

MEMORANDUM

To: DCR Stewardship Council
From: Henry Lee and Laura Johnson
Date:
Re: RMP review and approval

In 2003 the Massachusetts legislature created one parks agency by eliminating the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) and the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) and creating in their stead the Department of Conservation and Recreation thus placing approximately 450,000 acres of land under the new agency's stewardship. (M.G.L. Ch. 21).

The legislation also created the Stewardship Council as an oversight body to the new agency, but provided little by way of specific guidance for the role of the Council. Since its first meeting in September 2004, the Stewardship Council has struggled to define in particular the scope of its role under Section 2F which provided:

The Commissioner of Conservation and Recreation shall submit management plans to the DCR Stewardship Council for the Council's adoption with respect to all reservations, parks and forests under the management of the Department.

In the last six years, we have approved approximately eleven RMPs, but almost all of them were initiated prior to the establishment of the Council. We have had numerous discussions on how to accelerate their development and approval, knowing that it will take over 25 years to complete RMPs for every DCR property. While we have made progress, budget constraints and personnel changes have made the reforms we originally envisioned very difficult to attain. We are now on the verge of receiving a number of new RMPs –all of which were initiated within the last two years. I thought it would be valuable to have a discussion of the criteria, we should use in our review of these plans. In other words, can we develop a set of guidelines that will help frame our reviews and insure that they are consistent and meet the public responsibility that the legislature has placed upon us?

Planning protocols at DCR:

Our task is made more challenging because DCR has not yet created a single consistent planning framework which makes it difficult for those outside the agency to understand the functions served by various planning tools. These include:

- Landscape Designations (LD) and associated Management Guidelines (underway)
- Land Stewardship Zoning Guidelines
- Resource Management Plans (7 approved by the Council and 7 pending)
- District level Forestry RMPs (4 approved by the Council)
- Trail Guidelines and Best Practices Manual
- Large Reserves designated in 2007 (but consistency with the Landscape Designations not yet clear)

- Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC)
- Various other policies and guidelines specific to certain items (e.g. parkways, old growth, historic buildings)

What is consistent as one looks at the various planning protocols and tools is that they all try to balance in one way or another the tension inherent in the agency between **resource protection** and **resource use**. This tension is at the heart of the RMP planning process, and is recognized by the legislation itself:

*Management plans shall include guidelines for operations and land stewardship, provide for the protection of natural and cultural resources, and **ensure consistency between recreation, resource protection, and sustainable forest management.** (emphasis added)*

What the Council should consider in approving RMPs:

We should also keep in mind that these issues are not unique to Massachusetts and have been fought about in all parts of the country for many years. Opinion over the proper uses of public lands varies widely and is intensifying. Development and closing off privately-owned lands leads users to see public lands as the only way to meet their needs, while at the same time development also concentrates wildlife and natural resource values needing protection onto those same public lands.

We can categorize the competition roughly as being among:

- Economic (and often extractive) uses of resources: timber, grazing, energy production (traditionally oil/gas/minerals and now including renewable energy such as wind siting);
- Recreational uses ranging from those with more intensive impacts (OHVs, mountain bikes, dog parks) to those with less (walking, nature study);
- Protection of plants, animals and habitats; and preserving a sense of “wildness”.

However, much of the balancing DCR staff must do in making decisions, setting priorities and allocating ever-scarcer resources must be done without specific legal guidance or mandates. The one exception is the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act (MGL Ch 131A), which clearly states that all practical measures should be taken to resolve conflicts between protection, conservation and restoration of state listed species on state owned land in favor of the listed species. As this challenge is true for the agency, so it is also true for the Council.

With guidance from the Policy committee, and specifically its Chair, I have produced a set of questions that I would like us to address at our meeting later this week.