

# THE OUACHITA NATIONAL FOREST ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE: PROVIDING A FORUM FOR CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE AMONG INTERESTS<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The Ouachita National Forest Ecosystem Management Advisory Committee (AC) was established in 1990 by special legislation exempting it from the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). Although originally intended as a technical advisory committee, its role has expanded to providing a forum for constructive dialogue among the USDA Forest Service and interest groups. This paper describes the events on the Ouachita National Forest leading to the formation of the AC, and explains how the AC functions. It then examines the role of the AC in providing a forum concerning ecosystem management. Fifty-seven individuals who have been involved in AC meetings were interviewed. Respondents included AC members, Forest Service personnel, and members of the public. A majority of the respondents thought that some of the most important results of the activities of the AC derived from the forum it has provided. The AC was viewed as neutral and unbiased. Respondents thought that conflict had declined, at least partially due to AC meetings. National forests with similar issues and stakeholders may find it beneficial to create a neutral and technical-based forum similar to the AC, even though this would involve compliance with the numerous provisions of FACA.

*Key words:* USDA Forest Service, Ouachita National Forest, advisory committee, conflict resolution, forum, Federal Advisory Committee Act

## INTRODUCTION

Management of national forests is under much scrutiny with vigilant interest groups examining virtually every forest management decision. Better forest management decisions may be made and the number of appeals and lawsuits may be reduced by exploring alternative methods of communication. The New Perspectives program and subsequent ecosystem management approach of the USDA Forest Service have encouraged novel public participation strategies. The Forest Service launched New Perspectives in 1990 to bring a different way of thinking to managing the National Forest System, emphasizing ecological principles and research to improve ecosystem management (Salwasser 1991). Furthermore, it "seeks alternatives to solving problems by appeals, litigation, and legislation" (Salwasser 1991). In June 1992, the New Perspectives program was expanded to become ecosystem management, which was

defined by Forest Service Chief Robertson as "an ecological approach ... to achieve the multiple-use management of the National Forests and Grasslands ... [blending] the needs of people and environmental values in such a way that the National Forests and Grasslands represent diverse, healthy, productive, and sustainable ecosystems" (Robertson 1992). The emphasis that New Perspectives and ecosystem management placed on alternative methods of collaborative decision making has been constrained by the provisions of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). FACA was designed to prevent private interests from controlling agency decision making and to eliminate wasteful spending of tax dollars on useless advisory committees. Unfortunately, it severely curtails the ability of federal agencies to use an advisory committee by listing many requirements for its establishment and maintenance (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1993).

This paper describes an alternative method of communication employed by the Ouachita National Forest (ONF), the Ecosystem Management Advisory Committee (AC). The events leading up to the formation of the AC are first discussed. This is followed by an explanation of the manner in which the AC functions, and the evolution of its role in providing a forum for constructive dialogue. The remainder of this paper focuses on some of the results of a comprehensive evaluation of the AC's accomplishments.

### **The Ouachita National Forest**

As mandated by the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 and its amendment, known as the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA), the ONF in Arkansas and Oklahoma developed a comprehensive Land and Resource Management Plan that was finalized in 1986. As a result of fierce opposition to the plan's provisions regarding clearcutting and herbicide use, Forest Service Chief Robertson directed the ONF to engage in a supplemental planning effort in which issues raised in appeals were to be addressed (Holthoff 1993). The amended plan was published in 1990. According to a study by Voth et al. (1994), which summarized the results of Holthoff's survey of participants in the public involvement programs for both the initial and supplemental plans, a larger percentage of respondents was more satisfied with the supplemental plan than with the initial plan. Nevertheless, the controversy was not resolved. Administrative appeals were filed, followed by a lawsuit. Public opposition to the supplemental plan further intensified due to extensive coverage by Arkansas' two major newspapers, the Democrat and the Gazette, who were engaged in a circulation war.

The intense controversy surrounding the ONF's Land and Resource Management Plan led to the intervention by Forest Service Chief Robertson and U.S. Senator David Pryor (D - AR). The resulting meeting at the ONF in August 1990, known as the "walk in the woods," had several far-reaching consequences:—clearcutting would be eliminated in the ONF and the entire forest was designated as a "lead" forest in the New Perspectives program. In the ONF, New Perspectives program components were to include the following: showcase projects, ecosystem management research, and an advisory committee (AC).

