

## **From Assessment to Plan Development:**

# Preliminary Need to Change the Ashley National Forest Land Management Plan



**For More Information Contact:**

Cathleen Neelan, Team Lead  
Ashley National Forest  
355 N. Vernal Ave  
Vernal UT 84078  
435-781-5118

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at [http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint\\_filing\\_cust.html](http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint_filing_cust.html) and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: [program.intake@usda.gov](mailto:program.intake@usda.gov).

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender.

# Contents

Introduction .....	1
Identifying the Need for Change.....	1
Preliminary Identified Needs for Changing the Forest Plan.....	2
Core Themes or Focus Areas .....	2
Topics the Revised Forest Plan Will Not Cover.....	6
What's Next .....	7



## Introduction

This document provides the public, cooperators, Government agencies, and Tribes with an opportunity to review what the Ashley National Forest’s planning team has identified as preliminary needs for changing the 1986 Ashley National Forest Land and Resources Management Plan (hereafter referred to as the “forest plan”).

Management direction for the 1986 Ashley forest plan is now more than 30 years old. In October of 2017, the Ashley National Forest planning team completed an assessment of the ecological, social, and economic conditions on the Ashley National Forest. As required by the USDA Forest Service’s 2012 Planning Rule,<sup>1</sup> the assessment is the first phase of the land management plan revision process and provides a baseline of current conditions and trends for 15 resource topics. The full assessment report can be found online at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/ashley/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fseprd547713>.

The assessment was a rapid evaluation to address 15 topics to provide information for plan revision. The assessment report summarizes findings that help identify the portions of the current forest plan that are working well, or meeting desired management objectives, and those that are not.

## Identifying the Preliminary Need to Change the Existing Forest Plan

The basis for identifying what needs to change in the forest plan comes from several sources:

- the assessment information,
- current plan direction (that may be lacking, outdated, unclear, or conflicts with current laws, regulations and policy), and
- public input.

At this stage, the need to change the forest plan is considered “preliminary” because we have not formally solicited public input. At the release of the Assessment, the staff of the Ashley National Forest talked with attendees at public meetings and webinars about changes to the forest plan that the Assessment indicated needed our attention. The informal public input we heard at these events was carried forward by the Ashley National Forest planning team so the team could start developing a proposal to revise the land management plan.

The items of greatest interest to the public, became the focus of public workshops we called “Hot-topics workshops.” The workshops, open to all interested parties, were an opportunity to have in-depth review of current science, assessment findings, and socioeconomic demands associated with natural resource needs. Participants worked with some of the planning team members to help draft future goals to address the challenges to meet some of the needs. These goals were carried forward for the entire planning team to consider and many were incorporated into the proposal to revise the land management plan.

With the release of this document and the preliminary proposal to revise the land management plan (in short referred to as the “proposed plan”) we are asking for public input to determine if we are moving in the right direction. The proposal to revise the land

---

<sup>1</sup> See the Code of Federal Regulations at 36 CFR 219.

management plan will become a “proposed action” for the start of the environmental analysis phase. We will take the proposed plan and make changes based on comments we receive from this public review. After we analyze comments and feedback on both this Preliminary Need to Change document and the associated Proposal to Revise the Land Management Plan, we will refine the proposed plan and its components, develop alternatives to that content, and analyze all those options in a draft environmental impact statement.

It is our intent to work with stakeholders to collaboratively develop alternatives rather than have individual interests prepare and hand-in their version of an alternative. The development of alternatives will happen after scoping and once comments are analyzed, which we hope will occur in the summer of 2019.

**How We Will Use the Need to Change Statements:** Need to change statements are general—they neither provide plan direction nor necessarily discuss how the plan will address these issues. Instead, the statements form a bridge between the assessment and the development of the proposed plan. The statements help by identifying the greatest needs for different plan direction from what is in the current forest plan.

The need to change statements are grouped into focus topics. The topics identify resources, conditions and related plan direction that have the greatest need to change. Although the focus topics discussed here are each, and as a whole, far departed from where they are intended to be under current management direction, it does not mean that all instances within the resource are at risk.

