

National Forest Planning Rule: Recreation at Heart of Debate, Leaders tell Chief

September 27, 2010 (Washington, DC) - A high-level, diverse group of recreation community leaders met today with the Chief of the Forest Service, Tom Tidwell, and top agency leaders today to express their major concerns with the new Forest Planning Rule now being prepared for publication and comments. According to Derrick Crandall, President, American Recreation Coalition, "this rule will have a significant impact on forest plans and will thus determine recreational opportunities on some 190 million acres of key federal lands."

The seven recreation community leaders spoke on behalf of the \$400 billion per annum recreation industry, enthusiasts and gateway communities. The Chief told the group, "it is appropriate and right for recreation to be the first thought when Americans think about the national forests.

The meeting came in response to a letter to the Chief from more than 70 top recreation organizations expressing major concerns about the Planning Rule. Although they had responded to Forest Service invitations to help guide the rule, they had real doubts that the messages they had delivered in a series of meetings, in written comments and through an agency blog were understood and having an effect on the draft Planning Rule.

Chief Tidwell: Recreation is the Driver For Rural Economies & Quality of Life

Chief Tidwell urged the recreation group to start its messaging on the Planning Rule and other issues with the jobs message. "Recreation is it--it is the driver for rural economies and for quality of life for millions of Americans," he said. He pointed to the America's Great Outdoors Initiative as another key area where recreation interests need to focus. The goal, he told the group, is to "change the debate, to stop defending recreation and have broad understanding of its benefits. We need to consider impacts before restricting recreation. Can we mitigate conflicts without closures? Yes."

Tony Tooke: Recreation Interests Elevated

Tony Tooke, Director, Ecosystems Management Coordination, U.S. Forest Service, is leading the draft rule development process, which began with a *Federal Register* Notice of Intent. He acknowledged it failed to address recreation. He reported that the rule development process had not only heard but had responded to the significant input from recreation interests. While not sharing exact wording of the draft, he assured the group that recreation had been "elevated" in rule draft language to treatment of other key forest uses. And he assured the group that recreation would be included in the "social, economic and environmental" assessments required in forest plans.

Chief Tidwell spoke about the current status of recreation in Forest Service operations. He said in meetings on Capitol Hill and with Executive Branch personnel, he is often told "recreation is one of the agency's more controversial programs." He expressed concern and disappointment, telling the group that agency recreation efforts should be support-builders for the agency. He also expressed his view that there is legitimate concern that recreation has too often been an afterthought, not an equal in agency priorities.

Following the recreation community remarks, the Chief shared some responses before asking

agency staff to respond with more specifics. First, he reiterated his belief that the meeting was appropriate, and that the recreation community's involvement in the planning rule process was strategic. "The Planning Rule is a route to the goal of proper treatment of recreation in forest planning and programs," he added.

Importance of Protecting Access

After hearing the recreation community requests, which included specific references to recreation as a primary tenet of future recreation plans and a required forest management plan component, calls for incorporation of the Forest Service recreation framework in plan development, and to appropriate links to consideration of the economic impact of forests on rural (and urban) America, the Chief made special note of the importance of protecting access to national forests, and to letting national forests assist communities in transitioning from commodity-focus to sustainable recreation- and tourism-based communities. He used his home town of Riggins, Idaho, as an example of what can and should occur. He described the community as having a more sustainable and better lifestyle today through recreation than when he grew up in a town dependent on a saw mill and trucking.

Active discussion followed. Concerns about new barriers that could arise from a focus on "collaboration" were expressed, especially in light of agency capabilities and skill-sets. Concerns about a planning process that fails to address budget issues, and the deteriorated quality of recreation infrastructure, were expressed. Calls for a new paradigm in recreation management, which streamlines approval processes--perhaps even reverses the process, and making closures and restrictions subject to the approval processes--was described. Much focus was put on better use of partners such as ski areas, state trail, fishing and OHV programs and more--an issue mandated by the next generation of forest plans.

Deputy Chief Joel Holtrop: You Have our Commitment

Forest Service Deputy Chief Joel Holtrop helped bring the session to a positive close, telling the group that he perceived that those around the room were "friends and partners, able to have valuable and blunt conversations. We've heard your call for recreation to be incorporated as a principle in the forest planning process, and for recreation to be accorded a more visible role in the rule. You have our commitment to work with you, and to find an outcome of this effort which is consistent with the Chief's remarks that recreation is a core program for national forests. And I think you will find that we are closer to where you want us to be than you now think we are--and you'll see that in the draft rule."

The group explored a variety of next steps and agreed to stay in contact. Recreation leaders told the Forest Service leadership that they intended to meet with Department officials as well as those at Office of Management and Budget and the Council on Environmental Quality to explain positions and seek ways to find common ground without delaying the Planning Rule process. The recreation representatives also noted that they are and will continue to build sensitivity to recreation community concerns on the Hill and with state governors.