### **The Advisory Committee**

The creation and maintenance of the AC (then known as the New Perspectives Advisory Committee) was authorized by Congress through an appropriations bill rider introduced by Senator Dale Bumpers (D - AR) in 1990. The legislation specifically stated that the AC was exempt from the provisions of FACA. Through this exemption,

the delays associated with meeting FACA's provisions were avoided. However, in most other aspects, the AC was similar to committees established under FACA.

Based on prior experience, ONF's Forest Supervisor, Mike Curran, insisted that the AC be composed of technical experts, rather than representatives of interest groups. However, interest groups were invited to nominate AC members in the fields of ecology, sociology, wildlife biology, landscape architecture, silviculture, recreation management, economics, hydrology, and soil science. Thirteen individuals were appointed officially to the AC by the Regional Forester.

The AC first met in May 1991 and has continued to meet approximately three times per year ever since. Most of the work of the AC is conducted during its meetings and consists of a discussion of agenda topics. The agenda is determined usually through the joint efforts of the Ecosystem Management Coordinator of the ONF and the chairman of the AC. Many of the issues on the agenda are suggested by the ONF and some are proposed by AC members. Furthermore, issues identified by the public as important increasingly have become part of the agenda. Several topics repeatedly have received attention during AC meetings. They include the Forest Service's "Desired Future Condition" concept, ecosystem management research at the ONF, a consideration of the social context of forest planning and management, and the allegation brought forth by some of the public that ONF management is biased in favor of planting and growing shortleaf and loblolly pine to the detriment of native hardwood species.

Through its discussions, the AC helps the ONF consider aspects of particular topics that would not have been considered otherwise or that would not have been considered in such depth. Concrete advice and recommendations are offered in some instances. These usually are mostly verbal and offered during AC meetings. On a few occasions, recommendations are provided in written form. Since the AC is advisory in nature, none of its findings are binding.

During meetings, the various agenda items are discussed. Commonly, Forest Service employees provide status reports and make presentations, after which AC members ask questions and discuss the topic at hand. After all AC members have had the opportunity to engage in the discussion, the audience is invited to join the discussions. AC meetings are always open to the public. Legal notice is given at least 30 days in advance in two statewide newspapers, and individuals who have demonstrated an interest in the past are notified by mail of upcoming AC meetings. Members of the public who have attended AC meetings include representatives of environmental organizations, trade organizations, other nonprofit

organizations, the forest products industry, state agencies, individuals who hold private land within national forest boundaries, and individuals representing themselves. Furthermore, Forest Service personnel routinely attend AC meetings, including personnel from the ONF supervisor's office, the Southern Research Station, and occasionally ONF ranger districts.

Although the AC is technical in nature, over the years it has taken on the role of provider of a forum for discussion of forest issues. Members of the public, some of whom are distrustful of the Forest Service, have recognized AC meetings as an alternative venue in which to voice their concerns regarding forest management. The meetings have provided a setting in which the discussion about sometimes controversial issues does not become overly emotional, but rather allows arguments from various individuals, interest groups, and the Forest Service to be presented. Several factors have promoted this evolution. First, the meetings of the AC have always been open to the public and Forest Service personnel alike. Second, members of the audience have always had the opportunity to voice their opinions to the AC regarding the issues at hand. In some instances members of the audience have been invited to make formal presentations to the AC. Third, the AC has shown interest in the view points of members of the public in several ways. For instance, two field trips were organized by interest groups (an environmental organization and an organization representing the local timber industry) and one field trip was organized by an individual essentially representing his concerns about controlled burning and the misuse of fire. Fourth, the AC is perceived by the public as having influence on the ONF. Thus, interest groups that feel that the ONF does not take them seriously might try to make themselves heard indirectly by informing the AC of their concerns and points of view. And finally, the AC is perceived by the public and Forest Service employees to be impartial and highly professional due to its technical composition and the professional manner in which AC members have conducted themselves. Therefore, its findings are generally not disputed.

