Impact of 2012 Forest Planning Rule

The U.S. Forest Service implemented a new planning rule in 2012 to guide all land management plans on National Forest System (NFS) lands. Those plans must aim to maintain and restore forest NFS land and water ecosystems while providing for ecosystem services and multiple uses.

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

Martin Nie, Professor of Natural Resources Policy at the College of Forestry and Conservation, and co-authors recently published an invited paper on “Wildlife Conservation Planning Under the United States Forest Service’s 2012 Planning Rule” in the The Journal of Wildlife Management.

They conclude that President Obama’s forest planning regulations represent the most significant change in federal forest policy in decades and have sweeping implications for wildlife populations. One of the most controversial and litigated aspects of national forest management is the requirement to “provide for a diversity of plant and animal communities.”

“The diversity mandate,” says Nie, “is one of the most significant provisions in federal lands and resources law.” The 2012 regulations interpret this provision much differently than previous regulations. Nie and co-authors (Courtney Schultz, Thomas Sisk, and Barry Noon) analyze the intricacies of the new wildlife provision and what it means for national forest management. They also provide a number of recommendations of how they believe the rule should be implemented by the U.S. Forest Service in the future.

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Nie has published several other interconnected papers in the last three months that focus on some of the most controversial and complicated issues in federal lands and national forest planning. Two of these examine the widespread use of adaptive management by federal land agencies.

Nie and co-author Courtney Schultz examine the use of decision making “triggers” as a way to increase accountability in adaptive planning and its emphasis on monitoring and mitigation. “Triggers,” says Nie, “are a type of pre-negotiated commitment made by an agency within an adaptive management framework specifying what actions will be taken if monitoring information shows X or Y.”

The studies, recently published in Conservation Biology and a more law-focused piece published in Natural Resources Journal, provide the political and legal context of adaptive management and environmental monitoring. They also analyze some of the real world obstacles to the implementation of adaptive management.

Nie and Schultz examined several controversial cases, such as salmon management on the Columbia River and oil and gas development in Wyoming. According to Nie, decision making triggers, if designed with care and selectively used, could help bridge the need for more adaptive planning with political accountability.

STANDARDS IN FOREST PLANNING

Nie and co-author Emily Schembra also recently finished their research on the role standards play in national forest planning. Wildlife viability and standards are among the most controversial parts of national forest planning. Standards are typically understood as legally enforceable and
binding commitments made in a forest plan, requiring such things as old growth and elk protection, road density, or stream buffers. Nie and Schembra found widespread confusion on the role that standards have played in the past.

“Our paper is written so to provide a more common reference point and understanding in future debates over the topic,” says Nie. They hope their work will help managers write more effective forest plans in the future.

Roughly half of the national forests in the nation will soon begin revising their national forest plans. This research can provide the Forest Service and planning participants useful information to consider and possibly use for writing revised plans in Montana and elsewhere.


“This was a great opportunity,” says Nie, “to place some of my planning-focused work in a historical and political context.” He concludes that “All the talk and time devoted to ecosystem management was not in vain, but that the same barriers to this sort of adaptive, collaborative, and landscape-scale management are basically still in place.”

FURTHER READING


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