

FOREST PLAN REVISION ON THE CHATTAHOOCHEE AND OCONEE NATIONAL FORESTS

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Abstract. The Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests are currently in the process of revising the 1985 Forest Plan. This is a lengthy process that will take several years to complete. We are in the process of determining our significant issues (March 1997), Once this is complete, we will begin developing alternatives (July 1997), and then prepare an environmental impact statement (December 1997).

INTRODUCTION

The plan area (Figure 1) for the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests are the National Forest System lands in the State of Georgia. Forest Plans provide for integration and coordination of all resources within the plan area on a multiple-use and sustained yield basis. Forest Plans allocate the land and resources of the plan area to various uses or conditions by establishing management prescriptions consisting of goals, objectives, standards and guidelines. Goals, objectives, standards and guidelines may be established to apply throughout the plan area (forest-wide direction) or they may be established for only a part of the plan area.

FOREST PLANNING PROCEDURE

Decisions Made in a Forest Plan

The purpose and need began with the requirements of the National Forest System Land and Resource Management Planning regulations at 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 219. According to 36 CFR 219.10(g), Forest Plans are ordinarily revised on a 10-15 year cycle. The decisions made in a Forest plan include:

- Establishment of the forest-wide multiple-use goals and objectives. Goal statements describe a desired condition to be achieved sometime in the future. A goal is timeless in that it has no specific date to be completed. Objectives are concise, time-specific statements of measurable planned results that respond to pre-established goals.
- Establishment of forest-wide management requirements.
- Establishment of management areas (MA) and management area direction (management area prescriptions) for applying future activities in that management area.

- Determination of land that is suitable for the production of timber.
- Establishment of allowable sale quantity for timber.
- Establishment of monitoring and evaluation requirements
- Recommendation of roadless areas as wilderness study areas.
- Recommendation of rivers and streams eligible and suitable for inclusion in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Two Stages of Decision Making

There are two stages of decision making. The first stage is the Forest Plan which allocates lands and resources to various uses or conditions by establishing management prescriptions. Forest Plans do not compel the forests managers to plan or undertake any projects; rather they establish limitations on what actions may be authorized during project decision-making; these are programmatic decisions. The second stage is project decisions or site-specific decisions. Project decisions are an authorization of site-specific activities (such as a timber sale) within the plan area and must be consistent with Forest Plan direction.

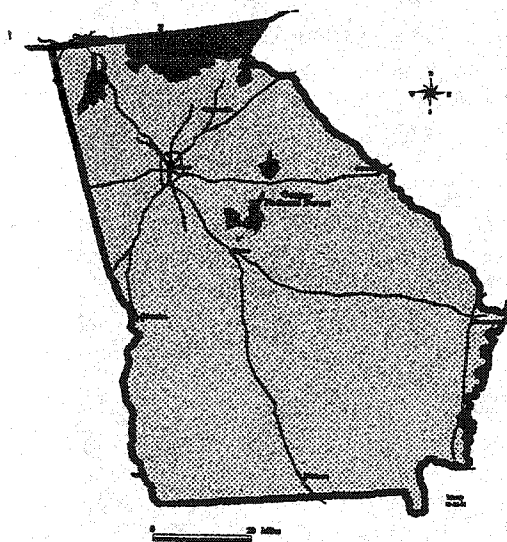


Figure 1. National forests in Georgia.

Summary of the General Procedures for Forest Planning

Scoping - The Forest Plan revision process formally began with the Federal Register publication of the Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement on August 1, 1996. This is a legal requirement and officially starts the process for Forest Plan revision. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) established this process. The Notice of Intent contained (1) a purpose and need for action, (2) a proposed action which is the need for change items we identified, and (3) a list of preliminary issues.

A 120-day comment period was provided. The purpose of this comment period was to identify significant issues prior to formulating alternatives, and to address and respond to issues, management concerns, and resource opportunities identified during the planning process.

Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) - Once alternatives are formulated, each will be analyzed in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The EIS will estimate the social, economic, physical, and biological effects of implementing each alternative. The Forest Supervisor will recommend to the Regional Forester for the Southern Region a preferred alternative to be identified in the Draft EIS. The Draft EIS will be made available for a 90-day review and comment period and will identify a preferred alternative.

