



USER'S GUIDE TO THE CIMARRON AND COMANCHE NATIONAL GRASSLANDS LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN

OCTOBER 2008

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service
Pike and San Isabel National Forests
Cimarron and Comanche National Grasslands
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Photo by Steve Olson

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This user's guide begins to answer some questions that we've been hearing, and questions that we've had ourselves, since we began developing the Cimarron and Comanche National Grasslands Land Management Plan (Grasslands Plan, or Plan). Some are about the new planning rule, released in April 2008. This new rule, the National Forest System Land Management Planning Final Rule¹ (2008 Planning Rule) brings about changes in some of the key elements of planning. One of the most obvious of those changes is how the Plan looks: the size, layout, and contents.

The first part of this user's guide directly addresses some of those questions. The second part reviews the organization of the Grasslands Plan. The third part gives information about using the Plan and its relationship with some existing decisions, and the fourth part sets out some of the new changes in public involvement and responding to the Plan. The final section lists some places to get more information and to access some of the documents referred to.

The actual 2008 Planning Rule is short (eight pages) and readable. The pages preceding the rule (the preamble) explain the rule's development and give an overview of the rule itself. This section also includes a summary of comments (that were received about the proposed rule) and responses to those comments.

The Plan and associated materials, along with a link to the 2008 Planning Rule, can be accessed at http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/psicc/projects/forest_revision/index.shtml.

1. Initial Questions

1.1. Why revise the PSICC Plan?

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requires that a land and resource management plan (plan) be revised every 10–15 years. The Pike and San Isabel National Forests, Comanche and Cimarron National Grasslands (PSICC) Land and Resource Management Plan was completed in 1984 (1984 Plan) (USDA FS 1984).

Now the Cimarron and Comanche National Grasslands (Grasslands) has its own free-standing Plan. A revision of the 1984 Plan for the Pike and San Isabel National Forests is underway.

1.2. Why does this Plan look so different from the 1984 Plan?

The Grasslands are the first Forest Service units in the nation to develop and release a plan under the 2008 Planning Rule. This is the main reason that the Grasslands Plan looks so different from the 1984 Plan.

¹ The 2008 National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule (36 CFR 219) can be found in the Federal Register, Vol. 73, No. 77, April 21, 2008, pages 21505–21512. A pdf version can be downloaded from <http://www.fs.fed.us/emc/nfma/index.htm>. Hereafter, references to the 2008 Planning Rule will include both CFR and Federal Register information.

Some major differences you might notice:

- It's shorter!
- There is a longer discussion of the overall vision for resources of the Grasslands, expressed as "desired conditions".
- We've included a short history of the Grasslands, to recognize continuity with our unique past.
- There's no EIS.
- There are no "standards" in the Plan; but there are guidelines.
- We have excluded policies, practices, and procedures that are more appropriately addressed in the agency's directive system or through other guidance material.

The Grasslands Plan is the context for subsequent activity and project decisions. It is not a final decision. It focuses on outcomes, rather than on outputs. Proposed actions will continue to involve the public as specific decisions are made, such as changes to existing programmatic direction for oil and gas leasing activities and livestock grazing management, or for specific projects like treating nonnative invasive plant species. The schedule of proposed actions continues to identify upcoming projects and activities for each fiscal quarter.

1.3. Where's the EIS?

Plans, like this Grasslands Plan, that are developed under the 2008 Planning Rule are strategic and aspirational, rather than prescriptive (like the previous plans). The 2008 Planning Rule anticipated that because plans like the Grasslands Plan would not have on-the-ground effects they could be categorically excluded from NEPA documentation.

1.4. What's this EA?

Although the categorical exclusion for land management plans was established in December 2006² the Responsible Official (the Forest Supervisor) prepared and released an environmental assessment (EA) and finding of no significant impact (FONSI) simultaneously with the release of Grasslands Plan during the 30-day objection period, initiated in October 2008. The EA summarizes key points of three alternatives; the proposed action (the Proposed Grasslands Plan), the "no action" alternative (the 1984 Plan), and the Sustainable Use Conservation Alternative (an alternative proposed by the Forest Guardians in 2006 during the 90-day comment period on the draft Plan). The EA shows that the Proposed Grasslands Plan has no effects on the human environment.

