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Citizen Participation in Long-Range Planning: The RPA Experience**

ABSTRACT

Public participants in National Forest Planning carried out under the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 were dissatisfied with the process. Even though two-thirds of the respondent public felt it was realistic to project the use of public lands fifty years into the future, and more than one-half of the public thought they could usefully participate in such ventures, a lack of perceived effect on the agency plan seemed to account for the dissatisfaction. The differing expectations and values of both the agency members and the participant groups suggest that resource planning is not seen as a neutral process.

"The Forest Service charged with managing the nation's water, timber, wildlife, mineral and recreation resources, recently made public its plan showing how the forests' resources will be used for the next 10 years.

Not surprisingly, it made nearly all the users mad."

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

June 12, 1988

INTRODUCTION

In the July 1984 issue of *Forest Planning*, Randal O'Toole reported that the United States Forest Service was receiving less response to the proposed 1985 long-range plan from conservation groups than in the development of the 1980 long-range plan even though the 1985 plan was "far more threatening to environmental groups than any which preceded

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it."¹ According to O'Toole, the 1985 plan "was systematically and deliberately biased toward timber, grazing and other market resources."²

The National Forest Products Association disagreed. They accused the Forest Service of succumbing to heavy preservationist pressure to lower their timber harvest projections.³ While it is true that action taken by the Forest Service may have been due more to Gramm-Rudman⁴ budget restrictions than to activities of clientele groups, the above statements indicate that neither utilization-oriented nor preservation-oriented groups have been happy with the guidance the Forest Service long-range planning process has been producing.

The Forest Service was first mandated by Congress to develop a long-range planning system in 1974.⁵ Today, over fifteen years later, no one seems to be satisfied with the way the system is operating. The Forest Service spent more than four years, from 1977 to 1980, developing a decisionmaking mechanism for constructing the original plan. This mechanism was intended to serve as a model for the original plan of 1980 and for each five-year updating of the plan required by the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (RPA).⁶ The Forest Service assumed that the process would result in an end product that reflected a workable public consensus. It is apparent from the *Seattle-Post Intelligencer* article quoted above that this has not happened.

This article examines why the original RPA planning process failed to accomplish this end. Even though citizen participation was encouraged and provided for by the Forest Service, the end result has not been agreement. In 1979, the Forest Service asked the authors to examine the citizen participation process employed in the development of the 1980 plan and to evaluate its role in the development of the long-range planning process. Questionnaires were sent to Forest Service employees who participated in developing the plan and to all citizens from Forest Service records known to have commented on drafts of the plan developed over the four-year period, 1977-1980.⁷ The public participants were asked what they thought of the Forest Service planning process in general, and whether

1. O'Toole, *Systematically Biased Towards Timber*, 5 Forest Plan., Apr. 1984, at 10.

2. *Id.* at 8.

3. 7 Forest Watch, July 1986, at 3.

4. Gramm-Rudman is officially known as the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985, Pub. L. No. 99-177, 99 Stat. 1038 (codified at 2 U.S.C. §§ 200-75 & scattered sections (Supp. V 1987)).

5. Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act, Pub. L. No. 93-378, 88 Stat. 476, codified at 16 U.S.C. §§ 1600-87 (1982).

6. *Id.*, 16 U.S.C. § 1602 (1982).

7. In each Region, all Forest Service directory names below the level of RPA element area Director under each element were polled, plus Forest Supervisors, deputies, element area staff officials, planners, and District Rangers. Non-RPA element staff officials were excluded (e.g., engineers, fire and administrative specialists). The intent was to confine the sample to field level officials contributing to the implementation of the RPA and familiar with the various public inputs.

the Renewable Resources Act Plan was a logical extension of the established planning efforts of the Forest Service. Both the Forest Service and the public participants were questioned about the extent to which they approved of the fifteen policy issues presented in the final version of the 1980 plan, and to what extent they felt involved in the development of these issues. The public participants were asked how they felt the Forest Service regarded each issue.

Correspondingly, the Forest Service participants were asked how they thought the majority of the involved public (those who responded to Forest Service requests for participation) would respond to each issue. Finally, the public participants were asked whether their views were considered by the Forest Service. Questionnaires were sent to 1274 Forest Service employees and 914 public participants; 61 percent and 62 percent of the questionnaires were completed and returned by the two groups, respectively. This article reports the conclusions drawn from these responses, preceded by a brief history of the Forest Service's experiences with long-range planning.

DEVELOPMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING IN THE FOREST SERVICE

Many long-range plans are developed by government agencies to serve as general guides for future decisionmaking. Such plans are typically employed at the discretion of decisionmakers. In contrast, the RPA plan, once developed, must be operationally integrated by the Forest Service into its annual budget plans.⁸ The requirement that the RPA plan be updated every five years is intended to ensure that it could reflect changes over time, but still retain sufficient structure to guarantee continuity.

