

Mountainair Collaborative
April 29, 2019
Edgewood SWCD, Moriarty, NM

Joe Zebrowski facilitated the meeting.

The meeting began at 1:09 pm.

Attendance

Dee Tarr, Claunch-Pinto Soil & Water Conservation District
Joe Zebrowski, NM Highlands University
Jay Turner, USFS, Cibola NF Mountainair District Ranger, Acting Natural Resource Staff Officer
Sarah Browne, Cibola NF, Forest Planner
Anthony Martinez, Cibola NF, Mountainair District FMO, Acting Line Officer
Juan Sanchez, Chilili Land Grant, NM Land Grant Council
Robert Barber, Lincoln County Land & Natural Resources Advisory Committee (LANRAC)
Steve Guetschow, Torrance County Planning & Zoning
Virginia Seiser, Great Old Broads for Wilderness
Alan Barton, NM Forest & Watershed Restoration Institute
Kerry Romero, NM Council of Outfitters and Guides
Susan Ostlie, Great Old Broads for Wilderness
Marc LeFrancois, National Park Service, Salina Pueblo Missions National Monument
Art Swenka, Estancia Basin Resource Association

Forest Plan Revision

Sarah Browne

Sarah and the planners from the Carson and Santa Fe National Forests traveled to DC in Feb., and briefed the Chief & her staff on the revised forest plan.

The Chief was impressed with the level of collaboration on the Cibola NF, and the use of collaboratives in plan revision. The Chief & staff had some questions on recommended wilderness, but other than that, there was no specific feedback on revising the plan. The Chief reiterated the agency's emphasis on shared stewardship, and the importance to work with state and county government.

Currently, Sarah and the Cibola Plan Revision Team is working on finishing revisions based on the USFS Regional Office (RO) review. The RO recommended more substantive changes to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, and had fewer comments on the forest plan. Comments from the RO focused on effects. A programmatic NEPA EIS was challenging at this level. Lots of the comments really were to help write a programmatic NEPA analysis.

Sarah is trying to get all the documents back to the RO this week. The RO has to approve the full version before they can publish the draft plan.

Once the RO gives final approval, then the Forest needs to provide a communications plan that must be cleared with the Washington Office's (WO) Communications team. This has to do with how the Cibola NF staff will talk to the public in rolling out the document.

The Planning Team is aiming to issue the Draft Plan and DEIS on July 5. This is the date the Notice of Availability (NOA) will be announced in the Federal Register. This date kicks off the 90 day comment period.

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A coalition of organizations has sent a letter showing concern that the three national forests in Northern New Mexico will have comment periods that substantially overlap. Responses to this letter should be going out this week, but the response will acknowledge that there will be an overlapping comment period for the Cibola NF and the other two national forests. The Cibola NF is crunched for time. The Cibola started the plan revision 7 years ago, the first national forest in NM to begin plan revision. After this fiscal year, which ends of Sep. 30, they won't get any more money for plan revision. Due to this time crunch, the Cibola NF plans to keep the comment period open for only 90 days. They have the option of extending the comment period if necessary, but any extension would set them back in finishing the plan. Once they have all the comments, it will take them perhaps one year to finish their responses and make changes to the plan, before issuing the final plan and EIS. If this process extends into a new administration, that could delay them another 10 months or so.

Along with the other two Northern New Mexico national forests, the Cibola NF is trying to come up with solutions to make it easier to comment on all three forest plans.

One thing the Cibola NF will do is publish its documents on the Cibola website two weeks before the formal NOA is published on July 5 – so it should be up and available about June 21.

Also, on the Cibola website they'll have a brief summary document showing the changes they made since last Fall. Sarah wants to have an outline with page numbers to show where the changes are, to make it easier to find the changes. The SFNF & Carson NF are also doing this – their plans have been posted on their websites for longer than Cibola's plan.

There will also be one joint meeting in Santa Fe, and they should have a date within one week for that meeting. This meeting brings together groups that are interested in commenting on the plans for all three northern national forests. At this meeting, they'll focus on what is similar and what is different in the three plans. Then, each individual forest can focus on their own plans and their DEIS's – the major differences are in the alternatives in the DEISs. This meeting will probably be towards the end of July.

Question from Sarah: What is a good date for a meeting for Mountainair?

