

**Summary and Evaluation of
The Collaboration and Forest Planning Summit**
April 20, 2015



On April 20, 2015 the Forest service held a meeting with key stakeholders to begin a collaborative process for the Nantahala & Pisgah National Forest Plan revision. The following is a summary of that meeting. A comprehensive report will be posted on the website as: *Collaboration & Forest Planning Summit (4/20/2015)*

The Setting and Expected Outcomes

The summit was held in the conference room at the North Carolina Arboretum. Leaders from the three active collaboratives were invited to attend. The collaboratives are: The Nantahala/Pisgah Forest Partnership, The Fish and Wildlife Conservation Council, and the Nantahala/Pisgah Restoration Collaborative. Approximately 55 stakeholders, who included Forest Service managers and planners, attended the meeting.

The Forest Service provided the agenda with the following expected outcomes:

- To build relationships among stakeholders;
- To discuss the merits of a broadly supported and inclusive plan
- To discuss the recent communication patterns and how to move forward productively.

Kristin Bail, the Forest Supervisor, set the stage during an introduction. The following quote summarizes the introduction.

“Today is about relationships and trust. The Forest Service will continue to listen, adapt, and respond to what partners express. This is an iterative process. How the discussions today will be used is not 100 percent certain. We have space to decide that together and move forward.”

Moving toward a Broadly Supported and Inclusive Plan

Following an exercise that required groups of participants to lower tent poles in a deliberate way, the stakeholders discussed the question about: What does a broadly supported and inclusive plan mean to you and why is it valuable?

Stakeholders spoke passionately with each other and there appeared to be general agreement that a broadly supported and inclusive plan is desirable. Some key points include the following.

- It would be a “win-win” for the environment, the people who use and value the forest and the ability to get work done on the ground.
- It means that everyone has a seat at the table and that all needs should be addressed.
- It means listening to and respecting a broad spectrum of opinions

What the Forest Service learned: *That stakeholders are passionate about the plan and the outcomes on the ground that would result from a broadly supported and inclusive plan. Stakeholders seem to agree that common ground through collaboration is needed for a plan to be supported and inclusive.*

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Communications around Timber Suitability

An exercise, the fishbowl technique, was used to uncover what was learned about communications during and following the Forest Service meetings in Fall, 2014.

Several of the comments included the following.

- The Forest Service did not set the context and provide clarity about the information presented during the Fall, 2014 meetings. This led to mis-communication among the collaboratives and the Forest Service.
- Provide information without jargon. Use of maps helps to provide context and clarity.
- When there are conflicts, deal with them first directly with each other rather than using the press as the forum for communication.
- Make sure that interests are represented across all the alternatives.
- Take the process step by step.

***What the Forest Service learned:** That they must be diligent in providing context and clarity for any information provided. Stakeholders seem willing to commit to communicating with each other to address different opinions. Use of the press would be centered on providing accurate information and respect of other opinions.*

Framing Issue for the Draft Environmental Impact Statement

The forest planner, Heather Luczak, provided the issues that would drive the development of the alternatives for the environmental impact statement. Issues were based on public input received in 2013 and 2014 and were shared at the October and November public meetings. These issues were largely validated through the nearly 14,000 comments that were received between November 2014 and January 2015. Stakeholders were asked to review and validate these statements as an effort to move forward in the planning process.

Stakeholders appeared to agree with the framing of the issues, with some refinements. Some suggestions are outlined below.

- Consider invasive species as an issue;
- Issues do not consider the local economy, whereas the themes do. What are the connections between the themes and the issues?
- More contexts about wildlife habitat structure and diversity should be considered, as well what is the context for restoration in the issue descriptions?
- How does fiscal capability figure into developing alternatives?
- Trails and roads should be given equal consideration
- That all interests should be shown to some degree in every alternative

***What the Forest Service learned:** More background information, context, and clarity may be needed to refine the issue statements. The request to disclose how all interests are addressed in*

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every alternative is understandable, but also, providing this information in a clear and readable format poses a difficult challenge.

Next Steps in Collaboration and Forest Plan revision

A brief exercise, Extra! Extra! Read All About It! was used to discuss what outcomes stakeholders wanted from the planning process. James Melonas, Deputy Forest Supervisor, followed up by defining next steps in the process.

The exercise uncovered a spirit that collaboration could be successful, that the plan could address all the key interests adequately and result with outcomes on the ground. Here is one of several headlines submitted: “Collaborative effort from 2014 Pays off Big for the Local Economy, the Wildlife, the People and the Forest!”

James Melonas presented key steps moving forward in the process.

Defining the collaboration space: The collaboration needed to move forward includes the topics of: 1) Restoring areas for resiliency of our forests; 2) Special designated areas , including alternatives for lands recommended or not recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System and; 3) A sustainable recreation program.

The timing of this process: Not every answer needs to be uncovered immediately. Let us move the process along to develop a reasonable range of alternatives. We will focus on agreements and work through disagreements. The alternatives for the draft environmental impact statement need to be formulated this summer and early fall. The planning team will analyze the alternatives during the fall and winter.

Defining the decision space: The process needs to include the collaboratives and as well as the broader public. The Forest Service will bring additional collaboration expertise and capacity to develop a structured collaborative process.

This presentation was followed by general discussion. Each individual was then given an opportunity to voice their commitment to the goal of a broad and inclusive plan, to work together to achieve that goal and to listen and learn from each other. Stakeholders were given the opportunity to provide a written evaluation of the meeting.

What the Forest Service learned: *That stakeholders are committed to a collaborative process and willing to communicate with each other. Stakeholders seem to agree that the collaboration space is valid and moving forward is important. Especially, that many stakeholders are ready to dive into the details of the plan and the draft environmental impact statement. The meeting ended with proactive, positive atmosphere. Although, according to the evaluations, stakeholders are still not clear about the path forward; giving the signal that the Forest Service still has work to do on the collaboration approach for the plan and the alternatives.*