² The "National Environmental Policy Act documentation needed for developing, revising, or amending land management plans; categorical exclusion" was finalized and published in the Federal Register, Vol. 71, No. 241, December 15, 2006, pages 75481–75495.

1.5. What's a FONSI?

A finding of no significant impact (FONSI) is a document which states that, based on the analyses and results of the EA, the project in question would have no significant impacts to the human environment.

1.6. Where is the comprehensive evaluation report?

Before we began developing the Grasslands Plan, resource specialists did various evaluations, assessments, and analyses. These documents are the foundation of the Grasslands Plan. Together they make up our initial comprehensive evaluation report (CER). They include evaluations of current ecological, economic, and social conditions and trends that contribute to sustainability.

Following implementation of a plan, every five years the CER must be updated. Changes from the conditions and trends in previous evaluations must be described, and may be based on monitoring, surveys, assessments, analyses, or other appropriate studies. Each updated CER is then reviewed, and the responsible official determines if and what types of changes are needed to the plan components (such as the desired conditions and objectives) or to the monitoring program (the monitoring questions and performance measures in the Plan).³

³ The CER is described in the 2008 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219.6; FR p. 21507).

2. The New Plan Organization

The Grasslands Plan contains the five components required by the 2008 Planning Rule: desired conditions, objectives, guidelines, suitability of areas, and special areas. The Plan also includes associated material, for example: introductions, roles and contributions, management challenges, existing conditions, a glossary, a list of acronyms, monitoring questions, performance measures, how the Plan addresses climate change, and proposed and possible actions.

In the Grasslands Plan, the five required components are distributed among three main parts, listed below:

1. Part 1 is the vision—the desired conditions or aspirations for the landscape, its people, and its resources.
2. Part 2 is the strategy—the objectives that will move resources toward the desired conditions, the monitoring questions and performance measures that will help us gauge how we're doing, and the suitability of areas showing how projects and activities may be consistent with the Plan.
3. Part 3 is the design criteria—the guidelines that are applicable for site-specific, on-the-ground projects and activities.

2.1. About Part 1: Vision (desired conditions, special areas)

Part 1, the vision, summarizes what we aspire to—the existing and desired conditions for the Grasslands. It provides strategic direction for the Plan Area⁴ and describes the roles, contributions, and settings for local communities, and for southeast Colorado and for southwest Kansas. It also establishes the context for projects and activities by describing the desired conditions for each of the four primary ecosystems and nine identified special areas that characterize the Grasslands, along with disturbance processes, and the benefits and experiences that these lands can offer. The vision is long-term (it may extend beyond the 15-year planning period) and reflects ecological timeframes and social desires.

Desired Conditions: Aspirational in nature, desired conditions are the ecological, economic, and social attributes that guide management of the land and resources of the Plan Area. They don't prescribe or approve management projects or activities, but they do establish purposes for those future actions and projects. Desired conditions may be achievable only over a long time period, may be reached in the short-term, or may already exist.

Special Areas: Areas within the Grasslands Plan Area that are identified because of their unique or special characteristics. Special areas may be subsequently designated by statute, by a plan, plan amendment, plan revision, or by a separate process in accordance

⁴ Plan Area: "The National Forest System lands covered by a plan" (36 CFR 219.16; FR p. 21512). The area within the Grasslands administrative boundary that includes only those lands administered by the Forest Service, not state or private lands. See the map in Appendix H to the Plan.

with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other applicable laws. Each special area may have different plan components that reflect its unique or special characteristics.

2.2. About Part 2: Strategy (objectives, suitability of areas)

Part 2, the strategy, describes how the Grasslands intend to maintain or move toward desired conditions through measurable outcomes. It includes such required plan components as objectives and the suitability of areas for land uses. The strategy states the intent and focus for Grasslands management actions during the planning period. The Plan objectives describe levels of conditions, uses, and activities that would help achieve the desired conditions. The strategy also identifies areas where the predominant land uses are generally suitable (compatible) with desired conditions.

