

Project Team Analysis of General Findings in Recreation Assessment Final Report

Review Draft – March 7, 2008

The Recreation Management Assessment Final Report prepared by David Reed and Associates contained 15 “General Findings” which they described as “critical to the future of the recreation program”. The Project Team assigned to develop an action plan for addressing issues raised by the assessment was charged with developing a summary of those findings, including any necessary corrections of inaccurate information and more detailed staff views on the issues raised.

In conducting a detailed review of the 15 General findings and the 73 more specific findings found in the report, the Project Team has the following comments relative to those findings.

General Finding #1. Major progress has been made to rehabilitate, upgrade, and professionally manage the forest recreation system.

This finding is really more of a comment on what has been accomplished since the “modern” program was initiated, which began following adoption of the Tillamook Recreation Plan in 1993. This finding does underscore the point that to date, the Department has worked to address the greatest good and highest needs (problems **and** opportunities) present in the program. It also underscores the fact that significant investments have been made in the recreation program over the past 14 years.

General Finding #2. Recreation management plans are outdated and lack strategic policy direction or Desired Future Condition.

There is strong agreement among Project Team members and district staff that the current recreation plans are out-of-date, and that those plans either do not provide clear strategic direction, or that direction is in need of revisiting and updating. In the case of at least one district with ongoing recreation use pressure, West Oregon District, there is no recreation management plan to provide direction.

For the Clatsop Recreation Plan, created in 2000, most of the realistic action items have been completed or are underway. This particular plan lacked an overarching strategic vision. This has resulted in a lack of clarity on what we are going to provide, and how we respond to new uses or needs. The plan for the Santiam State Forest, also created in 2000, was also very general in terms of strategic direction. Appropriate direction and decision have been made through a process of working with local users to identify needs and opportunities.

The Tillamook Recreation Plan was based on strategic direction and included information on future opportunities when first developed and adopted in 1993. However, this direction was not revisited when the action plan was updated in 2000. Recreational use and other forest management activities (timber harvesting and road system improvements) have both increased significantly in the 14 years since the original plan was adopted. This has resulted in a need to better integrate recreation planning with other activities, and a need to revisit the strategic direction, goals and objectives of the Tillamook plan.

The Project Team believes that it is important to develop specific action items in the areas of strategic visioning and recreation planning to address the situation identified in this finding.

General Finding #3. The current recreation delivery system is fragmented, unorganized, and inefficient to maintain due to lack of strategic direction, lack of formal recreation policies and management practices that are inconsistent throughout the program.

The Project Team agrees with the underlying causes identified in the second half of the statement, to wit, lack of strategic direction, formal recreation policies and inconsistent management practices. There is a consensus that we need some higher level expression of a vision for recreation management on state forest lands, as well as policy direction (processes, procedures, guidance). There is a need for consistent standards and practices to meet public expectations.

General Finding #4. The current management structure is not adequate to provide leadership and support for a growing, more complex, and diverse recreation program.

The Project Team agrees that the current management structure needs to evolve to better support a growing, complex program. The current management structure did not result from a conscious, analytical effort to identify the appropriate staffing levels and program leadership necessary to run the program. The original Tillamook plan did include specific staffing recommendations, but since that time, staffing and organization have evolved in a variety of ways in different districts, and in response to different needs and opportunities. There is a need for a more comprehensive look at the staffing and organization issue at the district, area and Program levels.

The team also agreed that beyond individual district staffs, there is not a strong voice to advocate for recreation program issues in the Department leadership structure.

General Finding #5. No risk management program exists specifically for managing recreation.

The Project Team feels that this finding is stated too simplistically, and misses the fact that understanding and mitigating risk has been an important effort since the Department began implementing the current recreation plans. The State of Oregon and the Department do have a risk management program, administered through both the Business Services Program and the State Forests Program Asset Manager.

The Project Team does agree that the Department and the State Forests Program can improve the direction and documentation provided in administering the risk management program. We could also do a better job of communicating information about specific risks and liabilities, and how they can best be mitigated. There is a lack of a clear and common understanding among field staff on the risks and liabilities associated with the program.

We believe that it is important for the Department to pursue actions to create a more formal risk management program specific to recreational use of state forests, one that identifies and addresses liability issues related to different uses and types of improvements and facilities. This effort also needs to address the distinctions between legal liability and risk tolerance in managing public use.

General Finding #6. An overall business approach to recreation management is lacking.

The Project Team generally agrees with the basic point of this finding, and considers actions to address development of consistent business management standards for the program a high priority. The team does feel that it is important to point out that there are mechanisms in place within the program that do provide a level of fiscal accountability. Fiscal budgets and associated review and approval processes are one example. However, there is a need for more specific direction and standards, particularly at the project level. Also agreement that lack of strategic direction and a strong desired future condition makes it difficult to determine appropriate levels of investment in facilities and infrastructure.

General Finding #7. Maintenance and operations funding is inadequate, even though funds appear to be readily available for continued recreation development.

