

FOREST SERVICE SOUTHWESTERN REGION
LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION
STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN

January 31, 2011

INTRODUCTION AND GOAL

A healthy and prosperous America relies on healthy forests and grasslands and the benefits they provide: clean air and water, carbon storage, renewable energy, food and fiber, fertile soils, wildlife habitat, and recreation opportunities. The threats facing our lands and natural resources – such as climate change, uncharacteristic wildfire, water scarcity, and development pressures – do not stop at ownership boundaries. Healthy forests and grasslands are elements of integrated landscapes that need to be restored, conserved and managed across all lands from remote wild lands to urban centers.

Goal – The Southwestern Region will conserve and restore landscapes across all ecosystems to improve the resilience, sustainability, and diversity of these systems to respond to climate change, ensure quality and quantity of clean water, while creating jobs to support vibrant communities by:

1. Working with partners to identify and prioritize landscapes on all national forests and grasslands and adjacent lands in the Region.
2. Developing the resources, partnerships, and tools needed to support planning, implementing, and monitoring landscape conservation and restoration work.
3. Developing a concise set of performance metrics to demonstrate our progress in meeting our goal and objectives.

This Strategic Action Plan will be guided by a Regional Steering Committee, composed of Forest Supervisors and Regional Office representatives, who will report to the Regional Forester and Regional Leadership Team. The make-up, purpose, and responsibilities for the Steering Committee will be described in a Charter.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

A Landscape Framework – This strategic action plan provides a new framework for describing restoration and conservation work in a broader landscape context. This is not an additional workload on top of our normal responsibilities; it is a new way to think about planning and executing work. We will plan and implement the work we do within priority landscapes and better integrate that work. In addition, we will implement landscape projects that leverage funding from our partners and position ourselves to better take advantage of appropriated funding.

Relationship Between Forest Plans and Landscape Work – Forest and grassland plans provide the overall direction for management of National Forest System lands. This strategic action plan provides a specific focus on accomplishment of landscape conservation and restoration goals and objectives within forest and grassland plans.

Forests Identify and Characterize Landscapes – Each forest will work with partners and stakeholders to identify, characterize, and describe current landscape conditions and values at risk. The region will provide guidance, tools, and resources to support this effort.

Forests Prioritize Landscapes for Restoration and Conservation Work – Each forest will work with partners and stakeholders to prioritize landscapes that are relevant to their local conditions, resource needs, and threats. The region will provide guidance, tools, and resources to support this effort.

Balancing Landscape Work and Stewardship Responsibilities – We will balance landscape work with our other required programs and commitments. This strategic action plan should accelerate restoration and conservation work through better integration of programs and leveraging opportunities. Implemented successfully, landscape work will support and complement, as opposed to interfere with, our basic management and stewardship responsibilities.

Funding – The prioritization of landscapes is intended to focus our work on those areas most in need of restoration and conservation and where ripe opportunities exist. We will have a greater impact in less time over a larger landscape by working with partners, across all lands, and in a coordinated and focused way. Certain landscapes will be regional priorities. This Strategic Action Plan will also be used to inform the allocation of funding for priority landscapes on each forest. We will continue our stewardship responsibilities on all forests and grasslands in the Region.

OBJECTIVES AND PERFORMANCE MEASURES

A concise set of objectives and performance measures are critical to know if we are achieving success towards our goal and to demonstrate that success to our partners and stakeholders. There will be a small number of measures for each of the four objectives: 1) Identify and Prioritize Landscapes; 2) Plan; 3) Implement; and 4) Monitor. To the extent possible, the performance measures should utilize existing databases and minimize additional reporting. However, we may need to modify reporting requirements to measure progress toward our goal. Listed below are short descriptions for each objective– the Regional Steering Committee will develop performance measures, baselines and targets, and identify reporting mechanisms to present to the RLT.

