



US Forest Service Intermountain Region **Communities of Place**

DRAFT FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS REPORT
PREPARED BY METROPOLITAN GROUP

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Introduction

The US Forest Service has a long tradition of work in communities. With changing times and conditions on the land, those with an interest in the Forest Service and the lands entrusted to its care have expressed a desire to engage with the agency in new or different ways.

To better understand the different perspectives and ideas communities have for improving engagement in each place where the Forest Service is active, the Intermountain Region launched “Communities of Place.” The goal in pursuing this work is to strengthen collaboration and partnership with diverse communities and stakeholders in carrying out its mission.

Metropolitan Group (MG) was engaged to help give voice to this Communities of Place effort. Through discussions with a wide range of stakeholders across the region, MG explored what people most want and need from the Forest Service in the 21st century and what the Forest Service most needs from communities to successfully deliver its mission.

This work, which took place between October 2013 and April 2014, culminated in this findings and recommendations report.

Methodology

MG conducted a **comprehensive communications and media review** to gain a better understanding of the climate in which the Forest Service operates with respect to its internal and external communications. The findings from this review helped identify the areas for deeper probing in the stakeholder engagement phase.

A 16-member **internal US Forest Service Advisory Committee was established** to ensure broad and diverse perspectives and leadership for the project. The committee included a representative from each forest and was purposefully structured to include diversity in terms of job responsibilities, tenure and seniority, gender, and geography.

To understand the perspective and thinking of US Forest Service employees and diverse external stakeholders, a **series of listening sessions** were held in nine locations across the region: Duchesne, Utah; Cedar City, Utah; St. George, Utah; Elko, Nevada; Las Vegas, Nevada; Jackson, Wyoming; Boise, Idaho; Salmon, Idaho; and Challis, Idaho. The invitation lists for the sessions were created by local forests and included broad representation of priority stakeholders.

Three of these sessions were designated to capture feedback from communities from which the Forest Service often does not hear: tribes (St. George, Utah), the Spanish-speaking Hispanic community (Las Vegas), and high school youth (Duchesne, Idaho). The findings

from these three sessions are included in the Culturally Unique Findings section. MG conducted all external listening sessions and interviews without the participation of the Forest Service to create an open environment where participants felt safe providing honest feedback. The sessions with Forest Service employees were facilitated without leadership in the room.

We facilitated the following sessions:

- 7 internal discussion groups with 89 employees
- 12 employee interviews
- A facilitated conversation with 49 district rangers
- 14 external discussion groups with 167 external stakeholders
- 20 executive interviews

In total, MG engaged **150 Forest Service employees and 187 external constituents** in the formal research process. In our expert opinion, the sample size was sufficient, and the findings in this report can be relied on as accurate. In addition, the Nevada Department of Wildlife provided written comments to MG (specific to the Spring Mountains National Conservation Area), as its representatives had been unable to participate in the listening session.

To distill the recommendations presented at the end of this report, a workshop was held on April 28, 2014, in Ogden, Utah, with the Communities of Place Advisory Group and members of the Intermountain Region District Ranger Council. After thoroughly discussing the findings, participants prioritized the recommendations that follow as ones that could create the most meaningful and immediate impact.

Overarching Findings/Themes

We have organized the findings from the internal and external stakeholder engagement process into **eight overarching themes** as follows:

A. MISSING THE LOVE

People lead with their emotional love of the land, a high-potential but underutilized opportunity for connection.

B. THREATS TEARING US APART

Growing threats to natural resources are fueling the “environment versus economy” debate rather than inspiring unified action toward solutions.

C. LAND TRANSFERS UNLIKELY

National forests are highly unlikely to be transferred to the states for management, despite high-profile attention.

D. DISCONNECT BETWEEN WORK AND MISSION

The Forest Service's work is not framed or communicated in the context of why the agency does what it does (its mission), creating the impression of an agency driven by its to-do list.

E. LEADERSHIP STYLE REIGNS SUPREME

Individual leadership styles dictate the public's experience with the Forest Service, as opposed to organizational brand and reputation, resulting in mixed impressions.

F. CAREER LADDER UNHELPFUL

Moving up within the Forest Service often depends on changing locations, an intentionally designed tradition that is resulting in unintended consequences.

