

OZARK CONNECTION

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Update On Forest Plan Revision

Plan Revision Moves Ahead



The last issue of the *Ozark Connection* was published in May, 2002. This update provides a brief description of the public comments received and how they were used to finalize the issues.

As you recall, the Notice of Intent (NOI) was published in the *Federal Register* in May 2002. During the 90-day comment period that followed, we received over 130 responses (letters, emails, and faxes). We identified over 800 individual comments. The Planning Team used a technique called “content analysis,” which is a systematic method of gathering, categorizing, and summarizing the full range of public viewpoints and concerns provided. Content analysis is not a vote-counting process. It is designed to read each response, capture the meaning of the comment, and group similar ideas or concerns. We used your comments to help identify whether the preliminary issues needed to be modified or if new issues needed to be added. These issues are discussed in more detail in this newsletter. The Planning Team is currently using the final issues to develop alternatives.

Alternatives—The Next Step

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires the development of a wide range of reasonable alternatives.

Each alternative is designed to address major public issues, concerns, and resource opportunities while complying with NEPA guidelines. The alternatives will vary by their objectives or the way in which they balance the importance of each issue in an attempt to achieve a compatible mix of uses for the forest. Each alternative reflects a different approach to our management challenges and results in different types and amounts of net public benefits.

With the public’s help, a Forest Service interdisciplinary team will develop a broad range of alternative themes. These themes will represent generalized descriptions of different responses to significant issues and will be the basis for more specific, detailed alternatives.

After studying each alternative thoroughly, the Forest Supervisor will recommend his preferred alternative to the Regional Forester in Atlanta. Once the Regional Forester approves the alternative, the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and the draft revised Forest Plan can be completed.

Proposed Changes to Forest Planning Regulations

The Forest Service recently released proposed changes to its forest planning regulations. The proposed changes are intended to emphasize public concerns and scientific knowledge in a simpler, more responsive planning process. The proposed rule was published in the *Federal Register* in December, 2002. There is a 90-day public comment period currently in process.

The changes to forest planning regulations are expected to be finalized in 2003. If you would like to obtain a copy of the proposed changes you can go online to: <http://www.fs.fed.us/emc/nfma/>. Contact the Forest Supervisor’s Office at 479-968-2354 if you have questions about the new regulations and ask for a member of the Planning Team .



Summary of Final Issues

We appreciate everyone who took the time and made the effort to respond to our preliminary issues. Your comments helped us to better understand the sentiment and reasoning behind particular viewpoints and values, revealed new information, and gave us a clearer understanding of how our decisions could affect various interests. Following are the five final issues and examples of comments received by the Planning Team.

WHAT MIX OF RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES SHOULD BE PROVIDED? This issue has changed. Originally, it only included developed recreation which includes things such as campgrounds and picnic areas. After reviewing your comments, we felt we could best address this issue by combining developed and dispersed recreation. Dispersed recreation includes motorized trails, hiking trails, horse trails, rock climbing, and whitewater activities. This allows us to evaluate a range of recreation opportunities from highly developed areas to those that are not developed at all (dispersed areas). Some of your comments included:

- * "...provide full-service facilities. This is what the public expects."
- * "Development should be limited to sparsely placed restrooms, water fountains, and parking lots."
- * "A mix that most limits impact on the forest should be considered."

HOW SHOULD PUBLIC ACCESS BE MANAGED? This issue has changed. It originally included all of dispersed recreation and public access. Most of the comments on this issue were related to use of the current road system, the effects of roads on the environment, and Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) uses. We can do a better job of providing a range of alternatives by focusing on public access, open and closed roads, and cross-country travel. Following are examples of your comments:

- * "When access is provided, spend enough funds to do the job right."
- * "I feel that vehicle travel throughout the forest should be limited so not to cause a negative impact on the environment and wildlife."
- * "Don't close roads for motorized vehicles."

HOW SHOULD SPECIAL AREAS BE MANAGED? This issue did not change. Your comments helped us focus more on the idea that these areas need to be managed for their values. The issue still includes special interest areas, wilderness areas, roadless areas, wild and scenic rivers, scenic byways, and experimental forests. Some of your comments included:

- * "Don't lock us out."
- * "Special areas" should be protected from development and logging."
- * "These (Special) areas should be open to the public. A few multi-use trails should be allowed in these areas."

