

USFS National Advisory Committee – Forest Planning Rule Implementation
November 21, 2013 – Washington, DC
Meeting Summary

Meeting Objectives:

- Deliver and discuss the committee’s final recommendations on draft directives with USFS leadership, and
- Dialogue on issues and interests in fulfilling the FACA Committee Charter beyond advising on the directives.

I. Opening Remarks

USFS leadership opened the meeting by acknowledging the value that a representative and skilled group of collaborators bring to the challenge of implementing the 2012 Planning Rule, and thanking the committee for their extraordinary work.

Tony Tooke, Designated Federal Official for the committee, opened the meeting by recognizing the extraordinary efforts of the committee, noting that the skill and the commitment to collaboration are demonstrated in the committee’s accomplishments to date. He added that Congressional briefings provided the day before by several individual members of the committee conveyed the quality of the deliberations, and the value of a representative group of interests. Mr. Tooke acknowledged the efforts of others that contributed to the recommendations, including the Forest Service’s Ecosystem Management Coordination team, the facilitators, and the regional planning directors.

Pam Motley, Co-Chair, added that she is honored to serve on the committee with the other twenty members, each of whom bring their expertise and experience into the work on the recommended changes to the directives. The committee has come to understand the complexity of the planning processes and is a model for the collaboration envisioned in the rule. She acknowledged Tony Tooke, Chris French and the Forest Service staff for their support of the committee’s work. She also emphasized the value of meeting with the Idaho delegation and with the Senate Energy and Natural Resource Committee, and with the Congressional Research Service.

Ray Vaughan, Co-Chair, stated that the process for producing the rule was groundbreaking not just for the Forest Service, but for any federal agency. He acknowledged that the soul and spirit of our country is captured in our national forests and that the committee’s recommendations are an historic break-through that addresses very difficult issues that have been vexing the agency. It is important to recognize that the committee is making its recommendations by unanimous consensus of the twenty-one members. Finally, Mr. Vaughan suggested that the Forest Service could be on the brink of its Golden Age if the agency continues the boldness it demonstrated through the rulemaking and this committee’s work and if the agency and the committee members continue to look to the horizon, be bold and have faith.

Robert Bonnie, Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, USDA, offered his thanks to the committee and acknowledged that this committee has become an example of what can be done to resolve longstanding differences. He indicated that the agency invested heavily in collaboration during the planning rule and that this committee proves that the investment was worthwhile. He stated that the agency is committed to continued collaboration and will need the committee's help.

Tom Tidwell, Chief of the Forest Service, added his thanks to the committee and recognized the contribution from Tony, Chris, the co-chairs and the committee. He contrasted dialogue and collaboration under the 2012 rule with simply sending comments to the Forest Service for consideration under the 1982 rule. He acknowledged that collaboration is not quick or easy, but it is the best way to provide for meaningful engagement of the public. He also cautioned that the new rule will only be successful if it can be implemented. Chief Tidwell indicated that it is vitally important that forest plans reflect diverse interests and that this can only happen if people are able to engage in ways that improve decision making. He indicated that the Forest Service is dealing with the most complex issues in the agency's history and that a modern planning rule is essential to handling them successfully. He stated the importance of the implementation to come, recognizing that for successful implementation, the plans must reflect the needs, wants, hopes of the individuals who care about the forests.

II. Introductions

Committee members introduced themselves individually and named one or two key issues of interest. This exercise surfaced a theme of acknowledgement that the rule represents a sea change in planning, and a concomitant willingness on behalf of committee members to work with the agency in navigating this transformative moment. Opportunity is not limited to the agency: committee members talked about transforming the relationships of their own constituencies to the forest planning process. Several committee members stated that the interests they represent are not favorably inclined toward the rule. In those cases, each committee member underscored the importance of implementation, and the risks that are sometimes necessary to assert leadership.

Many identified the need for outreach writ large—within the agency and department, across governmental agencies at every level (Tribal, state, regional and local) and with other relevant organizations, including NGO's. One aspect of this was expressed as the need for strategic partnerships and creative outreach using different methods (e.g. social media) to target broader and different audiences (e.g. urban populations and youth). Another aspect is learning how to improve collaboration on the ground and at the interagency levels. Finally, committee members identified the need to establish a willingness to take the necessary risks needed for implementation of collaboratively designed plans that factor for uncertainty and unpredictability. To this end, they also expressed strong dedication to making the adaptive management model real, particularly as it relates to place.