G. NO ONE LIKES "DO MORE WITH LESS"

The public reacts positively to the Forest Service's presence when employees let go of a "do more with less" mindset and engage on shared interests.

H. SILENCE DOES NOT AVOID CONTROVERSY

Where the Forest Service stops communicating, a vacuum is created, allowing others to tell the agency's story, often placing it in a poor light.

To allow for a basis of comparison between employee and external stakeholder views and experiences with regard to the Forest Service, we have noted whether each of the detailed findings represents a **joint perception** (held by both the Forest Service and external constituents), **public perception**, or **employee perception**. If there are no separate public or employee perceptions noted, there was complete alignment between the two, and these are listed under "Joint perception." To bring in the many diverse voices that contributed to this work, each set of findings is followed by illustrative quotes from external stakeholders and employees.

A. MISSING THE LOVE

People lead with their emotional love of the land, a high-potential but underutilized opportunity for connection.

Joint perception

- A.1 **Passion for the land is a core value** that drives behaviors, and there is untapped potential to unify diverse perspectives around this shared value.
- A.2 In rural communities, **people love the land for economic benefit**, in addition to cultural heritage and legacy, whereas in urban communities there is a greater tendency to **value land for recreation and protection of wildlife**.
- A.3 Although the perceived threats to the forests often depend on the person's point of view, deep appreciation of and commitment to the land drives **awareness and interest in preventing the loss of forests**.

- A.4 There are examples of how **communities have come together around their shared love of the land** and formed collaborations of diverse stakeholders that led to successful projects, but these are not the norm.
- A.5 **The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process is widely considered onerous** and the language too technical to tap into people’s love of the land – inside or outside the agency – which makes it difficult to understand why or how to be involved.

Public perception

- A.6 Because of the public’s love of the land, there is an **expressed willingness and interest to come to the table** to meet with the Forest Service, collaborate with those who hold opposing views, and volunteer for projects such as trail maintenance. Some even offer other means of support.

Employee perception

- A.7 The increased workloads employees experience make it **harder to stop, reflect, and consider the opportunities afforded by bringing people together.**

Quotes by external stakeholders

“Being a Western person with pioneer grandparents, rangelands are really the context of what the West is about. There are so many relationships that are interrelated. It is clear you have to take care of the land.”

“We depend on the public lands because all the wealth is derived from natural resources. The entire economy and culture of this county depend on public lands and multiple uses. It’s our inheritance.”

“The land is such an important part of our livelihood. It literally puts the coffee on our tables.”

“Look around you. The Forest Service is the common denominator with a lot of people in this room. Bring people in as resources ... and become a convener.”

Quotes by employees

“Public lands are the ultimate in a true democracy. No matter what your economic status is, the land is a treasure we can share with the world. It is an incredible resource that we take way too much for granted.”

“Volunteer programs really create a lot of ownership for people to be able to come in and spend some time – even if it’s one of the really short programs like the litter cleanups that happen here – it’s such a memorable experience for folks who have that interaction with the forest. I think it creates a lot of value.”

B. THREATS TEARING US APART

Growing threats to natural resources are fueling the “environment versus economy” debate rather than inspiring unified action toward solutions.

Joint perception

- B.1 **The fragile state of the land has heightened tensions within the region** and further positions the Forest Service as a broker of opposing views rather than as a convener toward common goals and solutions.
- B.2 **National forests face a variety of natural and human-caused threats**, although there is disagreement about what the threats are (e.g., catastrophic wildfires, pine bark beetles, invasive species, climate change, too much recreation, restricting access, lack of enforcement of policies on forest lands, lack of active land management [e.g., fuel load reduction, fire breaks], overgrazing, logging, mining, and regulations to protect sage grouse).
- B.3 The Forest Service is implementing blanket **policies from above without taking into account how these might disproportionately affect rural communities**. Controversial issues such as travel management decisions are sometimes pushed through without sufficient community input or without taking the input received into account.
- B.4 There is disproportionate **focus and attention on critics with extreme views and special interest groups that threaten to litigate**. This leads to decision making that is more reactive than proactive, a tendency to avoid conflicts and decisions, hesitancy to convene diverse perspectives, risk intolerance, and occasionally not backing employees who go out on a limb to engage their communities.
- B.5 There was **sincere appreciation for the listening sessions** as an opportunity to discuss where community engagement is working and where it is not.

