

My Turn

It is time to get your letters to the Carson National Forest—again

Jim O'Donnell

The Taos News, 1/25/2018

The Carson National Forest is in the process of revising its existing 1986 Forest Plan. This type of forest plan revision is a once-in-a-generation type of thing.

It is time to get your letters to the Carson National Forest.

Again, the plan affects the entire 1.5 million acres of our public lands that are managed by the Carson. This is the fourth year in a multi-year process.

The planning process takes place in three stages. Last year, the Forest Service kicked off the first stage by assessing current forest conditions and uses and how those things might change over the coming 30 years. We are in the second stage of the planning process where the Forest Service is drawing up a revised plan.

This process is the perfect opportunity for the people of Northern New Mexico to have a say in how our forests, lakes, streams and landscapes are managed. During the first stage, a diverse group of Northern New Mexicans, including groups, such as Amigos Bravos, the Western Environmental Law Center, Trout Unlimited, New Mexico Wildlife Federation and Backcountry Horsemen of New Mexico, joined with many individuals in our community to influence this management plan revision. We helped community members to submit informed and effective letters to the Forest Service.

And the Forest Service listened.

We need to keep the ball rolling. Even if you wrote a letter last fall, it is time to write another. Three main sections are the target of our efforts in the new plan.

The first has to do with Valle Vidal. A little more than 11 years ago, we were able to get legislation through Congress that permanently protected the Valle Vidal from oil and gas development. With the plan revision, we have the opportunity to get a cohesive vision for the valle encompassing the restoration work that is underway, the area's wild, roadless lands, its unique biological and recreation values and its working landscape.

For this round of comments, we thank the Forest Service for proposing a Valle Vidal management area as we suggested. And we want them to go further. We are asking them to prohibit the construction of new motorized trails, to require decommissioning of unauthorized routes, to ensure that grazing allotment management plans help to improve watershed conditions and, finally, to prohibit military maneuvers in the Valle Vidal.

The second section has to do with our "wetland jewels."

High-altitude wetlands are rare in the Southwest, and our forest hosts an impressive number of these places. We've identified 10 wetlands that hold important watershed and biodiversity

values. Our proposal seeks protections against a variety of impacts. These areas also need to be given special restoration priority.

The designation and protection of Wetland Jewel Management Areas are essential to the health and vitality of the entire Carson and to communities that rely on healthy watersheds and clean water. As such, the Carson must include the Wetland Jewels Management Areas in its proposed alternative (alternative 2) and not only in alternative 4.

Without healthy headwater wetland systems, snowmelt and storm water flow out of the forest all at once, causing floods in the spring and then dry streambeds later in the season. Healthy wetland systems moderate both of these events by soaking up flood waters and increasing streamflow during dry times.

Third, the Carson is downgrading river protections in the forest. We want them to know we strongly oppose this action. The Carson needs to make clear why they are taking away wild and scenic protections from more than 60 waterways.

We are concerned how the new evaluation of rivers previously found eligible will affect the quantity and quality of water in our region.

Your say in this management plan matters. We are asking you to support the Valle Vidal and wetland jewels proposals and to express your concern about removing the wild and scenic protections from so many of our waterways.

You can submit your comments to Carson National Forest, 208 Cruz Alta Road, Taos, NM 87571. The deadline is February 1.

If you find yourself struggling to put together your own letter, a bunch of Taose-os are going to meet at the Amigos Bravos office Monday (Jan.

29) from 4:30-7 p.m. to craft letters together. I will be there to answer questions and help you draft your comments along with folks from the Western Environmental Law Center and Amigos Bravos. Join us!

Jim O'Donnell is a photographer and conservationist in Taos.

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