

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

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### Witness Testimony

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Statement of the  
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Under Secretary  
Natural Resources and Environment  
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Before the  
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health  
Committee on Resources  
United States House of Representatives

Regarding the  
Final Report  
of the  
Committee of Scientists

March 16, 1999

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you the final report of the Committee of Scientists. The Committee was chartered and appointed by Secretary Glickman in the fall of 1997 to review the present forest planning process as well as propose revisions to the current regulation and recommend improvements in the development of future land and resource management plans (LRMPs). Today I want to help put the Committee's report in context by discussing the status of forest plans, the rationale for establishing this Committee and conducting its review, and the ways in which the Department and the Forest Service intend to use the Committee report and recommendations to improve forest planning and management in the future.

### Background

In accordance with Section 6 of the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (RPA) (16 U.S.C. 1600), the Secretary of Agriculture "shall develop, maintain, and, as appropriate, revise land and resource management plans for units of the National Forest System..... In the two plus decades since the enactment of RPA, as amended by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), there has been considerable debate surrounding planning.

Initially following enactment of the NFMA, the Forest Service promulgated rules for implementation of the planning requirements. Although completed in 1979, no forest plans were ever completed under these rules. Soon after the Reagan Administration took office, then USDA Assistant Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, John Crowell, withdrew these planning rules and sought to revise them. Such controversy was generated as a result, that the Committee of Scientists involved in the development of the first set of rules was reconvened and enlisted to work on what eventually became the 1982 LRMP rules.

Under the 1982 rules, 127 forest plans have been developed. However, in accordance with the planning statute, LRMPs are to be revised at least once every 15 years. By the end of FY 1999, 12 of the 127 LRMPs will have completed revision. An additional 39 plan revisions are due in CY 2000 and CY 2001. At present, we are concerned that in CY 2000, eleven plans may go beyond their 15-year due date, and an additional 28 plans may pass their 15 year cycle in CY 2001.

Much has been learned in developing, implementing, and litigating the 127 forest plans and the numerous plan amendments and revisions that have been completed during the past two decades. Several revisions of the planning process have been conducted, leading the Forest Service to seek revisions to the 1982 regulations.

When the Clinton Administration first took office, one of the first documents for our consideration was a proposal to rewrite the forest planning regulations. We elected not to proceed with this proposal, but instead began working with the Forest Service on a new approach to the rules. This effort led to the issuance of draft rules in 1995, but, based on the comments we received from the public, our lessons learned from our experiences in developing the President's Northwest Forest Plan, regional assessments and other regional ecosystem management strategies were not reflected adequately in the draft rules. In short, our experience was outpacing our ability to incorporate it fast enough in the draft rule.

After working two more years on applying ecosystem management strategies on the ground, the Secretary, the Chief and I felt more confident about taking on the task of rewriting tile regulations to incorporate an overall strategy for consistently applying ecosystem management across our forests and grasslands. As a starting point, the Secretary decided to use his authority under the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) to convene a federal advisory committee of scientists of diverse backgrounds to provide advice on revising the planning regulations.

Secretary Glickman directed the committee to make recommendations on how to best accomplish sound resource planning within the statutory mission of the Forest Service and the established framework of environmental laws. The committee also was asked to provide technical advice on the planning process and provide information for the Forest Service to consider in revising the planning regulations. Finally, the committee was to recommend improvements in Forest Service coordination with other federal, state and local agencies, and tribal governments while recognizing the unique roles and responsibilities of each agency in the planning process. In my first meeting with the Committee of Scientists, I emphasized that the Secretary and I wanted the committee to develop a conceptual framework for land and resource management planning that could last a generation.

The committee met in cities in each region of the country and heard from Forest Service employees, representatives of tribes, state and local governments and other federal agencies, members of the public, former Chiefs of the Forest Service and members of the original Committee of Scientists. They shared their concerns and offered ideas about the current planning process as well as the current management of national forests and grasslands.

