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US Forest Service announces final rule on restoration of soil and water resources

Agency also proposes formalizing ecological restoration policy

WASHINGTON, Sept. 12, 2013 – The U.S. Forest Service today published in the [Federal Register](#) a final rule improving the agency’s ability to restore lands affected by roads, trails, structures such as levees, culverts and drainage tiles and disturbance events such as floods and hurricanes.

Three National Environmental Policy Act [categorical exclusions](#) will be used when restoring uplands, wetlands, floodplains and riparian systems to their natural conditions by removing levees and other structures, removing debris and sediment following disturbance events and restoring lands occupied by roads and trails. Through these more efficient processes, the Forest Service will speed the pace of restoration efforts and stimulate rural economies by creating jobs.

“This rule will help us improve the resiliency, health and diversity of our forests and grasslands,” said U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell. “We will now be able to move forward with our partners to focus more energy on action, and less on paperwork, to restore more acres in less time.”

The Forest Service prepares approximately 2,000 to 2,500 categorical exclusions and 400 environmental assessments each year. Document preparation and review for categorical exclusions normally take one-third less time than for a typical environmental assessment, which can be hundreds of pages long. By using these categorical exclusions, the Forest Service will be able to move more efficiently through the environmental review process without short-cutting public involvement or sacrificing environmental protection.

The new categorical exclusions will allow the Forest Service to more efficiently analyze and document the potential environmental effects of soil and water restoration projects intended to restore the flow of waters into natural channels and floodplains. The categorical exclusions will be used for activities such as removing, replacing or modifying dikes, drainage tiles, ditches, culverts and pipes.

Additionally, the final rule will be used when restoring and stabilizing lands occupied by roads and trails to natural conditions. It will not be used on National Forest System roads or National Forest System trails and will not be used to make decisions about their public use.

The Forest Service has also proposed formalizing agency ecological restoration policy to provide direction for restoring national forests and grasslands under changing environmental conditions. This policy, also [published today in the Federal Register](#), follows up on an existing interim directive, and is designed to provide clear, comprehensive and science-based restoration guidance for sustainable management under conditions driven by a changing climate and increasing human influence.

This proposed policy would apply to all agency resource management programs and will help speed up the pace of restoration under the 2012 planning rule. The new ecological restoration policy would also apply when developing on-the-ground projects and activities under all existing land management plans developed under the prior planning rule procedures.

The mission of the U.S. Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. The agency manages 193 million acres of public land, provides assistance to state and private landowners, and maintains the largest forestry research organization in the world. Public lands the Forest Service manages contribute more than \$13 billion to the economy each year through visitor spending alone. Those same lands provide 20 percent of the nation's clean water supply, a value estimated at \$7.2 billion per year. The agency has either a direct or indirect role in stewardship of about 80 percent of the 850 million forested acres within the U.S., of which 100 million acres are urban forests where most Americans live.

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