

Summary of the Need for Change

The Forest Service began revising the 1993 George Washington Forest Plan with a comprehensive evaluation of what has been done over the past fifteen years and how well the issues that drove the planning process have been addressed. This evaluation was conducted by an Interdisciplinary Team of Forest Service employees who developed some preliminary ideas on things that needed to be changed in the Forest Plan.

Public workshops were held in March of 2007 where participants were encouraged to discuss what was working well on the Forest and what needed to change. In July of 2008 another set of public workshops asked participants to use District maps to identify areas of the Forest they would like to see managed in a different way.

From these workshops there appeared to be three prominent issues that needed more evaluation: (1) vegetation management (timber harvest and prescribed fire); (2) access management (roads and trails); and (3) management of roadless areas, other remote areas and wilderness. Public workshops were held on each issue and participants discussed changes to the Forest Plan that would address their concerns.

The Forest Service re-examined the results of the original comprehensive evaluation integrating the input discussed in the public workshops as well as written public comments. In January of 2009, the Forest Service presented our preliminary response to the discussions we had until that point.

The purpose of scoping is to identify significant issues. Since we have spent quite a bit of time discussing issues at public workshops, we wanted to take that information and put it into several documents to show how these needs for change could be addressed in the Plan Revision. We put this information together to help people focus their scoping comments.

The documents include a statement of the things that make the GW special, or its niche. We have also proposed a set of desired conditions for the Forest. We have identified a set of management prescription areas and forest-wide standards based on those used on the Jefferson National Forest. We also applied the management prescription areas to the GW based largely on how the Forest is currently managed. Exceptions to this are noted in the following section.

We want to assure people that these proposals are just a starting point. We want to hear any comments you have on what you would like to see changed (or not changed) in the Forest Plan. Do not confine yourselves to commenting on these items, comment on any aspect of forest planning and help us identify all the issues that need to be considered.

Following are the main topics that we identify as proposed changes:

1. Change the current management areas to their corresponding management prescription areas used in the Forest Plan for the Jefferson National Forest.

The George Washington and Jefferson National Forests were administratively combined in 1995, but have separate Forest Plans. We would like to make the Plans similar to reduce the confusion of

having two different plans. The Jefferson Forest Plan was prepared in conjunction with four other National Forests in the Southern Appalachians, so using much of the Jefferson will also align the George Washington with the rest of the Southern Appalachian National Forests. Similar plan direction will also improve efficiency in monitoring and in responding to regional, or landscape, level analysis of arising issues. We have attempted to keep the management prescriptions as similar as possible to the Jefferson Forest Plan, acknowledging that: 1) there are some differences between the two Forests; 2) that some issues and scientific approaches to management have changed since the Jefferson Plan was completed; and 3) we have learned lessons from implementing the Jefferson Forest Plan.

We heard comments from people who wanted us to use the Jefferson Forest Plan prescriptions and we heard some concerns about the Jefferson Forest Plan. Concerns focused on the small size of the Jefferson prescription areas. We addressed these concerns by generally using the existing GW management area boundaries.

2. Identify ecosystems and objectives to maintain the resilience and function of those ecosystems and identify the desired disturbance regimes for those ecosystems. The ecosystems identified include: Appalachian Spruce-Fire Forests; Appalachian (Hemlock)-Northern Hardwood Forests; Cove Forests; Oak Forests and Woodlands; Pine Forests and Woodlands; Alkaline and Mafic Glades and Barrens; Cliff, Talus and Shale Barrens; Riparian; and Caves and Karstlands.

Applying objectives and desired conditions to ecosystems allows us to better identify needs for management and protection of all of the habitats needed for the species that inhabit the Forest. The ecosystems have been defined so that they align with recognized classifications used by other organizations like The Nature Conservancy and the Virginia Natural Heritage Program.

The desire to describe plan components by ecosystem did result in one change from using the Jefferson Forest Plan prescriptions. The George Washington Plan had separate management areas for remote habitat, mosaics of wildlife habitat, early successional habitat, and timber management. These areas correspond to their Jefferson counterparts of black bear habitat, mix of successional habitats, early successional habitat/grouse habitat, and timber production areas. All of these management areas (or prescription areas) were similar in that they relied largely on timber harvest to create a component of early successional habitat within a forested base. The main difference between them was the level of early successional habitat and allowable open road densities. The differences between the levels of early successional habitat were not substantial, ranging from 4-10% to 10-16. In the 1993 Plan, road densities had been established for bear populations, but the bear populations on the Forest are now very healthy and studies in Virginia indicate that road density is not an important factor for bear populations. Roads that are constructed for wildlife habitat improvement or timber harvest are closed after the activity is complete. In addition, the Forest has a large component of backcountry areas and wilderness for remote settings. Our proposed change combines all of the former active wildlife and timber production management areas into a single management prescription area. We have identified this as Management Prescription Area 13 – Mosaics of Habitat.

