

National Forest Planning

In: The Environmentalism and Public Participation Era, 1970-1993

The early to mid-1970's saw a continued major national forest planning effort under the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960. By the mid-1970's, unit plans (ranger district level) and several forest plans were being developed. Many national forests created planning teams to assist in the multiple-use planning of their many resources. New Forest Service specialists were hired because of the planning needs---wildlife biologists, soil scientists, landscape architects, and hydrologists.

In 1974, the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (RPA) became law. The act provided that beginning in 1976, the Forest Service would develop a program or assessment every 5 years that outlined the proposed expected national forest productions of various resources. With the RPA program in hand, the Forest Service would go to Congress to obtain the necessary funding to implement its program. This act represented Congress's first legislative recognition that management of our natural resources could only occur with long-range planning and funding—not planning and funding on a year-to-year basis.

The Bolle Report (about Montana's Bitterroot National Forest) and a court decision against the Forest Service in the Monongahela National Forest clearcutting case spawned the NFMA. The NFMA amended RPA and also repealed major portions of the Organic Act of 1897. NFMA mandated intensive long-range planning for the national forests---the most comprehensive planning effort in the western world. NFMA specifically incorporated public participation and advisory boards, various natural resources, transportation systems, timber sales, reforestation, payments to States for schools and roads, and reporting on the incidence of Dutch elm disease.

A committee of scientists created NFMA's implementation regulations, which became final in 1979, and an intensive new forest planning effort began. The Forest Service hired many new specialists, many of them women, to address the various provisions of NFMA---including public affairs specialists, economists, archeologists, sociologists, geologists, ecologists, and operations research analysts. The Forest Service also began an extensive public involvement effort to prepare the new plans. In 1997 and 1998, a new committee of scientists met to evaluate and recommend changes to NFMA and the revised forest planning regulations.

In the late 1970's, RARE II once again launched the Forest Service into the public arena. The draft RARE II report, published in 1978, led to many public demonstrations and letter-writing campaigns. The final RARE II report, published in January 1979, recommended that Congress add 15 million acres (only 12.3 million acres were recommended in RARE) to the National Wilderness Preservation System. However, roadless decisions and wilderness legislation would have to wait until Congress acted. Today, after a series of congressional acts that established new wildernesses, the Forest Service manages over 35 million acres of wilderness. This is approximately 18.4 percent of the entire National Forest System.

Bidding for national forest timber reached an all-time high in 1979 and 1980, just before a wood-products "depression" hit the timber industry. Because of very high interest rates, the new-home market became very depressed, with the demand and price for lumber products falling to almost record lows. Timber companies could not economically harvest the timber they had purchased at high prices. Nationally, a number of timber

companies struggled, some going bankrupt, until the economy picked up in the mid-to-late 1980's. The Forest Service experimented with a lighter-than-air balloon and tethered helicopter mix, which was referred to as a "helistat," to transport logs from remote areas. After many attempts, the effort failed.

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, the illegal growing of marijuana on the national forest lands caused numerous management problems. Many of the national forests responded to this problem and other lawlessness by hiring law enforcement specialists, who have worked closely with other Federal, State, and local authorities.

In the Pacific Northwest, Mount St. Helens on Washington State's Gifford Pinchot National Forest rumbled to life with a huge volcanic explosion on May 18, 1980, that sent ash around the world. President Jimmy Carter visited the Forest and was instrumental in establishing the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument in 1982.

The Forest Products Laboratory designed a new strong, lightweight system for wood construction. Called the timber-truss-frame, the system has been widely used by the home construction industry since the 1980's.

NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT ACT of 1976

Congressional hearings began in the early 1970's on the clearcutting controversies on the Bitterroot and Monongahela National Forests, as well as a Federal court decision over the Organic Act of 1897. By the mid-1970's, arguments in Congress revolved around how specific any new law should be to direct the Forest Service in the management of the national forests. Some members wanted broad statements that would cover any possibility; others wanted language to mandate specific actions on the ground. In 1989, former Chief R. Max Peterson would say: "It became obvious to most that neither Congress nor anyone else could possibly write management prescriptions that would fit the many physical situations on national forests...This led to a recognition that the legislation would have to set forth a process rather than specify answers."

NFMA was signed into law on October 22, 1976. NFMA amended Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA) to provide a comprehensive blueprint for the management of the national forests. One of the NFMA's provisions was that the Secretary of Agriculture appoint a committee of scientists – not officers or employees of the Forest Service – to provide scientific advice and counsel on how to implement its intent. It took almost 3 years for these implementing regulations to become final.

The regulations required the beginning of a long-range planning process for each national forest. Other NFMA requirements mandated public involvement in the planning process, a redefinition of sustained and nondeclining yield, and clearcutting, which the act defined as an acceptable practice. Another requirement was to "preserve and enhance the diversity of plant and animal communities...so that it is at least as great as that which would be expected in a natural forest." NFMA also gave full statutory status to the National Forest System, which had previously been a series of Presidential proclamations from 1891 to 1907.

An act similar to NFMA was passed and signed into law for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). This 1976 act, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, has similar provisions requiring long-range planning on the BLM-administered lands.

In 1998, a second committee of scientists was formed to rewrite the NFMA regulations, which were felt by many to be outdated. The committee recommended many changes to the regulations. Draft regulations were announced in the summer of 1999, along with a public review period. The final regulations will be printed in 2000.

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