## Overview

At the outset, Madam Chairman, I want to acknowledge that some have argued that NFMA is broken and that the environmental laws that guide national forest management are, themselves, no longer manageable. I disagree. On principle, these laws remain sound and reflect the evolution of American interest and concern for our lands, air, water, and wildlife. In addition, we have not exhausted the flexibility within these laws to

improve their implementation. Only after we have exhausted this flexibility, should we revisit the basic statutes.

This Committee of Scientists was carefully selected to represent balanced views, experience, and academic backgrounds. Together, they have a breadth of expertise and a sum of experiences that well-qualified them to undertake this review. Their task was not easy. And, at times, differences of professional opinion boiled over. Yet, the recommendations they offer provide an important foundation for new directions in forest planning and management which we will seek to reflect in new forest planning rules.

Much of what we know about forestry, and forest management has changed since the 1982 NFMA regulations were developed.

- 1.Science has assumed a much stronger role as a foundation for national forest management.
- 2.We are focusing more on managing the sum of the parts - on entire ecosystems - rather than single species or outcomes. The cumulative effects of management activities over time and over larger parts of the landscape are considered, regardless of whether or not they occur within a specific national forest boundary.
- 3.The concept of "adaptive management" encourages changes in management emphasis and direction as new scientific information is developed. Of course, this requires more effective monitoring of management actions and their effects.
- 4.Regional ecosystem assessments have become the foundation for more comprehensive planning, sometimes involving multiple forests and other public land management units. The President's NorthWest Forest Plan, for example, affected 17 national forests and 6 BLM districts in a three state region. The Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Project will affect lands encompassing 25 percent of the entire national forest system and ten percent of the public lands administered by the BLM nationwide.
- 5.The number of agencies participating in management decisions has grown. Agencies like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NMFS, and the EPA are now partners in the planning process, as well as states and tribes, as appropriate.
- 6.The unit of analysis for management decisions has changed to a focus on watersheds discrete and ecologically intact units on the landscape. As a result, discrete administrative units such as national forests, are proving less useful for resource management purposes.
- 7.Our view of communities is changing. We no longer think solely in terms of "timber dependent communities," but instead recognize that other resource outputs and values affect community well-being. And, we are working more with communities, in partnership, to develop resource management strategies.
- 8.The public's role in forest planning and decision-making is also changing. Collaboration has replaced litigation in some instances. In others, the courts continue to play a significant role in shaping forest policy.

New science, new technology, and a renewed emphasis on seeking greater involvement on the part of the public and other agencies in the planning process warranted a new look at how we go about planning the management of the national forests. With this in mind, the Committee was encouraged to be bold and creative in their thinking and ask tough questions of the agency and others regarding the current planning process.

As Gifford Pinchot stated nearly a century ago in offering his perspective on managing the national forests,

"National Forests are made for and owned by the people. They should also be managed by the people.... If National Forests are going to accomplish anything worthwhile the people must know, all about them and must take a very active part in their management. What the people as a whole want will be done. To do it, it is necessary that the people carefully, consider and plainly state just what they want and then take a very active part in seeing that they get it."

The Committee's report paints a refreshing picture of the future for forest management and planning. The Committee acknowledges that they were surprised to learn that innovations in planning and collaborative partnerships already abound on many national forests and grasslands. Of necessity, many forest managers and Forest Service regions have developed innovative ways to commingle science and collaborative public processes to improve land management decisions.

As we believed would be the case, these innovative strategies provided a good starting point for the committee to use in developing a more integrated, long-lasting, and flexible planning framework. The committee's recommendations would do away with the one-size fits all approach to planning. Its proposed framework provides flexibility to managers in dealing with a multitude of resource issues at various scales across the landscape. Most importantly, the framework calls for managers to integrate public collaboration with science to identify desired future conditions of these lands that represent sustainable management. As pathways to achieving these conditions, forest plans should include adaptive practices, monitoring, performance and measures budgeting strategies. All should be linked to achieving desired future conditions with the underlying tenet of ensuring sustainability.

