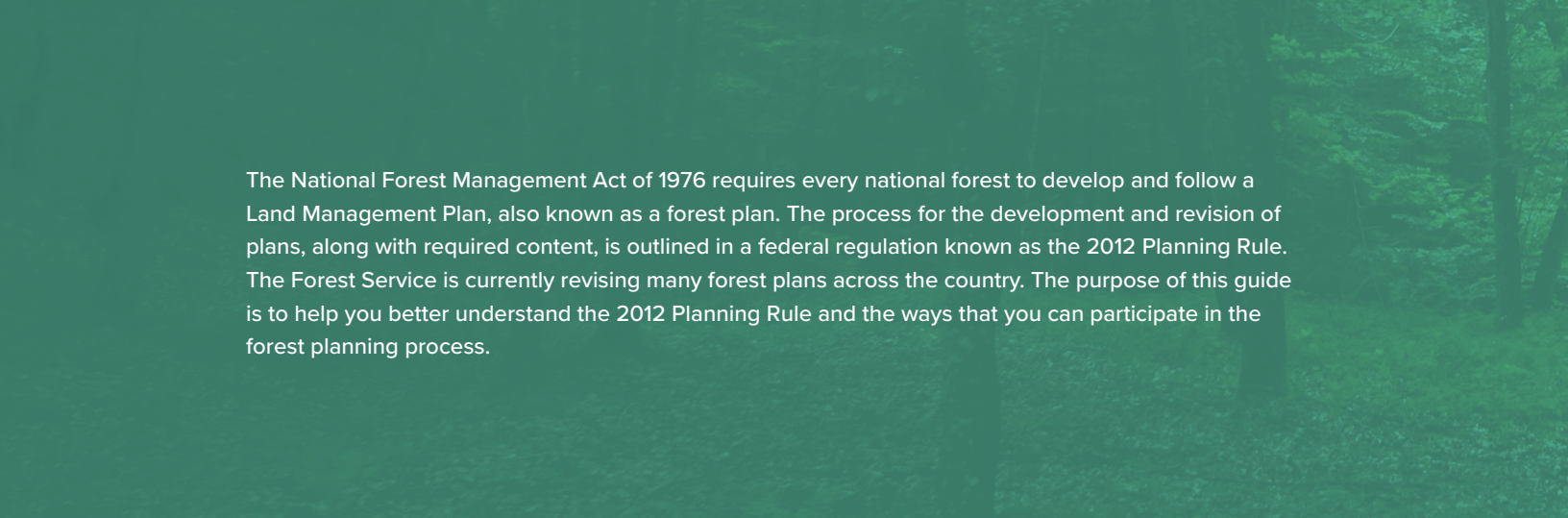




Outdoor Citizens' Guide To

Forest Planning

OUTDOOR  ALLIANCE



The National Forest Management Act of 1976 requires every national forest to develop and follow a Land Management Plan, also known as a forest plan. The process for the development and revision of plans, along with required content, is outlined in a federal regulation known as the 2012 Planning Rule. The Forest Service is currently revising many forest plans across the country. The purpose of this guide is to help you better understand the 2012 Planning Rule and the ways that you can participate in the forest planning process.

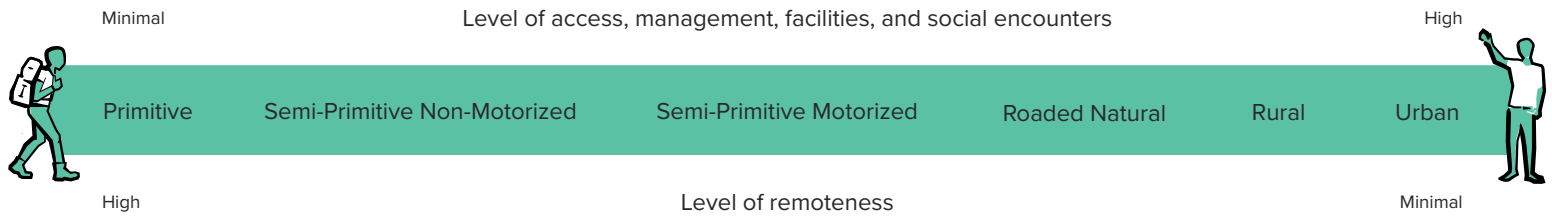
Overview of the Process

The purpose of this Outdoor Citizens' Guide to Forest Planning is to help you understand the forest-plan revision process and your opportunities for working with the Forest Service to help shape the future of the forests where you recreate.

