

**Rio Grande NF Forest Plan Revision
Awareness Meeting
October 15, 2014
Saguache, CO
7:00 pm - 9:00 pm
Meeting Summary**

Attendees

Forest Plan Revision Team

- *US Forest Service*: Mike Blakeman, Adam Mendonca, Jim Pitts
- *Peak Facilitation*: Kristin Barker, Heather Bergman

8 members of the public were also present.

Meeting Overview

Members of the public attended this kickoff Awareness Meeting to learn about and participate in the upcoming Forest Plan revision for the Rio Grande National Forest. The purpose of the meeting was twofold: 1) to inform meeting participants about the Forest Plan and upcoming revision process, and 2) to learn how community members use and value the forest, and about their key goals for the planning process.

Opening Remarks

Attendees heard two brief opening remarks:

- Peak Facilitation Group President Heather Bergman introduced herself as the meeting facilitator and gave an overview of what to expect from this and future meetings.
- Local District Ranger Jim Pitts explained the Forest Plan as a contract between the owners of the forest (the public) and the stewards of the forest (the Forest Service). The process of revising this contract will take time, but persistence, patience, and compromise will lead to success. Mr. Pitts invited participants to come to any local Forest Service office and share their input about the Forest Plan and the revision process.

Presentations

Two presenters spoke for ten minutes each about the Forest Plan and revision process.

Forest Plan and Revision

Adam Mendonca, Acting Forest Supervisor, explained that the Forest Plan provides a high-level guide for all decisions and activities on the Rio Grande National Forest. All projects on the forest must follow the guidelines of the Forest Plan, which is revised every 15 years and amended as needed. USFS revised the key requirements of the Forest Plan in 2012 to include aspects of ecological and biological health, resource management, and sustainable forest use. [View the presentation slides at the RGNF Plan Revision website.](#)

USFS encourages members of the public to participate throughout the Forest Plan revision process, which consists of the following five steps:

| Plan Revision Step | Opportunity for Public Involvement | Associated USFS Document(s) | Timeline for Completion |
|--|--|---|--------------------------------|
| Assess current and possible conditions | Participate in assessment meetings | Assessment report | Summer 2015 |
| Propose plan changes | Participate in planning meetings | Need For Change report | Fall 2015 |
| National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process | Comment on published Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Forest Plan draft(s) | Progressive drafts of Forest Plan and EIS, culminating in Final EIS | |
| Address objections and make decisions | Voice objections during 60-day objection period (if desired) | Record of Decision | 2017 |
| Monitor process and revise if necessary | Ongoing | | |

Questions and Answers

- *You talked about sustainability in terms of budget. When you mention “sustainability,” are you taking only economically or also ecologically?* Both. Our specific definition of sustainability often depends on what we’re talking about. Take trails, for instance. If we don’t manage trails appropriately, we end up with ecological issues. Often when we can’t maintain trails, it’s due to lack of budget. So economic and ecological considerations are both important in determining trail sustainability.
- *In your assessment process, do you assess the state of all the National Forests in the country? I think the forest needs to be removed as collateral on our national debt.* No. We are the only forest in our region currently revising our Forest Plan, and to do that we will only assess the Rio Grande National Forest. (Our region is Region 2, which includes Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, and most of Wyoming and South Dakota.) We may look at neighboring places a little bit to see if we’re influencing external areas.
- *So is the Rio Grande National Forest used as collateral on our national debt?* No.
- *Are any surrounding forests planning to revise their plans as well?* Yes, right now the Carson National Forest in New Mexico is also going through the revision process. They’re currently gathering public input just like we are, and that input may drive them in a different direction than us, so our management may or may not link with theirs. Plan revisions for our nearby National Forests in Colorado are staggered every 2 years: the Grand Mesa/Uncompahgre/Gunnison National Forests are next to revise in 2016, followed by the Pike/San Isabel National Forests in 2018.
- *You said you’d like to shorten the typical timeframe of the plan revision process. What’s your projection for completion?* We’re projecting 4 years because of how our money comes in. The Rio Grande National Forest gets extra money for going through this plan revision process, because we still have to do all our normal work in addition to this new task. We’ve said we want latitude to try new things, and we’ve committed to keep the planning process to only 4 years.