Public perception

- B.6 **People understand multiple use and its inherent challenges but give the Forest Service low marks** for achieving the right balance because of the following shortcomings:
- Increased decision making by managers based on satellite pictures viewed behind a desk rather than boots on the ground visiting the land in question.
 - Lack of enforcement of policies and rules on national forests, prompting active recreationists to flout laws and engage in damaging activities.
 - Perceived favoritism, particularly in rural communities, toward (1) environmental groups because of a fear of getting sued and (2) the “user group” that is most near and dear to the Forest Service. (Noteworthy: When the rural public feels heard and understood, people often refer to Forest

Service employees as able to comprehend their perspective because of “coming from a grazing background” or “a mining background” or “growing up in these parts.” Likewise, when people did not feel they had been heard or considered, it was often perceived that the Forest Service is expressing favoritism toward particular groups.)

Quotes by external stakeholders

“A small environmental group will have more access to the Forest Service than a commissioner who has been elected by 90% of the people. The environmental group – who may have no people behind them – has the same level of voice as the commissioner.”

“It’s amazing when man does a little bit of management how much healthier the forest is. If you took some of the trees down you have much more water, more grazing, and healthier forests. Even the sportsmen that don’t always get along with the cattlemen want the forest to be thinned.”

“Everybody is looking at how you cut the pie into more pieces, but you just can’t do everything in one place.”

“Travel management plan was very contentious. ... We felt like it was getting forced down the community’s throat and they had their minds made up from the start.”

Quotes by employees

“Rural communities depend on the forests for their livelihood. Multiple use is absolutely essential to make it work. If it weren’t for the Forest Service these communities would shrivel up and go away.”

“I would say we engage whomever is yelling the loudest. You try to engage with folks at meetings, but more often than not it’s the permittees you’re trying to resolve a dispute with, or an environmental group litigating you, or an adjacent landowner with a complaint about something happening on the forest.”

“Some people don’t realize we get as much flak from environmental groups as we do from the folks making their living off the land. Sometimes we’re in the middle, caught by all sides.”

“It’s good to know what your opponents think. There’s probably a grain of truth in every one of their points. If we just ignore them ... there might be a gem of an idea in one of those groups that could help us see how to do business differently. I need to keep reminding myself that this is their public land that they look at it every day, so it’s on us to take the best idea of what we’re hearing and say we probably can do something with that.”

C. LAND TRANSFERS UNLIKELY

National forests are highly unlikely to be transferred to the states for management, despite high-profile attention.

Joint perception

- C.1 Even publicly **vocal champions quietly acknowledge the unlikelihood of a transfer** due to complexities of the environmental lobby, a states' rights movement built more on philosophy than practicality, tribal treaty rights, and so forth.
- C.2 There is a fear that the **transition to state-managed forests would negatively affect the resource**. Financially strapped states would struggle more than the Forest Service to care for the land, particularly with fire and disease management.
- C.3 There is widespread **concern that states would sell lands to private owners for profit** or lean toward a particular extractive use based on the highest bidder.
- C.4 There is some concern, depending on the viewpoint, that **state control would bypass NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) and eliminate the public voice** in land management decisions.

Public perception

- C.5 **Proponents of federal land transfer to the states are anti-federal government in general**, motivated by the prospect of increased economic opportunity, fewer restrictions, faster turnaround on projects, and freedom from a Washington office that they perceive as having no understanding of their local community or way of life out West. (Note: For the most part, the proponents of transfer of federal lands to states were heard in Challis and, in a very small minority, in Cedar City.)

Quotes by external stakeholders

"We need to let the Forest Service do its job. They know how to manage land; we need to let them do it."

"Our state legislature is really pushing to get management authority from the Forest Service. I don't think our state has a clue how much money and resources it would take for the state to take on the Forest Service's responsibilities. ... It is a way to get around the cautiousness of the Forest Service that is driven by litigation."

"The East Coast tells the West Coast what to do but won't give us the money to do it. That is why the people and the state are looking to take back our lands."

Quotes by employees

"I think the question we should be asking is, 'What would happen if the states and the federal government cooperated in the management of public lands?'"

"I have grave concerns that when you move federal lands to the states they will only look at the forest as that state's product. The national forests belong to everyone in the country, from Nevada to New Jersey, and it's not just a state decision on how it should be used."

