

OT	S	RT	DT	EA	F	RI	CE

Attributes

Response Type: 1 - Letter

Delivery Type: W - Web-based submission

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Comments

Tlingit Alaskan's Formal Comment on the National Forest System Land Management Planning Proposed Rule
Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

Several parts stood out to me in this proposed rule I liked and a few things that I wasn't sure sounded fair. The science involvement in ecosystem planning, methods of planning and public opinion were the most interesting topics.

I thought the inclusion of current scientific information is a good idea; I was completely unaware this hadn't been changed years earlier. I was pleased to see that the proposed rule also included various forms of life aside from vertebrates. I think using the current and best available scientific information will not only provide jobs for unit level projects but will make unit level and nationwide level decisions easier to agree upon and will help the public understand why the Forest Service takes action on particular ecosystem components.

The amount of care that is in assessment, development/revision/amendment and monitoring are key to having a successful plan. Every element of the plan is necessary to keep ecosystems healthy. It was a good idea to put in public opinion where it would benefit the most in the different stages of the new frame work for planning.

Public opinion is a very important key to keeping the forests and ecosystems nationwide healthy. A monitored amount of tourism and recreational activities help to keep people interested in the environment and will cause the public to want to preserve animals and plants as well as scenic areas.

What concerns me about the public opinion section is the involvement of government recognized Native American tribes and Alaskan Native corporations. Giving the option for officials to contact them about cultural sustainability is not enough (Section 219.8 Sustainability Page 8492). I believe it should be mandatory for officials to try to contact the government recognized tribes and Alaskan Native Corporations. If the spiritual and sacred context of land is a focus of the National Forest System, it is crucial to have the people who value the forest and watershed areas give input. If no input I received, it is important to reach out and attempt to touch bases, giving them opportunity to participate no matter how small the village or town.

Another concern I noticed is the form by which the Forest Service plans to reach out to the public. The villages I come from in Southeast Alaska has little or no access to internet, television, and sometimes news papers; the generation of people who are old enough to know about the importance of our forests and watershed areas often don't use computers as frequently as we would like to think they do. It is very rare to come upon forest service opportunities in small communities through flyers or information sessions. For example, I work for the Forest Service through the Hoonah Indian Association, but many residents of Hoonah know little to nothing about the actual Forest Service and the Forest Service's plans for the neighboring ecosystems. I have never seen an information council held in these small communities; I think that needs to change. The small communities often get labeled as too small to be a concern, or it is assumed they are too small to offer large opinions on plans regarding the ecosystems. However, I think that these are the communities that we need to take care to listen to carefully. They are the people who have a relationship to the land (meaning they are living subsistence lifestyles and practicing cultural ceremonies), and they are the people who have a close personal history to the ecosystems that larger communities have more opportunities to learn about the upcoming plans or reasoning behind Forest Service actions. I attended the National Forum about this rule, and was absolutely shocked that a Sealaska member was there, and yet no one in my community heard about this rule until my family and friends back home started to tell people. Sealaska corporation is supposed to keep us informed; but unfortunately they don't as I learned in Washington D.C.. I believe it is mandatory for the Forest Service to make the public notifications public, not in a private envelope or email.

My suggestions for this are contact the public to establish a clear understanding of what kind of input and why the Forest Service wants to keep communication open. Having an understanding of a want to work with the Native

American peoples on a government level might be enough to strengthen a friendly relationship between Native Americans and the Forest Service. This right away will give the Forest Service our respect because it will show the Forest Service has enough respect to slow down and talk to us about projects and plans. For setting up this relationship it is very important to have some sort of a mediator, possibly an indigenous person who is interested in the well being of the people and connecting the well being for the National Forest System to them. Not only will this communication make more people feel recognized, it opens employment options within Native communities, establishing more trust and comfort among government officials and Native Americans.

Conservation education will definitely help out in these planning situations. Here is an example: I work counting fish at a fish weir along with my father, both him and I am well aware that the weir is in place to monitor fish populations and salmon health. However, there is a lack of basic education in Hoonah and many other small communities. The Forest Service often refers to the fish weir as a fish trap. Now, traditionally the Tlingit people trapped fish just as we continue to gaff fish in that same creek. Many people in our communities think that the Forest Service is catching and taking all the fish and monopolizing the fish stream, this results in people pulling out fish pickets, damaging camera equipment, slashing ATV tires, and putting water in the lake skiff's gas tank. The weir data then gets skewed, and the local people dislike the Forest Service a little bit more each time they see it. Education programs need to be taking place if the Forest Service plans to have a good relationship with local peoples.

I suggest starting more education programs that involve the younger generations and get the younger generations interested in the work of the Forest Service in keeping our lands and relationships healthy. I say this because while I told my father why I was reading the rule and getting involved with this, as a full blooded Tlingit man living off the land, he said to me, 'I'm glad you and your brother can do that, I'm too stupid'. He feels like the Forest Service terms are above him because he lives in a small community and he is never educated or informed about what is going on. Also, many Native elders won't want to go to meetings because they simply don't feel welcome due to the past with the Forest Service not communicating and the history we have with the Forest Service in Southeast Alaska. Many of us feel like our land was stolen, and is no longer ours, many people feel unwanted by the government and Forest Service. Because of this, they rely on their children and grandchildren to tell them what is going on with everything from local events to government proposals.

The youth are the key to building a brighter future for both the Forest Service and our communities. The youth are the ears, eyes, and voices of our elders. I believe there should be opportunities for young Native Americans to be educated and included in Forestry plans. This could be a successful way of not only building relationships, create mediators, strengthen the information the forest service would benefit from like the native ways of knowing, and, best of all many people would realize the Forest Service is a great career path with good intentions we both agree on.

I find it important to really engage Native American peoples in any choice that will have a large impact on their life. Many Native Americans nationwide believe we are the stewards of the land, air and sea. This might mean making a greater effort to contact these peoples, but I think that if the Forest Service wants a healthy relationship with Native American Tribes and Alaskan Native Corporations it has to be mandatory to contact them before making any plan that could affect cultural, economic or social elements just as it should be mandatory for Forest Service Officers to contact the general public for opinion.

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