

RGNF hosts public meeting about forest plan

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Forest Planner Judi Perez gave a brief history of the forest plan revision process during a presentation in Del Norte last week.

DEL NORTE— For the past two years, the Rio Grande National Forest (RGNF) has been working on the newly revised forest management plan and has recently released a final draft decision. On Wednesday, Aug. 21 several members from RGNF held an informational public meeting in Del Norte to discuss the draft decision and to answer any questions the public may have.

Forest Planner Judi Perez opened the meeting by giving a brief history of the work that has already been completed on the forest management plan, stating that though a draft decision has been made, the RGNF is still about six to seven months away from putting it into effect. “This is just the next step in a long process of revising the management plan. We are still quite a ways from the implementation phase of the revision,” said Perez. Forest Supervisor Dan Dallas, Deputy Forester Tom Malecek and Divide District Ranger Martha Williamson were also in attendance to help answer questions after the main presentation was complete. “Local comments collected through several meetings were very helpful, in coming to the final draft decision for the plan and helped guide the format of the forest plan,” said Dallas.

“There was a column in the local newspapers written by our retired public relations officer Mike Blakeman titled Land, Water, People. We used this column to help us create the plan we are presenting to the public today. We went to great pains to make easier to understand and this column helped us format the plan to what the people were wanting,” continued Dallas. “We are relieved to be at this point in the planning process and look forward to hearing the public’s comments.”

Perez continued the presentation stating that there was a draft environmental impact statement and draft plan released in 2017 that included four alternatives. After reviewing all of the comments submitted both in meetings and during the comment period of the planning phase, the RGNF decided on a combination of plan alternatives B and C. "We felt that this was what would best fit our management strategies while taking into consideration the comments from the public," said Perez.

Some of the major changes that will be implemented once the 60-day objection period is complete will include going from 17 management areas to nine, larger management areas. "We wanted to be able to manage the forest in a more organized format, which would allow our staff to be out in the field more often," said Perez.

The plan also altered the Southern Rockies Lynx Amendment to include the dead tree habitat. "The original amendment only included green, healthy forest habitat, so we modified it to include our dead tree habitat which allowed for better management strategies," said Perez.

The plan also includes two wildfire management areas, a smaller portion of new recommended wilderness areas near the Sangre De Cristo Mountains and tree harvesting plans that will be spread out over several years to help utilize the beetle kill in the area. "The next step is the 60-day objection period. Objections will be accepted from those who made comments and were involved up to this point. After the 60-day period, the comments will be reviewed, and a final decision will be announced once pertinent changes have been made."

Other upcoming meetings include the following: Wednesday, Sept. 4, 5:30 p.m.— Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish Hall, 6633 County Road 13, in Conejos; Thursday, Sept. 5, 5:30 p.m.— Conejos Peak Ranger District Office, 15571 County Road T. 5, La Jara and Tuesday, Sept. 10, 5:30 p.m.— Creede Community Center, #9 USFS Rd #503 in Creede. The document is available at the Monte Vista office located at 1803 US Highway 160 or online at www.fs.fed.us/riogrande for those who wish to review the document.

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