Strategic Plan

Southwestern Region, USDA Forest Service

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# Letter from the Regional Forester

[To be written.]

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# Introduction

The Southwestern Region of the Forest Service spans Arizona’s lower Sonoran Desert at 1,600 feet above sea level to northern New Mexico’s 13,171-foot Wheeler Peak. The Region hosts an abundance of wildlife, with some of the highest numbers 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 west Texas and Oklahoma to New Mexico and Arizona, the southwest’s forests, deserts, grasslands, and life-infusing waterways have long been and remain home to generations who have known, treasured, and depended upon special places here. Personal and community ties to the land range from Tribes and Pueblos here for millennia, to Land Grants with centuries of history, to scores of new arrivals drawn 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.

# World Forces

World forces represent context and circumstances external to the Region that affect the ability to carry out our mission. There are four ongoing and emerging trends that strongly influence the Southwestern Region’s land management and public service responsibilities and impact our delivery of mission critical work. These forces present both risks and opportunities, which are described here to set the stage for the Region’s strategic direction.

## 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 may become a new geologic age.

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. Options for plant and animal migrations are greatly reduced or eliminated, and introductions of non-native species and diseases are prolific. Underlying all this is reduced water availability, a lynchpin of ecosystem resilience. These factors and their impacts are amplified by global climate change, causing environmental extremes with which we are unfamiliar and underprepared to address.

**Associated Risks**

The pace and scale of global environmental change creates risks and uncertainty for 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 rapidly changing future. Given the extent of uncertainty, there could be a tendency toward inaction and/or continued management that is no longer appropriate to the emerging context.

**Potential Opportunities**

These challenges offer an excellent opportunity for the Region to leverage our expertise and resources by convening communities, sister agencies, cooperators, and stakeholders. In addition, the Region’s 55 Tribes and Pueblos, who have millennia of experience with landscape and climate change, offer a profound resource to the Forest Service as we engage challenging decisions. The vast land base of National Forests and Grasslands serves as natural infrastructure that mitigates climate change through biomass growth; captures, stores, and releases clean water; and provides 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 science and technologies aimed at species conservation. Venturing into new endeavors presents the opportunity to increase our effectiveness by monitoring actions to ensure they have the intended effects.

## Changing Relationship with the Natural World

**Description**

People’s relationship with nature is dynamic, constantly changing over time. The separation from producing one’s own food and shelter, coupled with growing populations and shifting demographics, social unrest, increased urbanization, alternate forms of entertainment, and advances in global technologies all continue to transform Americans’ relationship with nature. In turn, this relationship has a direct impact on the perceived role and importance of public lands. Exponential growth of 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 resulted in a dramatic increase in the numbers and types of visitors to public lands, which may indicate a major trend.

Wildfires in the western United States and epic weather events in other parts of the country are highlighting 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 has highlighted a broad range of social injustices built into utilitarian approaches to land use. The perception that land value derives from what can be taken from it is shifting to include recognition that we need to sustain intact ecosystems across landscapes as the basis for what can be taken.

**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, while at the same time, a smaller pool of people seeking employment as stewards of the land. This imbalance 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 views of how public lands should be managed and used. Additionally, the wide range of peoples living in and visiting this Region calls for heightened interest in and respect for their differing relationships with the natural world. Without which, we risk missing important perspectives, knowledge, relationships, and opportunities, as well as intensifying people’s disconnection from public lands. Finally, should recent increases in public land visitation persist, the risk is that our existing infrastructure is inadequate to ensuring the protection of people and nature.

**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, recreate and visit here, we can promote increased understanding of and connection to the land. The inclusion of direct experiences of land stewardship, as well as sharing our many 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 ensure wise use – whether for commercial, recreational, spiritual or sustenance purposes – of our public lands. Youth engagement can stimulate the next generation’s interest in and ownership of public lands, creating future advocates for the Agency’s multi-faceted efforts to care for the land and serve the people. As we become ever more sensitive to the communities with whom we share this region, opportunities increase to fully achieve the shared stewardship role.

