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Groups seek Congressional Assistance for Trail Maintenance Crisis

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WASHINGTON DC (March 25, 2014) – Citing threats to public access and increased natural resource damage, more than fifty diverse recreation and conservation groups today asked Congress to take immediate action to help dig the Forest Service out of a nation-wide trails crisis.

The request responds to a [study](#) last year by the Government Accountability Office which found the Forest Service trail system is squeezed between the demands of growing public use and shrinking budgets. According to that report, the maintenance backlog for forest trails exceeds \$314 million dollars and threatens to limit public access, harm natural resources, and increase future maintenance costs.

Groups as diverse as the American Motorcyclist Association, Professional Wilderness Outfitters Association, and National Wildlife Federation say that with no additional funding on the horizon, Congress must focus on solutions that stretch every dollar further. Specifically, they say new legislative direction for a national volunteer and partnership strategy will be an important piece of the solution.

“Regardless of how we use our trails we are united that they are too important to let lapse into ruin and disrepair and Congress has an important role to play,” said Paul Spitler, a senior director at The Wilderness Society. “We are asking Congress to make it easier to form creative partnerships that have demonstrated success in the service of our National Forest trails system.”

The groups specifically point to 1998 legislation which initiated a successful volunteer program for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service as an example of what Congress could legislate for forest trails.

That program has demonstrated dramatically increased volunteerism in National Wildlife Refuges leveraging 56,000 volunteers who donated 2.1 million hours in 2012 alone. That's the equivalent of 1,036 full-time employees.

The Back Country Horsemen of America say the Forest Service already has a good track record of using volunteers in some areas but that a more robust and coordinated program could strengthen existing efforts and start digging the agency out of the trail maintenance hole.

"The Forest Service does a great job working with volunteers and partners in some regions," said Jim McGarvey, Chairman of Back Country Horsemen of America. "But the trail maintenance problem is national in scope and demands a national solution. Congress can help the Forest Service take their volunteer program from good to great so we can keep America's trails open."

Today, nearly a quarter of all Forest Service trail maintenance is provided by volunteers, state funding, and other federal and non-federal sources.

In addition to legislating a trails-focused volunteer program for the agency, the groups are asking Congress to look into a variety of studies that could better leverage offseason forest-fire crews, limit liability concerns in the use of volunteers, and create new incentives for professional outfitters and guides to perform trail maintenance.

The United States Forest Service manages 158,000 miles of trails that provide a wide array of recreational opportunities and access to America's National Forests. These trails help fuel a \$646 billion recreation industry supporting 6.1 million jobs nationwide.

"Our trails won't take care of themselves, so collaboration and leveraging resources and volunteer power is the name of the game," said McGarvey. "With or without more dedicated trail dollars from Congress, more robust volunteer partnerships are essential to preserving American's access to the great outdoors."

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