While we are currently proposing to combine the management prescriptions areas, this is an area where we would like to have additional comments and discussions.

3. Incorporate management direction to provide habitat for maintaining species diversity and viability across the forest. This management direction would incorporate restoration objectives to address the many species that need habitat management and some form of opening, open woodland or early successional habitat. Examples of this direction are contained in the next 2 items regarding expanding the Special Biological Areas and increasing the objectives for planned and unplanned fire.

Maintaining and improving species diversity and viability were common themes in many comments that we have heard. Comments encouraging greater attention to restoration activities were also expressed.

4. Add new and expand existing Special Biological Areas (SBAs) to protect and restore rare communities and species. We have expanded the Special Biological Areas by about 23,000 acres from the current Plan.

Assuring that we protect the most sensitive and unique biologic communities on the Forest was a common comment. We have worked with the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation – Natural Heritage Program (DCR) and the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources to identify the additional areas. We currently have two areas in need of further discussion. They are Peters Ridge and Frozen Knob. The DCR considers these to be significant natural communities of old-age oak forests representing some of the best examples of old-age oak forests yet encountered in the Commonwealth. The Forest Service believes that SBA's should represent rare communities or assemblages of rare species, not just a particular successional stage of a common community. This is another area where we will look forward to additional comments and discussions.

Public comments recommended designating special biological areas for wood turtles. These areas are watersheds inhabited by the wood turtle, not rare communities. We do not believe that designation of special biological areas for the wood turtle is appropriate; however, we will add other plan direction for managing habitat for the wood turtle.

To respond to gypsy moth and other insect and disease infestation concerns, we have changed Plan direction to allow salvage of dead and dying trees in infested areas as long as the harvest would not impair the biologic resources for which the area was identified.

5. Substantially increase the objective for using prescribed fire in ecosystem restoration and incorporate the use of unplanned ignitions for resource enhancement.

While we heard a few concerns about the size of the prescribed burning program, comments generally supported increasing the use of fire to meet ecological objectives. The use of fire was especially important to state agencies. Our evaluation indicated that the level of timber harvest has not been sufficient to meet the objectives for early successional habitat. Fire use can improve our capacity to create early successional habitat and open woodland habitat at levels that will come

closer to our objectives. Fire will also help restore ecosystems adapted to, or dependent upon, fire to maintain the species composition and structure of these ecosystems.

6. Re-evaluate and update the list of Management Indicator Species (MIS) as required in the 1982 regulations.

A complete analysis of MIS was done for the Jefferson Forest Plan. This analysis is applicable to the GW except for the designation of the Peaks of Otter salamander that is not found on the GW. We propose to use the same list of MIS that is used in the Jefferson Forest Plan, except the Cow Knob salamander will replace the Peaks of Otter salamander.

7. Incorporate management direction for controlling, treating or eradicating nonnative invasive plant and animal species.

We received many comments interested in enhancing direction on the management of non-native invasive species (NNIS). We will be developing a strategy to manage NNIS including desired conditions, objectives for treatment, and standards for control and prevention of the spread of these species.

8. Update the direction for management of old growth to meet guidance for the Southern Region.

According to the definitions of old growth used in the 1993 Forest Plan, old growth forests increased from about 150,000 acres to 250,000 acres since 1993 and this trend will continue as the forest ages. After the 1993 Plan was approved, the Southern Region developed guidance for defining and managing old growth across the Region. We will adopt that guidance which changes some of the age requirements for certain forest types to be considered as old growth. This changes the amount of the forest that is currently in old growth conditions from 250,000 to 190,000 acres. However, the trend is still projected to increase with over 300,000 acres estimated to be in old growth conditions in ten years. We have old growth communities identified in ten old growth forest types. Eight of these forest types will continue to be unsuitable for timber production. The most common forest type (Dry-Mesic Oak Forests) will continue to be potentially available for timber harvest. One other old growth forest type (Dry & Dry-Mesic Oak-Pine Forests) is proposed to become available for timber harvest. Timber could be harvested from these two old growth forest types after site specific analysis and disclosure which includes a discussion on the old growth characteristics found in each project area, the effect of harvesting on these characteristics, and the effect the action will have on the contribution of the project area to the Forest-wide old growth resource.

Management of old growth received much attention in our public discussions. Some people wanted us to manage old growth as it is on the Jefferson, where it is a separate management prescription area and is all identified as unsuitable for timber production. A forest-wide field survey of old growth was completed on the Jefferson several years ago. The GW does not have the same level of detail on its old growth forests. In addition, old growth only represents about seven percent of the Jefferson. On the GW, about seventeen percent of the forest is estimated to be old growth. We

believe that old growth can be managed as a component of rest of the forest, rather than as a separate management prescription area on the GW.

