

# Introduction

## Purpose of this Land Management Plan

The purpose of the Flathead National Forest Land Management Plan (hereinafter referred to as “Plan” or “land management plan”) is to provide overall strategic guidance for the sustainable management of the Flathead National Forest by guiding relevant resource management programs, practices, uses, and projects. This Plan sets the overall context for informed decision making by evaluating and addressing social, economic, and ecological considerations relevant to management of the forest. In particular, the Plan:

- Is strategic in nature. This Plan does not include decisions with on-the-ground effects that can be meaningfully evaluated through a site-specific NEPA process. Those decisions are made later, only after more detailed analysis and further public involvement occurs.
- Describes the desired conditions of National Forest System (NFS) lands and resources.
- Identifies the strategies to maintain or achieve those conditions.
- Identifies land areas as generally suitable or unsuitable for various uses.
- Identifies the guidelines for projects and activities.
- Identifies areas with special or unique characteristics.
- Was developed through public involvement and collaboration, which started at the earliest stages of plan development and will continue through plan completion, project planning, and monitoring
- Emphasizes the role of best available science. New knowledge and information can be analyzed and added to this Plan at any time.
- Contributes to social, economic, and ecological sustainability. This Plan aspires to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

This Plan emphasizes an adaptive management approach which includes a collaborative public process and results in a dynamic document that can be improved at any time. Such an informed and adaptive guide to land stewardship allows the Forest Supervisor to better utilize resources and

manage ecosystems. The adaptive management cycle includes (1) plan development, (2) plan implementation, (3) plan monitoring, inventory and assessment, and (4) plan review and evaluation. The findings of plan review and evaluation reveal any needs to change the Plan, which begins the adaptive cycle again.

### **Special Note to Reviewers of this Proposed Plan**

While the monitoring program is not a plan component, it is a critical part of the adaptive management cycle. It is sufficiently important that the 2005 Planning Rule explicitly requires public involvement in development of the monitoring program. The final, Proposed Land Management Plan will include monitoring questions that guide development of the monitoring program. As part of your comments on this Proposed Plan, we would like your feedback as to the kinds of monitoring questions you think we should use to assess our progress toward the desired conditions. Monitoring questions should address whether management within the plan area maintains or makes progress toward the desired conditions. The most helpful input you can give us would be your answers to the following questions:

Which of the desired conditions do you think are most important to monitor?

Why do you think these desired conditions are especially important to monitor?

## **Plan Components**

The format of this Plan is different than plans issued in the first round of agency planning that occurred after the passage of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA). This Plan is designed to better communicate the concepts of strategic guidance and adaptive management for the Flathead National Forest. There is an important distinction between “plan components” and other sections of the Plan. No changes can be made to plan components without amending the Plan through an appropriate National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, including public involvement. Other plan sections, which contain information about the plan components or provide background on program emphases or forest conditions, can be changed without formally amending this Plan. Plan components are highlighted to make it clear which sections of this Plan cannot be changed without going through a formal amendment process.

There are five plan components:

### **Plan Components**

[Desired Conditions](#)

[Objectives](#)

[Suitability of Areas](#)

[Special Areas](#)

[Guidelines](#)

**Desired Conditions:** The social, economic, and ecological attributes toward which management of the land and resources of the plan area is to be directed. In some cases the desired conditions already exist and our intention is to maintain them. In other cases, they may be achievable in the relatively near future, while in some cases the desired conditions may only be achievable over a long period of time.

**Objectives:** Concise projections of measurable, time-specific intended outcomes. Objectives are the means of measuring progress toward achieving or maintaining desired conditions.

**Suitability of Areas:** National Forest System lands are classified as “generally suitable” or “generally not suitable” for various uses. Management areas are used in this Plan to identify the general suitability of lands for different uses and activities.

**Special Areas:** Lands within the National Forest System that receive special management consideration because of their unique or special characteristics, for example, research natural areas, botanical areas, or national historic trails.