The legislative impetus behind RPA can be traced to the environmental movement of the 1960s, which culminated in the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969.⁹ Long before this time, however, the Forest Service had been working toward the development of a comprehensive plan. In fact, the Forest Service was created in part to ensure the continued regrowth of timber resources, planned around the growth cycles of trees.¹⁰

By the 1950s, conflicting national forest uses made it apparent that public resources other than timber, such as water, vegetation, wildlife, and soil, could also be threatened if lands were not regulated to conserve them. On the recommendation of the Forest Service, Congress passed

8. 16 U.S.C. § 1606 (1982).

9. National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, Pub. L. No. 91-190, 83 Stat. 852 (codified at 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321-70 & scattered sections (1982)).

10. See the so-called Organic Act of 1897, 30 Stat. 11 (codified at 16 U.S.C. 475 (1982)). Under this act the stated purposes of the National Forests are to improve and protect the forest, secure favorable conditions of water flow, and to furnish a continuous supply of timber, in that order.

the Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act in 1960¹¹ which legally sanctioned the management of national forest lands for resources other than water and timber.¹² This action was followed by the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964¹³ at the behest of environmental groups, who wished to preserve the natural ecology on at least some of the public lands.¹⁴ Then in 1969, Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act.¹⁵

These laws and their interpretation by the courts stimulated the development of systematic servicerwide planning by the Forest Service. As Chart 1 shows, multiple use planning and wilderness studies began in the 1960s. By the late 1960s the Forest Service's initial effort toward comprehensive planning, *Framework for the Future*, surfaced.¹⁶ This was followed by the more elaborate *Environmental Program for the Future*.¹⁷ The RPA in 1974 evolved naturally from these internal efforts.

The development of a multiple use comprehensive plan assumes the reconciliation of many different publics, each with a different perception of how public lands should be managed. Timber companies, grazers, recreationists, preservationists, and naturalists all envisioned different and frequently conflicting uses of public lands. The Forest Service has long prided itself on encouraging citizen involvement in its decisions, although until the 1960s attention was concentrated on those citizens primarily interested in timber harvesting and livestock grazing. Other groups, such as recreationists and ecologists, became prominent in the 1960s. By late 1973, the Forest Service introduced CODINVOLVE, a text analysis technique for systematically collecting and analyzing citizen inputs on proposed public actions.¹⁸ The technique quickly spread throughout the Forest Service. But CODINVOLVE was primarily designed for collecting views on the uses of specific geographical areas where alternative uses could be identified with some precision. Citizen participation in nationwide or economywide long-range planning was something else again.

11. Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act of 1960, Pub. L. No. 86-517, 74 Stat. 215 (codified at 16 U.S.C. §§ 528-531 (1982)).

12. G. Bergoffen, *The Multiple Use Sustained Yield Law: A Case of Administrative Initiative in the Legislative Policy-Framing Process*, State University of N.Y., Syracuse, N.Y. (1962) (unpublished MS thesis).

13. Wilderness Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-577, 78 Stat. 890 (codified at 16 U.S.C. scattered sections (1982)).

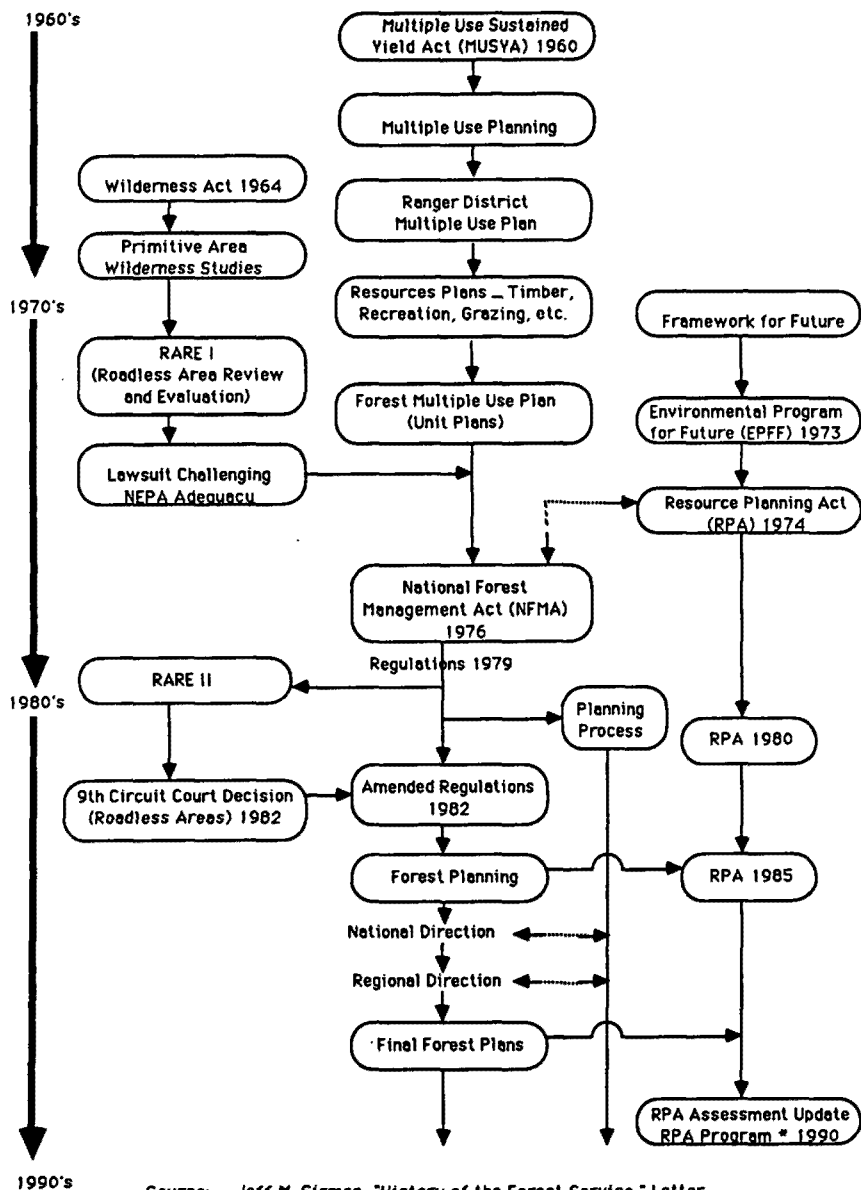
14. R. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* 221 (3d ed. 1982).