A forest plan is similar to a comprehensive plan that helps guide land use and development city- or county-wide. Such a plan lays out where particular uses may occur; forest plans describe how different areas of the forest will be managed and what uses are suitable in different parts of the forest.

A forest plan has many layers. At the top is forest-wide direction — things that apply across the entire forest. Below that, the forest is first divided into management areas or geographic areas, with specific management direction for each of these areas based on its unique geographic, topographic, cultural, and recreational attributes. Then there are other layers, like special designations to protect sensitive plant species, potential Wilderness areas, and wildlife habitat. For people who recreate on the forest, a layer of particular interest is the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum, which guides what types of recreation uses and infrastructure are suitable across the forest.

Recreation Opportunity Spectrum



Taken together, these layers combine to form a comprehensive plan for managing the forest. The forest plan doesn't set site-specific direction (where exactly to build a trail, for example), but it provides the management direction necessary to guide detailed decisions down the road.

Forest plans are generally only revised every 15 to 20 years, so it's important to get involved when the national forests where you recreate undertake forest plan revision. Plan revision usually takes several years. Your comments and input during the process will help to shape the future of the places where you recreate for a large portion of your life — and will determine how future generations will experience the national forest.

How does recreation fit into forest planning?

Under the 2012 Planning Rule, forest plans must include specific instructions for managing for sustainable recreation, including zoning for recreation settings, opportunities, and access, and managing scenic character. In Forest Service-speak, the term "sustainable recreation" means "a range of recreational settings, opportunities, and access that can be sustained over time." Recreation opportunities that the Forest Service manages for include non-motorized, motorized, developed, and dispersed recreation on land, water, and even in the air.

Forest Planning 101

The life cycle of the forest planning process

“National Forest are owned by all Americans, and we all have a role to play in how they are managed.”

U.S. Forest Service

Phase
1

Assessment

The U.S. Forest Service will:

- Examine how the forest is currently being used.
- Gather information about wildlife, air and water quality, economic benefits, outdoor recreation, roads, energy and mineral resources, and more.

Where you fit in:

- This is an information-gathering phase, so the Forest Service wants to hear about what matters to you on the forest — like your favorite trails.
- You can share your insights through online comment periods, public meetings, and field trips.
- Sign up for the Forest Service email list for the forest planning process.

Phase
2

Plan Development

The U.S. Forest Service will:

- Evaluate what parts of the current plan need to be revised and the “need for change.”
- Revise or develop a proposed plan.
- Initiate an environmental review process (NEPA) and a draft Environmental Impact Statement.
- Review and respond to objections to the completed plan.
- Submit the final plan and final Environmental Impact Statement.

Where you fit in:

- Attend public meetings throughout the process.
- Comment on the draft plan and the draft Environmental Impact Statement.

Implement and Monitor

The U.S. Forest Service will:

- Do the work they aspire to in the plan.
- Monitor whether their new plan is working.
- Evaluate the status of many aspects of the forest, from watersheds to visitor satisfaction.
- Work with partners to get the feedback they need to evaluate the plan's effectiveness.

Where you fit in:

- Track Forest Service projects and weigh in.
- Every two years, the Forest Service will share a monitoring report with the public.
- Share your data or feedback.

Collaboratives working together for the benefit of all

Have you heard the phrase “teamwork makes the dream work”? As with many things in life, this holds true for forest planning. Forest planning is a great opportunity for organizations and individuals who share an interest in a particular landscape (it doesn't have to be the entire forest) to work together to resolve differences and present a united vision for how the Forest Service should manage that landscape in the revised forest plan.

Forest planning-focused collaboratives take a variety of forms — two good examples are the Nantahala-Pisgah Forest Partnership and the Gallatin Forest Partnership — and each is unique to the landscape it is focused on. While there's no guarantee that the Forest Service will incorporate a collaborative effort's recommendations into the revised forest plan, the Forest Service usually is eager to work with collaborative groups and is generally very supportive of efforts by the public to find common ground and agreement.

Assessment

The Assessment stage is the very first step in the planning process, and it's exactly what it sounds like. During this stage, the Forest Service assesses what is currently happening on and near the forest: the existing social, ecological, and economic conditions and trends. This includes understanding how and where various forms of recreation occur; inventorying the types and abundance of fish, wildlife, and plant species on the forest; building an understanding of how the forest contributes social, cultural, and economic value; and quantifying different extractive resources. During the Assessment, the Forest Service gathers information that is critical to informing the planning process. After all, if you don't know where you are, it's hard to figure out where you're going.

