



Forest Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Carson National Forest

Southwestern Region

September 2021

# **Draft Record of Decision**

## **Carson National Forest Land Management Plan**

**Rio Arriba, Taos, Mora, and Colfax Counties,  
New Mexico**



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# **Draft Record of Decision for the Carson National Forest Land Management Plan**

**Southwestern Region**

**Rio Arriba, Taos, Mora, and Colfax Counties, New Mexico**

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List of Acronyms

BA	Biological Assessment
BASI	Best Available Scientific Information
BLM	Bureau of Land Management
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
DEIS	Draft Environmental Impact Statement
FEIS	Final Environmental Impact Statement
FSH	Forest Service Handbook
FWS	Fish and Wildlife Service
IRA	Inventoried Roadless Areas
LMP	Land Management Plan
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NF	National Forest
NFS	National Forest System
ORV	Outstandingly Remarkable Values
ROD	Record of Decision
RWMA	Recommended Wilderness Management Area
SAMA	San Antonio Management Area
U.S.C.	United States Code
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USDI	United States Department of Interior
VVMA	Valle Vidal Management Area
VFSYU	Vallecitos Federally Sustained Yield Unit

## Introduction

This draft record of decision (ROD) documents my decision and rationale for approving the Carson National Forest Land Management Plan (hereinafter referred to as “the final LMP”). This decision implements the Forest Service’s 2012 Land Management Planning Rule at 36 CFR Part 219, fosters productive and sustainable use of our National Forest System (NFS) lands by promoting sound land stewardship in partnership with communities, and advances other strategic goals of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), including: ensuring that USDA programs are delivered efficiently, effectively, and with integrity and a focus on customer service; maximizing the ability of American agricultural producers to prosper; and facilitating rural prosperity and economic development.

The Carson National Forest (NF) plays a unique role in supporting communities in northern New Mexico, as well as throughout the southwestern United States. The final LMP implements U.S. Department of Agriculture strategy and was designed with the following three goals:

- Maintain or restore sustainable, resilient terrestrial ecosystems;
- Protect and restore watershed health, water resources, aquatic ecosystems, and the systems that rely on them; and
- Actively contribute to social and economic sustainability in the broader landscape and connect citizens and land.

Counties directly affected by this decision are Rio Arriba, Taos, Mora, and Colfax Counties. The final LMP improves customer service to the American people by simplifying management of the Forest. As a result of public input, we reduced the number of management areas; the public will benefit with a management plan that is easier to read and understand. The final LMP is less prone to future conflicts over different interpretations of language and overly complex management areas.

The Carson NF contributes to rural prosperity, providing economic opportunities for fuelwood, livestock grazing, and abundant recreational opportunities. Many local communities draw from the forest’s abundant fuelwood, which is used as the primary, and sometimes only, fuel source for cooking and heating in rural homes. Traditional communities and families that live around the Carson NF continue to look to the forest resources for economic opportunity and vitality and to sustain the cultural practices that form the backbone of northern New Mexico life. The final LMP recognizes active forest management as a primary tool to improve forest health, reduce wildfire risk, and restore and maintain watersheds. Water quality and aquatic health are persistent, overarching concerns. The final LMP incorporates new fire management approaches that will reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire.

The assessment, land management plan, public notices, and associated environmental documents are available online at [the Carson NF website](#). The planning record includes documents that support analytical conclusions made and alternatives considered throughout the planning process; it is available at the Carson National Forest supervisor’s office, located in Taos, New Mexico.

## Forest Setting

The Carson NF (also referred to as the “Carson” or “national forest”) is one of five national forests in New Mexico. The Carson covers 1,486,372 acres in Rio Arriba, Taos, Mora, and Colfax Counties and is divided into six ranger districts—Camino Real, Canjilon, El Rito, Jicarilla, Tres Piedras, and Questa. It shares boundaries with the Rio Grande National Forest in Colorado; Santa



Fe National Forest; Taos Pueblo; Jicarilla Apache Nation; Southern Ute Tribe; Picuris Pueblo; U.S. Department of Interior; Bureau of Land Management (BLM); the towns of Red River, Questa, Taos, Taos Ski Valley, Peñasco, Tres Piedras, El Rito, Canjilon; and private lands. The final LMP covers all NFS lands within the Carson National Forest boundary.



Figure 1. Vicinity map of the Carson National Forest

NFS lands managed by the Carson make up about 37 and 23 percent of Taos and Rio Arriba Counties, respectively; the majority of these two counties are under the management of Federal agencies or federally recognized tribes. Taos, Rio Arriba, Mora, and Colfax Counties benefit from nearby NFS lands for activities such as recreation, wood product harvesting, oil and gas production, and livestock grazing. Forest Service management supports the continued relationship between the Carson NF and the communities in these counties and recognizes that its economic influence reaches beyond those nearby communities, extending into San Juan County in New Mexico and Conejos and Costilla Counties in Colorado.

The Carson NF contributes resources and uses that are important to federally recognized tribes and pueblos, land grant communities, acequia communities, traditional Hispanic communities, and many contemporary residents—all with historic, cultural, and social connections to the national forest. The mountains and their natural assets provide the basis for the traditional customs and practices, which contribute to the cultural life and social institutions essential to the people who live here. These include fuelwood for heating and cooking; timber, latillas, and vigas for construction; opportunities for hunting and fishing; forage for livestock grazing; medicinal plants and herbs; piñon nuts; family recreation opportunities; water for acequias, livestock, and domestic uses, including drinking water; and sacred sites significant to federally recognized tribes and pueblos.

There are many small, unincorporated communities within the boundaries of the Carson NF, as well as several adjacent federally recognized tribes and small incorporated towns and villages.



The Carson is a community forest and each community is geographically and historically rooted to a particular landscape. The Carson manages natural resources and landscapes that sustain these northern New Mexico traditional communities, their cultures, and traditions, now and into the future. Local heritage, culture, traditions, and values have been handed down over generations and predate United States' management of this area. Longstanding use of the national forest and its natural resources is fundamental to the interconnected economic, social, and cultural vitality of northern New Mexico inhabitants, including federally recognized tribes and pueblos, Spanish and Mexican land grants-mercedes and acequias, grazing permit holders, and other rural historic communities.

The Carson NF comprises some of the most productive and essential watersheds in the region and provides basic components for biological diversity in the landscape of the southwestern United States. Its high plateaus and rugged mountains are major sources of snowpack and stream runoff, contributing over 40 percent of the waters that flow into the Rio Grande from northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. Lands within the Carson form the headwaters of numerous rivers and streams that flow into the Rio Grande, Rio Chama, San Juan River, and Canadian River (provisioning ecosystem services). The national forest manages varied landscapes, vegetation, and wildlife that provide unique combinations of resources and recreation opportunities, attracting a wide spectrum of forest visitors. The State of New Mexico has designated many streams and lakes in the Carson's wildernesses and Valle Vidal as outstanding national resource waters.

The Carson includes two river sections designated as wild and scenic rivers; however, both are managed by the BLM as part of the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River. One Carson segment is an approximately 5 mile-stretch of the Rio Grande, along the west boundary of the Questa Ranger District. The other Carson segment is the lower 3.25 miles of the Red River, where it meets the Rio Grande. These sections were among the original eight rivers to be designated as National Wild and Scenic River Systems by Congress in 1968. Both sections of river are classified as wild, flow through deep gorges, and offer spectacular views from the gorge rim.

The Forest Service created the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit in 1948, allocating 73,400 acres of NFS land toward sustained yield management. The primary purpose of the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit is to provide the maximum feasible, permanent support to the Vallecitos community and nearby areas, including Petaca and Cañon Plaza, from forest products industries obtaining a supply of wood products from the national forest unit. The Carson continues to plan and accomplish thinning and fuels reduction projects in the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit. The projects have thinned acres and provided fuelwood to local communities on a small scale.

Over 1,000 species of plants and animals occur on the Carson, including large mammals such as mule deer, elk, bighorn sheep, pronghorn, mountain lion, and black bear. In addition to playing an important ecological role, diverse wildlife provides enjoyment and aesthetic value for photographers, bird watchers, nature lovers, hikers, and campers. Game species support traditional ways of life, hunting, fishing, trapping, and employment for outfitters and guides. Additionally, the Carson NF manages two active wild horse territories, as well as several threatened and endangered species, listed in table 1.

**Table 1. Threatened and endangered species of New Mexico and whether they occur on the Carson NF**

Species	Threatened or Endangered?	Occur on Carson NF
Black-footed ferret <i>Mustela nigripes</i>	Endangered	Yes
Canada lynx <i>Lynx canadensis</i>	Threatened	Yes
Jemez Mountain salamander <i>Plethodon neomexicanus</i>	Endangered	No
Least tern <i>Stern antillarum</i>	Endangered	No
Mexican spotted owl <i>Strix occidentalis lucida</i>	Threatened	Yes
New Mexican meadow jumping mouse <i>Zapus hudsonius luteus</i>	Endangered	Yes
Piping plover <i>Charadrius melodus</i>	Threatened	No
Southwestern willow flycatcher <i>Empidonax traillii extimus</i>	Endangered	Yes
Western yellow-billed cuckoo <i>Coccyzus americanus occidentalis</i>	Threatened	Yes

The 60-acre Small-Headed Goldenweed Botanical Area is the only botanical area designated on the Carson. A botanical area is a designated area that contains plant specimens, plant groups, or plant communities that are significant because of their form, color, occurrence, habitat, location, life history, arrangement, ecology, rarity, or other features (FSM 2372.05(3)). *Lorandersonia microcephala* is a small-headed goldenweed, an endemic species restricted to New Mexico; it is a Carson species of conservation concern and on the State Endangered Plant List. The massive granite outcrops northeast and northwest of Tres Piedras on the Carson are the only places where this species has been documented, thus adding to the ecological significance of this botanical area.

The Sangre de Cristo Pea Clam Zoological Area is the only zoological area on the Carson. A zoological area is a designated area that contains animal specimens, animal groups, or animal communities that are significant because of their occurrence, habitat, location, life history, ecology, rarity, or other features (FSM 2372.05 (4)). The Sangre de Cristo pea clam is on the State's Group 1 Endangered List; it is a narrow endemic, only known to occur in the Middle Fork Lake on the Questa Ranger District, although the pea clam found here has not been determined as a valid separate species at this time. In terms of ecological integrity, provided this pea clam is a valid species, this is the only location where it is found. The lake, its shoreline, and immediate surrounding drainage are within the designated area as protected habitat for the pea clam.

In the winter, the Carson's plateaus and mountains provide skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiling, and snowshoeing opportunities in developed and undeveloped settings. The rest of the year, they attract hikers, mountain bikers, campers, and other recreationists from throughout New Mexico and the rest of the United States. The Carson NF manages over 110,000 acres of designated wilderness, three national recreation trails, and portions of the Old Spanish National Historic Trail and the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail.

After evaluating 57 percent of the forest, or nearly 900,000 acres, including all 14 inventoried roadless areas (IRAs), the final LMP recommends one new stand-alone wilderness area and five additions to existing wildernesses (9,295 acres total). The Valle Vidal and San Antonio Management Areas recognize unique places for outdoor recreation, water, and wildlife habitat.

Of the Carson NF's estimated one million visitors, 89 percent come for recreational pursuits (USDA FS Carson NF 2015a), and tourism contributes the greatest number of jobs to the local economy. The trails system allows forest users to hike for exercise or simply to experience the beauty of the forest. Recreation infrastructure (trails, dams supporting fishing areas, roads, campgrounds, and toilets) facilitate recreation opportunities, which support communities directly (e.g., ski area jobs, outfitter guides) and indirectly (increased tourism in community shops and restaurants). In New Mexico, annually, outdoor recreation generates over 99,000 direct jobs, producing \$2.8 billion in wages and salaries, and \$9.9 billion in consumer spending, producing \$623 million in state and local tax revenue (Outdoor Industry Association 2017).

Natural gas production in the Jicarilla Ranger District also provides employment opportunities, as well as significant revenue to the State of New Mexico and the Federal Government. While natural gas production provides fewer jobs, it constitutes the Carson NF's largest economic contribution. The industry is an important economic factor for the cities of Bloomfield and Farmington. Based on 2016 revenues, mineral activities on the Carson support approximately 330 jobs and \$21.5 million in labor income, annually.

Other important economic contributions by the Carson include timber and ranching. In 2012, timber-related jobs accounted for less than 1 percent of private sector employment in the four counties comprising the Carson NF: Colfax, Mora, Rio Arriba, and Taos Counties (Headwaters Economics 2015). Ranching in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado is deeply rooted in history; families have been grazing in the plan area and greater landscape for generations. Livestock ownership and ranch life are powerful forces that bind communities and families and, as the majority of the plan area is either Federal, State, and/or tribal land, many ranching operations rely on public lands for livestock grazing.

The final LMP would contribute 1,735 jobs and \$69,203,000 annually in total forest management-related labor income to local communities, representing a 16 percent increase from current management. NFS land management balances the short- and long-term needs of people and nature through collaboration, promoting socioeconomic and ecological vitality, delivering world-class science and technology, and connecting people to the land and one another. The national forest offers opportunities for education and developing scientific understanding. The Carson plays a significant role in promoting the value of public lands and the importance of sustaining the symbiotic interaction among ecological integrity; the ability of society to produce and consume or otherwise benefit from goods and services; and the ability of society to support the network of relationships, traditions, culture; and activities that connect people to the land and to one another in vibrant communities.

