

Allegheny Forest Alliance

Summer 2007 Newsletter

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AFA FILES AN APPEAL

On June 29, the AFA filed an administrative appeal of the *Record of Decision* (ROD) for the new forest plan set to guide management of the ANF for the next 10-15 years. In the opinion of the coalition, the planning process, which produced the *Land and Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement* (LRMP/FEIS) contains several procedural errors causing the outcome to be flawed at best. Included among the procedural errors committed either by omission or co-mission are:

- Failure to meet “early and frequently” with local municipal organizations and special stakeholders.
- Failure to engage co-owners/co-partners in meaningful discussion regarding potential standards and guidelines for management activity.
- Failure to engage strategic, regional economic planning commissions in the planning process.
- Failure to properly analyze and consider the vital partnership role the ANF plays in the regional forest industry.



All totaled these significant shortcomings result in a LRMP/FEIS that heavily favors ecological conditions at the expense of the other two “Pillars of Sustainability,” namely the economic and social conditions. Such a circumstance has little benefit to coalition members.

Additionally, the LRMP/FEIS includes several substantive conclusions that are likely to have a negative impact on the local economy as well as a serious effect on forest health. They include, but are limited to:

- Providing an allowable sale quantity that is 40% less than the *1986 Plan*.
- Avoiding the mature condition of the merchantable timber by simply extending the structural stages in order to attain a more “mature forest” even though the predominant forest types are incompatible to such classification.
- Emphasizing non-motorized recreation when motorized recreation is overwhelmingly more popular across the forest.
- Providing more wilderness and quasi-wilderness when neither is justified given existing circumstances.
- Unwarranted application of new standards and guidelines severely restricting co-owners/co-partners (OGM) from doing business.

If the new LRMP/FEIS reflects the “desired future condition” of the ANF for the next decade or two, clearly the interests of a majority of local constituents are not destined to be served. Therefore, the AFA had no choice, but to appeal.

Note: A copy of the appeal notice can be found on the AFA website at www.renewableforests.com.

SELECTIVE HEARING

We would all undoubtedly agree it is easier to listen to someone or something that fits our interest and belief system than to someone or something that does not. This behavior is quite often referred to as selective hearing. Apparently, the Forest Service, collectively and often individually, suffers from the same malady as evidenced by the record.

While local governmental agencies clamored to be heard during the planning process, they were effectively muted among the crowd at collaborative meetings open to the general public. Meanwhile, Forest Officials had already met independently with various “experts” early and often in the process as the record indicates. *Appendix E* of the *FEIS* lists no fewer than 23 meetings with reported experts on species viability alone, just one issue among many that deserved such attention. But, as concluded in the response to PI #23 of *Appendix A*, which asked for more emphasis on government participation in the planning process, the following is recorded. “Given the large number of local government agencies, it is not practical for the ANF to meet individually with every agency.” Unfortunately, the regulations require they do so regardless of what they might hear.

Even more egregious is the fact that these meetings with reported species experts began as early as July 2003 when the plan was amorphous in nature. In fact, the *ANF Plan Revision Timeline* lists “Issue Development” completion on September 25, 2003. Clearly, the meetings with so called experts were scheduled early and often enough to help define the planning issues. Not so with local government agencies. The earliest recorded meeting with any of them was April 2005, well after the so called “Issues Development” deadline. All that remained for discussion in 2005 were the pre-determined issues the Planning Team selected, which certainly qualifies for selective hearing in my opinion.

ANF CERTIFICATION PILOT STUDY

In September of 2005, the ANF and six others national forests among the 155 in the system were chosen for a certification pilot study. An initial pre-assessment (“gap-analysis”) was conducted by the auditors (Smartwood and PricewaterhouseCoopers [PwC]) to determine how Forest Service procedures and protocols stacked up against Forest Stewardship Counsel (FSC) and Sustainable Forest Initiative (SFI) standards. Stakeholder surveys were even sent out to elicit comments from the field. In fact, I was among their numbers.

A final report of the pre-assessment was scheduled for release in February 2006, but no press release was ever forthcoming. It was to be followed by a “full-assessment” scheduled for June 2006, which involved site visits on the ANF, compilation of data, and the submission of a draft report to ANF staff for review. The final report from all that analysis and review was scheduled for completion by August 2006.

On September 20, I contacted a field representative for Smartwood and inquired about the status of the final report. He stated the auditors were still working on a draft for review and comment by the Forest Service and peer reviewers. He expected appropriate adjustments to be made and a final report issued shortly thereafter. A month later, I again inquired about the report’s status and was told it would be completed by the end of the year (2006).

Nearly six months elapsed with no announcement concerning the results of the study. Again, I contacted the field representative and was told the Forest Service had the results and any news release would be done by them. I then contacted the Forest Service in Warren and was told the USFS was holding the results until all seven national forest reports were completed in order to issue one homogenized report, an unfortunate circumstance for at least two reasons.

First, as has been the case far too often, the uniqueness of the ANF is once again negated when sandwiched among other national forest with dissimilar qualities and circumstances. Second, a report that potentially could have provided valuable information for the new forest plan has been successfully stonewalled rendering the results meaningless in that regard. As it stands, little if anything gleaned from the analysis of the ANF by Smartwood and PwC is likely to affect the potential for more reasonable management. The whole exercise serves as yet another example of a worthy intention gone awry, something we have come to expect from our federal bureaucrats.

BUDGET PRIORITIES

As I have mentioned on several occasions, the new forest plan will only be as good as the ability to fund it. The selected alternative (Cm) will require an annual appropriation of approximately \$27M to achieve its goals. An analysis of recent budget figures indicated an annual appropriation of only 60% of the required figure. Even in the best of times, it would be hard to imagine the ANF being suddenly blessed with that kind of dough.



