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Individual(s)

Organization Type Individual

Email Address raylrsn@u.washington.edu

Name RAY LARSEN

City SEATTE

State WASHINGTON

Zip 98103

Country UNITED STATES

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RESPONSE to Proposed New Planning Rule

To Whom It May Concern, at the USDA or USFS:

In reviewing your proposition for the New Planning Rule, I was immediately impressed with your commitment to environmental and social ethics, specifically in regards to your goals to constantly monitor the health and viability of ecosystems and to include the public in all steps of the decision-making process.

Too often there is a wide gap in communication between people who understand policy and scientific knowledge, and those who do not. There is often great mistrust of science among individuals and communities who are not helped to understand its insights, especially when those insights tend to limit the use of the land to the public. It is my belief that scientific knowledge should be shared by those who know it and have it, which is why I admire the emphasis in the new planning rule on continued interaction with the public. It appears that the USDA is heading in a direction of maximal transparency, and perhaps constantly incorporating the public in decision-making will help educate those less-science-minded individuals to understand and respect the authority of scientific information. Such a strong emphasis on public interaction can only illuminate the issues and goals of Environmental Planning for everyone involved. I'm very glad to hear that the USDA has decided to increase environmental and social vigilance by taking such a proactive and inclusive and approach to community involvement.

However, I am skeptical that, as you claim, continual public involvement will expedite the planning process (p.34). The Notice explains that the old planning rule of 1982 created conditions unfit for public involvement because the public review process was lengthy and cumbersome. I did not really understand the specifics of why the process was cumbersome though, or how the new planning rule will create a more streamlined process. To me, it seems that any increase in public interaction will put more thoughts on the table and require decision to satisfy more opinions. I wonder if this hope is a bit unrealistic. I can see how public ecosystem observation at the local level might assist the USDA in monitoring its lands, and how that might speed the planning process. I can also see how incorporating the public might make the public consensus on any given issue more apparent to the USDA (if a consensus exists, which will probably be rare!). But the process described in the notice calls for citizen involvement in every step of the planning process, including assessing, revising, and monitoring the plan, and conceiving the plan in the first place. I sincerely hope that public participation can be as efficient as the Notice claims, because time is something that conservation practice always lacks! If you share my concern, have you thought about developing smaller subcommittees composed of public representatives (tribal, agricultural, infrastructural representatives, etc...) instead of opening debates to the entire public? It might be a good way of gathering all the important perspectives on an issue without sifting through so many individuals.

Thank you for taking action to improve the effectiveness of your institution. I am hopeful that the proposed planning changes will result in healthy ecosystems and healthy communities across our

nation. Let me conclude by commending on of my favorite statements in your Notice, which reads “This planning framework will help the Agency to provide clean water, habitat for diverse fish, wildlife, and plant communities, and opportunities for recreational, spiritual, educational, and cultural sustenance”. It is refreshing to me that you have chosen to stay true to such an upstanding view of the Earth’s provisions. I am glad that your organization considers itself a steward of land for the benefit of both humankind and natural organisms, and I believe your proposed policy will help accomplish your mission.

Good luck!

Sincerely, Ray Larsen