9. Identify the importance of maintaining the high quality of water for drinking water and for aquatic life.

High quality water is one of the most important resources supplied by the Forest. Many groups and local governments requested we assure high quality water to those dependent on water originating from the Forest. In addition to the following two items, we will be highlighting the drinking water supply watersheds in the Plan.

10. Identify five reference watersheds.

Five reference watersheds will be identified. Reference watersheds are representative of watersheds in which existing water quality conditions are considered to be the “best attainable” for under relatively undisturbed, natural conditions. Monitoring of water quality and other stream characteristics would provide reference conditions against which other watersheds could be compared.

11. Update the standards for riparian area protection.

While the current standards and guidelines in the GW Forest Plan provide excellent protection of water quality, we will be adopting the riparian standards from the Jefferson Plan as these provide even greater protection for riparian area resources.

12. Incorporate adaptive management strategies for addressing climate change.

Many people commented on the importance of recognizing climate change as a significant factor in managing the Forest into the future. Our proposed emphasis on ecological systems and the importance of maintaining the resilience of those systems is in response to this issue. We recognize that our high elevation ecosystems (like the spruce system at Laurel Fork) and ecosystems tied closely to temperature (like our brook trout streams) are clearly at risk. This is a developing issue that will require more attention. We have tried to retain flexibility in management to address climate change concerns as we learn more.

13. Identify one new area and three additions to existing wilderness areas as recommended wilderness study areas.

There has been much interest in the topic of additional wilderness on the Forest. After participating in many of these discussions, we are identifying the largest area in our inventory, Little River, for wilderness study. The boundaries of Little River are those identified in the Friends of Shenandoah Mountain proposal except for the area where we do not own the mineral rights. While this boundary substantially reduces the size of the area, it was drawn to address a number of concerns from other users (such as bicycle riders) of the area. We are also identifying additions to existing wilderness areas at Ramseys Draft, St. Marys and Rich Hole. The total area identified is about

20,000 acres. These proposals respond to the many requests for additional wilderness, our desire to have larger wilderness areas where natural processes can act on the landscape, and concerns regarding the limitations that wilderness can place on management flexibility to meet other objectives that were raised by both the public and Forest Service specialists.

Some people supported identifying Laurel Fork and Kelly Mountain as wilderness. Instead we are proposing these areas as Special Biological Areas. We believe the sensitive biological resources of these areas need to be emphasized over the wilderness potential, so that management options to maintain or enhance the biological communities will be available.

We evaluated many other areas and we expect this to be a topic of much further discussion and comment.

14. Expand the current remote backcountry areas to include more of the Inventoried Roadless Areas and update management direction for these areas.

We received many comments about management of Inventoried Roadless Areas, Potential Wilderness Areas, and remote backcountry areas. Inventoried Roadless Areas are those areas identified in the 1993 Plan that met the definition of wilderness. These are also the areas addressed in the Forest Service 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (which does not currently apply to the GW, but is still being deliberated in federal court). Potential Wilderness Areas are those areas that we have inventoried for this revision as meeting the definition of wilderness. This inventory includes most of the Inventoried Roadless Areas plus twelve new areas and expansion of many of the Inventoried Roadless Areas. Remote backcountry is the management prescription area that we propose to use to manage areas where our emphasis is to retain remote and roadless character.

Our proposal is to increase the remote backcountry acreage by about 50,000 acres. Some of this is due to moving portions of the 1993 Forest Plan Special Management Areas (Laurel Fork, Big Schloss and Little River) into backcountry and special biological areas; however, there is a net increase of about 17,000 acres. In the 1993 Forest Plan, the boundaries of remote highlands (the 1993 Plan term for remote backcountry) did not match the boundaries of the Inventoried Roadless Areas. The proposed expansion of 17,000 acres is largely the result of moving the remote backcountry boundaries to match the Inventoried Roadless Area boundaries. Portions of a few Inventoried Roadless Areas (about 8,000 acres), where the boundary of the Inventoried Roadless Areas is along existing roads and the adjacent forest has been actively managed for many years, are proposed to remain in active management rather than in remote backcountry.

We propose to manage the backcountry areas with standards to closely mirror the management restrictions on road construction and timber harvest that were described in the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule. To address concerns about gypsy moth mortality as well as other insect and disease infestations, our proposed management would deviate from those rules to allow salvage of dead and dying trees as long as no road construction is involved and the roadless character of the area is maintained.

With the allocation of lands to the remote backcountry management prescription area and the standards in place, the major remote areas on the forest would be managed for their remote, backcountry resources.

In our current inventory of Potential Wilderness Areas, we identified 130,000 acres of lands in addition to the Inventoried Roadless Area that meet the definition of wilderness. The definition has many factors; the main factor is a limit on the amount of roads in an area. The twelve new areas and the expansion of Inventoried Roadless Areas that make up the 130,000 acres are predominantly lands that are currently managed for wildlife habitat and timber management. We propose that these areas remain in active management similar to that in the current Plan.