During the Assessment stage, the Forest Service needs the public to help them understand how you use and enjoy the forest and what benefits it brings to your community. You don't have to be an expert on a particular subject to provide useful information (they have a long list of "ologists" to handle the technical stuff). As a person who recreates on public lands, you can provide valuable information about where, when, and how you recreate on the forest. During Assessment, the Forest Service provides a number of opportunities for you to provide input: public meetings and open houses, sending in letters, and eventually reviewing and commenting on the Draft Assessment. The more detailed information you provide, the better! Maps showing where your favorite climbing areas are or the general areas where you like to ski are helpful, as is listing specific trails where you hike and bike or the stretches of river where you paddle. This is also a good time to mention what you'd like to see the Forest Service do differently in the future, as the Assessment helps the Forest Service determine their "need for change" — in other words, the reason for doing forest planning!

You might be surprised at how little the Forest Service sometimes knows about recreation in the forest, as well as how responsive they're likely to be to your input. If all you do is share information about where you recreate, even that can make a big difference in the quality of the plan. The process may seem technical at times, but know that, as a forest user, you absolutely have a legitimate area of expertise. If there are issues that you really want to see the Forest Service address during planning, it's best to bring them to the forest's attention during this phase.

Developing the Plan

The next phase of planning follows a process that you may be familiar with: the NEPA process. NEPA stands for the National Environmental Policy Act. This law was passed in 1970 and requires that federal agencies make informed decisions and examine the potential environmental effects of their proposed actions. It requires that agency decision-making be a public process, and it's the primary way in which we, the public, participate in public land management. And, because forest-plan revision is a big deal, it requires the most detailed level of analysis under NEPA, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). In addition to the standard steps that any EIS includes — scoping, draft EIS, final EIS, objection, decision — forest planning includes a couple of additional steps. Here, we'll outline each part of the process, one step at a time.

Determining the Need for Change

Forest plan revision does not mean starting from scratch. There are probably many aspects of forest management that work perfectly well on any given National Forest and don't need changing. Rather than reinventing the wheel, this step in the planning process involves identifying and explaining what parts of the existing forest plan should be revised. The Forest Service uses the information gathered during the Assessment, as well as any information gleaned from past monitoring, to identify the need for change. In turn, this focuses the rest of the planning process on those elements of forest management that need updating.

The Forest Service will put out a preliminary Need for Change identifying what planners think the forest-plan revision should focus on based on the Assessment. It's important that you review this and make sure they haven't left out anything that you feel needs to be addressed. The Forest Service bases its final Need for Change on the public input it receives on the preliminary document. This final Need for Change and the Assessment are the foundation upon which the rest of the revised forest plan is built.

Plan Components

The overarching purpose of the forest plan is to ensure that the National Forest is managed sustainably for future generations to use and enjoy. To accomplish this, the plan must address many ecological and socioeconomic topics, from maintaining, conserving, and enhancing forest resources to sustainable recreation management and opportunities for the public to connect with and enjoy the forest. The Forest Service is mandated to manage our forests for multiple use and sustained yield. Therefore, the Forest Plan must provide a framework for managing forestry, mineral development, rangelands, recreation, water, wildlife, fisheries, and more in an ecologically sustainable manner.

The plan itself is made up of many different components, which guide future site-specific projects and activities. The components are a blueprint, giving instructions to future decision-makers to determine what projects and activities can take place in any given area of the forest and under what conditions they may occur. Together, the plan components provide a guide for the Forest Service to bring the forest from the current condition to the desired future conditions.

There are six different types of plan components:

1. Desired Conditions

These describe the vision for what the forest will be like in the future — what the new plan is aiming for. Desired conditions encompass ecological, social, and economic characteristics and can be directed towards the entire forest or just a small area.

Example Desired Condition (from the recently revised Flathead Forest Plan, MT): There are sustainable dispersed recreation opportunities across the Forest. Dispersed recreation opportunities are compatible with the desired recreation opportunity spectrum setting and are managed to reduce the risk of user conflicts and environmental impacts.

2. Objectives

These are measurable and time-specific statements describing how to achieve a specific desired condition, based on reasonably foreseeable budgets and resources. The Forest Service should strive to meet objectives, but it is not required that they do. Objectives should be designed such that future monitoring can measure the progress and effectiveness of each objective.

Example Objective (from the recently revised Flathead Forest Plan, MT): Rehabilitate eight to ten dispersed recreation sites on the Forest with erosion or sanitation issues or other adverse effects on natural resources.