Objective 1: Identify and Prioritize Landscapes

Each National Forest and Grassland in the Southwestern Region will identify and prioritize landscapes that encompass NFS and other lands as described in the next section.

Objective 2: Plan

Planning includes left-side assessment, completion of NEPA and signed decisions for selected priority landscapes. Landscape planning documents should integrate multiple resource objectives.

Objective 3: Implement

Implementation involves actually completing restoration and conservation activities on the ground to effect change on the landscape. Targets are based on the percentage of priority landscapes that are in actual need of being restored, enhanced, or maintained. There is recognition that not all acres need to be treated, and that actual treatments may affect a broader area than just the treatment area.

Objective 4: Monitor

Monitoring will tell us if we have achieved or are moving towards our goal of restoration and conservation of priority landscapes. Targets are designed to assess the percentage of the landscapes treated that have been moved towards a restored or enhanced condition, or maintained in a restored

condition. This information will also help identify what's working, what's not, and where, and will be fed into the adaptive management process.

IDENTIFY AND PRIORITIZE LANDSCAPES

Each forest will prioritize their identified landscapes to focus restoration and conservation work. Prioritizing landscapes should be a collaborative effort with partners and should take into consideration the following criteria, and others collaboratively developed:

- values placed on the landscape (social, economic, and ecological)
- threats to those values
- degree of collaboration and local support to restore the landscape
- economics, including job creation and support for local infrastructure

The region will develop and distribute guidance for identifying and prioritizing landscapes. The region will also provide resources, datasets to assess values at risk, and other information to support this effort. After prioritizing their landscapes, forests will align resources and performance expectations to successfully achieve conservation and restoration objectives on the landscapes.

PLAN, IMPLEMENT, AND MONITOR LANDSCAPE WORK

The following four strategies and associated actions outline the critical steps for how the Region will develop the necessary skills, resources, tools, and information to support forests in planning, implementing, and monitoring landscape conservation and restoration work. Specific tasks have been identified under each action and will be included in a separate supporting document. These actions and tasks will primarily be carried out by the Regional Office to support forest landscape conservation and restoration work.

Strategy 1. BUILD INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL UNDERSTANDING AND TRUST: *Develop internal and external trust among all stake holders about landscape conservation and restoration to enhance sustainability and resilience.*

- a) Develop and increase stakeholder understanding of ecological desired conditions for the prioritized landscapes.
- b) Increase the acceptance of landscape scale planning across diverse landscapes.
- c) Involve collaborative groups in development, compliance, monitoring, and adapting future actions based on monitoring results.
- d) Work with partners to share and communicate data and accomplishments effectively.
- e) Increase the understanding of the Forest Service role in decision making and collaborative processes.

Strategy 2. BUILD INTERNAL CAPACITY: *Increase the Region's capability to achieve the strategic vision through organizational structure and a workforce that is skilled and trained.*

- a) Identify and fill gaps in skills and knowledge.
- b) Improve our organizational structure to achieve conservation and restoration of priority landscapes.
- c) Create an internal Regional Steering Committee for landscape conservation and restoration on all lands.

Strategy 3. EXPAND PARTNERSHIPS: *Increase Regional capacity through expanding partnerships.*

- a) Leverage non-FS expertise to increase agency capacity for landscape scale work.
- b) Coordinate with partners to align funding and resources within priority landscapes on state, tribal, local and private lands.
- c) Increase the number of acres treated through partnership agreements on landscape conservation and restoration projects.
- d) Demonstrate that landscape conservation and restoration is fully embraced by leadership from Federal and Non federal agencies.

Strategy 4. SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE RESTORATION-BASED ECONOMIES: *Create an environment beneficial to private infrastructure committed to assisting us with achieving conservation and restoration objectives of resiliency and sustainability across diverse landscapes while supporting rural communities.*

- a) Identify locations with the potential and/or established private infrastructure that can support landscape scale restoration.
- b) Identify and support opportunities for biomass utilization from federal, state, tribal, and private lands.