

**National Forest System Land Management Planning final rule**  
**77 Fed. Reg. 21162 (Apr. 9, 2012).**  
**36 CFR Part 219**

(For your reference, page numbers from the rule are in parentheses).

FOCAL SPECIES

Response to the Issue of Diversity of Plant and Animal Communities

In the final rule, MIS monitoring has been replaced with monitoring of focal species. The concept of focal species is well supported in the scientific literature and community. Focal species are not surrogates for the status of other species. Focal species monitoring provides information regarding the effectiveness of the plan in providing the ecological conditions necessary to maintain the diversity of plant and animal communities and the persistence of native species in the plan area. Modified Alternative A does not require or prohibit monitoring of population trends of focal species. Instead, it allows the use of any existing or emerging approaches for monitoring the status of focal species that are supported by current science. Monitoring methods for evaluating the status of focal species may include measures of abundance, distribution, reproduction, presence/ absence, area occupied, survival rates, or others. (at 21175)

The Department expects that monitoring key ecosystem and watershed conditions along with monitoring the status of a set of well chosen focal species will provide timely information regarding the effectiveness of plan components related to plant and animal diversity. (at 21175-21176)

Comment: Ecological Conditions and Focal Species (§ 219.9).

Comment: Questions about focal species. Respondents asked questions about focal species. (1) What are they? (2) What do they represent? (3) What criteria will be used to select them? (4) How many will there be for a particular plan area? (5) How will they be monitored?

Response: (1) The inclusion of the focal species (§ 219.19) in the monitoring section is based on concepts from the March 15, 1999, Committee of Scientists report, which recommended focal species as an approach to monitor and assess species viability. The term “focal species” is defined in the rule as: A small subset of species whose status permits inference to the integrity of the larger ecological system to which it belongs and provides meaningful information regarding the effectiveness of the plan in maintaining or restoring the ecological conditions to maintain the diversity of plant and animal communities in the plan area. Focal species would typically be selected on the basis of their functional role in ecosystems. (at 21232)

(2) The requirement for monitoring questions that address the status of focal species is linked to the requirement of § 219.9 of the final rule to provide for ecosystem integrity and diversity, which describes the coarse-filter approach for providing diversity of plant and animal

communities and the persistence of native species in the plan area. The rule requires plan components designed to maintain or restore a range of ecological conditions at a variety of spatial and temporal scales (§§ 219.8 and 219.9). Appropriate monitoring of focal species will provide information about the integrity of the ecosystem and the effectiveness of the plan components in maintaining diversity of plant and animal communities in the plan area. In other words, focal species monitoring is used as means of understanding whether a specific ecological condition or set of conditions is present and functioning in the plan area. Focal species monitoring is not intended to provide information about the persistence of any individual species. The rule does not require managing habitat conditions for focal species, nor does it confer a separate conservation requirement for these species simply based on them being selected as focal species.

(3) The Committee of Scientists report said focal species may be indicator species, keystone species, ecological engineers, umbrella species, link species, or species of concern. Agency directives will provide guidance for considering the selection of a focal species from these or other categories. Criteria for selection may include: the number and extent of relevant ecosystems in the plan area; the primary threats or stressors to those ecosystems, especially those related to predominant management activities on the plan area; the sensitivity of the species to changing conditions or their utility in confirming the existence of desired ecological conditions; the broad monitoring questions to be answered; factors that may limit viability of species; and others. This does not preclude the use of an invasive species as a focal species, whose presence is a major stressor to an ecosystem.

(4) The final planning rule does not require a specific number or numeric range of focal species to be selected. The number will vary from unit to unit. The definition of focal species requires a small subset of species. The responsible official has discretion to choose the number of focal species that he or she determines will be useful and reasonable in providing the information necessary to make informed management decisions. It is not expected that a focal species be selected for every element of ecological conditions.

(5) The rule does not specify how to monitor the status of focal species. Monitoring methods may include measures of abundance, distribution, reproduction, presence/absence, area occupied, survival rates, or others. The objective is not to choose the monitoring technique(s) that will provide the most information about the focal species, but to choose a monitoring technique(s) for the focal species that will provide useful information with regard to the purpose for which the species is being monitored.

The final rule does not require monitoring species population trends. Species population trend monitoring is costly, time intensive, and may not provide conclusive or relevant information. In addition, traditional monitoring of species population size and trend is not reliable for many species because of wide variations in population size. For certain species, for example, a more reliable method may be presence-absence data obtained through non-invasive genetic sampling. Presence-absence modeling could be used to map and predict species distribution, help model habitat requirements and use occurrence data to help estimate the probability of a

species being present in sustainable numbers within a geographic area. Genetic sampling, which is drawing DNA from physical species evidence collected at sites under evaluation, can be used to acquire data for this approach. Other monitoring techniques in addition to these examples may be more appropriate in a given circumstance. Therefore, although population trend monitoring may be used where feasible and appropriate, the final rule explicitly provides discretion to the responsible official to choose the most appropriate methods for monitoring, using the best available scientific information to inform the monitoring program.

Specific guidance on focal species selection and monitoring methodology is expected to be further described in the Agency's planning directives. Some focal species may be monitored at scales beyond the plan area boundary, while others may be more appropriately monitored and assessed at the plan area scale. (at 21233)