III. Public Comment

Jill Gottesman, Wilderness Society – Southern Regional Office – Ms. Gottesman stated that the best possible forest plan revision would come from the effort to coordinate with stakeholders, engage new voices, create a robust constituency for the plan and bring in new issues including cultural heritage, tourism, and economic development. She indicated that there are 40 organizations participating in the collaboration she's working on. She stressed the need to create a dialogue on the front-end and to develop a community supported and scientific management approach. In addition, successful engagement will create a lasting voice for innovative management, build trust and relationships, and give positive momentum to future management decisions.

Hugh Irwin, Wilderness Society – North Carolina – Mr. Irwin indicated that the successful restoration initiative in North Carolina is addressing difficult issues and identifying opportunities for ecological restoration, and is using best available science to address degraded conditions in hopes of reducing invasive species and increasing age diversity in the forest.

Craig McCullough, Recreational Aviation Foundation – Mr. McCullough asked that the committee recognize the importance of airstrips as the 'trailheads' for many forest users and as one way of introducing young people to the national forests. He asked that the committee consider air uses and account for them in the planning process.

IV. Presentation of Committee Recommendations

Overview

The committee spent much of 2013 carefully reviewing, learning about and building consensus recommendations regarding proposed revisions to the draft planning rule directives (directives) in a stepwise fashion. The consensus recommendations on the directives primarily focus on improving **efficiency**, by reducing the time to produce and finalize plans, and **effectiveness**, by producing viable, high-quality plans that are implemented. To do this, the committee focused their deliberations on engagement, creating effective collaboration that moves the plan to completion; breaking through long-standing issues by clarifying definitions, increasing transparency, accountability and public engagement; and by ensuring the adaptive management cycle is operationalized.

The body of recommendations comprise the following topics: Adaptive Management; National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Integration; Outreach for Diversity; Public Involvement and Collaboration; Intergovernmental Interaction; Social, Economic and Cultural Assessment; Water; Wilderness; Climate Change; Desired Conditions and Natural Range of Variation (NRV); Species Of Conservation Concern; and the Objections Process. Final recommendations can be viewed and downloaded from (<http://www.fs.usda.gov/main/planningrule/committee>).

Committee members presented brief overviews of the recommendations-highlights follow below.

Adaptive Management Framework

Monitoring is essential to adaptive management. These recommendations are designed to promote continuous monitoring and adaptive management cycles (assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring) in a manner that is both transparent and accountable. Active collaboration among the Forest Service, the public and external partners, including States, local governments, and Tribes, in the development and implementation of the plan-monitoring program, as included in Section 32 will further enhance the efficiency and efficacy of implementation.

NEPA Integration

One of the key goals of the committee is to broaden and deepen public involvement in the planning process. The recommendations are designed to ensure that the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is effectively and efficiently integrated into the forest planning process, and to ensure that members of the public have the opportunity to engage early in the planning process, e.g. pre-NEPA Assessment and NEPA Scoping phases, including issue identification and proposed action development. The committee and USFS designed a graphic to depict the links between the two processes. The recommendations address efficiency by potentially combining the notice of intent to begin an EIS with the notice to begin the planning process, and increase the level of transparency throughout the NEPA work. Finally, the recommendations are designed to ensure that forest planners distinguish between the necessary scoping that has to occur before the formal NEPA process Scoping Phase.

Outreach for Diversity, Public Involvement and Collaboration

These recommendations encourage the use of different tools and strategies to ensure a greater awareness and involvement of local communities and under-represented communities (youth, low-income, and racial/ethnic minority) in national forest planning and management.

Intergovernmental Coordination and Cooperation

The recommendations clarify that the agency has legal and moral responsibilities to tribal governments and state and local governments. If governments at all levels work together on forest plans, the federal government can access the resources and expertise of tribal, local, regional and state governments and can improve plans. Better coordination and cooperation will allow all governments to move together into restoration. It is essential that the final directives clarify roles/responsibilities and authority.

