



Forest Plan Symposium

A synopsis of remarks shared by the panel

Bridger-Teton National Forest | January 16, 2024



Panelists

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Moderator

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The goals of the Forest Plan Symposium were to: (1) Learn from those who have been involved with other forest planning efforts to gain their insights about the planning process and the 2012 Planning Rule, why Forest Plans are important, and how people can effectively engage, (2) Understand the special role tribes and treaty rights play in forest planning, and (3) Reflect on how we can bridge diverse interests to create a sustainable future.

Forest Plans and the 2012 Planning Rule

❖ Forest Plans are critically important because every decision made on a forest must be consistent with the Forest Plan. They are the foundation for how people experience the national forest ecologically and socially. Forest Plans provide a more holistic view that offer an opportunity to get past the fatigue of fighting over every project regarding a particular topic (e.g. timber versus conservation)

❖ The [2012 Planning Rule](#) is fundamentally different than the 1982 Rule which guided development of Forest Plans in the 1980s (including the Bridger-Teton Plan). Lines are still drawn on maps to define management zones across the Forest, and desired conditions, standards and guidelines are still developed. However, the 2012 Rule is structured so that planning is more inclusive and focused on public participation which is a fundamental game changer. There is opportunity for every voice to be included – not just the loudest or those who show up. This includes tribal engagement which was typically absent in old plans. Multiple use is still important but it must be within the context of ecological integrity.

❖ Planning has gotten more complex since the 1980s, hence the need to acknowledge what we don't know and show some humility. New legal and regulatory constraints and new scientific information has emerged since the 1980s. Forest planners need to be clear about what decision space exists so public dialogue can be focused on topics where common ground can be developed.

❖ There must be an honest conversation about what a Forest Plan can do. The burden is on the Forest Service to develop a Forest Plan that is not just aspirational. If the public is being asked to invest their time, the Forest Plan has to mean something. Clear monitoring metrics can be used to adjust plan direction over time rather than vague direction intended to permit flexibility.

Effective Public Engagement; Bridging Diverse Interests including Treaty Obligations

❖ People need to engage early in the process, starting with the Assessment. If you have interest in the forest, reach out to get involved. The Planning Service Organization is integrated within the Forest Service to provide expertise, process management, and stable staffing to support Forest Plan revisions, but the local Forest staff are still responsible for leading public engagement, outreach, and decisions.

❖ Spend time thinking about what is truly important – go beyond the surface to what is really important to you, your family, your community (places, experiences). Share what is important in a patient and compassionate way. Approach conversations with empathy, check assumptions, and be ready to offer creative solutions. Dial up the curiosity; reject the thinking that this is a zero sum game (I win, you lose). Be prepared to not get everything you want -- don't let perfect get in the way of okay.

❖ There is no such thing as "the public", instead there are many interests. If we only talk about our interest, we present forest staff with an impossible task. Bringing in neutral third parties can help diverse interests find common ground. Look to local organizations, collaboratives, and coalitions who can help co-convene meetings with the Forest Service.

❖ The Forest Service Tribal Action Plan outlines the work to be done with respect to strengthening relationships, advancing tribal relations, fulfilling trust and treaty obligations, and enhancing co-stewardship of forests. The Forest needs to go to the tribes and attend tribal meetings, as well as meet with tribal leaders and the cultural division. Use the tribal newsletter and understand where people get their news. Indigenous knowledge should be sought out early to bridge different perspectives. Tribal interests should not be last on the list.

❖ One challenge is separating input from those who enjoy the forest with input from those whose livelihood is dependent on the forest (recognize that there is more at stake if your livelihood depends on the forest). Another challenge is recognizing that national forests belong to everyone, although as locals we tend to think of the National Forest as "our forest".