

CAPITOL COMMENTS

National Forest Management Planning



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Planning in an ever-changing world is difficult, necessary, and sometimes an exercise in futility. This axiom applies to our personal lives as we plan our daily schedules, family budgets, careers, and retirements. The planning necessary to manage over 193 mil-

lion acres of National Forests from coast to coast is truly a daunting task. Since Congress passed the National Forest Management Act in 1976, there have been five attempts to establish comprehensive rules and regulations for forest management planning. Unfortunately, each of these attempts has been difficult and to some extent a lost cause.

The most recent example of this futility is the June 2009 U.S. District Court's decision to vacate and remand the 2008 planning rule back to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Court's order is a complex mix of legal and factual arguments. The order included a brief history of forest plan rules that dated to the first rule in 1979, the 1982 rule that amended the 1979 rule, the 2000 rule that really never saw the light of day, and the 2005 rule that was enjoined by the legal system. Each of the subsequent amended rules attempted to simplify and improve upon previous rules. Clearly each rule had a flavor added to the mix based on the political party that controlled the executive branch of government.

The point of this column is not to pass judgment on any particular rule. Each had its own pluses and minuses; however, each had fatal flaws either in the eyes of the legal system, Forest Service employees,

and/or environmental groups. The 1982 planning rule imposed a requirement to maintain viable populations of species within the planning area, which was unworkable for forest managers. Forest planning rules since 2000 have hit several legal roadblocks, including the latest, a 2008 rule recently negated for various legal and considerable inadequacies

This recitation of bureaucratic and legal actions was not intended to cure insomnia. Rather, it is a vastly simplified explanation of the current difficulty facing the Department of Agriculture as it attempts to implement forest management plans according to sometimes conflicting rules. Intense public scrutiny, legal issues, and national organizations—which may not support any type of forest management (except for total protection and preservation)—bedevil attempts by the Forest Service to craft a meaningful, practical, and appropriate planning process. In the absence of such a

public policy. First, we should recognize the need for conservation of and the demand for the valuable products and services that National Forests provide society. Second, we must provide for meaningful public participation in the planning process. Third, we must develop a planning process that works both for the natural resources within the National Forests and the Forest Service employees that actually manage these lands. Finally, the planning rule must conform to legal requirements set forth by Congress.

As the Department of Agriculture decides how to move forward, whether it uses the 1982 or 2000 rule as interim guidance, I would suggest that the Committee of Scientists report published in 1999 should be required reading. This report was developed after a series of meetings across the country that gathered information from the public and Forest Service employees. The recommended foundation for planning was based on some critically important principles:

ecological, economic and social sustainability; building stewardship capacity; collaborative planning; scientific assessments, analysis, and review; local decision-making; integrated land and resource planning; and tying budget realities to the planning process.

Now we have a sixth opportunity to engage in forest management planning. This time around I hope the Department of Agriculture will learn from its past successes and failures. This time, climate change will dictate a planning process that is flexible and

permits the use of adaptive management. This time I hope the opinions and principles of objective forest and social scientists will guide rule development. The National Forests are true national treasures that belong to all of us, and we must demand a planning process that works for all of us. ■

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process, the Forest Service's hands are tied as it attempts to meet the multiple use mandates of public lands.

I do not pretend to be an expert in forest planning. However, as the president of the Wildlife Management Institute, I believe I have some idea of how to craft sound

The Molas Divide near Silverton, Colorado. San Juan National Forest.