**Southwestern Region of the USDA Forest Service**

**Strategic Plan (Draft 2021.03.17)**

The Southwestern Region of the Forest Service spans Arizona’s lower Sonoran Desert that is 1,600 feet above sea level with an annual rainfall of 8 inches to northern New Mexico’s 13,171-foot Wheeler Peak with more than 35 inches of precipitation each year. The Region hosts an abundance of wildlife, including the highest number of threatened and endangered species in the nation and unique creatures found nowhere else. The Southwest’s aridity means both water and fire play unique and powerful roles here.

From the grasslands of Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico to the borderlands of Arizona, the Southwest’s forests, deserts, and life-infusing waterways have long been and remain home for generations who have known, treasured, and depended upon special places here. Personal and community ties to the land range from tribes, pueblos, and land grants with histories spanning centuries to scores of new arrivals drawn here by the climate, scenery, and unique heritage, as well as by expansive tracts of public land. The diversity in landscapes found here is matched by the diversity of perspectives, experiences, and values.

## 1. World Forces

World forces represent context and circumstances external to the organization that affect the ability to carry out our mission. These ongoing and emerging world trends are strongly influencing the Southwestern Region’s land management and public service responsibilities and are impacting our ability to deliver mission critical work. Each force brings forth both risks and opportunities, which are described here.

**1.1 Global Environmental Change**

**Description**

Humanity’s worldwide demand for resources, coupled with the economic and technological means to manipulate our environment, have led to planetary scale impacts to our global ecosystem over the last century. Our influence and impacts are growing exponentially with time, leading to what is being considered a new geologic epoch.

Human-caused alterations to climate, decreased plant biomass available for life forms, loss of open space and plant and animal migrations are examples of critical environmental vulnerabilities. As much as 40 percent of the global production of plant biomass is consumed by humans or unavailable due to loss of open space, leaving fewer food sources and habitats for plants and animals. Options for plant and animal migrations are greatly reduced or eliminated, and artificial introductions of non-native species and diseases to new areas are prolific. Underpinning all this is reduced water availability, a lynchpin of ecosystem resilience. The antagonistic impacts from each of these factors are substantially amplified by global climate change, causing environmental extremes that are outpacing the normal course of evolution.

**Associated Risks**

The pace and scale of this global environmental change is unprecedented and leads to significant risks and uncertainty in terms of how best to fulfill the Forest Service’s mission of sustaining the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. Increasingly frequent and intense drought and wildfires uncharacteristic in scale, timing, and duration, brought about by climate change, development, interruption of natural processes, and more create pressure and the need for immediate action. The cultural, institutional, and legal frameworks the Forest Service operates under are, in many cases, not agile enough to adapt to a future that has no historical analog. Given the lack of precedent, there is risk that amid uncertainty around how best and if to respond, there could be a tendency toward inaction.

**Potential Opportunities**

These challenges offer an excellent opportunity for the Region to leverage our expertise and resources by convening our communities, sister agencies, cooperators, and stakeholders to work in a boundaryless fashion toward common goals. By applying climate science in resource decisions and practicing adaptive (active?) management, we can reduce the negative impacts of climate change on forests. The vast land base of National Forests and Grasslands serves as green infrastructure and offers the opportunity to mitigate climate change through biomass growth; the capture, store, and release of clean water; and access to renewable energy and other resources for our communities. Further, there is the opportunity to retain resilient and connected landscapes that function as “experimental controls” and “living laboratories” for cutting-edge technologies and science aimed at species conservation. Venturing into new endeavors holds the opportunity of increased effectiveness in monitoring of our actions to ensure they are having the affect we intend.

**1.2 Changing Relationship with the Natural World**

**Description**

Over time, growing populations with shifting demographics, increased urbanization, alternate forms of entertainment, advances in global technologies, rising occupational specialization and separation from producing one’s own food and shelter all have greatly altered American’s relationship with nature. These changing dynamics impact peoples’ views and understanding of nature and affect the perceived importance of public lands. Additionally, democratization and exponential growth of (mis-)information on the internet has resulted in more diverse views and polarization on how land and water should best be managed. More recently, advances in recreation technology and a global pandemic have driven a dramatic increase in the numbers and types of visitors to public lands.

Wildfires in the western United States and epic weather events in other parts of the country are lessening doubts about the fragility of nature and the planet and the degree to which humanity relies upon both, not just for recreation and spiritual renewal, but for survival. Social unrest, including the uprising at Standing Rock, has highlighted the social injustices built into colonial and utilitarian approaches to land use. And the perception that land value derives from what can be taken from it is shifting to include the recognition that, first, we need to sustain the function of intact ecosystems across landscapes.

