**Southwestern Region of the USDA Forest Service**

**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.

**1.1 Global Environmental Change**

**Narrative**

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, and our influence and impacts are growing exponentially with time. This is leading to what is being termed the Holocene and Anthropocene Extinction, which in the latter case is a new geological epoch.

Anthropogenic alterations to climate, net production of plant biomass available to other life forms, open space, plant and animal migrations are examples of critical environmental vulnerabilities. National Forest System lands are the primary source of waters that nurture and sustain life and communities in the arid Southwest. As much as 40 percent of the global production of plant biomass is consumed by humans or preempted from occurring due to loss of open space leaving fewer food sources and habitats for other plants and animals. Options for plant and animal migrations have been greatly reduced or eliminated, and artificial introductions of non-native species and diseases to new areas have been prolific – all adversely impacting ecosystem resilience. The antagonistic impacts from each of these factors are substantially amplified in the context global climate change that is 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. The cultural, institutional and legal frameworks the Forest Service operates under are in many cases not agile enough, at present, to adapt to this future that has no historical analog. It will be difficult to determine when doing something is riskier than doing nothing.

**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 towards common goals. National Forests and Grasslands offer the opportunity to provide water for all life, renewable energy and resources for our communities, climate change mitigation for the planet, retention of inherently resilient and connected landscapes, and function as experimental controls and “laboratories” for cutting edge technologies and science aimed at species conservation.

**1.2 Changing Relationship with the Natural World**

**Narrative**

Growing populations with shifting demographics, increased urbanization, alternate forms of entertainment, advances in global technologies, travel, and communication as well as rising occupational specialization and separation from having to produce one’s own food and shelter have greatly altered American’s relationships with nature over time. This impacts peoples’ views and understanding of nature and makes it difficult to communicate the continued relevancy of public lands. This, along with the democratization and exponential growth of (mis-)information on the internet has also resulted in more diverse views and polarization for how land and water should be managed and used. More recently, advances in recreation technology and a global pandemic have driven measurable and dramatic shifts in the numbers and types of visitors to the outdoors and public lands. Wildfires in the western United States and epic weather events in other parts of the country are diminishing doubts many people have had about the fragility of nature and our planet and the degree to which we rely upon both, not just for recreation and spiritual renewal, but for survival. Social unrest, including the uprising at Standing Rock has highlighted the racial injustices built into a colonial and utilitarian approaches to land habitation. As the nation grapples with its history of racial and social injustice, indigenous wisdom is coming to the forefront and shifting the way many view the inherent value of the earth. A perception that land is only valuable for what can be extracted from it is shifting toward an understanding that we need to sustain the function and of intact ecosystems.

**Associated Risk**

Currently, the demographic makeup of Forest Service employees often does not adequately represent the diversity of the communities we serve. This means that we are missing important perspectives, knowledge, relationships, and opportunities for serving underrepresented populations. Many Forest Service guiding regulations and policies, including our appropriation framework are at odds with a shift away from a focus on what is *taken* from the land. We measure our successes in board feet and acres rather than consequences and outcomes. Our current systems and structures often impede proactive stewardship in a way that is responsive to the diverse and changing views for how public lands should be managed.

**Potential Opportunities**

We have both opportunities and a responsibility to deepen our commitment to agency values of diversity, interconnectedness, service, safety, and conservation. This includes continuing efforts to revamp institutional policies that lend themselves to (un)conscious biases and systemic racism or lack of inclusion. Our youth engagement efforts and work with partners can generate interest and ownership in the management of public lands to maintain future relevancy of the agency and help create constituencies that can themselves advocate through social media and politically on behalf of the Forest Service. Our workforce must become more representative of the communities we serve.

