

# Preface

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# Preface

## UNDERSTANDING THE FOREST PLAN

### Background

The Rio Grande National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, usually called the "Forest Plan," was first issued in January 1985. It was prepared according to the *1976 National Forest Management Act* (NFMA), the *1969 National Environmental Policy Act* (NEPA), and other laws and associated regulations.

The regulations associated with NFMA state that a Forest Plan should ordinarily be revised on a ten-year cycle or at least every 15 years (36 CFR 219.10). Accordingly, Rio Grande Forest personnel prepared a Draft Revised Forest Plan, which was released December 7, 1995.

The Draft Revised Forest Plan was available for public review and comment for 120 days. The Forest received over 5,200 comments from approximately 1,200 persons. Based on the public comments, many changes were made to the Plan and EIS.

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, unless otherwise noted, the term "Forest Plan" is intended to refer to the Final Revised Forest Plan.

The Rio Grande National Forest and the San Juan National Forest were officially combined in February 1995 for administrative purposes. The Forests are now known as the San Juan-Rio Grande National Forests. This Revised Forest Land and Resource Management Plan is applicable only to the Rio Grande portion of the Forest. The San Juan will prepare a separate Plan. The two Plans will tier to one another. The Final Revised Rio Grande Forest Plan will be amended, if needed, because of the San Juan Forest Plan.

### Purpose of the Forest Plan

The Final Revised Forest Plan, like the 1985 Forest Plan, provides guidance for all resource management activities on the Rio Grande National Forest. It establishes management Standards and Guidelines; it describes resource management practices, levels of resource production, people-carrying capacities, and the availability and suitability of lands for resource management.

The Forest Plan, like the 1985 Forest Plan, embodies the provisions of the NFMA, the implementing regulations and other guiding documents. Land-use determinations, Management-Area Prescriptions, and Standards and Guidelines are statements of the management direction. It should be understood, however, that projected outputs, services, and rates of implementation are dependent on the annual budgeting process, and are shown at both the full and experienced budget level.

### Relationship of the Forest Plan to other Documents

Several alternatives have been developed for revising the Forest Plan. Portions of the Forest Plan are the same in all alternatives, while other parts vary. The management direction is shown for the selected alternative in this document. **Alternative G is the selected alternative.**

Alternatives were formulated according to the NFMA and NEPA. An extensive analysis of the alternatives is described in the accompanying Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). The planning process and the analysis procedures used to develop this Final Revised Forest Plan are described or referred to in the FEIS. The FEIS also describes other alternatives considered in the planning process.

Upon release of this Final Revised Forest Plan, specific activities and projects will be proposed to carry out the Plan's direction. Forest Service managers will do environmental analyses on all proposed projects incorporating data and evaluations in the Final Revised Forest Plan and FEIS. All project analysis will tier to the FEIS.

## **Reader's Guide to the Forest Plan**

The reader will find the following in this document:

\* Chapter 1: Forestwide Desired Conditions

The Desired Condition statement is a description of the future mosaic of land and resource conditions that Forest personnel are managing for over the entire Forest, once the Forestwide Objectives are accomplished.

\* Chapter 2: Forestwide Objectives

This chapter contains multiple-use objectives for the integrated resource management of the entire Forest.

Objectives describe specific results or conditions resulting from actions. The allowable sale quantity is a good example of an objective. Forest Objectives include Regional Goals and Objectives identified in the *Rocky Mountain Regional Guide* (1992).

\* Chapter 3: Forestwide Standards and Guidelines

This chapter contains Standards and Guidelines applied Forestwide.

Standards are courses of action or levels of attainment required by the Forest Plan to promote achievement of the Desired Condition and Objectives. Standards are mandatory, and deviation from Standards is not permissible without an amendment to the Forest Plan.

Guidelines are preferred or advisable courses of action or levels of attainment designed to promote achievement of the Desired Condition and Objectives. Deviations from Guidelines are permissible if it is documented that objectives are still being met.

