

Summary of interviews with U.S. Forest Service Planning Rule Federal Advisory Committee members and with Forest Service leadership and an assessment of the opportunity for committee collaboration

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## **I. Introduction**

On September 11, 2012, U.S. Forest Service Planning Rule Federal Advisory Committee will meet for the first time. The 21-member committee will advise the U.S. Forest Service as the agency implements the new planning rule. To prepare for the meeting, the committee's facilitators spoke with each committee member and with members of the Forest Service and USDA leadership team in August, 2012. What follows is a summary of those conversations.

Typically, facilitators will speak with individuals before convening a committee – to determine the committee's composition and identify the committee's scope. In this case, the committee and its charter are in place, so the goals of the individual conversations were these:

- Introduce the facilitation team to the committee
- Identify topics for the first meeting's agenda and for subsequent meetings
- Give the committee members an opportunity to speak about their hopes for implementation of the rule and
- Give the committee members an opportunity to speak about how the committee should operate

The conversations have already helped the facilitators and the agency staff produce an agenda of the September meeting. The facilitators have also used the conversations to draft the committee's operating protocol, a supplement to their charter.

## **II. Overview**

Continuing the commitment to collaboration and stakeholder engagement that characterized development of the 2012 Forest Planning Rule, the U.S. Forest Service has convened a federal advisory committee to generate recommendations and advice on implementing the new rule under the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). The committee reflects the broad diversity of interests with a stake in how national forests are managed. It includes members representing industry; user groups; tribal governments; environmental organizations; conservation organizations; recreation interests; the scientific community; national, regional and local associations and public interest groups; and state, county or local elected officials.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the committee members have considerable experience in forest policy and planning, and are ready to address long-standing problems while others bring new perspectives to the agency and its planning processes. All are experienced in collaborative decision making and are prepared to bring those experiences to the committee's work and to the planning rule's reliance on collaboration and successful stakeholder engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> The committee's charter and other committee documents are available here: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/main/planningrule/committee>

The individual conversations with committee members and USFS leadership focused on surfacing procedural and substantive interests, issues and questions and developing the committee's scope of work over the next two years.

Nearly every conversation surfaced the importance of relationship building, trust building, and shared learning. Each participant and agency leader emphasized the importance of respect for different views and respectful conduct during what many expect to be difficult deliberations. The participants seek a forum that allows them to advocate for their interests while meeting others' needs. Many recognized the benefits of meeting in the field and learning about implementation challenges and successes on-the-ground – not just to inform their substantive work, but to give them time to get to know one another and build on shared experiences.

Every committee member voiced the need for an overview of the final rule to clarify the intent, requirements, and vision. Each conversation identified possible topics for the committee's deliberation and advice. These include:

- Species diversity and viability
- The use of best available scientific information
- The need to blend local knowledge and experience with peer-reviewed scientific data
- The tension between national accountability/consistency and local discretion/collaboration
- The role of monitoring and evaluation in adaptive management
- Restoration at the forest and watershed levels
- How to reconcile competing visions and priorities for land management
- The broad focus on an all-lands approach
- Climate change
- Wilderness recommendations and management of areas nominated but not designated as wilderness
- The perception that while the USFS has been and continues to be strong on ecological assessments and responses, it currently lacks the capacity to effectively balance this with social and economic concerns
- Achieving the rule's commitment to collaboration and making planning processes efficient and effective

When asked about the rule's greatest strengths and weaknesses, the fundamental differences surface. For example, for some the climate change provisions are the most worrisome; for others, including climate change in the new rule is among the most positive changes. Many of the participants recognize that their success depends on their ability to move beyond their differences and construct creative, interest-based solutions. By way of example, some noted the success of a number of timber restoration projects in this light, recognizing that the best projects are able to advance both economic and environmental objectives.

Many of those interviewed stressed the importance of working on the directives. Those who have worked extensively with Forest Service processes recognized the central role the directives will play in the successful implementation of the rule and believe that the

committee needs to spend time reviewing and giving advice about the directives. Others lacked adequate understanding of what the directives are, how they work, and the committee's role in advising on these. The issue of scale was frequently tied to questions about what level of work the committee will undertake vis-à-vis the directives and early adopter forests. To wit-several cautioned against directing the committees energy to an extensive, single-text negotiation of every word in the directives in favor of agreement about the sideboards that can effectively guide planning processes in each forest. Committee members expect to learn from early adopter experiences in order to sharpen their advice to the agency at a national level. They are clear, however, that their job is not to advise the early adopter forests.

