



Image Credit: USDA Flickr

SIERRA CLUB BRIEF: NEW 2017 FOREST PLAN REVISION BEGINS WITH ASSESSMENT

March 2017 marks the start of the four-year planning period for the revision of the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas (NFGT) Forest Plan for the Angelina, Sabine, Davy Crockett, and Sam Houston National Forests and the LBJ - Caddo National Grasslands. The planning process includes three phases:

- assessment
- plan development, amendment, or revision
- and monitoring and implementation

This fact sheet discusses the first phase of the planning process, assessment.

WHAT IS ASSESSED?

According to the National Forest System Land Management Planning regulation, the definition of “assessment” is:

“the identification and evaluation of existing information to support land management planning. Assessments are not decision-making documents, but provide current information on select topics relevant to the plan area, in the context of the broader landscape.”

All of this means that the Forest Service will be gathering, then separating out, the best information available to them on the current state of the forest in the context of the surrounding area and other topics particularly significant to the forest. Each of the national forests and grasslands has a surrounding landscape of developed and undeveloped lands which affects the management of national forests and grasslands, just as the national forests and grasslands affect surrounding lands. To manage the NFGT, the Forest Service must know what is needed for management and how this management is affected by nearby land uses (the landscape).

WHAT DOES AN ASSESSMENT INCLUDE?

Assessments include an evaluation of *“existing information about relevant ecological, economic, and social conditions, trends, and sustainability and their relationship to the land management plan within the context of the broader landscape.”* Then, the responsible official (Forest Supervisor of the NFGT), *“shall consider and evaluate existing and possible future conditions and trends of the plan area, and assess the sustainability of social, economic, and ecological systems within the plan area in the context of the broader landscape.”* In addition, current and prospective conditions of the area are analyzed. The long-term viability of social, economic, and ecological practices are also considered by the Forest Supervisor.

EXAMPLE- PRESCRIBED BURNS

Prescribed burning is important for management of the federally-endangered Red-Cockaded Woodpecker. However, as land use becomes more developed (urban), prescribed burning becomes a challenge due to the potential impact that fire has on air pollution, people's health, and smoke drifting across roads. The Forest Plan must address these concerns of the “broader landscape” so that the Red-Cockaded Woodpecker can thrive, but the surrounding community remains safe.

WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?

It means that if you are a visitor of these great places, and you have information about what is happening, what has changed, and what trends you see for any ecological, economic, and social factor or the sustainability of those factors, then you have important and valuable information to provide to the Forest Service during the assessment phase.

Local knowledge (what you and I know) will be considered if publicly available or voluntarily provided. So you have an avenue to provide information to the Forest Service in preparation of the assessment. To facilitate this, the Forest Service must provide opportunities for the public to provide information for the assessment. The Forest Service will be hosting six public meetings between March 20 and April 6, 2017. More information about these meetings can be found at www.fs.usda.gov/goto/texas/planrevision. Some of the information that the Forest Service will consider includes:

- Terrestrial/aquatic ecosystems (living/non-living elements of a landscape) and watersheds
- Ecosystem drivers (which push the development and functioning of ecosystems) including dominant ecological processes, disturbance regimes, and stressors (like natural succession, wildland fire, invasive species, climate change, etc.) and the ability of terrestrial/aquatic ecosystems to adapt to change
- Baseline assessment of carbon stocks
- Threatened, endangered, proposed, candidate, and potential species of conservation concern
- Social, cultural, and economic conditions
- Benefits people obtain from the NFGT
- Air, soil, and water resources and quality
- NFGT uses and their contributions to local, regional, and national economies
- Recreation settings, opportunities, access, and scenic character
- Renewable and non-renewable energy/mineral resources
- Infrastructure like recreational facilities and transportation and utility corridors
- Areas of tribal importance
- Cultural/historic resources and uses
- Land status and ownership, use, and access patterns
- Existing designated areas located in the plan area (like wilderness, scenic areas, etc.) and the potential need and opportunity for additional designated areas

The Sierra Club welcomes people who love our national forests and grasslands and want to get involved to share their experiences with the Forest Service and to sign up for the Sierra Club newsletter. Please contact Brandt Mannchen at 713-664-5962 or brandtshnfbt@juno.com for more information.