## Needs to Change

Over 30 years have passed since the regional forester approved the original forest plan in 1986, including 16 amendments. Today, we have a better understanding of ecological conditions and trends than in 1986, when the previous land management plan was issued, including the recognition that vegetation conditions (structure, composition, and function) are divergent from [reference conditions](#); forest conditions indicate a substantial departure from the natural fire regime; and plant and animal species need more consideration in the planning process. In addition, the 1986 Plan did not address newer issues like nonnative invasive plants and climate

change. In preparation for plan revision, the planning team identified guidance in the 1986 Plan that is working, new conditions that need to be addressed, and ongoing challenges that could be better addressed. This preparatory work was presented in two documents completed in September 2015, the “Assessment Report of Ecological, Social, and Economic Conditions, Trends, and Sustainability” (USDA FS Carson NF 2015a) and “Carson National Forest’s Needs to Change Management Direction of its Existing 1986 Forest Plan” (USDA FS Carson NF 2015b). The team identified current ecological and socioeconomic conditions and trends on the national forest and the associated “needs to change” to address through the revised plan. The needs to change can be summarized in three topics:

1. Terrestrial Ecosystems and Habitat: There was a need to identify adaptive management strategies and ecological desired conditions that are resilient to climate change and support federally recognized tribes and traditional communities. Plan direction was needed to promote restoration and maintenance of native vegetation and restoration of soil conditions and function. Direction was needed to support integrated pest (invasive plant and animal) management and to allow for an integrated resource approach to prescribed fire activity, while considering public safety and health concerns, especially in the wildland-urban interface.
2. Watersheds and Water: There was a need for plan direction to promote watershed health and function, maintain water quality and quantity, and restore and maintain the ecological integrity of associated vegetation communities. There was a need to promote the protection, restoration, and maintenance of the appropriate composition and amount of riparian vegetation, along with wetland condition and function to sustain watersheds for multiple uses (such as wildlife habitat, livestock grazing, recreation use, and mining) and water supplies for downstream users. There was a need to promote restoration and expansion of the range of native aquatic species and connectivity of fragmented populations.
3. Multiple Uses and Human Influence: There was a need to recognize the Carson’s contributions to the social and economic benefits desired by local communities, families, and visitors, and the need to sustain these contributions to remain relevant and responsive to changing recreation trends, while also being economically feasible and adaptable. The plan needed to be updated to provide the services and products that local and visiting forest users want and need, while also recognizing the importance of relationships with local communities and groups in managing the national forest. There was a need to recognize Tribal traditional cultural properties and sacred sites and places to ensure privacy in cultural and ceremonial activities.

The public commented on these needs to change and initial plan components following publication of the Notice of Intent to revise the 1986 Forest Plan in the Federal Register on February 27, 2014. Scoping comments were analyzed and grouped into issue categories (presented below), which the planning team used to develop alternatives. Issues serve to highlight effects, both anticipated and unanticipated, that may occur from the proposed action or alternatives. Addressing the issues identified during analysis provides opportunities to reduce adverse effects and compare trade-offs. The issue categories were then used to develop the draft LMP and alternatives. Public comments on the draft LMP and draft environmental impact statement were then used to further refine the preferred alternative. The Carson NF final LMP is a shared product resulting from extensive public involvement throughout the plan revision process.

## **Engagement with State and Local Governments, Indian Tribes, other Federal Agencies, and the Public**

The Carson's public participation efforts ensured engagement and collaboration with a variety of stakeholders throughout the plan revision process, beginning in 2014. This provided transparency, a better understanding of the planning process, and regular dialogue among different groups. Extensive collaboration and feedback have resulted in a land management plan that is responsive to State and local governments, other Federal agencies, federally recognized tribes, and the public; and contains specific language, themes, and concepts developed by the broader public. The final LMP relies fundamentally on continued partnerships and stakeholder involvement for its successful implementation.

As discussed above, local federally recognized tribes and communities depend on the economic, social, and ecological benefits the national forest provides. The Carson supports jobs and economies, local traditional communities and uses, healthy wildlife populations, and clean air and water, among other benefits. Many issues and concerns facing the Carson, such as wildfire and its impact on local adjacent communities, require a cohesive management approach across the landscape and ownership boundaries. Active involvement by representatives of federally recognized tribes, counties, other Federal agencies, and local communities has, therefore, been integral to plan development and will be essential during implementation. Throughout the planning process, the Carson worked closely with government entities that participated as cooperating agencies and directly with local land grants, acequias, federally recognized tribes, and non-governmental organizations.

The Carson's planning team categorized issues identified during scoping as either significant or nonsignificant. Significant issues were defined as those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action, that involved potentially significant effects, and that could be meaningfully and reasonably evaluated and addressed within the programmatic scope of the plan. Alternatives were developed around significant issues that involved unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources. The planning team identified the following significant issues during the public involvement process that drove subsequent development of alternatives:

- Vegetation management, forest products, and fire and fuels management;
- Wildlife habitat;
- Access and recreation; and
- Recommended wilderness.

## **State and Local Governments and other Federal Agencies**

Cooperating agencies include Federal, State, local, and tribal governmental entities that lent technical assistance or other resources to the development of the Carson's land management plan. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (42 U.S.C. 4231 et seq.) allows certain governmental organizations to be granted cooperating agency status when the agency has "special expertise with respect to any environmental impact involved in a proposal (or a reasonable alternative) for legislation or other major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment" (40 CFR 1508.5). While decision-making authority for managing the national forest is held by the Forest Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Carson worked closely with 19 Federal, State, local, and tribal governments as cooperators to develop this final LMP and inform my decision:

- Colfax County
- Colfax Soil and Water Conservation District
- East Rio Arriba Soil and Water Conservation District
- Jicarilla Apache Nation
- Mora County
- New Mexico Department of Agriculture
- New Mexico Department of Game and Fish
- New Mexico Environment Department
- New Mexico Energy, Minerals, and Natural Resources Department; State Forestry Division
- New Mexico Land Grant Council
- New Mexico Acequia Commission
- Picuris Pueblo
- Rio Arriba County
- San Juan Soil and Water Conservation District
- Taos County
- Taos Pueblo
- Taos Soil and Water Conservation District
- Upper Chama Soil and Water Conservation District
- Western Mora Soil and Water Conservation District

Cooperating agencies reviewed and provided feedback on pre-draft and draft products and contributed to plan development by describing:

1. their objectives as expressed in their plans and policies,
2. the compatibility and interrelated impacts of these plans and policies,
3. opportunities for the land management plan to address identified impacts or contribute to joint objectives, and
4. opportunities to resolve or reduce conflicts in the context of developing the final LMP's desired conditions and objectives.

Cooperating agencies represented the interests and needs of their constituents by soliciting input, disseminating information, and organizing and facilitating meetings to improve consistency with their own management plans and goals. Many members attended public meetings to engage in discussions and provide input.

Involving cooperating agencies in the planning process maximized the collective voice and interests of the communities and greater public around the national forest. The Carson NF benefited from cooperating agencies' knowledge and understanding of the concerns and needs of local communities in northern New Mexico. All parties also benefited from enhanced communication with, and representation of, the public and constituents.

## Federally Recognized Tribes

Numerous Tribes and Pueblos have relied on the lands managed by the Carson since time immemorial and have sacred sites, cultural heritage sites, and sites for gathering traditional and cultural resources on lands on the national forest. In acknowledgement of their unique and ongoing relationship with the land, the plan revision team involved federally recognized tribes from the beginning of the revision process. Between 2015 and 2019, there were 18 meetings between the national forest and federally recognized tribes that addressed forest plan revision. The meetings included three collaboration cadre meetings, an All Pueblo Governor Council, and three intertribal roundtables. In addition, four tribal sessions were held in Albuquerque, Cuba, Ohkay Owingeh, and Taos. To better hear from federally recognized tribes (Taos Pueblo, Ohkay Owingeh, Picuris Pueblo, Santa Clara Pueblo, and the Jicarilla Apache Nation), we met quarterly to discuss current issues and potential projects. These discussions also included updates and information-sharing around the plan revision process. The Carson's tribal liaison regularly reached out to other federally recognized tribes to ensure that their interests were included in the plan.

Three federally recognized tribes with land adjacent to the national forest (Taos Pueblo, Picuris Pueblo, and Jicarilla Apache Nation) participated as cooperating agencies, helping to develop the draft LMP alongside other government partners. Tribal comments included concerns related to management of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, water use, and access for traditional cultural religious use. Consultation with affiliated tribes ensured the revised plan components addressed the above concerns and needs with respect to the Carson NF.

## Public Involvement

Throughout the plan revision process, the Carson NF encouraged local community participation by holding meetings in multiple locations throughout northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. The Carson designed the process to be accessible to any interested individual or entity, while focusing on reaching the remote, rural, low-income, and minority populations that surround the national forest. Poverty is an important indicator of both economic and social well-being; over 20 percent of the population of New Mexico lives below the poverty line. While Taos County is the only county among the four in the analysis area with a poverty rate over 25 percent, this figure masks finer-scale, existing patterns of poverty; both individual and family poverty rates are higher in the assessment area than they are in the state of New Mexico or the rest of the United States. Therefore, to ensure equitable access, in addition to posting documents online, the Carson made printed copies available at many locations. Additionally, the preliminary draft and final draft land management plan were translated into Spanish and Spanish-speaking employees were available at most public meetings.

Public involvement in the planning process began in January and February 2014, with Forest Service National Collaboration Cadre "listening sessions" to hear from the public and start the process of building relationships with land grants, local community leaders, acequia associations, local and state governments, and federally recognized tribes. Twenty-two sessions were held across 19 northern New Mexico sites. In June 2014, the Carson held 14 public meetings in communities around the forest about current conditions and to hear what the public values about the national forest. In June 2015, following the release of the draft assessment report, the Carson held another 14 public meetings to present key findings from the assessment and to hear ideas from the public about addressing identified risks (needs to change plan direction). Those meetings helped set the stage for developing the draft forest plan and draft environmental impact statement. Following the notice of intent to revise the forest plan, we received and responded to over



1,300 individual comments. We continued to take comments on issues related to plan revision throughout the process of developing the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement.

Public engagement included over 80 public meetings in at least 24 local communities, a relationship-building workshop in March 2017, and monthly open houses between November 2017 and August 2019. Meetings were typically 2 hours long and focused on a specific step in the revision process; most occurred on weeknight evenings to accommodate people's work schedules. The relationship-building workshop was a 3-day working meeting and included Carson National Forest staff and leadership, partners, and elected officials or their representatives; it focused on partnership opportunities and shared understanding around plan revision and a broad range of forest management topics. The monthly open houses were held during the day, without a set agenda or topic, and allowed the public to ask questions or informally discuss any part of the plan revision process.

The Carson NF also reached out directly to land grant communities and livestock producers. These communities have a long history with the forest and depend on forest resources and rangelands managed by the Carson for traditional and cultural practices, including livestock grazing. The plan revision team held over 30 meetings with these communities between 2014 and 2020. Additionally, we mailed invitations for public meetings to all Carson permittees to reach out specifically to livestock producers. The New Mexico Land Grant Council, New Mexico Department of Agriculture, and soil and water conservation districts participated in the plan revision process as cooperating agencies and helped convene and facilitate meetings with their constituents.

The planning team gave presentations to, and participated in, many meetings organized by other groups, including the New Mexico Acequia Association, New Mexico Land Grant Council, New Mexico Department of Agriculture, Northern New Mexico Stockman's Association, Friends of the Rio Grande, Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, Taos High School, University of New Mexico-Taos, and others. The planning team informed the public about the land management plan and the revision process through various other venues, including radio interviews, newspaper articles, the annual fish fiesta, social media, and "ski with a ranger" presentations at ski areas.

Throughout the development of the draft plan, draft wilderness evaluation, and draft wild and scenic river evaluation, we posted documents as they were developed on the plan revision web page and placed hard copies at each district office for the public to review and provide feedback. A preliminary draft LMP was posted in July 2017; an updated version incorporating public feedback was posted in December 2017. We received and considered over 600 comments on the preliminary draft plan before posting the second version. We received additional comments on the second version and discussed comments with those groups or individuals who requested a meeting, including the Northern New Mexico Stockmen's Association, the Wilderness Society, land grants, acequias, and federally recognized tribes.

A significant opportunity for public engagement and feedback followed the release of the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement. The draft documents were released to the public in June 2019, prior to the formal comment period to allow additional time for review. A notice of availability published in the Federal Register on August 9, 2019, initiated the formal 90-day comment period on the draft environmental impact statement and draft forest plan, as required by Forest Service National Forest Management Act regulations at 36 CFR 219. The comment period closed November 7, 2019. During the 90-day comment period, the Carson NF held or attended 14 meetings with federally recognized tribes and pueblos, cooperating agencies, community groups, non-profit organizations, and the public to discuss multiple methods for delivering and drafting official comment responses and an overview of draft plan content and the associated

draft environmental impact statement. Additionally, three tri-forest meetings were held collaboratively with the Santa Fe and Cibola National Forests, with one for federally recognized tribes, one for government officials, and one for the public.

During the comment period, a total of 5,740 letters were received. The plan revision team distilled comments received into concern statements encompassing multiple similar comments. The final LMP and environmental impact statement reflect changes based on issues raised by public comment, as described in appendix A of the final environmental impact statement. Key concerns from comments are listed below:

- **Traditional Communities and Uses** – Local communities, including land grants, acequias, pueblos, and others have a long history of reliance on the resources that the Carson manages. Comments reflect the strong connections between use of national forest lands and the economic, social, and cultural vitality of such traditional communities. Concerns that those uses will be infringed upon in the future manifests as demands that the final LMP protect preexisting rights, resolve land ownership disputes, and recognize perceived historical injustices.
- **Wilderness Recommendations** - Comments express a preference for or against the amount of recommended wilderness. Some individuals and conservation groups suggest new areas for wilderness recommendation, particularly in the northern Tres Piedras Ranger District and around the Pecos Wilderness. Several groups object to the evaluation process, specifically that the Carson chose to evaluate wilderness characteristics as being present or not, instead of ranking them.
- **Wildlife** – There is strong support for wildlife protections and improved habitat connectivity. Conservation groups would like to see designated migration corridors in the plan. Many comments urge the Carson to coordinate with other agencies, such as New Mexico Department of Game and Fish or New Mexico Department of Transportation. There is broad support for the creation of a Valle Vidal Management Area with restrictive plan components and additional recommended wilderness.
- **Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers** – The Carson’s recent evaluation finds many fewer rivers to be eligible than were found eligible 20 years ago, under a previous evaluation. Some groups question the re-evaluation since a previous eligibility study exists. Commenters provided examples of additional outstandingly remarkable values that they believe certain rivers possess. Some commenters (including Santa Barbara Land Grant) suggest that certain rivers should not be eligible, because eligibility would interfere with possible future uses of the river.
- **Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep** – Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep advocates suggest that the final LMP needs to do more to protect wild sheep from disease transmission resulting from interaction with domestic sheep and goats. Many commenters believe that Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep should be included as a species of conservation concern.
- **Livestock Grazing** – Some conservation groups want to eliminate or reduce livestock grazing or want additional standards and guidelines that would reiterate desired conditions related to livestock grazing. There is strong support for continued grazing from some traditional communities, permittees, and grazing associations, who expressed concern that the final LMP does not sustainably protect on-forest grazing and therefore requested stronger protective language.
- **Watersheds and Riparian** – Some commenters want additional protections for watersheds, water, riparian, and aquatic ecosystems, including additional standards and

guidelines and inclusion of the Wetland Jewels Management Area from alternative 4. Some individuals were concerned their water rights would be negatively affected.