15. See *supra* note 9.

16. U.S. Forest Service, Dept. of Agriculture, *Framework for the Future: Forest Service Objectives and Policy Guides* (Feb. 1970).

17. U.S. Forest Service, Dept. of Agriculture, *Environmental Program for the Future: A Long Term Forestry Plan* (Feb. 1973).

18. J. Hendee, *Public Involvement and the Forest Service: Experience, Effectiveness and Suggested Direction*, U.S. Forest Service (May 1973). R. Clark, *An Introduction to CODINVOLVE: A System for Analyzing, Storing and Retrieving Public Input to Resource Decisions*, USFS Research Note PNW-223 (Apr. 1974).



Source: Jeff M. Sirmon, "History of the Forest Service," Letter to Forest Supervisors and Directors, April 26, 1984.

CHART 1. Historical Perspective of Forest Planning.

The need for citizen participation in Forest Service decisions had been recognized long before 1973. As early as the 1930s and 1940s, both keymen and formal advisory boards had been used to gain community and interest group views.¹⁹ The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 required citizen participation in the preparation of environmental impact statements.²⁰ The Forest Service's public involvement study of 1973²¹ identified fourteen different techniques then in use within the Service. All of these efforts were undertaken in recognition of the fact that legislative mandates often do not and cannot anticipate all of the policy questions that may arise in implementing legislation. Consequently citizens need to be given the opportunity to give meaning to laws when they are in fact implemented. Many means of encouraging citizen participation have been developed over the past twenty-five years, but as noted above, most involve citizens in the making of discrete decisions on specific land areas. Such decisions required planning but only within very narrow parameters.

The Forest Service began the construction of its 1980 RPA plan in 1975. The agency spent five years identifying: (1) the elements (water, forest and range lands, wildlife and fish, and outdoor recreation and wilderness), (2) the policy issues to be included, and (3) the alternative resource combinations that could be employed. Chart 2 shows the progress of drafts written over this period of time, beginning with the tentative plan drawn up in 1975 for interim use. Drafts of the 1980 RPA plan were developed successively in 1977,²² 1978,²³ and 1979²⁴ with each being critiqued by interested citizens and public interest groups. COD-INVOLVE-type surveys were employed at the national and regional office levels, using interdisciplinary teams to code the data collected.²⁵ The findings were included in planning reviews conducted at the Washington and regional levels of the Forest Service during this period of time.

RESPONDENT CONSENSUS ON THE PLAN

The questionnaires asked each respondent to indicate on a five-point scale the extent to which he/she favored each of the fifteen policy statements and the five alternative use options presented in the final plan.²⁶

19. See generally, J. Hendee, *supra* note 18.

20. *Supra* note 9.

21. U.S. Forest Service, Draft Assessment Outline and Proposed Alternative Forest Service Programs and National Goals (Feb. 1977).

22. *Id.*

23. U.S. Forest Service, The Resources Planning Act: A Progress Report (Jan. 1978).

24. U.S. Forest Service, Dept. of Agriculture, A Report to the Congress on the National Renewable Resources (Review Draft) (Mar. 1979).

25. R. Clark, *supra* note 18.

26. The fifteen policy statements and the five alternative use options are shown in Table 1.

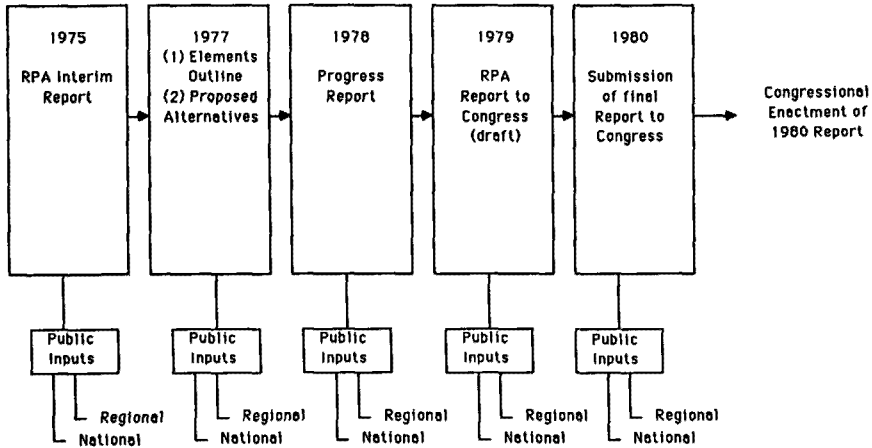


CHART 2. 1980 RPA Planning Process.

