

Carson Forest sees plan as chance to be good 'neighbor'

By J.R. Logan

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What should the national forest around Taos look like? And what should be done to preserve its resources while leaving it open to public use?

Those are the big questions being asked as the Carson National Forest begins a multiyear revision of a comprehensive forest plan that will likely affect forest activities — including the protection of water quality, grazing management and wildfire treatments — over the next several decades.

Around Taos, this sort of big-picture planning often highlights disagreements among opposing interests who aren't known for compromise (think environmentalists versus cattlemen). And given the complex and often antagonistic relationship between forest managers and longtime locals, there's plenty of mistrust that has stymied conversations in the past.

But at this early stage in the revision process, both the Forest Service and private groups are hopeful for a more constructive dialogue, in part because of imminent danger posed by changing climactic and ecologic conditions.

"It's a golden opportunity," says Peter Vigil with Taos Soil and Water Conservation District, which has been invited to take a seat at the table for the revision. "The management of federal lands affects the valley tremendously, and we want to get in on the ground floor to represent the interests of local, land-based people."

About 40 percent of Taos County's landscape — more than a half-million acres — is managed by the Forest Service. And those public lands include the upper watersheds of tributaries to the Rio Grande that provide water to Taos and the myriad communities at the base of the mountains. The national forest is also key to the area's tourism and recreation industry. That includes Taos Ski Valley, which operates on Forest Service land.

Kevin Naranjo, the Forest Service employee heading the plan revision, says the Carson sees itself as a "community forest" that recognizes the forest was integral to the survival of Native and Hispano people for centuries, and remains an important asset in the region. "We're a neighbor, and we want to behave like a neighbor," Naranjo said.

Of course, the Forest Service isn't just a neighbor, but a steward and, in many cases, arbiter.

A 2007 study of the Carson National Forest by the University of New Mexico Bureau of Business and Economic Research, asserted that, around Taos, there is "potential for conflict between traditional interests and the growing population of retirees, second-homebuyers,

tourists and recreational users” and the Forest Service “frequently finds itself at the center of these conflicts.”

Battles between locals and the agency are well-known. Taos Pueblo finally prevailed in 1970 after spending decades trying to wrest control of sacred Blue Lake from the agency. And to this day, there is latent resentment among descendants of Hispano settlers who believe the agency scooped up large portions of Spanish and Mexican land grants, depriving them of resources that were vital to their way of life.

Naranjo says the forest plan revision is a chance to redirect that legacy. “It’s an opportunity for us to start to engage more in a conversation with the public,” he says, adding that new relationships will hopefully lead to increased trust and cooperation.

The first step: Talk less and listen more.

In an initial series of public meetings, Naranjo said the agency made a very conscious effort to sit back and let the public offer opinions on what was important and what changes need to be made. He said the response was impressive.

“What we found at our public meetings is listening is powerful,” Naranjo says. “We started by hearing from the public how they value the forest. They got to talk and we listened.”

Exactly how this discussion will translate into tangible changes on the ground will now be hashed out in the coming years.

To get the plan revision process going, staff at the Carson did a preliminary study of the major ecological risks facing the forest — things like wildfire, water quality degradation and the impacts of climate change (all of which have significant areas of overlap).

Naranjo emphasizes that the forest plan will not be a to-do list of specific projects to address these issues. Instead, he says the plan clearly describes ideal forest conditions. He calls it a “vision for how we want the forest to look.”

One example, Naranjo says, might be adopting language in the plan to better accommodate efforts like the Rio Grande Water Fund, which seeks to do landscape-scale treatments of forests at risk of catastrophic wildfire. The effort is being led by the Nature Conservancy, but it includes dozens of private and governmental groups that are chipping in money and resources to tackle enormous swaths of forest. As an agency facing a dwindling budget at a time of mounting needs, it’s the kind of collaborative effort some forest officials hope to embrace to share the cost while enjoying broader community support.

For Taos-based environmental group Amigos Bravos, the plan revision is a chance to champion the important role wetlands play in the upper watersheds.

“The wetlands are the sponges of our watershed, and they’re critical, especially in a changing climate,” says Rachel Conn, interim director of Amigos Bravos.

Wetlands capture water and snow melt and release it slowly into streams and rivers, ensuring steady flow and consistent supply throughout the year, Conn says.

The group's "Wetlands Gems" initiative seeks to convince the forest service to put special protections on key wetlands to protect them from impacts like over-grazing and illegal vehicle use, which Conn says make these riparian areas less efficient.

But in the plan revision process, the interests of Amigos Bravos will no doubt be tempered by the interests of cattlemen (who enjoy enormous political support), as well as off-road vehicle users, who fear such increased regulation might impact them.

Naranjo acknowledges the challenge in finding a compromise, but he hopes everyone will have the patience to stick with the process long enough to feel some ownership in the final product, which isn't expected until 2018.

"Somewhere in there is the balance," Naranjo says. And to me, that will be a plan."

For more information about the Carson National Forest plan revision process, including a report on potential ecologic risks to be addressed, a timeline of action and instructions on how to comment, visit fs.usda.gov/carson/, email carsonplan@fs.fed.us or call (575) 758-6221.