

ASPEN WILDERNESS WORKSHOP

“We cannot solve the problems of today with the same thinking that created them.”
Albert Einstein

SPECIAL SUMMER NEWSLETTER - NEW FOREST PLAN RELEASED

INTRODUCTION

The Forest Service finally released its new Land and Resource Management Plan for the White River National Forest on June 4th. The Aspen Wilderness Workshop has been tracking and participating in this process for over five years, and an enormous amount of our time has gone into promoting a conservation oriented management plan for the White River National Forest.

As you may recall, the Aspen Wilderness Workshop helped coordinate a coalition of conservation organizations to promote a Citizen’s Alternative for the Land and Resource Management Plan. The alternative we submitted was considered among the range of alternatives considered for the Final Plan. The conservation minded alternative we promoted was recognized as Alternative I in the environmental analysis process.

When the Forest Service released its favored alternative in 1999, it chose Alternative D, which incorporated many positive management recommendations. The Forest Service planned to limit ski area expansions to existing permitted boundaries, limit motorized summer travel to designated routes, and implement bypass flows and hard targets for protecting adequate water levels in forest streams. Alternative D was specifically developed to provide a special emphasis for biological diversity and wildlife habitat for a variety of species. Alternative D embraced the idea that a higher priority should be given to physical and biological resources than to human uses of the Forest.

THE NEW FOREST PLAN

When the new Forest Plan was released on June 4th, a new alternative was selected as the Final Plan. The chosen alternative changed the primary emphasis of the Final Plan and combined different aspects of previously considered alternatives. Instead of placing an emphasis on biological resources and biodiversity, the chosen alternative emphasizes quality recreation experiences, and it promotes modest increases in recreation use on the Forest.

The chosen alternative, Alternative K, recognizes that forest ecosystems and components such as wildlife habitat and water quality should be maintained or improved on the Forest, but the emphasis is on quality recreation, and the alternative is structured to address social values and expectations. This means the Forest Service will accommodate human uses and expectations associated with population growth more in the Final Plan than was earlier suggested.

It will take time to understand the nuances of the Final Plan, but here is a quick analysis of several key issues:

WILDERNESS/ROADLESS AREAS

The Final Forest Plan takes a positive step in allocating 82,000 acres as recommended wilderness, which is an increase over suggested acreage in the preferred alternative in the Draft Forest Plan. Even though Congress must officially designate these areas as wilderness, the Forest Service will manage these areas to protect their wilderness characteristics.

The mother lode of all wilderness recommendations is Red Table and Gypsum Creek, a stand-alone area covering 49,800 acres. The other stand-alone recommended wilderness area is Assignment Ridge, which is located west of Redstone and which encompasses 11,800 acres. Both of these areas include more lower elevation habitat types than what is traditionally found in high elevation wilderness areas. We are glad the Forest Service recognized the need to create wilderness areas in more diverse vegetative community types. The rest of the wilderness designations are smaller in size (100 to 4,700 acres) and are adjacent to existing wilderness areas. In total, 28% of all available roadless areas are recommended for wilderness designation.

While positive steps were taken for wilderness areas, overall protection for roadless areas in the Revised Forest Plan is weak. The Forest Service inventoried 640,000 acres of roadless areas on the Forest. Less than one-third of these roadless areas will be managed specifically to retain their roadless characteristics. Over 367,000 acres will be managed in prescriptions that have the most potential for intensive developments, including road construction and timber harvesting. Almost 60% of all inventoried roadless areas, and 45% of those that are capable and available for future wilderness designation, will be managed in a manner that has the most potential for intensive development. In addition, the Aspen Wilderness Workshop actually inventoried over 1 million roadless acres on the Forest, which means there are even more roadless areas that should have been considered for protection. We are disappointed that a majority of the remaining roadless areas, including almost half of future wilderness areas, will be managed in prescriptions that have the potential to alter their wild and roadless characteristics.

SKI AREA EXPANSION

The preferred alternative in the Draft Forest Plan recognized that ski areas should remain within their permitted boundaries to minimize environmental impacts associated with additional ski area growth. The selected alternative in the Final Plan does an about face, and commits to a policy that ski areas should expand in order to accommodate population growth in Colorado.

The Final Forest Plan allocates additional ski area expansions based on projections for future skier visits to the White River National Forest. The projections the Forest Service relied on are very accommodating to the ski industry. The Final Forest Plan assumes that skiing will increase by 515,023 skier visits by the year 2010 based on population growth in Colorado. Future skier visits were calculated using an average skier visitation number from Colorado skiers in the 2001 ski season, a record year for the ski industry. The Forest Service failed to average weaker ski seasons into the skier visitation model, like the two previous years before the 2001 ski season. Therefore, skier projections were based solely on an average of skier visitations from one banner year, which may not accurately reflect future trends in skiing.