- *How exactly do you envision making your plan revision timeframe shorter than most? With this current public engagement piece. The old Planning Rule would have jumped right into the NEPA process, which can lead to conflict and slow things down. Instead, we're taking a full year to talk with people about their uses and values first, to avoid conflict during the NEPA process. We want to hear from lots of people. Let's come to an understanding right up front instead of having a long fight later. Also, keep in mind that we're just looking at what we want to change in our current plan. We can keep the things we already like, so that cuts down on the time as well.*
- *Does NEPA just have to do with actual resources on the ground, or does it have just as much to do with people's input about the use and need of those resources? NEPA has just as much to do with people's input; resources on the ground tie directly to management and uses. We have to pass a scientific rigor requirement, but we need to understand public uses of and desires for the forest before we can link the science to it.*

Rio Grande National Forest Planning Process

Heather Bergman, President of Peak Facilitation Group, detailed the overall plan revision process and its need for meaningful public participation. [View the presentation slides at the RGNF Plan Revision website.](#) Over the next year, USFS and the National Forest Foundation will host a series of public meetings to discuss specific forest management issues and areas of concern within the Rio Grande National Forest. Public participation at these meetings will help determine the scope of the planning process and will identify the key needs, values, and interests of stakeholders to be addressed in the Forest Plan. Additionally, local groups and organizations are encouraged to co-host meetings focusing on their issues of interest. In order to accomplish its goal of engaging the public frequently in a meaningful and transparent way, USFS brought in the National Forest Foundation and Peak Facilitation Group to ensure that meaningful public participation occurs throughout the planning process.

A new interactive website allows members of the public to answer questions, post comments and pictures, and be part of a conversation with community members and local leaders about the Rio Grande National Forest and the plan revision process: <http://riograndeplanning.mindmixer.com/>

Questions and Answers

- *This all sounds too good to be true. Who started this process where you actually want public input and are listening to people? Me [Mr. Mendonca, Acting Forest Supervisor], Jim Pitts [District Ranger], and Dan Dallas [Forest Supervisor] said, "if we're going to do this, we want to do it differently." We do public engagement, but not usually at this scale, and we know engagement is vital to this revision process. So we asked the National Forest Foundation to help, because they do lots of public engagement, and we also brought in facilitators. I see a lot of value in finding out what's important to people, and I want the local public to help us define and shape this process. Where, when, and for how long should we have public meetings? Which topics do you want to talk about? If we're successful, this engagement process can happen in other forests as well.*
- *Decisions about property close to our town were made without any public process whatsoever. Will going through this plan revision process present the opportunity to revisit the decision about the use of some of that property? It may or may not. I can't answer that directly, because I don't know the specifics of that decision. We have to recognize that all*

forest management is driven by individual Forest Supervisors, and every forest makes their own decisions. I don't know how decisions were made in the past. I do know we'll benefit from making new ties with people in the community through this revision process, which can impact our future interactions and decisions.

- *How does this process dovetail with BLM decisions? You do share offices, after all.* The BLM has a management plan that guides them the same way our plan guides us. There is opportunity for interaction, but we can't directly influence BLM management. We'll work together to determine possible links between our management efforts. This Forest Plan is specific to the Rio Grande National Forest.
- *So the BLM's process isn't as open as this one?* We're in two entirely different federal departments: the Forest Service is in the Department of Agriculture, and the BLM is in the Department of the Interior. They will make their own decisions and have their own processes. We do share information and work together (for instance, on fire management), but we can't directly influence their processes.
- *Will there be an opportunity for the public to advocate for the Forest Service getting the resources and budget you need to get this done?* Everyone has the ability and freedom to advocate for us. There will be opportunities as we work through this process, and as you see areas you may want to talk to higher level folks about, please feel free to do so. We as Forest Service employees cannot advocate for ourselves or encourage you to advocate for us.
- *Is funding considered as part of sustainability?* Yes. Management requires funding. Our funding has decreased over the past decade, and we don't know what our future funding will be. The monitoring and evaluation steps allow us to change our management in accordance with potentially different funding. We'll do our best to account for the possibility of increased or decreased funding.
- *Is the assessment done by Forest Service personnel? What content will be looked at, and what kinds of expertise will the people have who are looking at it?* There are 15 components to the assessment. Five are based on ecological processes, and ten are based more on social aspects--for example, benefits associated with aesthetic beauty. We're looking for additional help with the assessments and are bringing in others to assist. For instance, Oregon State University will help answer some of our ecological questions. We know the local ground fairly well, so we can point out important or concerning areas. We're also connecting the site-specific local knowledge that you as the public have to the wider monitoring process. We can post who's doing which parts of the assessment on the website when we have everything finalized.

Electronic Polling

Participants answered ten electronic polling questions identifying how individuals and their communities use and value the forest. Polling results can be found at the end of this summary.

Special Notes

- Although a participant attempted to choose Livestock grazing on question 3 (Which of the following are your TOP 3 interests in the Rio Grande National Forest?), that response was not reflected in the polling results.
- Nobody chose to verbally identify their "Other" response on question 10 (Which of these issues concerns you regarding the Rio Grande National Forest plan revision?).

Small Group Discussions

Participants broke into two groups to discuss questions about the Rio Grande National Forest and the plan revision process. An overview of key themes from this meeting follows; a summation of the discussions from all awareness meetings (held in Antonito, South Fork, Alamosa, and Saguache) [is available online](#).