- **Developed Winter and Summer Resort Management Area** – Sipapu Ski Area would like the developed recreation management area that includes their current permit area to be expanded. Others in the local community would like ski area expansion to go through a thorough NEPA process with public involvement.

## Decision and Rationale for the Decision

### Decision

The final environmental impact statement (FEIS) for the Carson National Forest Land Management Plan documents the analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based. I have reviewed the environmental analysis disclosed in the FEIS; the planning record; comments from our State and local government partners, federally recognized tribes, other Federal agencies, and the public and have considered how the Carson final LMP meets the identified needs to change and the requirements of 36 CFR 219. Based on this review, I have selected alternative 2-modified, as described in the Carson final LMP and the accompanying FEIS.

The selected alternative is based on alternative 2 from the draft EIS, with modifications in response to public comments. It addresses the needs to change identified during the assessment; meets the requirements of the Planning Rule at 36 CFR 219; is responsive to local government, tribal, and public engagement; and is based on over 30 years of knowledge gained from implementation and amendment of the 1986 Plan.

The final LMP replaces all previous plan direction, including the 1986 Plan and its amendments, and consolidates previous plan and amendment direction in one location. It applies plan direction to all portions of the Carson NF not included in the previous plan, including the Valle Vidal unit and the Miranda Canyon acquisition. With this decision, I approve the following:

1. Forestwide (chapter 2) and area-specific (chapter 3) plan components, including desired conditions, objectives, suitability, standards, and guidelines that meet the social, economic, and ecological sustainability requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule.
2. Identification of management areas, including: Developed Winter and Summer Resorts, Potential Developed Recreation Sites, the Jicarilla Natural Gas Management Area, Grassland Maintenance Management Areas, the Valle Vidal Management Area, the San Antonio Management Area, Proposed Research Natural Areas, Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers, and Recommended Wilderness.
3. Six areas (9,295 acres) recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System: (1) Lobo, (2) Huckaby, (3) Toltec, (4) Rudy, (5) Esther Garcia, and (6) Ash Mountain.
4. Identification of 51 river segments (170.4 miles) eligible for inclusion in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System and plan components associated with their management.
5. Plan components for designated areas, including the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit, designated wilderness, designated wild and scenic rivers, inventoried roadless areas, national trails, national scenic byways, wild horse territories, zoological areas, and botanical areas.
6. The land management plan monitoring program (chapter 4).

7. Identification of 455,844 acres as suitable for timber production.

## Nature of the Decision

The purpose of the final LMP is to guide future projects, practices, and uses to assure sustainable multiple-use management on the Carson NF over the next 15 years. A land management plan establishes goals, desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and land suitability to ensure coordination of multiple uses (e.g. outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish, and wilderness) and sustained yield of products and services.

The final land management plan does not authorize projects or activities, commit the Forest Service to take action, or dictate internal operations (such as personnel matters, law enforcement, budget, or organizational changes). Management direction will be implemented through site-specific activities, which must be consistent with the land management plan (36 CFR 219.15).

## Rationale for the Decision

### **Topic 1: Ecosystem integrity and fire and fuels management**

Ecological integrity of terrestrial ecosystems, and watersheds (36 CFR 219.8(a) and 219.9(a))

Alternative 2-modified provides direction for increasing ecosystem integrity, which will improve function and resiliency to extreme and uncharacteristic disturbances. A combination of mechanical treatment, prescribed fires, and naturally-ignited wildfire allows management to balance the need to protect communities and infrastructure with the need to restore departed ecosystems and return to natural disturbance regimes.

Under the final LMP, we envision treating 127,500 to 225,000 acres in ponderosa pine and mixed conifer with frequent fire communities over the next 10 years, through a combination of mechanical, prescribed, and naturally ignited wildland fire treatments. There is flexibility to focus on treating priority watersheds, areas identified in community wildfire protection plans, and lands in the wildland-urban interface. Treatments within the wildland-urban interface would help protect communities and protect national forest lands from fires that start on lands of other ownership. Strategically located treatments would also benefit firefighter and public safety.

Management actions that reduce the threat of uncharacteristic wildfire promote habitat quality, species diversity, and structural heterogeneity; improve watershed function; protect air quality; and reduce fragmentation, all of which contribute to the national forest's ability to resist and adapt to various stressors, including uncharacteristic fire, human activities, and climate variability. Mechanical treatments of ponderosa pine and mixed conifer with frequent fire communities are expected to result in a sustainable flow of wood products to local and regional wood-processing and biomass industries and provide fuelwood for local families and forest products for traditional and cultural purposes.

Ecological integrity of aquatic ecosystems, watersheds (36 CFR 219.8(a)(2)), and riparian areas (36 CFR 219.8(a)(3))

The final LMP carries forward the Forest Service's commitment to manage for healthy watersheds that benefit communities and ecosystem integrity. In addition to the forest management treatments described above, the final LMP includes watershed management direction that will maintain the productive capacity of soils; protect water quality and quantity; sustain native species; provide State-designated water uses; and reduce the threat of flood damage to Forest Service infrastructure and downstream values. Best management practices protect

watershed function during all management activities. New or rerouted roads are prohibited within 300 feet of water features, though other infrastructure may be allowed so long as it is consistent with other plan direction, especially requirements related to riparian management zone management.

The final LMP includes a thorough description and distinction among various riparian types and their associated management direction; it protects riparian function by defining riparian management zones and appropriate management around all perennial, intermittent, and ephemeral riparian areas. The delineation of riparian zones includes those areas that provide riparian function, but in alternative 2-modified, the default buffer of 100 feet applies to intermittent waters as required by 36 CFR 219.8(a)(3)(ii). An additional default buffer of 15 feet around all ephemeral channels is also included. Implementation is expected to result in a positive trend for riparian areas, based on its overall focus on ecosystem restoration and resiliency and specific objectives to improve watershed function, control erosion, treat riparian areas, and improve stream habitat and spring function.

The final LMP will be responsive as opportunities, partnerships, and needs arise, without prescribing specific treatments or prioritizing project locations. Site-specific consideration of possible approaches and limitations will allow efficient designs that take advantage of unique circumstances to maximize benefits. Rates of progress are based solely on expected Forest Service capacity; partnerships with interested stakeholders have the potential to expand opportunities and available funding.

Many commenters requested that wetland restoration treatments be focused in certain headwater wetland complexes identified through a community prioritization process. While the Wetland Jewels Management Area from alternative 4 is not included in alternative 2-modified, the final LMP recognizes the importance of headwater wetlands; watershed and riparian objectives now include language regarding consideration of community priorities when planning restoration activities.

#### Air and soils (36 CFR 219.8(a)(2))

The final LMP protects and improves soil and air resources that support wildlife and contribute to high levels of biodiversity and maintain water quality. Plan components direct management that promotes soil deposition and development by restoring and maintaining vegetative cover, including downed woody debris. Productive soils maintain hydrologic function, soil stability, and nutrient cycling while providing food and cover. Air quality standards protect human health and visibility. Air impairments are mitigated by managing prescribed fire smoke impacts and fugitive dust.

#### Timber (36 CFR 219.11)

Based on National Forest Management Act requirements, the final LMP identifies 455,844 acres as suitable for timber production. The amount of timber that could be sustainably produced on all lands that may be suitable for timber production (assuming all of these lands were managed to produce timber without considering other multiple uses or fiscal or organizational capability) is equal to 422 million board feet or 107 million cubic feet per decade.

Under the final LMP, green wood products, including commercial timber, would be removed from the Carson NF at an average of 41.0 million cubic feet per decade. Total green wood sale quantity, including hardwoods and non-industrial products, would average 48.9 million cubic feet per decade, which is well below the sustained yield limit. Total fuelwood removal, including by dead-and-down permit, is estimated to be 22.0 million cubic feet per decade. Group selection harvesting combined with periodic selection or variable density thinning would achieve

restoration objectives, maintain habitat connectivity, and contribute to a dependable flow of forest products to existing and prospective local industry.

Alternative 2-modified provides direction to maintain or improve the ecological integrity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, and watersheds in the plan area (36 CFR 219.8(a) and 219.9(a)).

The final LMP recognizes the interdependence of resources and supports an “all-lands” approach of working with neighboring land managers to improve landscape conditions where natural systems span administrative boundaries. Objectives in forested vegetation types emphasize silvicultural and prescribed burning practices that return stands to historic patterns and structures; aid fire managers in preventing loss of life, property, or cultural resources or irreparable harm to ecological resources; and build resilience and adaptive capacity.

## **Topic 2: Delivering provisioning ecosystem services—economic benefits**

### **Contribution to social and economic sustainability (36 CFR 219.8(b))**

Alternative 2-modified provides opportunities for economic growth while sustaining ecosystems for future generations. It focuses on restoration and diverse ecosystem services that contribute to the long-term socioeconomic diversity and stability of local communities. The final LMP recognizes the Carson’s continued contribution to social and economic benefits desired by local communities, families, and visitors. It is grounded in the economic and non-economic uses of unique local cultures and values those traditional uses that support cultural and subsistence needs. Economic benefit and forest products are a mechanism for supplementing management activities that move the landscape toward ecological desired conditions.

### **Integrated resource management to provide for ecosystem services and multiple uses (36 CFR 219.10(a))**

The final LMP recognizes and identifies key relationships among multiple uses. Plan components are integrated to recognize the interdependence of ecological resources and are based on the need for integrated consideration of ecological, social, and economic factors. Integrated and adaptable resource management promotes the Carson’s ability to remain relevant and responsive to changing user demands, while also being economically feasible and productive.

The final LMP manages for the continued availability of, and access to, forest products and traditional uses, such as fuelwood, timber, and forage, which contribute to the long-term socioeconomic diversity and stability of local communities. Livestock grazing on the national forest contributes to the livelihoods of livestock producers and to the economy of counties and local communities. Management of rangelands that encourages sustainable forage production contributes to agricultural business and local employment, as well as to traditional lifestyles and generational ties to the land. Many households rely on fuelwood for heating and cooking and the plan manages for its continued availability. Timber harvest and other treatments at an increased rate and scale will contribute to businesses and employment opportunities.

The final LMP identifies additional lands as suitable for timber production. The 455,844 suitable acres represent a 20 percent increase compared to the previous plan. The projected timber sale quantity would be 15.9 million board feet per year, or 11.7 times recent production. The Carson National Forest will continue to provide opportunities for livestock grazing, currently about 107,690 animal unit months per year. The plan responds to local elected official, tribal, and community needs, contributing 1,735 jobs and \$69,203,000 annually in total forest management-related labor income.

### **Topic 3: Support traditional and cultural ways of life**

#### **Recognition and inclusion of traditional communities (36 CFR 219.8(b), 36 CFR 219.10(b)(ii))**

The final LMP recognizes and values the uniqueness of rural historic communities and the traditional uses that maintain these cultures. The long history and ties of rural historic communities and traditional uses (such as livestock grazing, fuelwood gathering, acequias, and hunting) to NFS lands and resources are understood and appreciated. The final LMP provides sustainable grazing, fuelwood, water for irrigation (acequias), and other forest products and makes those resources available to rural historic communities and federally recognized tribes for cultural and traditional needs, subsistence practices, and economic support. It focuses on incorporating community perspectives, needs, and concerns, as well as traditional knowledge, into project design and decisions.

#### **Protection of cultural and historic resources (36 CFR 219.10(b)(ii))**

The final LMP recognizes responsibilities to preserve and protect cultural and historic resources that possess scientific, cultural, or social value and directs management to minimize impacts from vandalism, looting, and other human influences. It maintains access to areas of traditional and ceremonial use, while providing opportunities for solitude and privacy.

#### **Management of areas of tribal importance (36 CFR 219.10(b)(iii))**

The final LMP recognizes the Carson's legally mandated trust responsibilities to federally recognized tribes. It places value on locations of identified traditional and cultural use and includes traditional communities in the identification, protection, and preservation of those places that are spiritually and culturally important. The final plan integrates forest management with tribal needs through shared stewardship to address threats to adjacent tribal resources.

### **Topic 4: Access and recreation**

#### **Sustainable recreation; including recreation settings, opportunities, and access; and scenic character (36 CFR 219.10(b)(i))**

The final LMP provides a framework for comprehensive and consistent management of recreation opportunities and scenic resources that balances developed with primitive or dispersed recreation opportunities and motorized and nonmotorized access. Taking an approach that is responsive and adaptable to changing uses and trends, it provides high-quality recreation opportunities commensurate with public interest, resource capacity, and other natural and cultural resource values; reduces conflicting uses; and contributes to the economic, cultural, and social vitality and well-being of surrounding communities. Recreation sites that blend with the natural landscape complement the Carson's scenery resources and scenic character. The plan includes objectives to maintain recreation facilities, including the transportation system, so that they are sustainable and safe and function as intended.

