

November 21, 2013

Tom Vilsack
Secretary, Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Thomas L. Tidwell
Chief, U.S. Forest Service
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-0003

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Chief Tidwell:

The National Advisory Committee for Implementation of the National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule (hereafter Committee) is pleased to offer our recommendations to the Draft Planning Rule Directives.

After many decades of conflict and difficulties in the management of our National Forests, the visionary work of the Forest Service in adopting the 2012 Planning Rule and convening such a comprehensive Federal Advisory Committee has produced consensus-based recommendations that we believe can provide the necessary framework to generate viable, context specific solutions to numerous previously intractable issues.

We commend the conscientious attention required to establish the exceptional make-up of this National Advisory Committee. It has been an honor to work with such a professional, experienced and diverse set of individuals. Supported by the excellent staff of the Forest Service, the work of this Committee produced historic examples of collaborative decision-making and cooperative conservation of the highest degree. Our hope is that the exemplary work of the agency and this Committee will lead to similar cooperative collaboration in the planning and management of all National Forests over the coming years and decades. The foundation for such successful cooperation in that management has now been laid and solidified. We look forward to working with the agency and all parties in building upon that foundation.

Process Overview

The committee spent the last year carefully reviewing, learning and building consensus recommendations on revisions to the draft directives (manual and handbook) in a stepwise fashion.

First, using seven key questions (see Appendix Three) from the USFS, the committee identified a set of key topics for their deliberation. Considered fundamental to ensuring successful implementation of the Planning Rule, final recommendations address the definition, role and implementation of Adaptive Management; NEPA Integration; Outreach For Diversity; Public Involvement And Collaboration; Intergovernmental Interaction; Social, Economic and Cultural

Assessment, Plan Components and Monitoring; Water; Wilderness; Climate Change; Desired Conditions and NRV; Species Of Conservation Concern; and the Objections Process.

Next, work groups were created for each key topic to generate relevant context and choices for negotiation. Each work group used templates to: (1) elaborate key issues and underlying interests, (2) generate potential options to address those and (3) agree to the best recommendation, along with an explanatory rationale¹. Once consensus was reached at the work group level, recommendations were brought to the committee as a whole in recommendation templates that articulated specific issues, interests, recommendations, and rationale for specific changes. To ensure the body of recommendations translated into a coherent whole, final consensus was reached by reviewing the body of proposed changes in a markup of the draft directives. Only those changes that garnered full consensus (unanimous support) are included in the final recommended changes. OGC has reviewed and commented on the draft recommendations. With the exception of one recommendation- on the objections process- OGC's comments were taken into consideration and the committee reverted with revised recommendations, the body of which we proudly submit to you today.

Outcomes

A number of key themes emerged in support of the overarching objectives to improve the efficiency and efficacy of the planning process by:

- Diversifying and deepening the level of collaboration:
 - o among interested stakeholders near and far, and ensuring that new stakeholders – particularly young people and those from widely different backgrounds and experiences, are identified and welcomed into the planning processes, and
 - o among the relevant range of governmental bodies (Tribal, local and state), as well as non-governmental organizations and private landowners.
- Ensuring that:
 - o the planning process is efficient and effective and that forests are able to produce forest plans in less time than in the past and with greater support from all stakeholders;
 - o the tools utilized- conceptual, analytical and for outreach purposes- are sufficiently modern, reflective of contemporary reality (e.g. social media, crowd sourcing data, partnering with organizations that aggregate and or analyze relevant data, etc.);
 - o monitoring and adaptive management are integrated throughout the planning process;
 - o the Planning Rule can be implemented in a manner that balances and supports social economic and cultural sustainability while meeting desired ecological conditions; and that
 - o the directives do not exceed the content of the Planning rule itself.
- Clarifying the parameters of the assessment phase and integrating the planning process with the required National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) processes

- Where possible, clarifying ambiguities in the Planning rule or directives, and ensuring clarity, transparency and accountability are woven throughout-particularly in those areas where potential confusion or conflict is anticipated

Specific Topics for Recommendations

In total, the draft directives exceed 400 pages. After an initial review, and in order to maximize their own efficiency/efficacy, the committee deliberated on those areas anticipated to be either most important, or most likely to cause further delays as originally drafted or described.

