Proposal for Roads and Access

Introduction:

The following proposal is the product of conversations with Forum members, Partnership members, and county representatives. I am submitting it individually, but it reflects the following diverse values and perspectives:

- Meet BMP requirements for the protection of water quality and aquatic ecosystem connectivity.
- Provide adequate access to meet management objectives.
- Plan components for infrastructure are within the forest's fiscal capacity but allow for the possibility of increased capacity from non-federal sources
- Restore and maintain access for traditional and culturally important uses and local community access.
- Allow flexibility in project-level decisionmaking to open, close, construct, and decommission roads.
- Project-level decisions about roads should consider the needs and risks of individual roads in the context of the road system as a whole.

Background:

Access is a significant issue for plan revision. The plan is required to include desired conditions for the road system with a "basic framework for an appropriately sized and sustainable transportation system that can meet [resource management] needs." The plan must also "ensure implementation of [BMPs]." The NPNF lacks the resources currently to maintain system roads to standard. Closed roads that are not used between entries are the most neglected, but roads of all maintenance levels are causing acute and chronic sedimentation of waters, often in violation of state and federal law.

It will be impossible to fix these problems overnight, and there is no one right solution. The plan's framework should therefore make progress toward the overall goal of protecting water quality and ecosystem connectivity, but it should also be adaptable.

Other plans have used different strategies to deal with transportation. The Directives suggest desired conditions for limiting road density in MAs and GAs, objectives for decommissioning roads, or standards to limit road construction. However, none of these strategies is quite right for our forests, because they target roads themselves instead of mitigating road *impacts*. Under an ecological restoration framework, the plan should protect water quality and habitat connectivity while investing in roads where appropriate to meet restoration needs.

Proposal:

1. Include a desired condition that the road system is fully maintained to protect water quality.

    a. Include an objective to reduce the maintenance backlog for the road system. The desired condition to protect water quality is not currently being met, nor can it be met overnight. As a result we need to set an objective for reasonable progress toward that desired condition. We know that implementation and regular maintenance of BMPs is a reliable way to protect aquatic ecosystems, and failure to meet BMP obligations is therefore a good proxy for risk to waters. An objective to reduce maintenance backlogs would allow for maximum flexibility for using additional resources (from receipts or non-federal sources) to maintain roads. It would also ensure that line officers have the discretion to disinvest, relocate, sunset, or build roads at the project level, while still improving the sustainability of the road system as a whole.

2. Include a desired condition that the road system maintains or restores connectivity for relevant species (the ones that live in the neighborhood).
    a. Include an objective to replace culverts that are connectivity barriers for relevant species--fixing all barriers when reconstructing roads and making progress to fix barriers on other roads.
    b. Include a guideline that new roads should not create barriers for relevant aquatic or terrestrial species unless there is no other feasible way to meet the resource management need.
    c. Include a management approach explaining that in appropriate ecozones and MAs, daylighting roads or linear wildlife openings could increase connectivity and permeability for species adapted to disturbance.

1. Support the objective to revise the forestwide transportation analysis report (TAR) during plan implementation.
    a. The current TAR is based on the current plan. The TAR should identify a road system that both protects aquatic ecosystems and supports the revised plan's resource objectives.
    b. Add an objective to survey roads during project implementation. In order to revise the TAR, we need better information first. TAR is required to compare roads by their relative needs and risks in order to set maintenance levels. Some roads are in relatively good shape despite a lack of maintenance, and some roads are in bad shape even with frequent maintenance. This depends on many factors, including soils, rainfall levels, and grades. During each project, we should gather information about individual road segment risk, ranking them as high, medium, or low risk, and setting maintenance schedules accordingly. This information would inform the TAR, but it would also help to guide project level decisions until the TAR is finished. For example, it might cost less to relocate a risky road than maintaining it more frequently. Finally, this information could allow us to "write off" maintenance backlogs on roads that are in good shape.

4. Create a framework for monitoring and adaptive management.
    a. On the standard 3-year schedule, monitor progress toward reducing the maintenance backlog. If progress is not being made, use the revised TAR to help guide project decisions to stay on track.