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Forest Service tries different approach to developing contested planning rule

By BRETT FRENCH
Of The Gazette Staff

After the Forest Service's two attempts under the Bush administration to write a planning rule were shot down by court rulings, the agency is adopting a new tactic — involving the public on the front end of the process.

"What's different about this process is that we haven't put anything on paper yet," said Brandan Schulze, a public affairs specialist for the Forest Service's Northern Region in Missoula. "It's really a chance for the public to give their input on those areas we should be focusing the planning rule on."

The planning rule provides a framework for the management of national forests and grasslands.

As part of its creation of a new rule, the agency webcast a science forum Monday in Washington, D.C.

Then, across the United States beginning on Thursday, a series of national and regional roundtables have been scheduled.

Among the regional events are ones set on April 13 in Missoula, Billings and Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. The roundtable will include a full day's worth of briefings, talks by officials and small group discussions to gather public comments.

"We really have quite a few topics we're going to discuss," Schulze said.

Then the Forest Service will create an environmental impact statement including some of the ideas from the meetings.

The big picture

The roundtable meetings are important because the Forest Service Land and Resource Management Planning Rule "guides land managers in developing, amending and revising land management plans for the 155 national forests and 20 grasslands in the National Forest System," according to the agency.

Forest plan revisions already under way will continue under the 1982 planning rule. That's because, despite the fact that a new rule was created in 2000, it was too complex for the Forest Service to implement.

Ironically, the 2000 rule was developed because the 1982 rule was "very complex, had significant costs, was lengthy, and was cumbersome for public input," the agency stated.

Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack has already outlined what he expects in a speech he gave in Seattle in August.

In that talk, Vilsack cited a "new vision" for the agency that would seek to address the threat of climate change, protect watersheds, wildlife and roadless areas and commit resources to restoration of the forest while preserving recreational opportunities. He also noted the need to work with private forestland owners "while

creating local economic opportunity" and improving collaboration.

The Bush administration's planning rules released in 2005 and 2008 were overturned in the courts after a coalition of environmental groups sued. The courts found that the rules removed essential environmental safeguards and violated such acts as the Endangered Species Act.

Species concerns

Marc Fink works for the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the groups involved in the lawsuit overturning the 2008 rule. He said that, since the Forest Service has nothing down on paper, his group can only hope that a new planning rule will be more acceptable than the last two.

Fink said his group's main concern is the agency's viability provision. In its previous two versions, the Forest Service eliminated the requirement to maintain well-distributed populations of all native species. That provision had been key in halting the logging of old-growth forests in Oregon to protect the spotted owl.

"To alleviate our concerns they would come out and say they are going to maintain a strong viability provision, but no one from the administration has said that yet," he said.

"Due to climate change and the uncertainties going forward, we should be looking to protect forests."

Chief's perspective

Dale Bosworth, chief of the Forest Service between 2001 and 2007 and now living in Missoula, is hopeful that the new public process will work and that an updated planning rule will be implemented.

"The Forest Service is working under a rule that is quite old," Bosworth said. "The situation out there is quite different, and the rule needs to be modernized."

Bosworth said the agency needs to be able adapt more quickly to changes.

Long planning processes frustrate the public, he said. And incorporating new strategies, such as protection of

threatened species, can take too long to prevent them from being listed as endangered species.

"They can't spend 10 years developing a 15-year plan," he said. "We need the process to be effective, much faster and less expensive than the agency has been doing."

Public needed

Schulze hopes that a variety of forest users show up for the daylong meetings.

"If there are things that are working, we want to know what they are so we can include them in the rule," he said. "Likewise, if there is something we're

doing wrong, then we want to know that, too."

National groups, from those supporting more motorized vehicle use to the Backcountry Horsemen and The Wilderness Society, have alerted their members to take part in the discussions.

Schulze said there undoubtedly will be common threads in the different forest regions, but he said there is the possibility of a lot of localized differences, as well.

"It's kind of an exciting process because of this type of public involvement," he said. "The more diverse of a group we have, the better the discussion will be."