\* Chapter 4: Management-Area Direction

This chapter contains direction that applies only to specific portions of the Forest, as shown on the Management-Area Map. Management-area direction is applied in addition to the Forestwide direction. Each management area contains the following:

(1) Management-Area Theme, Setting, and Desired Condition: This section describes the Desired Condition for the Management Area in a narrative form. It represents the land and resource conditions that may be found after the Goals have been met. The Desired Conditions result from applying Standards and Guidelines that help meet the Forestwide Objectives.

(2) Management Area Standards and Guidelines: These are the specific Standards and Guidelines for the Management Area. They are applied in addition to the Forestwide Standards and Guidelines. Standards must be followed and no deviation is allowed without an amendment to the Forest Plan. Guidelines are preferred or advisable courses of action.

\* Chapter 5: Forest Plan Monitoring and Evaluation Process

This chapter describes how the Forest Service will ensure that the Forest Plan remains current and has the effect it is intended to have.

\* Appendix A: Related National Goals

This appendix contains national goals found in the Forest Service Manual (FSM) concerning land and resource management.

\* Appendix B: Key National and Regional Policies

This appendix describes key national policies related to land and resource management contained in the Forest Service Manual (FSM) and Forest Service Handbook (FSH). This appendix replaces Standards and Guidelines in the 1985 Forest Plan, which reference these documents.

\* Appendix C: Relevant Federal and State Statutes, Regulations, and Executive Orders

This appendix describes key statutes, regulations, and executive orders related to land and resource management. This appendix replaces Standards and Guidelines in the 1985 Forest Plan that reference legal direction.

\* Appendix D: Mineral Leasing Stipulations and Lease Forms

This appendix contains the Stipulations to be included in mineral leases, and where they are to be applied. The appendix also contains a sample lease form.

\* Appendix E: Land Adjustment Strategy

This appendix summarizes the strategy for acquisition or transfer of National Forest System lands.

## **Implementation of the Forest Plan**

## **Introduction**

The Revised Forest Plan, like the 1985 Forest Plan, provides the framework to guide the day-to-day resource management operations of the Rio Grande National Forest, and subsequent land and resource management decisions made during project planning. The NFMA requires that resource plans and permits, contracts, and other instruments issued for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands be consistent with the Forest Plan. Site-specific project decisions must also be consistent with the Forest Plan, unless the Forest Plan is modified by amendment.

## **Project-Level Decisions**

There are two objectives for project planning. In agency-initiated actions, the objective is to move toward or achieve the integrated direction in the Forest Plan through the proposed action. For example, if improvement of fisheries habitat is a Forestwide Goal, projects to move toward or achieve that goal might include placement of fish habitat structures in a stream, to promote recovery of streamside vegetation.

For proposals made by others, the objective of project planning is to decide if the proposal is or could be made consistent with Forestwide and Management-Area Standards. It must also be decided if the project is in the public's interest in terms of Forestwide Goals and Objectives. An example of an external proposal might be the proposed construction of a road or utility line serving private land across National Forest System lands.

The following ideas are important:

- \* Forest Plan Goals and Objectives guide the identification and selection of potential agency projects.
- \* The determination of whether an individual project is consistent with the Forest Plan shall be based on whether the project follows Forestwide and Management-Area Standards.
- \* Projects that cannot comply with Standards in the Forest Plan must be found inconsistent with Forest Plan management direction, unless the Standard is modified through Forest Plan amendment. In the latter case, project approval and Forest Plan amendment may be accomplished simultaneously.
- \* Plan Objectives, Forestwide and Management-Area Guidelines, project-specific outputs, and activity schedules should not be used in the consistency determination. Under those circumstances where a guideline is modified or not applied as described in the Forest Plan, the responsible official should recognize the purpose(s) for which the Guideline was developed. He or she should also provide assurance that any subsequently approved actions do not conflict with the Objective(s) the Guideline was intended to achieve. This will be documented during project analysis following the NEPA procedures.
- \* Resource plans and permits, contracts, and other instruments issued for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands must be consistent with the Forest Plan, unless specifically exempted from applicability in an amendment or revision decision document. Determinations of consistency

of permits, contracts, and other instruments for occupancy and use of National Forest System lands are based on whether they follow Forestwide and Management-Area Standards.

