

FSC® US FSS EXPLAINERS SERIES – REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE AREAS EXPLAINED



Purpose and Role of Representative Sample Areas:

Representative Sample Areas' (RSAs) primary function is to maintain or enhance conservation values by protecting examples of native ecosystems or specific ecological conditions of native ecosystems that are not already adequately represented and protected in the landscape. Certificate holders are expected (per Criterion 6.5 of the revised FSC US Forest Stewardship Standard) to designate RSAs within the management unit when viable examples, or possibly restorable examples, of the native ecosystems that are found to not be adequately represented or protected are present. If neither of these can be identified within the management unit, other areas need to be identified that will be restored to more natural conditions. RSAs exist within the broader framework of FSC conservation requirements – they may overlap with High Conservation Values (HCVs) areas and are always part of the Conservation Areas Network (CAN) (these are both highlighted in separate Explainers).

Management activities may occur within RSAs, so long as all management activities contribute to the maintenance or enhancement of the ecosystem or ecological condition(s) that are being conserved within that designated RSA. This could include activities such as timber harvesting and prescribed burning that are needed to maintain ecological conditions reliant on natural disturbances or activities that protect native ecosystems from encroaching invasive species, including application of chemical pesticides or other control methods.

RSA How-to Guide (see also flowchart below):

- The first step to conformance with RSA requirements begins with identifying native ecosystems that would typically occur within the management unit. For the purposes of RSA designation, the scale of “ecosystem” should be a mid-level classification roughly equivalent to the “Group” level in the National Vegetation Classification (<http://usnvc.org/explore-classification/>).
- The next step is a landscape-level analysis (including portions of the landscape that occur within the management unit) to determine which ecosystems or ecological conditions are under-represented or insufficiently protected. This can be done through internal analyses or by using external conservation assessments. Considerations that may help to determine representation and protection levels, include determining the proportion of the ecosystem examples under protected (GAP) status and the current extent vs the historical extent of native ecosystems. Ecological Sections (i.e., the so named scale within the hierarchy of the US Forest Service’s ecological classification system; Cleland 2007, an update of Bailey/USFS) or smaller units are recommended as the scale of “landscape” for this assessment.

- The next step is to determine if there are viable examples of identified ecosystems in the management unit. “Viable” means the ecosystem contains and maintains the critical components needed for long-term persistence, including key or characteristic species and structures and natural disturbance regimes. RSA size may vary widely, there is no minimum acreage prescribed, so long as ecological viability can be maintained, though a single larger RSA may be preferable to multiple small, fragmented RSAs. If the above step does not identify any native ecosystems that are underrepresented nor any that are insufficiently protected, then neither this step nor the two next ones are required.
- If viable examples of the identified ecosystems are not present within the management unit, restoration areas need to be designated – first looking for degraded examples of the identified ecosystems that could be feasibly restored, and if none are found, then other areas that could be restored to more natural conditions. These areas aim to reestablish native species composition, natural vegetation structures, ecological functions such as disturbance regimes or hydrology, or ecosystem conditions typical for the locality.
- Finally, an evaluation of the extent of designated RSAs and other areas being managed to restore more natural conditions within the management unit needs to be completed. The extent of these areas is expected to be proportionate to the landscape-level conservation deficiencies, as well as the size of and management intensity within the management unit. This means the extent of these areas should increase as representation and protection in the landscape decreases, and also as management unit size and/or management intensity increases.

Family Forest RSAs:

If the landscape-level analysis determines that there are under-represented or insufficiently protected ecosystems, family forest management units are expected to identify viable examples, or if necessary, restorable examples of these ecosystems (with a couple of exceptions covered below). However, if neither of these are found, then these management units are not required to identify other areas for restoration, nor evaluate the extent of designated RSA.

Very small (>124 acres) family forest management units that meet additional criteria are not required to designate RSA. Further, RSA responsibilities for family forest management units within Forest Management Group Certificates may be taken on by other group members.

For More Information:

For more detailed guidance including lists of recommended sources for best available information for completing the above steps, see Annex G in the revised FSC US Forest Stewardship Standard.

Criterion 6.5 Flowchart