Record of Decision - Once comments are received and reviewed on the Draft EIS, content analysis will be done and the Final EIS, a Record of Decision, and Forest Plan will be prepared. The Regional Forester is the decision maker for all Forest Plans in this region.

THE NEED FOR CHANGE

The U.S.D.A. Forest Service has made a commitment to use an ecological approach and the latest scientific information in managing the National Forest System. The current Forest Plan goals and objectives will be re-evaluated to better reflect these commitments. Results of annual Forest Plan monitoring (1986-1995) were evaluated, previously received public comments were reviewed, open houses and requests for input were sought, and information from the Chattooga River Watershed Project and the Southern Appalachian Assessment were used to determine needed changes for the Forest Plan and resulted in a Proposed Action. Forty sources were identified which needed evaluation during the Forest Plan Revision; thirteen of these areas are related to water resources.

Content Analysis - From August 1996, through January 1997, a content analysis team reviewed and analyzed each comment received and entered them into a database. Each

comment was assigned a code which identifies the subject, category, date received, who submitted the comment, etc. The database allows us to use the computer to query the comments and to quickly locate comments about a particular resource.

Significant Issues - Significant Issues are the result of content analysis and drive alternative formulation and mitigation. Significant issues are identified based on the following: (1) extent (the geographic distribution of the issue); (2) duration (the length of time the issue is likely to be of interest); (3) intensity (the level of interest or conflict generated by the issue).

Draft Analysis of the Management Situation (AMS)
The Draft AMS contains reports on the current conditions of the resources, preliminary supply and demand analysis, need for change items, preliminary list of issues, summary of Forest Plan Amendments, review of Forest-wide standards and guidelines, Social Assessment, and land allocations outside the Forest Plan decision process. This document contains 32 reports and is over 500 pages in size. It is only available upon request and can be distributed in whole or by individual resources. Once the AMS is finalized, it will also be made available for review.

Alternatives - Alternative formulation is expected to begin around July 1997. Public meetings will be held to present a detailed alternative. The detailed alternative will be used to help start the development of other alternatives. These meetings will be announced through our newsletter and local newspapers. The primary goal in formulating alternatives is to provide an adequate basis for identifying the alternative that comes nearest to maximizing net public benefits consistent with resource integration and management requirements. Alternatives will provide different ways to

The Proposed Actions Related to Water Resources

- Update direction for timber harvest in riparian areas.
- Address threats to forest ecosystem health (southern pine beetle, gypsy moth, hemlock wooly adelgid).
- Delineate Management Areas using watersheds.
- Assure consistency with State of Georgia Best Management Practices (BMP's).
- Recommend to Congress, through the Regional Forester, rivers and streams eligible and suitable for inclusion in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System.
- Revise Forest Plan management direction to better reflect and emphasize the increasing pressures and demands of the urban/rural interface.
- Revise management direction to reflect problems of recreation overuse along streams and in riparian areas.

- Address increased demand for gold mining by suction dredging or other methods.
- Revise soil and water management direction to include all causes of water pollution or lowered soil productivity. This is for all resource activities, not just timber sales.
- Revise management direction to better address the protection of aquatic diversity.
- Establish management direction for the restoration of native brook trout in appropriate streams.
- Incorporate carrying capacity (biological, physical, and social) of the Chattooga River.
- Revise monitoring requirements to address changes in management direction stated above.

PRELIMINARY ISSUES RELATED TO WATER RESOURCES

- What role should timber management have in meeting multiple-use goals and objectives?
- How should forest resources be managed to meet public demands for road access and trails? This concerns providing users of the Forests appropriate road access and meet the demands for additional trails while reducing impacts to the natural resources.
- How should management direction be changed to further maintain or enhance water quality relative to the increasing use of the Forests?
- What management practices are needed to address acidification and ozone concentrations at higher elevations? This issue is specific to the Chattahoochee only and to high elevation headwater streams where ozone and acid precipitation levels may cause water chemistry problems and growth loss in sensitive hardwoods.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information or to find out how to get involved in the revision of the Chattahoochee-Oconee Forest Plan, contact Marcus Beard at 770-536-0541, or FAX 770-534-4411, or E-mail: FWA/S=plan/ou=r08f03a@MHS.ATTMAIL.COM.

LITERATURE CITED

36 CFR 219.10, Forest planning-general procedures, July 1, 1994.