## METHODS

Considered a success by most, the question arises how the AC's success came about, and whether it provides insights that may prove beneficial to other national forests. In order to assess the components and underlying factors of this success, 57 individuals who attended AC meetings at least twice were interviewed by phone. Sixteen respondents were current and former AC members, 23 respondents were Forest Service employees, and 18 respondents were members of the public. All interview questions were open-ended. With permission of the respondents, the telephone interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Interview data were analyzed on a question-by-question basis. For each question, individual responses were characterized using keywords or key sentences. Subsequently, responses labeled with the same keywords or sentences were grouped and tallied. Cross-tabulations were primarily carried out between answers to a particular question and the affiliation of the respondent (past or present AC member, Forest Service employee, member of the public).

Statistical analysis was limited to descriptive, rather than inferential statistics since the three groups of respondents could not be considered representative samples of three populations. Rather, the group of respondents consisted of the entire population of individuals who regularly attended AC meetings. Therefore, any findings were by definition true for this group (population) and inferential statistics would not have been appropriate.

## RESULTS

Although the evaluation examined virtually all aspects of the AC, this paper only discusses the results pertaining to the AC's role in providing a forum for constructive dialogue. A full report on the results of the evaluation is provided by Frenz et al. (1997).

### Most Important Role

All respondents were asked what they considered to be the most important role of the AC (Table 1). The most frequently reported role was to provide advice to the Forest Service, reported by 47% of all respondents. An almost equal number of respondents (42%) mentioned the AC's role in providing a forum. This role was commented on by a Forest Service employee who said, "And the ... role, I think that they have evolved into, is providing a respectable forum for policy debate for the public. ... People who have [a] strong interest in how the forest is managed and represent strong interests or agendas or constituencies often come to these meetings and they're given an opportunity to express their ideas or issues and they get listened to. And they sort of behave themselves because of the forum that this committee provides." Other important roles (not further discussed in this article) included the provision of an outside perspective (21%), representation of the public (11%), and a "search for the truth" (7%).

The evolution of the AC's role of providing a forum may have been advanced by its aura of impartiality. In order to determine whether respondents viewed the AC as unbiased, they were asked whether the AC took their interests into consideration (Table 2). Eighty-two percent of all respondents answered affirmatively. Furthermore, when respondents were asked whether all interests were taken into consideration equally, 63% agreed. Commonly used

**Table 1.** Function of the AC according to three groups of respondents (past and present AC members, Forest Service personnel, members of the public).

Role	Total* (N=57)	Past and Present AC Members (N=16)	Forest Service Personnel (N=23)	Members of the Public (N=18)
Provide advice to the Forest Service	27 (47%)	9 (56%)	12 (52%)	6 (33%)
Provide a forum	24 (42%)	9 (56%)	11 (48%)	4 (42%)
Provide outside perspective	12 (21%)	2 (13%)	7 (30%)	3 (17%)
Represent the public	6 (11%)	1 (6%)	2 (9%)	3 (17%)
Seek the truth	4 (7%)	1 (6%)	0	3 (17%)
Other	5 (9%)	5 (9%)	0	0

\*Several respondents provided more than one answer. Therefore percentages add up to more than 100%.

**Table 2.** Percentage of respondents who thought that the AC considers the interests of the group to which the respondent belonged, and who thought that all interests were taken into consideration equally, respectively.

	Total (N=57)	Past and Present AC Members (N=16)	Forest Service Personnel (N=23)	Members of the Public (N=18)
Respondent's interests are considered	46 (81%)	14 (88%)	20 (87%)	12 (67%)
All interests are taken into consideration equally	36 (63%)	10 (63%)	5 (65%)	11 (61%)

adjectives describing the AC included "receptive," "balanced," "fair," and "broad-minded." However, a substantial minority (28%) did not think that the AC took all interests into consideration equally. Some respondents thought that the AC took the interests of certain "radical" interests (both environmental and timber) more into consideration. Others remarked that issues within the purview of certain professions received more attention than within the purview of other professions.

Three respondents pointed out that the AC could not possibly consider all interests, because of the multitude of interests. As expressed by an AC member: "I don't know what all interests are. ... And it [i.e., the AC] has no mechanism for having a comprehensive enough sense of what all the interests [are] to where it could see in confidence that it takes all interest into consideration equally. ... What it really then does take into consider-

ation are those interests that end up being articulated before the Committee. And those are the interests as they're expressed through the existing organizations and organizational structures and personalities, who are committed to coming to meetings and to communicating with the Committee"

### Most Important Result

All respondents were asked what they considered the most important results of AC activities so far (Table 3). The most frequently reported result by all three respondent groups was the moderation of conflict (56%). Many respondents described the forum that the AC provided as neutral and unbiased, the "honest broker," a conduit for the discussion among the ONF and its various interest groups. As a result, the dialogue in which the ONF, environmental interests, and timber interests engaged, became less antagonistic and more constructive.