ECOSYSTEM HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY. This issue did not change. It includes wildlife management, timber management, watershed health, ecosystem restoration, and the use of various tools such as prescribed fire and timber harvest to manage for a healthy forest. Following are examples of the numerous comments you submitted on this issue:

- * "No pesticides or herbicides should be applied on a routine basis."
- * "Please maximize the management to benefit the wildlife and beauty of the foliage."
- * "We should accelerate our prescribed burning efforts to minimize the understory."

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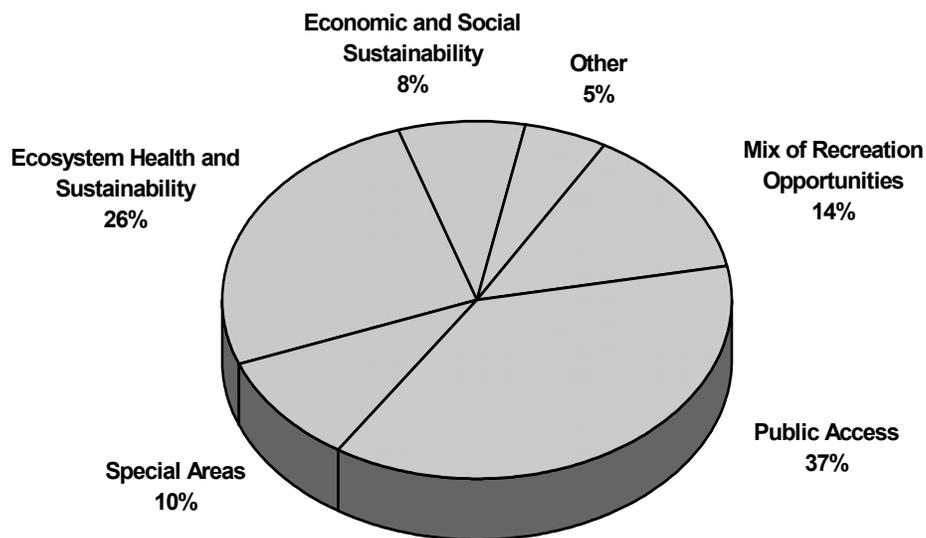


BALANCING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC NEEDS WHILE MAINTAINING FOREST HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY. This issue did not change. Your comments stated the importance of the forests continuing to be part of the economic and social needs of the surrounding communities. Some examples are:

- * “Allow local communities to have a greater input into management opportunities for their areas.”
- * “So much money can come into our community if we have good marked trails.”
- * “Renewable resources must be used to promote the economic viability of small rural communities.”

PUBLIC COMMENTS

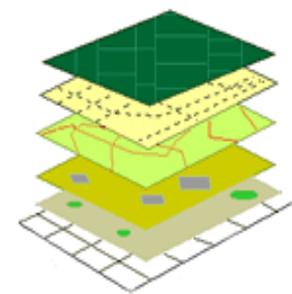
The following chart shows the percentage of comments received for each issue. Public access received a higher percentage followed by ecosystem health and sustainability, mix of recreation opportunities, special areas, and economic and social sustainability. Each issue will be evaluated equally. This chart is only a visual aid to show the breakdown of the comments received. These are the final issues we will use as we go forward in the plan revision process.



Forest Facts

Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

One of the tools we will use extensively for forest plan revision is the geographic information system (GIS). GIS is a computer-based program that stores, analyzes, and displays multiple layers of geographic information. Different map files or *layers* with common geography can be displayed at the same time and studied in relationship to one another. In a map of the forest, layers may represent types of vegetation, water (ponds/streams), soil types, areas of past-prescribed burns, land elevations, wildlife habitats, trails, and road systems. Once these layers are in place, our team can query the system to gather information from multiple layers. For instance, you would be able to pinpoint the primary vegetation and the wildlife habitat in an area that had experienced several wildfires. This may help determine the type of vegetation that should be used in reforestation efforts of that area. GIS-produced maps will supply immeasurable information to be used throughout the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests plan revision process.



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**UPCOMING
PLANNING
PROJECTS**

- * **Develop Alternative Themes**
- * **ROS (Recreation Opportunity Spectrum) Inventory**
- * **SMS (Scenery Management System) Inventory**
- * **Wildlife & Plant Species Viability Assessment**

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