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### 3. FOREST SERVICE: Final planning directives seek to involve public

Phil Taylor, E&E reporter  
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A final set of planning directives released today will help the Forest Service better engage the public, including youth, and resolve conflicts as it decides how to manage its 154 national forests and 20 grasslands, according to members of a federal advisory committee.

The Forest Service released directives that will guide implementation of its 2012 national planning rule, which dictates how the agency develops, revises and amends forest management plans that identify where and how recreation, energy development, logging and grazing may take place ([E&E News PM](#), March 23, 2012).

The [final directives](#), which run more than 500 pages, adopted most of the recommendations of a 21-member [advisory committee](#) of local elected officials, environmentalists and forest users. They were also shaped by more than 16,000 public comments and recently underwent a White House review.

"This was a true collaborative endeavor," said Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell.

The final directives drew heavily from the committee's November 2013 [recommendations](#) that the agency strengthen collaboration and achieve greater planning efficiencies while promoting the ecological and social sustainability of national forests ([Greenwire](#), Nov. 22, 2013).

So far, 19 national forests have begun to revise land management plans under the 2012 planning rule. Time will tell whether the rule's emphasis on collaborative and science-based decisionmaking will reduce conflicts over access and use of the forests.

In summer 2012, forest user groups -- including the American Forest Resource Council, National Cattlemen's Beef Association and BlueRibbon Coalition, an off-highway vehicle group -- challenged the rule in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia ([Greenwire](#), Aug. 14, 2012). Environmental groups including the Wilderness Society, Defenders of Wildlife and others intervened to defend the rule. A judge's ruling is pending.

If the rule stands, it will be strengthened by today's directives, according to committee members.

"The end product is a well-balanced planning guidebook that gives the public a comfortable seat at the table to help shape the future of our national forests," said Mike Anderson of the Wilderness Society.

Jim Magagna, executive vice president of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, said the Forest Service was

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"extremely receptive to the recommendations of our committee."

"I feel like our effort was very worthwhile," he said.

The final directives do a better job at ensuring members of the public -- including nontraditional users like youth, urban residents and minorities -- have a seat at the table in forest planning, committee members said.

"The 2012 planning rule and final directives give every American the chance to be involved in forest planning in a way that hasn't been possible with past rules," said Russ Ehnes of the Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council. "Now it's up to us to get involved."

The final directives appear to have resolved some committee members' concerns over how the Forest Service takes stock of wilderness-quality lands and recommends to Congress which lands to protect.

For example, they clarify that certain roaded lands are generally not included in wilderness inventories and require more transparency and public input. They also allow the Forest Service to consider lands that members of the public have proposed for wilderness, even if they have some nonwilderness characteristics, Anderson said.

The final directives also require the Forest Service to take better stock of how forest plans affect social factors like timber jobs, grazing access and recreational use, and to report those findings to the public, Anderson added.

Other language helps clarify how groups can object to Forest Service decisions.

"The final planning directives clearly demonstrate that thoughtful collaboration can sometimes resolve very tough forest policy issues, even at a national level," Anderson said.

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