

Public Interest Comment
on the Forest Service's Proposed
National Forest System Land and Resource Management
Planning Rules¹

The Regulatory Studies Program (RSP) of the Mercatus Center at George Mason University is dedicated to advancing knowledge of regulations and their impacts on society. As part of its mission, RSP produces careful and independent analyses of agency rule making proposals from the perspective of the public interest. Thus, the program's comments on the Forest Service's proposed rules for national forest planning do not represent the views of any particular affected party or special interest group, but are designed to represent the interests of American citizens.

I. Background

In 1974, Congress passed the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (known as RPA), which directed the Forest Service to prepare a national plan for national forests every five years. In 1976, the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) amended RPA by also requiring the Forest Service to prepare individual plans for every national forest every ten to fifteen years.

With the help of a committee of scientists appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture, planning rules for the NFMA forest plans were issued in 1979 and revised in 1982. The subsequent forest planning process continued through the 1980s, and by 1990 most of the plans were finished. In the early 1990s, many forests began the process of revising their forest plans.

In October 1999, the Forest Service published a new set of planning rules to help direct such revisions. These rules were written partly in response to a March 1999, report by a new committee of scientists appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture.

This comment examines the proposed revised forest planning rules; highlights why the proposed rules will not fix the problems with the planning process; and offers alternatives to the proposed rules that the Forest Service should consider. Appendix I presents the RSP Checklist, which evaluates the proposal against seven key elements necessary for sound policy decisions. Appendix II presents a review of the history of Forest Service planning and offers a careful critique of why planning efforts of the past have failed.

II. NFMA Planning is Flawed

When Congress passed the National Forest Management Act, the chief of the Forest Service described it as an "experiment."² The experiment turned out to be far more

¹ Prepared by Randal O'Toole, senior economist, the Thoreau Institute.

² John McGuire, "NFMA and Forest Planning," *Forest History* magazine, 26:84-91 (1982).

expensive than anyone expected, but it clearly proved that forest planning does not work. Appendix II to this comment offers a detailed review of the Forest Service's experience with planning. As explained there, forest planning failed because of:

- The reliance on central planning and targets;
- The failure to update forest inventories;
- The emphasis on process over substance;
- The tremendous expense of coordinating data and planning for a vast array of resources on a huge land base;
- The amount of time required to write a plan, which resulted in recent events and information rendering plans obsolete before they were done;
- The incentives for interest groups and Forest Service officials to promote polarization instead of cooperation.

A few of these problems, such as the reliance on targets and the failure to collect recent inventory data, may be specific to the process used in the 1980s. But most of these problems are generic to any large-scale planning process.

- Public involvement in a central planning process inevitably promotes polarization.
- History moves faster than planners can work.
- Planning a one-million acre national forest simply demands more information than any person, even with the help of computers, can possibly comprehend.
- A focus on any planning *process* will lead people to devalue *substance*.

III. The Proposed Planning Process Is Confusing, Open-Ended, and Vague.

The draft revised forest planning rules completely rewrite the old rules, which were written in 1979 and slightly revised in 1982. While the old planning process was flawed in many respects, the new rules fail to correct many of those flaws. While the new rules make no mention of targets, which hindered the planning process of the 1980s and 1990s, they do not and cannot resolve the other failings of forest planning. This section will examine the effects of each of the major changes in the rules.

A. New Planning Goals

The first and arguably most important change in the planning rules is in the first section. The old rules stated that the purpose of planning was to insure that national forests are managed “in a way that maximizes long term net public benefits in an environmentally sound manner” (§219.1).

The new rules state that the primary goal of planning is “ecological sustainability” (§219.2(a)(1)), while the secondary goal is “economic and social sustainability”

(§219.2(b)(1)). Not counting titles and subheads, the proposed rules, which are about 17,000 words long, use the word *sustainability* more than fifty times.

The objective of the existing rules, *net public benefits*, has the virtue of being at least partially quantifiable. The net benefits of producing commodities such as timber are completely quantifiable, while the benefits and costs of managing non-market resources such as water quality or endangered species are less quantifiable. Nevertheless, a plan that both reduced the net benefits of commodity production and increased environmental costs would have clearly violated the net public benefits goal.

Sustainability is much more difficult to define, as the rules themselves admit: “sustainability is broadly aspirational and can be difficult to define in concrete terms” (§219.1(b)(2)). The official definition in the rules is “The maintenance or restoration of ecological system composition, structure, and function which are characteristic of a plan area over time and space, including but not limited to ecological processes, biological diversity, and the productive capacity of ecological systems” (§219.36).

In proposing that ecological sustainability should be the primary goal of forest planning, the committee of scientists admitted that “it is impossible to define sustainability in a generic fashion that applies across the board to all natural systems.” But, they hastened to add, that is not how they meant it. Instead, they viewed sustainability “as applying in varying and particular ways to real places, to actual communities, economies, forests, watersheds, and rangelands. Different areas will have different ecological, economic, and social touchstones and different attributes to sustain.” In other words, it means something different in each different place.

The committee goes on to say that “the application of sustainability to a specific place will change with time.” So not only does it mean something different in each forest, it means something different each year. The committee concludes by claiming that, “Seen in this light, sustainability [which will vary according to the place and time] becomes tangible, definable, and measurable.”³ So sustainability is tangible and measurable precisely because its definition differs from place to place and time to time.

In announcing the proposed rules, Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman claimed that they represent “a fundamental change in philosophy” and “a dramatic departure from the way we have managed national forests in the past.”⁴ But sustainability has always been the goal of the Forest Service—except that it used the term “sustained yield.”

Environmentalists have claimed that sustainability is a superior criterion because sustained yield focused on timber. But the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960, which was largely written by the Forest Service, defined *sustained yield* as “the achievement and maintenance in perpetuity of a high-level annual or regular periodic

³ Committee of Scientists, *Sustaining the People's Lands: Recommendations for Stewardship of the National Forests and Grasslands into the Next Century* (Washington, DC: Forest Service, 1999), <http://www.fs.fed.us/forum/nepa/rule/cosreport.shtml>.

⁴ Forest Service, “Glickman Proposes New Rules for Managing the National Forests,” press release no. 0399.99, <http://www.fs.fed.us>.

output of the various renewable resources of the national forests.” All renewable resources, not just timber, are embraced by this definition.

At best, then, the “fundamental” and “dramatic” change in planning goals is a mere semantic shift from “sustained yield” to “sustainability.” More important, however, it represents a shift from the partly quantifiable “net public benefits” to the vague and unquantifiable “sustainability.”