If the plan comes out on July 5, then the 90-day comment period goes through Oct. 3.

Last Fall, the cooperating agencies (landscape teams) were given an opportunity to comment on the "soft release" of the draft plan (prior to RO or WO reviews). Cibola Forest Supervisor Steve Hattenbach & Sarah have created a response to each of the comments from the cooperating agencies. They put together a spreadsheet with all the comments and responses. This will be on the website along with the Draft Plan & DEIS.

Sarah opened the floor for questions and discussions.

Question – what will the public be commenting on this time, the whole plan or just the changes since last Fall?

Sarah said comments will be open on the whole plan, not just the changes since the Fall.

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Joe noted that the Mountainair Collaborative is having a workshop on May 21, to be held at the Edgewood SWCD office, on how to make substantive comments on the plan revision. We have discussed the timing of the collaborative commenting on the process.

Sarah said everyone can make their own comments, for partner organizations, separate from what the Collaborative comments on.

Question – would each district have a meeting of its collaborative before the public meeting?

Sarah responded that it's up to each collaborative to set its own meeting. Sarah would consider when the open house would occur based on when the collaborative is meeting.

Question – wouldn't the Collaborative need to know when the public meeting would be, and then we could determine when to hold our meeting?

Joe responded that the Collaborative discussed this issue. We talked about having an early meeting to advertise the plan. This wouldn't be a comment meeting, but the purpose would be to get ourselves organized regarding how we're going to do the comments. Ideally, this would be about 2 weeks after the Draft Forest Plan comes out. This would be for planning. Then, we could have another meeting before the public meeting, and another meeting at about 60 days in.

Question – Don't we need time for participants to go back to their organizations so the organization can make a determination of what members support? If the Collaborative is going to wait 60 days to determine what we'll comment on, that doesn't leave organizations much time to discuss issues with their members.

Joe noted that originally we'd said 45 days, but that pushes things a lot.

Alan suggested that if the plan comes out on June 21, we can have our first meeting during the week of July 8 and move everything up 15 days.

Joe asked if so we meet during the week of July 8, do we want to meet again before working out our comments? Perhaps mid- to end-of-August?

Question– would this be after the public meeting?

Joe responded that would depend.

Sarah said the public meeting should be 4:30 to 6:30 pm or 5:00 to 7:00 pm, to be able to capture folks. After 7:00 it's hard for USFS staff and the public.

Joe asked if we should have the collaborative meeting before or after the public meeting? What do people think?

Dee said we probably would want to have the meeting of the Collaborative after the public meeting. People may hear things at the public meeting that they hadn't thought about.

Joe asked if we want the Collaborative meeting to be between the roll-out meeting and the final meeting? Or do we want to play it by ear?

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Question – won't we have to give people time to take info back to their collaboratives?

Joe said 45 to 60 days after the first meeting, we should have our comments ready to go.

Dee had a conversation with Rosemary Romero, facilitator of the Cibola Shared Stewardship Council (CSSC). The CSSC would like to see the comments that each local collaborative is preparing so they will not duplicate comments. Once the Mountainair Collaborative gets its comments done, we should send them to the CSSC. The Mountainair Collaborative should have our comments together to know what to discuss at the Council.

Steve noted that we also want to see what the other collaboratives say, and can do so by attending the CSSC discussion.

Jay suggested that we may be able to do some of this through a conference call.

Joe asked when we would need to have comments ready for the CSSC? This has not yet been determined.

Joe then suggested that the representatives of each organization that participate in the Mountainair Collaborative be empowered by their organizations to speak for the organization, rather than having to send all joint comments back to each organization. This would make the process more efficient.

Question – how does the USFS assess the comments they receive? Do comments coming from organizations carry more weight than those coming from individuals? Do comments from district collaboratives or the CSSC carry more weight than other comments?

Sarah said the USFS does not weight any comments over any other. A comment from the collaborative would be entered just the same as any partner organization. The same comment over and over doesn't count any more than any other individual comment.

Susan said she has read that if you want your comment to be unique, it must be 30% different from other comments.

Jay said that the most valuable comments are those that avoid opinions. The more you avoid things that are just opinion, the more valuable the comment is.

Alan asked if we need to make comments as a collaborative? It would be good for the collaborative to go through this exercise, in terms of team building and understanding everyone's perspectives, but maybe we don't need to do this within the process of plan revision. Each partner can submit their own comments, and from the USFS's perspective, these would all be the same as if the Mountainair Collaborative submitted them.