Another interesting aspect of the Final Plan is it assumes the ski industry will be able to successfully implement market interventions to counter demographic projections and weather trends that are projected to decrease national skier visits by 12 percent by the year 2010. The Forest Service accepts at face value that Colorado ski resorts will continue to see increased skier visits in light of the decreasing national trends in skier visitation.

Assuming ski areas do enjoy the skier numbers reflected in the Final Plan, the Final Environmental Impact Statement discloses that 5,940 total additional acres are needed to accommodate skier growth in Colorado. Curiously, the Final Plan allocates a total of 8,327 additional ski acres for ski area expansion. The Forest Service granted even more ski area acreage than is necessary to accommodate skier growth on the Forest. The reasons for this increased acreage are not articulated well in the Final Plan, and it seems the Forest Service moved away from its original plan of prioritizing resource protection over ski area expansion.

WATER RESOURCES

One of the clearest examples of backpedaling in the Final Plan is the Forest Service's decision to drop the Draft Plan's goal of protecting 10% of all perennial streams by acquiring instream flow rights or establishing instream flow protections (often referred to as bypass flows) in special-use authorization projects, like reservoirs and water diversions. The Forest Service was under extreme pressure from Congressman McInnis to relinquish its goal of implementing bypass flows on the Forest, and our Congressman even threatened a political fight if the Forest Service did not soften its approach in acquiring instream flow protections. In the Final Plan, the Forest Service backed off its desire to assert its full range of legal authorities for flow

protections, and instead the Forest Service will work with water users within the more limited framework of Colorado water law to implement water resource guidelines.

On the positive side, the Final Plan does contain a standard requiring the Forest Service to ensure that projects maintain “sufficient” habitat for aquatic species. The Final Plan also contains a standard that the Forest Service will “maintain sufficient stream flows under appropriate authorities to minimize damage to scenic and aesthetic values, fish and wildlife, and to otherwise protect the environment.” This language might ensure that adequate stream flows are maintained on the Forest, but it is also worded vaguely enough to allow plenty of discretion in deciding the sufficiency of flows to minimize damage to aquatic resources. If adhered to, the Forest Service’s goal of moving at least 20% of degraded watersheds towards positive conditions over the life of the plan may assist in rehabilitating the health of degraded watersheds.

Several improvements in the Final Plan include stronger standards and guidelines for Colorado River cutthroat trout, a species of viability concern on the Forest, and improved attention to including aquatic species in the list of management indicator species on the Forest. Finally, the Forest Service did not embrace a policy of clear cutting forests to increase water flows from Forest lands, but the Final Plan does increase timber harvest levels, which will likely impact riparian health and contribute to stream sedimentation on the Forest.

TIMBER HARVESTING

Another disappointing change in the Final Plan is timber harvest levels are increased over preferred levels in the Draft Plan. The preferred alternative in the Draft Plan, Alternative D, originally suggested that 8.9 million board feet of timber would be harvested annually for the first decade of the Forest Plan. The Final Plan recalculated Alternative D’s annual harvest level to represent 10.8 million board feet per year. The Final Plan calls for 12.4 million board feet of timber to be harvested annually based on experienced funding, which means annual timber harvesting will increase by 15% over preferred levels in the Draft Plan.

Even though annual timber harvest levels are decreased from levels in the 1984 Forest Plan, the amount of suitable timber lands are significantly increased. The Final Plan increases lands that are suitable for timber harvesting by 63,000 acres, which represents a 17% increase over the previous forest plan. Increased timber harvesting will likely impact both wildlife habitat and taxpayer’s pocketbooks, especially since timber sales generally operated at an economic loss between the fiscal years of 1988 and 1997 on the White River National Forest.

On a positive note, the Final Plan removes old-growth spruce-fir forest from the suitable timber base on the Forest. This should help the Forest Service meet its standard of maintaining a minimum of 10% old-growth spruce-fir forest in a total of thirteen late-successional assessment areas. There is currently only 10% old-growth spruce-fir forest represented on the entire Forest.

RECREATION/TRAVEL MANAGEMENT

The Forest Service made a very good decision in ending summertime off-road motorized travel on the Forest. The Final Plan requires all summertime motorized and mechanized vehicles to stay on designated routes. This was a management recommendation we strongly supported and we are glad to see it in the Final Plan.

