



## NATIONAL FOREST TRAILS STEWARDSHIP – ADMINISTRATIVE 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 forms of outdoor recreation that allow Americans to enjoy the peace and quiet of the great outdoors. Further, these trails help fuel America's \$730 billion recreation industry, which supports 6.5 million jobs nationwide.

Unfortunately, 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—and this is before sequestration took its toll. Meanwhile, the number of miles of trails has 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 this era of budget-constraints, additional funds for trail maintenance are unlikely to be provided by Congress. Cost-free budget proposals to improve National Forest trail maintenance are needed more than ever before.

### PROPOSAL

What follows is a series of proposals that would increase National Forest trail maintenance, and could be accomplished by the agency through administrative action without additional funding from Congress. Adoption of these proposals would increase forest access for all Americans without adding to the federal deficit.

#### Transparency in the Trails Maintenance Program

In fiscal year 2012, the Forest Service received only \$81.9 million for the trails, despite having \$523.7 million in maintenance needs. To make matters worse, a significant percentage of the \$81.9 million appropriated gets used for agency overhead costs rather than for actual trail work. According to a June 2013 study from the Government Accountability Office (GAO), for fiscal years 2010 through 2012, 29% to 32% of the trails allocation was used for overhead

expenses at the national level. Regional offices and forest units retain additional amounts for overhead.<sup>1</sup> However, these amounts were not reported.

The agency should increase transparency in the trail maintenance program by providing the public, on an annual basis, with a breakdown of how its trail maintenance budget is used. This breakdown should detail the amounts retained by the Washington Office, regional offices, and by forest units to pay for overhead costs, and the resulting amounts that are used for actual trail work. This disclosure will allow the agency and the public to determine whether the amount of overhead can be reduced to enable the agency to do more trail work.

### Accountability and Recognition

There are currently no national-level goals or targets for trail maintenance and stewardship to which USFS managers are held accountable. Without actions to ensure that trail stewardship outcomes are prioritized, benchmarked, and assessed as a measure of performance, this important work will continue to drop to the bottom of the priority list when compared with other programs that have such accountability requirements.

The agency should increase accountability and performance in the trail maintenance program by taking the following actions:

- The Forest Service should establish trail maintenance targets at the national level and hold line officers and staff accountable for meeting these targets at the forest and district level. Such targets could be phased in as other strategies for increasing trail maintenance are implemented. Establishing and measuring a national target would 1) elevate trail maintenance to the position it deserves within the agency, 2) generate support from higher levels of the agency for forests and districts that are meeting their targets, and 3) allow the public to measure the agency's progress towards improving maintenance and stewardship of national forest trails.
- The agency should create incentives for trail managers that meet or exceed targets, and should find ways to better recognize and reward exceptional leadership and service on trails issues among its staff. One way to do this would be to partner with The Wilderness Society and the Back Country Horsemen of America to establish an annual award recognizing an outstanding Forest Service trail manager for his or her accomplishments in managing their trails program.

### Volunteer Liability Exposure

The Volunteer in Forest (VIF) program provides valuable Workers Compensation liability coverage for partner organizations and individual volunteers who work on Forest Service lands. This protection is expensive and difficult to obtain from other sources. Unfortunately, the VIF program has a significant flaw. If someone is injured and files a claim, that claim is paid out of the budget of local forest district, rather than out of an agency-wide fund that spreads the cost across the entire National Forest system. Some risk-averse forests and forest districts have refused to provide Workers Compensation coverage for volunteers through the VIF program

---

<sup>1</sup> Forest Service Trails: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability; United States Government Accountability Office; June 2013.

out of fear that they might be asked to pay a big claim. This is unfortunate, since agency records indicate that, nationwide, volunteer claims against the VIF program are miniscule when compared to the millions of dollars in volunteer service provided to the agency every year.

The VIF program should be modified to take the risks associated with the use of volunteers and distribute them throughout the National Forest System. This could be done in either of two ways: (1) The Washington Office could retain a percentage of the trail maintenance budget to pay Workers Compensation claims before distributing those funds to the regions and forests; or (2) Individual forests could make contribution payments to the Washington office out of their trail maintenance budgets. This minor adjustment would not require additional appropriations, and would relieve local line officers of the sole risk of paying claims, allowing them to facilitate more volunteer programs.

