

Opinions mixed on new U.S. Forest Service planning rule

- By ROB CHANEY

The U.S. Forest Service's recently released planning rule could turn the agency into a more efficient decisionmaker or create a department of perpetual planning, depending on who you listen to.

"We are ready to start a new era of planning that takes less time, costs less money and provides stronger protections for our lands and water," Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell said in an email announcing the final version of the rule. "This new rule will bring 21st century thinking to a process that is sorely needed to protect and preserve our 193 million acres of amazing forests and grasslands."

Critics have been equally expansive. Andy Stahl of the Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics predicted the process "would die of its own weight."

"Anyone who thinks this rule will make forest plans quicker to develop is naive," Stahl said. "It requires more process than its predecessor. To somehow think it's going to be quicker and able to anticipate the future better — we're lousy at being able to anticipate the future. The Forest Service has become a planning agency, while the only thing it does is fight fires, which now

consumes half its budget. And the irony is the one thing the forest planning rules don't address is fire management."

In the Forest Service way of doing business, the planning rule tells individual forest supervisors how to construct their forest plans. Those plans in turn guide what can be done, for example, in the Lolo National Forest around Missoula.

A recent example in the news involved a proposed ski area below Lolo Peak. The developer wanted permission to lease Forest Service land above his private property. But the snowy basin contained a resource management area protecting some wildlife habitat. The Lolo forest plan said such areas aren't suitable for recreation development.

Forest Service Region 1 spokesman Brandan Schulze said the new rule would require more public collaboration on how recreation or protection decisions are made in a future Lolo forest plan. That's not to say ski areas or habitat sanctuaries would get preference at the rule-making level, but that the priorities would get set in a different way.

"Some of those designations may change based on what happened since the last time the plan was done (in 1982)," Schulze said.

"The rule would guide how a new collaborative process would go forward. It's much more working up front to building the plan, as opposed to building the plan and getting the public involved after or toward the middle."

The new rule also requires national forests to protect watersheds and water supplies on national forests; balance multiple uses including recreation, timber-cutting, wildlife management and range use; get more people involved in outdoor recreation; and document the use of "best available science" in decision making.

The rule also changes the way people fight the Forest Service. In the past, opponents of forest projects appealed a supervisor's decision through an internal review, and then took the case to court if the outcome wasn't satisfactory.

The new objection format requires more up-front participation by people or groups interested in a project. Those participants have the opportunity to object to a project in its planning stage and argue for changes. But those outside the process have much smaller openings to challenge a Forest Service decision, either internally or in court.

The rule has won commendations from many environmental and conservation groups, including the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Defenders of Wildlife, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, The Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club.

It's also garnered a thumbs down from the Center for Biological Diversity, whose public lands campaign director Taylor McKinnon said it made species protection voluntary instead of necessary.

"The Forest Service today completed what it's been trying to do for 12 years, which is to weaken wildlife protections and public accountability on our national forests," McKinnon said in a statement. "These forests, owned by the American people, are vitally important habitat for hundreds of species now vulnerable to climate change — yet the Forest Service is weakening, rather than strengthening, the safety net that keeps them alive."

Retired Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth, a Missoula resident, said the rule was a much-needed advancement from its 1982 predecessor.

"Back in the 1980s, the Forest Service was sawing 12 billion board-feet of timber," Bosworth said. "Today what the Forest Service is doing is focused on restoration. The rule needs to reflect the things the service is doing today."

"There's no question that the processes we've had in place have gotten so burdensome, it's very difficult doing work on the ground," Bosworth added. "A lot of money gets spent on planning. Spending seven or eight years to develop a 15-year forest plan doesn't make sense. I'm sure there's people on all sides who say this isn't exactly what they want, but we need to move on."