

Planning for Priority Species and Vegetation

Katie Stevens and Cathy Humphrey

KATIE--As you may have guessed, Cathy and I aren't really planning team members, although this was a dramatic recreation of actual events.

CATHY--I'm Cathy Humphrey, the lead planning/NEPA coordinator at the BLM's National Training Center.

I'm here to reinforce the link between this training and our other planning courses and guidance.

We know that although you probably took the Planning Concepts and/or Planning Nuts & Bolts classes there's still a need to help you identify which pieces of the planning guidance apply directly to your program and that's what we're going to do with this lesson.

KATIE--I'm Katie Stevens, and I'm a planning and environmental coordinator from MT. I was one of the original design team members for this planning course, and during that pilot effort, we learned that it was very important for you to start off, very early in your plan, with a solid understanding of the decisions you'll ultimately be forming through your RMP.

CATHY: This training course is called Planning for Priority Species and Vegetation. Trying out new delivery method: online component followed by traditional, face-to-face class.

We started you off with a pretest. We designed it to focus you on the parts of the planning handbook that contain guidance—specifically Appendices C and F—for your resource, which should help you when developing the RMP.

The pretest also highlights the importance of two key planning steps that directly benefit your resource. These steps are the Analysis of the Management Situation and the Alternatives.

Online component consists of 3 modules and 3 homework assignments. You can access the information any time, no cost to your office, no travel requirements.

After you've watched the 3 modules and have done the homework, you will be prepared for the 3-day training at your office.

This on-site training will show you techniques to help you assemble major sections of your RMP, and assemble the administrative record for your plan.

KATIE--Returning to the skit that we started with: Embarking on a planning effort can seem overwhelming, it can be difficult to maintain focus on what you're trying to achieve, day-to-day activities (such as data management) can become tasks in themselves without link to overall goal.

Our objective for this session is two-fold:

- (a) at the end of this lesson you'll be able to identify what information needs to be pulled together early in the planning process (for the AMS), and
- (b) you'll be better able to develop potential management alternatives later in your planning process.

We're going to help you reach that objective by –

- discussing the biological information that goes into the Analysis of the Management Situation, which is a formative step that is designed to organize you for preparation of the RMP.
- we'll also discuss the types of biological land use plan decisions that will go into the alternatives for your RMP. Let's get started, Cathy.

CATHY—The Planning Nuts and Bolts class taught you the steps of the planning process. You learned that developing alternatives is one of the key RMP steps. The techniques you'll learn in this training will focus you on designing alternatives to meet the requirements in the planning handbook. Although we realize the AMS comes first, we're going to start by explaining what goes into developing alternatives so you'll understand why the AMS is so important.

According to our planning guidance, each RMP alternative should be a separate, workable land use plan. Each alternative in your Draft RMP is made up of goals, objectives, allowable/restricted/prohibited uses, and management actions. Goals and objectives together describe the desired condition you'd like to achieve on the ground. Goals are generally common to all alternatives and cover the whole planning area. Land Health Standards must be incorporated as goals in the plan. Objectives are more specific and often vary by alternative: e.g., you could include different levels of restoration as objectives in different alternatives.

KATIE—Other desired outcomes include identifying restoration opportunities for special status species and identifying ecologically important areas or scarce limited habitats. You'll also be identifying desired vegetative types, structural stages, and landscape and riparian functions to provide for wildlife habitat and livestock grazing. The process of identifying desired outcomes often involves adapting goals & objectives from existing conservation strategies and recovery plans to fit your planning area.

Other desired outcomes include identifying watersheds or specific soils in need of protection, setting desired width/depth ratios of streambanks, identifying desired

streambank and channel substrate conditions, and specifying large woody material characteristics for streams. These are things your soil/water person may come up with, but they're still relevant to your resource.

CATHY--Once you have identified some desired outcomes, you'll be able to move into the second type of RMP decision, which includes proactive actions (projects), as well as identifying where uses would be allowed, prohibited, or restricted to reach the desired outcomes.

KATIE--Examples of management actions might include highlighting a type of project that could be done across your planning area to improve resource condition, such as treating conifer encroachment or restoring fire to a fire-adapted landscape. Additionally, identifying where a use should be allowed, restricted, or prohibited might include specifying where oil and gas stipulations should be applied or identifying areas where OHV use would be restricted to existing roads and trails. All together, you'll have several different combinations of these desired outcomes and allowable uses; these different combinations will form your range of alternatives. The breadth of information that goes into alternatives makes it seem like a really complex effort. It is a lot of work, and that's what makes it so important to organize data and information ahead of time.