- \* Generally, it is during Forest Plan implementation--when a project decision is made-- that the irretrievable commitment of resources is also made. Therefore, before making decisions, additional environmental analysis and site-specific disclosure of environmental effects are required according to NEPA procedures.

Following are some examples of site-specific project decisions that require additional environmental analyses and disclosure as the Forest Plan is carried out. This list is not intended to be all-inclusive.

- Allotment management plans
- Timber harvest methods and related activities
- Wildlife improvement projects
- Watershed improvement projects, abandoned-mine reclamation, and Federal Facility Compliance projects (projects generating air and/or water pollutants and hazardous-material treatment or removal)
- Prescribed-burn projects in support of resource management objectives
- Decisions for winter-sports development, outfitter-guide proposals for Wilderness or other areas, and other externally generated projects involving occupancy and use of National Forest System lands
- Selection of roads and trails where motorized vehicle travel will be allowed, prohibited or limited
- Construction and reconstruction of trails, roads, staging areas, buildings, dams, bridges, recreation sites, utilities, potable water systems and road closures
- Notice of Intent to Operate, Prospecting Permits, Plans of Operation, Surface Use Plans of Operation (36 CFR 228 A and C), and mineral sales contracts.

### **Operational Activities Exempt from the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Process**

To help carry out the Forest Plan, Forest staff conduct resource inventories, prepare action plans and schedules, and administer previously approved activities. These are called operational activities. They represent neither binding decisions nor irretrievable commitments of resources, so they are not subject to environmental analyses and disclosure under NEPA procedures.

Following are some examples of operational activities that do not constitute site-specific project decisions, and are therefore exempt from NEPA procedures. The list is not all-inclusive.

- Scheduling the revision of allotment management plans (FSM 2210)

- Amending grazing permits to comply with the Forest Plan (FSM 2230)
- Developing five-year wildlife action plans (FSM 2620)
- Conducting resource inventories or identifying adverse air-quality conditions in Class I airsheds (FSM 2580)
- Developing fire-situation reports, escaped-fire-situation analyses, fire evaluations, fire-season severity requests, fire-management action plans, and dispatching fires (FSM 5120, 5130)
- Developing implementation schedules, three- to five-year plans, etc. Examples : Five-year timber sale plan and timber "gate system"
- Scheduling maintenance for developed recreation sites, developing heritage-resource overview, Scenic-Byway management plans, and interpretive plans (FSM 2330, 2360, 2380, 2390)
- Developing Wilderness operation and maintenance schedules (FSM 2320)
- Preparing landownership adjustment plans (FSM 5400)

**Note:** Operational activities exempt from the NEPA process are not synonymous with “categorical exclusions”. Operational activities, as indicated in the examples above, do not represent irreversible commitments of resources and do not, in themselves, create any environmental effects. Actions that can be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement are described in FSM 1952.2 and FSH 1909.15. These actions may represent irreversible commitments of resources, but do not individually or cumulatively have significant effects on the human environment.

### **Public Involvement and Coordination with Other Government Agencies**

Ongoing public involvement and governmental coordination are a central part of carrying out the Forest Plan. The Rio Grande National Forest has committed to an intensive program of public involvement. The Forest subscribes to the philosophy of "fish bowl" planning and management. This means that the door is always open and that Forest personnel are available to explain management objectives, decisions, policy, or procedure, or answer any other questions people may have. Project planning will include public involvement and cooperation. In essence, the Forest has committed to a **partnership with the public** and with other government agencies (local, state, or federal). Monitoring and evaluation reports will be available annually for public review.

To receive more information, or to be placed on the Forest mailing list, please write to the Forest Supervisor, San Juan-Rio Grande National Forests, 1803 West Highway 160, Monte Vista, Colorado, 81144.

## **Budget Formulation**

Annual Forest budget proposals are based on the activities and actions required to achieve the Goals and Objectives of the Revised Forest Plan. Monitoring results and actual costs of carrying out the Standards and Guidelines will be the basis for each year's budget proposals. Costs to carry out the Forest Plan are not complete without providing for an adequate level of monitoring and evaluation of projects.