### **Ecological Sustainability: Foundation for Management**

Based on this strong foundation, we strongly support the committee's recommendation that ecological sustainability should be a foundation for management of the national forest system. Managing for ecological sustainability will provide the public with a long-lasting flow of benefits from forests and grasslands, including clean air and water, productive soils, biological diversity, goods and services, employment opportunities, and broaden community benefits. I believe, in fact, that this is simply a reaffirmation of the direction provided to Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the Forest Service, by then Secretary Wilson which stated, "... where conflicting interests must be reconciled the question will always be decided from the standpoint of the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run."

We agree with the committee that conserving habitat for native species and the productivity of ecological systems remains the surest path to maintaining ecological sustainability. To accomplish this, the committee suggests that the agency maintain: 1) the viability of selected "focal" species and their habitat needs; 2) maintain conditions necessary for ecological integrity; and 3) monitor their effectiveness.

As many of you know, our current regulations require the agency to ensure viable populations of wildlife in our forests. In addition, as the agency has developed a keener understanding, of how our forested watersheds function through management and research, it has undertaken to preserve and enhance these functions. In other words, we are working towards these objectives already, but we can improve the means by which we achieve these ends. Therefore, we welcome the committee's recommendations and will evaluate them closely as we propose the draft rule.

At all levels of planning, we agree that ecological sustainability is inextricably linked to social and economic

sustainability. We must manage our forests to ensure that they are healthy and able to provide present and future economic and social contributions to society. At the same time, to achieve sustainability, the agency now relies and will continue to rely on the hard work and entrepreneurial spirit and investment of people in communities locally and elsewhere. We have a lot of work to do in the forests to achieve our goals and we cannot do it without people and healthy economies. Achieving ecological sustainability also means identifying the important social values of these lands to all, including Native Americans, and preserving or enhancing them.

From a management perspective, this concept of ecological sustainability has evolved in practice over the years since the passage of the 1897 Organic Act. And, from a legal perspective, a host of laws since then has decisively affirmed the overarching responsibility of the Forest Service to manage these lands in an ecologically sustainable way in order to ensure that multiple use values are preserved. The proposed regulation should encapsulate the multi-faceted policy of sustainability - a policy whose meaning has certainly evolved since 1897.

### **Collaborative Planning:**

#### **Involving the Public and Others to Gain Understanding**

We strongly support the committee's recommendation to make public collaboration and coordination with other federal, state, local and tribal entities one of the main elements of the new planning framework. As stated in the report, collaborative planning creates opportunities for people and organizations to work together to find agreement on a common vision for future land conditions. In doing so, the planning process would cultivate an understanding around problems and issues as well as strategies and actions. The overall purpose of this effort is to build effective stewardship for sustainability.

The agency has been experimenting with ways to involve the public earlier in the planning process to identify problems and solutions. The committee supports this and calls for even more vigorous involvement at all stages of the planning process. For example, the committee strongly recommends that the agency and the public look beyond the forest boundaries to determine the role that national forests play in ecosystems and communities. It is a starting point in helping the agency and the public determine future desired conditions when people understand the role the forests play or have played in the ecosystem.

We agree with the committee that even with more collaborative relationships and shared understanding of the planning process, conflicts will remain. However, through collaboration, the scope of the conflicts may be narrowed and the public will have a better understanding of how and why decisions are reached and a stronger role in affecting these decisions.

### **Integrating Science and Accountability into Collaborative Planning:**

#### **Assessments, Adaptive Management, Monitoring**

#### **Budgeting and Performance Measures**

As components of highly complex ecosystems, forests are always changing. The agency always will be working with imperfect approximations of conditions. However, we agree with the committee that credible scientific assessments at both large and small scales, as deemed appropriate, can shed light on tough issues, guiding the decision maker and the public toward identifying problems and reaching solutions. Assessments

can be used for a number of reasons, such as identifying issues of special importance; laying the groundwork for developing regional conservation strategies; improving inventories; and providing the context for planning.