B. The Continuous Planning Process

The second major change in the rules is a complete revision of the planning process. The 1979/1982 rules prescribed a well-defined, ten-step planning process. The ten steps were:

1. Identify issues and concerns
2. Develop planning criteria
3. Collect data
4. Analyze the management situation
5. Formulate alternatives
6. Estimate the effects of alternatives
7. Evaluate alternatives
8. Submit the draft forest plan to the public for comment
9. Write the final forest plan with a record of decision
10. Implement and monitor the plan

By comparison, the process in the revised rules is poorly defined, even confused. Even the number of steps varies depending on which part of the rules is read. Section 219.3(c) defines the “key elements” of the planning process as:

1. Broad-scale assessments and cooperatively developed landscape goals;
2. Topics of general interest or concern;
3. Information development and interpretation;
4. Proposed actions;
5. Plan decisions that guide future actions;
6. Amendment;
7. Revision;
8. Site-specific decisions; and
9. Monitoring and evaluation.

Sections 219.4 through 219.12 describe these steps in a different order from the above list and add one more step. Topics are discussed first. Then comes information development, which is broken into broad-scale assessments (element 1 above) and local analyses (not

listed above). This is followed by elements 4 through 9, and last comes landscape goals (element 1 above).

This makes it difficult to determine the order in which planners are expected to carry out each step. The preamble suggests that neither listing is in the proper order but that the real order is:

1. Topics of general interest or concern
2. Broad-scale assessments
3. Cooperatively developed landscape goals
4. Proposed actions
5. Plan decisions that guide future actions
6. Local analyses
7. Site-specific decisions
8. Monitoring and evaluation
9. Amendments and revisions take place as needed after step 5

In other words, the rules really describe two different planning processes, one at a broad scale and one local. The committee of scientists proposed three different levels: ecosystem (which might include many national forests), watershed (a portion of a forest), and local. The “broad-scale assessments” (which may “sometimes cross Forest Service regional administrative boundaries” (§219.5(a)(1)) may be the planning rules’ answer to ecosystem planning.

Even the above order is somewhat uncertain, as the rules state that “Local analyses may tier to, and may often provide information to update, a broad-scale assessment” (219.5(b)). It appears that many of the steps are to take place continuously and simultaneously. Steps 6, 7, and 8 (local analyses, site-specific decisions, and monitoring) are taking place all the time and information from these goes into the broad-scale assessments. The plan decisions that result from the assessments lead to changes in the local analyses and site-specific decisions.

Also continuous is the *topics* step, which is similar to the old scoping process except that new topics can be raised at any time. If the Forest Service determines that a topic is “appropriate for further consideration,” then plans in progress must address that topic no matter what the delay while completed plans must be amended to deal with the topic.

The Forest Service’s introduction to its proposed rules says that “The Committee of Scientists heard that many people are tired of the demands placed on the public and the agency by the current planning process. Many report that detailed analyses and seemingly endless meetings have resulted in planning documents deemed obsolete before their completion.” The new rules are supposed to fix this, but in fact they make the demands on the public’s and Forest Service’s time more endless than ever.

C. The De-emphasis on Analysis

One place where the process is apparently simplified is the deletion of the analytical steps that were in the 1979/1982 rules. At the forest planning level, the proposed rules contain no hint of analyses, alternatives, or estimating the effects of alternatives. These steps are still required by the National Environmental Policy Act, but the proposed rules contain no guidance on how they are to be carried out.

One advantage is that this means that the new rules describe less of a one-size-fits-all planning process. However, this could also greatly reduce the public's ability to evaluate decisions made by the Forest Service.

All decisions are based on an explicit or implicit model of how the decision maker thinks the world works. The old process required that this model be made largely explicit in the FORPLAN computer program and other quantitative analyses. The public could review FORPLAN runs, including the runs for the preferred and other alternatives, to see if the proposed plan truly met the goals stated for the plan and in particular the quantitative portions of the goal of maximizing net public benefits.

As the author of FORPLAN, Norman Johnson, says, FORPLAN was designed "to prevent professional groups within the Forest Service, especially foresters, from imposing their objectives for management of the forest on the rest of humanity."⁵ It was to do this by basing decisions on quantitative analysis instead of subjective judgments.

By substituting *sustainability* for *net public benefits*, the new process greatly reduces the quantitative nature of the process and the ability of the public to understand the decision maker's model. While forests may still use computer models, it appears to be optional. Forest managers could decide to do anything they want and call it "sustainable" and the public would have little ability to object.

The proposed rules do discuss *local analyses*, which will take place beneath the level of the forest plan. But even these analyses are not described in detail. The entire discussion of local analyses, including a 110-word definition, takes less than 300 of the 17,700-words of rules.

In sum, the proposed process is confusing, open-ended, and vague. On one hand, planning will demand more energy and time than ever before. On the other hand, final planning decisions will be less accountable and less transparent to the public than ever.

⁵ K. Norman Johnson, "The Analyst's Mystique: Evolution of a Forest Planning Model," *Forest Watch*, May, 1987, pp. 9-14.

D. Collaborative Public Involvement

The press release announcing the revised rules stated that they will “involve the public earlier in defining the issues and goals of individual national forests.”⁶ In fact, it is difficult to see how the new rules improve the public involvement process.

The 1979/1982 rules encouraged public participation “throughout the planning process” (§219.6(a)) and specifically directed forest planners to seek public input in steps 1 (identify issues and concerns), 8 (draft forest plan), and 9 (final forest plan). In actual practice, many forest planners—pressured by deadlines—discouraged public involvement in any of the other steps. (Once, for example, this writer was asked to leave a forest planning office “and not come back until the draft is done,” which turned out to be five years later.⁷)

Similarly, the proposed rules state that “The participation of citizens should be encouraged from the beginning and be maintained throughout the planning process” (§219.1(d)(2)). But the rules do not require the Forest Service to seek public involvement in *any* step of the process other than to say that step 4, “proposed actions,” must be done in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, which requires public involvement.

Topics, for example, are to be identified based on (among other things) “discussions among people, organizations, or governments interested in or affected by National Forest System management” (§219.4(a)). But the rules do not require the Forest Service to initiate such discussions or provide a process for the public to propose new topics.

The landscape goals are to be “cooperatively developed” by a collaborative group. Forest officials are directed to “initiate or seek to join on-going collaborative efforts to develop or propose landscape goals” (§219.12(b)). But collaborative groups are not generally representative of the general public:

- Collaborative groups must generally limit their numbers for manageability;
- They sometimes specifically exclude people with extreme views who are unlikely to work successfully with other members of the group;
- People who do not live near the forest are not likely to have the time or funds to attend collaborative group meetings;
- Collaborative groups are generally dominated by representatives of interest groups seeking favors from the government, while the taxpayers who have to pay for those favors are absent.