**Associated Risk**

If people are increasingly detached from the land, they do not see themselves needing it or having a role in stewarding it. This leaves a disproportionate responsibility to land managers and risks the gradual privatization of public lands for future generations. Many Forest Service guiding regulations and policies, including our appropriation framework, are at odds with a shift away from a primary focus on what is takenfrom the land. Our current systems and structures often impede proactive stewardship that is responsive to the diverse and changing views of how public lands should be managed. Additionally, the demographic makeup of Region 3 employees does not currently mirror the diversity of the communities we serve. As a result, we may miss important perspectives, knowledge, relationships, and opportunities for serving underrepresented populations, with the risk of intensifying people’s disconnection from public lands.

**Potential Opportunities**

The opportunity here is to deepen our commitment to community engagement in the Southwest. Through meaningful interactions with the peoples who live, work and visit here, we have the opportunity to promote increased understanding of and connection to the land. The inclusion of living experiences of land stewardship, as well as sharing our diverse stories and perspectives, can result in greater public appreciation of the natural world and our evolving part in it. Involving partners of all kinds enables us to reach the many diverse communities and peoples of the Southwest, with whom we can transform outmoded institutional assumptions and processes that can result in bias, racism and lack of inclusion. Further, our youth engagement efforts can stimulate interest in and ownership of public lands, as advocates for the Agency’s relevance into the future. As our workforce becomes more representative of and sensitive to the communities we serve, opportunities increase to fully achieve meaningful engagement and shared stewardship of these lands.

**1.3 Technology**

**Description**

For over half a century, computing power has nearly doubled every two years. With the exponential change of technology, applications, and devices, the slow wheels of government are unable to keep up. Technological changes have profound implications for business operational efficiencies and capabilities, land use and management including fire, science, and people’s connection to nature. With technological advances come increasingly higher expectations for both efficiency and sophistication in service delivery, compelling a need for updated regulations and policies, as well as proactive strategies. National, state, and local laws, policies, and social norms delay the advance of technology as it is being applied, especially as it relates to land and natural resource management.

**Associated Risks**

The current state of approval and procurement processes and network security concerns cause governmental adoption of new technologies to significantly lag the private sector and the public at large. The associated risks are reduced timeliness and quality of services and the resulting frustration of customers and partners. Additionally, the Agency risks losing opportunities to innovate toward more efficient and effective service delivery to increase employee safety, minimize financial costs of mission-critical work, and ultimately, achieve critical ecological goals. The rate of change in technology coupled with the out-of-pace rate of technology adoption (and procurement of out-moded solutions) creates the risk of a workforce with less technological savvy and capability than the public we serve. This erodes public trust and adversely impacts our ability to recruit and retain top talent in the Agency. As well, our cultural “can-do” attitude can result in makeshift solutions geared to the moment, with the risk of added workload and lost data in the future. Additionally, there can be resistance to investing the time needed to learn new technologies, with the risk of falling behind and loss of future efficiency. Finally, we tend toward a reactive stance to new land-use technologies (e.g., drones, e-bikes, etc.), with the risk of negative resource impacts, safety issues and public impatience.

**Potential Opportunities**

There is tremendous opportunity for the Agency and government at large to develop technology approval and deployment strategies that keep pace with the private sector since the appropriate use of technology can benefit every area of our work. Technology opportunities abound, from how we attend to and interact with the public, to what our workforce can accomplish, both in the field and in the office, to how we automate systems and processes and share scientific findings and applications. Potential gains include improved relations and confidence with employees and the public, maximized efficiencies that reduce workforce vulnerability and needs, and increased productivity and morale. In the Region, virtual technologies offer opportunities for us to reengineer the fabric of our hierarchical organizations and to blur our administrative boundaries, both within and outside of the Forest Service, in ways that can lead to increased savings and service to the public. Further, technology enables us to address broadscale issues at the appropriate scale. The Region can explicitly explore coming and available technologies, as well as more rapid deployment to support innovations that will enable us to retain our role as leaders in natural resource conservation.

**1.4 Appropriations & Expectations**

**Description**

Allocations to the Forest Service have been relatively flat for more than a decade. Factoring in inflation means that real purchasing power is declining, and there is little anticipation that this will change. Forest Service work is guided by expectations and associated allocations from Congress, USDA, the public, and special interest groups that influence Congressional decisions. While allocations have been flat, public and political expectations have not. New and more diverse land uses have led to higher expectations and demands, which shift from year to year. As well, growing development and habitation in the wildland urban interface resulting in additional demand for protection from wildfire, coupled with improved safety standards for firefighting have led to increased costs and substantial diversion of Agency funds and focus to fire suppression and fuels mitigation, at the expense of non-fire programs. Finally, the Forest Service’s success is measured in board feet and acres rather than more relevant consequences and outcomes. These circumstances mean that the Forest Service faces unprecedented challenges in how to achieve the entirety of its mission-critical work.