Perhaps more disturbing, however, is the line item nature of the forestry budget that limits movement of funds from one category to another as determined in the budgeting process. A quick look at the recent budget shortfall is a classic example. With the failure of Congress to pass a budget for FY07, the Forest Service, like all government agencies, was required to limp along using the 2006 budget figures. When the new budget was finally carved out, there were several line items that experienced a shortfall. Most notably were the line items devoted to timber harvest. Does that bring back memories of the previous administration or am I delusional?

In any event, the new budget did contain line items that did not suffer a serious shortfall. Fire preparedness was one such category as was land acquisition where there was a hefty 105% increase in allocated funds. I think this warrants attention from more than one perspective. First, it is no secret the Democrats are more heavily influenced (funded) by preservationist groups. Action in committee and on the floor of Congress bears out that fact. Consequently, a potential increase in the ANF budget may not yield a corresponding increase in timber management, but rather larger amounts appropriated to purchase subsurface rights and other “environmentally friendly” activities. An admission by a local Forest Service official recently indicates there will be a concerted effort on their part to purchase subsurface rights on an additional 57,000 acres of the ANF, which not so coincidentally aligns well with the new plan’s “special area” designation.

Keep this in mind as well, if the budget does not achieve the funding levels the plan requires, compliance cannot be achieved, or at least parts will not be achieved. The parts of the plan that still could be accomplished are those that require less money for success. Can you guess which ones those are? I will give you a hint, timber production is not one of them.

LESS THAN MEETS THE EYE

The Allegheny Hardwood Utilization Group (AHUG) hosted a forest plan information meeting for industry representatives at Olmsted Manor on April 14. I was privileged to attend and gained new insight regarding the new forest plan.

Representatives of the Planning Team were available to explain the rationale for the many decisions contained within the new LRMP. While several are worthy of comment including planned purchase of 10% of subsurface rights, a 15% reduction in intensive use areas (IUA), and the decision to apply standards and guidelines to co-owners (OGM), another issue struck a cord with me that was less publicized, but every bit as shocking.



Discussion centered on explanations of the three planning elements: recreation and special areas, vegetation management, and habitat diversity. Regarding the latter, a brief review of standards and guidelines took place. During the discussion of expanded buffer zones related to slopes, wetlands, riparian and ESA areas and the like, I asked the question how much land surface all these zones would encompass. The answer was startling, a whopping 15%.

To translate this answer into actual numbers, consider the following. The ANF includes 516,843 acres of which 443,117 are forest land. Among that forested land, a total of 86,989 acres have been withdrawn for various reasons leaving only 355,818 acres of suitable land for timber harvest (69%). When you then factor in the effect of the new standards and guidelines, an additional 15% is set leaving only 302,445 acres available for potential timber production, or only slightly over half (59%) of the entire forest.

Such a number sheds a whole new light on why ASQ has been lowered. When quizzed about the dramatic drop (94.5mmbf to 54.1mmbf), the pat answer is inevitably “the lack of resources.” Certainly limiting the available resource to only 59% of the forest substantiates that pat answer.

SAFETY-NET TRAGEDY

In October 2000, President Clinton signed the *Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self-Determination Act*. The law had been in the works for several years, dating back to at least 1997. A western coalition known as the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition (NFCSC) advocated for the bill for several years and with the bipartisan support of Senators Larry Craig (R-ID) and Ron Wyden (D-OR) the bill was crafted and eventually passed.

The *Secure Rural Schools Act* provided what was termed as a “safety-net” payment to school districts and counties nationwide for replacement funding for schools and roads in national forested areas. The *1908 Act*, back at the turn of the twentieth century, had established an annual 25% revenue share to assist local communities with school and road funding. The intention was to help off-set the loss of property taxes created by the establishment of non-taxable national forests. In essence, schools and roads maintenance were “coupled” to forest receipts.

In the 1990’s, however, forest receipts fell dramatically (down nearly 80%) due to preservation minded policies and decisions emerging primarily from Clinton Administration regulations. The result was a sharp reduction in 25% payments, which in turn wreaked havoc on school district and county budgets.

The devastating effects prompted the NFCSC to seek temporary relief (safety-net) until the Forest Service returned to traditional receipt levels.

The coalition was successful in its effort to get the safety-net passed primarily because of broad-based, grass roots support from across the country. Large national organizations like the US Chamber of Commerce, National Education Association and National Association of Counties along with hundreds of lesser organizations like the AFA joined forces to successfully promote the bill. It is also important to include preservationist organizations among the grass roots supporters, albeit apart from the NFCSC, because they were quick to recognize the safety-net for what it really was, de-facto de-coupling. Perhaps their support tipped the scale in favor of the legislation more than any other single element.

Once the legislation passed, a level of funding was guaranteed for six years during which time coalition members naively expected the Bush Administration to provide impetus to increase production thereby making the 25% payment viable once again. Unfortunately that has not happened across most the nation and as a result, the safety-net has morphed into an extended entitlement, no longer serving as a short-term fix (safety-net) as originally intended. In fact, it has taken on a new life of its own rendering timber receipts virtually meaningless, much to the joy of our silent partners. The net result is a dependence on an annual government handout, which is no longer “coupled” to the forest as the *1908 Act* intended. What a tragedy indeed.

BOARD MEETING SCHEDULED



The summer meeting of AFA Board of Directors is scheduled for August 14 at the Olmsted Manor in Ludlow at noon. All directors are encouraged to attend this important quarterly meeting. Many issues including safety-net reauthorization, forest plan appeal, and on-going facilitation meetings with wilderness zealots will be included on the agenda.

Your membership contribution for 2007 is due. Payment ensures you are represented in advocating for multiple-use management and a sustained yield on the Allegheny National Forest. Thank you.

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