**Southwestern Region of the USDA Forest Service (DRAFT v3)**

**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. Our influence and impacts are growing exponentially with time, leading to what is being considered a new geologic epoch.

Anthropogenic alterations to climate, decreased plant biomass available for life forms, 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 uncharacteristic wildfires 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 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 management, we can reduce the negative impacts of climate change on forests. National Forests and Grasslands serve as green infrastructure and offer 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. Venturing into new territory holds the opportunity of increased effectiveness in monitoring of our actions to ensure they are having the affect we intend. These opportunities will retain resilient and connected landscapes and function as experimental controls and “laboratories” for cutting-edge technologies and science aimed at species conservation. Additionally, the Region has the responsibility to take action and model sustainable operations with our infrastructure and strategies.

**1.2 Changing Relationship with the Natural World**

**Narrative**

Over time, growing populations with shifting demographics, increased urbanization, alternate forms of entertainment, advances in global technologies, rising occupational specialization and separation from having to produce 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 make it difficult to communicate the continued 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 best land and water should 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 any doubts people may 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 colonial and utilitarian approaches to land use. A perception that land is only valuable for what can be extracted is shifting toward the recognition that we need to first and foremost sustain the function of intact ecosystems.

**Associated Risk**

Currently, the demographic makeup of Forest Service employees does not adequately represent the diversity of the communities we serve. As a result, we are missing important perspectives, knowledge, relationships, and opportunities for serving underrepresented populations, which leads to people being disconnected with public lands. 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 tremendous 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 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.

**Potential Opportunities**

We have both opportunities and a responsibility to deepen our commitment to Agency values of diversity, interconnectedness, service, safety, and conservation. There is opportunity in education to help build greater public awareness and understanding of the importance of the natural world and our part in it. This must be done with partners of all kinds to reach the many diverse communities and peoples of the Southwest and should be accompanied by 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 who advocate for public lands. As our workforce becomes more representative of the communities we serve, the opportunities increase to ensure that meaningful engagement is achieved and shared stewardship is embraced.

**1.3 Technology**

**Narrative**

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, and people’s connection to nature. With technological advances, come increasingly higher customer expectations for both efficiency and sophistication in service delivery, compelling a need for updated regulations and policies and 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 Agency loses opportunities to innovate and more efficiently and effectively deliver services that can lessen both risks to employees and financial costs of 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 recruit and retain top talent in the Agency. Currently, bureaucracy and network security concerns cause governmental adoption of new technologies to significantly lag the private sector and the public at large, which reduces the timeliness and quality of services and frustrates customers and partners.

**Potential Opportunities**

The appropriate use of technology offers opportunity in every area of our work – from how we interact with the public in communication and transactions to what our workforce is able to accomplish both in the field and the office. Results include improved communication and confidence with employees and the public, maximized efficiencies that reduce workforce needs, and increased productivity and morale. 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. 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. Taking advantage of innovations 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, the public, and special interest groups that influence Congressional decisions. Allocations to the Forest Service have been relatively flat before inflation for the past 6 years1. At the same time, public and political expectations have shifted and increased. Increased habitation and development within the wildland urban interface, coupled with climate change and more than a century of suppression in fire dependent ecosystems, have led to substantial diversion of funding and Agency focus on fire suppression and fuels mitigation at the expense of non-fire programs. The Forest Service’s success is measured in board feet and acres rather than more relevant consequences and outcomes. 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 a more crisis management, reactive approach. Inability to be responsive to public, private, and state and local governmental requests for services diminishes confidence 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, decreases 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 of the Forest Service and creates concerns about liability for decisions.

**Potential Opportunities**

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 are aware and supportive of the Forest Service’s role. 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 opportunity and ability to communicate a focused program of work to our 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.