

Identification of Lands Suitable for Transportation Management – Southwest Region (R3) Plan Revisions

Version 3.0 – December 2009

Operational Draft: This document is prepared to provide guidance to forest plan revision teams. As this guidance is implemented we expect to learn improved ways to do this work. As we learn, this document will be updated. This document was reviewed and revised as appropriate in December 2009 to conform with the requirements of the 1982 Planning Rule Provisions.

Introduction

Transportation management impacts all aspects of National Forest visitation whether the visit is to work, recreate, or travel through the forest. For the purpose of this effort, transportation management includes three distinct types of travel: motorized travel, mechanized travel, and non-motorized travel.

Motorized travel comprises all motorized forms of travel including off-highway vehicles, jeeps, trucks, SUVs, motorcycles, all terrain vehicles, and motorized over snow vehicles. Mechanized travel includes mountain bicycles. Non-motorized travel includes hiking, cross country skiing, and horseback riding.

Executive Orders and Regulations

Executive Order 11644 (February 8, 1972), “Use of Off-Road Vehicles on Public Lands,” as amended by Executive Order 11989 (May 24, 1977), instructs Federal agencies to ensure that the use of off-highway vehicles on public lands will be controlled and directed so as to protect the resources of those lands, to promote the safety of all users of those lands, and to minimize conflicts among the various uses of those lands.

Implementing these executive orders, the Forest Service issued regulations at 36 CFR 212 governing administration of the forest transportation system and regulations at 36 CFR 295 governing the use of motor vehicles off National Forest System (NFS) roads. These regulations were combined and clarified in the 2005 Travel Management Rule¹. The Travel Management Rule requires designation of those roads, trails, and areas that are open to motor vehicle use. Designations will be made by class of vehicle and, if appropriate, by time of year. Transportation suitability determinations made in the forest plan will guide future route and area designations; however, site specific decisions related to travel management, such as designation of specific routes and areas for motor vehicle use as required under the Travel Management Rule, are not appropriate at the forest plan level.

As designation of roads, trails, and areas under the Travel Management Rule will occur on a nearly parallel time schedule with plan revision efforts, it is imperative that forest synchronize these two processes. Forests that complete their Travel Management Rule designations prior to plan revision will need to ensure subsequent suitability determinations under plan revision

¹ 36 CFR Parts 212, 251, 261, and 295 Travel Management; Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use; Final Rule published in Federal Register on November 9, 2005.

validate their Travel Management Rule designations. Conversely, forests that complete suitability determinations during plan revision prior to designation of roads, trails and areas, will need to ensure that these subsequent Travel Management Rule designations are in line with the plan suitability determinations.

Suitability Determinations

The identification of an area as suitable for a use is not a commitment or final decision; rather it provides guidance for project and activity level decision making. For example, the identification of lands suitable for a particular use within a revised plan is not a decision to authorize that use: The *final* decision to authorize the use would be made at a project level.

The Responsible Official shall not identify lands within the plan area as suitable for a certain use or uses if any of the following circumstances apply:

1. Law, regulation, Executive order, or Forest Service directives system prohibit that use,
2. The use would result in substantial and permanent impairment of the productivity of the land or renewable resources, or
3. The use is incompatible with the desired conditions for the relevant portion of the plan area.

Areas are suitable for a particular use, if that use is compatible with the desired condition in the forest plan. This does not mean that the use will occur over the entire area. Areas are not suitable for a particular use, if that use is not compatible with the desired conditions of the forest plan. This does not mean that the use will not occur in specific areas 36 CFR 219.12 (a) (1), 36 CFR 219.7 (a) (2) (iv).

In the Region 3 Plan Revision process, the starting point for the identification of lands as suitable is the existing suitability determination carried forward from current Forest Plans. The concept of the planning rule is that uses are generally suitable unless proven otherwise. This is consistent with the basic philosophy that these are the people's lands, and therefore it is appropriate to have a presumption that lands are suitable for a variety of uses.

Compatibility with desired conditions is the basis for determining whether or not a use is suitable for a particular area. During the need for change evaluations of the existing plan, comparisons between existing conditions and current Forest Plan desired conditions (including changed conditions since the adoption of the current plan) will be used to determine if there is a need for change in existing management direction. Determinations should be made if the current identification of areas suitable for a use is interfering with the ability to manage those areas to achieve desired conditions. If so, the Responsible Official will decide whether there is a need to change the suitability calls in current Forest Plans.

Step 1: The Forest will identify areas created via legislation that are not suitable for motorized and/or mechanized forms of travel. Because the legislation that established these areas can vary, it is necessary to review that legislation to insure compatibility. Additionally, agency management directives may further prohibit specific forms of transportation. For example:

- Most wilderness areas are not suitable for both mechanized and motorized transportation.
- Wild and Scenic River corridors generally have transportation restrictions.

- Research natural areas, botanical areas, and other “special areas” may have transportation restrictions.

Step 2: Transportation suitability will be built upon the outputs from other suitability determinations, such as timber, range, recreation, minerals, and fire and fuels. Suitability determinations involve social, economic, and ecological considerations and should be consistent with collaboratively developed desired conditions and objectives. Suitability determinations are part of strategic planning, and should focus on broad landscape areas rather than small scale, site-specific locations.