The final LMP requires that activities sustain recreation settings and opportunities and achieve scenic character goals; it clarifies the use of the recreation opportunity spectrum and scenery management system as tools to achieve this requirement during interdisciplinary project planning. The summer and winter desired recreation opportunity spectrums are described and mapped in detail in the separate "Desired Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Report," referenced in the final LMP. The process for determining scenic integrity objectives, the scenic class map, and scenic integrity map are included in the Scenic Integrity Objectives Report and referenced in the final LMP.



### Travel management (36 CFR 219.10(b)(i))

The final LMP provides for sustainably designed, well-marked, and well-maintained roads and trails that provide safe and reasonable access for public travel, recreation uses, traditional and cultural uses, and land and resource management activities and contribute to the social and economic sustainability of local communities. With three exceptions, the final LMP does not revisit existing travel management decisions. Two existing restrictions on future transportation system decisions are carried forward from the 1986 Plan—new motorized trails are prohibited in the Valle Vidal (carried forward from the existing Multiple Use Area Guide-added from alternatives 1 and 4) and new road and motorized trail construction is prohibited in wetlands (carried forward from 1986 Plan). The wilderness recommendation process resulted in a new restriction on the authorization of motorized or mechanized uses in the six areas recommended for wilderness designation. The final LMP does not open or close any roads. Travel management decisions are best made on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration site-specific factors, multiple-use management, and desired conditions as described in the final LMP.

The final LMP addresses negative impacts of existing roads through road maintenance and decommissioning objectives. Undetermined and temporary road management is clarified through plan direction that requires that roads be determined for need and by objectives to minimize impacts from unneeded roads. Through integrated resource management, the final LMP minimizes activities' impacts on the existing transportation system to maintain access and recreational opportunities.

## **Topic 5: Wildlife and fish habitat**

### Diversity of ecosystems and habitat types and connectivity of aquatic and terrestrial habitats (36 CFR 219.9(a))

The final LMP manages for plant and animal species that are healthy, well-distributed, genetically diverse, and connected, enabling species to adapt to changing environmental and climatic conditions. It also protects and restores rare and unique resources that support high levels of biodiversity, such as springs, wetlands, aspen forests, and habitats and refugia for species that are narrow endemics or have restricted distributions or declining populations.

The final LMP addresses habitat configuration and availability to allow long-distance range shifts of plant and wildlife populations. It provides for ecological connectivity at multiple temporal and spatial scales and considers landscape linkages. Barriers to movement are minimized, except where they benefit species management and recovery. Genetic exchange, daily and seasonal movements of animals, and predator-prey interactions continue, undisrupted by human disturbance and consistent with their potential based on existing landforms.

### At-risk species-specific ecological conditions in the plan area when coarse filter does not provide required protections (36 CFR 219.9(b)(1) and 219.9(b)(2)(ii))

The final LMP provides for a diversity of plant and animal communities commensurate with the suitability and capability of the Carson National Forest by restoring and maintaining ecological integrity. Consistent with the 2012 Planning Rule, the final LMP adopts a complementary ecosystem- and species-specific approach to maintaining species diversity (36 CFR 219.9). Most biotic species, both known and unknown, are protected by managing species, genetics, functions, and processes at the vegetation community, or ecosystem, level with a “coarse-filter” approach.

For those species requiring specific ecological conditions or habitat features that are not met by the coarse-filter, approach, the final LMP includes “fine-filter” components to ensure continued biological diversity on the national forest. The regional forester identified 17 terrestrial and aquatic wildlife and 9 plant species of conservation concern on the Carson. The best available

scientific information for these species of conservation concern indicates substantial concern about their capability to persist over the long term. In addition, there are six federally listed threatened, endangered, proposed, and candidate species on the Carson. Fine-filter components are included, as necessary, to maintain species that are vulnerable to decline, including federally listed species and species of conservation concern.

Some threats to species are not entirely within the control of the Carson's management authority, for example, disease risk to bighorn sheep populations from domestic sheep on adjacent private lands. In these cases, plan components focus on addressing threats the Carson is able to control and which will maintain or restore ecological conditions within the plan area to help maintain a viable population of the species within their range, as required by 36 CFR 219.9(b)(2).

## **Topic 6: Designated and management areas**

### **Base forestwide direction on actual conditions rather than mapped management areas (36 CFR 219.10 (b) and needs to change)**

Alternative 2-modified adopts forestwide direction by resource overlaid with area-specific direction for unique locations. This approach replaces the 1986 Plan's reliance on continuous coverage by management areas and thus reduces plan complexity, while allowing more flexibility for ecological and habitat restoration planning. Forestwide plan direction applies where on-the-ground conditions meet the definition of a resource instead of where resources have been mapped. The number, arrangement, and boundaries of management areas in the final LMP are simplified to reduce planning and management complexity.

### **Protection of congressionally designated wilderness areas as well as management of areas recommended for wilderness designation (36 CFR 219.10(b)(iv))**

Final plan components protect and maintain the wilderness character of designated wilderness areas and the ecological and social characteristics that provide the basis for each recommended area's suitability as wilderness. The Forest Service has an affirmative obligation to manage recommended wilderness areas for the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for their recommendation until Congress acts. The final LMP restricts management in recommended areas that would affect the wilderness characteristics of these areas and possibly jeopardize their designation as wilderness in the future. Designated and recommended wilderness areas provide opportunities for solitude and nonmotorized, nonmechanized recreation in an essentially unmodified environment.

### **Protection of designated wild and scenic rivers as well as management of rivers found eligible or determined to be suitable (36 CFR 219.10(b)(v))**

The Carson NF will continue to manage the Rio Grande and Red River segments of the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River according to the Bureau of Land Management's river management plan to protect or enhance their outstandingly remarkable values. Other rivers have been evaluated for their eligibility for designation. Based on a comprehensive study that included extensive public input, the final LMP adopts a revised evaluation of eligible rivers that compared river values to similar rivers in a defined region of comparison, updated free-flowing determinations based on current information, and accurately classified rivers found eligible based on existing levels of development. Alternative 2-modified provides clear direction for managing eligible rivers until a suitability determination is made. The final LMP includes a summary of river classification criteria, with a more detailed description available in the evaluation of eligibility report. The final LMP clarifies the process for analyzing water resources projects and their effects on free flow.

### Appropriate management of other designated areas or recommended designated areas (36 CFR 219. 219.10(b)(vi))

Alternative 2-modified directs management of other designated areas, consistent with their establishing legislation or decision. In addition to six designated wildernesses and the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River, the Carson manages the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit, inventoried roadless areas, national trails, a national scenic byway, wild horse territories, a zoological area, and a botanical area. The final LMP generally does not repeat law, regulation, or policy, but provides guidance consistent with those requirements and clarifies their intent as necessary.

### Management areas (36 CFR 219.10 (b) and 36 CFR 219.7 (d))

In addition to recommended wilderness and eligible wild and scenic rivers, alternative 2-modified includes six management areas that apply area-specific plan components to certain parcels of land to reflect a management emphasis. The plan components either constrain an activity or allow for discrepancies that would otherwise conflict with forestwide direction. They do not authorize any specific future use or development.

The Developed Winter and Summer Resorts Management Area includes the four existing ski areas on the Carson NF. Under alternative 2-modified, these areas are more developed than other areas on the Carson and resort activities play a dominant role. The management area covers only those locations currently included in the special use permit for each ski area.

The Potential Developed Recreation Site Management Area has been adopted from alternative 1; the area surrounds the existing Sipapu Ski Area and maintains the value of the site for future recreation development. The management area does not authorize future development or make assumptions about what future development might entail. Alternative 2 removed this management area; alternative 3 expanded the Developed Winter and Summer Resorts Management Area around Sipapu Ski Area to include a proposed expansion. I find that retaining the Potential Developed Recreation Site Management Area from alternative 1 provides the greatest flexibility and recognizes the value of this area for recreation development, but does not tie future management to a particular proposal.

The Jicarilla Natural Gas Management Area adopts stipulations and direction from the 2009 Analysis of Surface Management of Gas Leasing and Development in the Jicarilla Ranger District. It supports continued reasonable access for leaseholders, while mitigating impacts to ecological, cultural, and scenic resources; it changes no lease stipulations for existing leases.

The Grassland Maintenance Management Area contributes to the Carson's ability to maintain its grazing commitment. The primary purpose of these grassland conversion areas is to increase available forage for grazing. In addition, these areas provide valuable habitat for wildlife species and many occur in key elk and deer winter range. The location of these areas has been refined from the 1986 Plan Management Area 11-Revegetation Area based on improved mapping information.

The Valle Vidal Management Area (VVMA) is focused on restoring and protecting diverse and resilient biological communities, while providing a quality outdoor recreation experience with an emphasis on primitive and semiprimitive settings and natural-appearing scenery. The 1986 Plan contained no specific direction for the VVMA, which was acquired as the previous plan was being developed. Since 1983, the VVMA has been managed according to a Multiple Use Area Guide, which was never formally adopted into the plan. Alternative 2-modified adopts most of the direction from the 1983 guide, including a prohibition on new motorized trail construction that was analyzed under alternative 4. Seasonal closures for elk calving and winter range support the

prized elk herd and State wildlife management objectives. A limit on the number of overnight parking areas is not being carried forward, as I determine that it unnecessarily limits recreation management options. Likewise, limitations on feeding, tethering, and holding horses are not carried forward, because available facilities within Cimarron and McCrystal campgrounds and Clayton corral are insufficient to support the current level of horse use and purpose-built facilities are not necessary to manage impacts. The prohibition on for-profit commercial facilities is not carried forward because it places unnecessary limitations on possible partnership opportunities. Any such facilities would need to comply with all other VVMA-specific and forestwide plan components and would be subject to interdisciplinary specialist and public review.

The San Antonio Management Area (SAMA) also focuses on the restoration and protection of diverse and resilient biological communities, while providing a quality outdoor recreation experience with an emphasis on primitive and semiprimitive settings and natural-appearing scenery. Alternative 2-modified retains the western portion of this management area from alternative 2, without the additional Cebolla Mesa area that was analyzed under alternative 4. The Cebolla Mesa (Questa Ranger District) portion of this management area is disconnected and of a different character than the Tres Piedras Ranger District portion; it is heavily roaded and more easily accessible, with different scenery, vegetation, and uses.

Proposed research natural area management areas are managed to maintain those natural features that make them good candidates for ecological reference areas. Based on an evaluation of potential proposed areas, the final LMP proposes four areas as candidates for designation by the regional forester and research station director.

## **Topic 7: Building partnerships and shared stewardship**

The final LMP is built around the concepts of collaboration and shared stewardship, with a focus on building partnerships and organizing volunteers to achieve more than the Carson can with its limited resources alone. Partnerships with other organizations and government entities will increase the national forest's ability to do quality restoration work and to develop and provide improved recreation opportunities. Partnering across boundaries creates a dynamic of shared work, assets, and ideas and will lead to ecological, social, and cultural projects that benefit the greater forest community.

The final LMP directs management to incorporate the priorities and knowledge from a broad range of stakeholders to effectively contribute to social and economic benefits desired by local communities, families, and visitors. It recognizes the importance of integrating relationships with local communities and interested stakeholders in management decisions

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement alternative 2- modified, which most effectively integrates management strategies and guidance that: (1) are responsive to the issues, concerns, and opportunities expressed by State, local and tribal governments, the public, and other Federal agencies; (2) meet the purpose of and need for action by addressing the priority needs to change and significant issues that drove plan revision; (3) provide the direction necessary for moving resources toward desired conditions, while including measures to protect sensitive ecological and cultural elements of the national forest; (4) manage land uses in ways that are socially and economically sustainable; and (5) establish ambitious but achievable objectives for ecosystem restoration and maintenance, and recreation opportunities and management based on expected budget allocations.

Alternative 2-modified represents the result of extensive public involvement. Two versions of a preliminary draft proposed plan were modified based on public feedback, resulting in the draft

plan, which was modified based on formal public comments to develop this preferred alternative. Beginning in July 2017, with the release of the first version of the preliminary draft proposed plan, the Carson National Forest worked closely with our State, local, and tribal government cooperating agencies as well as other Federal agencies and the public. Alternative 2-modified is the result of that collaboration and includes perspectives and language developed by a broad range of national forest users and interested parties.

The distribution of resources under alternative 2-modified provides for restoration and diverse ecosystem services and allows for adaptive management. Alternative 2-modified addresses the need to recognize and enhance the national forest's role in contributing to local economies, including timber and forest products, livestock grazing, the service-based sectors of recreation and tourism, and other multiple-use activities and products. Compared to the previous plan, there is an increased focus on riparian management and stream restoration. While the final LMP cannot commit the public to act, alternative 2-modified emphasizes cultivating partnerships to work across boundaries, build consensus, and increase capacity. Alternative 2-modified recognizes and values traditional communities and uses, reflecting the Carson's contribution to local cultural, social, and economic vitality. Unique places on the national forest are recognized for their contributions to watershed function, wildlife habitat, outdoor recreation, grazing, and other multiple uses and economic benefits.

The broad framework for the interconnected management of resources provides for sustainable uses that support vibrant communities and honor traditional communities and their reliance on the Carson's resources, while also adapting to current demands by providing for forest conditions that protect communities, infrastructure, and watersheds; air quality; traditional and cultural forest uses; sustainable recreation opportunities; scenery; and forest-based economic activities such as wood products industries and ranching.