Emphasis was placed on managing the Inventoried Roadless Areas as backcountry (as opposed to the Potential Wilderness Areas) for the following reasons:

- a) In general these areas represent the more remote areas of the forest;
- b) These areas have generally had little active management in the past 15 years;
- c) There has been a high level of public input on the desire for limited management of the Inventoried Roadless Areas;
- d) Much of the area in the Potential Wilderness Areas that are extensions of the Inventoried Roadless Areas are readily accessible and available for management activities without additional permanent road construction;
- e) Many of the twelve new Potential Wilderness Areas are long and skinny and surrounded by roads. As such, they are well-roaded and available for management activities without additional permanent road construction; and
- f) Much of the area in the twelve new Potential Wilderness Areas is currently suitable for timber production and has been actively managed within the past 15 years.

We believe that this is another topic that will generate additional comment and analysis.

15. Re-evaluate the oil and gas leasing availability designations.

Since management areas are being proposed for change, we will also be changing the availability for mineral development in several areas.

16. Replace the current Visual Management System with the national Scenery Management System and consider the need for new visual objectives.

This is a change in the system that we use to assess and manage visual resources. While this change will not substantially affect the current visual objectives, the new system does consider more factors in managing the visual resource.

17. Drop the proposed Archer Run ATV use area. Maintain the existing ATV uses areas and not develop any new areas.

We heard from ATV users who wanted more ATV areas and from people who have concerns about the impacts of ATV use on other resources. We are proposing to drop the Archer Run area that was

identified as a potential ATV use area in the 1993 Forest Plan. While demand for ATV use likely exceeds supply, the provision of three areas on the forest does provide at least some geographic distribution for this use. However, based upon the expected use of the Jefferson Plan's Appendix H "Screening Criteria for New OHV Areas", it is doubtful that any new areas can be found to be suitable, including the Archer area on the North River District, proposed in the 1993 Plan. The forest is very likely at the limit of its ability to support ATV use due to the relatively substantial environmental impacts and high costs of maintaining these systems.

18. Designation of OHV Routes

We are proposing that OHV routes no longer be designated in the Forest Plan. With our Motor Vehicle Use Maps we now have another opportunity to identify high clearance roads suitable for OHVs. We are proposing to have an objective to maintain a defined mileage of high clearance roads suitable for OHV experiences.

19. Identification of suitable uses

Wind Energy: Potential wind energy development on the Forest generated many public concerns. We do not believe it is appropriate to prohibit any wind energy development on the Forest until more analysis of the specific impacts to this area is completed. However, we do believe that we can identify the following areas as unsuitable for the development of wind energy: wilderness or wilderness study areas, special biological areas, geological areas, research natural areas, Shenandoah Mountain Crest (Cow Knob Salamander Habitat), Indiana Bat protection areas, Appalachian Trail corridor, remote backcountry areas, and Mt. Pleasant National Scenic Area.

Timber production: In determining areas suitable for timber production for the 1993 plan, Ranger District personnel went through a screening process to identify areas where access was impractical or where most of the lands were of low productivity or excessively steep slopes. This resulted in the identification of about 200,000 acres of land as unsuitable for timber production. Since technology (such as helicopter logging) has changed and we are re-assessing desired conditions, we want to reexamine these areas as we develop the revised plan. This could increase the acreage of lands suitable for timber production from about 350,000 acres to about 500,000 acres of land. This is a substantial change in acreage and we need comments on this issue to determine the location and level of lands suitable for timber production.

20. Management of semi-primitive recreational settings

The 1993 Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) inventory showed 167,000 acres of Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized (SPNM) setting and 203,000 acres of Semi-Primitive Motorized (SPM) setting. The 1993 Forest Plan adopted (or chose to incorporate management restrictions to assure that areas would remain in their inventoried condition) 150,000 acres of SPNM and 208,000 acres of SPM. The current ROS inventory shows that there are 198,000 acres of SPNM and 211,000 acres of SPM.

We are proposing to drop the use of adopted ROS classes. About 158,000 acres of the inventoried SPNM lands and about 130,000 acres of the inventoried SPM lands would be assigned to

management prescription areas that would prohibit road construction. The areas of SPNM and SPM lands that are not in those management prescription areas would be managed to allow construction of only temporary roads or roads that would be closed after use. This requirement would keep the areas in a SPM setting. If temporary or closed roads were constructed in one of the SPNM areas, it would change to SPM, but any such change would be discussed in the NEPA analysis for the decision to construct the road.

More detail on what we heard at our public meetings, how we addressed the issues in our comprehensive evaluation and other maps and evaluations can be found at our website:
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/gwj/forestplan/revision/index.shtml>