

2. FORESTS: Forest Service plans review of NEPA jobs (01/17/2008)

Dan Berman, *Land Letter* senior reporter

As part of its ongoing effort to cut the time and manpower for producing environmental studies, the Forest Service is considering a top-to-bottom review of how it implements the National Environmental Policy Act.

The review, called "Business Process Re-engineering," could help the agency's NEPA operation and reduce turnover time for documents such as environmental impact statements and environmental assessments, the agency hopes.

"The objective is to do it better, faster, smarter," said Hank Kashdan, the Forest Service's deputy chief for business operations. "And better answer the questions our stakeholders have so we can move forward with the selected alternatives that come up."

Kashdan said there is no predetermined outcome, but an August 2007 [report](#) by Management Analysis Inc. suggests centralizing activity at six NEPA centers.

"A better organizational system would improve both the quality and efficiency of doing NEPA," the report states.

Jeff Ruch, executive director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, which released the report this week, said the review opens up a potential can of worms. "It is awfully late in the Bush administration to begin a gigantic game of bureaucratic musical chairs with thousands of people's jobs that may be reversed by the next Forest Service chief," Ruch said.

"Business Process Re-engineering is a tool we use to evaluate problems," Kashdan said. "It's not a centralization tool."

Once the review begins, it will likely focus on functions "performed by employees who spend a very significant amount of their time on NEPA," Kashdan said, and not include the thousands of employees who spend small amounts of time on NEPA-related activities, especially on the forest and district levels.

"You still have to keep touch with the ground when you're doing NEPA," he said.

A full study of NEPA functions could cost up to \$3 million, but Kashdan said any review won't be as extensive as the report outlines. However, the report says it could save the agency nearly \$88 million, similar to the potential cost-savings of a competitive sourcing study, the report states.

The Forest Service does not break out the total costs of NEPA services. "Its costs tend to be in the total program costs of managing a range allotment or doing a biomass sale or putting in a campground," Kashdan said.

Meanwhile, the Forest Service continues to revise its guidelines on NEPA implementation.

In August, the agency proposed changes to its NEPA rules, including deleting a list of actions that require an environmental impact statement (EIS), incorporating a controversial White House Council on Environmental Quality memo on cumulative effects analyses and allowing for the use of "adaptive management" practices.

For environmental impact statements, the proposed rule changes a list of classes of actions that require an EIS to actions that "normally" require an EIS. Currently, the studies are required for proposals to carry out or approve aerial application of chemical pesticides, proposals that would substantially alter the undeveloped character of an

inventoried roadless area, and proposals for major federal actions with major environmental impacts ([Greenwire](#), Aug. 15, 2007).

There is no timeline for the review, and a final decision is not likely before the end of the fiscal year in September.

Out with outsourcing

The NEPA study will not include competitive sourcing as an alternative, thanks to a rider in the omnibus spending bill President Bush signed last month.

The bill prohibits the Forest Service from spending money on competitive sourcing studies in fiscal 2008. It also limits the Interior Department's program to \$3.5 million.

Kashdan said the service will move on without the outsourcing option. "The best way to put it is competitive sourcing was one of the tools in the toolbag," he said. "No option could be on the table where we could pursue a public-private competition."

Congress had capped money on outsourcing studies and competition preparation in 2006, which slowed the progress of the studies. Previous efforts for an outright ban had been opposed by the Bush administration and some Republicans. In addition to the ban on the Forest Service, the bill directs Interior to study the effects competitive sourcing will have on its ability to fight and manage wildfires.

With Democrats, who are closely tied to federal labor unions, in control of Congress, Ruch predicts the fiscal 2009 bill will carry over the same prohibitions.

"The same people who made the decision for the '08 bill will be doing the '09 budget," Ruch said. "It may be extended."

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