### **Requirements of the Planning Rule**

The final LMP has been prepared in compliance with the Forest Service's 2012 National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule at 36 CFR Part 219. The set of plan components meets specific content requirements of the rule as follows:

#### **219.8 Sustainability**

The final LMP provides for ecological sustainability by:

1. Maintaining and restoring the ecological integrity including structure, function, composition, and connectivity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and watersheds in the plan area (FW-VEG and FW-WSW sections and subsections);
2. Maintaining and restoring air quality (FW-AIR);
3. Maintaining and restoring soils and soil productivity including guidance to reduce soil erosion and sedimentation (FW-SL);
4. Maintaining and restoring water resources and water quality (FW-WSW section and subsections);
5. Maintaining and restoring the ecological integrity of riparian areas, in part by establishing riparian management zones around all lakes, streams, and open water wetlands (FW-RMZ section and subsections); and
6. Ensuring implementation of best management practices for water quality (FW-WSW-G-1).

The final LMP provides for social and economic sustainability by:

1. Recognizing and valuing traditional communities and uses (Traditional Communities section, FW-FRT, FW-RHC, FW-CR, FW-GRZ, FW-FFP);
2. Facilitating opportunities for local employment and economic development associated with restoration, grazing, recreation, mineral development, and other multiple uses and ecosystem services (FW-FRT, FW-RHC, FW-GRZ, FW-FFP, FW-REC, FW-SU, FW-MM);
3. Providing surface and groundwater for many uses throughout the state, including those that contribute to economic growth and ecosystem integrity (FW-WSW section and subsections, FW-WFP, FW-FRT, FW-RHC);
4. Supporting a variety of high-quality developed and dispersed recreation opportunities for a diverse group of national forest users that are responsive, sustainable, and contribute to the economic, cultural, and social vitality and well-being of surrounding communities (FW-REC, FW-SU);
5. Providing safe and reasonable access via sustainably designed, well-marked, and well-maintained roads, bridges, and trails (FW-TFA);
6. Preserving and protecting cultural and historic resources (FW-CR);
7. Sustaining scenic character in ways that contribute to visitors' sense of place and connection with nature (FW-SCEN);
8. Protecting communities and ecological resources from wildland fire (FW-FIRE); and
9. Advancing partnerships and collaboration to manage forest resources, assist in communicating with and educating the public, and achieve short- and long-term mutually shared goals (FW-PART).

#### 219.9 Diversity of plant and animal communities

The final LMP adopts a complementary ecosystem- (coarse-filter) and species-specific (fine-filter) approach to maintaining the diversity of plant and animal communities and the persistence of native species in the plan area by:

1. Maintaining and restoring ecosystem integrity and diversity as described above, including rare plant and animal communities and diverse native tree species (FW-WFP), and
2. Including additional species-specific plan components where ecosystem components do not adequately contribute to the recovery of federally listed threatened and endangered species, conserve proposed and candidate species, and maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern within the plan area (appendix H of the final environmental impact statement contains a list of species-specific plan components by species).

#### 219.10 Multiple use

The final LMP provides for ecosystem services and multiple uses, including outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife, and fish, within Forest Service authority and the inherent capability of the plan area by:

1. Integrating management for multiple uses across resources (Plan Concepts);
2. Considering multiple uses during the public participation process that identified relevant resources and uses throughout plan development (documentation of the public

- participation process is included in appendix E of the final environmental impact statement);
3. Maintaining and restoring vegetation conditions, soils, and riparian areas to ensure multiple benefits, including biodiversity, wildlife habitat, and resilience to natural disturbance (FW-VEG, FW-SL, FW-WSW);
  4. Maintaining and restoring watershed conditions to provide water for beneficial uses through an integrated aquatic and riparian resource management approach (FW-WSW);
  5. Recognizing and protecting cultural, historical, and traditional resources and uses and areas of tribal importance (FW-FRT, FW-RHC, FW-CR);
  6. Providing rangeland for livestock grazing that contributes to agricultural businesses, local employment, livelihoods, as well as generational ties to the land (FW-GRZ);
  7. Providing fuelwood and other forest products that contribute to the long-term socioeconomic diversity and stability of local communities (FW-FFP);
  8. Providing a variety of sustainable, high-quality developed and dispersed recreation opportunities and activities to a diverse group of forest users (FW-REC);
  9. Providing motorized opportunities and access as well as nonmotorized and primitive areas (FW-TFA, FW-REC, DA-WILD, DA-IRA, MA-RWMA);
  10. Protecting congressionally designated wilderness areas and areas recommended for designation (DA-WILD, MA-RWMA);
  11. Protecting designated wild and scenic rivers and rivers found eligible for designation (DA-WSR, MA-EWSR);
  12. Protecting proposed research natural areas (MA-PRNA); and
  13. Providing opportunities for the development of mineral resources, where appropriate (FW-MM).

#### 219.11 Timber requirements based on the National Forest Management Act

The final LMP provides guidance for timber management by:

1. Identifying 455,844 acres in the plan area that are suited for timber production (FW-FFP and appendix D of the final environmental impact statement);
2. Prohibiting timber harvest for the purpose of timber production on lands not suited for timber production (FW-FFP-S-1);
3. Limiting timber harvest to only those lands where soil, slope, or other watershed conditions would not be irreversibly damaged (FW-FFP-S-2);
4. Requiring that timber harvest be carried out in a manner consistent with protecting soil, watershed, fish, wildlife, recreation, and aesthetic resources (FW-FFP-S-2);
5. Limiting the size of openings that may be cut during one harvest operation with standards describing specific conditions under which exceptions for larger openings may be allowed (FW-FFP-S-6);
6. Limiting the quantity of timber that may be sold from the national forest (FW-FFP-S-7); and
7. Limiting regeneration harvest of even-aged stands of trees to stands that have reached or surpassed 95 percent of the culmination of mean annual increment (FW-FFP-G-1).



## 219.12 Monitoring

The final LMP monitoring phase comes after revision is complete. The monitoring phase includes:

1. Designing proposed management activities to implement the final LMP in a way that will yield specific information and support learning.
2. Analyzing monitoring results using scientific methods that reduce uncertainty and improve understanding of system behavior. Well-designed monitoring programs and management activities contribute to better scientific analysis of these results. Monitoring and analysis also evaluate progress toward achieving desired conditions and objectives of the final LMP and the assumptions used in developing the plan.
3. Learning from the results of the analysis and sharing how the results either confirm or modify existing assumptions and provide feedback on management effectiveness. Learning is proactively shared with land managers and the public.
4. Adapting planning and management activities based on learning from the results of the analysis. This adaptation takes the form of modifying assumptions, models, data, and understanding of the system. This knowledge is then used to inform the planning process that leads to adjustment of plans and projects.

## Components of the Decision

I have reviewed the environmental analysis in the FEIS; the planning record; comments from our State and local government partners, federally recognized tribes, other Federal agencies, and the public and have considered how the final LMP meets the identified need for change and the requirements of 36 CFR 219. The selected alternative and its components include features of all alternatives considered and reflect modifications in response to comments.

This decision adopts components that will guide future project and activity decision-making, including all desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and suitability of lands determinations in the final LMP. The specific components included are consistent with the rationale detailed above and the requirements of the planning rule. The decision also constitutes preliminary administrative recommendations for recommended wilderness, eligible wild and scenic rivers, and proposed research natural areas, and a monitoring plan.

## Preliminary Administrative Recommendations

### Recommended Wilderness

The Carson NF followed the wilderness process required under the 2012 Planning Rule directives (FSH 1909.12 chapter 70) to inventory, evaluate, and analyze areas for recommendation as designated wilderness. This recommendation is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President of the United States. Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions regarding wilderness designation. Land management plan implementation is not dependent upon final determination of these areas' wilderness status.

I have carefully considered a range of land management allocations, recreation uses, and boundary adjustments across the alternatives to determine the mix of land and resource uses that would best meet public needs. Based on our analysis and extensive engagement with interested stakeholders, including local governments, federally recognized tribes, and the public, I am recommending six areas for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Five of these areas are adjacent to existing designated wilderness (Lobo-82 acres; Huckaby-21 acres; Toltec-1,038 acres; Rudy-1,675 acres; and Esther Garcia-1,165 acres). The Ash Mountain recommended wilderness is a new, stand-alone area of 5,314 acres. Together, the six areas total 9,295 acres. The recommendations for wilderness under alternative 2-modified have a low potential to conflict with other management goals and multiple uses; they contain no designated mountain bike trails or motorized trails and generally, their boundaries are easily identifiable based on existing natural features, locatable human-made features, or existing surveyed lines.

I conclude that, on these 9,295 acres, the benefits to be obtained by recommending these areas to Congress for wilderness designation and managing them as Recommended Wilderness Management Areas (RWMA) outweigh any associated limitations on management, such as community wildfire protection, ecosystem restoration, wildlife habitat management, or provision of forest products. This alternative strikes a balance between protecting wilderness values and the need to provide for multiple uses and retain management flexibility. Components in the final LMP protect these areas and maintain the ecological and social characteristics that provide the basis for each area's suitability for wilderness recommendation. Plan direction for recommended wilderness identifies suitable uses and provides direction to allow for some activities needed for the administration of the area and for ecological restoration of at-risk species.

The Llano RWMA was not carried forward, based on the difficulty of locating the boundary on the ground. The boundary would need to be fenced or signed to discourage non-conforming uses; however, the flat topography and nearby open roads would make management and enforcement difficult. It would, therefore, be very difficult to prevent impacts from human development and activity occurring outside the RWMA from affecting the solitude and unconfined values inside the RWMA.

The Rudy RWMA was included from alternative 4. Although the Rudy RWMA was excluded from alternative 2 because it is bordered by private land directly to the north and it was previously open to over-snow motorized use, it has been included in the final LMP. Active management, including fire management, would not be likely even to protect the adjacent private land because of the steep slopes above. Despite being open to motorized use, most of the area is steep and not accessible by vehicle. It is possible to ride a snowmobile out-and-back along the ridge separating this area from the Cruces Basin Wilderness, but once riders are on the ridge, it is difficult to prevent intrusions into the existing wilderness. Thus, the reasons for excluding the area from alternative 2 are not problematic from a management perspective and limiting snowmobile use to the NFS Road 87A corridor in this area can help limit intrusions into the

existing wilderness. The addition would expand the Cruces Basin Wilderness along the southern bank of the Rio de los Pinos.

The Esther Garcia RWMA, previously named Rito Claro, was renamed in honor of former Questa mayor, Esther Garcia, who passed away in 2020. Garcia was present at the signing of the declaration to designate the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness, about which she said, “These beautiful mountains...truly are the treasures of the Village of Questa, for the people of the Village of Questa. I want to preserve these areas for the future generations.” Garcia was an advocate for her community and the importance of land and water; she was president of the San Antonio del Rio Colorado Land Grant, an acequia commissioner, and an organizer and local leader throughout the Carson’s plan revision.

This recommendation is a preliminary administrative recommendation, which will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President of the United States. The Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on the wilderness designation. Plan implementation is not dependent upon subsequent action related to recommendations for wilderness designation.

### Wild and Scenic Rivers

A total of 217 rivers on the Carson NF were evaluated for their eligibility to be included in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System (Public Law 90-542). Of those 217 rivers, the Carson had previously evaluated 125 for eligibility between 1994 and 2001. The previous evaluation process, however, did not fulfill the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule directives (FSH 1909.12, Chapter 80). For example, (1) the previous evaluation did not involve the public in the evaluation of rivers; (2) the region of comparison was not explicitly defined; (3) some outstandingly remarkable values and eligibilities were identified on private lands; (4) some descriptions of outstandingly remarkable values were not specific; and (5) the effect of existing diversions such as acequias and community water supplies on free flow was not adequately considered. Since not all rivers were evaluated and previous evaluations were insufficient under the 2012 Planning Rule, I decided to reevaluate all 217 rivers using consistent criteria and a single process.

The evaluation of wild and scenic river eligibility is the same for all alternatives. Eligibility is based on whether a river is free-flowing and has at least one outstandingly remarkable value; these findings are based on existing conditions. Eligibility is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review through a suitability study and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, Secretary of Agriculture, or the President of the United States prior to designation. Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on designation of rivers as part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

The Carson NF released evaluation criteria, inventory, eligibility, and classification findings multiple times during the plan revision process, both prior to and during the formal comment period. We used input from the public, stakeholder groups, and local governments to refine the inventory, clarify eligibility criteria and the evaluation process, inform outstandingly remarkable value findings, and help determine eligibility. Several evaluation revisions were made available for public review to ensure that the public had an opportunity to provide input on those changes.

I have assigned each eligible wild and scenic river, or river segment, one or more preliminary classifications: wild, scenic, or recreational. Approximately 79.7 miles are classified as wild, 28.6 miles as scenic, and 62.1 miles as recreational (final LMP, table 7). These preliminary classifications are based on the condition of the river and the development level of adjacent lands at the time of the study and dictate the level of necessary interim protection measures. The final

LMP includes components for eligible wild and scenic rivers that maintain free flow, outstandingly remarkable values, and classification until a determination of the river's suitability is made.

### Proposed Research Natural Areas

Thirteen areas were assessed for proposal as research natural areas. We identified candidate areas based on the existing ecological distribution of research natural areas across major climate gradients, biophysical settings and, to some extent, across life zones. The geographic distribution of existing research natural areas across ecological sections and subsections of the Forest Service's southwestern region was also considered; previously proposed research natural areas were not proposed in the final LMP unless they fill a need as defined by the regional assessment.

I selected four areas as candidates for designation by the regional forester and research station director. Three of these areas (Clayton Pass [356 acres], Little Costilla Peak [440 acres], and La Cueva [742 acres]) are similar to research natural areas proposed under the 1986 Plan, with minor boundary adjustments to improve their manageability. The fourth proposed area (Yeso [519 acres]) is similar in size and vegetation type to the previously proposed Comanche Canyon area, but, unlike the Comanche Canyon area, is not within a grazing allotment. These candidates represent ecosystem types that are regionally underrepresented, areas without roads—especially inventoried roadless areas, and areas with limited grazing or other evidence of human impacts.