## Preliminary Identified Needs to Change the Forest Plan

The preliminary needs identified to change the forest plan are grouped into two categories:

- Need to change the plan based on current plan adequacy, efficiency, relevance, and compatibility with laws and regulations, such as:
  - ◆ New direction in 2012 Planning Rule
  - ◆ New laws, regulations, and policies since 1986, or redundancy of plan direction with laws, regulations and policy
  - ◆ Changes in science from the last 30 years
  - ◆ Need to clarify ambiguous direction and provide practical direction that is achievable during the plan period.
- Need to change the plan based on information about current resource conditions and trends identified in the assessment and how that information relates to current plan direction. This information has been organized into “focus topics.”

**Plan Direction that Will Not Change:** Despite the age of the current forest plan, there may be plan direction that is still valid and sufficient. Such direction may remain the same, yet how it is coded and worded may need to be revised.

## Focus Topics

Key findings from the assessment can be summarized into focus topics that show where the planning team has identified a preliminary need to change the current forest plan. The focus topics provide a foundation from which to develop future forest plan components and planning alternatives to be analyzed in an environmental impact statement.

Overall, there is a need for more integrated and holistic management that balances the needs of multiple resource areas during project design and planning. An integrated approach will provide increased opportunities for restoration of impaired or degraded systems, enhancement of habitat that promotes species diversity, and opportunities for economic growth within the local community through increased partnerships and collaboration.

There are five key focus topics. Alignment with multiple ecological social, and economic benefits makes these topics a primary need for change.

Broadly defined primary focus topics for resource management in the forest plan include the following:

### **1. Sustainable Recreation**

The recreational opportunities and scenic vistas on the Ashley National Forest are highly diverse and some of the Ashley's greatest assets. Expected population increases in Wyoming and Utah will likely lead to increases in nature-based recreation forest-wide and in the Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area. Since the forest plan was written in 1986, the nature and type of preferred recreation has evolved and changed. Fewer people use tents, while recreational vehicle use has increased. With scenery viewing identified as a top activity for visitors to the Ashley National Forest, it will be important to maintain natural-appearing landscapes so visitor expectations can be met.

In addition, with more of the aging population participating in active lifestyles there is increased need for adequate accommodations. Off-highway vehicle use has increased substantially since the forest plan was written which can cause various impacts to ecological integrity and species diversity. There is a priority need to balance recreation use with ecological integrity and update its role and contribution to the Forest.

### **2. Economic Resiliency**

Local communities that are close to national forest land tend to be some of the greatest beneficiaries of the ecosystem services the land provides. The local economy, historically based on agriculture and solid minerals mining, has diversified. Oil and natural gas and other forms of energy extraction and tourism are major industries associated with the Ashley National Forest. Mining is the Ashley's largest employment sector, while agriculture and forest products (including timber) represent small portions of the economy.

Since the 1986 forest plan was signed, there has been a shift in economic models from commodity-based goods to more of a restoration emphasis (outputs versus outcomes). Balancing commodity-based needs with more restoration based ecosystem services will be important for meeting the Ashley's multiple-use demands. Ecosystem services were not addressed in the 1986 plan. Local communities view the Ashley as a source for municipal water, recreational activities, employment, and an economic driver for tourism.

### **3. Managing Traditional Resources**

There is a need to conserve and encourage traditional resource uses and to balance those needs with other multiple uses. There is high public interest in maintaining mineral development at or near current levels. Oil and gas remains an important industry in the area and on the Ashley National Forest, but is susceptible to fluctuations in market conditions. Forestwide mineral development will be updated to reflect changes over the

30+ years since the last plan was developed. However, a detailed oil and gas leasing analysis will not be part of this revision process.

Livestock grazing on the Ashley National Forest is a traditional use that has been an important part of the local economy and culture for over a century. Grazing plays an important role in the economics and lifestyle of the local communities. Most rangelands on the Ashley National Forest are in good condition, but some areas have been affected by increases in invasive plant species, drought, and conifer encroachment that have contributed to reduced forage production. Management of rangelands have changed since the 1986 forest plan. Desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines for rangeland and grazing management in the Ashley's 1986 plan are vague or not measurable. Previous range inventories emphasized forage value rather than the effects of grazing on ecological integrity and plan communities as whole.