Objectives: These are concise projections of measurable, time-specific outcomes intended to maintain or achieve the desired conditions described in Part 1. Objectives are a way of measuring progress toward achieving or maintaining desired conditions.

Suitability of Areas: The Plan identifies areas on the Grasslands as generally suitable for various uses. An area may be identified as generally suitable for uses that are compatible with desired conditions for that area. The identification of an area as generally suitable for a use is guidance for project and activity decisionmaking and is not a commitment or a proposal approving projects and activities in the Plan Area.

Plan monitoring questions and performance measures are in Part 2 of the Plan.⁵ They are used to assess progress toward achieving the desired conditions.⁶ Each monitoring question must link to one or more desired condition, objective, *or* guideline. However, not every desired condition, objective, and guideline needs to be associated with a monitoring question. Performance measures, related to monitoring questions, are the basis for accountability, for both short-term objectives and long-term desired conditions.

2.3. About Part 3: Design Criteria (guidelines)

Part 3, the design criteria, includes the parameters in which the Strategy operates. They are technical and scientific specifications that provide guidance and information for future project and activity decisionmaking. Design criteria can also include references to other applicable guidance for this decisionmaking.

Guidelines: These are information and guidance for project and activity decisionmaking to help achieve desired conditions and objectives. In some cases, more than one guideline is related to a desired condition and objective.

⁵ “The plan must describe a monitoring program for the plan area” (36 CFR 219.6(b); FR p. 21507).

⁶ In previous plans, this may have been referred to as “effectiveness monitoring.”

Other Referenced Direction: This referenced direction is not considered a plan component, but can be helpful in designing projects and activities. It helps achieve desired conditions and ensures that projects and activities are consistent with existing laws, regulations, and policies that govern resource management of National Forest System (NFS) lands.

2.4. Organization and Content within the Three Parts of the Plan

The content in each of the Plan’s three parts is arranged in the categories and subcategories listed in Table 1. Maps of the four primary ecosystems and the special areas are found in Appendix H to the Plan and can be accessed on our Web site:

http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/psicc/projects/forest_revision/gr_rev.shtml

Table 1. Categories and subcategories in each of the Plan’s three parts

Category & sub-categories	What’s addressed
Land administration	The management of NFS lands in the Plan Area, including long-term goals for addressing boundary management and NFS land consolidation. Land administration is a separate category because, on the Grasslands, it influences the management of all other resources (ecological, economic and social, and physical).
Ecological resources: a. The Canyonland Ecosystem b. The Riparian and Aquatic Ecosystem c. The Sandsage Prairie Ecosystem d. The Shortgrass Prairie Ecosystem	The four primary ecosystems on the Grasslands are the Canyonland, the Riparian and Aquatic, the Sandsage Prairie, and the Shortgrass Prairie. Ecological resources are described in terms of disturbance regimes and vegetation composition and structure.
Economic and social resources: a. Livestock grazing b. Minerals and energy c. Recreation and tourism	The administration and management of human uses of the Grasslands, including livestock grazing, minerals and energy development, and recreation and tourism, as well as local and national values for the Grasslands identified through collaboration and comments.
Physical resources: a. Heritage b. Landscape and scenery c. Paleontological	Management of archaeological (cultural and historical), landscape and scenery, and paleontological resources.
Special areas	The general locations, within the four primary Grasslands ecosystems, of the nine areas that exhibit unique or special characteristics. The desired conditions of these special areas vary from those of the primary ecosystem(s) in which they are located, and, as a result, may require different plan components.

3. How Do You Know What's Working? Plan Monitoring!

To evaluate progress in maintaining or achieving desired conditions we use key ecological, economic, and social performance measures that are relevant to the Plan Area. To track performance and verify that we are maintaining or moving toward desired conditions and that we are accomplishing objectives, ecological, economic, and social conditions and trends are monitored and reported annually (for selected projects or activities) or every five years (for all Plan components). The desired conditions and objectives of the highest priority are identified in the Plan monitoring program.

