams); efficiencies for the SCC and Wilderness processes; identification of what tasks can be completed pre-assessment; development of a pre-planning capacity inventory checklist that identifies tasks that forests should initiate 2-3 years prior to commencing revision; looking at the planning process from a business perspective including the possibility of recruiting business school students to interview planners and summarize effective practices; recommendations that planning should be continuous within the adaptive management framework (implementation, monitoring, evaluating, on-going updates to the assessment); plans need to be relevant to forests and publics.

Additional responses and insights from the Committee included: more national oversight would contribute to trust in the system; it is key to ensure that science is driving plan development, particularly with regard to resilience to stressors like climate change; progress gets made when we learn from each other, public engagement needs to address how people educate each other about their concerns; the agency needs to think of planning from a life cycle perspective, time spent at the front end will expedite project planning over time; the impact of plans throughout the system should be considered when thinking about shortening the timeframe; forests need external people on IDTeams (tribes, governments, others) to create a focused 'swat team' approach; the Northwest Forest Plan can offer good examples of efficiencies; thoughtful sequencing of forests will create efficiencies; engage private sector planners to help the agency create better organization, create focus groups with private citizens around a forest plan prior to planning; partnerships are the solution to capacity issues; engage students as a recruiting tool; request assistance from fire crews while they are on call; monitoring transition plans should be a jumping off point into the planning process; staff and planners need collaboration training; charter placed-based FACA committees for revisions; and the agency needs to develop the decision framework and then allow partners to help with data once the methods are determined. The Committee asked Sue Britting if she would be willing to work with a timber representative to narrow the focus of concern on SCCs in region 5. The group discussed identifying potential pilot efforts to develop innovative approaches to planning (including wilderness, SCCs, adaptive management, monitoring, public engagement processes) that engage partners (universities, professional planners, state agencies, technical experts, etc). The Committee is also interested in engaging RPDs in a scenario-based exercise in the fictitious 'Region 7' that would allow planning teams to experiment with infusing adaptive management into the development of plan components in a risk-free environment.

Citizens and Government Guide Updates

Meryl Harrell requested that the Committee revise the Citizens' and Government Guides to reinforce that the rule states that the Forest Service retains decision-making while looking for mutual goals with partners. The working group chairs will work with the agency to finalize the texts, taking Meryl's suggestions into consideration. Full committee review of the edits is not anticipated; the working group co-chairs will determine if it is necessary. The draft guides will be posted to the agency FACA website as soon as the NRE clearance is complete (estimated date is mid-March). The final print date is estimated to be the end of April. The guides will be updated and refined on an on-going basis by the agency. Committee suggestions include creating an on-line means to capture public feedback on the guides and that external organizations might be able to host the guides.

Translating Inputs into Memo to the Chief/Secretary

The group acknowledged the need for an informal approach to communicating with executive leadership on a regular basis. To address this, the Committee will develop a memo, signed by the co-chairs, after each meeting to convey outcomes, messages and updates.

2016 FACA Meeting Schedule

- March 8/9 – Location TBD
- May 10/11 – Location TBD
- July 12/13 – Portland, OR
- Aug 30-Sept 1 - Washington DC (End of Charter)