### Monitoring Program

I recognize the importance of applying an adaptive management approach to plan implementation and of tracking our progress over time. Therefore, the final LMP includes a robust monitoring program (36 CFR 219.7 (c)(2)(x) and 219.12) designed to test our assumptions, track relevant conditions over time, measure our management effectiveness, and evaluate the effects of our management practices. The plan monitoring program (chapter 4 of the final LMP) addresses what I believe to be the most critical components of informed management of the Carson's resources that are within the financial and technical capability of the agency. Every monitoring question links to one or more desired conditions, objectives, standards, or guidelines; however, not every plan component has a corresponding monitoring question.

This monitoring program is not intended to encompass all monitoring, inventorying, and data-gathering activities undertaken on the Carson, nor is it intended to limit monitoring to just the questions and indicators listed in chapter 4 of the final LMP. Consideration and coordination with broader-scale monitoring strategies adopted by the regional forester, multi-party monitoring collaboration, and cooperation with state and private forestry as well as research and development, as required by 36 CFR 219.12(a), will increase efficiencies and help track changing conditions beyond national forest boundaries to improve the effectiveness of the plan monitoring program. In addition, project and activity monitoring may be used to gather information for the plan monitoring program where it provides relevant information to inform adaptive management.

The monitoring questions in chapter 4 of the final LMP address each of eight required monitoring categories (36 CFR 219.12(a)(4)). Within these categories, key ecological characteristics in the plan area and objectives from the final LMP focus available monitoring resources. This includes improving watershed function and wildlife habitat, particularly aquatic and riparian habitats. It also includes fire and fuels management and the restoration of frequent fire forests. In addition, the monitoring program addresses key socioeconomic metrics including visitor use and satisfaction, recreation facilities maintenance, contributions to local economies, and partnership capacity.

Details of the plan monitoring program—including monitoring and analysis protocols, data collection schedules, responsible parties, and data management—will be part of a separate monitoring guide. Because data sources and frequency of updates are likely to change over the life of the LMP, the specific monitoring process is more appropriately included in a monitoring guide, instead of in the final LMP itself. The Carson currently works with other Federal, State, and local agencies and stakeholder groups to complete monitoring and expects those partnerships to continue and develop further in the future. The specific roles of partners in monitoring will be developed in more detail in the monitoring guide.

A biennial monitoring evaluation report will be prepared to indicate whether a change to the land management plan, management activities, or monitoring program may be needed or whether a new assessment may be warranted, based on new information. This report will be made available to inform the public and to encourage feedback on the methods used and how the forest is doing in meeting plan goals. While monitoring results are to be reported biennially, not all monitoring questions are expected to be evaluated that frequently.

## Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered five other alternatives, which are discussed below. Alternative 2-modified is the environmentally preferred alternative. The selected alternative, alternative 2-modified, is similar to alternative 2 with several modifications made in response to public comments on the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement. It adopts elements of the original proposed action (alternative 2), the no-action alternative (alternative 1), and three additional alternatives described below.

Alternatives to the proposed action must meet the purpose and need for change and address one or more of identified significant issues. I considered only those alternatives that met both the purpose and need for change and created a reasonable range of outputs, costs, management requirements, and effects from which to choose. A more detailed comparison of these alternatives as well as other alternatives that were considered but eliminated from detailed study because they did not meet these criteria can be found in chapter 2 of the final environmental impact statement. All alternatives adhere to the principles of multiple use and the sustained yield of goods and services required by law (36 CFR § 219.10 (b)); elements common to all alternatives are:

- Managing for designated areas,
- Managing for a common list of species of conservation concern,
- Considering eligible wild and scenic river (WSRs) segments and plan components developed to maintain their outstandingly remarkable values, and
- Developing a forestwide plan decision with desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, timber suitability, and monitoring sections.

The primary difference among alternatives is in the allocation of acres by management area and the rate of progress toward certain desired conditions as described by objectives. The five alternatives analyzed in detail are: alternative 1 (the 1986 Plan); alternative 2 (proposed revised plan), which provides for restoration and diverse ecosystem services; alternative 3, which maximizes access and commodity utilization; alternative 4, which maximizes natural processes; and alternative 5, which maximizes wilderness protection.

**Alternative 1 – No Action (1986 Plan)**

Alternative 1, the no-action alternative, reflects current management practices under the 1986 Plan, as amended and implemented. It provides the basis for comparing the other alternatives to current management and current levels of output.

Alternative 1 emphasizes producing timber products; managing quality habitat for Mexican spotted owl and northern goshawk and its prey; providing recreation opportunities to meet demand; and range management. The current plan has no articulated desired conditions for wetlands, seeps, and springs, or some riparian ecosystems. It does not recognize traditional communities or uses that occur on the Carson and does not reflect changes in economic, social, and ecological conditions; new policies and priorities; or new information based on monitoring and scientific research. Management is organized using the existing 21 management areas that cover the entire forest. Since this alternative reflects no change in current management, no additional wilderness is recommended. This alternative provides a baseline for estimating the effects of the other alternatives.

**Alternative 2 – Restoration to Provide Diverse Ecosystem Services (Draft Land Management Plan)**

Alternative 2 is the original proposed land management plan; it was developed iteratively to respond to key issues identified with the interdisciplinary team and the public to address needs to change. This alternative provides for restoration and diverse ecosystem services, i.e., benefits that society obtains from the ecosystem. Alternative 2 addresses the need to better recognize and enhance the Carson's role in contributing to local economies, including service-based sectors such as recreation and tourism, timber and forest products, livestock grazing, and other multiple-use related activities and products. It addresses the need for restoration of fire regimes, protection of communities, and the reintroduction of natural fire. Like all the action alternatives, alternative 2 also includes plan direction that allows for adaptive management to address possible ecological and climatic changes that have the potential to alter the availability of national forest ecosystem services.

Alternative 2 uses a mix of mechanical treatments and wildfire, both prescribed and naturally-ignited, to move toward vegetative desired conditions; naturally-occurring fires would be allowed to perform their natural ecological role. Restoration treatments under this alternative would benefit wildlife by improving habitat. The inclusion of the San Antonio and Valle Vidal Management Areas highlights the value of wildlife habitat in those areas. This alternative includes a mix of developed and dispersed recreation similar to that currently taking place on the forest. Maintenance of infrastructure, such as developed recreation sites and trails, would contribute toward sustainable recreation by better meeting the needs of visitors and reducing ecological damage. Increasing recreation infrastructure would be unlikely under this alternative, which would decommission or eliminate unneeded forest roads and trails, while maintaining access for the public.

Alternative 2 identifies the Jicarilla Natural Gas Management Area, the Grasslands Maintenance Management Area, and the Developed Winter and Summer Resort Management Area, which support natural gas production, forage availability, and developed recreation, respectively. Increased mechanical treatment and support of a restoration economy create opportunities for small businesses and would make fuelwood more available. Improved rangeland conditions would improve forage for livestock grazing and wildlife. This alternative also puts a greater emphasis on traditional communities and uses, recognizing the forest management's contribution to meeting cultural, social, and economic needs. Sections of the final LMP define northern New Mexico traditional communities and uses and desired conditions and guidelines recognize and

value their significance. Availability of traditionally used products is protected. Recommended wilderness areas (9,189 acres) are included where they would not limit ecosystem restoration and opportunities for traditional and cultural uses and would not impact the management of a watershed for downstream communities.

### **Alternative 3 – Maximize Access and Commodity Utilization**

Alternative 3 responds to requests for more motorized recreation opportunities, enhanced mountain bike trails, and increased opportunities for fuelwood and timber production to support local economic development. This alternative also responds to public comments from those who want no additional wilderness on the Carson National Forest. Alternative 3 increases the rate of mechanical treatment to move toward vegetative desired conditions and produce more forest products, particularly commercial timber. While naturally occurring fires are generally encouraged to perform their natural ecological role, they are restricted where they would interfere with human uses such as timber production or recreation.

Alternative 3 recommends no areas for wilderness designation. The Valle Vidal and San Antonio Management Areas, which provide wildlife habitat, are eliminated. Habitat in those areas would instead be managed using forestwide plan components. Other plan components for wildlife habitat and connectivity are the same as in alternative 2. Alternative 3 also emphasizes traditional communities and uses. While no new roads or motorized trails would be created, alternative 3 would allow the most potential for expanded motorized access for traditional and cultural uses. This could also impact cultural resources and sacred sites due to increased visitation.

Alternative 3 deemphasizes road decommissioning and instead looks for opportunities to convert non-system routes to off-highway vehicle, mountain bike trails, or both. New road construction can occur without requiring the decommissioning of existing roads. The off-highway vehicle management area would provide off-highway vehicle opportunities in rugged terrain of the Camino Real Ranger District. Human uses are accommodated by maintaining roads instead of decommissioning them. More motorized access would increase opportunities to collect fuelwood and other products. Increased levels of mechanical treatment significantly increase levels of commercial timber harvest and would create additional opportunities for small businesses and the local timber industry. The Jicarilla Natural Gas Management Area and Grasslands Maintenance Management Area are unchanged from alternative 2. The larger Developed Winter and Summer Resort Management Area would expand opportunities for the recreation industry.

### **Alternative 4 – Maximize Natural Processes**

Alternative 4 was developed to respond to requests to reduce the amount of mechanical treatment and motorized access. It relies more heavily on fire to move vegetation toward desired conditions than other alternatives. It focuses on road decommissioning and obliteration of unneeded and temporary roads. Alternative 4 responds to requests to reduce timber removal and provide more primitive, nonmotorized opportunities on the Carson by recommending roughly 45,473 acres of wilderness.

Like alternative 2, Valle Vidal is identified as a management area, but with added restrictions, including no timber harvesting. This alternative also expands the San Antonio Management Area proposed in alternative 2 to include Cebolla Mesa on the east side of the Rio Grande gorge. This management area includes objectives for wildlife connectivity, standards for seasonal road closures, and restrictions on vegetation management. The Wetland Jewels Management Area adds restrictions to, and focuses restoration in, 10 significant wetland complexes. This management area includes objectives that prioritize work around wetlands and prohibits new roads, military ground operations, new utility infrastructure, and the establishment of new mineral rights.

Alternative 4 also includes the Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Management Area to identify areas on the Carson NF where restoration of Rio Grande cutthroat trout habitat should be emphasized.

Though it closes no roads, alternative 4 decreases opportunities for motorized access overall, both winter over-snow and other motor vehicle use. It encourages road decommissioning, obliteration, and naturalization of Forest Service system and non-system roads, as well as temporary roads. Road decommissioning in this alternative could reduce the potential for future motorized access for traditional and cultural uses. However, with decreased motorized access comes an increase in nonmotorized opportunities, which could increase privacy and confidentiality for cultural activities. This alternative would provide the most primitive and semiprimitive recreation opportunities.

Alternative 4 includes no grassland maintenance management areas; this would limit forage availability for livestock grazing and wildlife, mostly in the southern portion of the westside districts. There would be much less commercial timber production, but opportunities to collect other forest products would still exist—though the extent of those opportunities may be more constrained due to limitations on future road creation and management area restrictions. Recommended wilderness areas (45,473 acres) were selected where wilderness protection would limit commercial timber harvest or motorized use or both. They include areas with wilderness characteristics that are not part of an inventoried roadless area where timber harvest is, therefore, not otherwise prohibited or are part of an inventoried roadless area where motorized use currently occurs.

### **Alternative 5 – Maximize Wilderness Protection**

Alternative 5 was developed to respond to requests that all areas on the Carson National Forest evaluated as having wilderness characteristics be recommended as wilderness. Since not all of the evaluated areas fit into the other alternative themes, this alternative responds to the request that at least one alternative analyze 100 percent of areas that have wilderness characteristics.

Alternative 5 is the same as alternative 2, except for its emphasis on wilderness opportunities of solitude; apparent naturalness; and nonmotorized, nonmechanized recreation in a primitive setting. This alternative includes the same forestwide plan components, designated areas, and management areas identified in alternative 2, but recommends as wilderness all 13 areas (67,996 acres) identified as having wilderness characteristics.

All objectives are the same as in alternative 2. Fire and fuels management that may otherwise occur in some areas recommended for wilderness, however, would not occur. Recommended wilderness would prevent habitat management in some areas, but could simultaneously also reduce wildlife disturbance by humans. No roads or motorized trails would be closed, but snowmobiling would be limited in several currently popular areas. There would be more nonmotorized recreational opportunities than under alternative 2, but not as much primitive recreation as in alternative 4.

### **Alternative 2-modified – Preferred Alternative**

This alternative is similar to alternative 2, with some modifications made in response to public comments on the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement; it is the alternative that I select for the final LMP. In addition to clarifying and reorganizing some plan direction, several substantive modifications have been made to alternative 2:

1. Elements of the Wetlands Jewels Management Area were adopted. This includes the addition of installing erosion control treatments to FW-WSW-O-1, which clarifies the



- types of treatments that are intended for improving watershed function. Also, “other community priorities” were added to FW-WSW-O-1 and FW-WSW-RMZ-O-1, to provide flexibility to achieve those objectives outside of priority watersheds and respond to community-supported project opportunities.
2. The prohibition on new infrastructure within 300 feet of water features was narrowed to include only new or rerouted roads (FW-WSW-G-2). Other forms of infrastructure may be outside the Forest Service’s authority to manage, such as in the case of owners of water rights developing those rights. There may also be cases where the national forest may want to install new infrastructure, such as bridges, fish barriers, fishing piers, etc.; in these instances, impacts to water resources and the adjacent riparian area are better addressed by plan components in the Watersheds and Water section and its subsections, rather than through a blanket prohibition.
  3. The default location of riparian management zones of 100 feet around perennial water was expanded to include intermittent and ephemeral channels (FW-WSW-RMZ-G-2). This is consistent with FSH 1909.12 sec 23.11e(ii) and the intent for riparian management zones to include all areas that provide riparian and aquatic ecosystem function.
  4. A guideline was added limiting activities in at-risk species’ core stream habitat during their spawning and incubation seasons (FW-WSW-RMZ-STM-G-5).
  5. The application of the recreation opportunity spectrum was clarified in the recreation section introduction, particularly the difference between desired summer and desired winter recreation opportunities. The map of desired recreation opportunity spectrum classes was moved from the plan appendix into a report that describes its development based on alternative 2-modified plan components.
  6. Recognition of public demand for additional trails was added in several places, including FW-REC-DC-5.
  7. The application of the scenery management system was clarified in the scenery section introduction, particularly the difference between scenic classes and scenic integrity objectives. The map of scenic classes was moved to a scenic integrity objective report describing the process for developing scenic integrity objectives based on alternative 2-modified plan components. The map of scenic integrity objectives is also included in the report.
  8. A prohibition on new motorized trail construction was added in the Valle Vidal Management Area (MA-VVMA-S-5). The prohibition represents no change from previous management (alternative 1) and was analyzed under alternative 4.
  9. The limitation on the number of overnight parking areas in the Valle Vidal Management Area was removed.
  10. Limitations on the feeding, tethering, and holding of horses in the Valle Vidal Management Area was removed.
  11. The prohibition on for-profit commercial facilities in the Valle Vidal Management Area was removed.
  12. A one-half-mile corridor was added to Figure A-5 along the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail to depict the area within which several national trail plan components apply (DA-NTRL-DC-7; DA-NTRL-S-3 and -4; DA-NTRL-G-5, -7, and -11).

