

## **A Web-Based System for Monitoring the Public Discourse about Forest Policy**

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### **Abstract**

Traditional social science methods for analyzing public attitudes and beliefs about forest policy issues have several inherent limitations. Traditional methods such as surveys, focus groups, etc.: (1) provide only a snapshot in time rather than trends over time, (2) cannot be quickly and easily updated, (3) often produce findings long after they were needed for planning and decision making, and (4) are unable to monitor attitudes and beliefs at multiple spatial scales simultaneously (e.g., from a specific national forest or region to the entire nation).

This poster describes a prototype web-based social monitoring system that avoids these shortcomings. The system monitors the public discussion and debate about forest policy issues using computer-coded content analysis of news media stories and other textual data sources (<http://ncrs.fs.fed.us/issues>). News stories about forest policy issues are automatically obtained through CyberAlert.com, which searches more than 15,000 news sources daily. The news stories are then analyzed using the InfoTrend® computer content analysis method and software, and results are posted to the website on a regular basis. Information provided by this system could help natural resource management agencies monitor public attitudes and beliefs about key issues at the national as well as regional and local levels, assess the salience and geographic coverage of policy issues, and identify the underlying dimensions of issues.

Future developments will greatly increase the flexibility of this prototype tool, allowing forest planners, managers, policy makers, public affairs officers, communications officers, and other users to:

- (1) specify any policy or management issue to monitor,
- (2) specify a location to monitor (e.g., a particular national forest or region),
- (3) monitor multiple databases of text (e.g., news media discussion, blog discussion of issues relevant to the Forest Service, ethnic and minority news sources, public comments received by an agency, open-ended comments from surveys or focus groups, etc.),
- (4) identify emerging issues in the public discourse.