1. How and where do you use the Rio Grande National Forest?

Common Themes: Both groups mainly use the forest for recreation (motorized and non-motorized), primarily in the Saguache Ranger District.

Additional Responses: Uses of the Forest

Hiking, camping, picnicking, wood gathering, enjoying solitude, experiencing spirituality, defining local culture, experiencing quietude, creating art, gaining perspective, ranching, livestock grazing, horseback riding, observing nature and wildlife, driving, hunting, rock hounding, flower gazing, motorized recreation, history appreciation

Additional Responses: Locations of Forest Use

Outskirts of Saguache, areas around Creede and Crestone, Poncha Pass, above the sand dunes, Cochetopa, La Garita Wilderness, Penitente, Rock Creek, entire forest

2. What roles and contributions does the Rio Grande National Forest make to this community?

Common Themes: One group's responses centered around quiet enjoyment and personal development opportunities, while the other group focused on economic benefits.

Additional Responses: Roles and Contributions of the Forest

- *Economics:* Ranching, logging, tourism, recreation
- *Social and cultural benefits:* Personal development, reflection, quietude, open space, perspective, inspiration, education, religion, group gathering location, soul settling, service for people who don't live here full time, defining the community identity,
- *Ecosystem services:* Clean water
- *Life sustenance:* Hunting, firewood

3. What are things in the current plan or how the forest is currently managed that you would like to see changed in the plan revision?

Common Themes: Both groups noted the importance of ensuring water/riparian health and addressing the recent beetle outbreak.

Additional Responses: Proposals for Change in the Plan Revision

- *Forest health:* Address clean air, water sources, beetle kill, and climate change.
- *Quiet recreation opportunities:* Ensure quiet use we can count on not being disturbed, requirements for quiet engines and gunfire, and more wilderness designation with no motorized use.

- *Communication:* Increase community responsiveness and engagement; give better notification of road closures.
- *Fire risk mitigation:* Suppress fires, smoke damage, and smoke impacts.
- *Thinking ahead:* Protect the forest for future generations; recognize that public land is not collateral for our public debt.

4. *What concerns do you have about the Forest Plan revision process?*

Common Themes: Both groups recommended that the Forest Service make a concerted effort to reach out to underrepresented groups.

Additional Responses: Concerns about the Forest Plan Revision

- Consider the bigger picture – ethics, sustainability, future generations, stewardship, culture...
- Involve young people in the process so they feel ownership of the rules they rebel against.
- Springs must be drinkable and free of cattle tramping and manure.
- Process is currently missing the majority opinion. Only a small self-selected group has made comments so far.
 - Use questionnaires, mailings, election time

5. *If you could only tell the Forest Service one thing about the forest, how you interact with the forest, and/or the plan revision process, what would it be?*

Common Concerns: Both groups noted the importance of forest and watershed health. Additional comments addressed issues of responsible use, accessibility, exploitation, quiet recreation, and appropriate assessment techniques.

Additional Responses

- Create a more nurturing culture.
- Don't let the forest serve as a resource that can be exploited for economic gain (using minerals, timber, etc.).
- Maintain and protect the beauty of nature.
- We need many quiet, wild places we can count on where we can peacefully connect with wild animals, clean water, and nature's wisdom.
- The forest should be open and accessible to everyone, including the disabled.
- Ensure all forest users keep it clean, respect fencing, and practice responsible use.
- Put policies in place to ensure compliance with forest rules.
- Assessments should include more social and cultural input in addition to the sciences. Use a demographer.

Additional Comments and Perspectives

In addition to the common themes among participants and between groups that are outlined above, multiple unique comments and perspectives emerged from the small group discussions, large group discussion, and on comment cards provided at the meeting. These are listed below.

- Write newspaper articles calling for more input and directing the public to the website (Dean will publish these multiple times).
- Create multiple response venues.
- Please coordinate uses with the BLM.
- Take note of the changing demographics of the American people. It is a very important factor in the San Luis Valley as this area is 10 years older than the rest of Colorado. How will people 60-80 years old access the forest?
- Do not allow the loud minority to overshadow other voices.
- People at this meeting are 8 out of 46,000 valley residents. What do the other 45,992 people think?
- The vast federal lands around this community could contribute to the economic base of this community, but focusing on solitude does not.
- The forest is one of the few paths to the natural world and who we are. We have a growing world of consumerism (i.e., shopping malls). We as humans need the link to our roots as humans; Forest Service and BLM lands provide the best paths to this link.
- Do not use our public lands as leverage or collateral for our national debt.
- Solitude and quiet use we can count on, which allow us to immerse ourselves in the natural world and learn from the wild, are our nation's scarcest and most valuable resource.
- Bring people (i.e., city folks) here in ways that respect the forest and benefit the local businesses, artists, and residents. Use the internet and other technology to provide user friendly information.
- Ensure safe, quiet use of significant portions of the forest to non-hunters during the fall hunting season. Set aside an amount of land in proportion to the percentage of non-hunters in the U.S. population (95%).
- Protect clean water flows, starting with springs and headwaters.
- Stop livestock grazing in the highest mountain areas. Some places must be kept pure and off limits to the cows.
- Beetle kill is a huge local, regional, and national issue. Very few people outside of the region are aware of this issue. Address the social and personal choices that cause/exacerbate the issue.
- In addition to using a demographer in the assessment process, use an anthropologist to evaluate cultural impacts and benefits of the forest to societies.
- Fracking, motorized uses, public destruction and misuse, and wildfires are threatening the forest.

