

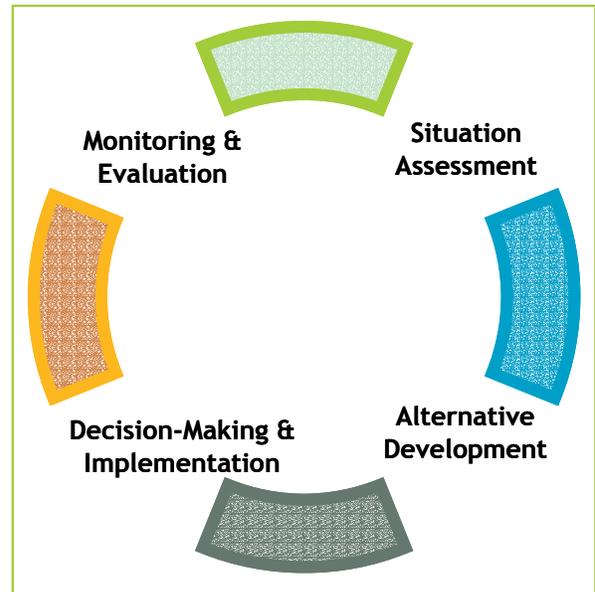
Forest Planning Processes

Forest Planning Process

Supporting text for this section is available at: http://www.uark.edu/depts/rsocweb/Community_Guides/guide2cd.PDF

Forest plans are the primary documents that define how individual forests will be managed. They achieve their mission to “*sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.*” (source: *Forest Service 2004 Strategic Plan*) The process of revising or amending a forest plan is only one step in a continuous, adaptive management process that includes assessment, development of alternatives, decision-making, implementation, and monitoring.

National Forests conduct their natural resource planning and decision making at two levels — comprehensive planning and project-level planning.



COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING	PROJECT PLANNING
<p>A comprehensive Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) is required for each National Forest by the 1974 Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resource Planning Act. A Forest Plan establishes desired conditions and objectives for the whole National Forest, desired conditions for different areas within the National Forest, and standards (limits) to be applied to management activities on the National Forest. Forest Plans are amended as needed and must be revised every 10-15 years.</p>	<p>Project-level planning and decisionmaking involves the analysis of site-specific activities designed to achieve the objectives, and desired conditions contained in the Forest Plan. Such activities could include projects like construction of a woodland waterhole for wildlife, prescribed burning to maintain or restore a particular ecosystem, construction of a new boat ramp in a recreation area, or a commercial timber harvest.</p>

The provisions of both the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) guide the planning process at both levels. Both of these Acts require the consideration and disclosure to the public of the environmental effects associated with federal actions. Such involvement can take many forms, including public workshops, open houses, or review and comment opportunities for planning and decisionmaking documents.

There are a number of steps in both levels of planning. The initial step is to conduct a pre-planning assessment.

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING	PROJECT PLANNING
<p>A Forest may conduct a formal assessment. In it, the Forest Service and cooperators compile an information base on social, economic, biological and physical conditions across a broad area. This provides context for the analysis of needed changes. The Forest Service also reviews the results of public involvement efforts and new laws and regulations to determine the “need for change” for an existing Forest Plan. Following this, a formal notice of the agency’s revision proposal is published in the Federal Register. This notice references the associated assessment information and asks for public comment on the proposal.</p>	<p>The Forest Service identifies possible projects by comparing existing forest conditions with desired conditions specified by the Forest Plan. Although public involvement is not required, it can be used. The public is generally encouraged to submit comments and feedback at any time. In many cases, project proposals may actually be developed in close collaboration with community groups, trail associations, etc. Detailed scoping notices about the specific project are sent to people who have expressed an interest in the project. These people are encouraged to comment on the proposal.</p>

A proposal is initiated to resolve the differences between the desired and existing conditions. Planners can then construct a number of alternatives approaches that will be compared to each other on how they resolve these differences.

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING	PROJECT PLANNING
<p>The Forest Service formulates alternatives in response to issues that have been identified. A draft Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) are prepared and made available for public comment for at least 90 days. Regional Foresters conduct public involvement activities to obtain comment on the draft Plan and EIS.</p>	<p>Based upon its analysis and public response, the Forest Service notifies the public either (1) that the project is routine, will have little or no environmental significance and issues a categorical exclusion (or a Decision Memo), or (2) that the project’s environmental significance is unknown, so that an Environmental Assessment (EA) will be done. If the EA determines that the environmental effects are significant, the Forest Service completes an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The public is given opportunities to comment on all three documents.</p>

Once the alternatives have been analyzed, the Forest Service makes a decision on how to proceed.

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING	PROJECT PLANNING
<p>The Forest Service analyzes public comments on the draft EIS and recommends the final Forest Plan to the Forest Supervisor. The Regional Forester approves the Plan and EIS in a Record of Decision (ROD). The ROD can be appealed by anyone within 90 days of its approval by the Regional Forester. Further challenge to the Forest Plan decision can be pursued through the Courts.</p>	<p>The Forest Service issues a decision to the public and keeps the public informed of progress on the project. A notice of decision subject to appeal is published in newspapers of record. At this point the public can contest the decisions through the administrative appeals process. After the period for appeals has ended, the public can pursue legal issues through the courts.</p>

It is important to monitor the progress of Forest Plan implementation so that its management direction can be adapted over time. Annual monitoring and evaluation reports document the findings.

Amendments to Forest Plans are made as needed, generally in response to having new information available that indicates a need to change the management direction contained in a Forest Plan. Under Forest Service planning regulations, amendments can be characterized as either significant or non-significant.

Public involvement is encouraged early in the planning process and Forest Service regulations also provide for an administrative appeal opportunity. An appeal is a request to a higher authority for review of a decision. The requirements associated with filing an administrative appeal differ, depending on whether the decision was made as a part of comprehensive planning or project planning.

Note: the comprehensive planning regulations (36 CFR 219) are currently being revised and may be approved in 2004.