



Board of Directors

Jon Dettmann
President
Minnesota

Louise Lasley
Vice President
Wyoming

Gary Macfarlane
Secretary
Idaho

Bill Worf
Treasurer
Montana

Stewart Brandborg
Montana

Joe Fontaine
California

Jeff Kane
Oregon

Susan Morgan
Washington

Bob Oset
Montana

Howie Wolke
Wyoming

Executive Director

George Nickas

Advisory Council

Magalen Bryant
Dr. Derek Craighead
Dr. M. Rupert Cutler
Michael Frome
Dr. Roderick Nash

Counselor

Stewart Udall

February 16, 2010

Forest Service Planning NOI
C/O Bear West Company
172 E 500 S, Bountiful, UT 84010

Sent via facsimile to 801-397-1605

RE: Notice of Intent to Prepare a New National Forest Planning Rule

Wilderness Watch is providing these scoping comments in response to the December 18, 2009 notice of intent to prepare a new planning rule for national forests.

Wilderness Watch is a national conservation organization dedicated to the protection and proper stewardship of America's designated Wildernesses and wild rivers. Our board of directors and staff include many who have been involved in Wilderness designation, stewardship, and protection for many decades, including in some cases before the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964. Our suggestions for the planning rule emphasize our concerns for the stewardship of Wilderness on the national forests.

Nearly 20 percent of the National Forest System—more than 36 million acres—is designated as Wilderness and must be administered in accordance with the Wilderness Act. Yet despite its size and legal mandates, Wilderness on the national forests receives scant attention in the day-to-day affairs of the Forest Service. That is due in part to the dearth of direction provided by previous planning rules. Wilderness Watch strongly urges the Forest Service to provide necessary direction in national forest plans to ensure that the agency is meeting its responsibility to protect and preserve the *resource of wilderness* on the national forests.

Wilderness Watch recommends the planning rule require the following for each forest plan:

1. Provide clear direction for protecting the wilderness character of each area in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). This is necessary to meet the statutory mandate in the Wilderness Act: "...each agency administering any area designated as wilderness shall be responsible for preserving the wilderness character of the area." Each forest plan or wilderness stewardship plan should include measurable indicators and standards that will achieve this goal.

Define the set of "minimum requirements" for preserving the wilderness character of each Wilderness. These minimum requirements will provide direction for

project level decision making to ensure that Wildernesses are administered in accordance with section 4(c) of Wilderness Act.

3. Establish a *wilderness character* monitoring and reporting requirement, based on the *Keeping it Wild: An Interagency Strategy to Monitor Trends in Wilderness Character Across the [NWPS]*. USDA Forest Service General Technical Report RMRS-GTR-212. July 2008.
4. Require that every administrative structure or installation be reviewed and assessed to determine whether it is the minimum required to preserve Wilderness, and to determine the disposition of each structure or installation. This review and assessment is necessary to determine whether each Wilderness is being administered in compliance with the prohibitions in section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act.
5. Clearly document and describe any identified need for the administrative use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment, or mechanical transport.
6. Provide for limiting visitor use in accord with a level that will preserve each area's wilderness character including outstanding opportunities for solitude and a primitive and unconfined recreation experience, and that allows natural processes to operate freely. This is similar to the requirements of the 1982 rule at 36 C.F.R. 219.18. In meeting this requirement, consideration should also be given to party size and day use.
7. Provide direction and standards for determining to what extent a trail system is needed and is in accord with preserving the area's wilderness character.
8. Provide guidance to ensure agency coordination and of oversight of wildlife management to protect wilderness character.
9. Provide guidance to ensure that search and rescue activities are conducted in a manner that has the least impact on wilderness character.
10. Provide clear direction and standards for determining the extent to which commercial services are necessary for activities which are proper for realizing the recreational or other wilderness purposes of the area. Where a single wilderness or complex of wildernesses are administered by more than one national forest or administrative unit, ensure that the need for commercial services is coordinated among the individual administrative units.
11. Identify staffing and funding levels required to "provide for the protection of [each area], the preservation of [its] wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness." (Wilderness Act section 2(a)).
12. Ensure that each administrative unit that administers wilderness has within its staff individuals trained in the use of traditional ("primitive") skills and tools, or has identified

other administrative units where those skills reside, such that each administrative unit can accomplish its wilderness stewardship objectives without the use of motor vehicles or motorized equipment.

13. Require that each Wilderness have a fire plan that allows, to the extent possible, a natural fire regime to play its natural role in shaping ecosystems in Wilderness. Identify any obstacles to allowing natural fires to burn, and develop a list of actions to overcome or mitigate those obstacles.

On a general level, we recommend that the planning rule include a robust public involvement process in the development of each forest plan.

We also recommend that the planning rule revise the administrative appeal process to provide for a more independent review of appeals. The current process gives those who are very close to the decision too much influence in determining the outcome of appeals. A process that involves “outside” agency personnel, perhaps those with expertise in the issues being appealed, in the review process could result in less bias and better outcomes, and would likely result in fewer instances of litigation over forest plan or project level decisions.

Wilderness Watch appreciates the opportunity to provide these suggestions for inclusion in the final rule.

Sincerely,

George Nickas
Executive Director