Both USFS leadership and some committee members recognize the opportunity to engage the committee in working with their own constituencies to bring them along as the committee shapes its advice, seeks consensus answers to difficult problems-including the development of sideboards for the key issues described in the next section-and helps the agency implement the rule successfully. The committee members and agency leadership recognize that the new rule is a sea change and an opportunity to transform the way the Forest Service does business. To this end, those interviewed inquired about other areas of work where committee advice might be useful, such as helping the Forest Service think through the capacity building that will be necessary to bring about effective collaboration at the local level.

### **III. Key Issues**

The following section elaborates the key issues, questions and concerns identified by participants in the individual conversations. We begin with how the rule should work and follow with how the committee should work.

#### **A. How the Rule Should Work**

##### **1. Local flexibility and national accountability**

On one hand, participants acknowledge that each forest presents a unique set of economic, ecological and social circumstances. Planning processes that respond to these individual characteristics may require flexibility. At the same time, participants recognize that the forests are national and that maintaining national consistency and aspiring to high, national standards and accountability are necessary. Committee members hope to help the agency and help those concerned with individual forests resolve this puzzle of local flexibility and national accountability.

When delving further, some participants expressed concern about how non-local interests are engaged, worrying on the one hand that outside interests would trump local interests or intervene to stop plan implementation and on the other that decisions about lands held in national trust would be too narrow, failing to factor in broader, long-term interests. Perspectives range from wanting to ensure effective local engagement to deferring to local decision making. The challenge to the committee lies

in helping to construct implementation advice and recommendations that connect local flexibility and discretion with national standards and accountability.

For some, the answer to the dilemma lies in long-term stewardship and conservation; for others it lies in ensuring multiple use. When the conversations moved to this topic, many stressed the important role of collaboration at the forest level that effectively draws in local ecological, economic and social issues. Many said that successful plans will anticipate national issues and national-level interests and will rely on rigorous, evidence-based decision making, and national accountability.

Some indicated that looking at ecosystem services (clean air, clean water, etc.) for local needs and for the country as a whole could be a starting point to build common ground on this subject. Others focused on the need to establish effective collaboration and decision making locally that ensures consistent interpretation across the different forests without tying the hands of planning teams and forest supervisors on the ground who are trying to respond to their particular ecological, economic and social circumstances.

## **2. Balancing ecological, economic and social interests and needs**

Many questioned the degree to which the agency has been able to balance successfully the economic, social and ecological dimensions of forest management, and hope that the committee will help the Service strike the right balance among these three dimensions. Past practice, and current capacity is viewed broadly as having focused more attention on ecological aspects of planning. Several indicated that the new rule itself speaks most directly to ecological interests with its attention on climate change, restoration and species diversity and habitat viability. For some, there is a clear distinction between different types of science, which gives rise to questions of whether and how social and natural sciences might be reconciled, translated or weighted under this three-pronged approach. Those interviewed see a need to develop agency capacity and strong planning tools that make it possible for individual forests to produce the economic and social elements of the plans.

## **3. Restoration**

Committee members are interested in how restoration is defined. Participants have more questions than answers on this topic and are looking to their own deliberation and input from the agency to give clarity to this topic and develop effective sideboards. Among their questions: How is the desired end-state defined? What is the relationship/significance of watershed restoration? Can we define restoration in a way that recognizes dynamic systems? How can restoration projects facilitate local economic development?

## **4. Species viability/diversity**

Some participants noted that the provisions focusing on species of conservation concern and species viability are a step in the right direction in the new rule; others

believe that these portions of the rule do not resolve these issues in ways that can prevent future disputes. This issue in particular was noted by many as requiring consistent definitions or parameters for interpretation across the different forests. Almost all noted this issue is challenging, and several emphasized the need to talk this out and to 'lower the temperature' on the issue.

The committee may be most helpful in developing effective sideboards. Because the viability clause was used to constrain management action in the past, some are concerned that there will be moves to increase the number of species required to monitor, noting that the agency lacks sufficient resources (both money and capacity) to take on more. Some, including agency leadership, focused on the fact the 2012 rule recognizes land capacity, agency authority and fiscal capacity as essential elements of the planning processes and underscored the effective use of the coarse filter/fine filter approach to analyzing species viability questions.

## **5. Climate change**

For some, the requirement to manage for the effects of climate change is one of the most important, positive elements of the new rule. For others, it is among the most worrisome. For everyone who mentioned this topic, questions abound. How will forest planning teams analyze and account for climate change impacts on the ground? What are the implications of climate analysis for specific uses and user groups? How should the directives and the committee's implementation advice speak to the impacts of climate change? Several participants mentioned this summer's fire season in this context, along with bark beetle infestation and invasive species problems as examples of climate-related stressors on the landscape.