13. The Llano Recommended Wilderness Management Area was eliminated, and the Rudy Recommended Wilderness Management Area added. Figure A-7 was updated to reflect those changes.
14. The Rito Claro Recommended Wilderness Management Area was renamed in honor of Esther Garcia.
15. The Potential Developed Recreation Site Management Area around the Sipapu Ski Area was added. This represents no change from previous management (alternative 1) and protects the value of the area for future recreational development, but makes no assumptions about what future development might include. The management area's location was added to Figure A-9.
16. Proposed research natural areas were reevaluated (environmental impact statement, volume 3, appendix I); a section guiding their management (MA-PRNA) and a map showing their locations (Figure A-14) were added.
17. Monitoring questions were added to track climatic trends; population data and habitat conditions for Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep; recreational uses; and partnership contributions.

## **Environmentally Preferable Alternative**

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations require agencies to specify the alternative or alternatives considered to be environmentally preferable (40 CFR 1505.2(b)). Forest Service NEPA regulations define an environmentally preferable alternative as: “the alternative that best promotes the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA’s section 101. Ordinarily, the environmentally preferable alternative is that which causes the least harm to the biological and physical environment; it also is the alternative which best protects and preserves historic, cultural, and natural resources” (36 CFR §220.3). Under alternative 2-modified, all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm have been adopted as part of the alternative’s desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and management strategies. Through the monitoring plan, the effectiveness of minimizing environmental impacts will be reviewed periodically as required by the 2012 Planning Rule.

I find, based upon the laws and regulations guiding National Forest System management, that alternative 2-modified is the environmentally preferred alternative. When compared to alternatives 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, it best contributes to, and moves the Carson National Forest toward, ecological, social, and economic sustainability, which will benefit future generations (see the Decision and Rationale section above). The project record contains additional documentation on how section 101 of NEPA was considered and evaluated.

## **Best Available Scientific Information**

The 2012 Planning Rule (§219.6(a)(3) and 219.14(a)(4)) requires the responsible official to document how the best available scientific information was used to inform the assessment, the plan decision, and the monitoring program. Such documentation must identify what information was determined to be the best available scientific information, explain the basis for that determination, and explain how the information was applied to the issues considered.

The Carson’s Assessment Report of Ecological, Social, and Economic Conditions, Trends, and Sustainability includes an analysis and summary of the best available scientific information and provides the foundation from which plan components for the proposed action were developed. In

developing the final LMP and related environmental analyses, specialists used many resources such as peer-reviewed and technical literature, databases and data management systems, modeling tools and approaches, information obtained through participation and attendance at scientific conferences, local information workshops and collaborations, and information received during public participation periods for related planning activities. State and local governments, other Federal agencies, and federally recognized tribes and other interested parties contributed science that was considered and incorporated as appropriate. The best available scientific information includes the publications listed in the literature cited sections of the assessment and final environmental impact statement, as well as others used in supporting documents included in the project record.

## **Findings Required by Other Laws**

The Forest Service manages the Carson in conformance with many laws and regulations. I have considered the statutes specific to individual resources as described in the FEIS and I find that this decision meets our obligations to the current statutory duties of the Forest Service. Following are summaries of how the final land management plan addresses the relevant laws and regulations.

### **American Indian Religious Freedom Act**

Federal agencies must make a good faith effort to understand how American Indian religious practices may conflict with other national forest uses and consider any adverse impacts on these practices in their decision making. The Carson consults with nineteen federally recognized tribes with an interest in and historic ties to lands managed by the national forest.

We anticipate no effects on American Indian social, economic, or subsistence rights as a result of the land management plan revision. Regardless of which alternative is chosen, the Forest Service is required to consult with federally recognized tribes when management activities may impact treaty rights and/or cultural sites and cultural use. Desired conditions for areas of tribal importance for all action alternatives of the plan are:

1. Healthy, sustainable, and harvestable populations of culturally significant flora and fauna are available to ensure the rights reserved by Native Americans.
2. Tribal members' access to the national forest to exercise treaty rights is recognized and accommodated. Opportunities exist to practice traditional, cultural, and religious activities, such as plant gathering and ceremonial activities, which are essential to sustaining their way of life, cultural integrity, social cohesion, and economic wellbeing.

I therefore find the final LMP to be compliant with the American Indian Religious Freedom Act.

### **Archaeological Resources Protection Act**

This act provides protection to archaeological resources found on public lands and Indian lands of the United States. The legislation provides civil and criminal penalties for those who remove or damage archaeological resources in violation of the prohibitions contained in the act. The act prohibits the removal of archaeological resources on public lands or Indian lands without first obtaining a permit from the affected Federal Land Manager or Tribe and requires federal agencies to develop plans to survey lands under their management to determine the nature and extent of archaeological and cultural resources.

The land management plan is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities. Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and 36 CFR 800 regulations requires assessments to document the presence of historic properties within the area of potential effect for any site-specific activities and also to meet the intent of this act. The Forest will also continue to consult with tribes during site-specific management activities that may impact cultural sites and cultural use. The plan components in the land management plan include provisions that take into consideration American Indian rights and interests and cultural resources. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with this Act.

## Clean Air Act

In accordance with the Clean Air Act of 1990 and the Organic Administration Act of 1897, the Forest Service has the responsibility to protect the air, land, and water resources from the impacts of air pollution produced within the boundaries of NFS lands and to work with states to protect air resources from degradation associated with the impacts of air pollution emitted outside of NFS lands. The final environmental impact statement (chapter 3, air resources sections) discloses potential impacts to air resources from program activities that are approved by the final LMP, including the use of prescribed fire.

At the scale of a programmatic plan such as this, the overall level of activities proposed under this decision is not anticipated to degrade air quality or violate State implementation plans; this finding is supported by information in the final environmental impact statement. Conformity determinations and more detailed air quality impact analyses will be made at subsequent levels of planning and analysis when emissions can be more accurately quantified and reasonably forecasted and local impacts assessed.

## Clean Water Act

Implementation of this final LMP is expected to maintain and improve water quality and satisfy all State water quality requirements. I base this finding on the extensive standards and guidelines contained in the final LMP, the application of State-approved best management practices specifically designed to protect water quality, and the discussion of water quality and beneficial uses contained in chapter 3 of the final environmental impact statement. Examples include management direction protecting riparian management zones and the requirements for road design. Additionally, project-level analysis for subsequent activities under the final LMP will be required to demonstrate compliance with the Clean Water Act and State water quality standards.

## Endangered Species Act

The purpose of the Endangered Species Act is to provide a means whereby the ecosystems upon which endangered and threatened species depend may be conserved and to provide for the conservation of endangered and threatened species. Section 7(a)(1) of the Act requires Federal agencies to carry out programs for the conservation of listed species. In addition, the Endangered Species Act requires Federal agencies to ensure that any agency action does not jeopardize the continued existence of the species (section 7(a)(2)). The Act also requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Forest Service, respectively, to base the biological opinion and subsequent agency action on the use of best scientific and commercially available data.<sup>1</sup> In accordance with section 7(c) of the Act, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identified the federally listed threatened and endangered species, species proposed for Federal listing, and candidate species to be considered for further evaluation throughout the land management plan revision process. In April

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<sup>1</sup> 16 U.S.C. 1536(a)(2)

2019, the Carson NF received the finalized list of proposed, threatened, endangered, and candidate species that would be addressed in the biological assessment (BA).

In accordance with Section 7(c) of the Act, the BA was prepared to assess the effects of implementing the Carson final LMP on nine federally listed threatened and endangered species and designated critical habitat known or likely to occur on the Carson. According to USDI Fish and Wildlife Service (2019b), these listed species include Jemez Mountain salamander, piping plover, least tern, Mexican spotted owl, southwestern willow flycatcher, western yellow-billed cuckoo, black-footed ferret, Canada lynx, and New Mexico meadow jumping mouse. There are no candidate species at this time for the Carson NF (USDI FWS 2019b).

The proposed action *may affect* and is *likely to adversely affect* Mexican spotted owl. The proposed action *may affect* and is *not likely to adversely affect* southwestern willow flycatcher and Canada lynx. The proposed action *may affect*, but is *not likely to adversely affect*, designated critical habitat for the Mexican spotted owl and southwestern willow flycatcher. There is no proposed or designated critical habitat on the Carson for Canada lynx.

The planning team determined that the following species were not likely to occur on the Carson NF nor be impacted by Forest Service actions addressed in the proposed land management plan: black-footed ferret, New Mexico meadow jumping mouse, western yellow-billed cuckoo, Jemez Mountain salamander, least tern, and piping plover. Therefore, *no effect determinations* were made for black-footed ferret, New Mexico meadow jumping mouse, western yellow-billed cuckoo, Jemez Mountain salamander, least tern, and piping plover.

A biological opinion will be issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding effects of implementing the final LMP on the threatened, endangered, and candidate species present on or near the national forest. As of release of this draft record of decision, we are expecting a final biological opinion that will determine that adopting the final LMP would not jeopardize the continued existence of federally listed species and would not adversely modify designated critical habitat.

The final LMP includes desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and objectives and provides broad management direction that meets our responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act Section 7(a)(1). These plan components comply with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act and the associated recovery plan for each federally listed species. For these reasons, I find this land management plan to be in compliance with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The 2012 Planning Rule defines a species of conservation concern as: a species, other than a federally listed threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate species, that is known to occur in the plan area and for which the regional forester has determined that the best available scientific information indicates substantial concern about the species' capability to persist over the long term in the plan area (36 CFR § 219.9; 77 FR 21169). The Carson NF followed the guidance provided in the proposed directives for the 2012 Planning Rule (Forest Service Handbook [FSH] 1909.12 – Land Management Planning, Chapter 10) in developing its species of conservation concern list. More information about the species of conservation concern selection process can be found on the Carson's Species of Conservation Concern webpage.

## Environmental Justice

Executive Order 12898 directs Federal agencies to focus attention on human health and the environmental conditions of minority and low-income communities. The purpose of this executive order is to identify and address, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse

human health or environmental effects on minority and low-income populations. The primary environmental justice communities present around the Carson NF are Hispanic/Latino, Native American communities, persons with disabilities, and low-income communities of all races and ethnicities. The following four counties were identified as environmental justice counties in the Assessment: Rio Arriba, Taos, Mora, and Colfax counties; each meets the definition of an environmental justice county under the ‘minority population’ and ‘low-income population’ tests. All alternatives considered in the FEIS would contribute to social and economic sustainability by providing benefits to environmental justice communities, improving the quality of life, and providing opportunities for income and jobs. The Carson would continue to provide for traditional, cultural, and spiritual values that are of particular interest to Native American tribes. No populations in the plan area would experience significant adverse human health impacts or environmental effects due to management actions proposed under any of the alternatives considered. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is in compliance with this executive order.

### **Executive Order 13084 (Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments)**

The Carson National Forest engaged three federally recognized tribes with land adjacent to the national forest (Taos Pueblo, Picuris Pueblo, and Jicarilla Apache Nation) who participated as cooperating agencies helping to develop the final LMP alongside other government partners. They were actively involved to ensure tribal perspectives were included as part of the revised plan. The Carson held a tribal roundtable session in April 2017, inviting 16 federally recognized tribes who expressed interest in the cultural, spiritual, and historical importance of the NFS lands. The roundtable sessions allowed the tribal partners to talk with forest leadership about what they wanted from forest management, what things they thought worked well, and how we could go forward collectively as we develop and implement the new plan. The Carson also participated in two regional tribal roundtables held by the Southwest Regional Forester. These discussions brought together all the national forests in New Mexico to discuss, learn, and collaborate with federally recognized tribes around plan revision.

### **Federal Land Policy and Management Act**

This act allows the granting of easements across NFS lands. The final LMP is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities; it does not create, authorize, or execute any site-specific activity, although it does provide for the consideration of granting easements and rights-of-way. Forest-wide desired conditions include strategic easements to provide reasonable public and administrative access. Therefore, the final LMP is consistent with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act.

### **Invasive Species**

Executive Order 13751 (amends Executive Order 3112) directs Federal agencies to prevent the introduction of invasive species; to detect, respond rapidly to, and control populations of such species in a cost-effective and environmentally-sound manner; to monitor invasive species populations accurately and reliably; to provide for restoration of native species and habitat conditions in ecosystems that have been invaded; to conduct research on invasive species and develop technologies to prevent introduction; and to promote public education on invasive species and the means to address them. All these actions are subject to the availability of appropriations. Forest Service Manual 2900, Invasive Species Management, sets forth Forest Service policy, responsibilities, and direction for the prevention, detection, control, and

restoration of effects from aquatic and terrestrial invasive species (including vertebrates, invertebrates, plants, and pathogens).