## **Budget Execution**

The annual budget must comply with the Revised Forest Plan and any specific direction provided in the annual *Appropriations Act* (FSM 1930). As actual allocations rarely provide for full funding of the Forest Plan, the scheduled activities and actions for any particular year are adjusted to conform to the intent of Congress. Although budget changes themselves do not require Forest Plan amendment, implications of budget changes may. For example, a project for which money is appropriated must be consistent with the Forest Plan; the project or the Forest Plan may require modification to assure this consistency.

## **Forest Plan Amendment and Revision**

### **Forest Plan Amendment**

The amendment process allows changes in components of Forest Plan management direction. Unless circumstances warrant a revision, an amendment is generally done when monitoring and evaluation show either of the following:

- \* that the achievement of one or all of the Forestwide Objectives is constrained by conflicting Forest Plan direction, or
- \* that adequate progress toward achieving the Desired Condition is not being made.

Other needs for amendments may arise during the evaluation of agency-initiated projects to achieve the integrated direction in the Forest Plan, or during the evaluation of external proposals. Amendments arising from agency-initiated projects or external proposals may be analyzed and decisions documented in a decision notice or record of decision simultaneously with project-approval decisions. This can be done if the consequences of the proposed amendment, and alternatives to it, are specifically disclosed in the project environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.

Significant and non-significant amendments are defined in 36 CFR 219.10(f). Significant amendments are those that affect the long-term balance of goods and services on the Forest or the biological "health" of the Forest.

Forest personnel conduct the process and forward proposed significant Forest Plan amendments to the Regional Forester, the responsible official for significant amendments, for approval. The Forest Supervisor is the responsible official for non-significant amendments.

## **Forest Plan Revision**

Normally the Forest Plan will be revised on a ten-year cycle. This means that the anticipated completion of a normal revision will occur about 10 to 15 years following completion of this Forest Plan Revision. Variations of this general rule may occur for various reasons. For example, a major event might suggest an acceleration of the revision. However, scheduled inventories, anticipated staffing changes, or other circumstances that might improve planning efficiency, might warrant a delay. Delaying a revision is not appropriate if monitoring and evaluation show immediate changes in the Forest Plan are needed.

A thorough review of the Forest Plan should be completed before initiating a Forest Plan Revision. The Forest interdisciplinary team conducts this review, which includes the following:

- \* Results of recent monitoring and evaluation, along with pertinent research findings and recommendations.
- \* New laws, regulations, or policies that may suggest a need to change the Forest Plan.
- \* How well the Forest is progressing toward the stated Desired Condition.
- \* Demand projections for selected outputs.
- \* Predicted and actual ecosystem responses.
- \* Predicted and actual costs, outputs, responses, etc.
- \* Emerging issues and opportunities.

## **Integration with Forest Service Directive System**

Management direction in the Forest Service Directive System, including the Forest Service Manual (FSM) and the Forest Service Handbook (FSH), is part of the Forest Plan management direction and is appropriately referenced within the Forest Plan. Management direction also includes applicable laws, regulations, and policies, although they might not be restated in the Forest Plan.

Appendices A and B reference the minimum resource management direction described in the Directive System. Nothing precludes the development of additional minimum resource management direction whenever appropriate. Under the following circumstances, this Forest Plan does not reference minimum resource management direction:

- \* The specific resource or use is not present on the Forest,
- \* The requirement addresses a condition or problem not applicable to the Forest, or
- \* The planning records document a sound rationale for the exception.

# UNDERSTANDING THE RIO GRANDE NATIONAL FOREST

The Rio Grande National Forest is the eastern portion of the San Juan-Rio Grande National Forests. The two Forests were officially combined for administrative purposes in February 1995. The Rio Grande portion of the Forests consists of about 1,852,000 acres, and is in south-central Colorado. The Forest surrounds and forms the backdrop for the San Luis Valley, one of the largest mountain basins in the world. Water for municipal, industrial, and agricultural purposes come from the Sangre de Cristo range on the Valley's east side, and the San Juan range to the west. The headwaters of the Rio Grande River originate in the Rio Grande National Forest, and most watersheds on the Forest drain into the Rio Grande system.