"States lack capacity, money, and scientists to manage the multiple-use mandate. They think they can, but when they look at what the feds spend to manage public lands, states do not have the resources. A lot of land would get locked up."

D. DISCONNECT BETWEEN WORK AND MISSION

The Forest Service's work is not framed or communicated in the context of why the agency does what it does (its mission), creating the impression of an agency driven by its to-do list.

Joint perception

- D.1 Employees have a tendency to **use the word "mission" to describe what they must do rather than the higher purpose and values that compel them to do it.**
- D.2 **Few can articulate what makes the Forest Service unique or uniquely important overall;** employees communicate the mission in relation to their specific job, while stakeholders perceive it in relation to their preferred uses of the land.
- D.3 Instead of viewing "caring for the land and serving the people" as a unified purpose with the two components intrinsically connected, **many see the Forest Service choosing between land conservation and providing to/for the public.**
- D.4 **Values often ascribed to the Forest Service are actually negative statements about condition and behavior:** hierarchical, consumed with process, bureaucratic, reactionary, afraid of litigation or controversy, checking off boxes, and overwhelmed with paperwork.
- D.5 The behavior of the Forest Service is often perceived to be about **protecting and perpetuating the institution (e.g., laws, process, risk abatement, bureaucracy) rather than the land.**
- D.6 There is a **sense that the Forest Service was different in the past;** employees had more pride and more time to be out on the ground in their uniforms, engaging the community and serving the public.

Public perception

- D.7 **Small rural communities know the Forest Service and the national forest system, and they can distinguish it** from other federal land managers (Bureau of Land Management [BLM], National Park Service [NPS], etc.).
- D.8 **Those without a direct working relationship with the Forest Service know very little or nothing about the agency and its people** (e.g., non-forest-related business community, the Spanish-speaking community, some of the tribal members).
- D.9 Many Forest Service **employees do not take the time to interact with or educate the public about the agency's mission. Those who do so make an impact on individual members of the public**, and they were highly praised.

Employee perception

- D.10 Some employees believe their **values aligned better with the Forest Service's values when they first joined the agency**; it was a "force to be reckoned with" that empowered employees to carry out the mission.
- D.11 When talking to the public, **some employees often blame their superiors in the Washington office or regional office for an unpopular decision rather than explain its rationale and defend it**. The tactic may help build individual connections locally, but it is eroding trust in the agency overall.
- D.12 Many Forest Service **employees do not feel they have the time to interact with or educate the public about the mission**.

Quotes by external stakeholders

"As an agency their core value is still maintaining the health and integrity of our national forests and grasslands. That is their main core value. With organizations as big as they are, that gets diluted a lot of times, and its strength differs by what part of the organization you are dealing with."

"I would like the Forest Service to reexamine their roots, go back to multiple use and take a commonsense, more reasonable approach. ... Things change over time, but the fundamental reason for their existence doesn't, and they need to get back to that."

"Most people would say they understand multiple use perfectly. The problem I have with people talking about it is that they are all in favor as long as MY use is the predominant use for the land – they understand it but interpret it selfishly."

"I don't see leadership or anybody trying to stir up excitement and get people to support the mission."

"Forest Service needs a pocket card that says, 'caring for the land; serving the people' so people can understand the mission."

Quotes by employees

“I grew up on Lassie. I wanted to work for the Forest Service in the worst way. When I first started, I lived and breathed the Forest Service. Over the last 15 years, I’ve seen the Forest Service change. It’s just an agency now.”

“The Forest Service has gone through a substantial identity crisis. Are we the Fire Service or the Forest Service, and what role does that play? We don’t focus on what we can do well. We haven’t identified our brand and what we are really trying to protect.”

E. LEADERSHIP STYLE REIGNS SUPREME

Individual leadership styles dictate the public’s experience with the Forest Service, as opposed to organizational brand and reputation, resulting in mixed impressions.