## Technology

**Description**

For over half a century now, computing power has doubled every two years – stunning validation of a 1965 prediction that surprises even Intel founder Gordon Moore, who made it. While it is unlikely this rate will continue forever, still, the pace of new technology, applications, and devices outstrips the slow wheels of government. As an example, big data (aerial photos, LiDAR, modeling) are a requirement in decision-making and increasingly in demand by the public, but often cannot be supported by Agency systems. Also, ongoing trends in workplace reconfiguration, including smart offices, touch-free and remote work, are no longer a distant future due to the pandemic. These are only a few of the technological changes having profound implications for business operations, land use and management, travel and recreation, science, education, and more. With technological advances come increasingly higher public expectations for both efficiency and sophistication in service delivery.

Technology is a force so sweeping and continuous, this creates a need for updated regulations and policies, as well as proactive strategies. At the same time, the population of the southwest includes many communities with limited access to technology. So, as technology continues to evolve exponentially, it’s essential to develop a culture in which rapid technological change is the norm, while bridging to communities with less access.

**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 in service delivery, increase employee safety, minimize costs of mission-critical work, and benefit from advances in science. Ultimately, we risk our ability to achieve critical ecological goals made possible by emerging technologies.

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 risks 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 to reengineer organizational structure in ways that lead to increased savings and service to the public. Further, technology has the potential to enable us to continue to deliver the resources required by the nation in a way that transforms our relationship with the natural world. 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 securing the future of our natural resources.

## Appropriations & Expectations

**Description**

Forest Service work is guided by expectations from Congress, the USDA, the public, and special interest groups that influence Congressional decisions. New and more diverse land uses continue to evolve, leading to higher expectations and demands, which shift from year to year. Managing the Nation’s Forests and Grasslands and providing services to the public require a growing variety of specialty fields and expertise, all of which require funding. Congress allocates funding to the Forest Service based on expectations generally inferred by outputs (targets such as acreage and board feet). For long periods budgets remain flat, and then in other years, Congress provides an influx of funding to address particular initiatives. Recent examples include the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, additional funds for Wildfire Suppression and Recovery, the Great American Outdoors Act, and the anticipated Infrastructure Bill of 2022. This means that while some aspects of the Forest Service receive an influx of funding, others may not. Such circumstances mean that the Forest Service faces unprecedented challenges in how to achieve the entirety of its mission-critical work.

**Associated Risks**

The waxes and wanes of both allocations and expectations put at risk the Forest Service’s ability to accomplish all that is needed to manage the lands under our stewardship. Traditionally, it has been difficult for the Forest Service to shift priorities and needed capacity swiftly enough to meet allocation expectations. Earmarked allocations can come and go quickly. For a program area to go from flat budgets to sudden, large inflows of funding or, conversely, from an influx to a flat or declining budget make successful planning and execution more challenging.

In turn, compromised ability to be responsive to growing expectations erodes public trust and risks diminished allocations. Further, the ebb and flow of funding trends can result in a lack of focus and reactive approaches to what are by nature long-term dynamics on the landscape. In addition, measuring accomplishments in outputs instead of outcomes inadvertently places our focus on quantitative work rather than on much-needed qualitative work. The constant shifts in focus, as well as targets that are often disconnected from meaningful impacts on the land, have adverse effects on workforce morale, with the risk of growing attrition. Finally, the increasing costs of the wildfire organization, though needed, risk decreased investment in other programs. Ultimately, we risk the demise of the critical conservation work accomplished by the Forest Service. If we are not nimble enough in the face of budgetary shifts and associated expectations, great opportunities for investment and achievement are at risk of being missed.

**Opportunities**

The Region has a tremendous opportunity to increase its agility with regard to budget allocations, whether that means greater focus and innovative approaches during leaner funding cycles or being prepared to fast-track initiatives that meet the requirements of specialized influxes of funding. This depends on creating an investment strategy that is forward-thinking and aligned with the Region’s Strategic Plan, in which a range of priorities are at-the-ready. By emphasizing outcomes first, along with related outputs, we can achieve high-level work that makes a difference.

