

March 25, 2014

Tom Tidwell
Chief, United States Forest Service
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-0003

Dear Chief Tidwell:

As recreation and conservation organizations whose members enjoy and steward National Forest trails nationwide, we are writing to ask your support for new approaches to address the trail maintenance crisis facing the National Forest System.

The Problem

America's National Forest trails are squeezed between the demands of an enthusiastic public and the challenge of shrinking budgets and a lack of attention. According to the comprehensive June 2013 study by the Government Accountability Office, The Forest Service trail maintenance backlog exceeds a half-billion dollars, and only one-quarter of the agency's 158,000 miles of trails meets agency standards for maintenance. Nearly two-thirds of these trail miles receive no maintenance at all.

Meanwhile, National Forest trails are giving back to American communities at unprecedented levels: since 1980, trail use has increased nationwide by 376% as people seek exercise, relaxation, and adventure on America's public lands. Forest trails help fuel a \$646 billion recreation industry. The constituency of people supporting trails is enthusiastic and energetic, bringing people together through unique partnerships that link hunters, horsemen, hikers, climbers, anglers, bicyclists, conservationists and many others in service of our national trails system. Today, nearly a quarter of Forest Service trail maintenance is provided by volunteers, state funding, and other federal and non-federal sources.

The trail network on our national forests is simply too important to let lapse into ruin and disrepair. We are aware that additional resources are necessary to fully maintain our nation's trails and are working to secure additional funding for trail maintenance. But in a time of limited budget, there are things that the agency can do now to improve trail maintenance, and the Forest Service needs to look for creative solutions to supplement limited funds, empower volunteer networks, and ensure existing resources are used more efficiently.

The Solution

The ideas we support to address these challenges and improve and safeguard our rich treasury of national forest trails include the following:

- **Increase transparency in the trail maintenance program** by providing an annual breakdown of how the US Forest Service's trail maintenance budget is used. This breakdown should detail amounts retained for overhead costs and the resulting amounts that are used for actual trail work. This disclosure will allow the Service and the public to consider whether the amount of overhead can be reduced to enable the agency to do more trail work on the ground;

- **Institute national-level goals and targets for trail maintenance and stewardship** that will be used as performance measures; create incentives that reward exceptional leadership and service on trails among agency staff;
- **Adopt a long-term solution for the “Volunteer in Forest” program** that limits the liability exposure of individual forests and reduces the barriers for using volunteers to assist with trail maintenance and stewardship;
- Provide national direction and better coordination to **maximize the utilization of fire crews and conservation and service corps** for trail work whenever possible;
- **Prioritize the selection, training, and retention of skilled and motivated trail staff** as well as leadership on trails at higher levels of the agency;
- **Develop a USFS interdisciplinary team focused on addressing the problems and challenges of existing national forest trails** – including working more effectively with partners and providing rapid response crews to remediate severe and sudden trail impacts;
- **Standardize national protocols for training and certification on chainsaw and crosscut saw use** and expand sawyer training capacity beyond the agency to include skilled non-agency partners; and
- **Develop policies, procedures, training, and leadership that would allow volunteer crews to operate more independently**, effectively, and efficiently, regardless of the presence of US Forest Service staff.

The enormous backlog of trail maintenance on our national forests inhibits trail use, poses safety hazards, harms natural resources, and increases annual maintenance costs. And we will remain behind the eight-ball until we better prioritize the investment of public funding, staff resources and skills, service corps resources, and volunteer labor into our trail systems.

National forest trails are increasingly important as gateways to America’s great outdoors. They benefit all citizens in ways big and small, and they deserve greater focus and attention from our national leaders and public land managers. A vocal and enthusiastic constituency stands ready to champion and celebrate your leadership in service to this essential public resource. We look forward to working with the Forest Service and to supporting these and other efforts on behalf of our country’s national forest trails system.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

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The Wilderness Society

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Policy Director
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