

March 25, 2014

Dear Member of Congress:

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 trails 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 enormous backlog of trail maintenance on our national forests inhibits trail use, poses safety hazards, harms natural resources, and increases annual maintenance costs. Our forest trails are simply too important to let lapse into ruin and disrepair.

### **The Solution**

We believe that additional resources are necessary to fully maintain our nation's trails. However, in a time of limited budgets, there are things we can do now to improve trail maintenance. The proposals below will not require additional funding, but will result in substantial improvements in trail maintenance within the National Forest System.

We urge Congress to consider the following legislative proposals for improving and safeguarding our rich treasury of national forest trails:

- **Create a national forest volunteer and partnership strategy** specific to expanding the use of volunteers and partners such as conservation and service corps in maintaining national forest trails. Currently, the Forest Service has no overall strategy for incorporating partners, service corps and volunteers in trail maintenance. In 1998,

Congress established a volunteer coordination program for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. This program has been very effective in increasing volunteerism in national wildlife refuges. Congress could create a similar program for the U.S. Forest Service.

- **Require the Forest Service to study the expanded use of fire crews for trail maintenance.** 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. The agency should be directed to assess the feasibility of expanding use of such crews to maintain National Forest trails—without jeopardizing firefighting capabilities.
- **Direct the Forest Service to adopt long-term solutions to legal liability concerns in order to support and facilitate the use of partners and volunteers.** Liability concerns currently are impeding volunteerism in the National Forest System. The Forest Service has developed a short-term solution that has the potential to address these concerns, thereby increasing volunteerism and partnerships in forest trail maintenance. Require the agency to adopt a long-term solution for FY 2015 and beyond.
- **Study a proposal to permit outfitters and guides to partially offset their fees through trail maintenance.** Outfitters and guides pay for the privilege of operating their business on public lands. Direct the Forest Service to assess the feasibility and related issues regarding allowing outfitters and guides to treat their trail maintenance activities as an in-kind contribution to offset fees owed to the federal government.

National forest trails are important gateways to America’s great outdoors, and they demand our immediate attention. We look forward to working with you to develop legislative solutions to the crisis in trail maintenance that undermines access to, and enjoyment of, our beloved national forests.

Sincerely,

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