**Guidelines: Technical guidance for designing projects and activities.**

During plan implementation, projects and activities must be consistent with the land management plan (36 CFR 219.8(b)). Consistency with the plan is achieved by being consistent with the plan components in the following ways:

**Desired conditions and objectives (36 CFR 219.7(a)(2)(i) and (ii)) -** Most projects and activities are developed specifically to achieve or maintain one or more of the desired conditions and objectives of the plan. It should not be expected that each project or activity will contribute to all desired conditions or objectives in every instance, but only to a selected subset. Furthermore, some projects and activities may not be clearly related to a specific social, economic, or ecological desired condition or objective of the plan (for example, facility maintenance may be proposed without a corresponding desired condition or objective for that proposal), so it also should not be expected that in every instance, a project can clearly point to a specific desired condition as the reason the project was proposed.

To be consistent with the plan, a project or activity can:

- Maintain or achieve one or more desired conditions or objectives,
- Be neutral to relevant desired conditions or objectives, or
- Have negative short-term effects, but beneficial long-term effects on one or more desired conditions or objectives.

To the extent practicable, documentation for projects and activities will identify which desired conditions and objectives are being addressed, and whether these conditions and objectives are being advanced, not affected, or temporarily slowed. Project documentation is not required to speak to all the available opportunities to meet or work toward desired conditions in a project area, but will instead focus on the specific social, economic, or ecological conditions that prompted the need for the proposal.

**Guidelines (36 CFR 219.7(a)(2)(iii))** - To be consistent with guidelines, a project or activity will apply relevant guidelines, unless there is a documented reason to adjust the guideline for a specific project or activity. If adjustment would be neutral with regard to the relevant social, economic, or ecological condition or would be a more appropriate way to achieve or maintain desired conditions and objectives, the Responsible Official will describe the proposed adjustment and explain the relationship to desired conditions and objectives in the project-level environmental analysis and decision documents. In such cases, a land management plan amendment generally is not required.

**Suitability of areas (36 CFR 219.7(a)(2)(iv))** – The plan identifies areas that are generally suitable for a variety of multiple-uses (36 CFR 219.12(a)). These identifications show where these uses are compatible or incompatible with the area’s desired conditions. The actual suitability for a particular use, even if an area is identified as generally suitable for a use, will not be determined until a project or activity is authorized. Moreover, it is not possible to anticipate every project or activity that could be proposed throughout the unit, throughout the life of a plan. An approved project or activity is considered to be consistent with the plan if the project or activity is consistent with the general suitability identification and is consistent with other relevant plan components. If the project or activity is not consistent with this identification, the Responsible Official should amend the plan.

**Special area guidance (36 CFR 219.7(a)(2)(v))** - Special areas may have different management direction that represents their unique or special characteristics. For example, a botanical area may have desired conditions that differ from the larger landscape surrounding that special area. Project consistency for a special area would be determined in the same manner as

consistency with other desired conditions, suitability identifications, and guidelines as discussed previously, but specific to that area.

## Other Important Concepts

In addition to the Plan itself, adaptive management also relies on a number of other important concepts. The following topics are all integral to this planning process and are further addressed in a separate collection of supporting documentation called the “Plan Set of Documents”:

**Assessments:** The current social, economic, and ecological conditions and trends, and substantial changes from referenced conditions and trends are assessed, analyzed and used in this Plan. Assessments are contained in the Plan Set of Documents.

**Sustainability:** “Sustainability” means meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Sustainability is composed of desirable social, economic, and ecological conditions or trends interacting at varying spatial and temporal scales embodying the principles of multiple-use and sustained-yield.

The overall goal for social and economic sustainability for the Flathead National Forest is to contribute to sustaining cultural, social, and economic systems within the plan area. The overall goal for ecological sustainability for the Forest is to provide a framework to contribute to sustaining native ecological systems by providing ecological conditions to support diversity of native plant and animal species in the plan area. This Plan provides for these sustainability goals.