While collaborative groups are an interesting new twist in the planning process, they do not solve the problem of polarization. The mere mention of collaborative groups in the rules does not change the incentives for polarization at all. Collaborative groups can only

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Randal O’Toole, “A Personal View,” *Forest Planning*, July, 1983, pp. 19–20.

work if all major interest groups, including at the very least forest users, environmental interests, and Forest Service officials, are willing to come to the table. While nothing in the old planning rules forbade collaborative planning, planners for only one or two forests were able to get representatives of all of these groups to cooperate. Even then, this did not insure that the interests of average citizens and taxpayers were represented.

One thing that might give interest groups an incentive to come to the table would be if the collaborative groups were given genuine decision making authority over the plan. But the proposed planning rules specifies only that a collaborative group may help develop “landscape goals,” a term that is not even defined in the rules. Beyond this, the Forest Service decision maker “has full discretion to determine how and to what extent to use the collaborative processes,” which in practice could easily mean that collaborative groups will never be heard from again after development of the landscape goals.

Even if a forest manager successfully put together a collaborative group and let the group make important decisions throughout the planning process, there is no guarantee that this would reduce polarization. People who do not participate in the group are likely to claim that the group does not fairly represent the general public and that its decisions are tainted. If outsiders cannot tell if this is true or not, the process will lack credibility.

E. The Emphasis on Science

According to the Forest Service press release, a major change in the planning rules is that the proposed process will “improve the use of science in planning and project decisions.”⁸ “Planning must be based on science and other knowledge,” says §219.2(a)(2)(ii), “including the use of scientifically based strategies for sustainability.” Unlike sustainability, *science* is a well-defined term. The proposed rules rely heavily on this term, yet it appears that the Forest Service does not understand what it means.

The rules insist that scientists must play an important role in planning. “Each broad-scale assessment must be lead (sic) by a Chief Scientist” (section 219.22(a)). “The responsible official must include scientists in the design and evaluation of monitoring” (section 219.22(c)). Each region of the Forest Service “must establish a science advisory board to be available to monitor the implementation of plan decisions” (section 219.25(a)).

Scientists are given a greater role than ordinary members of the public. “Scientists may participate in planning by assisting the responsible official in understanding and applying relevant scientific information” (section 219.23(a)).

These rules fundamentally misunderstand what science is. Science is a process, not a set of data or information. Science is a method of finding the truth, not a method of making decisions. Most scientists do not even know how to make decisions, at least not in the socio-political context of the Forest Service.

⁸ Ibid.

Certainly, scientists have information they can contribute to forest planning, but some of their information is not necessarily more valid than other people's information. Realistically, some scientists have their own special interests and seek funding for their projects and preferential treatment for the resources they study. For example, the President's Northwest Forest Plan was largely written by scientists and ended up significantly increasing both the budgets and land dedicated to scientific research.

IV. The Draft Planning Rules Do Not Fix the Problems.

In addition to problems with the proposed planning rules described above, the proposed rules do not solve deficiencies in the current regime. As Appendix II of this comment argues, forest planning in the 1980s failed because:

1. It centered around RPA targets;
2. It failed to insure updated forest inventories;
3. It emphasized process over substance;
4. No one could comprehend all of the data needed to plan an entire forest;
5. Forest needs changed and new information was gathered faster than planners could incorporate the information into the plans;
6. Interest groups and Forest Service officials all had incentives to promote polarization instead of cooperation.

The proposed rules eliminate the first problem by removing all mention of targets or the RPA plan. The second problem depends on budgets and the competing demands for funds. None of the other problems have been solved, or can be solved, by the draft rules.

Like the 1979/1982 rules, the proposed rules emphasize process over substance. The complicated and confusing framework of "key elements," the demand that planners consider a wide array of topics and involve a broad range of public interests, the new emphasis on collaborative groups, and the specific requirements that scientists participate in various planning steps all place the emphasis on process. The change in goals from the partly quantifiable "net public benefits" to the more subjective "sustainability" de-emphasizes substance.

The proposed rules may actually make the problem of data demands worse. The years of analyses required for the Upper Columbia Basin and Sierra Nevada ecosystem assessments, which the committee of scientists considered models of the planning process they envisioned, show that the data needed for such assessments are far greater than anyone can comprehend.

Events continue to transpire faster than planners can keep up. For example, the president's recent roadless area policy—the exact effects of which will not be known for a year—will completely change the land base and management problems on most national forests. Until the final policy is decided, planners will not be able to prepare or

analyze alternatives. Once the policy is decided it will remain subject to change by the next administration.

The collaborative process, which is supposed to reduce polarization, will probably fail to do so. The Quincy Library Group—the prototypical collaborative group—led to huge polarization. While the environmental and industry leaders who participated reached an accord, people who did not participate—some environmental groups and—significantly—the Forest Service itself—refused to cooperate. The incentives that led Plumas Forest officials to refuse cooperation won't be changed by new and highly discretionary rules.

These problems—the emphasis on process, the complexity of planning, the speed of change, and the tendency to polarize—cannot be fixed by revising the planning process. Something entirely different will be needed.

V. The Forest Service Must Explore Alternatives to Planning.

Planning was the Forest Service's response to national forest controversies over clearcutting, herbicide spraying, roading of roadless areas, and similar issues. But these controversies were not a result of poor planning, which is why dean of the College of Forestry at Northern Arizona University, Richard Behan said back in 1981 that “the solution bears no relationship to the problem.”⁹ Instead, they were caused by a budgetary process that encouraged forest managers to emphasize timber over other resources even when timber lost money and other resources were far more valuable.

This process has been well documented.¹⁰

- Forests emphasized timber because timber was the only renewable resource for which Congress allowed the Forest Service to charge fair market value and keep an unlimited share of receipts.
- Clearcutting was emphasized as a harvest method because it allowed the agency to spend its limited timber sale preparation budgets most effectively and keep the largest share of timber receipts for reforestation.
- Because forest managers could keep an unlimited share of receipts for reforestation they indiscriminately and sometimes repeatedly used herbicides as a part of the reforestation process.
- The budgetary process also encouraged forest managers to build expensive, high-impact permanent roads when low-cost, low-impact temporary roads would do.

Planning does nothing to correct these perverse incentives. Rather than revise the planning rules, the Forest Service should search for institutional arrangements that can change these incentives.

⁹ Richard Behan, “RPA/NFMA: Time to Punt,” *Journal of Forestry*, December 1981, pp. 802-805

¹⁰ Randal O'Toole, *Reforming the Forest Service* (Covelo, CA: Island Press, 1988), 250 pp.

Here are a few alternatives that can be considered, alone or in various combinations:

- Charging user fees at fair market value for all marketable resources instead of just timber. This will give managers information about which resources are most highly valued by the public.
- Funding national forests out of a fixed share of user fees rather than tax dollars. This will discourage managers from losing money on unnecessary projects and ensure that managers are not rewarded for emphasizing some resources and not others.
- Managing national forests as trusts, similar to the state trust lands, with the dual legal responsibility of producing revenues for certain beneficiaries and preserving the corpus of the trust.
- Dedicating some national forest revenues to a special fund to be used to give managers incentives to protect non-market values.
- Making forest supervisors or regional foresters responsible to a board of directors, selected by appointment, by election from members of a “friends of the forest” group, or *en bloc* as a collaborative group.

