Bioregional Assessment of Northwest Forests

Summary by KS Wild, July 2020

The U.S. Forest Service released the ***Bioregional Assessment for Northwest Forests*** (BioA) on July 8, 2020. The BioA follows the ***Science Synthesis*** and is the next step in the pre-planning process that will culminate in an update to the 1994 ***Northwest Forest Plan (NFP)***. The BioA reviews the primary changes in the region since enactment of the NFP to employ, "innovative planning strategies to more efficiently and effectively manage national forests" including several recommendations for "modernizing" management direction in the planning area. In addition to the 19 National Forests included in the NFP area, two adjacent forests; the Ochoco and Lassen, have been included in the BioA. The BioA is not a decision document and not part of the official public planning effort, yet this assessment contains key insights to the direction of the U.S. Forest Service across 24 million acres.

Key Changes Recommended

Dry Forest Management – The prominent theme in the BioA is ***the urgent need to increase mechanical treatments and fire use in frequent fire forests,*** most immediately in the eastside and south portions of the planning area. The BioA maps a very broad landscape constituting roughly half of the region that is both frequent and mixed fire, including areas that are often considered much more mesic (wet). Barriers identified to achieving dry forest management goals include land use allocations (e.g. 80-year age limit on LSR logging), single species conservation approaches, guidelines that conserve larger trees, and inconsistent management direction.

Aquatic Conservation – The BioA recognizes the ***significant contribution of the NFP's Aquatic Conservation Strategy (ACS)*** but suggests a need for better defining the desired aquatic conditions, so that active management can occur to benefit watersheds. Overlapping ACS, PacFish, InFish, and other direction creates inconsistent approaches, and there is a need for aligning these regulations.

Invasive Species – While the direct management of wildlife (e.g. barred owl) is outside the authority of the Forest Service, there is ***a need for plans to manage habitats to reduce invasive species*** introductions and competition between native and invasive species. The BioA suggests this is a landscape scale issue and that there should be consistent management direction across administrative boundaries.

Community and Fire Safety – Plan direction for late-successional reserves includes provisions for risk reduction activities; however, the risk is narrowly defined as risk of loss for late-successional habitats. The definition of ***risk needs to include risks posed to communities in addition to ecosystem integrity.*** Land management plans need to better address strategic wildfire-risk mitigation near communities.

Fire Use – The BioA recognizes the need for more fire on the landscape and that fire is often essential to the long-term function, stability and resilience of ecosystems. It suggests that updated land management plans need to be consistent with the National Cohesive Wildland fire Management Strategy and ***support the use of natural fire as an ecological tool.*** The Forest Service needs to identify places on the landscape where fire can safely and effectively be managed to benefit resources.

Recreation – The BioA recommends ***updating recreation direction*** for the forests to meet increasing demand.

What's Working?

While the BioA focuses on the needed changes in updating the NFP, it does acknowledge several areas where the NFP has been successful. These include:

The Reserve Network *(LSRs*, riparian reserves, and congressional reserves) supports healthy ecosystems including aquatic habitat and wildlife conservation. The network ensures consistent management direction, and a well-connected reserve network that persists can incorporate climate change refugia and fire refugia.

Conservation of Dense Multi-layered Old-growth Forests has led to more stable old forests as a result of mostly ceasing older forest logging. This has resulted in old forests being more stable on federal lands. Old forest coverage has increased slightly as a result of the NFP, supporting ecosystem functions and old-growth-dependent species. The caveat is that the loss of old forests as a result of fire was not adequately addressed in the NFP.

Conservation of Aquatic Resources has been a success. Even with climate change warming stream temperatures, data show cooler streams across the NFP area, likely a sign of the effectiveness of stream shading. All-lands Aquatic Conservation has engaged many community-based watershed restoration partnerships.

PNW Forests are Storing Carbon, and the BioA suggests that modernization of land management plans in the BioA area will likely help national forests and grasslands adapt to the effects of climate change and continue to work well at sequestering carbon.

Traditional Ecocultural Resources have benefited from the NFP and ***the ACS, which provides long-term tribal resource benefits,*** such as improved fisheries habitat. Tribal communities are central to national forests through tribal culture and viewpoints that can help with restoration-related work and interpretive and training programs.

Sustainable Timber production levels are deemed a success, but the BioA states that the failure to achieve the predicted harvest of about 600 million board feet per year is the result of conflicting plan direction, restrictions on tree size or stand age, and a lack of social acceptance of regeneration logging, which will likely limit future logging.

Habitat Management is another key area of focus in the BioA. It recognizes that the NFP reserve network established has been effective in stemming the loss of old-growth from public lands logging however, the ***northern spotted owl population*** continues to decline. Also, additional conservation focus has been placed on other species, such as ***marten, fisher, and wolverine,*** who also rely on late-successional forest. The BioA recognizes core principles of ***broad-scale habitat conservation*** *(e.g.* LSRs, riparian reserves) that provide effective direction for habitat protection. It states that the ***fine scale approaches*** (e.g. Survey and Manage) help focus on certain species and contribute to better forestry, but that survey and manage standards have been challenging and updates are needed.

What Needs to Change?

Ecological Integrity needs require plan level direction for forest restoration. There are 10 million acres in need of restoration: 2.2 million acres of wet forests need restoration to maintain old growth characteristics and 7 million acres of dry forest would benefit from mechanical treatment, fire, or both. Current LSR direction is static in location and goals, not accounting for increasingly large disturbances (e.g. fire, insects), fragmentation, and dynamic ecosystems. **Updated LSR direction is needed to reflect dynamic ecosystems**, including updating **tree age restrictions** that don't adhere to the best science. Invasive species direction needs to better anticipate the spread of non-natives. PNW forests store some of the highest levels of carbon in the U.S., and **plans must consider carbon management. Plan direction is needed for roads and infrastructure** to better address the impacts on aquatics, wildlife, and invasive species. Better processes to build collaboration would help integrate adaptive management into forest plans.