3. Standards

These are mandatory constraints on future site-specific decisions, intended to help meet or maintain the relevant desired conditions, avoid or mitigate undesirable effects, or meet applicable legal requirements. The Forest Service must comply with the standards in a forest plan.

Example Standard (from the recently revised Flathead Forest Plan, MT): New motorized routes or areas available to the public shall not be designated in primitive or semi-primitive non-motorized desired recreation opportunity spectrum settings (winter and summer).

4. Guidelines

Like standards, these are mandatory constraints on future site-specific decisions. However, guidelines allow for flexibility for different situations so long as the intent of the guideline is met. Guidelines must be written so that their intent is clear; that way, if managers propose a different approach than what is specifically described in the guideline, they can justify how the different approach meets the intent of the guideline. In the example below, the intent of the guideline is to protect fishery resources and riparian-associated plant and animal species. If the Forest Service wants to locate a new developed recreation site within an inner riparian management zone, it might still be able to do so if it can show that it will be done in a way that protects fishery resources and riparian-associated species. However, if the agency can't provide a scientifically-based justification for doing so, then the constraints of the guideline apply as written.

Example Guideline (from the recently revised Flathead Forest Plan, MT): To protect fishery resources and riparian-associated plant and animal species, new developed recreation sites should not be located within the inner riparian management zone except when they are related to health and safety or water, such as boat ramps and fish platforms. Structures should be developed with a Forest Aquatics specialist so that fisheries and riparian-associated plant and animal species are protected.

5. Goals

As you might surmise, goals are general descriptions of what the Forest Service is trying to achieve, usually related to process or public involvement. These are optional plan components, and the revised plan may not include goal statements for every resource or issue.

Example Standard (from the recently revised Inyo Forest Plan, CA): Highlight quality recreational experiences in this area so visitors are aware of the recreational opportunities in this area.

6. Suitability

Forest plans identify areas of the forest as suitable or not suitable for specific uses and activities (such as motorized recreation or commercial timber harvest). Suitability is based on the relevant desired conditions, and the forest plan does not have to identify suitability for every use or resource, or for every acre of land.

Example Standard (from the recently revised Inyo Forest Plan, CA): Locatable and leasable mineral exploration or extraction that causes surface disturbance is not suitable [within the Pacific Crest Trail corridor].

In addition to plan components, the forest plan must also

- Identify watersheds that are a priority for maintenance or restoration.
- Describe the national forest's distinctive roles and contributions within the broader landscape.
- Include a monitoring program and strategies to ensure the plan achieves what it's intended to achieve.
- Talk about proposed and possible actions that may occur on the forest during the life of the plan.

Special Designations

The Forest Service also undertakes two very important inventory and evaluation processes during forest-plan revision: Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers. To designate an area as either Wilderness or as a Wild and Scenic River requires congressional action; in forest planning, the Forest Service makes recommendations to Congress for potential designations. For both, the Forest Service follows a particular process as outlined in the Planning Rule.

Wilderness

Inventorying, analyzing, and recommending lands for Wilderness designation follows what's known as the "Chapter 70" process (because it's Chapter 70 of the Forest Service Handbook). There are four steps to the process: inventory, evaluation, comment and decision, and recommendation. Think of it like a gigantic funnel that a lot of acres go into and very few come out of. At the start, the inventory stage, the Forest Service considers any lands that are at least 5,000 acres, do not have roads that are open for motor vehicles, and do not have other "substantially noticeable" human impacts. This initial map is often referred to as "the freak-out map" because a LOT of land fits under those criteria, very little of which will make it all the way through the funnel to a final recommendation.

After drafting the so-called freak-out map, the Forest Service evaluates the wilderness character of these lands. At this stage in the process, even though there is not a formal comment period, if you have information you'd like to share with the Forest Service to inform this analysis, it is a good idea to send in a letter and/or meet with the forest-planning team. Once the Forest Service has completed the evaluation and determined the preliminary Wilderness recommendations, those recommendations are available for public comment. Usually this comment period is wrapped into the draft Environmental Impact Statement for the forest plan. After considering public comment on the preliminary Wilderness recommendations, the Forest Service includes final Wilderness recommendations as part of the revised forest plan. In some cases, the Forest Service does not recommend any lands for Wilderness in the final plan.

Lands recommended for Wilderness designation must be managed to protect their wilderness character. This means that many resource extraction activities will be prohibited, but it can also affect access for some forms of recreation, including mountain biking.