Each public respondent was also asked to predict, on the same kind of scale, the Forest Service response to each of the policy issue statements and alternative use options. Each Forest Service respondent was, in turn, asked to predict the public response to the same issues and options. Each respondent was also asked how well the planning process operated, how it compared with the Forest Service's earlier planning efforts, whether the respondent (directed to the public participants) felt that he/she was able to participate adequately, and whether his/her participation made any difference in the development of the final plan. Questions were also included which allowed classification of the public respondents according to their interests—Utilization-oriented, Preservation-oriented, or No Group (specific interests not identifiable).

The first question concerns the degree of agreement between the Forest Service respondents and the public respondents on what the plan should say. The Forest Service respondents gave more favorable answers than did the public to twelve of the fifteen policy issues. Chart 3, however, shows that both groups responded on the favorable side of the scale to all except one policy issue (number 5). Here the public respondents' profile dips slightly into the unfavorable side of the scale. The average Forest Service responses are also near the midpoint (neutral) on issue five. In fact, the two profiles are quite similar on all but five of the fifteen issues.

But how much homogeneity is reflected in these aggregate public responses? In Chart 4, profiles are presented contrasting the responses of the Forest Service respondents with those of the Utilization-oriented, the Preservation-oriented, and the No Group public respondents. The chart

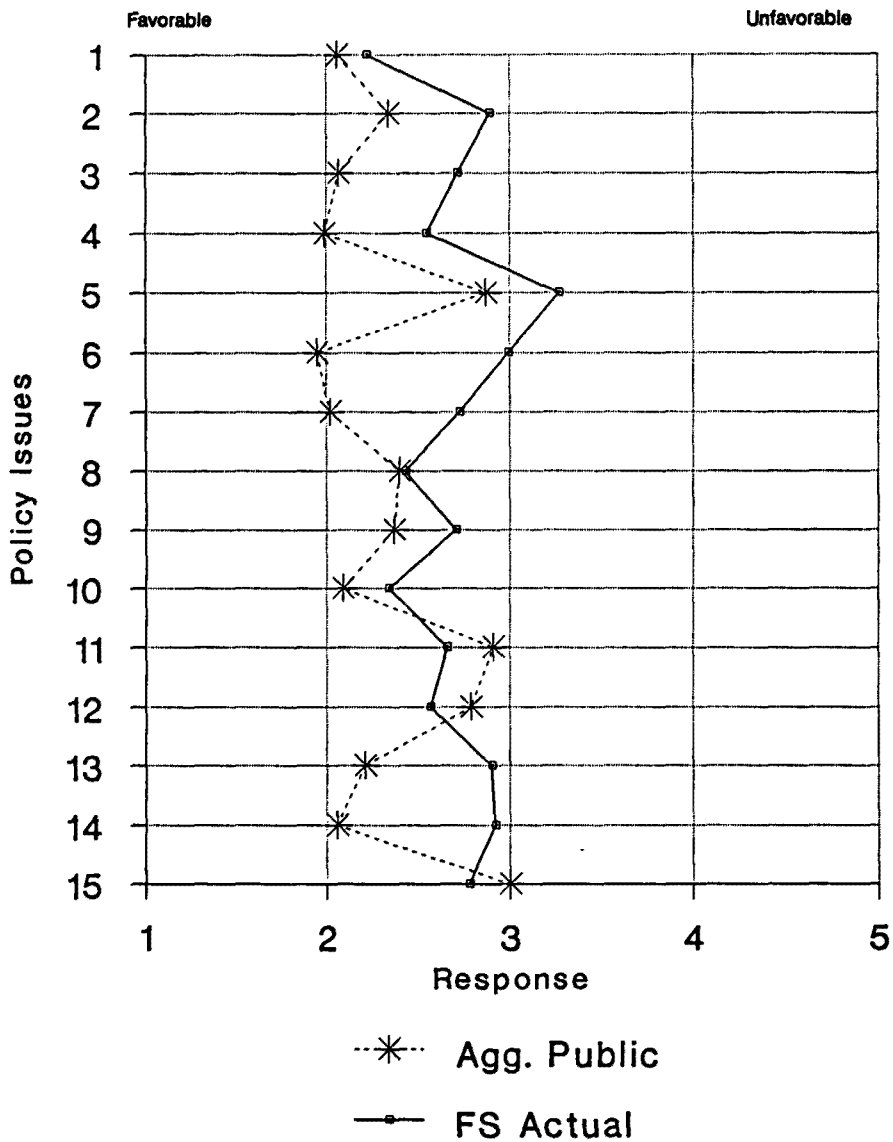


CHART 3. Comparative Response Profiles for Aggregate Public and Forest Service Respondents to Policy Issues.

