

Proposed MCFNS Guidelines for AI-Assisted Peer Review (2026 Edition, v1.0): A Framework for Structured, Transparent, and Human-in-the-Loop Use of Large Language Models in Forestry Journal Review

A proposal for discussion and voluntary use, not journal policy.
Supplementary file to Weiskittel (2026), MCFNS 18(1).

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Abstract

These guidelines propose operational practices for the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and large language model (LLM) tools in peer review at MCFNS. They are offered for discussion and voluntary use and are not journal policy. They are grounded in the empirical findings of Russell and Weiskittel (2026) and in direct editorial experience with a submitted manuscript exhibiting AI-generated content and citation integrity concerns. The guidelines are organized around four components: a conceptual framework defining where AI assistance is appropriate and where human expert judgment must be preserved; a two-document review architecture separating the internal EIC report from the author decision letter; a six-module LLM prompt library providing standardized, copy-paste-ready prompts for consistent structured review; and forestry-specific method checklists for five common manuscript types. A citation integrity escalation pathway, developed from COPE best practice, provides editorial guidance for three levels of documented concern. Reviewers may use the guidelines in whole, in part, or not at all. AI assistance in reviews is welcome within this framework, and disclosure of that assistance is encouraged but not required.

Keywords: peer review, artificial intelligence, LLM prompts, citation integrity, forestry journals, COPE, review guidelines

1 Scope and Status

These guidelines are a proposal for discussion and voluntary use by reviewers, associate editors, and editors of Mathematical and Computational Forestry & Natural-Resource Sciences (MCFNS). They are published as a supplementary file to Weiskittel (2026) and are not journal policy. They add to, and do not replace, the general reviewer guidance on the MCFNS website, and they place no new requirement on reviewers, who contribute their time voluntarily.

These guidelines were developed in response to two converging pressures: the growing documented use of AI tools by reviewers in the absence of journal guidance, and a specific manuscript submission to MCFNS exhibiting patterns consistent with AI-generated content and systematic citation misattribution.

2 Conceptual Framework: What AI Does and Does Not Do Well

2.1 The asymmetry principle

AI tools and human expert reviewers do not perform equally across all dimensions of manuscript evaluation. The MCFNS framework exploits this asymmetry: AI tools are assigned to tasks where current-generation models perform reliably and consistently; human expert judgment is explicitly preserved for the tasks where AI systematically underperforms.

Tasks appropriate for AI assistance (reliable, consistent): statistical reporting convention checks; structural completeness screening; mathematical notation consistency; figure and table format review; vocabulary and style analysis for potential AI-generated content signals; citation list structure auditing; and preliminary scoring scaffolds with explicit confidence flags.

Tasks requiring human expert judgment (AI performance unreliable): ecological validity and biological plausibility assessment; model validation adequacy for specific forest contexts; genuine scientific novelty versus incremental contribution; context-specific methodological errors not captured by generic checklists; and final publication recommendation.

2.2 Suggested uses

The following uses of AI assistance are suggested as appropriate, subject to the confidentiality and disclosure recommendations in Sections 2.4 and 2.5:

- Preliminary consistency screening of manuscript structure, statistical reporting, and notation
- Methods cross-checking against standard reporting conventions
- Vocabulary and structural screening for AI-generated content signals (using Module 3 of the prompt library)
- Citation list structure auditing (Module 4)
- Scoring scaffold generation as a starting point for reviewer calibration (Module 5)
- Draft structuring for the EIC report (Module 6a)
- Draft structuring for the Author Decision Letter (Module 6b), for EIC use only
- Language polishing of the reviewer’s own written text
- Personal summarization of manuscript sections for reviewer notes

2.3 Uses to avoid

The following uses are not recommended under these guidelines:

- Uploading manuscript content to any AI tool that stores, logs, or transmits that content externally without a confirmed zero-data-retention agreement
- Delegating the publication recommendation to an AI tool. The recommendation is a human editorial judgment, not an AI output
- Using AI to generate or extend the reference list. Fabricated citation rates of 18% (GPT-4) and 55% (GPT-3.5) have been reported (Walters and Wilder, 2023); AI-generated citations should not appear in a review report