#### Maximizing the Use of Fire Crews For Trail Maintenance

Current Forest Service policy allows for the use of fire crews for trail work when they are not needed to fight fires. However, fire crew utilization is not always handled in a structured way. For example, forests do not always have a prioritized list of projects at the ready when fire crew resources are available. Further, there is no national direction to utilize fire crews as a significant trail maintenance resource.

The agency should create and maintain prioritized project lists at the District, Forest and Regional level so that crews can be tasked with trail work quickly when they become available. National direction is needed to ensure that fire crews are utilized wherever possible to advance trail maintenance, in a manner that does not jeopardize firefighting activities.

#### Forest Service Staff Training and Retention

As noted by Forest Service officials in the June 2013 GAO study, the U.S. Forest Service "has no career path or comprehensive training programs for trails staff, making it difficult for the agency to develop and retain professional expertise and leadership for the trails program...the Forest Service currently has no national, standardized training for these skills." (p. 32)

The U.S. Forest Service should make the selection, training, and retention of knowledgeable, experienced, and motivated trail staff a higher priority at the district and forest level. The agency should put a high value on trail skills when it hires staff likely to perform trail work and/or coordinate volunteer trail work. In addition, the agency should develop a standardized curriculum to train staff so that they are better prepared for these roles. The USFS should also consider creating higher-level, leadership positions within the agency structure that have a stronger focus on and greater responsibility for the management and stewardship of the National Forest trail system.

#### Trail Maintenance Enterprise Team

Currently, there is a Forest Service Enterprise Team called Trails Unlimited that focuses on building new trails. This team functions as an internal contractor for trail construction, similar to the way the agency uses externally contracted trail construction firms.

The GAO study provides an opportunity for the Forest Service to develop an internal Enterprise Team focused on existing trails, and on engaging partners to assist with these trails. The team could include a cross-section of agency personnel.

Ideally, this team would include both "hard skill" trail specialists and partner development and agreement specialists. The team's work product would both restored and maintained trails and an engaged and empowered local partner to assist with maintenance work on an ongoing basis.

One potential sub-set of this team would be a rapid response crew of "hard-skill" specialists made up of agency and partner organization personnel that would be available to respond to a specific severe weather or invasive species event that causes significant trail issues. This "hot-shot" crew would assist forests by quickly re-opening severely impacted trails, while the remaining team members would assist forests with day-to-day maintenance, recruiting and engaging local partners, and improving the overall efficiency of the trails program.

#### Saw Certification Policy

Currently, there is no uniform policy to authorize volunteers to utilize chainsaws or crosscut saws on national forest land. This lack of uniformity—combined with lack of agency training and personnel—make it extremely difficult for volunteers and partners to receive the certification needed to undertake trail maintenance work in the national forests.

The Forest Service's new saw certification policy (due out this year) should provide a standardized national protocol for training and certification on chainsaw and crosscut saw use on National Forest lands. This standardization should enable the agency to issue certification cards that would be valid on any Forest. This policy should also clearly authorize partner programs to work with agency staff to certify saw instructors that are not agency employees, in order to expand overall training capacity.

#### Structure of Volunteer Crew Leadership

Too often, trail maintenance work by volunteer crews is held up because agency staff must be present in the field while the work is being done, and no agency staff are available.

The Forest Service should develop policies and procedures that would allow volunteer crews to work without agency staff present. One way to do this would be to establish a crew leader model that would allow volunteer crews to manage themselves.

One example that the Forest Service might consider using is CoTrails, the Trail Crew Leader training program in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. This nationally-recognized program, with specific guidelines and a syllabus that emphasizes trail safety, is a model that can be considered for wider implementation. Other programs around the country might also serve as examples for the development and adoption of a nationwide policy.

*Paul Sanford, The Wilderness Society; (202) 429-2615 or [paul\\_sanford@tw.s.org](mailto:paul_sanford@tw.s.org).*

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