

**Statement of
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Before The

**Subcommittee On Forests and Public Lands
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate**

Concerning

**The Proposed Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan)
for the White River National Forest**

February 23, 2000

Mr. Chairman and Members Of The Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the White River National Forest, and to report on the progress of their Draft Environmental Impact Statement and the Proposed Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). I am Lyle Laverty, Regional Forester for the Rocky Mountain Region. Martha Ketelle, Forest Supervisor for the White River National Forest, is also here today.

Forest plans are strategic, programmatic land management documents. They guide all land management activities on national forests for a period of 10 to 15 years. The current Forest Plan for the White River National Forest was approved in 1984. It is currently being revised. No final decision has been made regarding the plan revision, and I am currently engaged in reviewing public comments and working closely with Forest staff to ensure that public considerations, as well as agency priorities, are incorporated into the final decision.

Background

This revision is based on many factors, including significant changes in urban growth near the Forest. Population in the White River area was about 60,000 in 1980. That population has more than doubled in the past two decades. During the same time period, the recreation visits to the Forest have increased from less than 5 million per year to more than 12 million per year. The influx of people living in close proximity to the Forest, as well as the number of new Colorado residents living within a one-hour drive of the Forest, will exert pressures on the land and on the facilities people use to enjoy the land.

The State of Colorado estimates that the population of the White River area will double again to more than 250,000 residents by 2020. Planning for this growth, and the potential impacts it has on public lands is an issue for the revised plan.

In addition to more people living near and using the Forest, there are new activities occurring on public lands that are not part of our current plan. These activities, such as mountain biking, need to be managed so people can enjoy public lands while minimizing resource impacts. Technology is also advancing at a steady rate resulting in vehicles that can access more miles of terrain, as well as more types of terrain. These uses are not addressed in the current Forest Plan.

In addition to more people and uses, the scientific community has become more knowledgeable over the past 20 years about how forests and ecosystems function. This knowledge, when added to advances in data gathering technology, has given us a new framework for land management that needs to be incorporated into the new Forest Plan.

The plan revision for the White River National Forest has been underway for several years. It was developed with input from diverse public interests, government agencies and individual citizens. Working with our local and national constituents has been, and will continue to be, a priority.

Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Six forest plan revision topics were identified with input from the public through scoping efforts. The six topics are: biological diversity, travel management, recreation, roadless and wilderness areas, special interest areas and timber harvest. These topics are addressed in each of the alternatives in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

Specific concerns have been raised about some of the information displayed in the Draft EIS. One concern is the treatment of ski areas. In the preferred alternative, allocation of land for ski areas would be limited to lands currently under permit. This reflects a general strategy that will impact some areas more than others. Certain ski areas have significantly more development potential under this management strategy than others. We are currently working with ski areas to identify an approach that responds to each area's individual needs. There are significant concerns on both sides of the ski area expansion issue—both in favor of and against the Forest Service allocating additional lands for this purpose.

Another area of concern is travel management and public access. All alternatives in the Draft EIS allow for public access and enjoyment of the Forest. Road management is an agency priority. Because of this, each alternative looks at closing a certain number of roads that are no longer needed, not up to standard, or are causing an environmental concern. The vast majority of the current road system will remain open to multiple uses for the continued enjoyment of recreational and commodity users. Hikers and equestrians will continue to use all but a few small areas of the Forest for their activities.

A third concern is that the White River National Forest will be “locked up” and not available to the public for their use and enjoyment. This may stem from changes the Forest Plan makes for recreation uses. It is true, for example, that the Plan proposes to close some roads, remove some areas from snowmobile access, and eliminate some mountain bike trails. The key word is “some.” No recreational opportunity will be eliminated from the Forest. There will be approximately 1,500 miles of roads open and more than 1,800 miles of trails available for multiple uses. Diverse recreation opportunities will continue to be abundant on the White River National Forest.