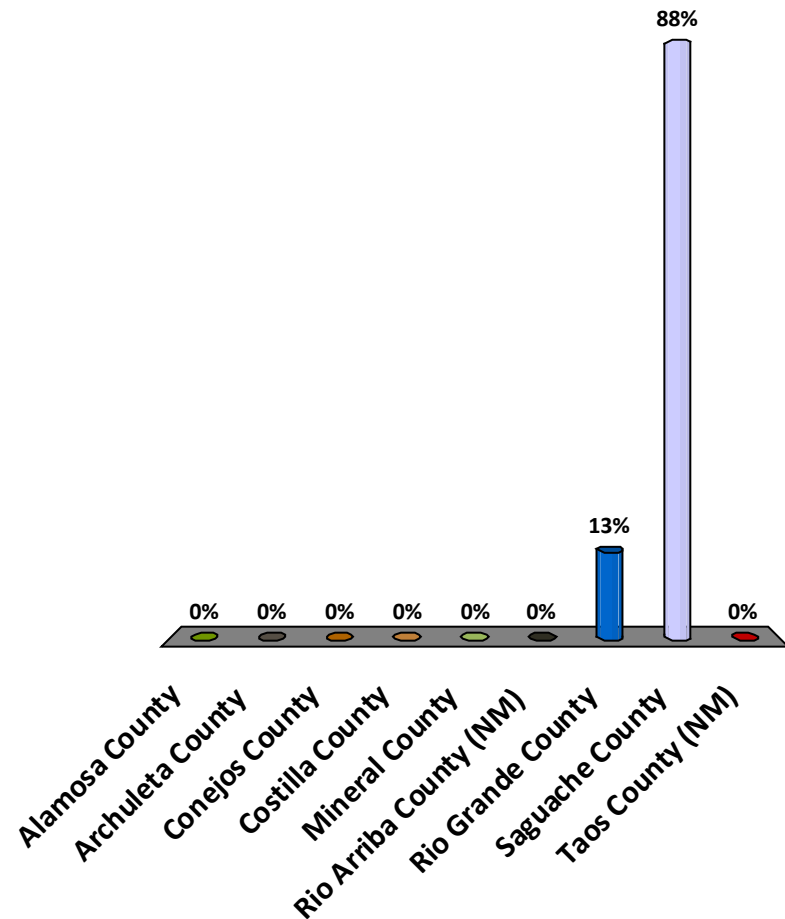


Rio Grande National Forest Plan Revision

Community Awareness Meeting
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Saguache

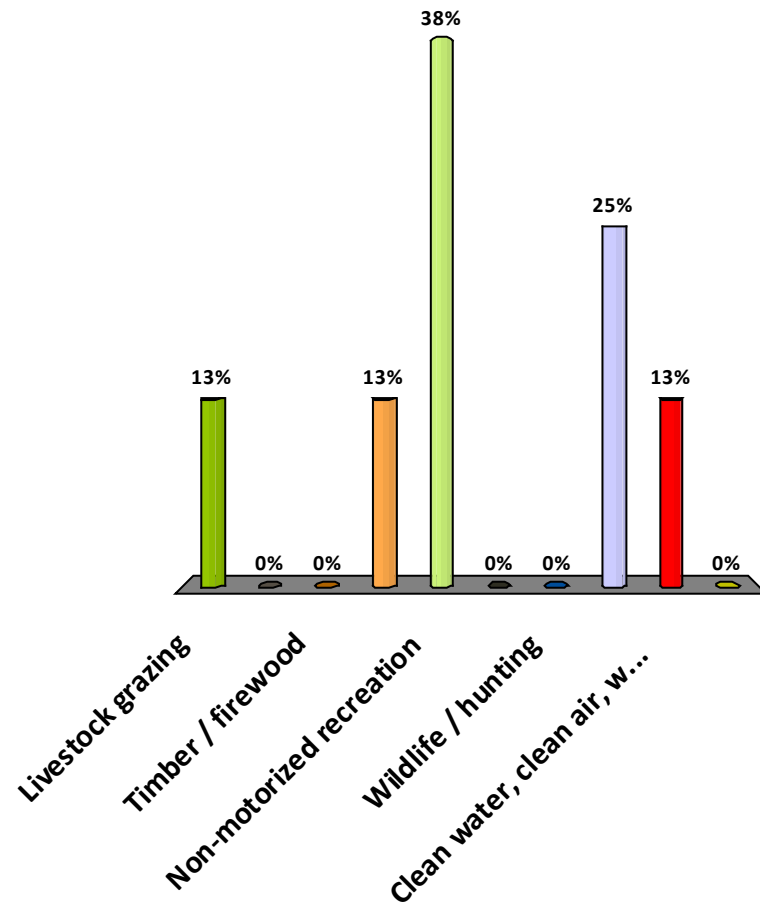
1. Where do you live?