## **6. Measurement/monitoring**

Several of those interviewed emphasized the need to clarify that planning is a means, not an end; plans should lead to implementation. There is shared interest in effective action on the ground. Many spoke of the importance of completing a planning process, acting on the vision, strategies and tactics in the plan, monitoring those actions, evaluating their ability to advance the plan's objectives, adapting the strategies as needed and continuing to monitor, evaluate and respond. At the same time, many spoke to the barriers to this approach to planning. Many believe that this approach is far from business-as-usual across the Forest Service, citing the lack of resources and capacity for implementing plans as a significant limitation. Several of those interviewed view effective measurement, monitoring and adaptive management as the tools by which local flexibility will be reconciled with national accountability and consistency.

## **7. All-lands approach**

Some expressed concern about implications of this construct and see the risk of exceeding statutory authorities and thus an increased likelihood of litigation unless directives provide additional direction.

## **8. Best available scientific information**

The participants value evidence-based, science-driven decision making. Many recognize that science will provide the basis for decision making but alone cannot reconcile values-based differences. They recognize that science brings conflicting information and may be most helpful in characterizing the possible effects of any particular policy decision. Many of the conversations stressed the importance of developing credible technical and scientific information in all three arenas - ecological, economic and social - while noting that time and financial capacity impede scientific inquiry. Some emphasized the need for broad definitions of the relevant technical information, encompassing local, traditional knowledge as part of science-based decision making.

How might the committee help reconcile different kinds of science-based and traditional-based knowledge? What is the right balance between rigorous scientific evidence and adaptive management? What is the threshold or burden of proof necessary to establish that an individual forest is using the most current scientific thinking? How can the committee help advance the Forest Service's thinking around social and economic dimensions throughout the planning process?

## **9. Collaboration**

The committee members expect to focus on the rule's commitment to collaboration. The committee may elaborate principles or guidelines, describe lessons learned or best practices or highlight successful strategies from early adopter forests. Many of those interviewed have experience with multiparty collaborative problem solving, and several of those experiences include an overlay of multi-level decision making. Key questions include how best to integrate local and national or regional interests, and how these are weighed in individual forest plans. As discussed in section 1, a critical distinction to be drawn is whether greater weight or deference is given to the local voices or to national principles and standards. The committee intends to help the Service advance the understanding and practice of collaboration while helping to make the planning processes more efficient. The participants recognize that high-quality collaboration can bring planning processes to successful conclusion and that ineffective collaboration risks making planning processes more expensive and lengthier. Several noted that developing a model timeline could help forest planners create efficient planning processes that incorporate effective collaboration.

## **10. Litigation**

Nearly all of the participants suggested that the committee should aspire to resolve differences in ways that meet the needs of all stakeholders, and in doing so, seek to reduce the likelihood of future litigation as the rule is implemented. Many recognize that this sets the bar high and are willing to do so, seeing that reduced litigation would be an important measure of the committee's success and, ultimately, of the rule's success. Those interviewed after the Federal Forest Resource Coalition case was filed noted the importance of acknowledging but not delving into existing litigation. The

participants hope that the committee will address the issues in question, but must do so in such a way as to not impact existing, or future cases.

## **B. How the Committee Works**

### **11. Building understanding and trust**

Committee members expressed an interest in designing a high functioning and collaborative group. Collectively, they bring to bear significant experience in multiple interest collaborative actions and policy dialogue. All those interviewed reflected on the importance of building understanding, learning together and building trust. This understanding and trust building occurs on at least three levels: between committee members, between the Committee and the USFS, and of course between the committee and the constituencies for whom they speak.

The diversity of perspectives and levels of experience will need to be reflected in agenda design and processes. By way of example, several noted the importance of speaking only when knowledgeable about a particular subject matter. This principle must be balanced with members' need to learn in order to engage effectively in committee deliberations. Balancing effective use of time with the need to learn and build understanding will be fundamental to ensuring a level playing field for designing implementation advice.

Also note that not all participants come from national organizations, or are otherwise connected to national networks. It is critical to ensure that each participant has what he or she needs to serve their constituencies and to communicate effectively with them. An aspiration is for the committee members to become ambassadors for the rule, engaging their own networks and serving as liaisons to others.

### **12. Scope and scale**

Scope—what comprises the group's focus, and scale—the appropriate level of detail at which the committee will focus, were frequent topics of conversation. Agreement on these questions is critical and the participants recognize that starting the committee's work with agreement on the group's objectives is an important first step. Many recognize that the committee has to work at a national level, at a 30,000-foot view, and not at the level of specific forest plans.