The Project Team generally feels that this finding misses the point somewhat from their perspective. Team members feel strongly that the limiting factor in relation to this issue is capacity or staffing, not funding. All districts felt that they had the available funds that could be allocated for maintenance and operations, but lacked staff to oversee and administer service contracts, volunteers and other means of accomplishing this work. In most cases, districts are dedicating resources to maintaining existing facilities/activities as opposed to developing new facilities or looking after new needs and opportunities. Program is stressed/stretched to be able to keep up with the need.

General Finding #8. Historical use patterns and user demands tend to drive recreation management more than suitability assessments that provide a sound ecological framework for planning, locating, and managing recreation facilities and infrastructure.

The Project Team is in general agreement with this finding. Typically, we have managed for uses when and where they occur. While historical use patterns are important, and cannot be ignored, the program would benefit from more guidance and direction on planning and locating recreation facilities and other improvements. There is a need for more specific policy direction on locating recreation facilities, and accommodating specific uses, on both Board of Forestry and Common School Lands.

General Finding #9. Motorized recreation use and organized competitive events are creating ecological, operational, and staff impacts.

Project Team members agree that the challenges of managing a growing OHV program are a high priority issue. Comprehensive trail planning, organized event management, trail standards and implementation of motorized and non-motorized zones are all areas that need more attention and work.

Team members agree that there are impacts from motorized use, but feel that the day to day use impacts are more significant than those related to competitive events. We currently lack good inventory information on the overall trail system, including stream crossings and potential sources of sediment delivery to streams. Thus, it is difficult to quantify actual adverse impacts. The team does believe that adverse impacts have been significantly reduced in recent years through an aggressive program of installing bridges on stream crossings, and closing or relocating problem trail segments. Improved inventory and monitoring systems need to be implemented to better quantify a baseline and trends related to trail conditions and impacts.

The team feels that the more significant underlying issue within this finding is lack of capacity (resources and staff) to do an adequate job with OHV program management. Existing staff is not able to spend enough time working directly with the users, or overseeing upgrading and maintenance work on the trail system. The program lacks an agreed to set of standards for

condition of the resource, and thus lacks a baseline for assessing or defining acceptable impacts or limits of change. While the Project Team acknowledges that organized event management does draw on staff time, these events also provide an opportunity to reach out, and work directly with users.

There is a need for a more conscious discussion and determination as to what level of OHV use will be accommodated on state forest lands.

General Finding #10. Organized OHV groups tend to place intense demands on recreation staff.

The Project Team feels that the underlying issue here is again related to overall capacity and staffing to manage existing use demands. All recreation users present demands for staff time and attention. Clearly, the OHV community represents the largest and most organized user element on some state forests (particularly the Tillamook). There is a need to achieve a better balance between our capacity to manage this use, and the overall level of use that is accommodated on state forests

General Finding #11. There is no consistent and universal approach to establish desired tolerance levels.

The Project Team is in agreement with this finding. The team believes that the fundamental issue is the lack of a strong strategic direction and desired future condition for recreation use levels and improvements on state forest lands.

General Finding #12. Resource damage from recreation use was observed on all State Forests and in varying degrees.

The Project Team agrees that resource damage is occurring from a variety of different recreational uses. We believe that while OHV use is sometimes a source of damage, other uses, such as dispersed camping and target shooting are also sources of acute damage. As discussed in the previous finding, lack of inventory systems for establishing baseline conditions, and an ongoing system of monitoring to discern changes, makes it difficult to make meaningful statements about current damage levels. We simply don't have the data to conclude that damage levels are within or outside of acceptable limits.

The team does acknowledge that the overall level and wide distribution of OHV use on state forests makes it a high priority to improve information on how this use impacts the resource, establish standards and limits of acceptable change, and improve our capacity to effectively manage this aspect of the program.

General Finding #13. Recreation is not well integrated into forest management and transportation planning.

The Project Team feels that the statement in this finding is too broad, and fails to distinguish between the various planning levels. The team feels that integration of recreation issues and concerns into short-term planning efforts (annual plans and specific timber sales) has improved in recent years and is working well. Longer-term planning efforts are improving, but would benefit from a stronger strategic direction and vision to provide a foundation for this type of planning. Transportation planning efforts now underway would be more effective with this foundation in place. Opportunities exist to improve on this area.

General Finding #14. Each of the State Forests varies ecologically, in land ownership, size and patterns; landscape characteristics, and terrain.

The team generally agrees with this statement. There is a need to recognize this throughout the various planning processes to develop strategic direction and more specific action plan for recreation management.

General Finding #15. ODF does not communicate a clear image to the general public in terms of its recreation mission, role, management goals, rules and regulations, and opportunities, nor does it provide adequate information.

The team generally agrees with the finding, although we feel that there have been significant efforts in recent years to improve this communication. Examples are the investment in the Tillamook Forest Center and the related forest education programs, and development of consistent (although limited) written publications on state forest recreation opportunities. The team does believe that these sources of information are under-utilized and we could do more to communicate about our recreation program to the public.

The team also believes that the agency needs to improve it's efforts to foster internal understanding and alignment regarding the recreation program. This has become a significant element of our state forest management, and is the largest point of contact between the agency and the public.