Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me to talk with you today about the status of Forest Plan Revisions in the Northern Region (Region One) which includes all of Montana, Northern Idaho, North Dakota and portions of South Dakota. I am accompanied today by Northern Region Forester, Gail Kimbell.

A series of legislative initiatives, dating back to 1960, has given us the Multiple-Use Sustained Yield-Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Forest and Rangelands Renewable Resources Planning Act, and the National Forest Management Act. These and other laws recognize the complex nature of managing renewable resources for the American people and the changes that occur in demand and supply over time. Forest and grassland plans – developed with the assistance of the public and interested agencies and groups – identify the availability of lands and their suitability for resource management. The goal of this planning is sustainable use of natural resources and sustainable communities.

Five western Montana National Forests, as well as the three Idaho National Forests in Region One, are currently in the revision process. All of the forests, with the exception of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge, are revising their plans under the 2005 rule. The Beaverhead-Deerlodge continued its revision under the 1982 rule since it had already completed its draft plan which was ready for public comment at the time the new rule was published. Region One has decided to accomplish the revision process by organizing the work in planning zones. This approach has been employed to recognize the similar interests of communities within the zone, similar resources and ecosystems, and opportunities to spend planning dollars efficiently.

The current planning zones are:
We began land management planning under the provisions of the National Forest Management act and the 1982 Planning Rule. We were optimistic that the early forest plans would provide a strategic framework for management of the national forests. We also believed the plans had the necessary analysis and disclosure to implement forest management projects and activities. A series of legal challenges taught us that individual projects would need additional, extensive, site-specific analysis. Sometimes this added analysis developed new information that was not consistent with Forest Plan standards and guidelines, resulting in plan amendments. Furthermore, new legislation, regulations, and case law changed the operating environment over time, requiring additional changes to Forest Plans in order to bring proposed activities into compliance. The complexity of navigating through the process became very difficult – I’ve referred to it as process predicament – and the Forest Service faced many public challenges as we attempted to “fit” management proposals into plans that were quickly becoming out of date.

Several attempts were made over the past decade to develop a new planning rule that would help better define the role of the Forest Plans, streamline the process for responding to change, and shorten timeframes. The current planning rule was adopted in January of this year. The Forest Service is pleased that we can move forward with our revision processes. We are optimistic that the new rule will provide for a more efficient process and allow the agency to respond to change in a way that benefits forest and grassland management and communities.

The new planning rule provides for broad and continual public participation during the planning process and throughout the plans’ implementation. The new rule requires the Forest Service to engage the public in a “collaborative” manner during the revision process and continue that approach throughout plan revision. The old planning process required analysis of several alternatives that displayed a range of management themes and levels of resource outputs. Various interest groups then aligned with whichever alternative most reflected their concerns. This left the Forest Service in the unenviable position of seeking a compromise solution among these interest groups.

The collaborative approach does not focus on multiple alternative development, but rather on bringing communities together “up front” in the process to work together to find common themes and to find common interests. It is a tangible expression of the kind of citizen involvement encouraged by so many at the recent White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation. Both communities of place and interest play key roles in finding areas of agreement. Competing interests and some level of disagreement will continue as we move through the plan revision process; however, I believe the level of polarization will be less than we experienced in the first round of forest planning. It is also important to understand that this public participation process
requires everyone’s energy and patience. Parties need to be at the table in order to have their input addressed. Since there are no alternatives developed under the new rule, interests may have difficulty recognizing how their interests are addressed unless they remain engaged in the process.

The 2005 rule allows forests, as they revise plans, to ensure they remain current and congruent with changes in the physical and social environment. New generation plans will allow “adaptive management” where they are consistently monitored, evaluated and updated. This continuous improvement methodology will be applied using processes that are internationally recognized. The Forest Service will develop and implement Environmental Management Systems (EMS) using the ISO 14001 Standard. The EMS process requires regular cyclical planning, implementation, monitoring and review. This process relies on application of the best available science and certified audits.

The Northern Region is on the cutting edge of revising plans under the 2005 planning rule. I am proud of Regional Forester Kimbell, Region One employees, and the public for embracing collaborative participation as evidenced by the involvement of Resource Advisory Committees, Forest Stewardship Projects, and other community interests. This concept of collaboration is more than just words on paper. It defines a new spirit of partnership of the Forest Service and the communities we serve.