Fire and Fuels Management requires ***plans to address wildfire-risk mitigation near communities and infrastructure.*** A strategic, risk-based approach would reduce losses from wildfire and reduce suppression costs. Given the important role of fire in fire-adapted ecosystems, ***plans need an improved focus on managing wildfire and promoting the use of unplanned ignitions*** to meet ecological and resource objectives. Plans need to ***increase the pace and scale of work*** to reduce uncharacteristic large and severe fire using more strategies than suppression. ***Combining timber harvest, other mechanical fuel treatments, and prescribed or natural fire can achieve desired conditions*** where using one option would not meet the landscape needs.

Sustainable Timber processing infrastructure and a skilled workforce has declined in the region. Timber outputs anticipated under the plans have never been met primarily because of restrictions on active management restricting restoration objectives and community support. Harvest levels are unlikely to increase under current plans because the objectives for timber production and restoration often conflict with habitat objectives. The BioA suggests that **plans need to be updated to focus more on desired conditions**. NFP LSRs and matrix are similar in restoration need, including timber harvest.

Habitat Management necessitates ***plan direction that better aligns with U.S. Fish and Wildlife's spotted owl recovery plan*** and desired conditions for old-forests in drier ecosystems. Conservation of ***survey and manage species should be screened and transitioned to at-risk species of conservation concern***. Managing aquatic and riparian ecosystems under the ACS, Sierra Framework, and PACFISH/INFISH needs integration under one approach. ***Plan direction is needed that improves management of riparian areas*** based more on desired conditions. A ***Need to adjust key watershed locations*** is identified to consider science and ESA listings since 1994. ***Plan direction needs to consider complex early-seral*** habitats, meadows, and other habitats.

Sustainable Recreation requires ***plan direction that sustains opportunities considering increasing use*** and the need to maintain existing developed recreation sites. ***Plans need direction to address the effects of climate change*** and other landscape- altering events on recreation and infrastructure. ***Recreation management direction needs overall cohesion and consistency*** within and across the national forests in the region to sustain recreation opportunities.

Process for the Revisions

The Forest Service suggests several options for updating the plan, including:

1) **Incremental Plan Revision:** Revise three to six land management plans at the same time based upon similar challenges and geography.
2) **Simultaneous Plan Revision:** All 19 forests within BioA would complete plan revision at the same time.
3) **Amendment(s):** a range-wide amendment of all or a subset of the land management plans to address one or more of the topic areas identified as needing change in the BioA.
4) **Individual Forest Plan Revision:** Would be the most time consuming, but how the process is normally carried out.
5) **Incremental Plan Revision and Amendment:** Begin modernization on a prioritized group of units, as in the incremental plan revision option, and simultaneously complete amendments on other units that are facing some of the same urgent issues.

National forests and grasslands within the BioA area **rated by urgency to address lack of resiliency**. High urgency includes the Fremont-Winema, Rogue RiverSiskiyou, Six Rivers, Klamath, Modoc, Lassen, Shasta-Trinity, Mendocino, and Ochoco National Forests and Crooked River National Grassland.

Top Level Recommendations

1—Maintain And Restore Ecosystem Characteristics And Processes By Working Toward Desired Conditions That Are Compatible With The Diverse Landscapes Across The BioA Area.
2—Address The Dynamic Nature Of Ecosystems To Better Respond To Future Environmental Uncertainties.
3—Update And Integrate Existing Aquatic Direction From Multiple Aquatic Strategies.
4—Reduce The Introduction And Spread Of Exotic Plant, Animal, And Other Invasive Species.
5—Prioritize Community And Firefighter Safety In Forested Areas Near Communities At Risk From Wildfires.
6—Recognize That Fire Is A Natural Process And Plays An Important Role In Reducing The Risk Of Uncharacteristic Fire And In Promoting Ecosystem Health
7—Expand The Use Of Timber Harvest As A Restoration Tool To Provide Economic And Social Benefits To Communities.
8—Evolve From Single-Species Focus To A Complementary Ecosystem And Species Approach To Maintain Diversity Of Plant And Animal Communities And Species Persistence.
9—Promote Active Management In Plant And Animal Habitats To Restore And Encourage Ecological Resilience.
10—Recognize The Social And Economic Benefits To Communities And People From Sustainable Recreation Opportunities.

What's Next?

Using the five categories***—ecological integrity, fire and fuels, sustainable timber, habitat management, and sustainable recreation—***the Forest Service will move into the next planning phase. Following the BioA, they ***will begin Tribal and public engagement in Washington, Oregon, and California*** to ensure they identify issues important to communities they serve before formal plan revision or amendment efforts. More public engagement opportunities are on the NWFP web page, and go to GovDelivery to sign up to receive updates, stay involved and join the conversation.

Additional Resources:

- Citizens Guide to National Forest Planning: In 2012, the Forest Service adopted an innovative new rule to guide land management planning in the National Forest System.
- National Forest Management Act: Establishes standards for how the Forest Service manages national forests, requires the development of land management plans and directs the Forest Service to develop regular reports on the status and trends of the Nation's renewable resources.
- National Environmental Policy Act: This policy assures that all branches of government give proper consideration to the environment prior to undertaking any major federal action that significantly affects the environment.
- NFP Land Use Allocations: A central component of the NFP was the creation of a regional set of land allocations, each with associated management standards and guidelines.