The acreage in both summer and winter motorized recreation is reduced from the 1984 Plan. Overall, 32% of the Forest will be available for motorized designated travel in the summer, and 38% of the Forest will be available for motorized winter travel, with one-third of the Forest remaining open for snowmobiles to travel beyond designated routes. The acreage for non-motorized winter activities actually increases in the Final Plan, which should help accommodate quiet-use winter time recreation on the Forest, especially near backcountry huts, where increased non-motorized buffers have been created. Route specific recommendations will still be determined through a separate travel management planning process to start later this year.

In general, there are no major surprises in the standards and guidelines in the Forest Plan for travel management, and there is a great deal of discretion in the wording of the guidelines. For example, one guideline encourages the Forest Service to consider decommissioning roads when environmental degradation is occurring, but there is no standard requiring closure if environmental degradation is in fact occurring.

WILDLIFE HABITAT & ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT

As mentioned previously, there is less of an emphasis on habitat management and biodiversity protection in the Final Plan in comparison to the preferred Draft Plan. This means the overall emphasis of quality recreation is shared with wildlife management concerns, but the prioritization of biological resource management once clearly stated in the preferred alternative is missing from the Final Plan.

There are numerous issues facing wildlife management in the Final Plan, many of which deserve closer scrutiny. For starters, it appears the Forest Service has provided a more thorough review of species viability in the Final Plan as a result of direction from an appeal on the Black Hills National Forest Plan Revision. The Final Plan lists species of viability concern and it provides standards and guidelines for maintaining species viability. The Final Plan also identifies species needing additional baseline inventory to determine their status on the Forest.

The number of species needing baseline data brings up a critical issue on the Forest: the monitoring and inventory of species. Under the 1984 Plan, the Forest Service was required to monitor certain management indicator species and report on their status on an annual basis. Under the new plan, the Forest Service will be required to monitor for management indicator species, but new species have been selected, and the Forest Service will only be required to report on their status once every five years. This means the Forest Service will be reporting only twice over the duration of the plan on the population trends of management indicator species, and the effects of management activities on species trends. This leaves an enormous amount of discretion to the Forest Service, which is problematic since the Forest Service failed to comply with its monitoring obligations over the entire duration of the 1984 plan.

A separate issue that garnered much attention in the Final Plan is lynx management. With the listing of the lynx as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 2000, the Forest Service was required to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service to determine how the Final Plan would affect the lynx. Since it was determined that the Final Plan was likely to adversely affect the lynx, and lead to an incidental take of the species (ESA language), reasonable and prudent measures were incorporated into the Final Plan as standards and guidelines to minimize impacts to the lynx. These standards and guidelines are too numerous to list, but projects that have the potential to affect lynx or lynx habitat will need to go through an assessment, and disturbances will need to be limited according to specific standards.

In an effort to provide more habitat connectivity, the Forest Service has also created a new management prescription called Forested Landscape Linkages. The largest example of this new prescription is in the upper Fryingpan Region where wilderness areas will be connected by forest conditions that are largely shaped by natural processes. Motorized travel will be confined to designated areas, and timber harvesting will only be promoted in aspen and lodgepole forests, and not spruce fir forest. The overall effectiveness of this prescription still needs to be examined, but through this prescription, the Forest Service does acknowledge the need for greater habitat connectivity on the Forest. The shortcoming in fragmentation management, though, is the Forest Service failed to implement comprehensive road density standards for wildlife species in the Final Plan.

Finally, the Final Plan backpedaled on the amount of acreage for Research Natural Areas (RNA's) on the Forest. Alternative D would have designated 12 RNA's over 93,900 acres, while the Final Plan only allocates 5 additional RNA's over 37,400 acres. Thus, the Forest Service decreased protection for natural ecosystems and areas of special ecological significance by 60% from the preferred alternative in the Draft Plan.

CONCLUSION

There is much in the Final Plan that needs to be studied. The entire plan cannot be classified as either entirely good or bad for resource protection, as there are still too many factors that need to be considered. However, there is disappointment over the general shift in emphasis in the Final Plan from the preferred alternative in the Draft Plan. The probable impetus for this change is the White River National Forest was under powerful pressure from the Bush Administration and Colorado politicians, such as Representative McInnis, to increase development on the Forest. This is unfortunate, but there is still plenty of opportunity for the Forest Service to prioritize resource protection through future site-specific decisions on the Forest, and we will encourage this to the best of our ability through the duration of the Plan.