

Allegheny Forest Alliance

Spring 2007 Newsletter

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Inside this issue:

- * New Forest Plan Released
- * ANF Budget Dilemma
- * Truth & the Forest Service
- * Tracking Reauthorization
- * Reauthorization
- * More on Tourism
- * Transitioning to the new Plan

NEW FOREST PLAN RELEASED

The Forest Service finally released the “Record of Decision” (ROD) along with the “Land and Resource Management Plan” (LRMP) and “Final Environmental Impact Statement” (FEIS) relative to the new forest plan on March 30. Nearly four years in the making, the 2,000 page document is formidable indeed, but necessary in our litigious society as every issue must be thoroughly covered. Although there is a 90 day window for appeal, the decision is virtually assured and will now become the roadmap for management on the ANF for the next 15 years.

Summarily, the decision is not far removed from Alternative C offered in the draft form a year ago. With minor adjustments, the chosen alternative is now being presented as Alternative Cm. The “m” stands for “modified,” but could also stand for modest because the changes, while quite rational, are substantively minor in the entire scope of things.

It is important to identify major differences between the 1986 Plan and 2007 Plan to get a sense of the direction forest management is headed. Here are just a few of the significant changes.

- Suitable land area for timber harvest is reduced from 460,000 acres to 379,000 acres.
- ASQ (allowable sale quantity) is lowered from 94.5mmbf to 54.1mmbf.
- Wilderness is expanded by nearly two and a half times (8,979 to 21,358).
- Early structural habitat remains about the same (8%), but late structural habitat is increased nearly threefold (10% to 28%).
- Corridors or late structural linkages are created (121,176 acres).
- Late successional forest has been reclassified from >111 years old to >149 years old.
- Restrictive zones for riparian areas, wetlands, slopes and selected habitat are expanded as much as threefold.
- Oil, gas and mineral (OGM) activities are to be thoroughly scrutinized by new standards and guidelines used for surface land management as reference to “limited authority” have been removed.
- Subsurface rights on 57,000 acres (11%) will be aggressively targeted for purchase by the USFS and their allies.
- Management areas associated with semi-primitive, non-motorized recreation have nearly doubled.
- The number of different management areas (MA) has been expanded from 11 to 19.
- Intensive use areas (IUA) related to ATV/OHM activities are reduced by approximately 30% (35,000 acres).
- Allegheny hardwoods are scheduled for decline on the ANF.
- Increased emphasis is given to uneven-age management, but with new standards and guidelines for applicability.
- Greater emphasis is placed on “a natural appearing landscape” as the desired condition.
- Maximum economic and financial efficiency reflects more negatively due to emphasis on preservation (50 cent less return on every dollar invested).



It is important to point out that although management planning requires consideration of all the “pillars of sustainability” (ecological, economic and social factors); each may not and in fact does not receive equal weight. Greater emphasis is given to ecological sustainability in the new plan primarily because preservation outweighs production. For those wondering whether the ANF is becoming more parks-like, the answer is quite apparent.

ANF BUDGET DILEMMA

Bad news was received recently by the ANF leadership team regarding their final FY07 budget, the results of which will have some far reaching effects. As you are probably aware, each new funding year begins the previous October and is managed primarily in quarters. Quite often, Congress delays appropriating the money to fund the budget and FY07 was no exception. In order to maintain operations, the Forest Service is given an allocated amount or expectation tagged as the "initial FY07 budget." To complicate the process, money is tagged to specific line items and must be spent in that category. Therein lays the problem for this year.

The initial '07 budget allocated \$5.184M for timber management activities. The leadership team worked especially hard the first two quarters to get various scheduled projects sold to allay potential problems with cross referencing decisions between the new and old forest plan. They were successful in selling nearly 34mmbf of material by the middle of the third quarter, which is the most sold in a number of years. It took approximately \$4M of the initial allocation to pull off that feat. It was anticipated the remaining \$1.184M would be used for site prep activities for future harvest projects over the next five years. Such work is necessary to establish seedlings to replace the eventual trees to be harvested.



Now comes the kicker. On March 30, exactly half way through the fiscal year, the final '07 budget figures came out and the forest management allocation for the ANF was slashed \$1.18M, nearly a quarter of the original figure. The devastating result is that there are no more funds to conduct forest management activities for the remainder of 2007.