This is the function of the Analysis of the Management Situation, or AMS, a planning exercise that can begin as soon as the planning project is approved. You'll probably be spending about a year on this piece of the planning effort.

Cathy, maybe you can explain the three important types of information the AMS contains, and I'll follow up with some examples.

CATHY--There are several sections in an AMS; the 3 that are most relevant to you are: The area profile, Current Management direction, and Management Opportunities. In the Area Profile, you'll identify indicators, define current conditions, define trends from historical conditions, forecast trends into the future, identify management opportunities, and identify key features. This section should also draw on any broader information you have, such as ecoregional assessments, which explain how your planning area is oriented in and contributes to the function of broader landscapes.

KATIE—Indicators and current condition are fairly straightforward; and I understand the value of trends and forecasts. It's important to know whether your resource's condition is heading toward or away from desired condition. For example, if you know that there was a certain amount of sagebrush habitat in the early 1900s, but the lack of fire has allowed more conifers to replace a certain amount of that sagebrush, that's an important piece of information, and it may tell you it's moving away from desired condition. It's

also necessary to understand what's likely to happen in the future. So I understand those pieces, but what do you mean by key features?

CATHY—A key feature could be an area that is regionally important to special status species. One example would be habitats that are in good condition and that have a strong population that serves a broader function for the species.

Another example would be areas of high plant and animal species diversity like where 2 or 3 ecoregions intersect—it was like that in the upper Klamath Basin in southern Oregon. Areas that provide habitat connectivity are yet another example. Knowing that these areas are there isn't necessarily going to restrict activities, but it will provide critical information to consider when developing alternatives.

KATIE—After you understand current condition of your resource, it's also important to know how it's being managed. This information goes into the second major section, which is called "Current Management Direction". This section lists plans and amendments that have been completed and each decision that has been approved. This section can track whether decisions have been implemented, and whether they were as effective as we expected when we developed the current plan. This helps you start thinking about where you can improve management.

CATHY-- That brings us to the 3rd piece of the AMS-- Management Opportunities. This section will help you consider changes in management direction. These changes should respond to what's in the Area Profile and to planning issues elevated through scoping. The options for improving management can later be combined into RMP Alternatives. Again, knowing where your ecologically important areas are can be useful at this point.

KATIE--For an example of management opportunities, I know that some of our early RMPs indicate that sage-grouse were one of the most abundant game birds in our planning area. Over time, we've gained a broader understanding of the condition of sage-grouse populations throughout their range, so when we revise that plan, we might consider some new approaches to restoring habitat or limiting impacts.

Another example of a management opportunity is tied to the guidance that directs you to identify ecologically important areas. Once we know where those are in our planning area, we can look at different ways to maintain or improve their condition or increase habitat connectivity among these areas.

CATHY—To recap: the three main sections of the AMS are: Area Profile, Current

Management Direction, and Management Opportunities.

These 3 sections have another purpose--they provide the basis for different chapters in the RMP/EIS:

- The Area Profile provides a basis for the Affected Environment chapter.
- The Current Management section of the AMS will form your No Action alternative, and
- The Management Opportunities section can help you develop your Action Alternatives.

KATIE--Planning can seem like a lot of work when you're just getting started, and it is, but it does give you a chance to make meaningful changes to manage your resources on the ground for the next decade or two. By looking at management across the planning area, and thinking about how your resources fit into the broader ecological context, you can resolve resource conflicts and highlight important roles that your resources play in the greater scheme of things.

Of course, you're not going to need to invent all of this. Much of it is out there in one form or another. But in order to identify, understand, and adapt it to BLM's land use planning needs, it helps to be systematic and organized in how you go about it.

Our primary purpose with this whole training is to help you pull the relevant pieces out of those existing information sources, adapt them to your planning effort, and document your rationale for the goals, objectives, management actions, and allowable/prohibited/restricted uses that you develop. You'll learn more about this in the next modules of this training.

CATHY--So as you probably starting to see, the process we'll describe isn't really new. Regardless of which process you use—this one or another one, you still have to look at and organize existing data and information to write the different sections of the RMP and end up with meaningful planning decisions. However, as Katie said, the process we'll describe in upcoming modules will give you a systematic way to organize your information so the decisions for your resource will be more robust, more defensible, and will better achieve the desired outcomes.

KATIE—Thanks for your attention and I look forward to seeing you soon for the face-to-face training!!!