- A. Alamosa County
- B. Archuleta County
- C. Conejos County
- D. Costilla County
- E. Mineral County
- F. Rio Arriba County (NM)
- G. Rio Grande County
- H. Saguache County
- I. Taos County (NM)



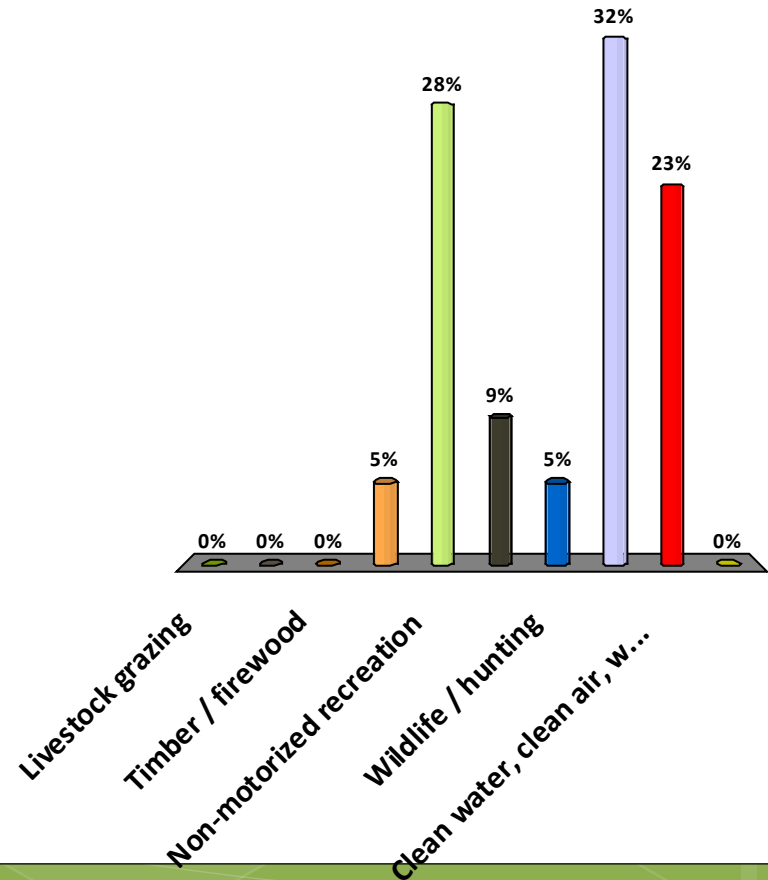
2. What is your primary interest in the Rio Grande National Forest?

- A. Livestock grazing
- B. Energy / minerals
- C. Timber / firewood
- D. Motorized recreation
- E. Non-motorized recreation
- F. Camping
- G. Wildlife / hunting
- H. Wilderness
- I. Clean water, clean air, water supply
- J. Other