These and other ideas were considered by the Forest Options Group, a consensus group consisting of more than twenty interest group leaders, Forest Service officials, and policy analysts. The group concluded that Forest Service governance and budgeting processes needed reform and it proposed that alternative reforms be tested on various national forests.¹¹

Some, though by no means all, of the Forest Option Group’s proposals revolved around a greater use of market mechanisms for managing national forests. Markets can solve many of the problems with planning.

- Market processes are practically transparent to their users, meaning that they emphasize substance over process.
- While plans are invariably obsolete before they are done, markets respond rapidly to changing conditions;
- While planning promotes polarization, markets promote cooperation among both producers and consumers;
- While planning demands impossibly huge amounts of information, markets rely on prices for much of their information needs and information is provided as it is needed;
- Markets focus managers’ attention on site-specific capabilities and needs, not top-down priorities and demands.

The conventional response is that markets cannot work on national forests because so many national forest products are non-market resources. In fact, most are not marketed

¹¹ Forest Options Group, *Second Century: Options for the Forest Service* (Bandon, OR: Thoreau Institute, 1998), <http://www.ti.org/2c.html>.

only because of obstacles placed by Congress preventing the use of markets. Only a few forest resources are truly non-marketable, and these can be protected through extra-market incentives such as a biodiversity or stewardship trust fund.

Of the multiple-use resources, timber, recreation, domestic forage, and many forms of fish and wildlife can rely on market processes. Nonrenewable resources such as minerals and oil and gas are amenable to market mechanisms. Water is also marketable, although controlled by state laws rather than federal. So-called intangibles such as scenery are also marketable within the context of recreation fees. The main non-marketable resource is certain forms of wildlife.

Biodiversity, ecosystem health, forest health, and similar concepts are more difficult to market. Their very definitions are endlessly debated even among their adherents. In truth, they are merely effects of the good or bad incentives given to forest managers.

Markets do not require privatization, that is, turning the national forests over to private owners. Markets do require that national forest managers act like owners. This means that, rather than give resources away and get funding from tax dollars, they must bear the costs and enjoy some of the benefits of forest management.

Forest users, meanwhile, must be allowed to purchase, trade, use, and not use forest products with a minimum of red tape and transaction costs. Use-it-or-lose-it requirements must be eliminated so that people can buy, for example, grazing or timber cutting rights and not exercise those rights if they so choose.

In sum, markets can help solve the problems that led to planning as well as the problem that planning created. While markets are not perfect, their imperfections will lead to far fewer problems than a planning process that spends more than one billion dollars yet produces no tangible results. The Forest Service needs to consider alternatives to planning and prominent among these alternatives should be an increased reliance on markets and incentive-based mechanisms.

VI. Conclusions

Central planning is not the way to solve complex resource allocation problems. While the proposed planning rules remove the most obvious flaw from the existing planning process—the RPA targets—they retain other more subtle, yet just as fatal, flaws inherent to all central planning.

National forest managers planned before Congress passed RPA and NFMA, and they will continue to plan after Congress repeals them. But the plans written before 1970 dealt with either a single resource or with relatively small areas of land. Such plans responded to local problems and not to one-size-fits-all national direction.

In contrast, the centralized planning process used in the 1980s cost well over a billion dollars, wasted much time and resources, and brought many national forests close to gridlock. Most of the very real changes in the Forest Service in the past decade happened

in spite of, not because of, planning. Often those changes came not from lawsuits but from forest managers discovering that the targets in their plans could not be accomplished.

Centralized planning cannot work because no one can collect or integrate the huge amount of data needed to understand a forest or alternative ways of managing that forest. Planners have no special insights into the future, and most of the predictions that they build in their computer models turn out to be wrong. Most importantly, planning gives interest groups incentives to polarize the public, not to cooperate with the Forest Service and each other.

The proposed forest planning rules fail to solve the problems that originally led to planning, such as the incentives to emphasize timber over other resources. Nor, except for the elimination of the RPA targets, do the rules solve the problems that planning created, such as polarization, the drain on Forest Service resources, and the fact that plans are obsolete before they are done.

Appendix I
RSP Checklist
Forest Service Planning Rule

Element	Agency Approach	RSP Comments
1. Has the agency identified a significant market failure?	<p>National forests were created because people believed private forest management would lead to a timber famine. No one believes this anymore. Instead, the current justification for national forests is that many non-market resources would not be protected by private owners, though this is only implicit in the planning proposal.</p> <p>Unsatisfactory</p>	<p>The agency has not explicitly identified a market failure that justifies a central planning process. Moreover, the planning process fails to do anything about the perverse incentives currently built in to the legal and financial structure of the Forest Service.</p>
2. Has the agency identified an appropriate federal role?	<p>Given federal ownership of forest lands—which the Forest Service would never question—some federal agency needs to manage them.</p> <p>Fair</p>	<p>The assumption inherent in the planning rules is that such management requires a central planning process, even though such centralized forest planning failed miserably during the 1980s.</p>
3. Has the agency examined alternative approaches?	<p>The process of revising the forest planning rules began when the Secretary of Agriculture appointed a committee of scientists to review the rules, and suggest alternatives.</p> <p>Unsatisfactory</p>	<p>The committee was told to improve the planning process, not find an alternative to it. At no time has anyone within the Department of Agriculture or Forest Service publicly considered an alternative to centralized planning.</p>

Element	Agency Approach	RSP Comments
4. Does the agency attempt to maximize net benefits?	The previous planning rules specifically state that the goal of national forest management is to "maximize net public benefits." The revised rules replace this goal with "ecosystem sustainability." Unsatisfactory	Little attempt is made to justify planning or management based on net benefits. The Forest Service should return to its old goal of maximizing net benefits and judge plans and outcomes on that criteria, rather than on quantities of outputs or vague terms such as "sustainability."
5. Does the proposal have a strong scientific or technical basis?	Several sections of the proposed rules ostensibly aim to improve the science behind centralized forest planning. At the same time, the rules are thoroughly infused with such undefinable and scientifically indefensible terms as "sustainability" (used more than fifty times in the rules). Unsatisfactory	The proposed rules treats "science" as a decision-making process, and emphasize process over substance. They would eliminate the analysis required by existing planning regulations, and substitute instead, a requirement that a scientist be involved in the process. This would mean that the basis for decisions will be less transparent to the public.
6. Are distributional effects clearly understood?	No attempt is made to consider the distributional effects of forest planning. Unsatisfactory	Forest planning in the 1980s cost taxpayers well over one billion dollars and cost private citizens who wanted to participate in planning much more. Yet, in the end, the Forest Service maintained, and the Supreme Court agreed, that forest plans made no decisions. The proposed rules do nothing to change this.
7. Are individual choices and property impacts understood?	The proposed rules inherently assume that national forests, and the taxpayer dollars which fund them, are a commons and that the job of the Forest Service is to allocate that commons among competing interest groups. Unsatisfactory	Congress and the Forest Service have placed several roadblocks to forest users who would treat resources as property. For example, purchasers of many forest resources are not allowed to resell those resources to others or to leave them unused. No attempt is made to use the price system, property rights, or markets to resolve forest controversies.