- Submitting AI-generated text as the reviewer’s own expert judgment without critical verification and rewriting

2.4 Confidentiality

Manuscripts submitted to MCFNS are confidential. Reviewers have a COPE-mandated obligation to protect submitted manuscript content. The major commercial AI providers (OpenAI, Google, Anthropic, Mistral) have different data retention policies for API versus consumer product access. Before uploading any manuscript content to an AI tool, reviewers should confirm that the specific product being used does not retain or transmit manuscript content. Acceptable approaches include: locally deployed models (Ollama, LM Studio); confirmed enterprise or zero-data-retention API access; or paraphrasing manuscript content in the reviewer’s own words rather than pasting verbatim text.

2.5 Voluntary disclosure

Reviewers who use AI assistance are encouraged, but not required, to include a disclosure statement at the top of the review report. A useful statement specifies: (1) which AI tool and version was used; (2) the specific tasks for which it was used; (3) whether manuscript content was uploaded verbatim or paraphrased; and (4) how AI outputs were critically evaluated and modified before inclusion.

Example disclosure: “This review was assisted by [Tool, version]. AI assistance was used for statistical reporting convention checking (Module 2) and citation structure auditing (Module 4). Manuscript content was paraphrased, not uploaded verbatim. All AI outputs were verified against the manuscript and substantially rewritten before inclusion. Expert judgments on ecological validity, model validation, and the publication recommendation are my own.”

3 Two-Document Review Architecture

3.1 The core distinction

Under this proposal, each manuscript that completes peer review would generate two distinct documents serving different purposes and held to different standards.

The **EIC Report** is the confidential internal record for editorial decision-making. It may and should include: full scored dimension ratings with justification; integrity concerns documented with evidence; COPE escalation recommendation; scope alignment assessment; and confidential process observations. It is never transmitted to authors.

The **Author Decision Letter** is formal editorial correspondence. It communicates: the editorial decision; scientific and methodological findings from the review; specific, actionable revision requirements; and a genuine acknowledgment of strengths. It should be professionally appropriate for transmission to the manuscript’s authors in any context, including in a formal institutional dispute.

3.2 Content exclusions from Author Decision Letters

The following content should not appear in an Author Decision Letter, regardless of its presence in the EIC Report:

- Integrity accusations, AI generation hypotheses, or language suggesting the bibliography was fabricated or hallucinated

- COPE escalation language (“research misconduct,” “institutional notification,” “COPE referral”)
- Numerical scoring totals or weighted dimension scores
- Confidential editorial analysis including scope redirection suggestions or community context observations
- Reviewer identity signals or specialized knowledge cues that could identify the reviewer
- Submission metadata anomalies (these are addressed administratively, not in the decision letter)

For citation accuracy concerns, the appropriate author letter framing is factual and without causal attribution: “The reviewer identified instances in which cited references do not appear to support the specific claims made for them. [Table of examples.] We require a fully verified corrected reference list.” Do not use the terms *fabricated*, *hallucinated*, *AI-generated*, or *misconduct* in author letters.

3.3 Integrity escalation pathway

When citation or content integrity concerns are documented, the following three-level pathway is suggested.

Level 1 (suspicion, insufficient evidence to confirm): Log in manuscript record. Request AI use disclosure in revision cover letter. No special procedure beyond standard review.

Level 2 (2–4 confirmed Pattern B misattributions, or >15% misattribution rate across checked references): Editor independently verifies 5 additional references. If ≥ 2 confirmed: escalate to Level 3. If 0–1 confirmed: Major Revision with point-by-point citation response required in cover letter.

Level 3 (>20% confirmed misattribution rate, or Level 2 confirmed, or convergent integrity signals including metadata anomalies): COPE referral. Reject on integrity grounds. Author letter communicates rejection without integrity framing. Retain all documentation. Do not use scientific review content in the rejection letter.

Pattern A misattribution is a non-existent reference, detectable by DOI resolution failure. Pattern B misattribution is a real reference whose content does not support the cited claim; it requires reading the cited paper and is undetectable by DOI resolution. The proposed escalation pathway calls for Pattern B verification at Levels 2 and 3.