3.1. The Plan Monitoring Program

The desired conditions and objectives of the highest priority are identified in the Plan monitoring program. The “plan monitoring program” includes the monitoring questions and performance measures (included in Part 2 of the Plan) that are linked to Plan desired conditions, objectives, or guidelines.⁷

Documents that are closely associated with the monitoring program include:

1. A description of the process used to develop monitoring questions and performance measures.
2. Monitoring guide: Includes methods of data collection, schedule of monitoring activities during the planning period, and cooperators and their roles.
3. Annual monitoring work plan: Identifies work expected for the upcoming fiscal year and anticipated resources for carrying out the monitoring tasks.
4. Annual evaluation report: Includes summary of what monitoring activities were carried out; evaluation of what was monitored that year, recommendations of needed actions.
5. Comprehensive evaluation report: This report is prepared every five years, and builds from the information in the annual evaluation reports.

3.2. Responses to Monitoring Results

Monitoring information is collected, reviewed, and evaluated for key changes in conditions and trends that contribute to sustainability. The degree to which on-the-ground management is maintaining or moving toward desired conditions is specifically evaluated. Based on evaluations of monitoring results, the Responsible Official determines any needed adjustments to the monitoring program or plan components.

To continually improve land management, performance measures would be periodically reviewed. These reviews help identify current and future topics of interest or concern (“issues”) that could be considered in future planning. The most current and critical issues that call for concentrated effort are identified in the USDA Forest Service Strategic Plan for FY 2007–2012 (USDA FS 2007) as goals, objectives, and performance

⁷ Information in this and the next paragraph is from FSM 1921.5 and also the Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.12, chapter 10. See also (USDA FS 2008) 36 CFR 219.6; FR p. 21507.

measures. The Plan objectives consider local conditions and concerns and contribute to the broader objectives of the Forest Service Strategic Plan (see Appendix A).

As a result of monitoring, a plan can be updated through either Plan amendments or administrative corrections. Amendments are used to make substantive changes to desired conditions, objectives, guidelines, suitability of areas, and identified or designated special areas. Administrative corrections are used to make other changes, such as corrections and updates of data and maps, typographical errors, monitoring program and monitoring information, and other non-substantive changes.⁸ The public will be notified of any future amendments and administrative corrections to the Plan.⁹ Proposed and final changes to the Plan will be posted on the PSICC Web site.

⁸ For more about administrative corrections, see (USDA FS 2008) 36 CFR 219.7(6)(b); FR p. 21508.

⁹ For more about changes to the Plan, see 36 CFR 219.9; FR p. 21509.

4. Putting the Plan to Work

This part explains some of the ways the Plan and its components will work.

4.1. How do the five components of the Plan work together?

As a way of measuring progress toward overall desired conditions, *objectives* will guide management. Most projects and activities will be developed specifically to maintain or achieve one or more of the *desired conditions* and objectives of the Plan. However, a project or activity may be neutral in relation to relevant desired conditions, or may have short-term variations to achieve long-term progress toward desired conditions.

Guidelines contribute to maintaining or achieving desired conditions and objectives. Relevant guidelines will be incorporated into project design, unless there is a documented reason to adjust it (generally no amendment would be required in that case).

The Plan identifies the *suitability of areas* for a variety of multiple uses by identifying which uses may be compatible with the desired conditions described for ecosystems and special areas. In a project or activity decision, this identification will be used when considering which uses will actually take place. Suitability can be changed with a Plan amendment at the time of a project or activity, or by a Plan correction if a mapping error was made.

Finally, the Plan has identified *special areas*. Each of these areas has its own unique desired conditions, objectives, guidelines and suitability of areas; descriptions that apply to the special area along with those of the ecosystem(s) involved.

4.2. Which objectives and guidelines do I use?

That depends on what you're going to be doing and where, and what resources are involved. For a project or activity in the Sandsage Prairie Ecosystem, for example, you'd look at those objectives (Plan section 2.1.2.d.), along with the objectives common to all ecosystems (Plan section 2.1.2.a.). But if you're going to be doing something in the Comanche Lesser Prairie Chicken Habitat Zoological Area that's within the Sandsage Prairie Ecosystem, you'd also want to look at the objectives for that special area, too (Plan section 2.1.5.c.). The same is true for guidelines. For a project in the Comanche Lesser Prairie Chicken Habitat Zoological Area, you'd look at the guidelines that are common to all ecosystems (Plan section 3.1.2.1.), and those for the Sandsage Prairie Ecosystem (Plan section 3.1.2.7.), and those for the special area (Plan section 3.1.5.3.).

