NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE FORESTERS
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USDA-Forest Service
Sidney Yates Building
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1SE-Mailstop Code
Attn: Director-Policy Office
Washington, D.C. 20250

RIN 0596-AD74, Proposed Rule on Standards, Criteria, and Guidance Applicable to Forest Service Programs

To Whom It May Concern:

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the U.S. Forest Service's proposed revisions to the Forest Service Directives System, including changes to the processes and roles of Forest Service Manuals and Forest Service Handbooks.

NASF, established in 1920, represents the directors of the state forestry agencies in all fifty states, the U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia. State Foresters work closely with the Forest Service to implement federal forestry programs, conduct cross-boundary forest management, reduce wildfire risk, support private forest landowners, and improve the health and resilience of forests across the nation.

In general, NASF supports the Forest Service's efforts to modernize and streamline the agency's Directives System and appreciates the goal of creating a more efficient and effective framework for agency guidance. We have long recognized that the current directive system is overly detailed, and its prescriptive nature can be problematic. We therefore support simplifying, updating, and downsizing the thousands of existing directives and supplements.

However, this overall effort must be balanced with producing sufficient guidance for Forest Service employees and outside entities who work cooperatively with the agency. At every level of government—federal, state, tribal, and local—statutes and regulations are translated into

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operational policies, manuals, handbooks, standard operating procedures, and other forms of administrative guidance. These tools are fundamental to achieving consistent results and enabling employees to perform complex work safely, efficiently, and at a high professional standard. Additionally, for State Foresters, the current directives system provides important consistency and predictability for cooperative programs such as the Landscape Scale Restoration Program and Good Neighbor Authority.

In general, NASF encourages the Forest Service to clearly communicate its intended path forward on cooperative program directives while also considering consistency and predictability when determining what will be retained as "mandatory direction" in the manual, and what will become optional "informational guidance" in the handbook.

Good Neighbor Authority Handbook (Forest Service Handbook 2409.19 - Chapter 80) Consistency and Predictability

NASF supports continued efforts to strengthen and expand the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) program, which has become an important tool for advancing cross-boundary forest management and addressing shared forest health and wildfire challenges. State forestry agencies find the current "GNA Handbook" (Forest Service Handbook 2409.19 Chapter 80) to be an important source of consistency and predictability in program implementation. Beyond restating statutory requirements, Chapter 80 establishes common expectations regarding collaboration, project development, revenue management, fire liability, and other operational considerations that are essential to successful federal-state partnerships.

In practice, Chapter 80 has provided states and the Forest Service with a consistent framework when crafting agreements and implementing projects across different forests and regions. The guidance has helped promote uniform application of GNA authorities and has provided clarity in areas where statute alone does not fully address implementation questions.

For this reason, NASF encourages the Forest Service to carefully review existing Chapter 80 provisions in partnership with state agency implementers and identify those that establish substantive standards, criteria, or implementation expectations that should be incorporated into the Manual or other durable guidance. Certain topics – including collaboration expectations, use of state procedures, revenue management, and fire liability – provide important assurances to state partners and should not be reduced to purely advisory guidance that may be modified without public involvement.

NASF also encourages the Forest Service to update GNA guidance to reflect recent statutory changes and authorities enacted since Chapter 80 was originally developed. Incorporating these

legislative updates into the Directives System will help ensure that guidance remains current, accurate, and consistently applied nationwide.

Proposed Changes to 36 CFR 216.1 - Public Notice and Comment

NASF is concerned with proposed changes to 36 CFR 216.1 that would allow the Forest Service to rescind or repeal all directives – both Manuals and Handbooks – without public notice and comment. While there may be circumstances where administrative flexibility is appropriate, directives that establish expectations, processes, or requirements relied upon by external partners should not be removed or substantially altered without transparency and an opportunity for meaningful stakeholder input.

This concern is particularly significant for cooperative authorities such as GNA and other federal-state partnership programs that depend upon long-term planning, negotiated agreements, and consistent implementation. The ability to repeal or substantially revise directives without requiring engagement with those doing the work creates uncertainty for state partners that rely on established Forest Service policies and procedures, particularly those programs that bring state and other outside investments onto the landscape over a medium- to long-term time horizon.

Pathway for Manual and Handbook Revisions Under Proposed Regulation

The supplementary information provided in the Federal Register Notice charts the agency's next steps towards reform of the Directives System following adoption of a final rule. We are pleased to see that despite a final rule eliminating the requirement for public notice and comment, the Forest Service still intends to allow for comment on initial revisions to all Handbooks. For the purpose of tracking changes and continuity across revised Manuals and Handbooks, it is our hope that at this time both sets of revised directives will be available to the public to allow for meaningful feedback.

However, as noted in earlier comments concerning the "GNA Handbook", NASF urges the Forest Service to continue its longstanding practice of engaging directly with state partners and other cooperators on frameworks for GNA program administration prior to the beginning of the formal public comment period. Early consultations have frequently allowed the identification of implementation challenges and further ensured effective program delivery and the achievement of joint objectives.

Conclusion

NASF appreciates the opportunity to provide comments. As the Forest Service moves forward with revisions of its Manuals and Handbooks, we urge the agency to preserve the predictability,

transparency, and consistency that support effective long-term collaboration with State Foresters. Reform should eliminate obsolete, duplicative, unnecessarily prescriptive, or conflicting requirements while preserving essential authorities, procedures, and standards of performance. We welcome the opportunity to discuss our recommendations further and assist in developing practical implementation approaches that support both accountability and effective program delivery.

Sincerely,



Jason Hartman
President, National Association of State Foresters
Kansas State Forester