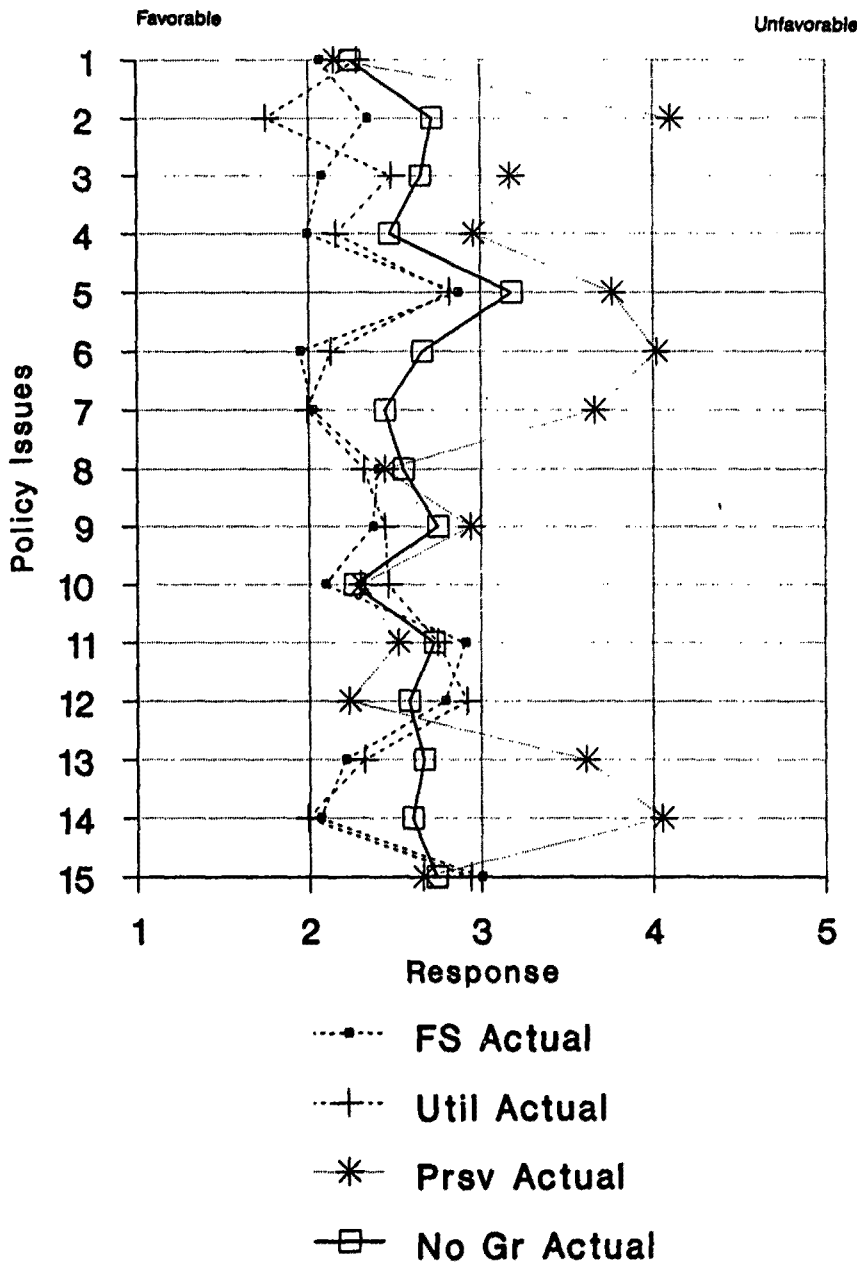


CHART 4. Profiles of Forest Service, Utilization-Oriented, Preservation-Oriented, and No Group-Oriented Publics' Responses to Policy Issues.

indicates remarkable differences. The profiles of the Forest Service and the Utilization-oriented public respondents are very similar, but the Preservation-oriented respondents' profile differs radically from both. In fact, on three policy issues (numbers 2, 6, and 14) the Preservation-oriented respondents' profile moves far into the unfavorable side of the scale. The No Group responses consistently fall between those of the Utilization-oriented and the Preservation-oriented respondents, but the No Group profile more closely resembles the shape of the Utilization-oriented profile than that of the Preservation-oriented profile. It is evident: (1) that the Forest Service respondents' and the Utilization-oriented public respondents' scales are quite similar, (2) that the No Group respondents' profile runs between the Utilization-oriented and the Preservation-oriented profiles, but (3) that the Preservation-oriented respondents' profile differs in form from those of the Forest Service, the No Group public, and the Utilization-oriented public. Perhaps the similarity between the Forest Service and the Utilization-oriented profiles reflect the Forest Service's historical preference for controlled use rather than preservation.