Social, Economic and Cultural Assessment, Plan Components and Monitoring

Through this recommendation, the committee intends to deepen the guidance on and demonstrate parity in the relationship between ecological sustainability and social, cultural and economic sustainability. To achieve the necessary parity between the USFS' historical expertise in ecological assessment, planning and managing, the recommendations ensure that the Forest Service will assess, plan for, monitor and adaptively manage social, economic and cultural questions that are important to those who rely on the forest and use the plan area and will put these priorities on par with ecological assessment, plan components, monitoring and adaptive management efforts.

It has been over a quarter century since the 1982 Rule was promulgated, and the world has changed considerably. There is a need for a concomitant change in the type (e.g. crowd sourced data, participatory mapping outputs, etc.), quality (e.g. increased granularity), availability and analysis of information about how the forest is used. The directives should point to these new sources of information, and evaluate the degree to which existing tools for analyzing social, economic and cultural information are sufficient to the task.

Water

The draft directives spoke to the environmental aspects of water management and didn't speak to the water users; the committee intended to give clear consideration to the water users and to promote risk management in dealing with questions of the forest's water resources.

Wilderness

Wilderness designation has been historically fraught with conflict. The committee's intent in designing these recommendations focused on the need to find ways to create dialogue rather than creating court cases. Transparency, effective use of the Wilderness Act, dialogue, improved efficiency in starting the inventory – these are all part of the recommendation. Key elements of this set of recommendations include the importance of distinguishing between management of designated and recommended wilderness, use of travel management planning information for wilderness inventories, and recognizing distinct considerations between eastern and western wilderness areas.

Climate Change

These recommendations are designed to ensure that the Forest Service can efficiently and effectively address climate change and associated uncertainty within the planning process by clarifying the need to address and plan for the implications of climate change through specific monitoring and adaptive management. Use of existing tools such as the climate change roadmap to address climate change questions in forest plans is encouraged. Finally, the recommendations recognize the need for flexibility to allow the agency to manage for resiliency, and they encourage the agency to be a leader in developing strategies to that end.

Desired Conditions and Natural Range of Variation (NRV)

There is credible uncertainty about what is in NRV, how to consider climate change and how to reconcile the difference between managing to NRV and managing to desired conditions. The recommendations define both desired conditions and NRV, and are designed to ensure planners understand that managing for NRV is not required by the planning rule, and that national forests can be managed for desired conditions outside the NRV. The committee wants a forward-looking plan, focused on desired conditions and resiliency, as a way to make good decisions.

Species of Conservation Concern (SCC)

These recommendations address ambiguity in the draft directives as to when, how, and under what process potential SCC's become determined SCC's by clarifying the timing, stressing that the regional forester SCC determinations be made early, and clarifying the role of responsible officials and regional foresters in SCC identification and determination. To facilitate transparency and public engagement, the recommendations direct the regional forester to provide public access to the list of determined SCC's. To increase efficiency and efficacy, the recommendations also encourage utilization of local, state and Tribal agency expertise to identify SCC's.

Objections Process

Designed to ensure that eligibility requirements for interested parties are anchored in substantive participation in the planning process, these recommendations also give the reviewing officer discretion to structure participation in the objections process. The committee understands that OGC that differs on the definition of interested party, however the committee remains concerned about the definition of interested party and stands behind their proposed recommendation.

V. Dialogue with Leadership- Recommendations on the Draft Directives

Overview

With the brief overview of recommendations completed, the group turned to the USFS leadership to identify questions or concerns with the recommendations. USFS leadership thanked the committee again for their work, noting that they anticipate the need for ongoing advice to finalize the directives. More broadly, they concur that the rule represents a sea change in planning for the USFS, and they noted that it is imperative to ensure that the necessary cultural changes occur both within the agency, and across other partner organizations. With respect to the body of recommendations, they requested further conversations to clarify details and practical approaches to the recommendations on objections process, public involvement and collaboration, integration of cultural, social and economic dimensions in the planning process, species of conservation concern, NRV and climate change.

Discussion

Outreach for Diversity, Organizational Change, and the Role of Partnerships

How might the committee assist with the imperative of cultural change and resistance to make those changes within the agency, externally with relevant governments, agencies and others? The conversation opened with a discussion on the relationship between outreach for diversity, organizational change, and the role of partnerships.

