

Groups push Forest Service to update planning effort

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From the air, no clear boundary delineates the Lolo and Bitterroot national forests.

On paper and in the public sphere, however, the two federal public landscapes soon may become very distinct. If Scott Laird and the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership have their wish, “soon” will become “now.”

“There’s momentum here,” Laird said after an aerial tour of the two national forests with EcoFlight pilot Bruce Gordon on Tuesday.

“We hope to elevate this issue and put pressure on the D.C. office to get this going,” he added. “The forests want to feel they’re prepared, with staffing, support and good relations in the community. We want to show they’ve got constituents in three counties who say we’d like you to move forward.”

Forest plans contain a multitude of current condition inventories of tree stands and campground facilities, user groups and future demands. They also form the rule book for decision-making as new issues come up.

Last March, TRCP joined 10 other conservation groups and the commissioners of Missoula, Mineral and Sanders counties in encouraging the two national forests to accelerate their planning efforts. The whole U.S. Forest Service has been undergoing a planning revision since 2012.

From the air, a constellation of future concerns comes into view.

Old and current logging sales bump against roadless forests in the Ninemile Valley, where several conservation groups are [suing the Lolo](#) National Forest over proposed new road-building and timber management plans. Burn scars around Lolo Peak and a nearby failed ski resort show two different kinds of rehabilitation work that could be considered in the Bitterroot National Forest. Across the Bitterroot River, housing developments creep toward the edge of the Sapphire Mountains and their

isolated elk winter and summer ranges, nestled below the [new Mount Dean Stone trail](#) network on the edge of Missoula.

The Forest Service has divided its national forests into three: the Mountain, Pacific and Eastern [planning service groups](#). All the Montana national forests are in the Mountain group. Of them, only the Kootenai and Flathead national forests have completed new plans as of June. The Helena/Lewis and Clark and Custer/Gallatin national forests are close to completing their plans.

That leaves the Lolo and Bitterroot with three-decade-old plans and Beaverhead/Deerlodge with a 12-year-old plan in need of revision. The Lolo plan is 35 years old; the Bitterroot a year younger.

The Lolo and Bitterroot national forests together enclose about 3.5 million acres — enough to hold three Glacier National Parks. They encompass two major river drainages, the Clark Fork and Bitterroot. The Bitterroot, Welcome Creek, Rattlesnake and Scapegoat wilderness areas draw hordes of hikers, hunters and other recreationists. Logging, mining and ranching workers make money off their resources.

“It’s a big effort,” Laird said. “The Helena/Lewis and Clark forest held something like 70 meetings in 12 counties to get public input. The BLM (Bureau of Land Management) has already updated its plan and they’re really focused on recreation. They’re neighbors. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes are right on the boundary. They need to be involved.”

That will happen, according to Lolo National Forest Supervisor Carolyn Upton, but not until 2023. Upton said on Tuesday that Forest Service Region 1 has the Lolo scheduled for plan revision in 2023. But preparation for that effort will start next month at the beginning of fiscal 2022.

“We’re going to stay next in line,” Upton said. “There isn’t anybody in region who can outcompete us for funding or staff.”

Of the 47 national forests and grasslands in the Mountain Planning Service Group (which includes the Lolo and Bitterroot), 12 have been revised under the new procedures and 15 are in revision. Twenty are older than 15 years and not yet started on a new plan.

Only four of the 37 Pacific Planning Service Group have completed new plans, and 5 are undergoing revision. Six of the 19 Eastern Planning Service Group national forests have revised their plans and one is in revision.

However, there are lessons learnable from the experience of other national forest planning efforts that Upton plans to absorb. For example, the Flathead National Forest’s plan includes guidelines for expansion of trails and campsites in areas occupied by grizzly bears that apply to several other forests (including the Lolo and Bitterroot).

Those rules required lots of new research, and several have already [been challenged in court](#) for failing to balance the interests of bears and people.

“The current forest plan for the Lolo was signed in 1986,” Upton said. “We have amended it many times, but haven’t taken a comprehensive look. My intent is to stay on the plan schedule, getting them organized, and having a thoughtful plan for engaging all our interest groups.”

Source:https://www.kpvi.com/news/national_news/groups-push-forest-service-to-update-planning-effort/article_ffb2a7a8-0d26-58f0-adaa-a0d9d4953b99.html