**Role of Science:** The Forest Service has a long history of science-based decision making. The use of science in planning provides the Responsible Official with knowledge, methods, and expert review in order to make an informed decision. To ensure the Flathead National Forest’s land management planning decisions take into account the best available science as well as other information and factors, the Forest Supervisor must:

- Document how the best available science was taken into account in the planning process within the context of the issues.
- Evaluate and disclose substantial uncertainties in that science.
- Evaluate and disclose substantial risks associated with plan components based on that science.
- Document that the science was appropriately interpreted and applied.

To ascertain the best available science, the Forest has worked with scientists and other professional peers in federal and state agencies, research institutions, and other agencies and organizations. Examples include but are not limited to:

- U.S.F.S. Inventory and Monitoring Institute
- U.S.F.S. Forest Management Service Center
- Mason, Bruce and Girard, Consulting Foresters
- U.S.F.S. Rocky Mountain Research Station
- Montana Natural Heritage Program
- Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
- U.S. Geological Survey
- Glacier National Park
- Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
- Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- NatureServe Database
- Montana Natural Heritage Program

We will continue to work with these and other entities between publication of the proposed Plan and final Plan. It is not until the final publication of the Flathead National Forest Land Management Plan that the Forest Supervisor must document how science was taken into account.

**Ecological Diversity:** The NFMA requires that land management plans provide for diversity of plant and animal communities. According to NFMA, diversity is based on the suitability and capability of the specific land area. With an ecosystem approach, this Plan will provide the framework for maintaining and restoring desired conditions for plant and animal species. When necessary, additional provisions for federally listed threatened or endangered species, species of concern, and species of interest will be included.

**Timber Management Analysis:** The NFMA and the 2005 Planning Rule require timber management analyses such as identification of land's suitability for timber harvest or timber production, and an estimate of the quantity of timber that can be removed annually in perpetuity on a sustained yield basis.

## Procedural Points

**Changes Between the Proposed and Final Plan:** Based on analysis of public comments and the incorporation of any new information, changes will occur between the proposed and final versions of this Plan.

**NEPA Compliance:** Under the 2005 Planning Rule, land management plans are not required to have an accompanying environmental impact statement (EIS) or environmental assessment (EA). A plan, plan amendment, or plan revision may be categorically excluded (CE) from documentation in an EIS or EA. Projects implemented to achieve plan objectives will continue to be documented in EISs, EAs, or CEs.

**Transition from the 1982 Planning Rule to the 2005 Planning Rule:** Because the Flathead National Forest had started revision of its land management plan before January 2005, we were not required to stop the process and start over when the new planning rule came into effect. Consequently, some of our supporting documentation, while it is fully adequate, is in a different format than that specified by the 2005 rule. For example, our Analysis of the Management Situation (AMS) documents conditions and trends that, under the 2005 rule, would be found in the Comprehensive Evaluation Report (CER). (36 CFR 219.14(e))

**Final Authority on Travel Management:** While this plan does include desired conditions, objectives, general suitability, and guidelines relevant to access and travel management, decisions regarding where and when motorized use is allowed are made at the site-specific, project level. This plan may express desired conditions or general suitability that differ from current access and travel management; however, current access and travel management will remain in place until such time as the Forest has completed site-specific NEPA documentation and public involvement to determine which, if any, changes to current management would be made. The Forest Visitor's Map and special orders reflect current travel management.

**Decisions Made in the Previous Forest Plan:** In general, decisions made in the previous Forest Plan, such as resource management standards, will no longer be binding unless they have been explicitly carried forward by inclusion in this Proposed Plan. It is our intent that all necessary and effective resource protections in the old Plan have been carried forward in one or more of the components of this Proposed Plan; however, the strategies we propose to use for accomplishing those protections may have changed.

## Plan Organization

This Plan is organized into this Introduction, three chapters entitled Vision, Strategy, and Design Criteria, and a Glossary of terms. Each chapter includes one or more plan components, plus additional information to help the reader understand the guidance included in plan components.

### Chapter 1—Vision

This chapter describes the vision for the future of the Flathead National Forest through **desired conditions** that reflect the Forest’s uniqueness on a national and regional level. It includes the desired conditions plan component.