4.3. What's suitable where?

Look at Plan section 2.3. Suitability of Areas. You'll want to use both Tables 2-2 and 2-3 to make sure you've covered all the bases. For example, you want to travel with a motorized vehicle on designated roads within the Picket Wire Canyonlands, an area in both the Canyonland Ecosystem and the Riparian and Aquatic Ecosystem. Table 2-2 says

that the Canyonland Ecosystem is *generally suitable* for that activity, as does Table 2-3 for the Picket Wire Canyonlands. But Table 2-2 indicates that motorized travel is not generally a suitable use in the Riparian and Aquatic Ecosystem. If you're planning a project or activity involving motorized travel in the Picket Wire Canyonlands, you should pay attention to not only the guidelines for the Canyonland and the Riparian and Aquatic ecosystems, but for the Picket Wire Canyonlands as well.

Remember, that each special area is part of an ecosystem! That is, an ecosystem is generally suitable for a variety of uses, but there might be a special area in that ecosystem with its own special objectives and guidelines.

4.3.1. How many acres may be prescribed burned each year?

See these sections of the Plan Part 2: Strategy:

- 2.1.2.b. The Canyonland Ecosystem
- 2.1.2.d. The Sandsage Ecosystem
- 2.1.2.e. The Shortgrass Ecosystem

4.3.2. Where may the Forest Service carry out prescribed burns?

See these sections of the Plan Part 2: Strategy:

- 2.1.2.b. The Canyonland Ecosystem
- 2.1.2.d. The Sandsage Ecosystem
- 2.1.2.e. The Shortgrass Ecosystem
- 2.1.5. Special Areas

4.4. How will you monitor progress toward desired conditions?

Through a collaborative process, a comprehensive 15-year monitoring program has been developed and will be included as part of the approved Grasslands Plan.

To track performance and verify that we are moving toward desired conditions and that multiple-use objectives are being met, ecological, economic, and social conditions and trends may be monitored and measured annually (for selected projects) or every five years (on all Plan components). When implementing the monitoring program, information will be collected and assessments made of key changes in conditions and trends that contribute to sustainability. Monitoring shows us how well we're maintaining or progressing toward desired conditions. Monitoring will also identify any needed adjustments to the program to account for unanticipated changes in conditions.

4.5. How does the Grasslands Plan affect existing decisions?

This Plan is not changing any existing decisions for the Grasslands, such as the oil and gas leasing decision or the range allotment management plans. At a future date, if these decisions are revised, the broad direction in the Plan will be considered.

4.5.1. Oil and Gas Development

The potential for the occurrence of petroleum resources (oil and gas) is high on the Cimarron and portions of the Comanche National Grasslands. In 1991, an environmental impact statement covering oil and gas development addressed these resources and the projected development over the following 10–15 years (USDA FS 1991). In 1992 the Forest Supervisor signed a Record of Decision (ROD) (USDA FS 1992) that approved management of this program, which covers an average of nine new wells completed each year. In 2003 these drilling estimates were reassessed, and resulted in a future projection which averaged 11 completed wells each year over the next 15 years (USDI BLM 2003). This reassessment validated the 1992 ROD, and Grasslands management of the oil and gas program will continue as in the past. During development of the Grasslands Plan, we ascertained that the desired conditions, objectives, guidelines, and suitability of areas of the Plan would be compatible with the 1992 ROD. Therefore, the Plan does not change any existing direction for the oil and gas program.

4.5.2. Rangeland Management

The Grasslands have five current decisions in place for managing livestock grazing that are tied to allotment management plans (USDA FS 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2004a, 2004b). The permittees, organized into grazing associations and grazing districts, are authorized to graze cattle under permits that specify stocking rates, seasons of use, and other management practices. Managing the livestock grazing program based on the guidance in the Grasslands allotment management plans will help move resources toward the desired conditions of the Plan. All decision notices issued for this program will remain in effect when this Grasslands Plan is approved.