4 LLM Prompt Library

The following six-module prompt library is designed for use with any current-generation LLM (GPT-4o, Claude 3.5+, Gemini 1.5 Pro+, or equivalent). All modules should be preceded by Module 0 in the same session. All outputs should be critically verified by the human reviewer before use.

4.1 Module 0: System setup

Paste this at the start of every review session. Do not proceed to other modules until the model confirms the ready state.

SYSTEM ROLE: FORESTRY JOURNAL PEER REVIEW ASSISTANT

You assist a human reviewer for a scientific forestry journal. Your journal publishes quantitative and applied research in forest science including mensuration, growth modeling, forest inventory, spatial ecology, LiDAR, remote sensing, machine learning, ecosystem services, and silviculture.

YOUR CONSTRAINTS: You assist but do not replace the human reviewer. Never fabricate citations. Every flagged issue must include a specific manuscript location. Produce ONLY structured outputs as specified in each module. Do NOT make the final publication recommendation.

SCORING SCALE: 5=Excellent; 4=Good; 3=Adequate; 2=Below standard; 1=Unacceptable; N/A=Not applicable.

EQUITY RULE: Do NOT penalize non-native English writing unless it makes the science incomprehensible. Do NOT flag a concern as confirmed -- use 'potential concern' or 'warrants reviewer verification.'

Confirm readiness: FORESTRY REVIEW ASSISTANT READY.

4.2 Module 1: Preliminary manuscript screen

Input: title, abstract, introduction, conclusions.

Output format: (1) Stated research question; (2) Methodological approach; (3) Stated contribution; (4) Scope alignment [CLEARLY IN SCOPE / MARGINAL / OUT OF SCOPE]; (5) Major strengths (up to 3); (6) Preliminary concerns (up to 5: Location | Concern | Type); (7) Recommended focus areas for Modules 2 and 5.

4.3 Module 2: Methods and statistical rigor audit

Input: Methods and Results sections. Specify the primary method type.

Checklist covers: General (G1 reproducibility; G2 software/version; G3 random seeds); Statistical (S1 test appropriateness; S2 spatial/ temporal autocorrelation; S2b grid-cell correlation/ANOVA under spatial autocorrelation — flag if Moran's $I > 0.3$ and standard tests are used without correction; S3 hierarchical data; S4 pseudoreplication; S5 effect sizes and confidence intervals; S6 residual diagnostics; S7 multiple comparisons); Mathematical (M1 equation correctness; M2 notation consistency; M3 assumptions stated); Validation (V1 independent data; V2 spatial blocking in cross-validation; V3 validation metrics; V4 benchmark comparison); ML-specific (ML1–ML3 if applicable).

Critical check S2b: If the manuscript reports Pearson correlation, ANOVA, or similar tests computed across spatially autocorrelated grid cells, and the manuscript itself reports a Global Moran's $I > 0.3$, standard tests are anti-conservative. Required corrections include: Dutilleul's (1993) modified degrees-of-freedom correction (R: `SpatialPack::modified.ttest()`), spatial lag or error regression (R: `spdep/spatialreg`), or zone-level aggregation with spatially-adjusted standard errors.

4.4 Module 3: AI-generated content detection screen

Input: full manuscript text.

Produces: (1) Lexical signal inventory with density rating [LOW / MODERATE / HIGH / VERY HIGH] for high-risk vocabulary (*delve*, *multifaceted*, *tapestry*, *nuanced*, *pivotal*, *paramount*, *intricate*, *seamless*, *harness*, *elucidate*, *underscores*, *testament*, *illuminate*); (2) Structural red flags (uniform paragraph structure, conclusion repeating introduction, formulaic transitions, absent experiential detail, prompt artifacts, verbatim phrase repetition); (3) Internal consistency flags

(numerical discrepancies, implausible values, method-result contradictions); (4) Citation pattern flags (absence of niche references, consecutive-numbered clusters, incomplete metadata); (5) Overall risk level [NONE / LOW / MODERATE / HIGH] with recommended reviewer action.

This module produces probabilistic signals, not conclusions. All flags require reviewer verification. Non-native English writing is explicitly not an AI signal.