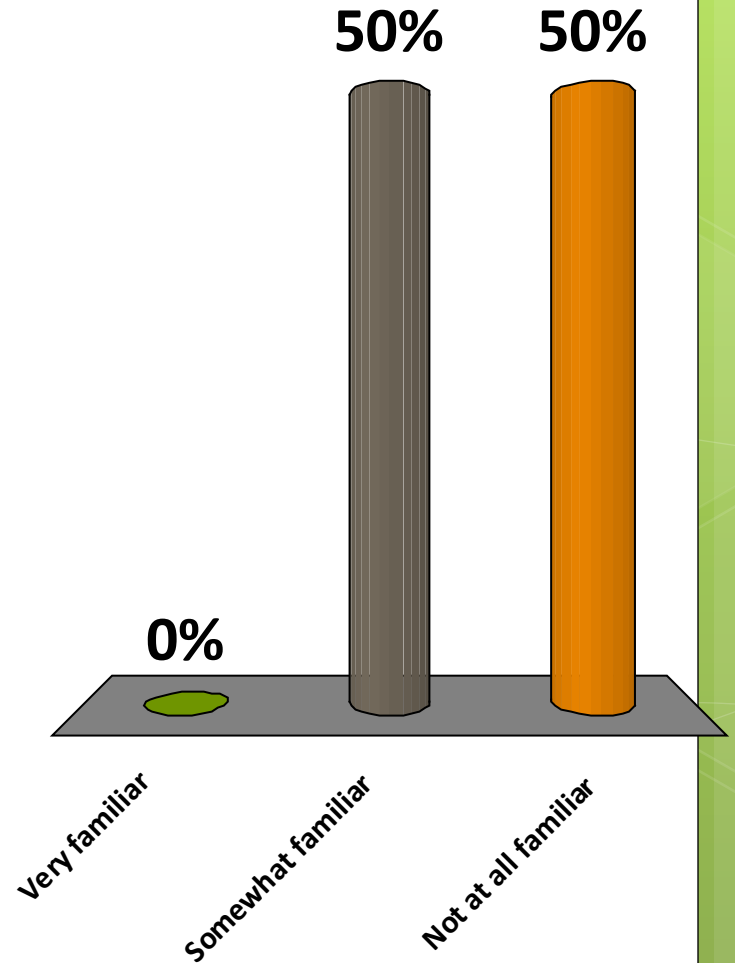
3. Which of the following are your **TOP 3** interests in the Rio Grande National Forest.

- A. Livestock grazing
- B. Energy / minerals
- C. Timber / firewood
- D. Motorized recreation
- E. Non-motorized recreation
- F. Camping
- G. Wildlife / hunting
- H. Wilderness
- I. Clean water, clean air, water supply
- J. Other



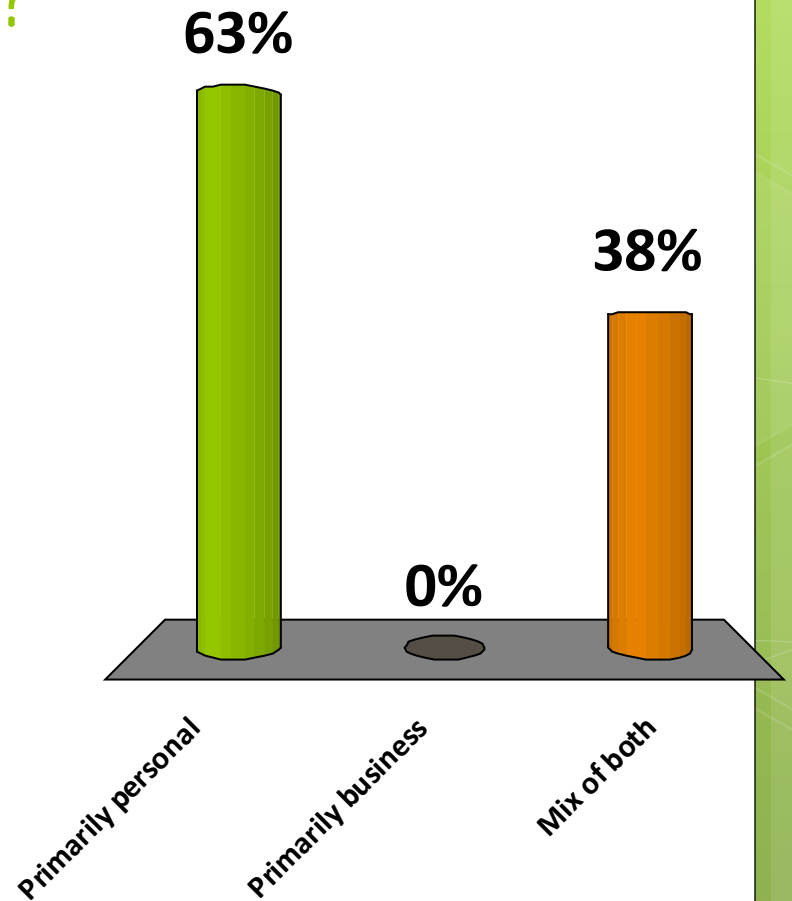
4. How familiar are you with the current Rio Grande National Forest Plan?