### Chapter 2—Strategy

Chapter 2 describes how the Forest intends to move toward the desired conditions. It includes a discussion of program emphases and the **objectives, suitability of areas, and special areas** plan components. While the program emphasis section is not a plan component, it describes the general framework for project planning on the Flathead National Forest.

### Chapter 3—Design Criteria

Design criteria are the sideboards that guide our management activities. They ensure the protection of resources as we implement projects to help us move toward the desired conditions. This chapter includes the **guidelines** plan component. In addition to plan guidelines, the design criteria chapter also points the way to other existing direction outside this Plan. Management direction found in public laws, regulations, Forest Service manuals and handbooks is generally not repeated in this Plan.

### Glossary

The Glossary defines terms used in this Plan that may not be familiar to the reader. In most cases, the entries are short definitions; however, in other instances, entries are expanded in order to clarify more complex concepts, such as “riparian conservation areas” or “multiple use purposes.”



## Relationship to Other Strategic Guidance

The Forest Service has defined a five-level strategic planning framework: Mission, Vision, Strategies, Tactics, and Projects. Several of these five levels are directly related to the 2005 Planning Rule's plan components. This connection is made through this Plan's Vision, Strategy, and Design Criteria. The following table demonstrates the linkage between the Forest Service's strategic planning framework and the 2005 Planning Rule's plan components.

Table 1: Strategic planning framework.

Forest Service's Strategic Planning Framework	Flathead Forest's Plan Format	2005 Rule Plan Components
<b>Mission</b>	Precedes the Plan	Not applicable
<b>Vision</b>	Vision (Chapter 1)	Desired Conditions
<b>Strategies</b>	Strategy (Chapter 2)	Objectives Suitable Uses Special Areas
<b>Tactics</b>	Design Criteria (Chapter 3)	Guidelines
<b>Projects</b>	Follow the Plan	Not applicable

## Environmental Management System

The 2005 Planning Rule requires the Forest Service to establish an environmental management system (EMS) for each unit of the National Forest System. While not a part of the plan itself, the Flathead National Forest EMS will be an important successor to this Plan, aiding in its implementation.

### What is an EMS?

An EMS is a system to manage environmental impacts. It focuses on how to improve our everyday work to reduce impacts to the environment. The expected outcome is a continual improvement of our management.

EMS identifies the major activities, products or services conducted on the Forest, and their associated impacts on the environment. The Forest Supervisor selects the activities, environmental impacts, and objectives deemed most important, and these become the focus of the EMS. EMS implementation reflects accepted quality management principles based on a "Plan, Do, Check, Act" model. The EMS is intended to help the Forest prevent adverse environmental impacts by planning carefully, implementing our work on the ground with appropriate controls in

place, monitoring the effectiveness of our controls, and adjusting our management to continually reduce undesirable environmental impacts.

The Flathead National Forest will develop an EMS using an international standard known as ISO 14001. The standard has 17 requirements, including an independent audit to assure that the system is working. More information about EMS and ISO 14001 is available on the Forest Service website at: [www.fs.fed.us/emc/nepa/ems](http://www.fs.fed.us/emc/nepa/ems).

### **Why an EMS?**

A basic framework for the Flathead National Forest's Land Management Plan is sustainability. EMS uses independent audits to display to the public how we conduct selected activities, measure the results, and improve our performance in meeting our commitments to the environment and to sustainability.

It is a more transparent way of improving our management. We will document our procedures for accomplishing certain activities, check our work performance, and make adjustments to improve our performance. The responsibility for implementing the EMS falls to all our employees, as well as contractors and permittees. Implementing our EMS includes helping visitors understand and reduce the impacts of their activities on the land. The following benefits of EMS should accrue quickly: (1) We will adjust for changing circumstances or to improve performance; (2) We will account for performance through required audits and assure the results of these audits are visible to the whole organization and the public; and (3) We will communicate with every employee so we all know our environmental commitments and what we are supposed to do to improve our management.