\*Many respondents provided more than one answer. Therefore, the sum of the percentages is greater than 100. Several members of the public did not know any results, or listed results that were mentioned by only one individual.

\*\*Although 28% seems low, it was still the most frequently reported result by members of the public.

As an AC member put it, the controversy “moved away from gridlock to debate and discussion.” A member of the public added that “this has resulted in a relatively civil interchange between opposing interests and individuals, which has been largely absent in Arkansas in natural resources and environmental affairs.” Other important results of the AC (not discussed in this article) included its impact on ecosystem management (EM) research, its interpretation of EM, an increased diversity of viewpoints, the introduction of the social context in forest management considerations, and a statement regarding the desired future condition of the ONF.

The moderating effect of the AC on the amount of conflict was even more apparent when all respondents were asked directly whether the activities of the AC had led to a reduction in conflict between the Forest Service and interest groups (Table 4). Seventy-five percent of all respondents thought that AC activities had led, at least to some extent, to a reduction in conflict. Five respondents

pointed out that the reduction in conflict may not have been solely due to the AC’s activities. As explained by a Forest Service employee: “There’s definitely been a reduction in conflict. We can establish that. Now how do you tease out the different sources of that reduction? I tend to think that the major source was getting away from clearcutting. ... Bringing in research was another way to build credibility and reassure people that we’re really looking at these relationships that people are concerned about. Now the Committee itself, I think, did contribute also by providing that sort of neutral third-party forum, in which people felt free to bring their ideas and concerns.” The latter idea was echoed by a member of the public, who remarked, “They have provided citizens with a middleman, so to speak, ... , that makes people feel like they do have some kind of voice in how the forest is managed. And of course when they do provide input to the Advisory Committee, it is of course in the hopes that the Advisory Committee will take that information and use it to change the way the Forest is managed.”

Respondents were also asked whether conflict between interest groups had been reduced as a result of AC activities (Table 5). Only 44% of all respondents answered affirmatively. The potential impact of the AC on the relationship among interest groups was elucidated by a Forest Service employee, who remarked that “the Committee meetings are rare occasions where, say, the

**Table 3.** Responses to the question “So far, what are the most important results of AC activities?” according to three groups of respondents (past and present AC members, Forest Service personnel, and members of the public).

Response	Total* (N=57)	Past and Present AC members (N=16)	Forest Service Personnel (N=23)	Members of the Public (N=18)
Moderation of conflict	32 (56%)	7 (44%)	20 (87%)	5 (28%)**
Impact on EM research	10 (18%)	2 (13%)	5 (22%)	3 (17%)
Interpretation of EM	7 (12%)	3 (19%)	3 (13%)	1 (6%)
Increased diversity of viewpoints	7 (12%)	3 (16%)	2 (9%)	2 (11%)
Introduction of social context	5 (9%)	3 (16%)	2 (9%)	0
Desired future condition statement	5 (9%)	3 (16%)	2 (9%)	0

\*Many respondents provided more than one answer. Therefore, the sum of the percentages is greater than 100. Several members of the public did not know any results, or listed results that were mentioned by only one individual.

\*\*Although 28% seems low, it was still the most frequently reported result by members of the public.

**Table 4.** Responses to the question “Have the activities of the AC led to a reduction in conflict between the USDA Forest Service and interest groups?” according to three groups of respondents (past and present AC members, Forest Service personnel, and members of the public).

Response	Total (N=57)	Past and Present AC members (N=16)	Forest Service Personnel (N=23)	Members of the Public (N=18)
Yes, at least to some extent	43 (75%)	12 (75%)	22 (96%)	9 (50%)
No	8 (14%)	0	0	8 (44%)
Don't know	6 (11%)	4 (25%)	1 (4%)	1 (6%)

**Table 5.** Responses to the question “Have the activities of the AC led to a reduction in conflict between interest groups?” according to three groups of respondents (past and present AC members, Forest Service personnel, and members of the public).