Appendix II

History of NFMA Planning¹

In 1974, Congress passed the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (known as RPA), which directed the Forest Service to prepare a national plan for national forests every five years. In 1976, the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) amended RPA by also requiring the Forest Service to prepare individual plans for every national forest every ten to fifteen years.

In 1981, when NFMA planning was just getting started, the dean of the College of Forestry at Northern Arizona University, Richard Behan, wrote in the *Journal of Forestry* that “the Resources Planning Act, as amended by the National Forest Management Act, should be repealed.”² Forest planning, he said, would achieve “very, very little” yet demand “enormous costs in money, manpower, political energy, and activity.”

Dr. Behan had long experience with national forest planning. In 1970, when he was an associate professor of forestry at the University of Montana, he was a chief author of the “Bolle Report” (named after the dean of the University of Montana School of Forestry, Arnold Bolle), which criticized the Forest Service for its clearcutting policies on the Bitterroot National Forest.³ This led the Forest Service to undertake a land-use planning process with extensive public involvement during the 1970s. In effect, NFMA merely ratified a process that the Forest Service already had in place, and by 1981 Dr. Behan and others had a decade of experience with that process.

In his *Journal of Forestry* article, Dr. Behan predicted that planning would make “documentation, consistency, and correct procedure . . . far more important than a land manager’s solid, professional, experienced judgment.” He added that planning “has the capability of paralyzing or displacing completely the management and production responsibilities of the agency” and that it would cause a “real, acute, and growing” morale problem within the Forest Service.

Dr. Behan’s predictions proved remarkably accurate. Forest planning ended up taking far more time and consumed far more dollars and resources than anyone else expected. Yet the focus on process and the centralized nature of the approach meant that important site-specific information was often not incorporated. As a result, when forest managers were asked to implement the plans, they found that their targets for timber and other outputs were often unachievable.

These results are not surprising in light of what we know today—and should have known in 1976—about the failure of central planning in general. For the reasons outlined below, forest planning failed not because of specific problems with the 1979/1982 forest

¹ Randal O’Toole, senior economist, the Thoreau Institute

² Richard Behan, “RPA/NFMA: Time to Punt,” *Journal of Forestry*, December 1981, pp. 802-805.

³ Arnold Bolle, et al., “A Select Committee of the University of Montana Presents Its Report on the Bitterroot National Forest,” University of Montana, November 18, 1970.

planning rules but because central planning does not work. As Dr. Behan said, “The solution bears no resemblance to the problem.”

I. The High Cost of Forest Planning

When Congress passed the National Forest Management Act, the Forest Service estimated that it could write plans for all 123 national forest units within five years.

- In 1980, soon after the forest planning rules had been published, the agency was confidently predicting that all plans would be completed by September, 1984.⁴
- The schedules were interrupted in January, 1983, when new information led at least twenty-seven forests to scrap everything they had done and start over.⁵ Of the remainder, only three would be published in final form in 1983, but two of them were successfully appealed and sent back to the forests for revision.
- By mid-1986, less than a quarter of the plans were published in final form, and those that had been published had been appealed. The remaining forests predicted they would be done in 1987.⁶
- As of April, 1989, thirty-nine plans were still incomplete. Of the remainder, all but two had been appealed.⁷
- By 1991, fifteen years after the law was passed, at least one plan still had not been published in final form and many other plans were being rewritten as a result of successful appeals or court challenges by environmentalists, timber industry, ranchers, and other interest groups.

The dollar cost was also far greater than original estimates of about \$1 million per plan. Some forest planners told this writer that they spent \$1 million on computer time alone. Most forests dedicated huge planning staffs to the project and many spent well over a decade writing their plans. By 1983, the Grace Commission report on streamlining government estimated that the Forest Service was spending \$200 million *per year* on planning. In 1989, Richard Behan estimated that the total cost up to that year was somewhere between \$2 and \$4 billion, or around twenty times the initial estimates.⁸

Dollars and years are only two measures of the excessive costs of forest planning. For well over a decade, the Forest Service dedicated well over one thousand of its most intelligent staff members to a process that ultimately proved futile. The staff was demoralized, and many alleged that the credibility of the agency was impaired.

⁴ Anonymous, “Current Plans,” *Forest Planning* magazine, April, 1980, p. 20.

⁵ Randal O’Toole, “Forest Planning in Crisis,” *Forest Planning*, June, 1983, pp. 16–19.

⁶ *Forest Watch* staff, “Region-by-Region Overview of Forest Planning,” *Forest Watch*, May, 1986, pp. 20–29.

⁷ Anae Boulton, “Major Milestones (and Delays) in NFMA Planning,” *Forest Watch*, July, 1989, p. 5.

⁸ Richard Behan, “RPA/NFMA: Time to Dribble (It’s Too Late to Punt),” *Forest Watch*, July 1989, pp. 6–8. Also see “Correction: The Real Cost of Planning,” *Forest Watch*, October, 1989, p. 5.

As early as 1982, one forest supervisor retired from the agency complaining that planning was leading to “from-the-top-down political management.”⁹ In 1983, a survey of 5,000 Forest Service employees in Oregon and Washington found that nearly two-thirds believed that the agency was “worse today than in the past” and that most of those believed the problem was “organizational dysfunction.”¹⁰

The Forest Service also lost something very precious during the planning process: its credibility. In 1952, *Newsweek* magazine called the agency “one of Uncle Sam’s soundest and most businesslike investments.” The magazine added that “most congressmen would as soon abuse their own mothers as be unkind to the Forest Service.”¹¹ The magazine stated that the agency’s decentralized structure and its employee’s sense of “responsibility and loyalty to the organization” were key reasons for its success.

Although the 1970s witnessed increasingly intense controversies over wilderness, herbicides, and other national forest issues, as late as 1981 the Forest Service still retained enough credibility to be rated an “excellent organization” by Pennsylvania State University and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management.¹² Like *Newsweek*, the reviewers considered decentralization and a strong sense of mission to be key features of an excellent organization. The agency maintained its independence from whatever administration was in office and was the only federal agency whose chief was appointed from within and not routinely replaced by incoming presidents.