- A. Very familiar
- B. Somewhat familiar
- C. Not at all familiar



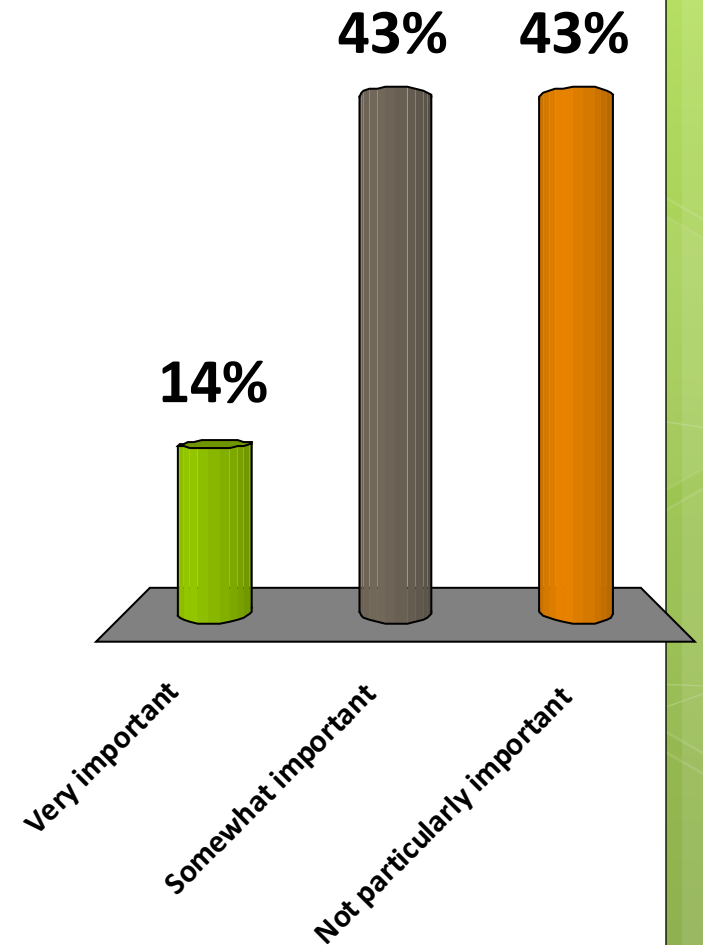
5. Do you use the Rio Grande National Forest primarily for personal or business purposes?

- A. Primarily personal
- B. Primarily business
- C. Mix of both



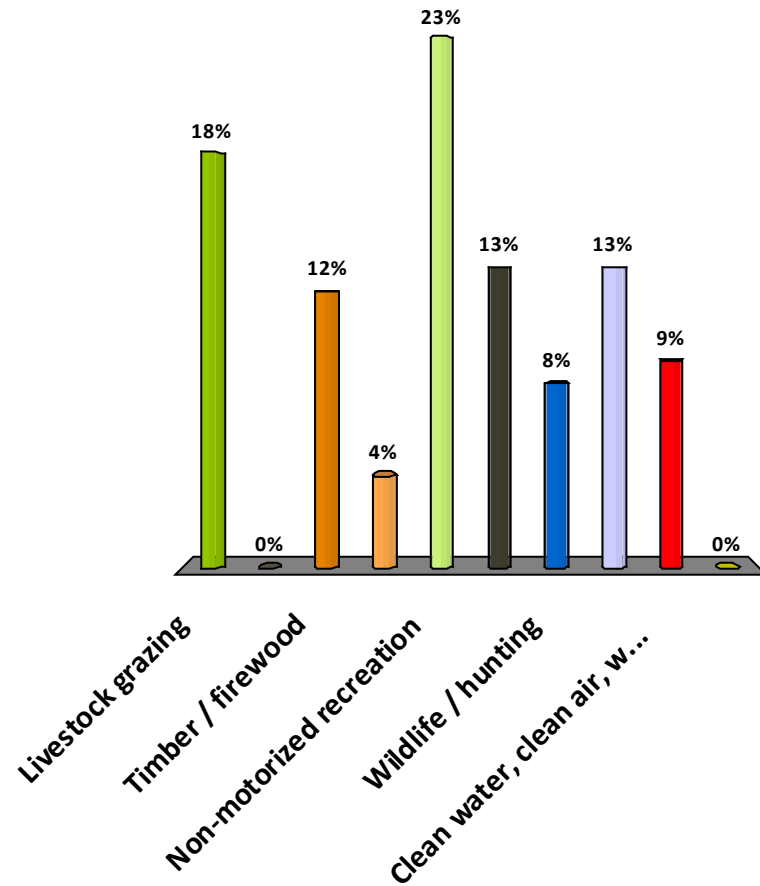
6. How important is the Rio Grande National Forest to your ability to make a living?

