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Innovations in Forestry: Public Participation in Forest Planning

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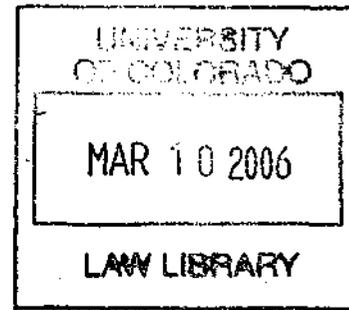
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Innovations in Forestry: Public Participation in Forest Planning

Under federal law, the Forest Service must provide for public participation in the development, review and revision of management plans for the National Forests. This participation must include making the plans or revisions available to the public and holding public meetings or comparable processes at locations that foster public participation. The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) further requires the Forest Service to provide the public with notice and an opportunity to comment on the formulation of standards, criteria and guidelines for Forest Service programs.

While NFMA sets these minimal standards for public participation, the Forest Service and other groups have developed innovative means for providing the public with effective opportunities to participate in forest planning. Some of these innovative means are described in this pamphlet in hopes that they will be used more widely and more effectively as the forest planning process continues.

The Forest Service must "provide for public participation . . . including, but not limited to . . . hold[ing] public meetings or comparable processes at locations that foster public participation."

GOALS

In its most basic form, public participation consists of giving out and taking in information—by both the agency and the public. The goal of public participation can, however, be much more complex and create a true dialogue between the Forest Service and the public. Effective public participation may be used to:

- Convey information on existing conditions and on-going planning issues;
- Gather baseline data and develop management alternatives;
- Establish the variety and intensity of viewpoints;
- Build trust;
- Develop consensus on planning issues; and
- Develop long-term community stewardship relationships.

Different methods of involving the public address different functions and may be more or less effective, depending on the circumstances.

EFFECTIVE & EFFICIENT

Effective public participation in forest planning can benefit the forest resource, the community and the planning agency. But the dollars spent on public participation must be spent efficiently, as well as effectively, since agency planning budgets are necessarily limited. Agencies must always balance the use of funds for planning with the need to implement those plans and manage the resources.

This pamphlet describes some of the innovative processes employed in recent planning exercises. Some have been tried with the support of private foundation funding. Others have been funded with a combination of agency, community and local government monies. Many have been funded largely by the Forest Service.

As the Forest Service proceeds into their next round of forest planning, use of many of these techniques will obviously be more time consuming and expensive than employing the minimal notice and comment activities required by law. Each planning unit must determine which of the public participation techniques will work for it, which it can afford and, based on the issues and controversies involved, which it cannot afford to do without.

EVENTS

PUBLIC MEETINGS

The public meeting is an integral part of the public participation process. While "public meeting" is a very imprecise and inclusive term, it has been used in the forest planning process to denote a gathering in which there is a formal dissemination of information, from agency to public, and receipt of comments by agency from the public.

The "comment" portion of a public meeting generally includes some combination of formal oral testimony, written statements and group brainstorming.

Questions posed by the public at a public meeting may be answered immediately, or may simply be recorded for later consideration by the agency.

Although the dynamic is not well understood, the location of meetings can be critical to whether they are effective tools for public participation. Meetings are often held:

- At a district or forest supervisor's office;
- In a public place in the vicinity of the forest at issue; or
- Hundreds of miles from the forest and agency's office.

To schedule a constructive meeting, agencies should consider various factors:

- The segment of the public that is being informed and consulted;
- Whether the target public feels comfortable with or animosity toward the agency;
- The convenience of the location to potentially interested individuals;
- Times, including evenings and weekends, that are convenient to a diverse public; and
- Agency budget constraints.

OPEN HOUSES

Open houses give the Forest Service and the public an opportunity to share information on a more informal basis, yet still within the institutional setting of the district or forest supervisor's office. Open houses (as well as less traditional public meetings) can provide opportunities for exchange in a variety of ways, including:

- Lecture or slide presentations;
- "Issue stations" designed to provide information, answer questions, generate discussion and/or solicit comments on a particular planning issue;
- Graphic data displays (see the "Maps" and "Image Processing" sections of this pamphlet for potential techniques for displaying data); and
- Informal, small group discussions or coffee clatches.



[P]ublic participation activities may include, but are not limited to, requests for written comments, meetings, conferences, seminars, tours, and similar events designed to foster public review and comment.

HIKES/FIELD TRIPS

Taking planning out of the office and into the forest can clarify issues and put them into perspective.

- The public may be unclear about the on-the-ground effects of the many uses of the public land.
- Agency personnel may not appreciate the spiritual or aesthetic value that the public places on forest resources.
- One group may not fully comprehend another's understanding of and appreciation for their values.

Field trips can help participants see the land and understand the issues, as well as develop a working relationship with each other.

For each field trip, the format, duration, distance traveled and participants should be tailored to the specific goals of the trip. A field trip may be used to:

- Address a single issue, such as off-road recreational vehicle use, oil and gas development or grazing over the entire district or forest; or
- Address multiple use controversies in a particularly contentious area of the forest.