Step 3: Once desired conditions have been developed and suitability for other land uses has been identified, units will consider the following in determining if a given area is suitable for managing roads, trails, or specific areas for mechanized, motorized or non-motorized uses. The mere presence of one or more of these items may not result in an area being deemed not suitable for travel management, as site specific mitigations could be developed at the project level to address resource concerns. Rather, these items, and others highlight situations where careful consideration will be applied when determining transportation suitability for a given area:

- Existing travel management designations including those made under the 2005 Travel Management Rule
- Protection of cultural and historic properties
- Protection of critical stream management and riparian areas
- Protection of wildlife and wildlife habitats
- Management of NFS natural resources, such as soils, watersheds, vegetation and other forest resources
- Promotion of public safety
- Recreational opportunities
- Access needs
- Minimization of conflicts among users of NFS lands including those conflicts between motorized and non-motorized users and conflicts among different classes of motor vehicle uses on NFS lands and neighboring lands.
- Need for maintenance and administration of roads, trails, and areas; and the availability of resources for that maintenance and administration
- Valid existing rights
- Compatibility of motorized and non-motorized use with existing conditions in populated areas, taking into account sound, emissions, and other factors

Scale

If desired conditions are comparable on several forests, suitability determinations could apply at the multi-forest level. If desired conditions are unique to a particular forest, suitability will be determined at the forest or sub-unit level.

Public Involvement (Occurs throughout the Process)

It is critical that the public be involved in identifying desired conditions. Once desired conditions have been identified, suitability will be determined as it relates to the desired conditions. Additionally, there are opportunities to build upon other collaboration efforts such as those related

to the 2005 Travel Management Rule. Specific to public involvement related to determining suitability, units need to work with the public to identify:

- Possible recreation opportunities and the public value placed on those opportunities
- Potential user conflicts (motorized, non-motorized, pedestrian, equestrian, etc)
- Wants, needs, and concerns of forest users, private land owners, and adjacent land managers
- Costs associated with maintenance of the desired system as compared with future expected budgets
- Opportunities for partnerships
- Sensitive resources requiring protection

Beyond the identification of desired conditions, the public can be a valuable resource during all phases of planning and implementation of travel management projects, including monitoring and enforcement.

GIS (Occurs throughout the Process)

When suitability for travel management is questionable, as may be the case for special areas, units would begin the suitability determination process by identifying areas that preclude various forms of travel due to existing management direction, previous decisions, and/or protection of resources. Existing GIS information will be necessary when beginning the task of determining suitability. The following list is the kind of information that will be used in determining suitability:

- Existing Forest Service transportation maps displaying NFS roads, trails, and if applicable, areas where off-highway vehicle use has been specifically designated
- Topographic and Terrestrial Ecosystem Survey maps displaying steep slopes and/or sensitive or erosive soils that may preclude development and maintenance of system roads and trails
- Vegetation and Hydrology maps identifying sensitive areas where some modes of transportation could negatively impact natural resources.
- Threatened, endangered, sensitive species and critical habitat maps identifying areas where some modes of travel could negatively impact the species of concern.
- Cultural property maps identifying areas where some modes of travel could negatively impact sensitive archaeological resources.
- Congressionally designated areas (wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, national recreation areas, etc.) where legislation may limit some modes of transportation
- Other special management areas (research natural areas, botanical areas, etc.)
- Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) or Scenery Management System (SMS)
- Land ownership maps including private lands and other government jurisdictions.
- Special use information, such as road easements, rights-of-ways, and permitted access to special use developments.
- Previous travel management decisions (if available).

Displaying Suitability in Forest Plans

The following table (Table 1) is one way to present transportation suitability. It is organized by land use emphasis followed by a suitability determination related to the type of transportation. This table would be complemented by the use of maps and clarifying text. A combination of text, maps, and an accompanying table provides a clear display of transportation suitability for use with the public and internal resource specialists. In most cases, if a given area has been identified as suitable for timber production, it will likely be suitable for all forms of transportation. Wilderness areas however, would not be suitable for motorized or mechanized forms of transportation. Special areas, locations identified as suitable for dispersed recreation activities, and urban interface areas may have special circumstances associated with them that would influence transportation suitability. It will be incumbent upon a given unit to make these suitability determinations, tailored to their specific revision situation.

Table 1 Example Transportation Suitability Determinations

Land Use Emphasis Areas	Motorized	Mechanized	Non-Motorized
Timber	Suitable	Suitable	Suitable
Range	Suitable	Suitable	Suitable
Minerals	Suitable	Suitable	Suitable
Special Areas	Not Suitable	Not Suitable	Suitable
Wilderness	Not Suitable	Not Suitable	Suitable
Developed Recreation Areas	Suitable	Suitable	Suitable
Dispersed Recreation Areas	Not Suitable	Suitable	Suitable
Urban Interface	Unsuitable	suitable	Suitable

Note: the above suitability calls are for example only; your suitability determinations should be specific to your Forest situation.