The Forest Service is proposing to revise its NEPA procedures (including its regulations at 36 CFR part 220, Forest Service Manual 1950, and Forest Service Handbook 1909.15) with the goal of increasing efficiency of environmental analysis. The Agency will continue to hold true to its commitment to deliver scientifically based, high-quality analysis to decision makers that honors its environmental stewardship responsibilities while maintaining robust public participation. These values are at the core of the Forest Service mission.

Reforming the Forest Service’s NEPA procedures is needed for a variety of reasons. An increasing percentage of the Agency’s resources are spent each year to provide the necessary resources for wildfire suppression, resulting in fewer resources available for other management activities such as restoration. In 1995, fire made up 16 percent of the Forest Service’s annual appropriated budget. In 2017, more than 50 percent of the Forest Service’s annual budget will be dedicated to wildfire. Along with this shift in resources, there has also been a corresponding shift in staff, with a 39 percent reduction in all non-fire personnel since 1995.

Additionally, the Agency has a backlog of more than 6,000 special use permits awaiting completion, and over 80 million acres of National Forest System land are in need of restoration to reduce the risk of wildfire, insect epidemics, and forest diseases.

Increasing efficiency of environmental analysis will enable the Agency to complete more projects needed to increase the health and productivity of our national forests and grasslands. The Agency’s goal is to complete project decision making in a timelier manner, to improve or eliminate inefficient processes and steps, and where appropriate increase the scale of analysis and the amount of activities authorized in a single analysis and decision. Improving the efficiency of environmental analysis and decision making will enable the agency to ensure lands and watersheds are sustainable, healthy, and productive; mitigate wildfire risk; and contribute to the economic health of rural communities through use and access opportunities.

Agency NEPA Procedures
Each Federal agency is required to develop NEPA procedures that supplement the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations and reflect the agency’s unique mandate and mission. The CEQ encourages agencies to periodically review their NEPA procedures. The Forest Service’s NEPA procedures were last reviewed in 2008 when the Agency moved a subset of its NEPA procedures from the Forest Service Manual and Handbook to the Code of Federal Regulations. However, the Agency’s NEPA procedures still reflect in part the policies and practices established by the Agency’s 1992 NEPA Manual and Handbook. The proposed revision of the Forest Service’s NEPA procedures will be developed in consultation with CEQ.

Request for Comment
The Agency is seeking public comment on the following:

- Processes and analysis requirements that can be modified, reduced, or eliminated in order to reduce time and cost while maintaining science-based, high-quality analysis; public involvement; and honoring agency stewardship responsibilities.
- Approaches to landscape-scale analysis and decision making under NEPA that facilitate restoration of National Forest System lands.
- Classes of actions that are unlikely, either individually or cumulatively, to have significant impacts and therefore should be categorically excluded from NEPA’s environmental assessment and environmental impact statement requirements, such as integrated restoration projects; special use authorizations; and activities to maintain and manage Agency sites (including recreation sites), facilities, and associated infrastructure.
- Ways the Agency might expand and enhance coordination of environmental review and authorization decisions with other Federal agencies, as well as State, Tribal, or local environmental reviews.
I. Introduction

1. In this Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM), the Commission proposes measured steps to ensure that rural healthcare providers get the support they need while guarding against waste, fraud, and abuse. The Commission considers a series of measures to ensure the Rural Health Care (RHC) Program operates efficiently and in the appropriate size of the funding cap. The Commission takes targeted, immediate action in the Order section of the item to mitigate the impact of the existing RHC Program cap on rural healthcare providers in funding year (FY) 2017. Because the Order section does not establish any final rules, we do not incorporate the Order section in this document.

II. Notice of Proposed Rulemaking

A. Addressing RHC Program Funding Levels

1. Revisiting the RHC Program Funding Cap

6. The current cap on the RHC Program has remained at $400 million since its inception in 1997. RHC Program demand, however, exceeded the cap in FY 2016 and is expected to exceed the cap in FY 2017 and in future years. The proration that comes with a cap potentially places the child and family on a more positive future trajectory. With a high-speed data connection, a surgeon can perform an emergency procedure remotely. In places where the nearest pharmacist is a plane ride away, vending machine-like devices can dispense prescription medications.

4. The efforts by the Commission's Connect2HealthFCC (Connect2Health) Task Force have illustrated the significant impact communications services can have on addressing the healthcare needs of persons living in rural and underserved areas, and how communities are leveraging broadband-enabled health technologies to improve access to health and care throughout the country. For example, in Mississippi, the Connect2Health Task Force highlighted the positive impact of public-private partnerships on health outcomes and how broadband-enabled health technologies have made a difference to diabetes patients in Mississippi. Additionally, in Texas, the Connect2Health Task Force emphasized how broadband-enabled health technologies can improve access to mental health care.

5. It is therefore crucial that the benefits of the RHC Program are fully realized across the nation. But current RHC Program rules and procedures may be holding back the promise of the RHC Program for the rural healthcare providers that need it most. For the second funding year (FY) in a row, demand for RHC Program support is anticipated to exceed available program funding, leaving healthcare providers to potentially pay more for service than expected. Unfortunately, part of that growth is due to an increase in waste, fraud, and abuse in the RHC Program. Further, the Telecommunications (Telecom) Program, a component of the RHC Program, has not been significantly reviewed or revised since its inception in 1997.

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