Susan said if the Mountainair Collaborative went through the process of discussing and forming comments from the whole Collaborative, it would bring out our differences.

Alan said it will help the collaborative, but asked would it help the Cibola National Forest's plan?

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Joe noted that coming together as a group and deliberating could provide a better comment than any individual could do. But, then, should these comments be sent back to individual groups, or should we make the comment as a Collaborative?

Kerry said she can speak for the NM Council of Outfitters and Guides, and sign off on whatever the collaborative does.

Joe pointed out that in our operating principles, we have a vehicle for presenting minority views.

Dee said that we've been meeting all this time to learn about each other and make formal comments as a Collaborative. In reaching those common comments, that will help us move forward in working together to work with the Ranger District and the National Forest in the future.

Kerry said the discussions will bring out our differences, and this will be of value.

After more discussion, the group agreed that the Collaborative wants to make comments as a collaborative.

Joe asked, do all the participants feel empowered to be able to represent their organization vis a vis the collaborative?

Many agreed they did.

Jay said that for organizations that require approval, they have to fit their work within the Collaborative's timeline.

Joe then asked if we don't have the constraint of having to take everything back to partner organizations, what would our timeline be?

There was discussion on the role of the CSSC. Participants wondered why we needed to run comments by them?

Robert suggested that the Mountainair Collaborative should set our own schedule and send things to the CSSC when we're done. Joe recommended that if, in our deliberations, we find issues that affect the whole Cibola NF, we can send those to them.

Timelines

There was discussion about the timeline for preparing and submitting comments by the Collaborative, as well as scheduling a public meeting during the comment period. The public meeting would be an open house run by the USFS, to take comments and to explain the plan revision process and product. Previously, we talked about having the public meeting later in the process. This might encourage people to put off reading the forest plan until just before the public meeting. Sarah emphasized the importance of the comment period, as this is the last chance for public input, until the final plan comes out.

Joe suggested that a good time for the public meeting would be about halfway through the 90-day comment period established by the USFS. This would be the week of July 29 to Aug. 2. This seems to be a good week for everyone.

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After doing some checking, it was determined that the public meeting will be Aug. 1 (Thursday), 5:00 to 7:00 pm at the Dr. Robert Saul Center in Mountainair, NM.

We set the date for the Collaborative's kick-off meeting to work on comments as July 10. The Estancia Basin group will meet in the morning, and the Mountainair Collaborative kickoff meeting will be in the afternoon. We'll decide on other dates on that meeting.

Robert asked that we make sure to include the Lincoln County newspapers for public announcements on Cibola plan revision and meetings.

Sarah asked that anyone who had information on publications that are no longer in business, to please let her know. Robert said he would send info on Lincoln County media, including radio stations.

Sarah noted that the official newspaper of record for the Cibola National Forest is the Albuquerque Journal, so all notices will be published there.

Round Robin

◆ Anthony – the Mountainair Ranger District is planning to do a Rx burn this spring, or if not, then in the fall. They want to burn 500 to 600 acres, weather permitting, perhaps as soon as Wednesday. This will be by Thunderbird Area south of Manzano, near Veteran's Park.

Dee – we haven't gotten any info from Mt. Taylor about burns. We have gotten info on Magdalena. It's good to know if people ask about the smoke.

◆ Robert – The Smokey Bear Collaborative in the Lincoln NF is working on a transportation and recreation plan for 3,500 acres around Hale Lake, near Ruidoso. The area has been treated, and they now are looking at different uses, from horseback riding, mountain bikes, hiking and OHVs. Robert's plan is to protect current uses such as hunting and grazing, and making sure it's all within budget. The Lincoln NF will start NEPA scoping soon.

◆ Steve – the renewable energy projects in Torrance County have their areas for generation figured out, but not their transmission routes. Sun Zia and Western Spirit are the current names of the companies (although they change names).

Question – is it true that Western Spirit doesn't have to go through the PRC? Steve said this is still up in the air. A member noted that the wind towers disrupt the wide open spaces in the County. Marc from the National Park Service (NPS) said the companies have reached out to the NPS, which is unusual. They have tried to site the lines away from the places where people object.

Meeting ended: 2:45 pm