

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

GENERAL

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requires all national forest lands to be managed under a “Forest Plan” as defined and structured by the Act and its implementing regulations. The Forest Plan provides an integrated framework for analyzing and approving future site-specific projects and programs. Additionally, it guides all natural resource management activities on the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests to meet the objectives of Federal law, regulations, and policy.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLANNING AREA

The area governed by this plan consists of the Chattahoochee National Forest and the Oconee National Forest. The Chattahoochee NF is located across the northern portion of the state with lands in 18 counties. The Oconee NF is located in the Central/Piedmont portion with lands in 8 counties. The lands within each forest lie within either a proclamation boundary or a purchase unit. A proclamation boundary is established by Executive Order and provides that existing National Forest System lands, or lands to be acquired for national forest purposes, shall be a part of the National Forest System. The Secretary of Agriculture may establish a purchase unit to create a new boundary or to adjust or expand an existing boundary, within which federally acquired lands will become a part of the National Forest System.

The two National Forests in Georgia are administered by one Forest Supervisor, headquartered in Gainesville, GA. The Oconee NF is managed as one ranger district, and the Chattahoochee NF is divided into five ranger districts. There are three other areas held by the USDA Forest Service in the State of Georgia. The Hitchiti Experimental Forest and Scull Shoals Experimental Forest both lie within the Oconee NF and are administered as part of that Forest. The Forest Service also administers a two-acre Experiment Station office site in Athens. All of these areas are managed under the direction of the Research Branch of the Forest Service.

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT APPROACH

This Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) represents an adaptive management approach for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. Adaptive management is a concept that means different things to different people. To Forest Service employees, numerous partnerships in Federal, State, and local governments, academic institutions, conservation organizations, and Georgia citizenry, it means

**ADAPTIVE
MANAGEMENT
APPROACH**

practicing restorative ecosystem management with the understanding that we are students of nature, not masters of it.

**PURPOSE OF THE
FOREST PLAN**

Adaptive management will use our scientific knowledge and experience to design management strategies that allow us to progress toward ecological and socioeconomic objectives as we learn. The adaptive aspect of these strategies is the ability to test our assumptions and make adjustments as we learn from our work and the work of others in the field.

**RELATIONSHIP
OF THE FOREST
PLAN TO OTHER
DOCUMENTS**

Adaptive management covers a broad range of activities and practices. With sustainable forest habitats and healthy watersheds and ecosystems as primary goals, a great deal of knowledge is being tested; and there are many factors to monitor over time. This is why adapting or adjusting management practices cannot be done in isolation of the bigger picture.

Monitoring (and constant evaluation) is the heart of adaptive management. To ensure that all factors are considered before initiating change, an Interdisciplinary Team very much expanded from the team that developed the Forest Plan will review the situation. This expanded team includes professionals from all levels of the Forest Service, scientists from research units and from local academic institutions, along with our local partners who have shown a great interest in the health of the National Forests.

PURPOSE OF THE FOREST PLAN

This Forest Plan guides all natural resource management activities and sets management standards for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests in Georgia. It describes resource management practices; levels of habitat production, protection, and management; and the availability and suitability of lands for resource management.

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA), implementing regulations, and other documents guided the preparation of this Forest Plan. Land-use determinations, management practices, goals, objectives, and standards are statements of the Forest Plan's management direction. Projected yields, services, and rate of implementation are dependent on the annual budgeting process.

This Forest Plan provides broad program-level direction for management of the land and its resources. Future projects carry out the direction in this Forest Plan. This Forest Plan does not contain a commitment to select any specific project. An environmental analysis is conducted, when required, on these projects as they are proposed. This analysis may tie to the data and evaluations in other environmental impact statements.