- A. Very important
- B. Somewhat important
- C. Not particularly important



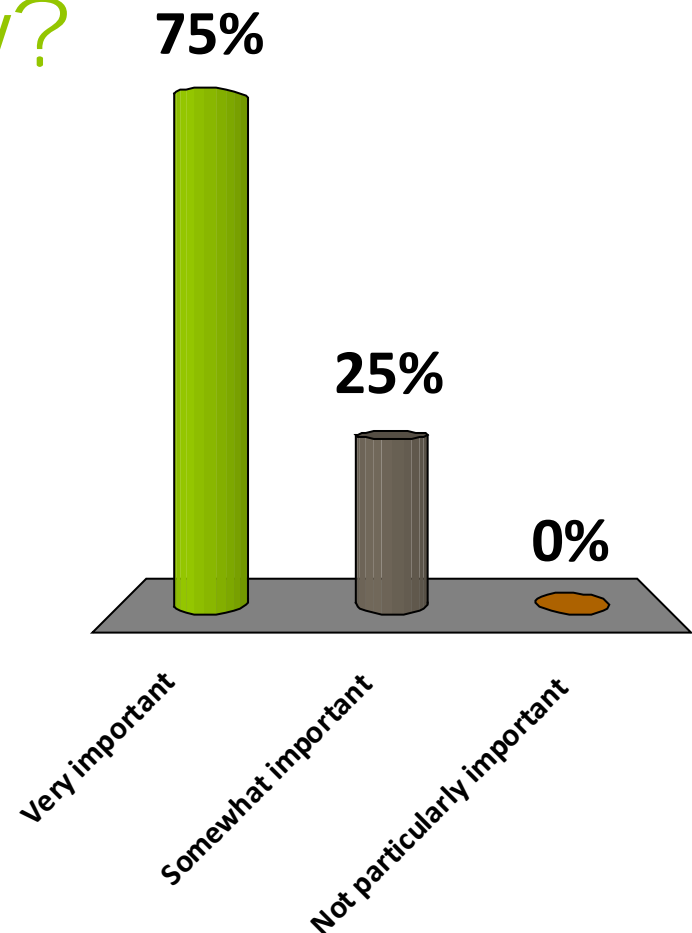
7. What are your community's TOP 3 uses or interests in the Rio Grande National Forest?

- A. Livestock grazing
- B. Energy / minerals
- C. Timber / firewood
- D. Motorized recreation
- E. Non-motorized recreation
- F. Camping
- G. Wildlife / hunting
- H. Wilderness
- I. Clean water, clean air, water supply
- J. Other



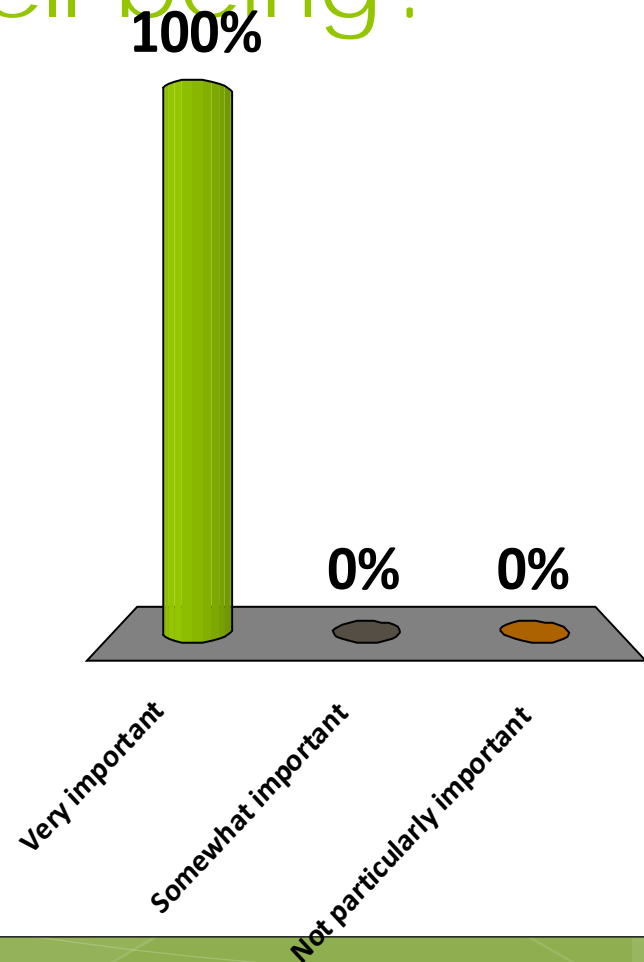
8. How important is the Rio Grande National Forest to your community's economic prosperity?

- A. Very important
- B. Somewhat important
- C. Not particularly important



9. How important is the Rio Grande National Forest to your community's social and cultural well-being?

- A. Very important
- B. Somewhat important
- C. Not particularly important



10. Which of these issues concerns you regarding the Rio Grande National Forest plan revision?

- A. Maintaining and building trust with stakeholders
- B. Maintaining multiple uses
- C. Addressing beetle kill impacts
- D. Wildfire preparation
- E. Maintaining forest health
- F. Protecting water supplies
- G. Ensuring developed and undeveloped recreation
- H. Other