The immediate effects appear to be that personnel charged with forest management activity will likely be moved to another forest in Region 9 for at least the remainder of FY07. What a blow to an already fragile morale situation. In addition, no site prep work will be done due to lack of resources. On the longer term, without adequate site prep, there will be fewer project sales available as part of the harvest cycle. Therefore, we can expect a severe drop

in ASQ during subsequent years; perhaps even a return to the disaster of the late 90's, early 2000's when the ASQ bottomed out in the low teens.

Several factors contributed to this disaster, most of which point directly to politics. Again, the new leadership in Congress is predominantly western and their nests are to be feathered first. As we are reminded daily, "the people have spoken."

FOREST SERVICE NEEDS TO BE MORE TRUTHFUL

Articles appeared in area newspapers recently that painted a rosy economic picture for the four county region over the next 10-15 years. Quotes attributed to Region 9 supervisor Randy Moore indicate the new forest plan will generate some impressive numbers. He states the four counties surrounding the ANF can look forward to an estimated economic benefit equal to \$95.7M annually compared to \$57.3M over the period 2001-2005. Mr. Moore further states the ANF will generate 2,345 jobs compared to only 1,572 from 2001-2005. Expected revenue shares to local townships and school districts will be \$13.4M per year as compared to only \$5.6 previously and twice as much as the \$6.4M average provided by the *Secure Rural Schools Act*. It is an impressive forecast indeed. Unfortunately, it is but a myth.

First, the assertion assumes the ANF will be fully funded respective of the chosen alternative. That means the annual budget for the ANF will need to nearly double (\$14.5M to \$27M) as the plan reports, which is highly unlikely. Second, if rumors circulating about are true, the new leadership in Congress has diverted Region 9 money to their home regions (1 and 6) causing an additional \$1M to be siphoned off the ANF budget for use elsewhere within Region 9. Third, the ANF budget has been virtually zero-based for several years. And finally, more budgeted dollars each year are used for mandated administrative expenses leaving less for revenue generation.

It is time for the Forest Service to be honest with the public. There is no way the new plan will accomplish what Mr. Moore reports simply because it lacks USFS and Congressional support. The ASQ of 54.1mmbf per year reported in the

new plan is an unreachable goal along with all its economic benefits for the reasons stated. As much as the supervisor and I would both like to experience the Utopia described, reality prevails.

TRACKING REAUTHORIZATION

There have been many twists and turns on the road toward reauthorization of **PL 106-393**, popularly known as the *Secure Rural Schools Act* or safety-net. You will recall the six year term for the legislation sunset last September essentially resulting in a return to 25% payments for school districts and townships. For the past two years, there has been an intense effort to reinstate the law because for most of the 39 states that benefited from its authority, a return to 25% payments would simply destroy operating budgets.

Circumstances, however, on the ANF the past two and a half years have suggested otherwise. The volume and dollar value of the sustainable harvest have raised incrementally giving rise to the belief that 25% payments may still be applicable on this forest. As a result, the AFA has maintained an aggressive stance that reauthorization must include a choice annually between the safety-net or 25% payment. It only makes sense, if Pennsylvania and other states were to select the traditional option; less money would have to be appropriated to cover safety-net payments.

Now the twists and turns. With the advent of the “new direction” team in Congress, terms and conditions regarding reauthorization have changed. Although opting in or out may still be a part of the new five year proposal currently before Congress, it appears the fine print has changed considerably. Leading Democratic Senators have successfully come up with reasonable monetary off-sets to fund the bill, but along the way have skillfully reapportioned amounts among the states using a combination of the traditional high year average with a new acreage stipulation. In other words, the amount of federal forest lands each state has will be factored into the amount distributed to each state. There is also a median poverty level factor included in the final equation, the affect of which is yet to be determined.

Regarding the acreage situation, Pennsylvania ranks 34th among the 39 states, but under the old law received the 10th most amount of money due to the value of revenue generating resources (black cherry). To a degree yet to be determined, the new formula will negatively affect Pennsylvania’s reimbursement for sure. As a result, the opt-out clause quite possibly could be even more important for the four counties on the ANF. Of course, opting is only viable 25-30mmbf of quality material is harvested annually. As conditions stand currently, that is a big IF.

MORE ON REAUTHORIZATION

By the time you read this article, President Bush’s decision will have been made about whether to support or veto the emergency spending bill proposed by Congress. As you know, the bill to date includes language requiring a timeline for withdrawal of troops from Iraq, something the President has said repeatedly he will not support. As you may also know, the bill was choked full of “pork” in order to get conservative members to buy on. The peanut and spinach farmers along with Katrina victims are a part of all that lard and as is reauthorization of **PL 106-393** for the next five years.

