



May 16, 2011

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

RE: Proposed National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule, Docket
Number FS-2011-0002

To Whom It May Concern:

The California State Association of Counties (CSAC) and Regional Council of Rural Counties (RCRC) appreciate this opportunity to offer comments on the proposed National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule (Planning Rule). Land management planning is one of the most important functions of local governments, and ensuring that federal plans are consistent with local plans is imperative to our communities, particularly in counties with significant amounts of National Forest System land.

Counties are not just another group of stakeholders in the planning process. We are governmental bodies comprised of elected officials working to promulgate the best possible land management decisions to maximize the health, safety, economic stability, and quality of life of our citizens. A cohesive, coordinated effort between regional U.S. Forest Service representatives and local officials is crucial to guarantee the implementation of the best possible final forest plans, and these efforts begin with the adoption of the Planning Rule. Our comments and recommendations follow.

The final Planning Rule must reinstate and strengthen coordination language included in Section 219.7 of the 1982 National Forest System Land and Resource Management Planning Rule.

CSAC and RCRC are disappointed that the coordination language in the proposed Planning Rule was not made more prescriptive for responsible line officers, and are concerned that it was in fact softened from the coordination requirements contained in Section 219.7 of the 1982 Rule currently in effect.

The proposed Planning Rule completely omits the 1982 Rule coordination requirements, which are consistent with requirements in 36 CFR 219.9, effectively removing

many of the mandated steps the forests must take in coordinating with other governmental agencies. And while Section 219.4 (Requirements for Public Participation) of the proposed Planning Rule states that forests are required to coordinate planning efforts with tribes, federal agencies, and state and local governments “to the extent practicable and appropriate,” the Rule lacks definitions for what is practicable and appropriate, effectively leaving it up to the interpretation of the individual responsible line officer. Inconsistencies from one forest to the next in how counties are involved and considered in the planning process already is fostering frustration among local government officials. The omission of the 1982 coordination language will only exacerbate those inconsistencies and further strain relations between counties and forests.

Not only do we recommend restoring the 1982 coordination language, but we also recommend strengthening the language to ensure that counties are involved in the planning process as early and often as possible. The most important part of coordination is ensuring that forest plans are consistent with local land use plans to the maximum extent practicable. As we commented during the scoping process, regional staff should be required to consistently begin coordination with local governments at the earliest possible time. Local land use plans should be reviewed prior to developing a draft forest plan in direct consultation with the local agency. Once the initial draft of the plan is complete, the responsible line officer should immediately consult the local agency to determine the level of consistency with local plans.

In cases where a forest plan is inconsistent with local land use planning efforts, the regional officer should be mandated to meet again with local government officers and, if necessary, form a joint task force to work towards achieving consistency. If the region finds, after exhausting all methods of coordination, that the forest plan cannot be made consistent with local plans, the inconsistencies should be justified in the Environmental Impact Statement.

Economic and social impacts should be weighed equally with ecological concerns.

In Sections 219.7 and 219.8 of the proposed Planning Rule, the way ecological concerns are to be considered in forest plans is fairly detailed and prescriptive. In contrast, social and economic impacts are only described in general terms, and consideration in plans is often optional. While we appreciate that the proposed Rule includes social and economic data in its considerations during the Assessment phase, we don't feel the Rule goes far enough in mandating social and economic considerations in the actual plans. Many California counties are in economic crisis and the social landscapes of many rural areas have been greatly affected by previous plan adoptions. If those communities are to ever recover and thrive, each forest must carefully consider the impacts of their planning efforts on social and economic sustainability. CSAC and RCRC recommend that those sections be revised to include more detailed requirements for social and economic considerations in planning efforts.

Wildland fire should be a higher priority in ecosystem plan components.

In Section 219.8, wildland fire and opportunities to restore fire adapted ecosystems is the last in the list of required ecosystem plan components. CSAC and RCRC believe that there is truly no way to move forward with the other ecosystem plan components until fire-

ravaged forest land is properly managed and wildfires are mitigated at a higher level. We recommend that this be moved to Section 219.8 (a) (1) (i).

The Pre-Decisional Administrative Review Process in Subpart B will be a valuable addition to the final Planning Rule and should be retained.

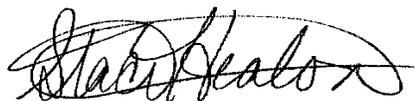
During the planning process, counties have often felt like they have no viable recourse to appeal unsatisfactory components of a plan once the responsible line officer has made the final decision. On many occasions, local governments have found line officers to be unresponsive to their requests for meetings to work out differences of opinions on proposed plans and the plans are adopted - seemingly without consideration of county comments. The Pre-Decisional Administrative Review Process, or objection process, gives stakeholders the valuable opportunity to request an independent review by higher level USFS staff to resolve issues before a plan is finalized without counties feeling like costly lawsuits are the only way to have their comments heard. We recommend the objection process be retained in the final version of the Planning Rule.

Ultimately, while the proposed Planning Rule has many positive elements, CSAC and RCRC are concerned that the issues that most profoundly affect the local communities associated with national forest lands are treated with less significance than others. Our comments and suggested changes are intended to ensure a more balanced and equitable planning process. We also support and concur with the comments submitted by the National Association of Counties (NACo). We thank you for your consideration of our comments and look forward to providing more input as the rulemaking process progresses.

Sincerely,



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