To a person, committee members requested a primer on the rule and the directives. The group will need to find ways to give general direction and advice on substantive issues to ensure that the rule is implemented in clear, efficient, participatory and transparent ways. Several noted that this will need to be done without getting into specifics around any particular forest plan or into a single-text document negotiation on the language in the directives. Rather, what most noted would be most valuable is the development of sideboards, including the identification and analysis of key issues and the range of options for addressing those issues. Take restoration as an example. Rather than getting the group to agree on a single definition, many saw higher value in



articulating the sideboards in which to anchor the definitional conversation. This could be achieved if the group maintains its national-level focus.

### **13. Early topics – early adopters and directives**

Committee members expressed interest in grounding their recommendations by learning from early adopters and others who are building successful collaboration, addressing challenges, and creating innovative plans. A few noted that these pilot projects should be observed but not given undue weight in the committee’s deliberations. Most, however, view engagement with early adopter forests as a critical source of challenges and lessons learned. Participants are interested in working with early adopters to learn from the field and not to instruct the field; they recognize the importance of not constraining or meddling in early adopter implementation efforts. Several noted that focusing the committee’s energy on reviewing and advising on the directives first, and engaging with the early adopter after would be a logical approach to the work. Attention to the directives will focus the committee on effective implementation guidance.

### **14. Additional topics**

Several areas of focus not elaborated in the charter were identified as potentially value added for the committee. These include helping the agency think through the change in Forest Service culture that may be necessary for the rule’s transparent and participatory approach to planning. Several mentioned that successful implementation will require significant resources and will test the Service’s ability to fund scientific investigation, planning processes, collaboration, plan implementation, monitoring and adaptive management.

## **IV. Conclusion**

The interviews have already proved invaluable in helping the Forest Service and the facilitation team to build a detailed agenda and draft operating protocols for the first meeting, and to begin building agendas for the first year’s meetings. The conversations will continue to lead the committee – and all who are committed to helping them – as they work to help the Service implement the rule successfully.

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Mike Anderson	National, Regional, or Local Environmental Organization Representative	The Wilderness Society	Seattle, Washington
William Barquin	American Indian Tribe Representative	Kootenai Tribe of Idaho	Portland, Oregon
Butch Blazer	Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment	USDA	
Robert Bonnie	Senior Advisor for Environment and Climate	USDA	
Susan Jane Brown	Conservation Organization or Watershed Association Representative	Blue Mountain Forest Partners	Portland, Oregon
Robert Cope	County or Local Elected Office Representative	Lemhi County Commissioner	Salmon, Idaho
Adam Cramer	Dispersed Recreation Representative	Outdoor Alliance	Bethesda, Maryland
Daniel Dessecker	Commercial or Recreational Hunting and Fishing Interests Representative	Ruffed Grouse Society	Rice Lake, Wisconsin
Russell Ehnes	Developed Outdoor or Commercial Recreation Interest Representative	National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council	Great Falls, Montana
Stephen Kandell	Conservation Organization or Watershed Association Representative	Trout Unlimited	Durango, Colorado
James Magagna	Private Landowner/Grazing Representative	Wyoming Stock Growers Association	Rock Springs, Wyoming
Leanne Marten	Associate Deputy Chief for National Forest System	US Forest Service	
Joan May	County or Local Elected Office Representative	San Miguel County Commissioner	Telluride, Colorado
Pamela Motley	Timber Industry Representative	West Range Reclamation, LLC,	Hotchkiss, Colorado
Peter Nelson	National, Regional, or Local Environmental Organization Representative	Defenders of Wildlife	Washington D.C
Candice Price	Youth Representative	Urban American Outdoors	Kansas City, Missouri
Vickie Roberts	Public at-Large Representative	Shelton Roberts Properties	Winona, Mississippi
Greg Schaefer	Energy and Mineral Development Representative	Arch Coal, Inc	Gillette, Wyoming

Harris Sherman	Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment	USDA	
Rodney Stokes	State Elected Office Representative	Michigan Department of Natural Resources	East Lansing, Michigan
Thomas Tidwell	Chief	US Forest Service	
Christopher Topik	Conservation Organization or Watershed Association Representative	The Nature Conservancy,	Vienna, Virginia
Tom Troxel	Timber Industry Representative	Intermountain Forest Association	Rapid City, South Dakota
Lorenzo Valdez	Private Landowner/Grazing Representative	Youngsville Cattlemen Association	Fairview, New Mexico
Howard Raymond Vaughan	Public at-Large Representative		Montgomery, Alabama
Leslie Weldon	Deputy Chief for National Forest System	US Forest Service	
Not Interviewed: Wally Covington	Scientific Community Representative	Northern Arizona University	Flagstaff, Arizona