Following is a list and brief description of the primary topics that will be included in that packageⁱⁱ:

- **Monitoring and Adaptive Management:** Ensure continuous adaptive management cycles (assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring) in a collaborative, transparent, and accountable process.
- **NEPA Integration:** Ensure that the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is effectively and efficiently integrated into the forest planning process and that members of the public have the opportunity to engage early in the planning process.
- **Outreach For Diversity; Public Involvement And Collaboration:** Encourage and ensure a greater awareness and involvement of local communities and under-represented communities (youth, low-income, and racial/ethnic minority) in national forest planning and management.
- **Intergovernmental Interaction:** Emphasize that other federal agencies, and tribal, state and local governments are key to developing robust forest and grassland plans that meet social, cultural, economic and ecological needs. Accessing the special expertise possessed by the other governments also assists to stretch limited government resources to increase effectiveness, efficiency and transparency in forest and grassland planning
- **Social, Economic and Cultural Assessment, Plan Components and Monitoring:** To achieve the necessary parity between the Forest Service's ecological expertise, greater clarity must be provided to ensure that the Forest Service will assess, plan for, monitor and adaptively manage social, economic and cultural questions that are important to those who rely on the forest and use the plan area and will put these priorities on par with ecological assessment at every stage.
- **Water:** Provide clear direction to Forest Service personnel to consider water resource contributions to community and ecosystem needs and services within the area of influence in collaboration and consultation with tribal, state, local governments, other water managers and the public during Forest and Grassland Planning.
- **Wilderness:** Chapter 70 (Wilderness) received careful scrutiny that resulted in a number of clarifications and assurances with respect to participation, scope and consistency with the Wilderness Act and other applicable laws, including those guiding Tribal Consultation. Clarifications include the use of existing information/starting point; whether, when and how state and local governments, tribes and Alaska Native Corporations, and the general public can participate in the Wilderness evaluation process
- **Climate Change:** Ensure that the Forest Service can efficiently and effectively address climate change and associated uncertainty within the planning process.

- **Desired Conditions and Natural Range of Variation (NRV):** Both terms were defined to improve clarity. Ensure forests understand that managing for NRV is not required by the planning rule, and that forests can manage for desired conditions outside the NRV
- **Species Of Conservation Concern (SCC):** The draft directives are ambiguous as to when how, and under what process, *identified* SCCs become *determined* SCCs. Efficiency and efficacy would be greatly enhanced by 1) clarifying the timing of SCC identification, 2) stressing the regional forester SCC determination be made early, clarifying the role of responsible officials and regional foresters in SCC identification and determination; 3) directing the regional forester to provide public access to the list of determined SCCs, and (4) encouraging that the expertise of local, state and Tribal agency expertise is utilized in identifying SCC.
- **Objections Process-** Authentic participation is valued deeply by the committee. Protecting such interests gave rise to the desire to ensure that eligibility requirements for interested parties are anchored in substantive participation in the planning process. Additionally, ensuring that the reviewing officer has discretion to structure participation to ensure integrity of objections process through consistency of participation in planning process

Ultimately, we hope that greater cooperation among all who value our national forests will translate into more effective planning processes and higher-quality plans to advance the Forest Service mission “to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.”

We thank you for the opportunity to assist the Forest Service and look forward to successful forest planning processes across the country.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the National Advisory Committee,

Pam Motley
Co-Chair

Ray Vaughan
Co-Chair

Attachments:

APPENDIX 1- Final Consensus Recommendations

APPENDIX 2- Co-Chair’s Summary of Rationale/Interests for major topics

APPENDIX 3- List of Seven Questions from USFS

ⁱ It is important to note that a number of recommendations- e.g. water, were developed toward the end of the process, and the workgroups did not utilize the recommendation templates at that time. Moreover, even in those cases where the templates were utilized, they do not represent final consensus- the final consensus is conveyed in the markup of the directives text. The intent behind sharing the chair’s summary of the recommendation templates is to provide background for those interested in understanding how particular decisions were arrived at.