The agency currently uses large and small scale assessments, such as the Sierra Nevada and the Interior Columbia Basin assessment efforts for some of these purposes. For example, recently, in tackling the pine beetle infestation affecting the Idaho Panhandle National Forest Supervisor Dave Wright not only used the Interior Columbia Scientific Assessment as a guide, but he initiated an intermediate level assessment over a large area of the Panhandle, and then a smaller-scale assessment at a more site specific level to determine the scope of the problem as well as possible solutions. The Forest Service was pleased with the outcome of this analysis and the range of alternatives in the Draft EIS which is out for public comment.

I think the most important aspect of this recommendation is that the agency should decide, after involving the public, at what scale to conduct its assessments. Management decisions would be matched to the scope and scale of the issues addressed. Issues or problems can be addressed at the regional, large, or small, or a combination of the three, depending on the need.

Assessments and other scientific information can help shape problems and issues as well as a common vision for the future conditions and outcomes of the national forests. This is as essential to the planning process as focusing on a schedule of management actions needed to reach desired future conditions. Ensuring that the forests and regions stay on track will require adapting to changing conditions; therefore, monitoring and adaptive management strategies are essential to forest plans. Underlying these efforts must be land managers' commitment to measuring performance regularly and adjusting management strategies when desired future conditions are not being met. The agency is already working on land based performance measures which will be implemented by 2001.

In addition, forest managers, as they develop forest plans, need to be realistic about their budgets. The committee recommends, and we strongly agree, that a nexus needs to exist between the plan, the budget and the public's expectations.

Other recommendations in the report underscore the need for science and research to play an integral part in the development and implementation of forest plans. Without the science, achieving desired future conditions will be difficult, if not impossible, because we have no way to ensure that our management strategies are working. We have known for years that science is integral to management, but our efforts presently are falling short due to lack of funding and an inconsistent commitment on the part of the agency. We believe that a planning regulation with more rigorous adaptive management and monitoring requirements is definitely needed, but we are mindful of budget constraints.

## **Watersheds and Timber Supply: Traditional**

### **Focuses in Achieving Sustainability**

The Organic Act and NFMA both recognize the importance of watershed protection and timber supplies from National Forest System lands. The committee recommends that strategies for achieving healthy Watersheds must be integrated with collaborative planning processes at all levels. I strongly agree with the Committee's belief that watersheds must be restored and maintained to achieve sustainability. As you know, restoration and maintenance of healthy watersheds is one of the primary goals of the Forest Service's Natural Resources Agenda. As stated earlier, the agency now uses watershed assessments to guide

management decisions, particularly in the Pacific NW and California. The agency also collaborates with interested parties, Indian tribes, and other Federal state and local agencies to achieve watershed goals.

I also agree with the committee that a functioning timber industry can help the Forest Service accomplish long-term timber stand and landscape objectives, just as predictable timber supplies from the national forests help the timber industry and surrounding communities. Communities need as much certainty as possible in planning for their futures. A collaborative planning process, using assessments and scientific information, adaptive management and monitoring to develop strategies to achieve desired future conditions can result in watershed protection and timber harvest that contributes to long-term sustainability for forests and communities.

### **Summary**

The Committee of Scientists exceeded my v expectations in responding to the Secretary's direction. Indeed, the Committee's work verifies that the mission of the agency is very clear, to sustain these forests and grasslands for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. We have been striving to meet this charge, but we can do it better with more clarity, purpose, coordination and consistency, as indicated in the report. For this very reason, the agency needs to move forward to write a new forest planning rule, incorporating much of what it already knows from practice and building upon the strong foundation established by this Committee report.

In closing, the Secretary and I are very grateful for the committee's public service in writing this report. I want to thank the committee for giving us this opportunity today to discuss this report and now I will let Chief Dombeck add a few more comments before turning it over to Dr. Norm Johnson, chairman of the committee.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to join you today.

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