INFORMATION EXCHANGE

Methods of distributing and gathering information include both the traditional and the high tech. Using a variety of methods to reach an equally varied public is always appropriate.

LOCAL MEDIA

Traditional media—television, radio and newspapers can be used to disseminate basic planning information. Public service announcements, paid advertisements, public interest interviews and talk show discussions can:

- Notify the public of opportunities to participate in the process; and
- Explain significant forest planning issues.

NEWSLETTERS

Timely newsletters can help keep the public informed on the revision process, the results of public participation, and the basics of the substantive issues being addressed in the planning process.

- Newsletters are typically produced on a periodic basis, generally no more than quarterly. The Tongass National Forest has published a general purpose daily newspaper, including periodic articles on their forest plan revision.
- Because of its abbreviated format, a newsletter cannot provide a detailed discussion of issues, but it can:
 - Summarize critical planning issues;
 - Alert the public about sources of comprehensive information;
 - List knowledgeable people, with phone numbers and mail/e-mail/Internet addresses; and
 - Provide calendars of events, including field trips and meetings.

SURVEYS/QUESTIONNAIRES

Questionnaires can be used to solicit baseline information and opinions. Survey data, both gathered and distributed at public gatherings, in public places such as the local post office and through newsletters or the Internet, can help both the Forest Service and the public gauge community opinions and concerns.

Depending on who is targeted in a questionnaire, it may be necessary for the agency to provide assistance to respondents to record answers.

MAPS

Maps are often an integral part of a forest plan, used to portray existing conditions and uses of the forest, as well as the range of alternatives being considered in the planning process. Maps can facilitate explanation of issues at public meetings and open houses. Agencies can also effectively use maps to elicit from the public recommendations for planning alternatives as well as baseline information that may clarify conflicts in resource use.

Computer-generated maps. At public participation functions, key aspects of alternatives can be presented visually using either laptop or desktop computers. User-friendly computer software can allow the public to alter the maps to portray their individual vision of the forest. In effect, by creating overlays, individuals are able to add baseline data or design and submit a personalized alternative for a future forest condition.

Mylar Map Overlays. Clear plastic overlays can provide the same information as a computer-generated map and may be more effective in some circumstances. Plastic overlays may be preferable when computer equipment is not accessible at a meeting location or when the public is not accustomed to computers and might be intimidated by a computer mapping system.

IMAGE PROCESSING

A picture is worth a thousand words, and without one it may be difficult to visualize changes that will occur if a particular forest plan alternative is implemented.

With computer software, the future effects of plan alternatives can be superimposed on pictures of current forest scenes through a procedure called image processing. Starting with a videotape, or photographic prints or slides, images are captured in computer files. Once captured, elements of the image can be moved or deleted or other images imported to create a new picture depicting a potential future condition of the forest.

With visual portrayals of both existing and proposed conditions in hand, the public and agency personnel can discuss the suitability of projects or management alternatives. Activities that may be appropriate for this type of illustration include:

- Road building;
- Riparian habitat improvement;
- Construction of recreational facilities; and
- Timber clear cutting in visually sensitive areas.

INTERNET

While the Internet may currently have a more limited audience than other media, it can fulfill multiple functions in the planning process. An agency home page can:

- Notify the public of opportunities to participate in the process;
- Explain significant forest planning issues;
- List knowledgeable people, with phone numbers and mail/e-mail/Internet addresses;
- Provide calendars of events;
- Furnish comprehensive documents for downloading; and
- Solicit and record comments.

WORK GROUPS

Planning work groups provide the public with a more substantive role in the planning process. By participating in work groups, members:

- Learn more about the forest and its resources, the requirements of the planning process and the views of different stakeholders;
- Gain an appreciation of the difficulty of developing a forest plan which satisfies everyone; and
- In some cases, develop a long-lasting relationship that can increase local stewardship of the forest.

A forest plan revised using such groups should not only reflect community perspectives realistically, but should also draw more fully upon citizens' knowledge of the land and forest management issues.



GROUP FOCUS

Groups may be oriented *geographically* or *topically*.

Geographic groups are usually formed to deal with a range of issues on a district or forest wide basis, depending on the size of the area, the complexity of the issues and the interest level of the public.

Topic or issue groups specialize in addressing specific issue areas. During a plan revision, a set of topical work groups might address the full range of issues addressed in the revision, or may be formed to deal only with the most contentious or most complex issues. Categories of topical working groups might include:

- Timber management and fire;
- Travel management and recreation;
- Special management areas;
- Range and riparian areas;
- Special water concerns; and
- Wildlife.

Some groups start as district- or forest-wide geographic study groups dealing in general with all issues in the geographic area and later reorganize into topical groups dealing with individual issues in more depth.

Initiation

Forest plan revision work groups may be formed on the initiative of the Forest Service, by interested members of the public or by concerned local governments.

Groups intentionally or inadvertently excluded from early meetings may be difficult to incorporate into the process later, so early efforts at inclusiveness can be important.

Once there is a decision to form a work group, the Forest Service might advertise for participation in its planning newsletter and other advertising media.