4.5 Module 4: Citation integrity audit

Input: reference list only.

Produces: (1) Structural anomaly flags by type (A: non-existent; B: real reference, wrong content; C: journal name variant; D: year/volume inconsistency; E: DOI format anomaly; F: block-generated cluster); (2) Priority spot-check list of 10 references for human manual verification; (3) Recognized versus unrecognized references from training knowledge; (4) Integrity risk level.

Critical note: AI can detect structural anomalies (Pattern A indicators) but *cannot* verify whether a real paper’s content matches the claim made for it (Pattern B). Pattern B verification requires the human reviewer to read sufficient text from the cited paper to confirm its subject matter. When Module 3 produces a HIGH or VERY HIGH AI content risk level, all top-10 priority references from Module 4 should be manually verified for content relevance.

4.6 Module 5: Scoring scaffold

Input: full manuscript plus Module 1–4 outputs.

Produces preliminary scores (1–5 or N/A) for the twelve evaluation dimensions defined in Annex A: B1 originality and novelty; B2 scientific significance; B3 methodological rigor; B4 statistical appropriateness; B5 mathematical and model rigor; B6 model validation; B7 data availability; B8 code and reproducibility; B9 literature and citation quality; B10 interpretation; B11 writing clarity (equity rule applies); B12 figures and tables. Each dimension includes: score, confidence level [HIGH / MODERATE / LOW], specific manuscript location, and 30–80 word justification. Concludes with the weighted total, any critical override flags, an indicative recommendation, and primary concerns for human reviewer verification.

4.7 Module 6a: EIC report draft scaffold

Input: reviewer’s notes and Module 1–5 outputs.

Produces a structured EIC Report draft covering: Part 1 (scientific and methodological major issues with location, problem, and suggested resolution for each); Part 2 (minor issues, numbered and location-specific); Part 3 (strengths, 3–5 bullet points); Part 4 (scoring summary with weighted total if applicable); Part 5 (integrity analysis from Modules 3 and 4 with pattern classification and escalation level recommendation); and Part 6 (confidential notes to editor). All items requiring expert verification are flagged [REVIEWER VERIFY].

4.8 Module 6b: Author decision letter draft

For EIC use only. Input: editorial decision and scientific findings from Module 6a only — do not input integrity speculation, numerical scores, or confidential analysis.

The module prompt includes built-in content exclusion rules that prevent the LLM from re-introducing integrity framing even if it is present in the input. Before transmitting any Module 6b output, the EIC should search for: *fabricat*, *hallucin*, *AI-generat*, *misconduct*, *COPE*, and any numerical score patterns (e.g., 29/80, 36%). Remove any that appear.

5 Domain-Specific Method Checklists

5.1 Growth and yield modeling

- Model form identified (Chapman-Richards, Weibull, GADA variant, or other) with biological parameter interpretation discussed?
- Fitting algorithm specified (Gauss-Newton, Levenberg-Marquardt, `nlme`/`lme4` for mixed-effects)?
- Goodness-of-fit reported: RMSE, bias, AIC/BIC, residual plots?
- Independent validation or k -fold cross-validation ($k \geq 10$) with spatial blocking?
- New model compared against a published benchmark for the same region or species?
- Log-transformation bias correction applied where back-transformation occurs (correction factor $\exp(\text{MSE}/2)$ or equivalent required)?
- For site index models: path invariance tested?

5.2 Forest inventory and FIA-based studies

- Sampling design documented with citation to its specification (e.g., Bechtold and Patterson 2005 for FIA)?
- For FIA panel data: annual panel combination method documented?
- Estimation variance formulas correct for the sampling design?
- FIA plot coordinate confidentiality acknowledged?
- Species-level estimates flagged for reliability where sample sizes are small?

5.3 LiDAR and remote sensing

- Point cloud preprocessing steps documented (ground filter algorithm, normalization method, minimum point density)?
- Derived metrics listed, defined, and software version specified?
- Positional accuracy reported (≥ 30 independent checkpoints, ASPRS standard)?
- Training and validation plots geographically independent (spatial blocking)?
- For individual tree detection: commission and omission errors reported separately?

