

## I. Background Information

A Notice of Intent to revise the 1985 Forest Plan for the National Forest in Mississippi was published in the **Federal Register** in 1999 (FR 69686, December 14, 1999). However, Forest Plan revision efforts for the National Forests in Mississippi were delayed due to changes in national planning priorities and reduced funding. This (revised) Notice of Intent provides public notice that the revision for the National Forests in Mississippi is again underway, updates the December 1999 projected schedule for Forest Plan revision, and affords an opportunity for additional public comments on the scope of the analysis to be included in the draft EIS.

The Forest Plan covers the six proclaimed National Forests in Mississippi; Bienville, Delta, De Soto, Homochitto, Holly Springs and Tombigbee National Forests. Decisions made in the Forest Plan identify actions that may take place but do not represent a commitment by the agency to implement site-specific projects. Forest Plan decisions do not normally make any irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources. Site-specific decisions, which may involve irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources are reserved for the second stage decisions which follow Forest Plan decisions.

The following decisions are made in a Forest Plan:

- (1) Establishment of the forest-wide multiple-use goals and objectives (36 CFR 219.11(b)).
- (2) Establishment of forest-wide management requirements (36 CFR 219.13 to 219.27).
- (3) Establishment of multiple-use prescriptions and associated standards and guidelines for each management area (36 CFR 219.11(c)).
- (4) Determination of land that is suitable for the production of timber (16 U.S.C. 1604(k) and 36 CFR 219.14).
- (5) Establishment of allowable sale quantity for timber within a time frame specified in the plan (36 CFR 219.16).
- (6) Establishment of monitoring and evaluation requirements (36 CFR 219.11(d)).
- (7) Recommendation of roadless areas as potential wilderness areas (36 CFR 219.17).
- (8) Where applicable, designation of those lands administratively available for oil and gas leasing; and when appropriate, authorizing the Bureau of Land Management to offer specific lands for leasing (36 CFR 228.102(d) and (e)).

The authorization of site-specific activities within a plan area occurs

through project decision-making, the second state of forest planning. Project decisions must comply with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) procedures and must include determination that the project is consistent with the Forest Plan decisions listed above. (**Note:** The above citations are from the 1982 36 CFR 219 planning regulations)

## II. Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose for this revision rests primarily in the requirements of the National Forest Management Act. The law's implementing regulations at 36 CFR 219.10(g) require that Forests Plans be revised at least every 15 years.

A genuine need to revise the plan exists due to: Changes in policy or law and changed physical, biological, and social conditions occurring on the forest.

### *Changes in Policy or Law*

A substantial body of case law has developed since the Mississippi plan was written, which more clearly defines the roles and requirements of a Forest Plan. One resulting example is the concise listing of eight forest-plan decisions given above. Similarly, the science and policy of national forest management have continued to evolve. The service-wide adoption of Ecosystem Management in 1992, in 1994 with its "Course to the Future" document, the Southern Region's recovery plan for management of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker in 1995, 2002 Southern Forest Resource Assessment, the USDA Forest Service Strategic Plan (2000 Revision) direction and 2003 Healthy Forests Initiative are illustrations of such changes. These policy statements represent a fundamental change in management philosophy and, as such, are built from an extensive set of concepts and principles.

### *Changed Physical, Biological, and Social Conditions*

Hurricanes, tornadoes, ice storms, and Southern Pine Beetle outbreaks have made changes to the forest beyond those contemplated in the current plan. Beaver impoundments and the success of exotics such as kudzu and cogongrass have made, or threaten, additional changes. In many areas, our neighbors and customers have also changed significantly. Particularly near the Gulf Coast, the private lands in and around the national forests have become more densely populated with an increasingly urban population. Urban interface is occurring in varying degrees on all national forests within the state.

## III. Proposed Action

The Regional Forester for the Southern Region proposes to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for revising of the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the National Forests in Mississippi. The Forest Plan will prescribe resource management direction pursuant to the requirements of the National Forest Management Act for the six proclaimed National Forests in Mississippi; Bienville, Delta, De Soto, Homochitto, Holly Springs and Tombigbee National Forests. The agency invites the public, state and local government officials and their representatives, other federal agencies, and any affected Indian tribes to participate in the forest plan revision process which will proceed over the next 24 to 36 months before a final revised Forest Plan is issued.

The current Forest Plan for the National Forests in Mississippi requires revision to incorporate agency established ecosystem management principles. The Forest Service will identify ecological units through the Landtype Association (LTA) level, according to the Forest Service National Hierarchical Framework of Ecological Units. Management direction in the revised Forest Plan would work toward maintaining the long-term ecological structure and function of affected ecosystems.

The current Forest Plan contains limited descriptions of the desired conditions (DC's). The current plan's DC's will be updated to accurately reflect evolving agency and public expectations regarding resource uses, products, values or services occurring on or generated from national forest administered lands. One of the more critical tasks to be accomplished during the forest plan revision process will be development of updated DC's. *Desired Conditions* (DC's) are descriptive statements expressing a collective vision of landscape conditions and the uses, products, values, and services that will be provided by these conditions. The desired condition and the associated outcomes will serve as central reference points for planning and management of national forest lands. DC's will be developed in response to the significant issues identified during scoping. Extensive public participation will be sought as the forest identifies and develops these DC's. Each DC will utilize established ecological units as a criteria for defining their location and capabilities. Each DC will emphasize the resource or condition which the issue addresses. Plan revision