In all funding scenarios, the Region engages with others in a cross-boundary, shared stewardship model that provides substantial opportunities to benefit the land. Through partnerships with our communities, sister agencies, non-governmental organizations, cooperators, and local and international governments, we are more nimble and able to leverage a broad range of resources. We can also positively influence expectations through our relationships and broaden the public’s awareness of the Forest Service’s role related to species protection, water production, recreation, and research. Additionally, we can bring increased rigor to maintaining the strategic balance between our mission priorities and our capacity requirements (that is, workforce, funding, technology, infrastructure, governance, and reputation) to ensure our readiness no matter the situation.

## World Forces 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 large-scale 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 habitat for animals. Some see the raw materials, such as minerals and timber, demanded by the American standard of living, 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.

Fortunately, the Southwestern Region is one of grit and adaptation – we are known as the *Innovation 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

In developing the Region’s strategic plan, the question arose, does the Region need its own vision and mission statements, as well as core belief statements? While it is imperative that the Region’s strategic plan well aligns with the aspiration and direction coming from above, it is also important that the Region articulate how these are shaped by and expressed in the unique landscape and culture of the forests and grasslands here.

Thus, the Region’s vision statement is aspirational and expresses what we are ultimately working toward in the special landscapes of the southwest. The belief statements clarify foundational understanding of the world that is core to our work here. Finally, the mission statement specifically describes how we will reach for the vision. These statements together provide the basis both for the Region’s response to the external forces and for the emphasis in our work for the coming years.

Our Vision statement:

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

This statement captures the fundamental importance of the many cultures that make up and interact in the southwest. As well, it recognizes this place’s cherished status, not only for the people here, but for many around the world. The vision statement’s aspiration is that those who know and love this land will ensure its ongoing existence into the future.

Our core beliefs:

*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.*

The Southwestern Region of the Forest Service holds many values and beliefs as important to what we do and how we do it. Of these, there are three primary beliefs that serve as pillars for the Forest Service here. First and foremost, water is inseparable from all decisions and actions concerning the land. Its scarcity has defined life in the southwest for eons and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Second, we understand that our decisions today have consequences for the future, which we may come to know only then. It is therefore essential that we learn from our actions and evolve what we know as an ongoing practice. Finally, our devotion to the land is based in our need for it. These needs are various and often competing so, through the involvement of many, our decisions are strengthened.

Our Mission statement:

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

The mission statement captures the essential nature of the Forest Service role: that of service to the land on behalf of the American people. Again, here in the southwest, our interdependence is woven into the fabric of our storied history. We can only fully achieve our mission together with the people who live and visit here.

# A New Structure for the Region’s Work

## The Region’s Mission Work

The Southwestern Region’s mission work covers a wide and growing array of activities. One of the challenges of a strategic plan is appropriately addressing the totality of what the Region does, while giving sufficient direction as to current priorities. One way the strategic plan does this is by organizing all the mission work into a coherent structure. Obviously, there are various possibilities for how to structure the work. The value of a strategic plan is selecting the structure that will support an approach to the work that best equips us for the future we face.

To that end, the Region is adopting a structure for its mission work based on the scale of impact of its actions. This represents a departure from the three Rs structure (Restoration, Recreation and Relationships) we have used for the past five years. This departure is deliberate. In order to keep abreast of our changing world, we too, benefit from new thinking from time to time. This does not mean that the work related to the three Rs is complete or obsolete. Instead, this work is woven throughout the new structure, integrated, and expanded by it in new ways.

Additionally, in keeping with our core beliefs that call for more intentional consideration of our decision-making process, both its inclusivity and its forward thinking, organizing our work under three broad scales of impact better enables the Region to consider the longer-term and larger consequences of our actions. Another advantage of this structure is how it benefits our workforce. By explicitly seeing the breadth and long-term effects of the Region’s work, our employees tap into a greater sense of purpose. This includes how their work contributes to something bigger than themselves and even the communities in which they work. This sense of mission and far-reaching purpose has the potential to motivate our workforce in entirely new ways, retaining and attracting the types of people the Region needs.