5.4 Machine learning applications

- Spatial blocking applied in cross-validation or train/test split? (Random splits are invalid for spatially autocorrelated data and will produce optimistically biased performance estimates.)
- Both training and test (held-out) performance reported?
- Hyperparameter tuning on a separate dataset from the final test set?
- Interpretability measures provided (variable importance, partial dependence plots, SHAP values)?
- Comparison against at least one interpretable baseline model?
- For classification: precision, recall, and F1 alongside overall accuracy?

5.5 Coupling coordination degree (CCD) and multi-criteria index studies

This method family appears frequently in Chinese spatial planning and forestry recreation submissions. Recurring errors warrant a dedicated checklist.

- *Entropy weighting zero-value handling*: when standardized indicator values equal zero, $\ln(p_{ij})$ is undefined. How are zero values treated? Must be documented.
- *CCD formula notation*: does the square root in the Coupling Degree C unambiguously cover the full fraction?
- *Weighting assumption sensitivity*: is the $\alpha:\beta$ ratio in $T = \alpha U_1 + \beta U_2$ justified? Sensitivity analysis across at least two alternative scenarios required if equal weights are assumed.
- *Spatial statistics*: if Pearson correlation or ANOVA is computed across spatially autocorrelated grid cells, apply check S2b from Module 2.
- *KDE bandwidth*: must be stated explicitly and justified (Silverman’s rule, cross-validation, or policy-relevant catchment distance).
- *CCD threshold classification*: cite the published source of the classification convention.

6 Model-Specific Guidance for the Prompt Library

Not all LLMs perform equally on all modules. Table 1 summarizes recommended use by model tier for the 2026 generation of commonly available models.

Table 1: Recommended module use by LLM tier (2026).

Model tier	Recommended modules
GPT-4o/o3, Claude 3.5+, Gemini 1.5 Pro+	All modules (0–6b). Verify B4/B5 mathematical rigor independently for Gemini.
Llama 3 70B, Mistral Large	Modules 0, 1, 3, 4 reliable. Verify Module 2 statistical checks and Module 5 scores independently.
GPT-3.5, Gemini 1.0, older vin- tages	Modules 0 and 1 only. Module 3 Section 1 (lexical). Do not use for citation generation or scoring.

7 Worked Example: Application to a Declined Submission

To illustrate how these guidelines function in practice, the following summarizes their application to a manuscript submitted to MCFNS in early 2026. Details are anonymized.

7.1 Manuscript characteristics

The manuscript presented a fine-grained grid-scale Coupling Coordination Degree (CCD) analysis of forest ecosystem resilience and recreational efficiency, integrating Intangible Cultural Heritage kernel

density estimation as a novel spatial indicator. Study area: approximately 1,800 km². Methods: entropy weighting, CCD model, Kernel Density Estimation (KDE), InVEST Habitat Quality model, Global Moran’s I /LISA, spatially explicit obstacle model.

7.2 Module 3 findings: AI content signals

Lexical density: HIGH. The vocabulary screen identified elevated frequency of AI indicator terms concentrated in the literature review and discussion sections. Most diagnostic was verbatim repetition of the phrase “The empirical evidence mostly agrees that” appearing four times as a structural template across different subsections — a feature inconsistent with single-author human writing.

Structural flags: paragraphs throughout the literature review followed an identical claim-evidence-implication sequence with uniform length. Approximately 30 common disciplinary terms were capitalized as proper nouns throughout (“Coupling Degree,” “Grid-scale Spatial Heterogeneity,” “Trade-off Band”) — a pattern reflecting AI treatment of conceptual terms as named entities.

7.3 Module 4 and manual verification: citation integrity

The Module 4 citation structure audit flagged a concentration of high-profile journal citations with no idiosyncratic niche references — consistent with AI bibliography generation. Manual content verification of 35 references found systematic Pattern B misattribution in approximately 11 cases (31% rate). Six representative examples: a poultry litter phosphorus paper cited for forest cultural ecosystem services; a sewer system water footprint paper cited for spatial spillover effects in recreation governance; a wheat nitrogen fertilizer paper cited for recreational resource spatial heterogeneity; a tourist deviance behavior paper cited for recreational supply-demand matching; a COVID-19 digital signature paper cited for cultural resource-tourist spatial association; and a disabled-customer tourism readiness paper cited for intangible cultural heritage interpretation systems.