Joint perception

- E.1 Although there is widespread recognition that the Forest Service leaders face increased workloads and landscapes to cover, **there are great shared stories about particular leaders who are able to get things done.**
- E.2 **The diversity of leadership approaches leads to inconsistent and unpredictable Forest Service experiences** for the public and employees.
- E.3 The success or failure of the **Forest Service’s engagement with people depends on individual leadership styles at the district and forest levels.** Inconsistencies result in differences in policy implementation, inclusion, and visibility.
- E.4 There is **agreement about the profile and characteristics of good leaders at the Forest Service:**
 - They listen to understand, are willing to ask questions, seek solutions and resources, and then act on that information in a timely manner to the best of their abilities.
 - They make decisions, empower and trust their employees to make decisions, and remain accountable.
 - They communicate regularly and openly. They take the time to explain the WHY behind decisions and share rationale and how decisions were reached with both employees and the public.
 - They are accessible, with an open-door policy, and value face-to-face communication.
 - They are knowledgeable. They take the time to understand local community needs and potential impacts, they understand the jobs held by employees and are willing to roll up their sleeves to help with any job needed, and they stand up for employees and local community needs and/or represent their

interests at the regional office (rather than pursue self-interest or self-preservation).

- They are visible in the community. They make a point to be active in the community by attending diverse meetings and through involvement in activities such as serving on school boards or chambers of commerce, coaching, and volunteering.

E.5 **Fear of litigation undermines good leadership** because it eliminates willingness to take risks, drives conflict avoidance, and perpetuates “analysis paralysis.”

Employee perception

E.6 **District rangers clearly described their roles as frontline staff.** The description that follows is presented in their words. There is great alignment between this and the description of a good leader shared by employees and the public.

- **Support employees:** Kick rocks out of the way of employees so they can get the job done, create passion among employees, advocate for them up the ladder, and block for them when they get pressure from higher-ups who don't understand what they're doing.
- **Communicate:** Listen, invest face time, build relationships, and be a contact in the community.
- Serve as a **convener of stakeholders.**
- **Educate:** Help the community understand how the mission looks in action and what actually happens on the ground to ensure that we achieve the mission on a local and national basis.
- **Advocate for the land:** Advocate in terms of impacts that will or will not happen.
- **Lead and be accountable:** Be a role model, walk the talk, and lead by example.
- **Be process engineers:** There's a way to go around the process or change it if we choose to take the time. It's easy to say no. But we can choose to make things happen if we, and our community members, are ready for the long haul.
- Do things that **make us relevant externally.**

E.7 Yet there exists an apparent **disconnect between some district rangers who know and describe the profile and characteristics of a good leader (see E.4) and the experience their employees and the public have with some of their leadership.**

Quotes by external stakeholders

"The forest supervisor goes out of her way to work with groups and make things happen. We had this bridge that was unsafe. She called us to see how we could work together to solve the problem. She brought the county in, and within 30 days we had a short-term and long-term resolution. Instead of saying 'no,' she brought people together to figure it out."

"It really comes down to the individual. It can work and be so rewarding, but it can also be downright miserable."

"So much depends on who is in office and how willing they are to risk position or advancement."

Quotes by employees

"In the last couple years, Region 4 has become a more positive arena and a little more worth taking a risk to work toward a common goal. It has a lot to do with leadership staff we've hired. DRs [district rangers] and the Forest Service have different attitudes on how they're willing to sit at the table with people and hammer out problems to creatively come up with solutions instead of, 'We have no money, so no, we can't do that.'"

"I take the time to educate people and allow them to educate me. I find ways to work with them. ... I tell my teams that the community where we are is who we are working for."

"There is a lack of leadership, and we are in a constant reactive and not proactive state. We have a lot of dedicated employees, but the demands are really intense, and the skills needed are not the skills we have."

"We don't train our folks enough for those polarizations or don't look for people with those skills, that is, strong communication and leadership skills. All this leads to poor morale, and it's like we are a rudderless ship."

F. CAREER LADDER UNHELPFUL

Moving up within the Forest Service often depends on changing locations, an intentionally designed tradition that is resulting in unintended consequences.

Joint perception

- F.1 Moving employees around can allow them to gain experience from other regions and bring fresh ideas into a forest, but **most see this practice as much more of a hindrance than a help to building trust and relationships in communities.**
- F.2 Relationships that **"homegrown" employees have in their communities are not always leveraged when a new leader comes into town**, a missed opportunity to compensate for the challenge of transitions. For example, homegrown employees

are not consistently relied on to make an introduction, attend a cultivation meeting, help resolve a conflict, address a misperception, and so forth.