RELATIONSHIP OF THE FOREST PLAN TO OTHER DOCUMENTS

In addition to direction found in this Forest Plan, projects are also implemented through direction found in laws, rules, regulations, and the Forest Service directive system (a listing of these can be found in Appendix A); and the following programmatic decision documents:

- *Record of Decision, Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Gypsy Moth Management in the United States: A Cooperative Approach* (USDA, Forest Service and APHIS, Washington, DC, 5 volumes, January 1995)

- *Record of Decision, Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Management of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker and its Habitat on National Forests in the Southern Region* (USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, June 1995)
- *Record of Decision, Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Suppression of Southern Pine Beetles* (USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, April 1987)

RELATIONSHIP
OF THE FOREST
PLAN TO OTHER
DOCUMENTS

PLAN
STRUCTURE

PLAN STRUCTURE

Levels of Management Direction

The Plan is structured with two levels of management direction, each with several important characteristics. The levels of direction generally increase in degree of constraint from first to second. They also tend to decrease from first to second in land area to which they apply. They are designed to be complementary rather than conflicting. Both levels (described below) are considered as applicable direction in planning or carrying out resource management actions.

- First is forestwide direction that usually applies at the geographic scale of the entire Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. Within this set, some direction may be specifically written to apply to one Forest or the other, or to some other sub-Forest scale such as an ecological section unit. This direction is arranged by topics representing the planning issues and several major Forest resource areas.
 - Second is individual management prescription (MRx) direction within a single land allocation. Land allocations to specific management direction are mapped, with the map serving as the 'key' to where on the ground that direction applies.

At each level, management direction consists of goals, objectives, and standards. Of these three, goals give strategic direction for a program such as recreation or wildlife. Objectives are steps along the way to achieving the goals, and they give purpose to individual projects. They also are tools to check progress toward a goal. Objectives are linked to the Forest Monitoring Plan. Standards limit type, timing, intensity, method, location, and so on of actions taken to reach an objective.

The practical effect of these levels, scales, topics, and activity-specific direction is to produce a complex web of inter-related requirements. This complexity has the unfortunate side effect of 'scattering' direction somewhat, so that it does not always appear in the location where people might expect it.

Organization of the Documents

The Forest Plan consists of five chapters, a glossary, and several appendices.

Chapter 1 introduces the Forest Plan; explains its purpose, structure, and relationship to other documents; and summarizes the issues and analysis of the management situation for the revision.

Chapter 2 provides forestwide goals, objectives, and standards related to the identified issues and several important resource areas.

Chapter 3 describes the management prescriptions in detail with desired future conditions, goals, objectives, and standards that relate specifically to each prescription.

Chapter 4 defines the watershed management areas and shows management prescription allocations by watershed.

Chapter 5 gives direction on Forest Plan implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

**PLAN
STRUCTURE**

**PLAN RESPONSE
TO THE ISSUES**

**SUMMARY OF
THE ISSUES FOR
FOREST PLAN
REVISION**

Major topic headings are replicated in the outer margins to assist readers in navigating within the document. The heading in the margin appears in a heavy font on the page where that topic is introduced. If the topic continues beyond the page where it began, the margin heading is printed in gray on the subsequent pages.

PLAN RESPONSE TO THE ISSUES

Public involvement is a key part of the planning process. Public comments were sought to identify what the forest should be and provide in the future - including goods, services, and environmental conditions. Opportunities were offered for people to get involved in the planning process and to provide comments. Issues submitted by the public, as well as from within the Forest Service, guided the need to change current management strategies. Issues were submitted by the public during open meetings conducted by the Forest beginning in 1995. The Regional Office developed issue statements common to the five Forests in the revision process, and provided a standard set of 12 issues. The Chattahoochee-Oconee added four forest-specific issues, which had been identified during the scoping process.

Based on public comments, the five Southern Appalachian Forests developed four preliminary alternatives (themes) for resource management and direction to address these issues. Public meetings were held throughout the state, and comments were solicited on the preliminary alternatives.

Preliminary issues and the additional issues identified through public involvement were stated in the form of planning questions to be addressed in the planning process. The most significant issues and planning questions are summarized into the following questions, used to develop alternatives for the Forest Plan revision.

SUMMARY OF THE ISSUES FOR FOREST PLAN REVISION

Issues Common to the Southern Appalachian Forests

Southern Appalachian Forest issues are common to the following national forests: National Forests in Alabama, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests in Georgia, Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee, Jefferson National Forest in Virginia, and Sumter National Forest in South Carolina. These issues were used to define several alternative management strategies, which are analyzed in detail in the Environmental Impact Statement. As a Piedmont forest, the Oconee National Forest has quite different characteristics. However, it shares the issues identified for the Southern Appalachian forests.