Elevations range from about 7,800 feet in the foothills to more than 13,000 feet in the San Juans, along the Continental Divide. A few Sangre de Cristo elevations exceed 14,000 feet.

The San Luis Valley is composed of unconsolidated sediments laid down in the late-Tertiary period. The two mountain ranges on either side of the San Luis Valley (where the Forest is) are very different in origin and geology. Volcanic rocks and shallow, intrusive rocks of the mid-to-late Tertiary period make up the San Juan mountains. The Sangre de Cristo mountains are of more recent origin than the San Juans, although the rocks are older. Faulting and upthrusting along the Rio Grande rift formed the Sangre de Cristo mountains into a steep, narrow range.

Common vegetation types on the RGNF, generally from lowest to highest elevations, include sagebrush, grass, oakbrush, Pinyon-juniper, Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, aspen, lodgepole pine, spruce/fir, and alpine tundra.

The RGNF has habitat for almost 300 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. Threatened or Endangered animal species on the RGNF are the Mexican spotted owl, peregrine falcon, bald eagle, and possibly the grizzly bear.

Counties containing lands covered by the Forest Plan include Hinsdale, San Juan, Archuleta, Alamosa, Conejos, Mineral, Rio Grande, and Saguache. These counties are generally characterized by their low population densities, high unemployment, and low per capita income. While there are no Forest lands in Custer and Costilla counties, people there rely on the Forest for gathering forest products and recreating.

## **The San Juan-Rio Grande (the Rio Grande side): Distinctive Roles and Contributions**

There are over 191,553,000 acres of National Forests and Grasslands nationwide. Colorado ranks sixth highest in the nation, with approximately 14,471,800 acres of National Forests and Grasslands that provide an abundance of recreation activities for tourists and residents. Of the many recreation activities offered, driving for pleasure is the most popular activity. With 21 designated Scenic Byways in Colorado, scenery is a major attraction.

For Colorado and most of the Rocky Mountains, tourism is a main source of income. There is a direct tie between beautiful scenery and local economic benefits. People come to Colorado for the outstanding scenery. The "*Report of the President's Commission on America's Outdoors*" (Alexander et al., 1986) said that America's most important attribute for a recreation area is natural beauty.

The Rio Grande National Forest makes up 13% of the National Forest System lands in Colorado. The Forest has two designated Scenic Byways, the Silverthread and Los Caminos Antiguos, and an abundance of roads and trails. In addition, there are many outfitter and guide tour services that give people the opportunity to experience the Forest.

The Forest falls within the south-central portion of the Rocky Mountain Range. Because of this, it offers a unique scenic experience. The Forest combines the unique flora of the Southwest with the central Rocky Mountains. To the east, the open Valley floor is surrounded by the rigid mountain peaks of the Sangre de Cristos. These mountains descend into steep slopes covered with colorful aspen against a background of subalpine fir, spruce, and Pinyon-juniper that abruptly ends at the Valley floor. To the north, the high mountain peaks give way to much gentler rolling hills covered by lodgepole pine, which extend to the valley bottom. To the west, the scattered mountain peaks are interspersed with rolling hills of mixed rock canyons and open meadows. The southern portion of the Valley is fairly flat, with several dominant, rounded mountains that rise above the horizon.

These characteristics offer visitors some of Colorado's most unique scenery. The Sangre de Cristo Range is home to several of Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks, such as Crestone Peak, Crestone Needles, Kit Carson Mountain, and Blanca Peak, and also the Great Sand Dunes National Monument.

The western part of the Forest has spectacular views of the Rio Grande Pyramid, the 100-foot high North Clear Creek Falls, Bristol Head Mountain, the headwaters of the Rio Grande, and the Weminuche and San Juan Wildernesses. Many open parks and meadows, such as Saguache Park, contain a variety of plant and animal life, including a wide range of wildflowers. In addition, there are a number of historical scenic areas, including the Bachelor Loop, near Creede; the Bonanza Loop, near Villa Grove; and the Cumbres and Toltec Scenic Railroad, near Antonito. Tucked within the foothills are many unique rock formations like the Natural Arch and Summer Coon Volcanic Areas. There are several canyons of rounded rock formations such as Penitente, Witches, Sidewinder, and the Rock Garden canyons, known worldwide by avid rockclimbers, which lie on adjacent BLM lands.