- F.3 Even though it makes them more successful in their work, employees who make a conscious decision to stay in the same community often feel like they are **sacrificing their own career advancement or are perceived as underperformers.**

Public perception

- F.4 A community's **perception of the Forest Service often shifts dramatically with district ranger or forest supervisor transitions.**
- F.5 The **"move out to move up" practice is perceived to be an agency policy** required for career advancement.
- F.6 Some **perceive that leaders are purposefully moved in and out to complete an unpopular decision and avoid accountability** or to guard against the development of allegiance to the community.
- F.7 Leadership **transitions complicate relationship building, create gaps in understanding of the local area, and disrupt the continuity** of projects and planning processes.

Employee perception

- F.8 **The transition of leaders with completely different styles and approaches affects morale** and how engaged, trusted, and respected employees feel in their workplace.

Quotes by external stakeholders

"Our community has Forest Service rangers who have been there for a long time. We have regular meetings, and they are deeply involved in our county. We were successful in getting things done thanks to our strong relationships with the Forest Service."

"There was a time that the Forest Service understood grasses better than anybody, but now just when an employee gets good they move on."

"A new person comes in and reinvents the wheel. And yet we are there all of the time with a tremendous amount of information."

"We've had five different rangers in the last eight years. They aren't part of the community, and they're just there until their next post. When I brought it up at a meeting they just said, 'Live with it.'"

"We laugh about the revolving door; there's just no consistency."

"Communication breaks down because they are here today and gone tomorrow."

"Forest Service employees used to be involved in our communities, but now two years is a long term for a district ranger. It's as if they're sent here to implement unpopular policies and then get rewarded by transferring."

Quotes by employees

"The district ranger turnover and the instability takes its toll, and employees can feel it. Is this person here because they care about this place, or are they here just on their way up? They are not willing to make the hard calls on what we stand for. They can't make waves to not jeopardize their careers."

"Turnover amongst employees is about us making a career choice. I've had someone say he only stays in a position for three years and then he's learned enough and moves on. I think it's within our purview to say, 'I'm looking for a district ranger to stay here at least five to seven years because I need to build some trust.'"

"The loss of momentum with projects is very costly. When people leave, people forget that something is out here not finished. We then start over. For example, we had one project almost ready for decision. The leader passed away. Someone came to replace him but reported under a different DR [district ranger]. All the questions that had been answered and the thinking that had gone into the project were lost. We had 50 miles of surveys and analysis that were not used."

G. NO ONE LIKES "DO MORE WITH LESS"

The public reacts positively to the Forest Service's presence when employees let go of a "do more with less" mindset and engage on shared interests.

Joint perception

- G.1 **People want to experience the Forest Service actively engaging in the community**, but bureaucratic systems, hard targets, and increased workloads prevent this.
- G.2 Even in the most contentious areas, there is a **strong desire to clear through the red tape and start working together** for the land everyone values so deeply.

Public perception

- G.3 Forest Service employees individually are often viewed as **good community citizens** (e.g., volunteer service, teaching), **but their "off the clock" contributions are not seen as connected to the Forest Service.**
- G.4 While there is empathy for local Forest Service employees' managing with limited resources, the **public still feels frustrated by not getting its needs met by the agency.**

Employee perception

- G.5 Employees recognize the correlation between the agency's **low morale and the pressure of having to be all things to all people with fewer resources.**
- G.6 "Do more with less" has become a very negative term for employees, who feel they are already doing so and have nothing left to give. In some cases, it is viewed as a direct contradiction of the agency's focus on safety.

- G.7 Most employees **blame things beyond their control as barriers to prioritizing public engagement** (e.g., administrative duties, workloads, lack of prioritization, not having all the answers).

Quotes by external stakeholders

"The people I know in the Forest Service are doing the best they can with the resources they have."

"You cannot keep cutting their budget and increasing work they have to do. Vacancies remain vacant for months. How can you do your job without staff?"

"With budget slashing and costly lawsuits, the Forest Service has sadly devolved into a planning organization. Because of all the appeals and the lawsuits, they have to go to great extents to ensure decisions are bulletproof and can withstand challenge."

"Every time they try to do something, the Forest Service gets a lawsuit. ... There are fewer feet on the ground because they are in the office doing legal paperwork. The Forest Service rangers want to be out on the ground but are stuck behind the desk."