Wild and Scenic Rivers

The Wild and Scenic River inventory is guided by another chapter in the Forest Service Handbook: Chapter 80. Here, the Forest Service inventories rivers and streams across the forest to determine which are eligible for Wild and Scenic designation. To be eligible, a river or stream segment must be free-flowing and have at least one “outstandingly remarkable” river-related value. Outstandingly remarkable values are attributes that are rare, unique, or exemplary and are generally regionally or nationally significant. Incredible paddling opportunities or other river-related recreation opportunities can count as outstandingly remarkable values, as do scenery, geology, fisheries, and history.

During the inventory, the Forest Service develops a systematic and comprehensive inventory of rivers and streams to consider for potential eligibility. To be eligible, a river or stream must meet the criteria described above. Next, the Forest Service classifies the eligible segments as “wild,” “scenic,” or “recreational” based on the level of development along the reach and access at the time it is found eligible. The Forest Service will then develop and include plan components that will protect the values that could cause each stream to be designated in the future. Thus, eligibility is an outstanding tool for protecting rivers for the life of a forest plan.

In rare cases, the Forest Service will consider conducting what they call a “suitability analysis” during planning. This is a test of whether the stars are aligned, politically speaking, for designation. They will then recommend a subset of eligible streams for designation and remove eligibility protections of the rest. The Forest Service should not conduct suitability analyses during planning; doing so violates the 2012 Planning Rule as well as the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, and leads to reduced protections for rivers. If you see a suitability analysis proposed, strongly object.

If free-flowing rivers are your jam, then it’s important to pay attention and get involved during the Wild and Scenic Rivers process. Once the Forest Service has completed its inventory, you should review it and make sure they didn’t miss any streams. Throughout the process you should share photos, videos, opinions, articles, and other evidence in support of outstanding remarkable values. The Forest Service may not know about your favorite whitewater creek, and the outstandingly remarkable recreation value that it provides may well make it eligible for Wild and Scenic protections!

Time to Build the Plan!

The Forest Service works with the public, other stakeholders, and government partners to develop the plan components and weave together the narrative of the revised forest plan. Although it's important to get involved early and often — your input during the early stages of planning will have an outsized effect on the outcome — there are a couple of BIG comment periods you don't want to miss.

First: scoping. This is the official start to the NEPA process. By now, the Forest Service has already completed the Assessment and developed the Need for Change. At scoping, the Forest Service puts out a proposed action. This may be a draft plan or it may be something much less detailed, but either way, this is your first chance to review something resembling a complete plan. Scoping includes at least a 30-day public comment period, during which the Forest Service will hold public meetings. The input you provide at scoping is critical to shaping the rest of the planning process (sound familiar?). The next step is for the Forest Service to develop and analyze a range of alternatives, and this range is determined by what planners hear from the public during scoping.

The next step in the NEPA process is the draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). After scoping, the Forest Service considers all of the substantive comments they received and develops several alternatives (potential plans). Depending on the identified Need for Change, the range of alternatives may address many aspects of the forest plan or only a few, but either way you've got options to consider. Usually there will be one alternative on the far end of the motorized access/multiple use end of the spectrum, one on the far end of the Wilderness/land conservation end of the spectrum, and a couple somewhere in between these two extremes. It is very likely that all of the alternatives will include some similarities, as well. These are generally the things the Forest Service is going to do no matter what, like monitor for and adapt to changing conditions due to climate change. The range of alternatives should encompass all of the relevant issues raised during scoping, and the DEIS analyzes and compares all of the alternatives. In addition, the Forest Service often picks one alternative and wraps it into a "Draft Plan" (although it's really the draft-draft plan). The DEIS comment period is your opportunity to review and provide feedback on the Draft Plan and DEIS.

During the DEIS comment period, it's your responsibility to bring up any issues that may have been left out of the DEIS and provide substantive feedback on both the DEIS and Draft Plan (if there is one at this point). Consider the Alternatives within the DEIS to be an à la carte menu when you're commenting on the DEIS. You may like elements of several different alternatives and not feel that any one alternative is just right. That's fine: the Forest Service is hoping you will tell them which elements from each alternative should be part of the final plan and why. It's pretty tough to get the Forest Service to add anything new to the plan at this point, but if you can make a case for why something should be considered that wasn't included in the DEIS, then you certainly should. This is the last unrestricted opportunity for public comment in the plan revision process.