4.5.2.a. How may permitted livestock grazing be affected in special areas?

See Tables 2-2 and 2-3 in the Plan section 2.3. Suitability of Areas.

Livestock grazing has been found to be generally suitable in all special areas except for the Campo Research Natural Area.

4.5.2.b. Will I still be able to graze on my allotment?

Yes. The Grasslands Plan does not eliminate livestock grazing from any part of the Grasslands that is currently being grazed. Any adjustments that may be needed to help maintain or move resource conditions toward desired conditions would be addressed at the project or activity level.

4.5.2.c. Will I have to remove fences on the allotment I use?

The Plan says that the size of allotments would “remain at 2006 levels or would increase, where possible, if the pattern of livestock grazing would help achieve vegetative or habitat conditions.” The need for and opportunities to increase allotment size will be reviewed during the next 15 years.

5. Collaboration and Public Involvement

Rather than rely on the familiar model of holding public meetings in which the Forest Service presented information and the public asked questions, we have begun and will continue collaboration with all interested parties, including individuals, organizations, state and local governments and Federal agencies and tribal governments.¹⁰

To date we have held workshops and open houses, sent out letters, postcards, and newsletters, kept current information on our Web site, and responded to comments on the draft Plan. Collaboration will continue. If you'd like to be on our mailing list, let us know!

¹⁰ See 36 CFR 219.9, "Public participation, collaboration, and notification;" FR p. 21508.

6. An Objection Process, not an Appeal Process

Under the 1982 Planning Rule, after the approval of a Plan, appeals were filed to contest parts or aspects of the Plan. The appeals process took a long time and cost a lot of money. Above all, it set up a relationship of opposition between the Forest Service and critics of the Plan.

Under the 2008 Planning Rule public participation begins with the planning process, so that interested parties can contribute while the Plan is being developed. This promotes a less antagonistic relationship among parties and encourages relationships and interactions that can continue beyond the approval of the Plan.

Instead of requiring a post-approval appeal process, the 2008 Planning Rule includes a 90-day comment period on proposed plans.¹¹ Later, before a plan is approved, there is a 30-day review and objection period.¹² This lets people collaborate, share ideas, and work out differences before the plan is completed. (This process is modeled after the successful objection process used by the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management.)

During the 30-day review period, any person or organization, other than a Federal agency, who participated in the planning process through the submission of written comments, may object to the Grasslands Plan. It is not necessary for you to have sent us written comments during previous formal comment periods. If you submitted any written comments at any time during the planning process, you will be able to object to the Plan during the 30-day review period.

NOTE: All comments, names, and addresses become part of the public record and are subject to FOIA, except for proprietary documents and information.

¹¹ See 36 CFR 219.9, "Public participation, collaboration, and notification;" FR p. 21509.

¹² See 36 CFR 219.13, "Objections to plans, plan amendments, or plan revisions;" FR p. 21509.

7. Where to Get the Plan, the EA, FONSI, and Related Documents

The Grasslands Plan, the EA and FONSI, and supporting documents (such as evaluation reports, species diversity reports, specialists' reports) can be accessed, viewed, and downloaded in pdf format from our Web site at http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/psicc/projects/forest_revision/gr_documents.shtml.

The Grasslands Plan and EA and FONSI are available in paper copy or on CD, by request, from the PSICC Supervisor's Office in Pueblo, Colorado.

PSICC – Forest Supervisor
2840 Kachina Drive
Pueblo, CO 81008

E-mail: r2_psicc_grassrevision@fs.fed.us

8. Resources for More Information

The 2008 Planning Rule in the Federal Register (in pdf):

http://fsweb.r2.fs.fed.us/strategic_planning/forest_planning/policies/2008_planning_rule.pdf

The planning directives, about the 2008 Rule, and background documents:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/emc/nfma/index.htm>

The PSICC Grasslands Revision Web site:

http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/psicc/projects/forest_revision/index.shtml

The new Plan model and about the model:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/emc/nfma/model.html>

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