7.4 Scientific deficiencies (independent of integrity)

Module 2 check S2b identified that the manuscript reported a Pearson correlation of $r = -0.62$ and one-way ANOVA across grid cells with a Global Moran’s $I = 0.652$ — making both tests anti-conservative without autocorrelation correction. KDE bandwidth was not stated (the paper’s most novel indicator depends on an undisclosed parameter). InVEST Habitat Quality threat parameters were absent. No sensitivity analysis was conducted on the $\alpha:\beta = 0.5:0.5$ weighting assumption controlling the manuscript’s central zonal finding.

7.5 Outcome and two-document handling

The EIC Report documented all of the above, classified citation integrity at Level 3, and recommended Reject with COPE referral. The Author Decision Letter communicated the rejection, the citation accuracy finding (with the example table), the three scientific major issues, and minor editorial points — without any integrity framing, AI hypothesis, or numerical scoring. The letter was transmitted directly by A.R.W. as manuscript editor.

This case is presented in fuller detail, in anonymized form, as Appendix S5 of the supplemental materials to Russell and Weiskittel (2026).

8 Annex A: B1–B12 Scoring Rubric and Decision Rules

As with the rest of these guidelines, the rubric and decision rules below are proposed for voluntary use. Module 5 and Part 4 of the EIC Report score each manuscript on the twelve dimensions in Table 2, using the scale defined in Module 0 (5 = Excellent to 1 = Unacceptable). Each score is multiplied by its dimension weight, and because the weights sum to 16 the weighted total has a maximum of 80. The total is reported both as a fraction of 80 and as a percentage.

Table 2: B1–B12 evaluation dimensions and weights.

Dim.	Evaluation dimension	Weight
B1	Originality and novelty	×1
B2	Scientific significance	×1
B3	Methodological rigor	×2
B4	Statistical appropriateness	×2
B5	Mathematical/model rigor	×2
B6	Model validation	×2
B7	Data availability	×1
B8	Code/reproducibility	×2
B9	Literature/citation quality	×1
B10	Interpretation	×1
B11	Writing clarity	×0.5
B12	Figures and tables	×0.5
Maximum weighted total		80

The percentage maps onto an indicative decision band, with Accept at 85% or above, Minor Revision from 65% to below 85%, Major Revision from 45% to below 65%, and Reject below 45%. The band informs the recommendation without making it. Where the handling editor departs from the band, the EIC Report records the departure and its reason, since those departures are the most useful evidence for recalibrating the rubric.

A score of 1 on any ×2 dimension (B3, B4, B5, B6, or B8) is a critical override, which triggers a Reject or Major Revision recommendation regardless of the weighted total and is marked with † in the scoring matrix. A score of 1 on a ×1 or ×0.5 dimension lowers the total and does not trigger the override.

Citation integrity is assessed separately through the escalation pathway in Section 3.3. A Level 3 citation integrity finding would lead to COPE referral and rejection on integrity grounds independently of the weighted total and of any override, and it is marked with ‡ on B9 in the scoring matrix. Scores, weighted totals, and override flags appear in the EIC Report only and never in the Author Decision Letter. In the declined submission described in Section 7, three critical overrides (B4, B6, and B8) and a Level 3 integrity finding on B9 accompanied a weighted total of 29/80 (36%).

9 Updating These Guidelines

These guidelines will be revised as AI tools evolve and as MCFNS accumulates further editorial experience with structured AI-assisted review. Reviewers, AEs, and editors who identify gaps, errors, or new method-family checklist needs are invited to communicate them to the editorial office at editor@mcfns.com.

Comments on these proposed guidelines are invited from readers, reviewers, authors, and editors, including as discussion papers submitted to MCFNS. The guidelines will remain at the proposal stage during this period of consideration and discussion, and their next version will build on the feedback received.

Proposed updates would be versioned (e.g., v1.1, v1.2) and released with change summaries. This version is available with the paper on the MCFNS website at mcfns.com.

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