The Forest Service is obligated to consider all of the substantive comments that they receive on the DEIS in writing for the final EIS (FEIS). The FEIS should look pretty similar to the DEIS — the major components are likely all the same — but this final analysis incorporates anything new that the Forest Service learned from the public during the DEIS comment period. At this point the Forest Service also takes all the feedback that it got during the DEIS comment period to refine the draft plan and create a real Draft Plan. When it's ready, the Forest Service puts the newly formed plan out into the world for one last public comment period. At this point there's a FEIS, a Draft Plan, and a Draft Record of Decision (ROD). This time, there isn't a wide-open public comment period. Instead, there's an objection process.

What is a substantive comment?

Your comments should focus on why you feel a certain way. Explain the reasons why you like — or don't like — a particular proposal rather than just saying that you do or don't support it. Your explanation doesn't have to be long or complicated, but your comment should provide information that the Forest Service can use to inform their analysis and decision making.

Bad example: I don't like logging.

Good example: The Icy Mountains should not be designated as suitable for timber harvest. This is an important area for recreation. As a cyclist and trail runner, I really enjoy using the single track trails in the area and am concerned that commercial logging would turn many of these trails into two-track roads to accommodate logging trucks, degrade water quality in the Rocky River (one of my favorite whitewater runs), and degrade the scenic character of this area. In addition, the Icy Mountains are important habitat for moose and I am concerned about how logging would impact moose.

The objection process is the final opportunity to comment on the plan. There are a few restrictions: you can only submit an objection if you've previously commented on the plan, your objection has to relate specifically to issues you raised in your previous comments, and you have to propose a remedy that would solve your objection. If your objection meets all of those criteria, you have 60 days to file an objection to either (or both) the FEIS and Draft Plan. If you choose to file an objection, you may meet with the Forest Service to attempt to resolve your concerns. The resolution meeting usually includes other objectors, as well as interested parties and other members of the public. If you and the Forest Service successfully resolve your concerns, you withdraw your objection. If you and the Forest Service cannot resolve all of your concerns, the Forest Service will issue a formal written response, which may identify changes to the plan reflecting any resolutions, generally within 90 days of the close of the administrative review period.

Once the objections have been resolved, or at least responded to, the Forest Service publishes the final plan and a Record of Decision. The Forest Supervisor has the final say in forest planning, and the ROD explains their rationale, particularly around contentious topics. It's sort of like an open letter to forest-planning enthusiasts.

That's it! After the ROD is issued, plan revision is complete.

Implementing and Monitoring

After planning comes the really important part: Implementation and Monitoring. After all, the plan doesn't mean anything if it just sits on a shelf gathering dust. This is where forest plan revision really comes to life.

Once the Final Plan and ROD are published, the Forest Service begins following the new plan. New projects must be consistent with plan components and guidance in the new plan, and the Forest Service will get to work on any objectives that require immediate or near-term action. Even though forest planning is done, your involvement as a public-lands owner is not. Being a public lands owner is a long-term relationship, and you should continue to work with the Forest Service and other interested parties on future site-specific projects intended to meet the desired conditions, as well as other projects or Forest Service actions that arise.

Throughout the life of the plan, the Forest Service will also monitor to ensure that their new plan is effective. The revised plan includes guidance on two types of monitoring: plan monitoring and broad-scale monitoring. Plan monitoring tests the assumptions that underlie the plan to make sure they're accurate, and it helps the Forest Service track its progress towards meeting the desired conditions. Over time, monitoring may show that it's necessary to modify the forest plan. Plan monitoring must address the following issues:

- The status of watershed conditions, ecological conditions, and focal species, including ecological conditions necessary to contribute to the recovery of federally listed threatened and endangered species, conserve proposed and candidate species, and maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern
- The status of visitor use and visitor satisfaction
- Progress toward meeting the desired conditions and objectives in the plan, including recreation objectives
- Measurable changes within the forest related to climate change and other stressors
- The effects of management activities to determine that they are not harming productivity of the forest

Broad-scale monitoring supports plan monitoring. It considers questions at a bigger scale than just a single forest, and this program is developed at the regional level. The Forest Service works with many different partners in monitoring, from research scientists to citizen scientists and any others who can help to answer the monitoring questions.

That's it!

Now you have the knowledge you need to help shape the future of your favorite national forests.

And, better yet, you're not in this alone. Outdoor Alliance and its partner organizations will be with you every step of the way to provide resources, support, and tools to leverage your engagement and help you and your adventure partners make a difference.

Learn more at:

outdooralliance.org/forest-planning

