

Understanding the Forest Plan

Wilderness Standards, Guidelines, and Thresholds that Relate to Visitor Use

Overview

As the coronavirus pandemic canceled or changed most Americans' travel plans, people flocked to public lands in record numbers—many for the first time. Although the outdoor spaces we manage are a vital haven to visitors trying to cope with the pandemic, land managers are finding that there's a steep learning curve when it comes to these visitors' responsible use. Many wilderness areas experienced much higher use in 2020 than in previous years and, in some situations, the increased use resulted in increased problems: crowding, loss of solitude, driving or parking in fragile locations, trampling vegetation, not packing out trash, camping in inappropriate locations, such as close to water or alongside trails, and not completely putting out campfires.

With increased visitation even at traditionally less frequented areas, public land managers have recognized the need to promote responsible recreation as well as place some restriction on use. One of the first places wilderness managers should look for guidance is the local Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). The Forest Plan provides sideboards on what management actions may be allowed in wilderness or adjacent to wilderness. The Forest Plan may also provide specific standards, guidelines, and thresholds to help wilderness managers know what to monitor and when to take management actions.

If you are not familiar with Forest Plans, the information below should help you better understand your Forest Plan, what to look for in it to help guide decisions about managing situations of high visitor use, examples of specific standards, guidelines, and thresholds, and what needs to be done if your Forests Plan does not have a lot of detail.

The Forest Plan

The Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) sets the overall management direction for each of our national forests. The Forest Plan describes resource management opportunities, land use determinations, goals, and guidance.

The requirement to complete a Forest Plan is found in the provisions of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA). To remain current, NFMA requires the Forest Service to revise its Forest Plans at least every 15 years. However, Forest Plans remain current until revised, even if it is beyond 15 years.

Forest Plan Components

Each Forest Plan includes a consistent set of components. Plan components guide what future site-specific projects and activities may take place, where they can occur, and under what conditions. They are intended to be interdependent, with suites of plan components designed to meet specific needs.

Desired condition

Desired condition statements are descriptions of specific social, economic, or ecological characteristics of the plan area, or a portion of the plan area, toward which management of the land and resources should be directed. Desired conditions provide the vision of what should look like, and guide how other plan components (objectives, standards and guidelines, and suitability) should be designed to get there. For example, a Desired Condition statement for wilderness might state: *The area provides a recreation experience offering a high degree of solitude, physical and mental challenge and risk, inspiration, and primitive recreation. Opportunities exist for nonmechanized recreational activities such as hiking, backpacking, camping, horseback riding, scientific study, hunting, fishing, and nature study.*

Objectives

These are concise, measurable, and time-specific statements of a desired rate of progress toward a desired condition or conditions, based on reasonably foreseeable budgets. Objectives should be designed so that monitoring can gauge progress as well as the effectiveness of activities in moving towards the desired condition. An example Objective for wilderness might state: *Conduct Wilderness Character Monitoring every 5 years to determine if trends in wilderness are improving, staying stable, or degrading. Take management action when monitoring shows conditions are degrading.*

Standards

Standards provide objective thresholds that galvanize decision making or agency action; they are established to help achieve or maintain the desired condition or conditions, to avoid or mitigate undesirable effects, or to meet applicable legal requirements. Standards must be implemented as written. Deviation from a standard requires an amendment to the Forest Plan. Adaptive management direction may support the use of situation-dependent (if-then) or qualified (unless) standards. Example Standard 1: groups cannot be larger than 10 people. Example Standard 2: Individual campsite condition rating cannot exceed condition class 4.

Guidelines

Guidelines should be implemented in most cases. Deviation from a guideline does not require a Forest Plan amendment, but the rationale for not following a guideline must be justified. In the example below, the intent of the guideline is to limit the evidence of human development and introduction on non-native materials. If it is determined that natural materials will not allow for a sustainable trail, would be unsafe for the visitor, or would cause additional resource damage to the area, divergence from the guideline can be justified. Otherwise, the mandatory constraint applies as written. Example Guideline: Use native materials in trail construction.

Goals

These are broad statements of intent, other than desired conditions, that are usually related to process or interaction with the public. Goals are an optional plan component. An example of a Goal for wilderness might state: Provide for recreation use in harmony with natural ecosystems.

Forest Plans and Wilderness Management

Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, Land Management Planning Handbook, Chapter 20 requires that the Forest Plan must include plan components, including standards or guidelines, for designated areas, including wilderness areas.

In most Forest Plans, Wilderness will be designated as a separate Management Area, with specific plan components that apply only to these portions of National Forest System land.

Wilderness Performance Measure, prior to 2015

The wilderness performance measure that was in place from 2001 to 2014 (referred to as the Chief's 10-year Wilderness Stewardship Challenge") contained two elements addressing the need for adequate direction in management plans that relate specifically to management of visitor use. Element 5 emphasized the need for adequate direction to protect opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined recreation. Element 8 emphasized the need for adequate direction in the Forest Plan to prevent degradation of the wilderness resource.