## Three Areas of Mission Focus

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Description automatically generatedThe Regional Vitality focus area is an integrated set of objectives that represent the work that focuses across the Southwestern Region – the activities that specifically benefit the Region’s landscapes, communities, and businesses. Most of the Region’s population live in major urban centers such as Albuquerque and Phoenix and interact with the National Forests largely with a recreation focus. Yet, there is a substantial land base with rural communities that have deep roots and traditional cultural connections. These communities are often near National Forests and Grasslands and utilize their resources as fundamental to their way of life. The Southwestern Region is committed to serving both rural and urban communities and to bridging their broad range of interests. In particular, the Forest Service is attentive to benefitting disadvantaged and underserved communities wherever possible, with specific trust responsibility for protecting Tribal treaty rights, lands, assets and resources. This regional focus area contains most of what the public sees of our work, and as a result, is perhaps the most familiar of the three areas of Mission focus.

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Description automatically generatedThe National Prosperity focus area daylights the big resource contributions the Region is expected to make for the benefit of the nation. This is major work of the Region that may be controversial and/or invisible to much of the public, but that is required both in terms of the agency’s mandate and in terms of supporting the country. For instance, issuing Special Use Permits for mining, energy development or telecommunications is time-intensive and often contentious, but all these activities are required by the Forest Service’s authorizing legislation and demanded by our national standard of living (cell phones, broadband, automobiles, etc.) This area of focus is critical to increasing understanding of the Forest Service’s multiple use mandate, the resulting decisions and actions, as well as the opportunities for innovation that reduce the impacts from these uses.

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Description automatically generatedThe International Ecological Connection focus area provides the Region the stance to its work that involves the larger ecological scale demanded by climate change and its impacts (e.g., migration corridors, waterways, and contiguous soils), as well as for partnering with others at this scale. The Sonoran Desert and Madrean Pine-Oak Woodlands are examples of important and treasured ecosystems that span international borders, as watersheds are examples of vital resources that cross boundaries with tribes, pueblos, land grant communities and acequias. As discussed in World Forces above, the scale of ecological change now is global, so to meaningfully respond to its climactic change effects, we must work across international boundaries with approaches tuned to this scale. Another benefit of this focus area is an expanded mindset for engaging with the vital sovereign entities with whom we must work effectively to have the impacts we intend.

## Mission Objectives & Outcomes

The emphasis in the Mission Outcomes on T&E habitat acts to leverage the Region’s efforts for greater impact on the landscape, both for T&E and beyond, as well as for critical benefit for the communities that depend on them.

*[Insert Mission Objectives & Outcomes here.]*

## The Region’s Capacity Work

Many strategic plans express aspirational goals and objectives, but fewer also assess the requisite capacity to achieve them. Without capacity, mission goals and objectives remain aspirational without becoming realistic and achievable. This strategic plan considers the Region’s current capacity in seven core areas, with an eye to identifying the elements of capacity-building necessary to achieving what this plan outlines.

Distinguishing the Region’s work related to building and maintaining capacity from its work related to mission accomplishments enables the Region to focus its efforts where needed, while engaging partners where the most benefit will result. In general, mission work tends to be more visible to our customers and publics, since, after all, this is what they seek from us. While capacity work tends to be more inwardly focused – for example, the Region needs adequate database information storage and technology equipment (cells phones, laptops, etc.), but the public is generally unaware and unconcerned with this. Although capacity work is about building the Region’s ability to do its mission activities, nether type of work is more important than the other. In fact, both capacity and mission work are vital to the success of the Region, and it is leadership’s responsibility to ensure an adequate balance between the two.

## Seven Areas of Capacity Focus

### I. Workforce

### II. Funding

### III. Infrastructure

### IV. Technology & Information Management

### V. Image

### VI. Governance

### VII. Knowledge

## Capacity Objectives and Outcomes

*[Insert Capacity Objectives & Outcomes here.]*

# Appendices

## Tables of Mission & Capacity Goals, Objectives and Outcomes

## Compilation of Resources to Support Plan Outcome Implementation

## Glossary

[lists being developed]

### Acronyms

### Terms

Dispersed Recreation

Unmanaged Recreation

Underserved Communities

Headwaters / Water Source

Grassland(s) and grassland(s)

Physical assets - include the FS land base, recreation infrastructure, administrative space and the road/trail system.

Industry

Mission Work

Capacity Work

Region vs region – when Region is capitalized, it refers to the Southwestern Region of the US Forest Service; when region is not capitalized, it refers to the geographical area of the southwest of the United States.