But by the early 1990s the Forest Service was all but demolished as an agency. Its loss of credibility could be seen in several ways. First, Congress was disgusted enough with the Forest Service and forest planning that for three years, from 1995 to 1998, it refused to appropriate any funds to forest planning. Although it relented in 1999, this action should give the Forest Service cause to search for alternatives to planning.

Second, the agency had always had strong defenders in Congress, which was a major reason why no incoming president had ever replaced a chief of the Forest Service; instead, all of its top officials were career employees. In 1987, the Forest Service proposed to create a new deputy chief position (one of six) in charge of planning. Rumors indicated that the job was being created for a Reagan-administration appointee. Members of Congress, including Senator Patrick Leahy and Representative Bruce Vento, strongly objected and the proposed position was dropped.¹³

In 1993, however, President Clinton fired the chief of the Forest Service and replaced him with a Forest Service employee whose seniority and experience were well below the

⁹ Ed Marston, “The Forest Service Is Changed, Weakened, and Scared,” *Forest Planning* March, 1983, pp. 12–15.

¹⁰ Randal O’Toole, “Forest Service Morale Low,” *Forest Planning* October, 1984, p. 6.

¹¹ *Newsweek*, 1952, “Fabulous Bear, Famous Service, Fight Annual Billion Dollar Fire,” 2 June 1952, pp. 50–54.

¹² Ken Gold and Dave Seifert, *Ten Successful Organizations: How They Do It* (Washington, DC: Office of Personnel Management, 1981).

¹³ Anonymous, “Proposed deputy chief put on hold,” *Forest Watch*, June, 1987, p. 3.

levels of previous chiefs. No one in Congress objected; in fact, no one outside of some Forest Service employees and retirees objected. In 1997 the administration replaced the chief again, this time with someone who was not even a Forest Service employee. Again, no one objected.

Third, in 1998, Roger Sedjo, a senior fellow at Resources for the Future and member of the committee of scientists commissioned by the secretary of agriculture to review forest planning, wrote that his “experience [on the committee] suggests that little good will currently exist” towards the Forest Service. The local people who had participated in forest planning “felt the most betrayed by the Forest Service and by the process.”¹⁴ Once “an elite agency” held in “high esteem,” Sedjo found that today, “It seems that nobody is happy with the Forest Service.”¹⁵ He therefore asked, “Does the Forest Service have a future?”

Later that same year, Gifford Pinchot III, the grandson of the Forest Service’s founder, worried that “traditional constituencies have abandoned or softened their support for the Forest Service” and he expected that “Congress will treat it with increasing cruelty. This means budget cuts, increasing micro-management, more incompatible demands and sooner or later extinction.”¹⁶ The Forest Service even held a conference on how to save itself from extinction in Big Bear, California, in November, 1998.¹⁷

These changes in the agency’s stature and credibility were largely the result of forest planning. “It was the battles among [competing groups], particularly the environmentalists and timber interests, that forced Congress to pass the NFMA to try to restore order and balance,” wrote Sedjo. “However, this was not to be.” The law instead led “to increasing rancor over the management of the National Forest System.”¹⁸

II. Planning’s Failure to Be Comprehensive

Both RPA and NFMA were initially introduced into Congress by Senator Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey hoped that planning would “resolve the conflicts over clearcutting, wilderness versus timber, and whether resource management in general was on a solid environmental footing,” says Robert Wolf, who was on Senator Humphrey’s staff and who drafted the early versions of both laws. Wolf adds that “the senator believed that, given the means and the forum, differences over environmental questions could be resolved, and use could be balanced with protection.”¹⁹

Three great controversial issues led Congress to pass NFMA: clearcutting, herbicides, and wilderness. The three were intimately related: herbicide spraying was needed mainly

¹⁴ Roger Sedjo, *Forest Service Vision: Or, Does the Forest Service Have a Future?* (Washington, DC: Resources for the Future, 1998), p. 5, http://www.rff.org/disc_papers/PDF_files/9903.pdf.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Gifford Pinchot, letter to participants in Forest Service 2020 Symposium, 5 October 1998.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Roger Sedjo, *Forest Service Vision*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Robert Wolf, “The Corruption of the Resources Planning Act,” *Forest Watch*, April 1989, pp. 17–20.

in clearcuts. The aesthetic damage caused by clearcuts also led people who might not object to other forms of cutting to become wilderness advocates. Humphrey hoped that comprehensive planning could resolve these issues, perhaps by identifying cutting methods that were not so aesthetically offensive and that did not require so much herbicide spraying.

Unfortunately, these issues were not treated comprehensively but separately. For example, the Forest Service did not evaluate whether alternative cutting practices, such as shelterwood cutting, could be done with fewer or no herbicides. Instead, it evaluated herbicides in a separate series of environmental impact statements written only after the clearcuts that demanded herbicides were already in place. This meant that the forest plans did not consider all of the benefits of using alternatives to clearcutting.

The Forest Service also turned wilderness and the appropriate use of roadless areas into a separate process by doing a national Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE). Since the agency had already conducted one such evaluation, the one done in the late 1970s was known as RARE II. RARE I had been ruled inadequate by a court decision, which directed that roadless areas be considered in individual forest plans. RARE II would meet the same fate. Yet few forest plans considered the merits of managing roadless areas for wilderness, which naturally enraged wilderness advocates.

This pattern of diverting controversial issues into a separate planning process would be repeated as planning continued. For example, when the spotted owl became an issue, the Forest Service chose not to deal with the issue in forest plans but to prepare a separate environmental impact statement for old-growth management on the twenty or so spotted owl forests. Similarly, when bark beetle epidemics swept many forests in the Rocky Mountains and the South, the Forest Service evaluated treatment of the epidemics in separate environmental impact statements, thus ignoring evidence that should have been considered in forest planning that the agency's own management practices had led to the epidemics.

III. The Emphasis on Central Planning

The link between the RPA Program and forest plans resulted in a huge emphasis on meeting centrally determined targets, especially timber targets. The Forest Service allocated a share of the RPA Program timber sale level to each forest. This target often became the ruling feature in forest planning. Alternatives that did not meet the timber target were simply dismissed from consideration. With the notable exception of Region 6 (Oregon and Washington), forest planners in most states felt themselves pressured to develop plans that met the timber target.

The Forest Service insisted that this was not a top-down process because it included feedback from the bottom to the top. The original RPA targets were based on partly on what local forest managers thought they could produce. If forest planning revealed that they could not meet those targets, they were allowed to negotiate with the chief to have lower targets.

In reality, few forests outside of Region 6 made any attempts to negotiate lower targets. Moreover, the failure to collect new inventory data, as described below, prevented many forests from getting the information that would allow them to know that their targets were too high.