Issue 1 - Terrestrial Plants And Animals And Their Associated Habitats

Issue Statement: How should the national forests retain or restore a diverse mix of terrestrial plant and animal habitat conditions, while meeting public demands for a variety of wildlife values and uses?

Issue 2 - T & E And Sensitive/Locally Rare Species

Issue Statement: What levels of management are needed to protect and recover the populations of federally-listed Threatened, Endangered and Proposed species? What level of management is needed for Forest Service sensitive and locally rare species?

Issue 3 - Old Growth

Issue Statement: The issue surrounding old growth has several facets, including: (1) How much old growth is desired, (2) Where should old growth occur, and (3) How should old growth be managed?

Issue 4 - Riparian Area Management, Water Quality And Aquatic Habitats

Issue Statement: What are the desired riparian ecosystem conditions within national forests, and how will they be identified, maintained and/or restored? What management direction is needed to help ensure that the hydrologic conditions needed for the beneficial uses of water yielded by and flowing through National Forest System lands are attained? What management is needed for the maintenance, enhancement or restoration of aquatic habitats?

Issue 5 - Wood Products

Issue Statement: The issue surrounding the sustained yield production of wood products from national forests has several facets, including: What are the appropriate objectives for wood product management? Where should removal of wood products occur, given that this production is part of a set of multiple use objectives, and considering cost effectiveness? What should be the level of outputs of wood products? What management activities associated with the production of wood products are appropriate?

Issue 6 - Aesthetics/Scenery Management

Issue Statement: The issue surrounding the management of the visual quality has two facets: What are the appropriate landscape character goals for the national forests? What should be the scenic integrity objectives for the national forests?

Issue 7 - Recreation Opportunities/Experiences

Issue Statement: How should the increasing demand for recreational opportunities and experiences be addressed on the national forests while protecting forest resources? This includes considering a full range of opportunities for developed and dispersed recreation activities (including such things as nature study, hunting and fishing activities, and trail uses).

Issue 8 - Roadless Areas/Wilderness Management

Issue Statement: Should any of the roadless areas on National Forest System lands be recommended for wilderness designation? For any roadless areas not recommended for wilderness, how should they be managed? How should areas recommended for wilderness designation be managed? How should the patterns and intensity of use, fire, and insects and disease be managed in the existing wilderness areas?

Issue 9 - Forest Health

Issue Statement: What conditions are needed to maintain forest capacity to function in a sustainable manner as expected or desired? Of particular concern are the impacts of non-native and native pest species, and the presence of ecological conditions with a higher level of insect and disease susceptibility.

Issue 10 - Special Areas And Rare Communities

Issue Statement: What special areas should be designated, and how should they be managed? How should rare communities, such as those identified in the Southern Appalachian Assessment, be managed?

SUMMARY OF
THE ISSUES FOR
FOREST PLAN
REVISION

DECISIONS MADE
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PLANS

Issue 11 - Wild And Scenic Rivers

Issue Statement: Which rivers are suitable for designation into the National Wild and Scenic River System, and how should rivers that are eligible, but not suitable, be managed?

Issue 12 - Access/Road Management (Travel Management)

Issue Statement: How do we balance the rights of citizens to access their national forests with our responsibilities to protect and manage the soil and water resources, wildlife populations and habitat, aesthetics, forest health, and desired vegetative conditions?

Issues Specific to the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests

In addition to the issues affecting the Southern Appalachian region as a whole, the following local issues were determined for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests:

Issue 13 – Chattooga River Watershed

Issue Statement: How can the National Forests manage the Chattooga River watershed for desired social and ecological benefits while protecting the outstanding values of the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River corridor?

Issue 14 – Red-cockaded Woodpecker

Issue Statement: (1) What portions of the Oconee National Forest should be designated as a habitat management area (HMA) for the Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW). (2) Should it be a Forest Plan goal to acquire lands in order for the Oconee to be a recovery area for the RCW, or maintain current land ownership and be a support area for the RCW?