The final LMP is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities; it does not create, authorize, or execute any ground-disturbing activity, although it does provide for the consideration of certain types of activities that may have the potential to affect the dispersal of invasive species. The final LMP includes forestwide desired conditions, objectives, and guidelines that stress the need to treat new invaders and use best management practices that limit the introduction and spread of invasive species due to management activities. In addition, other direction serves to protect watershed, soil, riparian, and aquatic conditions in ways that will reduce management-caused disturbances that otherwise might increase weed spread or introduction. The monitoring program includes indicators associated with invasive plant species and the effectiveness of treatments. Therefore, the final LMP is fully compliant with Executive Order 13112.

### **Migratory Bird Treaty Act**

Executive Order 13186, Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds, was in furtherance of the purposes of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Acts, Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, Endangered Species Act, and NEPA. This order requires including effects of Federal actions on migratory birds as part of the environmental analysis process. On December 8, 2008, the Forest Service signed a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to complement the executive order and the Forest Service agreed to (a) incorporate migratory bird habitat and population objectives and recommendations into the agency planning process, in cooperation with other governments, State and Federal agencies, and non-Federal partners, and (b) strive to protect, restore, enhance and manage the habitat of migratory birds and prevent the further loss or degradation of remaining habitats on NFS lands.

### **Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act**

Consistent with the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 (16 U.S.C. 528-531), the Forest Service manages NFS lands to sustain the multiple use of its renewable resources in perpetuity, while maintaining the long-term health and productivity of the land. Resources are managed through a combination of approaches and concepts for the benefit of human communities and natural resources. As demonstrated in the final environmental impact statement and as required by the act, the final LMP guides sustainable, integrated management of the resources of the Carson NF in the context of the broader landscape, giving due consideration to the relative values of the various resources in particular areas. Therefore, the final LMP is fully compliant with the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act.

### **National Environmental Policy Act**

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires public involvement and consideration of potential environmental and social effects of implementing Federal actions. The environmental analysis and public involvement process outlined in the final environmental impact statement complies with the major elements of the requirements the Council on Environmental Quality set forth for implementing the NEPA (40 CFR 1500-1508). These include: (1) considering a range of reasonable alternatives; (2) disclosing cumulative effects; (3) using best available scientific information; (4) considering long-term and short-term effects; and (5) disclosing unavoidable adverse effects.

The Carson considered a range of alternatives in the final environmental impact statement and compiled a comprehensive record of the effects relevant to the alternatives (long-term, short-term, and cumulative), considering best available scientific information. The final LMP adopts all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental harm; such means include provisions for providing the ecological conditions needed to support biological diversity and standards and guidelines to mitigate adverse environmental effects that may result from implementing various management practices. The final LMP includes monitoring requirements and an adaptive management approach, assuring necessary adjustments over time.

The final LMP does not represent an irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources; it is a programmatic-level planning effort and does not directly authorize any ground-disturbing activities or projects. Future ground-disturbing activities and projects will be consistent with the final LMP and subject to additional site-specific public involvement, environmental analysis, and pre-decisional review processes. Therefore, the final LMP is fully compliant with the National Environmental Policy Act and the Council on Environmental Quality implementation regulations.

## National Forest Management Act

The National Forest Management Act requires the development, maintenance, amendment, and revision of land management plans for each unit of the National Forest System. These plans help create a dynamic management system so that an interdisciplinary approach to achieve integrated consideration of physical, biological, economic, and other sciences is applied to all future actions on the unit (16 U.S.C. 1604(b), (f), (g), and (h)). Under the act, the Forest Service is to ensure coordination of the multiple uses and sustained yield of products and services of the National Forest System (16 U.S.C. 1604(e)(1)).

The National Forest Management Act requires the Secretary of Agriculture to promulgate regulations for developing and maintaining land management plans. Accordingly, on April 9, 2012, the Department of Agriculture issued a Final Planning Rule for National Forest System land management planning (2012 Planning Rule; 36 CFR Part 219; refer to the Federal Register at 77 FR 68, pages 21162-21276). The final LMP is fully compliant with, and fulfills the requirements of, the National Forest Management Act.

## National Historic Preservation Act

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires each Federal agency to take into account the effects of its actions on historic properties, prior to approving expenditure of Federal funds on an undertaking or prior to issuing any license; Section 110 of the Act outlines the Federal agency responsibility to establish and maintain a preservation program for the identification, evaluation, and nomination to the National Register of Historic Places and protection of historic properties. The final LMP is a programmatic action and authorizes no site-specific projects. Projects undertaken in response to direction in the final LMP will fully comply with the laws and regulations that ensure protection of heritage resources. The final LMP contains direction for heritage resource management, including direction to integrate such management with other resources management activities. Because the final LMP does not authorize ground-disturbing activities, consultation with the New Mexico Historic Preservation Office under the National Historic Preservation Act is not required per the 2003 Programmatic Agreement between the Forest Service's Southwestern Region and the State Historic Preservation Officers of Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. It is my determination that the final LMP complies with the National Historic Preservation Act and other statutes that pertain to the protection of cultural resources.



## Roadless Area Conservation Rule

Management direction for inventoried roadless areas is compliant with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (36 CFR 294 Subpart B, published at 66 FR 3244-3273). The 2001 Roadless Conservation Rule includes a prohibition on road construction and road reconstruction in inventoried roadless areas and prohibitions on timber cutting, sale, or removal except in certain circumstances. The land management plan is a programmatic-level planning effort and does not directly authorize any road construction, reconstruction, or timber removal. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with the Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

## Travel Management Rule

The final rule for Travel Management; Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use (commonly referred to as the 2005 Travel Management Rule) implements provisions of Executive Orders 11644 and 11989 to address the use of off-road motor vehicles on Federal lands. Regulations implementing this rule are found at 36 CFR Part 212. The portion of the rule pertaining to motor vehicle use is subpart B; the portion of the rule pertaining to motorized over-snow vehicle use is subpart C, which was updated in January 2015. The executive order's "minimization criteria" specify:

In designating National Forest System trails and areas on National Forest System lands, the responsible official shall consider effects on the following with the objective of minimizing:

1. Damage to soil, watershed, vegetation, and other forest resources;
2. Harassment of wildlife and significant disruption of wildlife habitats;
3. Conflicts between motor vehicle use and existing or proposed recreation uses of National Forest System lands or neighboring Federal lands; and
4. Conflicts among different classes of motor vehicle uses of National Forest System lands or neighboring Federal lands.
5. Compatibility of motor vehicle use with existing conditions in populated areas, taking into account sound, emissions, and other factors (36 CFR 212.55(b), Specific criteria for designation of trails and areas).

Prior to this plan revision, the Carson designated specific roads, areas, and trails for the use of motor vehicles (which includes off-road vehicles), which are displayed on the motorized vehicle use maps required by 36 CFR 212 subpart B. The forest also has completed subpart C through amendment 24 to the 1986 land management plan, which is displayed in the Forest's Over-Snow Vehicle Use Map as required by 36 CFR 212 subpart C. This programmatic plan decision does not authorize additional motor vehicle use or prohibit existing motor vehicles uses; those maps therefore remain unchanged and the final LMP is compliant with the Travel Management Rule.

## Wetlands and Floodplains

These executive orders (11988 Floodplain Management and 11990 Protection of Wetlands) require Federal agencies to avoid, to the extent possible, short- and long-term effects resulting from the modification or destruction of wetlands and the occupancy and modification of floodplains. Forestwide standards and guidelines are provided for soil, water, wetlands, and riparian areas to minimize effects to wetlands and floodplains. They incorporate the best management practices of the Forest Service Soil and Water Conservation Handbook. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with these executive orders.

## Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (Pub. L. 90-542, §(b), Oct. 2, 1968, 82 Stat. 906, as amended); (16 U.S.C. §127-1288) describes consideration of potential additions during planning in Section 5. (d)(1): “The Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture shall make specific studies and investigations to determine which additional wild, scenic and recreational river areas within the United States shall be evaluated in planning reports by all Federal agencies as potential alternative uses of the water and related land resources involved.” The forest complied with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act by evaluating whether rivers on the Carson NF might be eligible for inclusion in the Wild and Scenic River System, as documented in appendix G of the final environmental impact statement.

Analysis of designated wild and scenic rivers was included in the final EIS. Management area direction in the land management plan provides protection for water quality, free-flowing conditions, and outstandingly remarkable values identified for those rivers. In addition, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires an evaluation of eligible wild, scenic, or recreational rivers in land management planning. This evaluation was completed and the 51 eligible rivers identified through the eligible wild and scenic river study process were analyzed in the FEIS. Management direction in the land management plan maintains the eligibility of eligible river segments by protecting free-flowing conditions and outstandingly remarkable values.

## Wilderness Act

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established a National Wilderness Preservation System to be administered in such a manner as to leave these areas unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness. It provides the statutory definition of wilderness, how areas are assessed for addition to the wilderness preservation system, and management requirements for congressionally designated areas.

Evaluation of existing wilderness and areas recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System was included in the environmental analysis for the revised land management plan. The final LMP provides direction for designated wilderness through desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and suitability that preserves the wilderness character of designated wilderness. Therefore, I find that this land management plan is compliant with this act.

## Implementation Date

This land management plan becomes effective 30 calendar days after publication of the notice of its approval in the Federal Register (36 CFR 219.17(a)). A final record of decision is issued concurrent with this approval.

Land management plans are permissive in that they allow, but do not mandate, the occurrence of certain activities. The revised land management plan will be implemented through a series of project-level decisions based on site-specific environmental analysis and public involvement that will adapt to changes in budget, resource capability, and management priorities. The final LMP guides management activities and projects by establishing clear desired conditions, rather than by establishing schedules of action.

## Administrative Review

This decision is subject to the pre-decisional administrative review process required by Federal regulations (36 CFR part 219, subpart B). An objection must be filed in writing to the Objection

Reviewing Officer. Objections filed by mail should be addressed to: Regional Forester, USDA Forest Service Southwest Region, 333 Broadway Blvd. SE, Albuquerque, NM 87102. Electronically filed objections may be submitted by email in word (.doc or .docx), rich text format (.rtf), text (.txt), portable document format (.pdf), and/or hypertext markup language (.html) to [objections-southwestern-regional-office@usda.gov](mailto:objections-southwestern-regional-office@usda.gov) with subject: Carson National Forest Plan Revision Objection. All objections are open to public inspection during the objection process and must contain the information as required at 36 CFR 219.54.

Objections, including attachments, must be filed within 60 days from the publication date of the notice in the *Taos News*, the newspaper of record. Objections or attachments received outside the 60-day objection period must be set aside from review. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection. Those wishing to object to this project should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Individuals and entities who have submitted substantive formal comments related to plan revision during the opportunities for public comment (as provided in subpart A of 36 CFR Part 219) during the planning process for this decision may file an objection. Objections must be based on previously submitted substantive formal comments attributed to the objector unless the objection concerns an issue that arose after the opportunities for formal comment.

Additionally, we request that objection issues related to species of conservation concern be identified in the cover letter or introduction of the objection along with page numbers where the species of conservation concern-related objections can be found in the objection document. The decision to approve the species of conservation concern list will be subject to a separate objection process. The Chief of the Forest Service is the reviewing officer for species of conservation concern identification since the Regional Forester is the deciding official. Objections related to species of conservation concern will be forwarded.

## Plan Implementation

As required by the National Forest Management Act of 1976 and the 2012 Planning Rule, subject to valid existing rights, all projects and activities authorized by the Forest Service after approval of this plan must be consistent with applicable plan components (16 U.S.C. 1604(i)), as described at 36 CFR 219.5. Previously approved and ongoing projects and activities are not required to meet the direction of the revised plan and will remain consistent with the direction in the 1986 Plan, as amended (USDA FS Carson NF 1986).

## Project Consistency

All project or activity approval documents, made after the effective date of the final LMP, will describe how the project or activity is consistent with applicable components, as described in the “Consistency of Projects with the Plan” section of the final LMP (chapter 1). In the case that a proposed project or activity would not be consistent with applicable plan components, the responsible official shall take one of the following steps, subject to valid existing rights.

1. Modify the proposed project or activity to make it consistent with the applicable plan components;
2. Reject the proposal or terminate the project or activity;
3. Amend the plan so that the project or activity will be consistent with the plan as amended;

4. Amend the plan contemporaneously with the approval of the project or activity so that the project or activity will be consistent with the plan as amended. This amendment may be limited to apply only to the project or activity

Resource plans (for example, travel management plans) developed by the Carson that apply to the resources or land areas within the planning area must be consistent with the plan components. Resource plans developed prior to this plan decision will be evaluated for consistency with the plan and updated if necessary.

Authorizations for occupancy and use made before this plan approval may proceed unchanged until the time of reauthorization. At the time of reauthorization, all permits, contracts, and other authorizing instruments must be made consistent with the plan, subject to existing valid rights, as provided at 36 CFR §219.15(d).

## Maintaining the Plan

A land management plan is an integral part of an adaptive management approach that includes assessment, plan revision or amendment, and monitoring. This adaptive management cycle enables management to identify and respond to changing conditions, changing public desires, and new information, such as that obtained through research and scientific findings. The land management plan monitoring program is an integral part of this adaptive management cycle, consisting of monitoring questions and indicators.

## Amending the Land Management Plan

A land management plan may be amended at any time based on a preliminary identification of the need to change the plan. The preliminary identification of the need to change the plan may be based on a new assessment; land management plan monitoring; or other documentation of new information, changed conditions, or changed circumstances. The amendment and administrative change processes are described at 36 CFR 219.17(b)(2) of the 2012 Planning Rule.

## Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision contact Peter Rich, Forest Planner:

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 Taos, NM, 87571  
 phone: 575-758-6200  
 email: peter.rich@usda.gov

## Signature and Date

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James Duran  
 Forest Supervisor  
 Carson National Forest

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DATE

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