Timber and woodland products are a traditional use of national forest resources, support local businesses and can be a useful restoration tool for mitigating wildfire risk. Management actions that support a healthy forest products industry can also improve ecosystem health and integrity. This can be done by reducing hazardous fuel loads, maintaining tree species diversity, reducing undesirable stand densities and promoting desirable stand structures. Fuelwood is also important for some local individuals and communities as a source of heating fuel. Timber harvesting and fuelwood harvesting can be an economical way to manipulate the forest vegetation to meet management objectives, because the timber value can help offset some of the implementation cost.

As the Ashley transitions from commodity based goods to those that emphasize restoration, resiliency and sustainability, user conflicts may arise. There is a need to balance these more traditionally based outputs with newer economic models.

#### **4. Tribal Relations and Cultural Resources**

The current forest plan for the Ashley National Forest does not provide any guidance on Tribal consultation or consideration of areas of Tribal importance when planning management activities. There is a need to improve tribal relationships and partnerships so that subsistence and other cultural activities are provided for.

#### **5. Managing for Resilient Ecosystems and Watersheds**

Creating more resilient ecosystems will address common stressors such as uncharacteristic wildfire, nonnative invasive species and disease, and sedimentation. In addition, more resilient ecosystems will be better able to resist the negative effects of climate change, which has the ability to further exacerbate existing stressors that affect multiple ecosystems on the Ashley National Forest.

Managing for resilient fire-adapted ecosystems will help maintain biological diversity. The management will provide functioning and healthy ecosystems and wildlife conservation and protection. Restoration efforts in upland areas, combined with management practices that enhance sustainability of groundwater-dependent ecosystems, along with wetlands, riparian areas, and perennial waters, would improve overall watershed health and reduce wildfire risk.

Emphasis on resilient ecosystems and watersheds would benefit local communities. Emphasis would also have numerous benefits on wildlife diversity including connectivity, recovery, and conservation of federally protected species, as well as maintaining viability



of species of conservation concern and common and abundant species. Within this broad context, there are there specific areas where action is needed:

**a. Protect and Restore Terrestrial Ecosystems** (modify stand structure and density and restore historic fire regimes; decrease risk of uncharacteristic fire)

There is a high ecological and socio-economic need to reduce the risk of uncharacteristic (large, high intensity) fire on the Ashley National Forest. Developing treatment objectives for the wildland-urban interface and other areas is critical for maintaining ecosystem resiliency and offsetting climate change-related risk. Longer duration, larger, and more severe wildfires could become more common if climate trends continue to favor warmer and drier conditions.

Management practices that help reduce disturbances and retain carbon include maintaining the health of forest vegetation and the forest floor, and quickly regenerating stands after fire or timber harvest. Current forest plan direction does not address the changes that have occurred to terrestrial vegetation communities in the last 30 years. These changes include increases of nonnative species, changes in forest structure and heterogeneity, increases in fuel loads, and increases in insect outbreaks. Collectively, these changes have the potential to negatively change fire regime and ecosystem diversity particularly in pinyon juniper and conifer systems. These changes were also identified as areas of high public concern.

**b. Protect and Restore Aquatic, Riparian and Groundwater Dependent Ecosystems**

Protecting water quantity and quality, the timing of flows, and national forest watersheds are all critical to sustaining ecosystem functions of the Ashley National Forest. These protections are also critical for providing water resources for visitors, communities in the surrounding areas, aquatic and terrestrial plants and animals including species of conservation concern and numerous valued sport fish species. High alignment with multiple ecological, social, and economic benefits makes this a primary need to change from the 1986 plan.

Groundwater resources are very important to local ecosystems, as well as agriculture and local communities. These resources include seeps, springs and wetlands, as well as numerous natural caves and underground drainage systems. These unique geologic systems contribute to overall biodiversity, endemic species, and rare habitats. The existing forest plan does not have direction for addressing groundwater resources and groundwater-dependent ecosystems. Groundwater flow (and surface) regimes can be affected by domestic water use, irrigation, and livestock developments.

Actions to protect natural waters are relatively inexpensive and easy to accomplish. These actions provide important benefits, and are consistent with social and economic needs. Watersheds on the Ashley are also moderately to highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change which current research has substantiated thus, it has emerged as an area of high public interest.