Forest and Grassland plans revised under the 2005 rule will be strategic documents and focus on how the agency, working in concert with the public and other government agencies, will manage the landscape to reach desired future condition deemed to be beneficial to the social, economic, and ecological attributes of the area – a part of communities, not apart from them. Instead of rules and standards focused on prohibitions, the new approach centers on identifying and achieving desired future conditions. The plans will be revised with collaborative public participation and the best available science and identify activities necessary to reach those desired conditions over time. This process will allow continual monitoring to incorporate new technology, current and future scientific findings, and public input.

Public scoping has identified many issues that will need consideration during the collaborative process. While each forest and grassland has issues that are unique to that unit, there are issues common to all the planning zones, especially the forested zones. Three key issues that I want to address in this testimony are (1) lands generally suitable for timber harvest; (2) lands proposed for Wilderness designation; and (3) lands generally suitable for motorized and/or non-motorized use. These issues always generate controversy and will continue to be among the most difficult challenges to developing collaborative solutions.

A highly debated and often misunderstood component of forest plans are “lands generally suitable for timber harvest.” In the first round of planning, these were one category of lands, identified solely with an eye to potential timber harvest. This lead to expectations that were never realized as legal, resource, socio-economic, and organizational factors interacted to reduce
outputs. A primary goal for Region One under the new rule is to identify lands suitable for timber harvest, working with communities, that result in expectations that can be reliably met and are ecologically sound.

The 2005 planning rule identifies two types of land uses for which timber removal is suitable, “lands generally suitable for timber production” and “lands generally suitable for timber harvest”. The Forest Service has long recognized that timber harvest is a viable tool to accomplish several management objectives. Forest inventories have identified sites where silvicultural prescriptions can be applied to contribute to the national demand for wood fiber while contributing revenue to the national treasury. These lands, when harvested in an environmentally sound manner, are lands that will likely be identified as “generally suitable for timber production.” Other lands, where timber management is not the highest and best use, can still be harvested to help meet other multiple use objectives. Examples would be timber harvest that improves wildlife habitat, fire regime condition class and forest health can also produce timber products. In these areas timber harvest may be less economically efficient and would be incidental to other objectives. These lands would likely be identified as “generally suitable for timber harvest.” While the number of acres generally suitable for timber production may decrease in comparison to the old plans, the total acreage of lands generally suitable for timber production and timber harvest appear to be about the same. I want to emphasize that the collaborative process will determine which lands meet these objectives.

Forest Plans will continue to examine and identify lands to be recommended to Congress for inclusion into the National Wilderness Preservation System. Communities and the public, working collaboratively with the Forest Service, will have the opportunity to participate in the identification of lands that the agency will recommend for Wilderness designation. Region One has already been working collaboratively with communities and Tribal Governments to identify lands that have wilderness characteristics that make them candidates for recommendations to Congress. Some plan revisions may recommend acres that are logical additions to existing Wilderness because of topographic boundaries, ecoypes, or other management considerations. Some will recommend new acres based on the land’s suitability for wilderness designation. Other revisions may eliminate some areas that were previously recommended. Again, decisions will be made in a collaborative process with extensive community involvement. We will manage any lands recommended for Wilderness to protect wilderness values. These preliminary administrative recommendations will receive further review and possible modification by me, by the Secretary of Agriculture, or by the President. Congress has the authority to accept these recommendations when deliberating on wilderness designation.

Motorized versus non-motorized travel, and all the associated implications, are undoubtedly among the most controversial challenges facing the Forest Service. I want to clarify what will be determined by forest plans and what will be determined outside the revision process. The revised plans are strategic and will only identify lands that are generally suitable for motorized use and lands that are generally suitable for non-motorized use. Forest Plans will not make site-specific motorized and non-motorized route designations. The Final Travel Management Rule will guide
forests and grasslands in decisions that designate specific routes, employing a separate public collaborative approach.

Mr. Chairman, the Forest Service is committed to an open and participative forest plan revision process. Local communities will have a say in decisions that directly impact them. The public at large will also be part of the plan revision process. Again, I want to emphasize that collaboration does not have a specific beginning and ending. Instead, it is a continual process where the public works with the Forest Service to determine what benefits the land and people. Collaboration continues beyond plan revision and includes public participation in monitoring as well as audits to ensure we are moving toward the desired condition and examining the need for change. It won’t always be neat and tidy, but it will always be the right thing to do. I am encouraged by how people in Idaho, Montana and the Dakotas are engaging in collaborative efforts. Tribal, State and Local Governments are working with federal agencies and the public on natural resource issues at unprecedented levels. I see approved revised plans not as a point of completion, but a starting point where community relationships will be the catalyst for land management decisions that have local and national acceptance. This concludes my statement, I am happy to answer questions.