**1.3 Technology**

**Narrative**

For over half a century, computing power has nearly doubled every two years. This has resulted in an explosion of technological fields, applications, and devices. Many have profound implications for business operational efficiencies and capabilities, land use and management, and people’s connection to nature. With technological advances, come higher customer expectations for both efficiency and sophistication in our mission delivery, compelling a need for updated regulations and policies and proactive strategies. Unfortunately, bureaucracy and network security concerns cause governmental adoption of new technologies to significantly lag the private sector and the public at large. This frustrates our publics and business partners and reduces the timeliness and quality of services that we could otherwise provide. National, state, and local laws, policies, and social norms delay the advance of technology as it is being applied, especially as it relates to new forms of outdoor recreation putting the Forest Service in a constant reactive rather than proactive stance.

**Associated Risks**

The agency loses opportunities to more efficiently and effectively deliver services and innovate with new capabilities that simultaneously lessen risks to employees and financial costs associated with mission critical work. The rate of change in technology creates the risk of leaving the current workforce with less technological savvy and capability than the public we serve. This erodes public trust and affects our ability to retain top talent in the agency.

**Potential Opportunities**

The agency has a need and opportunity to increase our options and skillsets in communication through social media and to offer more of our permit and forest product sales online. Similarly, we can train our workforce to more effectively understand and use the full capabilities of existing and emerging tools and software such as mobile devices, GIS, the cloud, drones, and LiDAR. 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. Technology will allow us to address broadscale issues at the appropriate scale. Taking advantage of advancements that provide quality decision-making will enable the Forest Service to retain our role as world leaders in natural resource conservation.

**1.4 Appropriations & Expectations**

**Narrative**

Forest Service work is guided by expectations and associated allocations from Congress, USDA, and publics and special interest groups that influence Congressional decisions. Allocations to the Forest Service have been relatively flat for the past 6 years1 before inflation. At the same time public and political expectations have increased and shifted. Increased habitation and development within the Wildland Urban Interface coupled with climate change and more than a century of suppression in fire dependent ecosystems has led to substantial diversion of funding and agency focus to fire suppression and fuels mitigation at the expense of non-fire programs. This threatens the agency’s ability to sustain the full spectrum of our services and mission. Allocations come with expectations that can vary from year to year, and constraints on how funds can be spent make it difficult to achieve the entirety of our mission critical work.

1Managing for Results-Application & Reports-Budget Status and Work Plan Reports-All Funds FY14-FY20 Analysis.xlsx

**Associated Risks**

Factoring in inflation on top of flat budgets means that real purchasing power is declining. The ability of the Forest Service to accomplish all that is needed for National Forest land management is constrained and can lack focus, which leads to more of a crisis management, reactive approach. Inability to be responsive to public, private, and state and local governmental requests for services damages trust in the agency. Lack of adequate resources and having more work than time are consistent and known impacts to employee morale based on years of Federal Employee Viewpoint surveys for the agency. Costs of the wildfire organization and preparation, though needed, diminish the ability to invest in the other programs and successfully meet expectations in land management. Increased need to rely on partners and cooperators can mean that we must give up some control over project planning and implementation, which strains cultural/historic norms for our agency and creates worries about liability. Lack of budget certainty makes it difficult to commit to partners and cooperators on joint projects that can assist us with implementing mission critical work.

**Potential Opportunities**

Necessity is the mother of invention. Flat budgets offer the opportunity for innovation and joining forces with our communities, local governments, sister agencies, non-governmental organizations, and cooperators. Substantial opportunities exist to reframe every aspect of our business processes and decision-making framework to simplify the problems we are trying to solve and work more efficiently. There are opportunities to expand our role in leading through convening to work with our neighbors across boundaries in the spirt of Shared Stewardship. We have numerous opportunities to improve our branding, reputation, and relevancy to those we serve so that they can advocate for us politically. We can be more attentive to departmental performance metrics and assure that the databases that support those tools reflect current and accurate information for the region given that often affects funding. We also have the need and ability to more clearly communicate a focused program of work to our employees with clear priorities and sense of purpose. We need to assure that we are being effective with all aspects of people, money, facilities, technology, image, governance, and knowledge that affect our capacity.