Closures and changes are based on the need to manage for healthy physical and biological resources. Changes are based on an ever-increasing understanding of what the Forest and ecosystem can endure. Changes reflect an increasing demand on a fixed resource—public land. Changes are being proposed so that people can enjoy the Forest on a sustainable basis into the future, for many generations to come.

Economic viability is a concern of many people who make their living through activities tied to the White River National Forest. Tourism related businesses are the predominant employer in the White River area. Tourism accounts for half of all jobs in three of the counties that contain White River lands. I am fully aware of the impact that management decisions have on economic growth and development in this area. Our analysis shows, however, that all of our alternatives will increase job opportunities in these communities.

The issue of water, and water rights, has also received considerable attention. The Forest Plan contains statements regarding water and instream flow measures. The intent of the Forest Plan is to continue the approach to water management that is in use today. That is, when water permits come due for reissuance, or we receive a new application for a water development, the Forest will do an analysis to determine if there is a resource condition that requires an instream protection measure. Such site-specific analyses are done today, as part of our current land management activities. They are done to determine if there is a sensitive species present, a fragile riparian area, or other resource conditions that would necessitate keeping a certain amount of water in a system. Unfortunately, the State of Colorado and the Forest Service have not yet come to agreement on what the best mechanisms are for protecting such conditions. We will continue the dialog with the State in hopes of working through this issue.

Planning Process

I would now like to briefly touch on the planning process and where we go from here. The revision effort started several years ago with review of the current Forest Plan and identification of revision topics. We have actively engaged the public for the past three years. This includes work group sessions, public meetings, formal and informal presentations, and countless one-on-one sessions with individuals to spread the word about the Plan and to solicit input. This has helped us narrow the scope of the issues and identify potential future management options for the White River National Forest.

The draft documents were released to the public last August. Documents are available for review at all White River offices and local libraries. It is also available on the Internet and on CDROM. Over 1,500 hard copies were distributed to clubs, groups, and agencies.

We have had two extensions to the original comment period. The comment period now lasts nine months and will end May 9th of this year. We are using this time to continue to meet with interested parties to help them focus their comments and help us craft the Final Forest Plan.

We have received approximately 2,500 comment letters. We are working on an analysis of the comments at this time. We expect to use these comments to develop additional alternatives for consideration in the Final EIS and Final Forest Plan.

Six alternatives were presented in the Draft EIS. These alternatives represent a wide range of emphasis areas brought to our attention through public scoping. We chose Alternative D as our preferred alternative. We are asking for, and receiving comments on all alternatives and aspects of the draft documents. We anticipate that there will be many changes to both the original alternatives and several sections of the Draft EIS and Forest Plan. The hope is to create a management strategy in the Final Forest Plan that is responsive to public concerns and reflects our agency's priorities and our nation's laws.

Other Planning Efforts

There are currently several national planning efforts underway that may impact the White River Forest Plan. They include: the national roadless initiative, the potential listing of the Canada lynx as an endangered species, the revision of the forest planning regulations, and the Government Performance and Review Act implementation strategy for 2000. The Forest staff is aware of all of these efforts and will incorporate any new directions that come out in a timely manner into the Final Forest Plan. The roadless initiative is on a schedule similar to that of the Forest Plan. If the roadless initiative is completed on time, the White River planning team will incorporate the resulting direction into the Final Forest Plan documents. All of these large-scale planning efforts add to the complexity of creating a final management strategy for the White River National Forest.

Summary

In closing I would like to say how important it is to keep the dialog open on public land management. The degree of interest in the White River Forest Plan reflects how important these lands are to the American people. Public lands are valued for a variety of reasons, all of these reasons are valid and all of them are important. Interest in public lands has never been higher. To serve the people and manage the land for the future, trade-offs must be made and compromises reached. We will continue to meet with interested parties to discuss this plan and look for solutions.

This concludes my written statement. Martha and I are happy to answer any questions you or your subcommittee has at this time.