Issue 15 – Recreational Gold Collecting

Issue Statement: How will recreational gold collecting be authorized on the Chattahoochee National Forest to meet public demand and minimize impacts to other resources?

Issue 16 – Special Uses

Issue Statement: How should the special uses of communication sites, utility corridors, and recreation residences be authorized on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests?

DECISIONS MADE IN FOREST PLANS

National Forest System resource allocation and management decisions are made in two stages. The first stage is the Forest Plan, which allocates lands and resources to various uses or conditions by establishing management areas and management prescriptions for the land and resources within the plan area. The second stage is approval of project decisions.

Forest plans do not compel the agency to undertake any site-specific projects; rather, they establish overall goals and objectives (or desired resource conditions) that the individual national forest strives to meet. Forest plans also establish limitations on what actions may be authorized, and what conditions must be met as project decisions are made.

The primary decisions made in a Forest Plan include:

- Establishment of the forestwide multiple-use goals and objectives (36 CFR 219.11(b)).
- Establishment of forestwide management requirements (36 CFR 219.13 to 219.27).
- Establishment of multiple-use prescriptions and associated standards for each management area (36 CFR 219.11(c)).
- Identification of lands within management areas not suited for timber production (16 U.S.C. 1604(k) and 36 CFR 219.14).
- Establishment of allowable sale quantity for timber within a time frame specified in the plan (36 CFR 219.16).
- Establishment of monitoring and evaluation requirements (36 CFR 219.11(d)).
- Recommendation of roadless areas as potential wilderness areas (36 CFR 219.17).
- Where applicable, designation of lands administratively available for oil and gas leasing and authorization of the Bureau of Land Management to offer specific lands for leasing (36 CFR 228.102 (d) and (e)).

DECISIONS MADE
IN FOREST
PLANS

RELATIONSHIP
OF THE PLAN TO
PROJECTS

RELATIONSHIP OF THE PLAN TO PROJECTS

A Forest Plan is a strategy that answers the question, ‘Where are we going?’. The tactics, or ‘How do we get there?’ are an individual activity or a set of related activities called a ‘project.’ The authorization of site-specific activities within a plan area occurs through project decision-making, which is the implementation stage of forest planning. Project decision-making must comply with NEPA procedures, and site-specific projects must be consistent with the Forest Plan.

The typical process for a project carrying out the plan is as follows:

- Existing conditions are compared to the plan desired conditions in goals, objectives, and management prescriptions.
- Where differences exist, a project is identified that – when carried out – will help reach the plan desired conditions.
- The idea for a project is reviewed and refined by the appropriate disciplines within the Forest Service.
- The refined project is proposed to interested and affected publics; including co-operating agencies, groups, and individuals through a variety of media that may include telephone, web site, newspaper notice, and letters with a request for comments.
- Comments received are used to further refine and improve the proposal, or perhaps even drop it altogether.
- The appropriate National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation is prepared, reviewed, and completed per agency guidelines.
- If an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement is the appropriate NEPA documentation, a draft copy is circulated to those commenting on the project proposal, and comments received on the draft are addressed in the final.
- The Responsible Official signs the decision document, which includes a finding that the decision is consistent with the forest plan, among other required points, and appropriate public notice of the decision is given.
- Implementation of the project is funded through annual work planning and budgeting.

**RELATIONSHIP
OF THE PLAN TO
PROJECTS**

- Needed implementation documents are prepared and approved such as contracts, specifications, or reports.
- The project is implemented by, or under the direction of, Forest Service employees.
- The project is monitored to ensure applicable plan standards have been implemented and are working.
- The results of monitoring this and other projects are reported to the public in an annual monitoring report.
- Results of monitoring are evaluated to determine if there is a need to amend or revise the Forest Plan.

There are variations in the details of the individual steps, depending on the nature of the project, but the general process remains the same. At the project level is where site-specific items such as threatened or endangered species, steep slopes, cultural resources, and so on are considered.