I spent a good amount of time in early March visiting majority party offices in Congress lobbying for reauthorization on behalf of coalition members. The good news was the Democrats found a way to fund it, something the Republicans failed to do when they were in charge. The bad news is the bill was not offered independently, which may have received the President’s signature, but rather is being used as a bribe to promote another political agenda.

From this layman’s perspective, such a maneuver demonstrates government at its worst. Whether the school districts and townships in rural America are fairly compensated for the burden brought by national forest lands has become nothing more than a pawn in the political chess game. Important issues such as this are no longer afforded the courtesy of meritorious review, but rather must be used purely for political gain. How shameful. This is yet another example of why a line item veto is necessary.

ABOUT TOURISM

A great deal of time, effort and resources has been devoted recently to promoting our region as a tourist attraction. Governor Rendell and the preservationist community are leading the charge. While I do not criticize them for drawing attention to the natural beauty of our area, the whole idea of turning the society into a tourist Mecca is a bit delusional.



Does anyone in their right mind honestly believe the economy of the region can be sustained by tourism? Congressman John Peterson does not. At an “Eggs and Issues” breakfast in Warren last fall, he stated, “I’m not a believer that a service economy will give our children the life we had...”

I concur with the Congressman and believe we are being coerced into service by promoters outside the region who for the most part are unaffected by the economic consequences. There are studies available to prove the point.

In the Pacific Northwest following the spotted owl fiasco, preservationists played the tourist card as the antidote for the loss of wood industry, the very base of the region’s economy. The results were disclosed recently by a study and analysis done by Professor Lee at the University of Washington. The demise of forest industry in the region caused middle class residents, the backbone of the forest economy, to leave the area because they could no longer maintain a comparable lifestyle. The result was the emergence of a service based economy offering jobs of the minimum wage variety and attracting a disproportionate number of immigrants. You can imagine what that did to the standard of living in the region.

Another negative ramification of the service evolution was the decline of the timbering infrastructure. Necessary attention to the forest for reasons such as salvage and fuel loading, were no longer met by adequate facilities to process the material.

While I am all for promoting tourism for our region, it must be in the context of local customs and culture. Visitors to the area should see and accept the fact that oil and gas production and timber harvesting are and have been integral parts of the very fabric of our society. They must not be offended by their appearance and location across the forest landscape. Tourism could provide an added benefit to the local economy, but in no way will it ever supplant traditional industries.

TRANSITIONING TO THE NEW FOREST PLAN

The new forest plan set to guide management activities on the ANF for the next 10-20 years was unveiled March 30, 2007. Ten years in the making the new plan is billed as a revision of the 1986 Plan rather than a new plan and it focuses on three major areas of change: recreation and special areas, habitat diversity and vegetation management. Several other areas of less importance also received attention including: transportation, air, water and soil resources, scenery and economic issues.

The new plan is scheduled to go into effect on April 30, 2007, and from that point on will be used to guide all activities on the ANF. Following the announcement is the required 90 day comment period, which allows interested parties to appeal parts or all of the planning elements. Appeals are submitted for review in the Washington, D. C. headquarters, but will not delay implementation on April 30. Chances are slim that alterations will be made during the appeal period because such changes would need to be of a procedural nature rather than substantive. Since the documentation is approximately 2000 pages in length and took nearly a year to write it is highly unlikely procedural errors slipped through undetected.

There is always the possibility that one or more parties are so upset with the new plan that a legal appeal will be registered in district court in Pittsburgh. No one on the Plateau would be overly surprised if that happens. Quite likely, though the new plan would continue to chart the course for management while the court sorts out the issues being challenged.

Regardless of anyone's view of the conclusion, the thoroughness and detail of the plan are quite impressive. No stone has been left unturned and every facet of management is addressed at length from a centrist approach.

Now that the new plan is in place, the problem of funding it remains. In order for it to succeed, Congress will need to commit to increased funding for the ANF. In fact, there will need to be a 45% increase in funding annually for the chosen alternative to be achieved. As Congress ponders such a hefty investment, they need to be cognizant of the fact that the ANF is quite capable of turning a profit unlike nearly all of the other 154 national forests. Will turning a profit make a difference? Only time will tell.

Your membership contribution for 2006 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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