Appendix G. An explanation of Watershed Condition Framework

Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) – An introduction

The Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) is a comprehensive approach for proactively implementing integrated restoration on priority watersheds on national forests and grasslands.

The WCF proposes to improve the way the Forest Service approaches watershed restoration by targeting the implementation of integrated suites of activities in those watersheds that have been identified as priorities for restoration. The WCF also establishes a nationally consistent reconnaissance-level approach for classifying watershed condition, using a comprehensive set of 12 indicators that are surrogate variables representing the underlying ecological, hydrological, and geomorphic functions and processes that affect watershed condition. Primary emphasis is on aquatic and terrestrial processes and conditions that Forest Service management activities can influence.

The approach is designed to foster integrated ecosystem-based watershed assessments; target programs of work in watersheds that have been identified for restoration; enhance communication and coordination with external agencies and partners; and improve national-scale reporting and monitoring of program accomplishments. The WCF provides the Forest Service with an outcome-based performance measure for documenting improvement to watershed condition at forest, regional, and national scales.

Why a Watershed Approach?

Watersheds are universal, well-defined areas that provide a common basis for discussion of water-related resources and landscapes.

The WCF is an attempt by the Forest Service to provide a consistent way to evaluate watershed condition at both the national and forest levels. Watershed condition assessments by individual national forests are critical because local national forest staffs are the closest to the ground and best understand existing conditions. The WCF consists of reconnaissance-level assessments by individual national forests, implementation of integrated improvement activities within priority watersheds, validation and monitoring of watershed condition class changes, and aggregation of program performance data for national reporting.

The watershed condition goal of the Forest Service is to protect National Forest System watersheds by implementing practices designed to maintain or improve watershed condition. The WCF provides a means to achieve this goal by—

- Establishing a systematic process for determining watershed condition class that all national forests can apply consistently.
- Fostering integrated ecosystem-based approaches for managing watersheds and aquatic resources.
- Strengthening the effectiveness of the Forest Service to maintain and restore the productivity and resilience of watersheds and their associated aquatic systems on NFS lands.
- Improving the internal dialog among disciplines to focus and integrate programs of work to efficiently maintain and restore watersheds and aquatic ecosystems.
- Enabling a coordinated and priority-based approach for allocating resources to restore watersheds.
- Enhancing coordination with external agencies and partners in watershed management and aquatic species recovery efforts.

- Improving national-scale reporting of watershed condition.

New Paradigm (Watershed Condition Framework) versus Old Paradigm

New 1: The "best" watersheds are treated first. Highest priority treatments remove risk factors that may threaten the integrity of the watershed.
Old 1: The "worst" watersheds are treated first. Highest priority is to create desired habitat conditions for stream segments/sites in the worst condition.

New 2: Efforts focus on a few priority watersheds.
Old 2. Treatments tend to focus on stream segments or sites. They are scattered over several watersheds.

New 3: Watershed analysis precedes project work, identifies key processes, and prioritizes areas and associated treatment approaches that address "causes."
Old 3: Analysis is generally limited to the project scale and to addressing site-scale conditions. Treatments address "symptoms."

New 4: A wide range of treatments are generally integrated at a watershed scale and sequenced based on an overall work plan.
Old 4: A narrow range of treatments usually focuses on individual sites. They are not integrated at the watershed scale.

New 5: Suites of essential projects are completed in a watershed before work emphasis shifts to the next priority watershed.
Old 5: Highest priority work is completed on individual areas or sites located in a number different watersheds.

New 6: Partnerships are an essential part of restoration. Skills and resources are strongly leveraged.
Old 6: Partnerships are limited in number and scope. Skills and resources are only somewhat leveraged.

"Clean, healthy forests are vital to our efforts to protect America's fresh water supply," said Vilsack. "Our nation's economic health, and the health of our citizens, depends on abundant, clean and reliable sources of freshwater. The Watershed Condition Framework and map will help provide economic and environmental benefits to farmers, ranchers and residents of rural communities."