Partnerships

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The Proposed Action’s recognition of the importance of partnerships with Local, State, and Tribal governments, other Federal Agencies, non-profit and business groups, and various user groups is an advance from the original Forest Plan. These partnerships will extend the reach and effectiveness of Forest Service management on issues such as creating fire-safe communities, building wildlife connectivity corridors, protecting at-risk species, and connecting people with nature. These comments focus on the need to enhance environmental awareness in all segments of the surrounding communities through partnerships with non-profit organizations that work on environmental education.

In several plan components the Proposed Action notes the need for partnerships to further a goal of connecting people with nature.

Goal (FW-RSUP-GO-02) provides an expectation that:

“The LNF works with special use permit holders to deliver interpretation ad education messages that instill and appreciation for natural and cultural resources and promotes conservation and stewardship.”

Desired Conditions (FW-PUB-DC-01 and 02) state:

01. Conservation education, interpretive, and visitor information programs provide opportunities for visitors, youth, and communities to appreciate and understand the Lolo National Forest’s natural and cultural resources and learn how to conserve those resources for future generations.

02. Opportunities to connect people to nature and open space, including underserved populations, are available to promote the use of the Lolo National Forest for the improvement of physical and mental well-being.

Goals (FW-PUB-GO-03 and 04) state:

03. Formal and non-formal educators in local communities understand natural resource issues and partner with the forest to deliver place-based outdoor learning opportunities.

04. Youth have lifelong opportunities to learn, and a continuum of experiences that span from discovery to awareness and connection, to knowledge, to action are provided. The youth of local communities have a personal connection with the natural and cultural resources of the forest and a personal conservation ethic through their recreation experiences.

And more..

In communities adjacent to the Lolo National Forest there are several non-profit education groups whose mission is to connect people of all ages to the natural world. They stand ready to partner with the Forest Service and engage local communities including the underserved. Unfortunately, the work of these organizations continues to be stymied by the Forest Service special-use-permit regulations. These non-profit education organizations are treated like any commercial operation and given severe use restrictions that limit the number of participants in their educational programs. Instead of feeling welcomed as a partner with the Forest Service, they are constrained by regulations that work at cross-purposes to the goals and desired conditions provided in the Proposed Action plan components cited above.

I realize that the Forest Service intends their Special Use Permit regulations to minimize user conflicts in heavily used sites. However, Forest should take a proactive approach with educational non-profits to design programs in locations and at times that do not conflict with other users and other values of the LNF. Artificially constraining involvement of these organizations will not allow the Forest to meet the laudable goals outlined above.