



The Ruffed Grouse Society

DEDICATED TO IMPROVING THE ENVIRONMENT
FOR RUFFED GROUSE, WOODCOCK,
AND OTHER FOREST WILDLIFE

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CQ105

20 August 2002

NEPA Task Force
Council on Environmental Quality
P.O. Box 221150
Salt Lake City, UT 84122

To Whom It May Concern,

The Ruffed Grouse Society appreciates the opportunity to comment on ways to improve and modernize analyses and documentation fostered under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). These comments are generated by the Society's experiences with federal land management agencies as we've worked to promote science-based forest wildlife conservation.

The NEPA and associated regulations are important tools that when thoughtfully employed by natural resource professionals do indeed aid in safeguarding the environment from degradation. However, guidance promulgated under NEPA could be clarified to enhance the effectiveness of land and resource management planning and decision-making processes.

Current NEPA direction requires the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement for any "major Federal actions significantly affecting the quality of the human environment." This direction has at times been interpreted by the courts, federal agencies, and interested publics to apply to virtually any proposed action. This interpretation is seriously flawed in two significant respects.

1. With regard to the manipulation of natural systems (e.g., forests, wetlands, grasslands), there is no recognition that a decision to NOT implement a management action is, in itself, a management action that has very real and far reaching consequences. This is particularly relevant where past and current actions have altered natural disturbance regimes.
2. Fails to adequately recognize and allow for the variability in the degree of impact of proposed actions.

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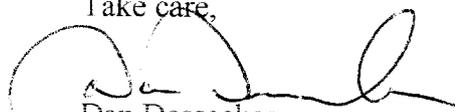
Number one above is a fundamental flaw of existing analysis requirements. Many species of plants and animals exist only where disturbance is allowed to play its natural role on the landscape. Man's interruption of natural disturbance regimes has in some instances placed these species and entire ecological systems at risk. The ecological ramifications of agency inaction must be substantively incorporated into planning and decision-making processes to enable a thorough assessment.

Number two above has been addressed to some degree, yet with only limited success by agencies through the development of guidelines for "categorical exclusions". In essence, the identification of categorical exclusions has created a tiered system of analyses based on the likely ramifications of the proposed actions. This tiered system could be expanded to provide guidance for agency professionals and interested publics, and to better target the use of limited agency resources. Both the spatial and temporal effects of the proposed action could be used to determine a relative significance measure and, therefore, the appropriate level of analysis. In addition, it could be helpful to explicitly differentiate between site and/or facility "development", and the manipulation of natural systems that does not alter existing land use.

Clearly, it would be problematic to establish guidelines that would encompass all possible on-the-ground situations or guidelines that would receive universal support and acceptance. However, current guidance has commonly lead to voluminous paperwork and a significant drain on agency staff and financial resources and public patience - an untenable situation.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact my office.

Take care,



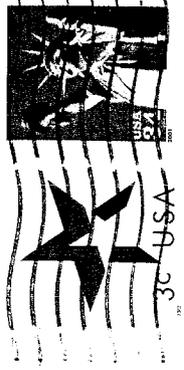
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