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US Forest Service proposes new management practices for stewardship of water resources

WASHINGTON, DC, MAY 2, 2014 AT 9:00AM - The U.S. Forest Service today announced its intent to strengthen agency management direction for groundwater resources and the use of best management practices to improve and protect water quality on national forests and grasslands. This action is an integral component of watershed stewardship and land management.

"Water from national forests contributes to the economic and ecological vitality of communities across the nation and plays a key role in supplying 66 million Americans with clean drinking water," U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell said. "The changes to our internal management practices that we are proposing today will strengthen and support the Forest Service's ability to manage the National Forest System to protect water resources and support healthy and resilient ecosystems."

The Forest Service manages 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands in 44 states across the country. Over the past few years, the agency has taken a number of steps to protect and enhance water resources on National Forest System (NFS) land to support ecosystem health, water quality and water availability. These initiatives include creating the first national Watershed Condition Framework, publishing a new National Land Management Planning Rule that emphasizes water stewardship, implementing a National Climate Change Roadmap and Scorecard, and investing in national assessments like the Forests to Faucets project.

Today's actions are another step towards improving agency management to protect and enhance water resources. In the draft Directive on Groundwater Resource Management, the Forest Service is proposing to amend its internal directives for Watershed and Air Management to establish direction for management of groundwater resources on NFS land as an integral component of watershed management. Specifically, the proposed groundwater direction would:

- provide for consideration of groundwater resources in agency activities,
- encourage source water protection and water conservation,
- establish procedures for reviewing new proposals for groundwater withdrawals on NFS land,
- require the evaluation of potential impacts from groundwater withdrawals on NFS natural resources and
- provide for measurement and reporting to help build our understanding of groundwater resources on NFS land.

These changes would improve the Forest Service's ability to manage and analyze potential uses of NFS land that could affect groundwater resources.

The Forest Service is also proposing to amend the internal Manual for Water Quality Management and to establish a National Best Management Practices (BMP) Program Handbook. These proposed changes to agency directives would enhance the Forest Service's ability to protect water quality on NFS land by:

- formalizing the National BMP Program as the primary method for control of non-point sources of water pollution to achieve federal, state, tribal or local water quality requirements;
- requiring implementation of the National BMP Program on all NFS land;
- establishing monitoring for implementation and effectiveness of the national BMPs; and
- adding definitions and direction to clarify and improve consistency in the agency's use of the national BMPs.

The Forest Service welcomes input on both proposals, which will be published in the Federal Register next week. There will be a 90-day public comment period on the proposed groundwater directive and a 60-day public comment period on the best management practices directives starting on the day the notices are published. Instructions on how to comment are in the Federal Register notices.

The Forest Service will host a national webinar at 1 p.m. EST May 20 to discuss the components of the proposed policy to manage groundwater resources on the country's national forests and grasslands. Forest Service leaders and technical specialists will provide an overview on groundwater issues and information on the intent of the agency's directives.

The mission of the Forest Service, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 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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