**c. Reduce Conifer Encroachment into Non-Forest Communities**

The ingrowth of conifer trees into sagebrush, grassland and aspen communities threatens these vegetation types. There has been widespread aspen decline in the Intermountain West. Aspen plays an important role in providing local habitat

diversity and scenery. Current monitoring indicates seral aspen stands are diminishing within the plan area and are being displaced by conifer trees.

Many sagebrush communities are also susceptible to conifer encroachment and displacement. This has negative effects on wildlife diversity including species at-risk (such as greater sage grouse and pygmy rabbit) as well as more common species such as elk, deer, and moose. Conifer encroachment also affects grazing and range management by reducing available forage.

## Topics the Revised Forest Plan Will Not Cover

It's important to note that forest plans set broad direction—they do not include site-specific direction for where future projects will occur or how many permits will be issued. Forest plans are prescriptive documents that set objectives, guidelines, and standards for managing resources. Forest plans also do not affect treaty rights, water rights, or other valid existing rights established by statute. Therefore, you will not find the following in future forest plan direction:

**Direction about Specific Roads and Trails:** Determinations about which roads and trails will be opened or closed to specific types of motorized and nonmotorized uses are not addressed at the forest plan level. Travel management planning occurs outside of the forest plan revision process; however, the forest plan may provide context and guidance for future travel management decisions.

**Authorizations for Oil and Gas Leases:** Although the forest plan could determine whether certain lands are suitable for oil and gas exploration and development, it does not provide any site-specific authorizations for energy leases.

**Designation of Wilderness or Wild and Scenic Rivers:** The formal designation of wilderness and wild and scenic rivers will not occur during plan revision as these acts can only be performed by Congress. The forest plan revision process can recommend areas for wilderness designation, or recommend rivers or river segments to be eligible or suitable for wild and scenic river status. Such temporary classifications do not guarantee formal designation, but they do influence forest plan guidance of how to manage the recommended areas.

**Changes to Designated Roadless Areas:** The boundaries of inventoried roadless areas defined by the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule cannot be changed at the National Forest level. The Roadless Rule can only be modified through a national rulemaking process or Congressional action.

**Numbers and Types of Permits:** Determining the number of livestock permitted to graze or the types and numbers of other types of permits is managed at the site-specific project level. However, the forest plan will establish desired conditions and other guidance in which permitted activities will need to be consistent with.

**Changes to Existing Water Rights:** The National Forest Management Act does not authorize bypass flow or water right transfer requirements. Rather the Act directs the Forest Service to prepare management plans that provide for multiple use and sustained yield of forest resources in accordance with the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960. The Act provides that the national forests shall be managed for outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, and wildlife and fish purposes, and contains no grant of authority for bypass flow requirements to the Forest Service. The National Forest Management Act does not contain

any other specific directives governing Forest Service management of water resources. The forest plan establishes desired conditions and other guidance for watershed management; however, it does not address transfer of water rights.

## What's Next?

Public understanding of how our plan needs to be changed is important to help focus the planning process on the issues and resources that need attention. Therefore, gathering public input on our preliminary need to change the plan is important to ensure we aren't missing something, and that our focus is where it should be.

You can provide input by recommending comments or edits to the need to change statements, providing additional need to change statements, or providing comments on changes to the forest plan that you think we need to know. After we review all the input, we will prepare the Final Identified Need to Change the Forest Plan and begin our formal environmental analysis process with the release of a proposed plan.

We will be holding the following public engagement opportunities:

- Utah open house locations will be; Manila, Vernal, Duchesne and Salt Lake City (dates to be determined).
- Wyoming open house (location will be either Green River or Rock Springs with the date to be determined).
- Webinars and virtual meetings will be held for those that wish to participate electronically or virtually. The information on these will be published on our website and on Facebook along with emailed to those on our mailing lists. To get on our email list to receive information and updates go to our home page for Ashley National Forest Plan Revision and sign up with Gov. Delivery.

These sessions will provide people the opportunity to discuss and submit comments on what they feel is important in the next steps to revise the forest plan. We are also accepting comments and input via email, fax, or U.S. mail so we can move forward with developing a proposed forest plan:

Email: [AshleyForestPlan@fs.fed.us](mailto:AshleyForestPlan@fs.fed.us)

Fax: (435) 781-5142

Mail: Ashley National Forest  
355 North Vernal Avenue  
Vernal, UT 84078  
Attention: Cathleen Neelan