The targets had almost nothing to do with economic reality. In the early 1950s, the Forest Service made a profit from its timber program. According to *Newsweek*, this was a major reason why it was such a popular agency. But forest managers soon learned that they could sell more timber, enhance their budgets, and increase their opportunities for promotion by selling timber sales at a loss. This led to below-cost sales, cross-subsidized sales in which valuable timber was sold for less than its true value to subsidize worthless timber, and high-grading, in which the most valuable timber was sold first in the hopes that future timber prices would be high enough to sustain sale levels when the valuable timber ran out.

These sorts of policies were built into the forest planning process. Although the National Forest Management Act specifically stated that economically unsuitable land should not be managed for timber, the 1979/1982 planning rules defined “suitable” as including all of that land needed to meet the predetermined timber targets—even though the targets had been set without much economic consideration. Effectively, this rule ensured that the process would be a top-down, central planning process on almost every national forest.

IV. One Size Fits All

Early in the planning process, the Forest Service directed that all national forests use a particular computer program known as FORPLAN. This program centered around timber; all other resources were mere side effects and, in fact, only a few other resources could be built into the FORPLAN computer models for each forest.

Timber is a major component on only a few national forests and is not a component at all of some forests, yet all were required to use FORPLAN. Eventually, the author of FORPLAN was persuaded to write an updated version that had more flexibility regarding non-timber resources, but for many forests it was still an inappropriate tool.²⁰

V. Planning’s Failure to Resolve Controversies

The National Forest Management Act required the Forest Service to use a detailed public involvement process. Giving the public an opportunity to get involved in forest planning, Senator Humphrey hoped, would help defuse controversies.

However, instead of working together on forest plans, interest groups used the public involvement process to polarize their constituencies. Industry associations, environmental groups, and other groups used mass mailings, encouraging people to send in prewritten postcards or letters endorsing the most extreme alternatives considered in the plans.

²⁰ K. Norman Johnson, “The Analyst’s Mystique: Evolution of a Forest Planning Model,” *Forest Watch*, May, 1987, pp. 9–14.

Many Forest Service officials had the incentive to promote polarization. Polarization effectively broadened their decision space, since any decision between the extreme views could be portrayed as an appropriate “balance.” One way the Forest Service promoted polarization was in the development of alternatives. Forest plans typically contained five alternatives:

- An environmental extreme, with low timber outputs and maximum roadless area reservations;
- An industry extreme, with maximum resource outputs and minimal environmental protection;
- A “current direction” alternative based on the previous plan or recent history of the forest;
- An RPA alternative that met the RPA targets, or at least the timber target; and
- The preferred alternative, which was often a minor modification of the RPA alternative.

The Thoreau Institute (under its previous name of Cascade Holistic Economic Consultants) reviewed every national forest plan and prepared detailed reviews of over half the national forest plans. The detailed reviews included analyses of the computer runs prepared for the forest plan and alternatives; the background data used in those computer runs; and many of the other planning documents.

The Institute found that the apparent trade-offs between the industry and environmental alternatives were often spurious. In many cases, all of the alternatives considered could produce the same level of timber sales as the industry alternative while still protecting all of the roadless areas from development. In more than half the cases, an alternative could have been developed that both produced more timber and protected more roadless acres than the preferred alternative.²¹

Such “win-win” situations were ignored by the Forest Service. It appeared that preserving its decision-making prerogatives was more important than producing plans that would benefit all segments of the public. For example, forest planning documents for forests in Montana and northern Idaho revealed that building roads in roadless areas was neither necessary to meet timber targets nor economically efficient. Yet the records of decision for many of these plans specifically stated that failing to immediately build such roads could “close options” because Congress might designate the lands wilderness.²²

In short, none of the parties in the forest planning process had an incentive to cooperate with the other parties. Thus, planning promoted polarization. In some cases, this polarization led to violence, as trees were spiked, apparently by people stimulated by

²¹ Randal O’Toole, *The Suitable Timber Base, FORPLAN, and Win-Win Situations in National Forest Planning* (Bandon, OR: Thoreau Institute, 1988), 22 pp.

²² Forest Service, *Record of Decision, Idaho Panhandle National Forest* (Missoula, MT: Forest Service, 1988).

environmental arguments, and national forest offices were bombed, apparently by people stimulated by industry arguments.

VI. Planning without Data

Richard Behan's prediction that process would supersede substance proved accurate. Prior to the NFMA planning process, the Forest Service regularly inventoried national forest resources, attempting to update the inventories every ten years. Regular inventory updates were needed as a check on previous inventories and to measure forest growth and other changes in the forest. Sometimes the updates revealed embarrassing flaws in the previous inventories, but since the updates were so frequent the harm was minimal.

This all changed with NFMA planning, which placed the emphasis on public involvement, development of alternatives, social analyses, and other procedural steps. Forests often found that they were spending so much money on forest planner salaries and computer runs that they did not have enough resources to update their inventories.

In some cases, plans were based on inventories that were more than twenty years old. Planners attempted to "update" the inventories by adding their estimates of forest growth and subtracting their estimates of mortality and timber cuttings. The resulting data did not necessarily reflect reality.

In one case, the Deschutes National Forest published its draft forest plan, then finished its inventory. The new inventory revealed that the forest had a third less standing timber than planners had assumed in the forest plan. Yet the Forest Service decided that it would be too much trouble to revise the plan based on the new data, so it went ahead with a final plan based on the old, erroneous inventory data. Many other plans were also based on obsolete data.²³

The Forest Service also used exaggerated or unrealistic projections of future timber growth. The Clearwater National Forest used timber growth tables that projected that second-growth timber would grow to be 650 feet tall. The tallest trees in the world are half that height and the tallest trees in Idaho are only about a third that height.²⁴

Timber was the most obvious problem because of the emphasis on this resource and the agency's long history of regular timber inventories. But other resources suffered from a lack of data as well. Information about many wildlife populations was little more than guesswork, and the presumed relationships between forest management and wildlife and water quality outputs were highly speculative.

Many forests which lost money on their timber sale programs attempted to cover up the losses by building into FORPLAN assumptions that recreation, water, or wildlife benefited from road construction or timber sales. Without those assumptions, the

²³ Randal O'Toole, "Forest Service Uses Ancient Timber Inventory," *Forest Watch* June, 1986, p. 5.

²⁴ Randal O'Toole, "What Congress Should Know about Forest Planning," *Forest Watch*, pp. 18-23.

computer program might propose to cut no timber but with those assumptions the program would happily cut timber and report positive net benefits from doing so.

The claims that timber or roads benefited other resources could rarely be justified. Most forests found, for example, that the Forest Service had already built so many roads that they had saturated the demand for road-based recreation. Building more roads would not increase recreation or add new value to the forest. But this conclusion was often ignored in the plans.

For example, the Hoosier National Forest made two estimates of roaded recreation demand. The first estimate showed that the forest already had plenty of roads. The second estimate, however, found that demand was many times greater than the supply. Based on the second estimate, the FORPLAN model placed most forest land in the timber base.

