

Monumental Outlook Over The Horizon
(What's Happening on the Sequoia National Forest/Giant Sequoia National
Monument)
November 2007

Hello Sequoia National Forest/Giant Sequoia National Monument Stakeholders!

The next update regarding what is happening on the Sequoia National Forest/Giant Sequoia National Monument deals with the new collaborative process the Forest has embarked on to develop a new Giant Sequoia National Monument Management Plan.

Now, some of you may be saying what happened to the old one? Well, the history of how we got here is too long to go into much detail here. I am just going to say the Forest Service wants to work with stakeholders in a new, proactive way to develop the monument management plan required by the Presidential Proclamation that established the Giant Sequoia National Monument in 2000.

One of the hallmarks of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 (which is the process the Forest Service uses to analyze the environmental effects of federal action on public land) is to involve the public in the environmental review process. To that end, the CEQ regulations implementing NEPA require agencies to make diligent efforts to involve the public in NEPA processes and to give the public notice of NEPA-related public meetings and hearings. The CEQ regulations also require agencies to actively identify parties that might be interested in a proposed federal action, and to give notice to the public through a variety of media such as the Federal Register, local newspapers, or direct mailings (such as the Schedule of Proposed Actions document the the Sequoia National Forest/Giant Sequoia National Monument publishes quarterly). The regulations allow agencies to determine the details of each public involvement process.

To develop a new monument plan (including an environmental document), I decided early this year to try a different process for planning and environmental analysis. This process is called "collaboration" in planning circles. It is a broadly used term that describes how people and organizations work together, in a proactive way. There are many ways to collaborate: informally or formally, as partners or in teams, in advisory capacities or as joint decision-makers. This process is being used more and more by government agencies. When we collaborate with someone, we work with that person or organization up front in a proactive process to develop the plan itself and the environmental analysis of it. This results in a relatively high level of influence in our decision-making and distinguishes "collaboration" from other forms of public involvement and degrees of influence.

So, what is this collaboration regarding the Management Plan?

I intend to develop the Management Plan for the Giant Sequoia National Monument through just such a proactive, collaborative process. From the Forest's perspective this means sharing power, engaging in ongoing conversations rather than relying solely on the often-frustrating public commenting process, and being open to any possibilities that are legal, fair, and practicable. From the public perspective, this means representatives of constituent groups would have the opportunity to be a part of defining objectives, crafting alternatives, guiding the analysis of alternatives, and ensuring that the Forest Service's efforts are transparent to the public and easy to understand—every step of the way. I completely understand that this approach means a lot of work, but for those who stick with it, it is the best way to help shape the new plan.

To lead this process, the Sequoia National Forest/Giant Sequoia National Monument contracted with the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution, a third-party independent and impartial federal organization with a mission and history of helping people find workable solutions to tough environmental conflicts ... anywhere in the United States. The U.S. Institute engaged a professional mediator, Carie Fox, who identified stakeholders and is currently working on an assessment with the Forest Service and our stakeholders to define specifically how we can collaborate to develop a new management plan. How—and whether—that could work is still being discussed. Collaboration does not have a set timeline, and that is good. For a good collaborative effort to work, those involved must be comfortable with the process.

In October, Ms. Fox facilitated an initial meeting among potential stakeholders to discuss the possibility of doing an umbrella process for the whole plan, including ecosystem issues. One suggestion at the meeting of stakeholders was why doesn't the Forest Service start with developing the recreation portion of the new management plan? Recreation in the Giant Sequoia National Monument is an important issue. It could benefit from community vision. It would also provide an opportunity to explore what is meant by collaboration in the context of the Monument. Ms. Fox is currently planning a meeting to occur on December 13 (Thursday) in Visalia with the Forest Service and stakeholders. She will facilitate a discussion about whether and how the Monument recreation community wishes to engage with the Forest Service in building the recreation component of the Management Plan.

The public is welcome to observe, in fact I encourage you to come and see for yourself what we are embarking on. If you are interested in attending, please e-mail Ms. Fox at cf@foxmediation.com. This is a great opportunity and I hope you take advantage of this. Again, I thank you for your interest in how your national forest is managed and for your involvement in the Giant Sequoia National Monument planning process.