The more general similarity between the Forest Service and the No Group public profiles illustrates the Forest Service's attempt to reconcile use and preservation values in the RPA plan. The Preservation-oriented respondents apparently feel that too little was done to effect a balance between these two values.

FOREST SERVICE ACCURACY IN PERCEIVING PUBLIC PREFERENCES

Did the Forest Service accurately perceive the attitudes of the public, particularly those of the Preservation-oriented public? Chart 5 compares the aggregate (total) public respondents' scores with those scores that the Forest Service respondents predicted the general public would express on the fifteen policy issues. The Forest Service profile reveals that these respondents accurately estimated the favorableness of the general public on more than half of the policy issues, but greatly underestimated their favorableness on four and overestimated their favorableness on two of the policy issues. As shown in the previous section, however, the (total) aggregate is not a homogeneous respondent group. There is no way of knowing what the Forest Service respondents' perceptions of the Utilization-oriented or Preservation-oriented public respondents might be since the Forest Service respondents were asked only about their perceptions of the general public's views. But it is possible to report what the Utilization-oriented, the Preservation-oriented, and the No Group publics' perceptions were of the Forest Service. This information is presented in Chart 6.

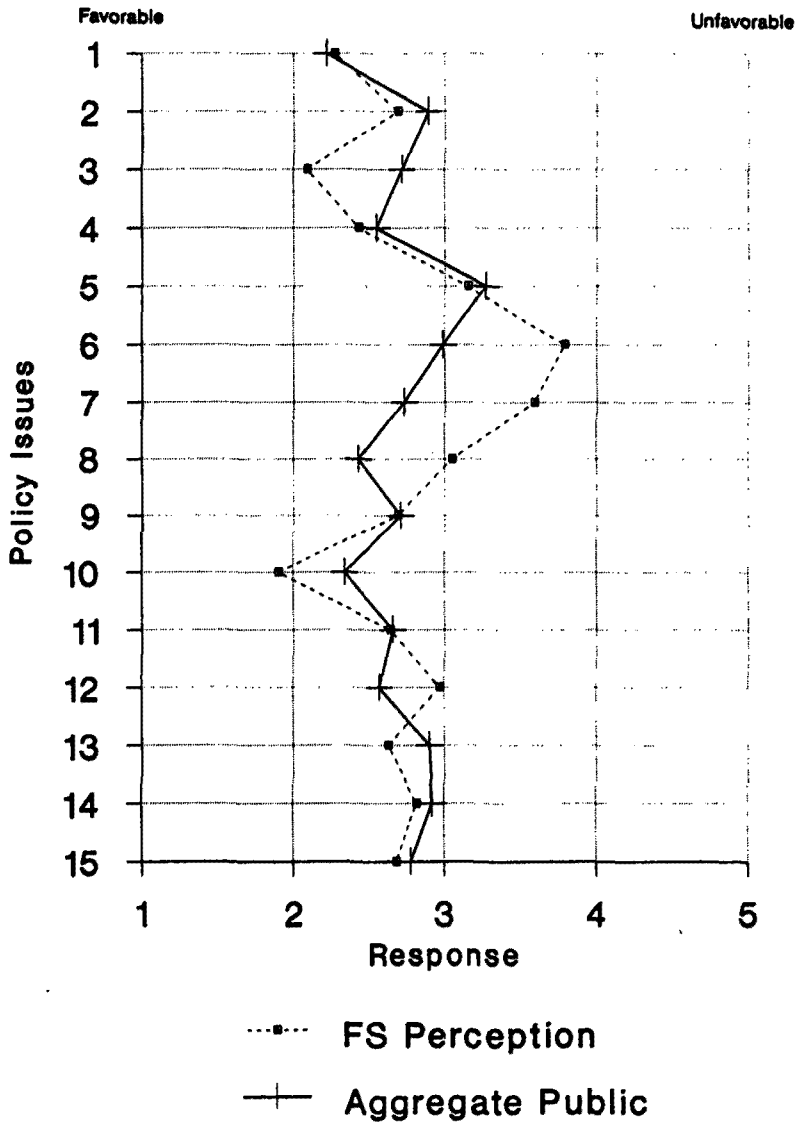


CHART 5. Comparative Responses Profiles: Aggregate Public and Forest Service Perceptions of Aggregate Public Responses to Policy Issues.