**Associated Risks**

Under the current circumstances, the ability of the Forest Service to accomplish all that is needed for National Forest land management is at risk. The associated consequences and risks are many. First, compromised ability to be responsive to public, private, and state and local governmental requests for services diminishes confidence in the Agency, with the risk of allocation cuts. Second, growing and shifting demands in a constrained financial environment can cause a lack of focus, with the risk of a more crisis management, reactive approach. Third, having more work than time is a consistent and known impact to employee morale, with the risk of workforce attrition. Fourth, costs of the wildfire organization and preparation, though needed, decrease the ability to invest in the other programs. A major risk here is the separation of fire suppression from land management, and the demise of critical conservation work accomplished by the Agency. Finally, increased reliance on partners and cooperators demands capability in collaboration, communication, and governance. If this is lacking, such relationships can feel like giving up authority, with the risk of unclear liability for decisions.

**Potential Opportunities**

Flat budgets offer the opportunity for innovation, and the Region can reframe every aspect of our business processes and decision-making framework to simplify, bring focus, and seek new approaches to our work. Flat budgets also incentivize our engagement with others in a cross-boundary, shared stewardship model, with substantial opportunities to benefit the land by joining forces with our communities, local governments, sister agencies, non-governmental organizations, and cooperators. We have numerous opportunities to broaden our relevancy with the public in relation to lesser-known areas of service and knowledge, such as species protection, water production, recreation, and research so that they are aware and supportive of the totality of the Forest Service’s role. We also have the opportunity and ability to communicate a focused program of work and engage employees with clear priorities and sense of purpose. Additionally, we can bring increased rigor and innovation to the strategic balance between the Region’s mission priorities and real capacity in the areas of people, funding, technology, infrastructure, governance, and reputation.

**Conclusion**

In such a dramatically changing world – in many ways, far from the one in which the Forest Service was founded, we see the changing climate and environment, marked by largescale trends like floods, drought and fire, an Agency funding imbalance that favors fire suppression over conservation work, all in the context of people’s ever-evolving and widely various relationship with nature.

When we look at the Southwest’s mountaintops, for instance, some people see ancient summer homeland and sacred sites, while others see high pasture, firewood for the hearth, and forage for animals. Some see the raw materials, such as minerals and timber, demanded by our way of life, and others see an abundant playground, rich with possibilities to recreate. Still others see the wild nature of our world as sanctuary, playing a larger role within a global ecosystem. As the public’s steward of these lands, the Southwestern Region of the Forest Service is charged with balancing these many and often opposing perspectives with the long-term sustainability of the land.

In the face of all this, the primary risk indicated here is the inability to fulfill the entirety of the Forest Service mission. This risk can be both confounding and debilitating. But with a clear-eyed look at each world force, we see a common opportunity emerge: that of innovation. The call to the Region is for evaluation and transformation of our ways of doing business, as well as of the cultural assumptions and norms from which they spring. This does not mean a complete reinvention, but rather careful consideration of the Region’s strengths and capabilities that may be brought more to the fore, as well as where we will benefit from growth as we explore new approaches to our work.

Happily, the Southwestern Region is one of grit and adaptation – we are known as the *Pilot Region* because we are comfortable with – even inspired by – trying new things. This strategic plan outlines the path forward.

## Southwestern Region’s Vision, Beliefs and Mission

The Region’s vision statement is aspirational and expresses what we are ultimately working toward. The belief statements clarify foundational understanding of the world that is core to our work. Finally, the mission statement describes how we achieve the Vision. These statements together provide the basis for the Region’s response to the external forces.

**Our Vision:**

The peoples of the iconic American Southwest care for these treasured landscapes as an essential and continuous legacy.

**We believe:**

Water is the keystone of caring for the lands of the Southwest.

Land stewardship evolves, anchored in science and place-based experience.

Many voices balance multiple uses in service to resilient nature.

**Our Mission:**

As the public’s steward, we join forces with communities in the work of sustaining southwestern forests and grasslands.

## The Mission and Capacity Areas of Focus

[*explanatory paragraph: what this material is and how it will be used by the Region, namely to guide and direct the development of the Program of Work*]