## **About the Flathead National Forest**

The Flathead National Forest is located in the northern Rocky Mountains amidst the mountains and valleys of western Montana and includes about 2.3 million acres of public land. It includes portions of Flathead, Lake, Lewis and Clark, Lincoln, Missoula, and Powell counties. The Forest has five ranger districts which include: Swan Lake, Hungry Horse, Glacier View, Tally Lake, and Spotted Bear. The Forest Supervisor's office is located in Kalispell, Montana.

The Flathead National Forest is the gateway to national and world destinations, such as Glacier National Park, the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, Big Mountain Ski Resort, and Canada. The Flathead National Forest complements these areas by providing high quality recreation settings and experiences, motorized and non-motorized travel opportunities, or primitive settings and experiences.

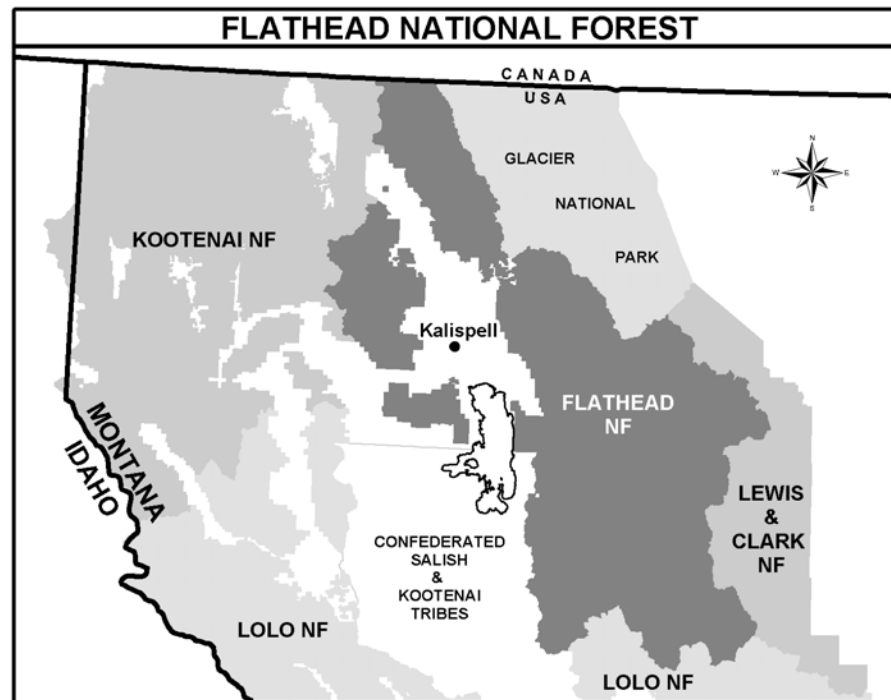


Figure 1: Vicinity Map of the Flathead National Forest.

Encircled by other national forests and Glacier National Park, the Flathead National Forest is the true heart of the northern Rocky Mountain wild ecosystem. Large designated wilderness areas, such as the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex and the Mission Mountains Wilderness, in concert with other special areas such as wild and scenic river systems, the Jewel Basin Hiking Area, and other undeveloped backcountry areas, provide habitat strongholds for federally-listed species, such as grizzly bears, gray wolf, Canada lynx, and bull trout. The Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Recovery Zone for grizzly bears covers most of the Flathead National Forest. In addition, more than 200 species of birds have been recorded.

The diversity of life on the Flathead is striking. Twenty to sixty inches of annual precipitation create a wide variety of plant life, from lush groves of cedars cloaked in moss to lone whitebark pines clinging to the tops of windswept mountain ridges. Dense forests occupy about 89 percent of the Flathead lands. Dominant tree species include Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir, lodgepole pine, Douglas-fir, and western larch. Traces of grand fir, western white pine, ponderosa pine, and aspen also occur. Likewise, the landforms themselves vary greatly, from the magnificent peaks of the Mission Range with their craggy reaches of bare rock to the more rounded, glacial landforms of the Swan valley and Salish Mountains.