One committee member advised thinking about the future now by focusing on young people. She noted that there are media professionals on standby ready to engage and help get the message out externally. Several noted that there is no need to reinvent the wheel, referring to existing efforts both within the USFS (e.g. CFLRP, participatory mapping in Region 6) and outside of the USFS that are doing similar work now (e.g. NPS, USFWS). A committee member shared an illustrative example from Detroit where a charter school is based on service projects that include conservation. He cited several examples of partnerships between city, state and federal entities designed to address cross cutting issues of conservation, education and workforce development. The committee emphasized that now is the time to improve opportunities for mutual benefit by improving coordination and cooperation and partnering opportunities to leverage shared interests with greater efficiency.

More detailed questions were then asked about how to effectively access and engage the broader population served by the USFS that is predominantly in urban/suburban areas. How should the USFS define and evaluate a satisfactory level of outreach to such areas? As with the above example, committee members noted the importance of partnering and shared several examples of both governmental and non- governmental organizations with vectors from population centers into the forests. Getting effective participation from both rural and urban areas is important, may require different strategies, and in both cases will require outreach, partnering and education.

Social/economic/cultural dimensions – analytical tools and methodologies, and partnerships- Thinking beyond outreach strategies, the discussion turned to how to build frameworks to capture social and economic values that reflect both statistically sound data and information generated by other sources (e.g. crowd-sourced data) in a purposeful way to inform the planning process. The recommendations emphasize the need to evaluate whether existing tools are sufficient for implementing the Rule, because external networks and associations have a handle on empirical data the USFS misses. With appropriate tools, the relevance and value of specific resources to publics proximate and distant could be determined. In conclusion, one committee member noted that this discussion serves as a good example of where the spirit of the planning rule- not the mechanics- creates both an opportunity and obligation for the USFS to be more engaged in efforts outside of the planning rule itself.

Climate Change, Natural Range of Variation (NRV), Restoration, Desired Conditions, BASI and Forward Looking Resilience

One committee member described this as one of the committee's greatest achievements. He noted that the key player in developing the agreed text is not a scientist, and underscored the intent of recommendations to restore to the future.

Climate is changing the natural range of variability (NRV) into the future, increasing uncertainty and unpredictability for planning purposes. Ecological integrity is defined in the rule in terms of NRV, and NRV is defined in the directives. The potential for misuse of the NRV framework as an end goal concerns the committee. The recommendations assert that the end goal should be achieving desired conditions --including when such conditions are outside the NRV. Committee member discussed a number of key considerations including the need for flexibility, the ability to mitigate for what we don't want- e.g. catastrophic fire in a watershed, and the need to manage for resilience – defined as the ability to bounce back. The relationship between restoration and resilience may warrant further consideration.

Species of Conservation Concern

Transparency and accountability were key drivers in the conversation about determination of SCC's. The recommendations direct the responsible official to make the list of potential SCC's available for public comment during the assessment phase. The regional forester would make the determination on SCC's once the assessment is complete, when formal planning starts. This would be published so it can be included in development of alternatives and plan components. Ensuring this determination is made at the regional level is important for clarifying governance issues.

Committee members added that there is no way not to make that determination fairly early on without giving up considerable efficiencies. Leadership reflected that this approach met their interests-- including ensuring a predictable and transparent process with clear pathways to involve the public in developing, adding or subtracting from the list of SCC's. Committee members noted two further clarifications on this matter. First, there is no mechanism for public involvement in the case of an addition to or deletion from the regional list-- instead the forest has to determine whether changes to the existing plan are necessary, and if so, how those changes are to be made. Second, the recommendations direct the USFS to involve the public in determining whether new plan components need to be changed/amended. The committee also acknowledged that there is a question as to how long into the future the USFS will maintain dual lists (SCC and sensitive species) for those working under the '82 rule. This issue plays into monitoring requirements. It is a mushy area where the committee can continue to sort out the monitoring component for those going through revisions under the '82 rule.

Adaptive management and monitoring

The committee first discussed their recommendation to move the chapter on adaptive management to the front of the directives, following the zero code. Noting that we have all seen plans that had monitoring chapters that included everything but the kitchen sink- the committee urged the USFS to be strategic and thoughtful about what goes into those monitoring plans, prioritizing the most important questions and clarifying how those fit into the adaptive management cycle. Determining what and how to monitor ties directly to the design of plan components --in this way plan components can be monitored and evaluated for efficiency/efficacy. Accordingly, the recommendations target the assumptions underpinning

plan components throughout and require monitoring questions associated with those assumptions.

