



Our Forests Matter: Please Participate

by Marilyn Loser

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Any of you who've gotten out over the last few years have seen the decline in the health of our forests in and around the San Luis Valley. Colorado Foresters are in the process of updating the state's Forest Action Plan. The U.S. Forest Service and National Forest Foundation have held public meetings around the San Luis Valley to discuss and receive public input for the Rio Grande National Forest's plan revision. The last two meetings are today in Saguache at the Bridge Building, 305 3rd St. – 5 and 7 pm.

If you are interested in participating in the process, but didn't attend a meeting, you can share your ideas via the website (<http://riograndeplanning.mindmixer.com/>) during the next 15 days. According to the website, "The National Forest Foundation also wants to hear how to best communicate and meet with the public throughout the revision process. The forest plan revision is expected to take 3-4 years to complete."

Earlier in the month, I travelled to Salida to attend 1 of 8 statewide meetings for the Colorado Forest Action Plan (FAP) Update. The original plan was created in 2010.

Hey! I got a free lunch! In the break-out session I was happy to meet with Marianne Dunne, Alamosa County Commissioner; Noel Dunne, SEED Park, International; 2 men from Zapata (community near the Great Sand Dunes National Park); and one man from Bear Creek (community on the Conejos River west of Antonito).

The FAP addresses the issues facing Western forests – wildfire, invasive species, changing ownership patterns and markets, fragmentation, and climate change. Dang, a big agenda.

Did you know that one-third of Colorado is covered by forest? We often think of forests as only being in the mountains away from town. However, according to Joseph Duda, Deputy Colorado State Forester, "perhaps the least expensive and most rewarding investment to a community is its forest." I love both the Alamosa Community Forest and our national forests.

Why should we care about our forests? For me, their beauty and my ability to enjoy them is enough. Others might want more.

"Wildfire, invasive species, changing ownership patterns and markets, fragmentation, and climate change affect all lands and all people," reported Michael Lester, Colorado State Forester. "Healthy forests filter our air and water, provide jobs and wood products, and are places where our children can experience wildlife and nature.

At the Salida meeting I was interested in hearing from folks in the San Luis Valley who live outside of Alamosa. Fire protection was their major concern. Not a surprise with last year's West Fork wildfire near Creede still fresh in our minds. I heard from the Zapata folks that they would like a fire break surrounding their area but that the Forest Service would not provide it. Apparently, Zapata would need to provide it within its boundaries. I believe the Bear Creek community is surrounded by Bureau of Land Management controlled land and is having a difficult time connecting with the appropriate agency (agencies).

I especially notice the decline in forest health on the west side of the valley. The top of Wolf Creek Pass, once a lush green forest, has vast stands of dead trees. According to Lester, 70% of Engelmann Spruce have been killed or weakened by the spruce beetle. He also said that "sudden aspen decline", which peaked in 2008, took a great toll on Colorado state forests. Aspens are the second largest forest type in the state – second only to pinon/juniper. An article on the Smithsonian website states, "By 2006, close to 150,000 acres of Colorado aspen were dead or damaged, according to aerial surveys. By the following year the devastated acreage had more than doubled."

You can download the original FAP from the Colorado State Forest Service website: csfs.colostate.edu/pages/statewide-forest-assessment.html. The assessment document is full of maps that allow the reader to easily identify conditions on a county by county basis. Map topics include important habitat for imperiled species, invasive species, and wildland fire intensity index. Sadly, supporting data is not as easily found. I discovered a number of broken links.

Please take a few moments and participate in the Rio Grande National Forest planning process by visiting the website and sharing your ideas. Here's hoping they pay attention!

"What we are doing to the forests of the world is but a mirror reflection of what we are doing to ourselves and to one another." Mahatma Gandhi