Response	Total (N=57)	Past and Present AC members (N=16)	Forest Service Personnel (N=23)	Members of the Public (N=18)
Yes, at least to some extent	25 (44%)	8 (50%)	14 (61%)	3 (17%)
No	19 (33%)	3 (19%)	3 (13%)	13 (72%)
Don't know/other	13 (23%)	5 (31%)	6 (26%)	2 (11%)

[environmentalists] and timber industry are thrown together. And they have shown some signs of being able to work together somewhat better. I think they realize that folks are human, that they're not monsters after all, and that they may even have a little bit in common now and then. I saw that going on tangentially. That probably did lead to some reduction in conflict, but the environmental litigant/appellant groups and the timber industry groups are still miles and miles apart, and probably always will be”

In order to explore the reduction in conflict between the Forest Service and interest groups, Forest Service employees were asked whether the Forest Service had increased its contact with the public as a result of the AC. Although 96% of interviewed Forest Service employees agreed that the ONF had improved its contact with the public, 35% brought up that the ONF already had a very good public involvement program: “The overall public involvement on this forest is by far the highest of any forest I've worked on. ... That [is] still part of the legacy of [retired forest supervisor] Mike Curran. ... He really opened up the forest to really getting the public involved in all of our processes. Not just from an information standpoint, but also from a decision making standpoint....

And that's really how this forest has survived all the controversy. ... The communication lines are always open, we don't shut them down.” Whether the increase of contact with the public was due to ONF activities (such as changes in forest management practices and public involvement programs) or not, most respondents agreed that the AC had furthered additional contact.

Respondents differed in their opinions regarding the nature of the improved contact. Three (of 23) Forest Service employees pointed out that the number of interactions increased with people who were already involved, rather than an increase in contact with a wider audience. The latter opinion was supported by many members of the public. All but 1 of the 18 (94%) interviewed members of the public said that their willingness to engage in an active dialogue with the Forest Service had not changed as a result of AC meetings, indicating that they had always been involved with ONF issues. Three (of 23) Forest Service employees remarked that although the amount of contact with the public did not necessarily increase due to the AC's activities, the quality of that contact had improved by providing a different venue for interaction.

**Success**

The importance of the AC's role in providing a forum for constructive dialogue was further emphasized when all respondents were asked if they considered the AC a success. Ninety-three percent of all respondents thought that the AC had been a partial or a complete success (AC members: 94%; Forest Service employees: 100%; members of the public: 83%). When asked to justify why they considered the AC a success, the reason most frequently reported by all three respondent groups was that the AC provided a setting promoting dialogue between the Forest Service and interest groups. This was reported by 56% of all respondents, or 50% of AC members, 74% of Forest Service personnel, and 39% of the members of the public. According to a Forest Service employee: "It brought interests together in a better manner ... than before. And in a more structured manner. We just couldn't do it. We had various meetings, we had open houses, we had forums, all encompassed within the planning process, which is a constraint in itself. And to have an ongoing process, where everyone knows that perhaps on a quarterly basis there will be an opportunity ... to come forward ..., it was a success beyond my wildest dreams."

In order to further explore the success of the AC, respondents were also asked which factors had facilitated this success. Table 6 provides an overview of the most frequently reported factors. The AC's composition, consisting mostly of technical experts, was reported most frequently as a facilitating factor, especially by employees of the Forest Service. The role of the Forest Service was also mentioned frequently, especially by AC members.

The Forest Service facilitated the AC's success through assistance in logistics and the positive attitudes and commitment of Forest Service employees. The relationship between the AC and members of the public was also considered an important contributor to the AC's success, especially by members of the public. Other facilitating factors were the leadership provided by the AC's chairmen (12%, n=57) and the social interactions among the AC members, Forest Service employees, and members of the public (9%).

The factors contributing to success were related to the AC's role in providing a forum for dialogue. For instance, the technical nature of the composition of the AC resulted in the perception that the AC was unbiased and highly credible, having the respect of members of the public and Forest Service employees alike. This was reflected in the positive relationship of the AC with the Forest Service and members of the public. As explained by an AC member, "The committee has been very open. The committee has not been a very egotistical group that was only interested in their own pontification, but [it] is really understood that their role was to encourage the dialogue, and to some extent ... [the committee] use[s] [their] expertise to make judgments about what people say."