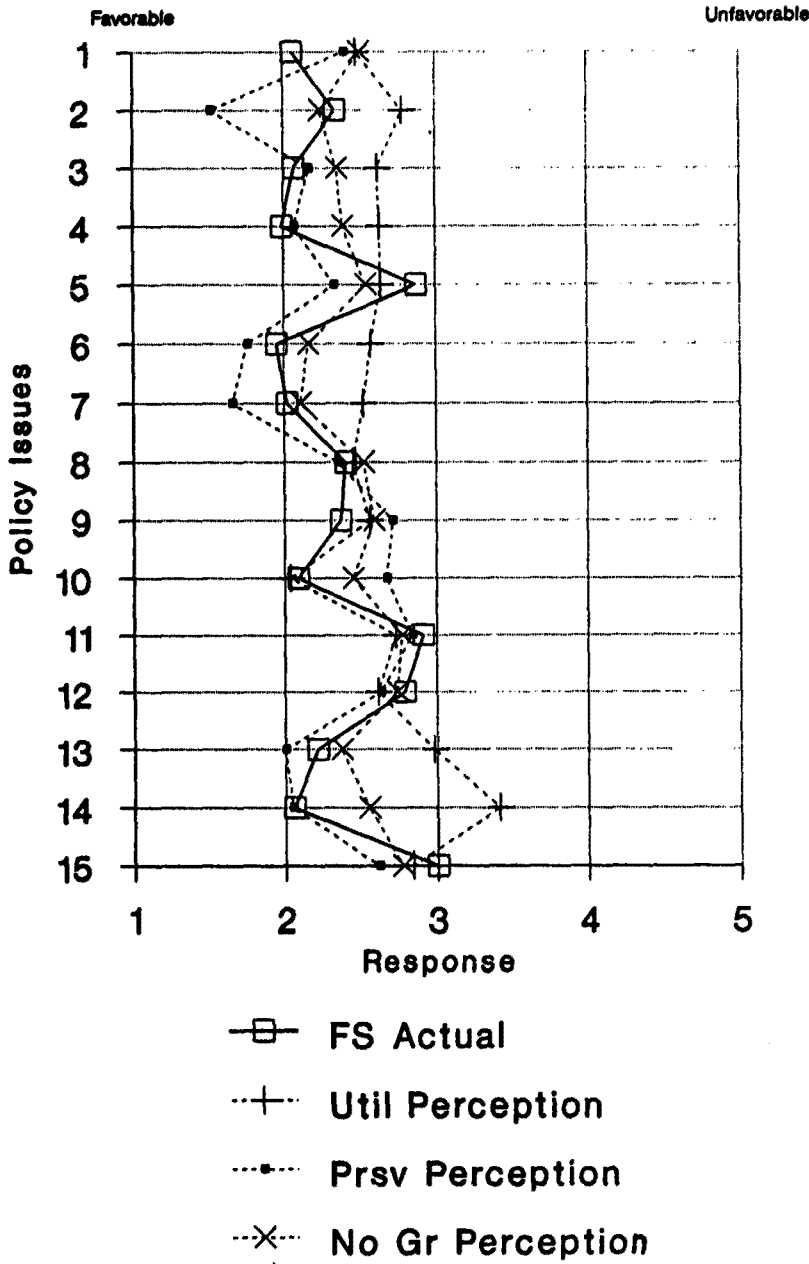


CHART 6. Profiles of Forest Service, Utilization-Oriented, Preservation-Oriented, and No Group-Oriented Publics' Perception of Forest Service Responses.

It is apparent that the Utilization-oriented public quite consistently saw the Forest Service as viewing the fifteen policy issues less favorably than the Forest Service respondents actually reported. The opposite was true for the Preservation-oriented public. They perceived that the Forest Service respondents would be much more favorable to more of the fifteen policy issues than the Forest Service in fact turned out to be. Thus, the Preservation-oriented public respondents thought that the policy issues reflected the policy positions of the Forest Service more than the Forest Service respondents actually acknowledged. Conversely, the Utilization-oriented public respondents believed the opposite. *Both groups saw the Forest Service as more sympathetic to the other group's values than the Forest Service respondents acknowledged.* Only the No Group respondents appear to have a relatively accurate perception of Forest Service preferences.

SATISFACTION OF PUBLIC RESPONDENTS WITH THEIR INVOLVEMENT

What did the aggregate (total) respondents think about the RPA planning process and their opportunities for involvement in it? On the issue of planning in general, nearly two-thirds of the public respondents agreed that the Forest Service has a centralized planning system reinforced by decentralized participation. Few agreed, though, about the success of past planning efforts by the Forest Service. Public responses produced almost equal groups indicating that the agency is seen to change too often, often enough, or not often enough. Thus, approximately 31 percent felt changes had been made too often to allow the organization to incorporate change, about 38 percent felt changes have not been made often enough to eliminate stereotyped thinking, and about 31 percent felt changes had been frequent enough to ensure a progressive organization. Forest Service respondents, on the other hand, were in strong agreement (72.3 percent) that the Forest Service changed its planning approaches too often to allow the organization to incorporate changes.

There was also little agreement among the public respondents about whether integrated national planning was a good thing. Approximately 45 percent said it allows the Forest Service to make better use of natural resources, about 38 percent said it does not allow as good use of resources as the old centralized-decentralized approach, while approximately 16 percent said it had no effect on how resources were used. Again these responses contrasted with those of the Forest Service respondents, the majority (59 percent) of whom felt that national planning allowed the Forest Service to make better use of resources.

The public respondents, on the other hand, reacted more favorably to long-range planning than Forest Service respondents. Two-thirds (64.2

percent) of the public respondents felt that it is realistic to project the use of public lands fifty years into the future. Only 47 percent of the Forest Service respondents agreed. Also, more public respondents (53.9 percent) than Forest Service respondents (41.9 percent) felt that the public can usefully take an active part in both long-range and short-range planning. In contrast, the Forest Service respondents felt that the public could best contribute to short-range planning.