Fiscal Year 2014 was the last year wilderness areas were required to report under the performance measure which tracked these two elements. In 2014, 81% of wilderness areas reported that there was adequate direction in a management plan to protect opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined recreation. That same year, 93% of wilderness areas reported that there was adequate direction in the Forest Plan to prevent degradation of the wilderness resource.

Based on these data, information in existing plans should help guide management responses to increased use, resource damage, and monitoring needs.

Although the former wilderness performance measure has been replaced with Wilderness Stewardship Performance (WSP), the focus on outstanding opportunities and prevention of degradation continue to be important, and elements have been expanded within WSP.

Wilderness Performance Measure, 2015-present

Below is a description of elements from WSP that may have direction (goals, objectives, standards) in Forest Plans:

Two elements are related to visitors' experiences in wilderness:

- Solitude: "This wilderness has adequate direction, monitoring, and management actions to protect outstanding opportunities for solitude."
- Primitive and unconfined recreation: "Managers for this wilderness know the location of administratively provided facilities that degrade opportunities for primitive recreation and the existence of management restrictions that affect unconfined recreation and have ensured these are required to protect other wilderness values."

What are some examples of forest plan standards for solitude or a primitive and unconfined recreation?

- The following items, as listed in the WSP counting instructions, exemplify some of the direction commonly found in forest plans related to conditions that affect opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation. These are just examples of indicators of social conditions; your individual wilderness may dictate the use of a selection of these examples or of different indicators entirely. Limits (standards) are often set for:
 - Group size
 - Encounters
 - Carrying capacity (e.g., PAOTs or campsite density)
 - Access management direction such as trail classes and management objectives
 - Wilderness recreation opportunity classes
 - Presence of permanent improvements or evidence of modern human occupation
 - Trail features or signage that reduces the opportunity for challenge or self-reliance
 - Length of stay limits
 - Campsite location (e.g., distance from lakeshore, trail, etc.)
 - Quotas/permit requirements
 - Administrative overflights

Several other WSP elements are related to preventing degradation of the wilderness resource and maintaining its undeveloped character. While many of these are related to factors other than visitor use, some may be impacted by visitation:

- Invasive species: “The priority invasive terrestrial and aquatic species in this wilderness, including vertebrates, invertebrates, plants, and pathogens, have been assessed and treatment actions taken to address the highest priority populations, with an emphasis on prevention and early detection/rapid response.”
- Recreation sites: “Wilderness recreation sites have been located and their condition routinely assessed. Forest Plan Direction has been developed and stewardship actions taken if conditions are not in compliance with direction.”
- Trails: “Trails need to be managed to provide quality wilderness experiences while minimizing biophysical impacts.”

What are some examples of forest plan standards for these WSP elements?

The following items, as listed in the WSP counting instructions, exemplify some of the direction commonly found in forest plans related to the impact of recreational use on the untrammeled and natural qualities of wilderness. These are just examples of indicators of resource conditions; your individual wilderness may dictate the use of a selection of these examples or of different indicators entirely. Limits (standards) are often set for

- The number, size and condition of wilderness campsites
- The presence of permanent recreational structures
- Total miles of user-created trails
- The use and handling of recreational stock
- The use of site restoration activities to address impacts to ecosystems or plant communities
- The management and construction of system trails

How is adequate direction established?

Several WSP elements refer to having “adequate direction” to maintain wilderness character. Often, this direction may be contained in the Forest Plan. However, direction is often expanded in other plans or documents, such as the following:

- A wilderness plan, in the form of a forest plan amendment or as integrated into a forest plan revision process.
- An amendment to the Forest Plan
- Documents associated with a Forest Plan revision process

How do I know if the direction in my Forest Plan is adequate?

- Ultimately, it is up to the wilderness manager and responsible line officer to determine if the direction is adequate for protecting wilderness character for the individual wilderness, based on current resource (both physical and social) conditions and the desired future condition as identified in the forest plan.
- A technique that has proven successful for some is to network with other wilderness managers on adjacent forests or in your region to describe and assess what “adequate direction” means and determine if any “leveling” or clarification is needed between units to insure that the standard is effective for your area and that scoring is comparable.

Good Examples of Standards and Guidelines from Forest Plans

- Motorized/mechanized use
 - Motorized use or mechanized transport is prohibited except for emergencies approved by the Forest Supervisor and cemetery maintenance and access. Non-motorized wheelchairs used by persons with disabilities are permitted.
- Developments/structures
 - Only minimal facilities are provided to prevent site deterioration and protect users from safety hazards.
 - Design structures such as gates and signs on the periphery of the area according to wilderness policy so that they blend with the wilderness characteristics of the area.
 - Designated sites may be provided with a wilderness style fire grate and wilderness privy.
 - Use signs to close trails, protect the environment, and provide direction to help correct environmental damage when needed.
 - Do not authorize permanent structures or installations associated with recreation special uses. A permanent structure is a constructed feature remaining for more than one season.
- Recreational livestock
 - Restrict horses and pack stock to those portions of the trail system specifically designated for their use. Prohibit off trail riding.
 - Require the use of weed-free feed or pellets for stock animals.
 - Allow tying of recreational stock to live trees for a maximum of one hour.
- Trails
 - Limit the trail system to 40 miles with no connectors to trails outside of the wilderness.
 - There will only be five trailheads.
 - Maintain trails to a standard as low as possible while still protecting the resources and providing for visitor safety.