A memo in the Hoosier's planning files, in the handwriting of the recreation planner, stated that "The regional office thought that my calculations [of demand] were too high. . . . I would agree that my 7/7/82 calculations are high! I was told by the forest planning team to make sure that the demand was higher than our capability. I did as I was told."²⁵ The Hoosier was a "pilot forest" for eastern and midwestern forests and many other forests ended up following its example of using overestimate recreation demand to justify timber cutting.

VII. Plans Overtaken by Reality

New events and information, such as fires and the identification of endangered species, happened faster than they could be built into the plans. Efforts to include the latest information in plans merely delayed the plans. Efforts to publish the plans in a timely manner merely resulted in plans that were out of date.

In 1983, controversy over data in Oregon and Washington plans led the Regional Forester to order that all of the plans be scrapped—even ones that were about to be published in final form—and thoroughly revised. Most of the region's plans only began appearing in final form in 1990, by which time court decisions in lawsuits over the spotted owl had rendered them moot.

The Klamath National Forest never did publish a final forest plan. A draft forest plan published in 1982 contained so many flaws that the forest decided to do it over. About the time the second draft came out, in 1988, the forest was ravaged by fires. Planners then put their efforts into writing environmental impact statements for the salvage sales after the fires. By the time they were able to work again on forest planning, many other forests were already beginning to revise their plans. Since the fire had rendered the data in the draft plan irrelevant, the forest decided not to publish a final.

²⁵ Bartlett Bertilino, Memo to planning files on recreation demand calculations, 17 November 1982, Hoosier National Forest.

VIII. Implementation Reveals Flawed Plans

As a result of outdated data, inadequate analyses, and the emphasis on targets rather than on-the-ground capabilities, most forest plans were obsolete before they were done. Many on-the-ground managers soon found that they were unable to meet the targets set by the plans.

- In 1990, the supervisor of Idaho's Clearwater National Forest reported that he would sell a third less timber than called for in the forest plan because site-specific analyses had found major discrepancies with the assumptions used in the plan.²⁶
- In 1991, the supervisor of Montana's Lolo National Forest reported that he would sell only half the timber called for in the forest plan due to inventory errors in the plan and environmental problems not considered by the plan.²⁷
- Also in 1991, Utah's Wasatch-Cache Forest found that it had to reduce timber sales to 44 percent of planned levels because the plan overestimated on-the-ground timber volumes and the number of acres suitable for timber.²⁸

Problems such as these led to what the press labeled as a "revolt" of forest managers against the Forest Service leadership and planning process. Forest supervisors in Region 6 prepared a video for Forest Service chief Dale Robertson saying "unless targets are reduced, we cannot be the stewards of the land that you expect us to be."²⁹ Supervisors in Alaska and California signed onto the tape as well.

Supervisors in Montana and Northern Idaho wrote a letter of support, saying that "unrealistic timber targets" and "an inordinate stress on commodity outputs" prevents the Forest Service from doing quality land management.³⁰ A second letter, saying that timber targets were "unrealistic even with full funding," was signed by most supervisors in the interior West.³¹

While mid-level managers were sending these messages to the top, regional officials were passing similar messages to national forest employees. The chief engineer for the California region sent a memo to forest engineers blaming agency problems on unrealistic targets, inadequate Washington leadership, unclear goals, a budget morass, and the spotted owl.³²

From 1970 through 1990, the Forest Service offered between 10.5 and 12.5 billion board feet of timber for sale each year. The individual forest plans (before the President's Northwest Forest Plan) cumulatively called for sales of around 10 billion board feet per

²⁶ Fred Trevey, memo titled Timber Resource Strategy Update, 26 February 1990, 4 pp.

²⁷ Orville Daniels, Letter on timber sale levels, 11 September 1991, 2 pp.

²⁸ Wasatch-Cache National Forest, Timber Resource Situation, 7 June 1991, 16 pp.

²⁹ Region 6, *Up from the Ground* (Portland, Oregon: Forest Service, 1989), videotape.

³⁰ Forest Supervisors, An Open Letter to Chief Dale Robertson, November, 1989, 2 pp.

³¹ Forest Supervisors, Feedback to Chief Dale Robertson, November, 1989, 5 pp.

³² Milroy Tiegen, Forest Engineers Meeting, April 20–21, 1989, memo dated 5 May 1989, 6 pp.

year. Yet by 1994, actual sales had fallen to 3.4 billion feet, and since then they have averaged well under 4 billion.

While some of this decline is due to the spotted owl, much of it is on non-spotted owl forests where managers decided they could not sustain sales at the levels called for in their forest plans. Even on the spotted owl forests, many managers welcomed court-ordered reductions in sales because they felt that the Forest Service had been cutting too much. Clearly, the forest plans were completely out of touch with national forest resources.

IX. Plans Made No Real Decisions

One of the greatest ironies of forest planning is that, after spending well over a billion dollars and some fifteen years on planning, the forest plans made no real decisions. When the challenge to the Wayne National Forest plan reached the Supreme Court in 1998, the court decided that “the controversy is not yet ripe for judicial review” because the plan made no final decisions.

“The plan does not give anyone a legal right to cut trees, nor does it abolish anyone’s legal authority to object to trees being cut,” wrote Justice Stephen Breyer. Since no decisions were made, there was no case for a court to decide. The Supreme Court’s decision supported a view that had been held by the Forest Service since early challenges had been made to forest plans in the late 1980s.

This raises an obvious question. If plans make no decisions, then why go to the trouble and cost of planning? The Forest Service will say that planning provides information and guidance to decision makers. But the plans written in the 1980s gathered very little new information, and in fact the high cost of planning forced the Forest Service to forego many regularly scheduled inventories.

X. Conclusions

When Congress passed the National Forest Management Act, the chief of the Forest Service described it as an “experiment.”³³ The experiment turned out to be far more expensive than anyone expected, but it clearly proved that forest planning does not work. Forest planning failed because of:

- The reliance on central planning and targets;
- The failure to update forest inventories;
- The emphasis on process over substance;
- The tremendous expense of coordinating data and planning for a vast array of resources on a huge land base;
- The amount of time required to write a plan that resulted in recent events and information rendering plans obsolete before they were done;

³³ John McGuire, “NFMA and Forest Planning,” *Forest History* magazine, 26:84–91 (1982).

- The incentives for interest groups and Forest Service officials to promote polarization instead of cooperation.

A few of these problems, such as the reliance on targets and the failure to collect recent inventory data, may be specific to the process used in the 1980s. But most of these problems are generic to any large-scale planning process.

- Public involvement in a central planning process inevitably promotes polarization.
- History moves faster than planners can work.
- Planning a one-million acre national forest simply demands more information than any person, even with the help of computers, can possibly comprehend.
- A focus on any planning process will lead people to devalue substance.