Respondents were also asked which factors have impeded the success of the AC. Table 7 provides an overview of the most frequently reported factors. The table shows that almost 25% of the respondents did not think that there had been any obstacles to success. Furthermore, if respondents did identify obstacles, they often pointed out that these were only minor. The most commonly reported

**Table 6.** Most frequently reported factors facilitating the success of the AC according to three groups of respondents (past and present AC members, Forest Service personnel, and members of the public).

Response	Total (N=57)*	Past and Present AC members (N=16)	Forest Service Personnel (N=23)	Members of the Public (N=18)
AC's composition	32 (56%)	8 (50%)	19 (83%)	5 (28%)
Role of Forest Service	19 (33%)	10 (63%)	7 (30%)	2 (11%)
Relationship between AC and members of the public	13 (23%)	2 (13%)	2 (9%)	9 (50%)
Leadership provided by AC chairmen	7 (12%)	2 (13%)	2 (7%)	3 (17%)
Social interactions	5 (9%)	2 (13%)	3 (13%)	0

\*Percentages add up to more than 100% since many respondents reported more than one facilitating factor.

**Table 7.** Most frequently reported factors impeding the success of the AC according to three groups of respondents (past and present AC members, Forest Service personnel, and members of the public).

Response	Total (N=57)*	Past and Present AC members (N=16)	Forest Service Personnel (N=23)	Members of the Public (N=18)
Meeting frequency too low	16 (28%)	9 (56%)	5 (22%)	2 (11%)
There were no impeding factors	13 (23%)	1 (6%)	7 (30%)	5 (28%)
AC's composition	10 (18%)	5 (31%)	3 (13%)	2 (11%)
Relationship between AC and members of the public	10 (18%)	4 (25%)	2 (9%)	4 (25%)
Role of Forest Service	7 (12%)	0	0	7 (39%)
Membership turnover	7 (12%)	2 (13%)	3 (13%)	2 (11%)
Getting started took time	4 (7%)	3 (19%)	1 (4%)	0
Focus not always appropriate	4 (7%)	0	3 (13%)	1 (6%)

\*Percentages add up to more than 100% since many respondents reported more than one facilitating factor.

factor was that the meeting frequency of approximately three meetings per year was too low. The second most commonly mentioned obstacle was AC composition. Although a majority of the respondents had identified the composition of the AC as a factor facilitating success, almost a fifth of the respondents considered the composition to be an impediment. Several respondents pointed out that the AC, consisting mostly of academics, could be viewed as an elite group, which could impede its success. Some respondents commented on the drawbacks of allowing the public to participate as much as it does, remarking that it sometimes slowed the discussion down by having special interest groups continually presenting their viewpoints. According to an AC member, "many times it almost appeared as a free for all. That it wasn't just the committee hearing presentations and deliberating amongst themselves. It was the whole audience, with the committee, going about commenting and back and forth. This in some ways added things to the committee's knowledge and some ways may have been old stuff being rehashed again, when you have special interest groups continually presenting their viewpoints on things. And so it was probably that which led the committee to evolve into a public forum thing which is somewhat of a positive. It made for additional dialogue. On the other hand, being open and not controlled in the meeting set up meant

sometimes that the committee was waiting for these other people to have their say ... and sometimes did not necessarily contribute to the discussion." In contrast, several members of the public thought that the role of the Forest Service was too large. They remarked that the Forest Service had tried too much to influence the AC and was too controlling. Obviously, the impeding factors focusing on committee composition, the relationship with the public, and the role of the Forest Service were related to the AC's role as provider of a forum. Other impeding factors included membership turnover (12%), the time it took to get the AC started (7%), and an occasionally inappropriate focus of the discussions (7%).

## DISCUSSION

Originally set up as a technical advisory committee, the AC took on the additional role as a provider of a forum for dialogue among the ONF and members of the public. According to respondents, this became its second most important role. Furthermore, the AC was considered successful by most respondents because of its role in the reduction of conflict among the ONF and members of the public.

