



USDA Forest Service
Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests

2005 Forest Planning Regulations

Last update: May 16, 2005

New Planning Regulations Published

On January 5, 2005 the Forest Service published a final rule that provides the framework for individual forest management plans governing the 155 national forests and 20 grasslands. The new planning regulation builds on the work of the 2000 planning rule, recognizes available resources, and reflects the public input received after the publication of the December 2002 proposed planning rule.

Also issued on was a proposed regulation that provides for forest plan revisions and amendments to be categorical excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), because forest plans do not approve projects or activities and do not result in any significant effects on the human environment. The intent of the categorical exclusion is to facilitate efficient planning and timely development, amendment or revision of forest plans. The 60-day public comment period on the Proposed Categorical Exclusion concluded on March 7, 2005.

The withdrawal of the 2000 proposed planning rule was also published in the Federal Register. After careful review of internal and external concerns about the 2000 planning rule, the Department of Agriculture requested the Forest Service to respond to those concerns by proposing a new rule. This notice, in response to that request, withdraws the 2000 planning rule and prepares the way for the 2005 planning rule. These documents are available at www.fs.fed.us/emc/nfma.

On March 17, 2005 the Forest Service issued Interim Planning Directives and published a summary in the Federal Register (Vol. 70, No. 55.) on March 23, 2004. The new rule and the proposed directives are available at www.fs.fed.us/emc/nfma/. The 90-day public comment period on the Interim Planning Directives ends June 21, 2005. Comments can be sent to planningdirectives@contentanalysisgroup.com. The final planning directives, which will take into account public comments received, will be released within 18 months.

Forest Plan Revisions

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 requires the Forest Service to develop, periodically revise, and amend all forest and grassland land and resource management plans. The first generation of forest plans was developed under a regulation adopted in 1982. There are currently 49 revisions underway nationwide using the 22-year-old regulation. These forests may choose to change to the 2005 rule or stay with the 1982 rule. Those forests that have not yet begun their revisions must use the 2005 rule.

Under the new regulations, a comprehensive evaluation of the forest plan will be completed every five years to ensure it is meeting goals and objectives. The improved efficiency puts public dollars where they do the most good -- monitoring, evaluating, and improving the environment -- instead of into the planning process. Nothing in the new planning regulations exempts the Forest Service from the process outlined in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Environmental analysis will still be completed and existing resource protection laws will continue to be followed.

Implications for the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision Effort

After weighing the advantages and disadvantages of transitioning to the 2005 Forest Planning Regulations, the three Forest Supervisors and the Regional Forester have decided to complete revision of the Umatilla, Malheur, and Wallowa-Whitman Forest Plans under the 2005 regulations.

There are a number of features in the 2005 regulations that were considered in the decision, including the use of a collaborative public process; a clear commitment to working closely with tribes and other agencies; consideration of current science; and the emphasis on social, economic, and ecosystem sustainability. While these are all consistent with the 1982 regulations, they are emphasized more strongly in the 2005 regulations.

The 2005 planning regulations facilitate adaptive management by allowing the Forest Service to respond quicker as new science becomes available, as on-the-ground conditions change, or as social values evolve. There is also increased emphasis on monitoring contained in the 2005 rule, and in tracking a few key forest plan aspects using an Environmental Management System (EMS). The EMS is a system to review and evaluate activities related to environmental impacts and requires independent audits.

Current activities in the Blue Mountain forest plan revision process and the work accomplished to date can be used under the 2005 rule and we expect to continue working on the forest plan revision in a collaborative manner and provide many opportunities for the public to be involved in the process.

Best Information

The 2005 rule directs forest managers to take into account the best available science to protect air, water, wildlife, and other important natural resources at a landscape-level. New information and advances in science and technology can more quickly be incorporated into agency actions as they become available. Plant and wildlife protections will be provided first by conserving ecosystems as a whole, with more targeted protections for species listed under the Endangered Species Act and other species of concern. Management decisions will consider ecological, social, and economic sustainability, consistent with broadly accepted international standards.

Strategic, not Site-Specific

Land management plans developed under the 2005 rule will be strategic in nature. Generally, these plans will not include specific project management decisions, thus the proposed rule allowing revisions and amendments to be categorically excluded from documentation.

Front-end analysis that attempts to predict projects and activities and their impacts for the next 10 or 15 years is not required in the 2005 rule. Instead, environmental analysis required for land management plans will be at a broad level of conditions and trends and documented in an evaluation report. A separate site-specific analysis of impacts of projects carried out under the plan will be documented in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), Environmental Assessment (EA), or Categorical Exclusion (CE).

If a plan does include decisions with on-the-ground effects, it will require an EA or an EIS as appropriate, consistent with NEPA. This provision is in a separate proposal identifying how plan development, amendment, and revision will comply with NEPA requirements.

Environmental Management System

For the first time, an Environmental Management System (EMS) will be used during the planning process to improve performance and accountability. The EMS is intended to increase environmental performance and accountability for the agency. The 2005 rule establishes a dynamic process to account for changing forest conditions, emphasizes science and public involvement, and ultimately helps local forest managers make adjustments in the plan to continue progress toward the desired conditions.

The agency will adopt an EMS for each forest and grassland. EMS is a management tool used widely by the public and private sector both nationally and internationally that includes internationally-accepted standards. EMS connects forest planning with implementation so that plans can be dynamic and outcomes of project-level decisions can be assessed for continuous improvement. A key feature of the EMS is the requirement for independent audits of the Forest Service's work. This new review and oversight of agency performance will help the Forest Service more fully account for its management of more than 192 million acres of public land.

Procedural Requirements

The 2005 rule moves many detailed procedural requirements to the Forest Service's directive system, which is the agency's internal "how to" manual. For example, broad species protection goals remain in the 2005 rule, but the analytical procedures on how to achieve those goals will be spelled out in the directive system. The proposed directives are available for public review and comment.

The 2005 rule neither promotes nor discourages any particular forest use, such as recreation, grazing, timber harvest, or mineral development. Decisions regarding such uses will be made on a forest-by-forest basis and will be informed by local conditions, science, and public input.