



NATIONAL FOREST TRAILS STEWARDSHIP - CONCEPT PAPER

BACKGROUND

The United States Forest Service manages 158,000 miles of trails that provide a wide array of recreational opportunities and access to the America's National Forests. These trails provide world class opportunities for hiking, horseback riding, camping, hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation. National Forest trails provide opportunities for all Americans to enjoy the peace and quiet of the great outdoors. Further, these trails help fuel America's \$730 billion recreation industry that supports 6.5 million jobs nationwide.

Yet, America's trails are in decline. And the problem is only getting worse. From 1980 to 2012, funding for trail maintenance has increased only 1.75% after adjusting for inflation. Meanwhile, the miles of trails have grown by 57%, and trail use has increased by 376%. As a result, only a quarter of National Forest trails are maintained to standard. The agency currently faces a \$314 million backlog in trail maintenance, as well as a \$210 million backlog in annual maintenance, capital improvements, and operations. In an era of budget constraints, additional funds for trail maintenance are unlikely.

PROPOSAL

Cost-free budget proposals to improve National Forest trail maintenance are needed more than ever before. This proposal is designed to expand National Forest trail maintenance—and increasing forest access for all Americans—without adding to the federal deficit.

NATIONAL FOREST TRAILS VOLUNTEER STRATEGY

The Forest Service relies heavily on volunteerism to fulfill its mission, and volunteers play an important role in maintaining National Forest trails. With shrinking agency budgets, volunteers will play a growing role in trail maintenance in the future. To date, the Forest Service has no overall strategy for increasing volunteerism and ensuring that volunteers are effectively utilized for trail maintenance projects. Such a strategy is sorely needed, and will help the agency meet its trail maintenance demands and continue to provide high quality recreational

opportunities for Americans. Volunteering is also great way to share the outdoors with America's youth.



Volunteers play an important role in National Forest trail maintenance, and will play an even more important role in the future. Photo courtesy wilderness.net.

In 1998, Congress passed legislation establishing a National Volunteer Coordination Program to provide meaningful opportunities for volunteers to help fulfill the vision of the National Wildlife Refuge System. In response, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service developed a volunteer program that has significantly increased volunteerism in National Wildlife Refuges. It is an incredibly successful program that results in thousands of volunteer hours representing millions of dollars in contributions and savings. This effective program is the model for the Forest Service National Forest Trails Volunteer Strategy.

TRAIL MAINTENANCE STUDY

The study would address three issues related to maintenance of National Forest trail maintenance: a proposal to authorize outfitters and guides to expand their trail maintenance activities; the utilization of fire crews in maintaining trails, and addressing liability concerns regarding National Forest volunteers and cost-share agreements.



Trails provide Americans with access to high quality outdoor recreation opportunities. Photo courtesy of wilderness.net.

NATIONAL FOREST TRAILS OUTFITTER AND GUIDE IN-KIND CONTRIBUTION PILOT PROGRAM

Outfitters and guides provide important services in America's wilderness areas by making wilderness accessible to average Americans. This access depends on well-maintained trails—without them, many special places will be inaccessible to people seeking to enjoy the great outdoors.

The shortfall in National Forest trail maintenance has forced many outfitters and guides to maintain trails on their own. Currently, this maintenance work is done on a volunteer basis, putting a huge strain on these small businesspeople. Outfitters and guides pay for the privilege of operating their business on public lands.

This study would assess the feasibility of allowing outfitters and guides to treat their national forest trail maintenance activities as an in-kind donation to offset fees owed to the federal government and would examine issues surrounding this proposal including: how to ensure that maintenance is performed on priority trails and to acceptable standards; how to address potential impacts to forests from lost outfitter and guide fee revenue; and how to ensure that the proposal results in a net gain for trail maintenance.

FIRE CREWS

Historically, fire crews played an important role in maintaining National Forest trails through trail maintenance work in the off-season and when not fighting fires. This approach helped to maintain trails without adding costs. In constrained budget times, it is imperative that all federal employees do what they can to fulfill important government functions in the most cost-conscious manner possible. While crews are still used, this study would assess the feasibility of expanding the use of such crews to maintain National Forest trails when not fighting fires—without jeopardizing firefighting capabilities. This could make a huge difference in reducing the trail maintenance backlog in National Forests.

LIABILITY

Liability concerns are currently impeding volunteerism in the National Forest System for two reasons. First, workers' compensation claims come out of the budget of the forest where the claim occurs. This makes some forests unwilling to utilize volunteers for fear that a claim could jeopardize their budget. Second, under cost-share agreements, liability for workers' compensation claims generally rests with the partner organizations. This makes some partner organizations less willing to engage in cost-share agreements. This study would assess potential solutions to the liability concerns that are impeding volunteerism and cost-share agreements in the National Forest System.

Paul Spitler, The Wilderness Society; (406) 586-1600 or paul_spitler@twc.org.

Randy Rasmussen, Back Country Horsemen of America; (541) 745-5452 or quietrecreation@gmail.com