The group coordinator might also invite specific individuals or groups to participate.

Such active solicitation may be necessary to achieve representation of the full range of interests.

- A small focus group might be used to identify the interests and groups that should be actively solicited.
- When traditional advertisements or solicitations fail to capture the full range of stakeholders, resource mapping projects can be a useful tool. Mapping of seasonal resource uses can provide important baseline information and at the same time engage non-traditional participants in the planning dialogue. Mapping forest uses can be an effective starting point because it taps non-verbal skills to portray concrete personal experiences rather than opinions.

Participation

- Groups may be open to all interested participants. Such groups may be quite large at the outset. While group size may be naturally reduced through attrition, an initially unwieldy group may be so inefficient that it frustrates members and discourages long-term participation by genuinely interested individuals or groups.
- Some groups consist of representatives elected or otherwise selected from various interest groups. These representatives serve as contacts for members of the public who can not participate as group members.

WORK GROUPS (continued)

GROUP OPERATION

If a public participation work group is functioning properly, it necessarily brings together individuals and organizations with very different perspectives and experience. Participants should acknowledge from the outset that the process may be difficult and require considerable effort to be successful. Cultural, educational, economic and power differences must be recognized and addressed.

While each group operates differently, there are some generally effective techniques:

- Start the process with a general discussion of the participants' vision for the future of the forest;
- Articulate a common vision and crystallize the goals of the group in a mission statement;
- Schedule and hold monthly meetings advertised in a wide range of media;
- Organize field trips for summer monthly meetings;
- Pre-schedule a reasonable agenda for each meeting, stick to the agenda and start and end on time;
- Make technical background documents available well before meetings; provide summary documents soon after each meeting;
- Include time for presentations by outside experts as well as discussions among group members;

- Use a professional facilitator to organize and run meetings and provide follow-up materials;
 - A facilitator can provide continuity that an ever-changing group might need.
 - An independent person who has developed credibility in the community may be the most effective facilitator.
 - Agency personnel trained in facilitation may meet this need where planning budgets are limited.
- Level the playing field between citizens and resource and industry professionals with communications training for all participants.

PITFALLS AND LIMITATIONS

Length of the planning process

Forest planning is a multi-year process. Active participation in the process can lead to burn-out of voluntary participants. Where there is burn-out, a resulting high turnover rate in work groups can dilute group effectiveness and contribute to the difficulty of solving complex problems.

Groups should try to maintain continuity by recognizing and addressing the time and resource limitations of their members. At a minimum, the needs of the group members should be accommodated in scheduling and locating meetings and, where possible, by providing supplementary funds for travel.

FACA

The Federal Advisory Committee Act applies to forest plan revision work groups if they are "established by" or "utilized by" the federal agency. FACA need not be a barrier to the use of working groups if its procedural requirements are followed. FACA requires that the advisory committee have:

- Fairly balanced membership;
- A charter;
- Designated federal officer;
- Notice of meetings published in the Federal Register;
- Open meetings;
- Procedures to permit interested persons to attend, and appear or file statements;
- Committee records available for public inspection and copying;
- Detailed minutes of each meeting.

Some forest planning work groups legitimately avoid the constraints of FACA by creating a forum open to all participants rather than creating a formal advisory group.

Concrete answers for complex problems

Reaching consensus or otherwise developing a "final solution" to complex forest planning problems is beyond the mission and perhaps the capability of most work groups. Even if consensus can be reached, it can only serve as a recommendation, with the final decision and implementation left to the agency.

A revised forest plan should not only reflect community perspectives realistically, but should draw upon citizens' knowledge more fully.

RESOURCES

The following are just a few of the agencies/groups that can provide additional information on the public participation techniques discussed above. Many of the contacts are valuable sources of information on other aspects of public participation as well.



EVENTS

Thurman Wilson
Plan Revision Team Leader
San Juan National Forest
USDA Forest Service
701 Camino del Rio
Durango, CO 81301
(970) 247-4874
Fax: (970) 385-1243

INFORMATION EXCHANGE

Graphics—Computer Mapping

Howard Sargent
Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest
240 W. Prospect Rd.
Ft. Collins, CO 80526-2098
(970) 498-1100
Fax: (970) 498-2759

Graphics—Mylar Overlays for Maps

Rosemary Romero
Western Network
811 St. Michael's Drive, Suite 106
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87505
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Fax: (505) 983-8812
E-mail: 72733.775@compuserve.com

Computer Image Processing

Gary Wells
Watershed Technical Team
Natural Resources Conservation
Service
655 Parfet Ave. Room E200C
Lakewood, CO 80215
(303) 236-2903
Fax: (303) 236-2848

WORK GROUPS

Office of Community Services
Ft. Lewis College
1000 Rim Drive
Durango, CO 81301
(970) 247-7333
Fax: (970) 247-7032

Taylor Barnhill
Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition
P.O. Box 2059
Ashville, NC 28802
(704) 252-9223
Fax: (704) 252-9074
E-mail: taylor@safe.org

Keystone Center
P.O. Box 8606
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FACE

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