The public respondents also felt that they should be expected to comment on all aspects of the RPA planning process (60.4 percent), while more Forest Service respondents felt that the public should comment on only certain aspects of the process (50.5 percent). The majority of the Forest Service respondents (58.2 percent) also thought that the public should only be presented a simplified statement of the plan for comment. The public respondents disagreed on this question. The largest number of them agreed with the Forest Service (45.1 percent), but about 27 percent said that the public should comment on the whole draft. Another 24 percent felt that special simplified statements should be aimed at the interest of each particular client group.

The Forest Service respondents also disagreed on whether the public should be expected to respond to all five of the resource options included in the plan. Nearly two-thirds (64.1 percent) of the public respondents felt that they should be expected to respond, but only a slight majority of the Forest Service respondents (52.2 percent) agreed. Both the Forest Service and the public respondents (76.7 percent and 73.7 percent), however, agreed that the public did indeed expect to comment on all five resource options.

Finally, did the public respondents feel that their participation in the 1980 RPA planning process was worthwhile? Forty-five percent responded that their involvement in the Forest Service's planning process had had no effect on the end result because the Forest Service had already made all the relevant decisions before their participation was requested. Over 50 percent said that the Forest Service had not made *any* changes in its plans in response to public participation or comments on the Forest Service drafts. In fact, fewer than two percent responded that a lot of change had resulted because of their participation. Only 18 percent said that some changes had occurred.

Almost 77 percent of the public respondents said that they would participate in Forest Service decisions on policies and programs much more or somewhat more if they knew that they were really being listened to, even though they may not get their own way. A similar question was asked of a national sample of respondents by the Harris Poll in 1980²⁷

27. L. Harris and Associates, *A Survey of the Public's Attitudes toward Soil, Water and Related Resources Conservation Policy* (pts. 1-5), NTIS #PB 80-219942-77 (Mar. 1980).

with similar results—71 percent replied that they would participate more if they felt they were listened to.

CONCLUSIONS

What may we conclude about public participation in long-range planning from this review of the development of the 1980 RPA plan? It is apparent that the majority of public respondents who participated in this venture were either Utilization-oriented (32 percent) or Preservation-oriented (36 percent). The Forest Service responses were much closer to those of the Utilization-oriented than to those of the Preservation-oriented public respondents. As the Forest Service is a strongly traditional or institutionalized bureaucracy, this suggests that we might expect future plans to also be Utilization-oriented.²⁸

The Forest Service respondents accurately predicted the responses of the aggregate public on more than half of the policy issues. When one examines how well the Utilization-oriented and the Preservation-oriented public respondents understood the Forest Service's positions on policy issues, it is evident that each group felt that the Forest Service was less favorable to their own views than the Forest Service respondents actually reported to be the case. Thus, both Utilization-oriented and Preservation-oriented public respondents failed to understand the positions taken by the Forest Service on many of the policy issues. This may explain why the public respondents were dissatisfied with their participation in the RPA process. Forty-five percent of *all* public respondents felt that they had no effect on the Forest Service plans since the relevant decisions had already been made when they were asked to participate. Over 50 percent said that the Forest Service had made no change in its plans as a result of their participation in the planning process. Yet nearly two-thirds of the respondents felt that it was realistic to project the use of public lands 50 years into the future, and over 50 percent of them thought that they could usefully participate in such ventures. Less than 50 percent of the Forest Service respondents agreed to either.

But what do these findings mean from a planning perspective? Perhaps they mean that planning is not viewed as a neutral process, but rather takes on the values of the different participating groups. The Utilization-oriented, the Preservation-oriented, and the No Group participants each have different expectations. The fact that the responses of the Forest Service employees coincide most closely with those of the Utilization-oriented is undoubtedly a reflection of the way multiple use policy is currently viewed by Congress. Until recently, at least in the Congress,

28. For a more statistical and historical assessment of this closeness of the Forest Service and the utilization-oriented (industry) groups, see Twight & Lyden, *Measuring Forest Service Bias*, 87 (No. 5) J. Forestry, May 1989, at 35.

the Preservation-oriented participants have reflected a minority view of policy on most issues.²⁹

Of special interest, however, are the views held by the No Group respondents. Their profile of responses appears to mediate most effectively between the profiles of the Utilization-oriented and the Preservation-oriented publics. Perhaps the Forest Service should recognize that the Utilization-oriented and the Preservation-oriented groups will always reflect divergent views on many or most policy issues. Those participants who represent the views of neither of these groups may prove to be a more effective barometer of evolving public policies than either of the organized groups.

29. While the preservation-oriented groups have won many individual policy battles in the Congress, overall policy as reflected by Forest Service appropriation totals has strongly favored the utilization-oriented groups. However, a recent Senate cut of \$65 million from the Service's logging road construction budget in favor of agency stewardship and conservation programs may indicate a change of congressional direction is taking place. See A. Antico, 21 *Sierra Club Nat'l News Rep.*, Aug. 15, 1989, at 1.