- No new trails will be constructed. Standards for hiking trails in the Wilderness will be the same regardless of management area, except for the Pristine MA, where trails are not constructed or maintained.
- Do not construct new trails, unless determined to be the minimum necessary to protect wilderness character.
- Tread width of trails generally will be no greater than 1½ feet. The treadway may be clear of obstructions such as deadfalls and boulders.
- Assess impacts and determine if management actions are needed to maintain wilderness character if total miles of user-developed routes (i.e., unauthorized trails) increase by 3% or more over two reporting periods.
- Use native materials in trail construction to the extent possible. Generally, utilize native and local materials in completing trail construction and reconstruction. Use nonnative materials if it is determined they are necessary to protect resources. Trail work includes but is not limited to: tread maintenance, diversion ditches, side-sloping and waterbars to divert water from trails and maintain adequate trail drainage, brushing and removing trees that fall across the trails, and removing and scattering vegetation from the tread area to make the materials unobtrusive. Make drainage structures look as natural as possible.
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- Visitor behavior
 - Prohibit the use or possession of spray paint, and any paintball activity.
 - Prohibit the discharge of firearms for target shooting or reasons other than hunting.
 - Emphasize refuse disposal through a pack-it-in and pack-it-out program.
- Camping/campsites
 - Prohibit camping within 100 feet of ponds, lakes, trails, or streams except at designated sites. Camping throughout the rest of the wilderness is not restricted. Additional designated camping sites may be provided throughout the wilderness.
 - Manage dispersed campsites and recreational activities to prevent them from expanding or deteriorating beyond a point where impacts to riparian and aquatic resources cannot be effectively addressed.
- Camp area should not exceed 400 ft²
- Prohibit roadside parking and camping along Tower Ridge Road except at designated locations. Provide parking and signs at trailheads as needed.
- Campsites will not be constructed. Maintenance will occur on user-built sites only when necessary to protect the biophysical resource.
- User-built campsites will be monitored on a rotation basis, every five years, for compliance with the standards for limits of acceptable change indicators. If, through monitoring, impacts exceed limits of acceptable change standards, sites will be rehabilitated. Currently there are three indicators that are considered critical to the health of the resource. They are erosion level, amount of exposed mineral soil, and number of trees with roots exposed. The standards are:
 - Allowable amount of mineral soil exposed – 0 to 250 square feet
 - Number of trees on site with exposed roots -none to 25%

- Erosion level - none to erosion level 2 (erosion either on the campsite, access trails, or at the shoreline resulting in the loss of soil which is not pronounced, gravel on site, or obvious loss of soil at the landing or along the shoreline.)
 - Rehabilitation or closure of a campsite will occur when it is determined that the site has exceeded the limits of acceptable change standards. The site will be restored to an acceptable condition. Currently, there are three indicators that are considered critical to the health of the campsite. They are erosion level, amount of exposed mineral soil and number of trees with exposed roots. The standards are:
 - Allowable amount of mineral soil exposed - 800 square feet.
 - Number of trees on site with exposed roots - 50% of total trees.
 - Erosion level 2 - campsites with erosion either on the campsite, access trail(s), or at the shoreline resulting in the loss of soils that is not pronounced, gravel on the site, or obvious loss of soil at the landing or along the shoreline.
 - Restoration activities may be considered and evaluated to return native biotic communities to natural patterns of abundance and distribution in areas where conditions are unable to recover naturally from human-caused disturbance
 - Use locally sourced native seed or plants where reseeding or replanting is determined necessary.
- Visitation
 - Limit group size to no more than 10 people.
 - Limit group size to six people or less, unless otherwise authorized by permit.
- Opportunities for solitude:
 - Maximum encounters with other groups along established trails are six per day.
 - Maximum encounters with other groups in trailless areas is one per day.
 - Campers should be able to camp out of sight and sound of any other campers at least 80% of the time.
 - Minimize administrative flights that cannot avoid airspace over wilderness and fly them at the highest altitude possible (minimum 500 feet above ground level) to minimize disturbance to wilderness character.
- Primitive and unconfined recreation
 - Trail signs will not contain information on mileage.
 - Trail signs will be posted only at major trail junctions.
 - Blazes will not be used to mark trails.
 - Bridges over small streams will generally be single stringers without handrails.