Although the percentage of members of the public who commented positively on the AC as a provider of a forum



for dialogue was generally lower than the percentage of AC members or Forest Service personnel, in several instances it was still the most common response to a particular question among the members of the public. Nevertheless, the lower percentage of members of the public who commented positively on this role of the AC could suggest that the decrease in conflict with the ONF (as implied by the decline in the number of appeals and the absence of lawsuits) was not as much a result of AC activities as AC members and Forest Service personnel think. However, given the repeated emphasis by members of all respondent groups on the importance of the forum that the AC provides, it is reasonable to assume that the AC has at least contributed to the decline in conflict.

The composition of the AC has contributed significantly to the success of the forum it has provided. The members of the AC are primarily technical experts drawn from universities and a few agencies. They do not represent interest groups, nor have they taken any public stance on issues concerning the ONF. As a result, all parties with an interest in forest management at the ONF (Forest Service, timber interests, environmental interests, others) have been able to agree about the integrity of members of the AC and the quality of the input provided by the AC. Furthermore, the AC is not threatening to any of the involved parties. Forest Service employees, environmentalists, and timber industry representatives alike feel that the AC takes their statements seriously. Furthermore, because of the technical nature of the AC, agenda items tend to be of a technical, rather than an emotionally charged nature. Although charged subjects are touched upon while discussing technical issues, the discussion usually remains detached from emotion. However, in a few instances, the AC has explored the technical basis of some of the emotionally charged issues in an effort to improve the AC's understanding of these issues.

### **Recommendations for Other National Forests**

National forests and other public lands facing similar issues and controversies as the ONF may want to consider the establishment of an AC, if only to help provide their managers with a fresh outside perspective. The cost of establishing such a committee may be negligible when compared to the cost of one lawsuit that an AC may help prevent.

Where issues have become very polarized, an AC should be made up of technical experts rather than representatives of interest groups. Meetings of a committee comprised of interest group representatives could easily turn into shouting matches and end up in stalemates. A technical AC, composed of local or regional experts, could command respect from a variety of interest groups, including the Forest Service. The propensity of Forest Service personnel to regard technical expertise highly

should facilitate the interaction between the Forest Service and the AC. Once the amount of conflict has been reduced, and trust and respect has been increased among stakeholders and between stakeholders and the Forest Service, a gradual change in composition to include stakeholders may be appropriate. However, "fringe" groups should not be allowed to dominate. National forests interested in establishing an AC could identify prospective AC members using the same successful process that was used by the ONF. Members of the public that had previously been involved in forest management issues were asked to nominate experts in a variety of fields for assignment to the AC. Thus, although members of the public were not invited to become AC members, they were involved in deciding upon the composition of the AC.

Any national forest establishing an AC needs to be highly committed to the committee for it to be successful. Strong commitment and support from the Forest Supervisor is an absolute requirement. The national forest should further provide logistic support, preferably by someone permanently assigned as the liaison with the AC. It is important that the national forest provides the AC with information and keeps AC members interested. Also, it is beneficial to make AC meetings enjoyable through overnight stays and field trips. At the same time the national forest should allow the AC the freedom to take up any issues it wishes. It should be clear to all involved, that the AC is not a "kept" committee. The AC should not function as a watch dog either.

The major hurdle to establishing an AC for federal lands is the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) of 1972. Although many have questioned whether the FACA is still useful and even have suggested changes to the Act (Wondolleck and Yaffee 1994), FACA is still in place and must be accommodated. A consideration of the host of Forest Service memoranda regarding FACA shows clearly that any AC similar to the one at the ONF would be considered a Federal Advisory Committee and thus be subject to FACA's provisions. Individual national forests wanting to establish an Advisory Committee have three choices: 1) Obtain an exemption from FACA through legislation, as was the case for the ONF AC; 2.) Comply with FACA and endure FACA's abundant red tape (e.g., FBI background checks of all prospective AC members); or, 3.) Ignore FACA and hope that nobody notices (which, of course, creates the potential for lawsuits and the invalidation of achievements by the AC). The second option may be the most straightforward. The effort needed to deal with FACA requirements will more than likely pay off through the successful establishment of an AC.

The Ouachita National Forest Ecosystem Management Advisory Committee has been very successful. A

majority of the individuals involved, whether they are AC members, Forest Service personnel, or members of the public, have benefited from AC meetings. With hard work from all parties involved, it should be possible and very much worthwhile to replicate this success story on other national forests across the U.S.

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