

Opportunities for Collaborative Involvement in the NEPA Process

Landscape Identification: Before defining what projects will look like, what prescriptions they will entail, or how the work will get done, the agency must first identify and prioritize where to focus. Once these areas are identified, a clear process for their prioritization must be delineated.

This can be an early opportunity for the collaborative members and the agency to jointly identify areas on the landscape in need of restoration, and an important step for establishing trust between stakeholders and the agency.

Identification of Project Area(s) and Goals and Objectives: Once project areas are prioritized, detailed conversations may begin about the discrepancies between current and desired future conditions. It is through this process that goals and objectives are established. These goals and objectives form the foundation for further development of projects.

When mutually agreeable to agency personnel and collaborative members, these goals and objectives create a strong foundation for future project work. Building in feedback between these parties is critical.

Environmental Assessment: Environmental assessment work is conducted as necessary for project planning, including stand exams, Forest Vegetation Simulator modeling, treatment unit layout, rapid assessments, and additional surveys. Once environmental assessment data are collected, the ID team meets to review and refine goals and objectives and define desired conditions. With refined goals and objectives as well as survey data in hand, project prescriptions can be developed.

The ID team may consist of agency staff, collaborative partners, or a combination thereof, and partners may assume responsibility for assessment work. This may include conducting stand exams, surveys, etc.

Draft Proposed Action, Purpose, and Need: The ID Team will develop a Draft Proposed Action, Purpose, and Need document for review and approval after environmental assessment work has been completed. The purpose and need states the underlying purpose of the proposed management action, clarifying why it is needed.

Collaborative partners may write the Proposed Action, Purpose, and Need. With strong collaborative buy-in, it may also be possible to develop a draft Proposed Action, Purpose, and Need contemporaneously with necessary environmental assessment work.

Public Scoping and Responses, and Developing Alternatives: The agency must conduct public scoping and additional public outreach elements following the release of the Proposed Action, Purpose and Need document, as well as respond to written comments. The ID team may develop alternative(s) and determine the level of analysis required as needed, based on public comment and supported by environmental assessment work.

Collaborative partners may conduct scoping and other public outreach in partnership with the agency, and in developing appropriate alternatives.

NEPA document and NEPA Compliance: Following scoping and development of alternatives, the ID team will draft the appropriate NEPA document. This will entail work to comprehensively address each required specialist report, economic analysis, greenhouse gas analysis, and public involvement. The ID team will ensure the project record is available online and offer the required time for public comment. Finally, the ID team will coordinate with responsible officials to reach agreement on the decision, and work to develop a Decision Notice, Finding of No Significant Impact, or Record of Decision as appropriate.

With appropriate coordination, collaborative partners may participate in writing the NEPA document.

Project Preparation Work and Contract Development: After completing all needed steps for NEPA compliance, the project will enter the final phase. During this phase, the agency will oversee project preparation work including unit layout, development of marking guidelines, marking and cruising, and will develop and execute a timber sale plan.

Collaborative partners can lead project preparation, provided the appropriate checks are in place to ensure compliance with Forest Service protocols and legal conditions.

Note: While partners may assume new roles and provide needed capacity for the environmental analysis process, the USFS must perform “inherently governmental tasks” and always retains decision-making authority.