Water is abundant on the Flathead Forest. Rivers, streams, lakes, reservoirs, glacial potholes, fens, and bogs are common across the Forest. Over 200 miles of wild and scenic rivers have been congressionally designated on the north, middle, and south forks of the Flathead River. Nearly three dozen lakes lie within the Jewel Basin Hiking Area which provides exceptional scenic vistas of the Flathead valley and the Swan Range. Flathead National Forest streams flow into the Swan, Stillwater, and the three forks of the Flathead River. They eventually flow into Flathead Lake, the largest freshwater lake west of the Great Lakes. The Flathead National Forest provides high quality habitat for bull trout, cutthroat trout; and other important fish, amphibian, and aquatic species. The combinations of high quality terrestrial and aquatic habitats offer outstanding hunting and fishing opportunities

Recreation opportunities abound in any season. Hiking, horseback riding, boating, white-water rafting, hunting, fishing, camping, driving for pleasure, skiing, and snowmobiling are just a few of the recreational activities that occur on the Flathead National Forest. About 3,500 miles of system roads and 2,100 miles of system trails provide a mixture of motorized and non-motorized travel opportunities on the Forest for resource management and public use.

The Flathead Forest has productive forest lands that contribute to the local and regional supply of forest products and is an important contributor to the local economy. Managing vegetation composition and structure, including fuels, using modern harvesting techniques contributes to people's livelihoods and enriches their lives.

## Changes and Trends

Much has changed since the adoption of the original Plan. The Flathead National Forest has monitored changing conditions across the Forest, which guides us in preparing this Plan. The public has helped us identify concerns about these changes on: access and travel management, vegetation, biodiversity and ecosystem integrity, inventoried roadless area management, and recreation. This section describes the most pressing types of change we currently face in managing the Flathead National Forest and offers a few examples of each.

### Demographic Changes

Over the last 10 to 15 years, Flathead County has been among the fastest growing populations in Montana. Population increase and other demographic changes greatly affect land management. Demographic change has caused: a greater demand for recreation opportunities, an increase in private land developments adjacent to

National Forest System lands, and a growing number of people with a range of personal values and different levels of natural resource experience taking part in land management issues.

### **Economic Changes**

Local communities and the Forest have experienced much economic change in the past two decades. Examples are: the decrease in forest product manufacturing jobs, the increase in service-oriented businesses, and the decline in the Forest budget and reduced numbers of employees to carry out land management activities.

### **Technological Changes**

Changes in technology can prompt new demands or create new options for managing the land. An example of this is the production of more efficient helicopters that offer new possibilities in logging. Examples of new demands are cellular and electronic company requests to place towers on National Forest System lands and new capabilities in recreational equipment like mountain bikes, off-highway vehicles (OHVs), and global positioning systems (GPS) that allow people to experience the outdoors in new ways.

### **Ecological Changes**

Natural resources are dynamic and some of the trends we are experiencing include: changes in forest, grassland, and shrubland vegetation composition and structure, an increase in invasive species populations, increasing fragmentation of wildlife habitat, and increases in threatened and endangered species. Watersheds have also been impacted with a resultant decline in aquatic habitat and species. Recent large fires on the Flathead National Forest have changed the species composition and structure of the vegetation, particularly in the South Fork and North Fork Flathead River drainages.

## **Summary**

Change in the world is inevitable. Sometimes changes progress at a steady, predictable, slow pace, such as growing forests from young trees to complex old growth structures. Other times changes happen rapidly, such as the death of trees during a severe fire. People and their ideas change too. Sometimes people change in response to changes in their environment. Other times, people cause their environment to change.

The Flathead National Forest considers people to be an integral part of the forest environment. Forest managers are committed to balancing the need to conserve and sustain natural resources with providing for people's desire for products and services now and in the future. It is appropriate that forest management direction changes in response to changes in people and their environment. The following chapters describe the Flathead National Forest's **vision** for the future, its **strategy** for achieving the vision, and the **design criteria** that will guide projects and activities across the Forest.