The conversation surfaced the challenge of conducting effective and open conversation about limitations, and prioritizing what to track throughout. The committee anticipates that plans would be amended more frequently than the past, based on consistent and strategic monitoring. Monitoring should be a good thing -- and the committee emphasized the importance of ensuring monitoring does NOT become an onerous process.

VI. Dialogue with Leadership – Discussing Options for the Committee’s Path Forward

Overview

Setting the stage for the group discussion exploring options for the committee’s future work, Tony Tooke outlined a number of ideas on behalf of the leadership team, and the Implementation Work Group shared several possible approaches. The group discussed a number of options, including work with early adopter forests, broad scale monitoring, outreach and collaboration, and ongoing help with complex subject matter such as wilderness, NRV and climate change.

In addition to potential topics to focus the work on, committee members and USFS leadership identified a range of potential roles for the committee to play. These include ambassadors for the rule/directives, informal advisors and/or problem-solvers on complex issues (e.g. wilderness, NRV and climate change, SCC’s etc.), knowledge management facilitators and capacity building. Finally, committee members and leadership also discussed a number of levels in which the committee could work- within and across the USFS and other governmental and non-governmental agencies and/or associations; at the national and local level and finding ways to link the two. Early on in 2013 the committee began to discuss the idea of generating a Planning 101 or Citizen’s Guide to Planning. This idea has evolved over time and was deemed highly valuable by the leadership group as well as several other external stakeholders.

Discussion

Tony Tooke described the Forest Service’s efforts to create a learning environment among the early adopters and suggested that the challenges they face can be an important source of direction for this committee’s future efforts. He noted that the committee’s charter includes additional items that can inform next steps. Among the possible topics for future work are broad scale monitoring, addressing the concerns of stakeholders who either don’t participate in collaboration or leave the collaborative process, and outreach to urban areas.

The Implementation Workgroup was initially convened to explore linkages and shared learning opportunities between planners and the FACA committee, and was initially focused on crosswalking the rule with Open Standards for Conservation and elaborating the idea of a simple user’s guide for those who want to participate in forest planning. This could be a Planning 101 for the public and for line officers, twenty pages that explain how the rule and the

directives should work. This guide could serve as a tool for capacity building both within the USFS and for interested stakeholders.

The group has generated a number of additional ideas for future work over the course of several meetings. These include: establishing a network of practitioners – those who are working on plans under the new rule – to create a learning network and document innovations; outreach to broaden interest in support of implementing the rule, including among committee member networks comprising NGOs, and state and local officials; outreach to those who are dealing with related topics that bring them into forest planning such as those who are dealing with preventing catastrophic fire. The group underscored the role of partnerships as central to outreach strategies, describing when and how they can help implement the rule and the abundance of complementary initiatives and efficiencies to be gained through improved networking of partnerships and other mechanisms to increase communication, coordination and collaboration.

Discussion turned to implementation of the final directives and next-level recommendations with a focus on what the group anticipates will be the most complex questions: NRV and desired conditions; the monitoring transition; SCC; wilderness evaluation; and collaboration. The committee urges an evaluation of the existing tools for socio-economic or cultural assessment.

Members noted that the existing workgroup structure may continue to serve the group's interests by managing adaptively and transitioning their attention toward implementation of the recommendations. Activities might include general capacity building/education, ad-hoc problem-solving and advice, and developing guidance on strategies and techniques. Utilizing their own professional networks and associations, the committee can extend outreach beyond the USFS toward the general public, interested stakeholders, organizations and agencies. The committee could be helping in places where plan updates or new planning processes are likely to face conflicts such as northern New Mexico where there is a history of confrontation and mistrust. To this end, the group underscored the importance of exercising their unique position to address questions of national consistency and local innovation/responsiveness to local conditions, stakeholders and collaboratives. The committee stands in a position to think about both national policy and local implementation and try to link the two as they advance problem solving on specific issues and best management practices at the national level.

In the near term, there may be additional interaction on the directives. The Forest Service is considering employee comments, public comments and the committee's recommendations to revise the directives and then take the revised directives through the required clearance process. Tony reminded the committee that the Forest Service is committed to coming back to the committee if the next steps give rise to a problem with the committee's recommendations. There may be additional steps in the iterative process of creating final directives. The FACA committee will develop and finalize a work plan in early 2014.