## **Factors That May Affect the Rio Grande National Forest**

Many factors may affect management of the Rio Grande National Forest. Some are global, some national, and others regional or local. These may include:

### **Global/Intercontinental/National Scope**

- Global warming
- Balance-of-trade issues
- Shifts in the volume of timber supplied by Canada, southern states, and the West Coast
- Changes in off-road-vehicle technology
- Changes in modes of recreation
- Military needs
- Tourism

### **Multi-State/Regional Scope**

- Regional population trends
- Shifts in employment and manufacturing base
- Shifts in tourism
- Drought and water availability
- Major fire risks
- Insect and disease outbreaks
- Trends in visitor use

### **Forest Scope**

- Development of new industry
- Shifts in recreation-visitor preferences
- New uses for forest products

## **Resource Commodities and Services from the Rio Grande National Forest**

This section consists of a brief summary of the current management situation, including demand and supply conditions for resource commodities and services, production potentials, and use and development opportunities within the Rio Grande National Forest. This information was derived from the accompanying Final Environmental Impact Statement.

### **Dispersed Recreation**

Outdoor recreation is the primary resource on the RGNF. The management emphasis is to feature and perpetuate undeveloped and diversified dispersed-recreation opportunities. The qualities and flavor of the RGNF are characterized by moderate summer temperatures, abundant snow, clear blue skies, high-elevation country, sparkling cool streams and lakes, and an array of beautiful scenery. It's a great place to get away from crowds and congestion, where you can find friendly people, a rich and colorful history, a rich Hispanic culture, and small towns. Demand for dispersed-recreation opportunities has been growing and is expected to continue to do so.

The key to providing quality dispersed-recreation opportunities and experiences is to manage a broad spectrum of recreation settings. The mix of recreation settings on the Forest provides for summer and winter, as well as motorized and nonmotorized recreational activities. Balancing the mix and resolving the conflicts is the challenge.

### **Developed Recreation**

Developed recreation includes all recreation activities that take place on a developed recreation site. Managed capacity ranges between 809,750 and 851,250 people-at-one-time, depending on the alternative. Demand is expected to remain within the capacity over the next 10 years.

### **Locatable Minerals**

Locatable minerals that may be important on the Rio Grande National Forest include gold, silver, and copper. All alternatives continue mineral production according to the 1872 Mining Act.

### **Leasable Minerals**

The only known leasable minerals on the Rio Grande National are oil and gas. Currently, there are no producing wells on the Forest. Projections suggest the potential for as many as 23 wells during the 10-year planning period.

### **Timber Production**

Timber harvest is an important component of forest management. In December 1992, Douglas B. Rideout, Ph.D., Professor of Forest Economics at Colorado State University, published an *Administrative Study of the Timber Supply and Demand Situation of the Rio Grande National Forest and Its Timbershed*. This report addressed the sawtimber economy of the RGNF and its timbershed from fiscal years 1982 - 1991. It also assessed the sawtimber from the Forest Plan Revision. Rideout estimated the demand for timber from the RGNF and its timbershed to average approximately 50 MMBF per year.

This Forest Plan projects an Total Sale Program Quantity (TSPQ) of 79 MCCF/year or 29 MMBF/year at the full budget level. TSPQ at the experienced budget level is projected at 39 MCCF/year or 15 MMBF/year. TSPQ is comprised of hardwood and softwood sawtimber, fuelwood, posts and poles, salvage, and house logs.

The Sawtimber ASQ will be 51 MCCF/year or 21 MMBF/year at the full budget level and 28 MCCF/year or 11 MMBF/year at the experienced budget level.

### **Livestock Grazing**

This plan projects the capacity for livestock grazing at 143,077 head months. This figure includes grazing by sheep and cattle. There are about 577,000 acres of land considered suitable for grazing on the Rio Grande National Forest.

### **Special Forest Products**

The Plan allows the gathering or collection of special Forest products such as herbs, mushrooms, rocks, small trees and shrubs, floral products, etc. on a case-by-case basis. The program is administered by the Ranger Districts, upon request.