"It's been a transition. Fifteen to 20 years ago, they came to the Board of County Commissioners and asked which roads we wanted to keep and which ones we didn't. They don't do that anymore."

Quotes by employees

"As we become more shorthanded, we become less efficient. We can't continue to expand. We are already doing more with less. ... Why can't someone at the Forest Service and the regional office realize this?"

"I drove 1,200 miles this week just to do my job. This isn't safe."

"We visit the forests through Google."

H. SILENCE DOES NOT AVOID CONTROVERSY

Where the Forest Service stops communicating, a vacuum is created, allowing others to tell the agency's story, often placing it in a poor light.

Joint perception

- H.1 The agency **does not do a good job of regularly communicating** its reasons for being, its successes, or the values behind its decisions.
- H.2 Outside the listening sessions, **proactive storytelling about the good work of the Forest Service is largely absent and represents a major missed opportunity.**
- H.3 There are **high dividends for the Forest Service when it takes the opportunity to educate and share information**, even while enforcing a policy.

- H.4 **Some employees avoid communicating with the public**, explaining that they do not feel empowered, informed, or comfortable enough sharing information.
- H.5 While people recognize that the agency cannot always prevent rumors and inaccuracies, **it was noted that the Forest Service rarely corrects misinformation and should do so.**

Public perception

- H.6 **The Forest Service communicates at its best during a fire;** if it regularly communicated like it does during a fire, much more would be accomplished.
- H.7 **Lack of communication has led to misperceptions of favoritism, resentment, and an “us versus them” mentality.** Some of the most recalcitrant individuals shared that all they want is a simple acknowledgment that they have been heard and a rationale for decisions and they will be fine.
- H.8 **Many external stakeholders do not feel informed,** noting out-of-date Forest Service website content, lack of signage and maps in national forests, and too little social media presence beyond basic information such as road closures.

Employee perception

- H.9 Employees recognize **the difference it makes to have a dedicated team of public information officers with the time** to focus on proactive communications, support for local district offices, and engaging the community.

Quotes by external stakeholders

“The Forest Service did some great collaborative work recently, but they need to hire a PR firm to put their successes and budgetary shortfalls out there for the public.”

“The Forest Service doesn’t do a good a job educating the general public on the task at hand and the magnitude of their work. They don’t do it in an informal way, nor do they explain the reasons they do different things; they just put out a press release.”

“The best interaction we have year in and year out is with the fire management. They break down barriers to get the job done. If that happened with other approaches, it would accomplish a lot.”

Quotes by employees

“There is a lack of Forest Service employees pushing back and defending their position. We stay in silence instead of telling the story – ‘we may have closed 1,000 miles, but we opened 1,500 miles of new road.’”

“Every one of our biggest issues can be traced back to a failure in communications.”

"We debated about what to do and finally decided this was a great chance to talk to those people. ... It took an extra half hour, and they were super happy. They were up there working on an Eagle Scout project and were trying to get some information but weren't sure who to contact, so we gave them information. One of our guys got a really nice thank-you note later. ... I do think we need to empower our people to take five minutes and talk to the public."

"Our fire guys are one of our best advertisers. They go out to these events with our Smokey the Bear trailer and they're out there talking to a lot of different people. These guys are good spokespeople; they tell a good story."

"The public believes things that are largely untrue because of the reluctance of Forest Service staff to go the extra step to accommodate a permittee, or explain why a program has changed, or why they can't accommodate what someone may want. It comes down to communication and taking enough time to help people really understand things."

Culturally Unique Findings

Within the 21 listening sessions, MG conducted 3 that were with tribal representatives, Spanish-speaking community members, and teenagers – stakeholders whom the Forest Service felt it would not hear from unless a culturally specific session were held.

The findings that follow represent the perceptions of the participants in those listening sessions. The sample sizes are too small to generalize across entire populations. However, the information can be used as a starting point for deeper engagement, discussions, and exploration with those communities.

Tribes

In St. George, Utah, we held a listening session with tribal members of three bands of the Paiute Tribe: the Kanosh and Koosharem Bands of Paiutes and the Kaibab Paiutes. We also conducted an in-person interview with Chairman Silas Whitman of the Nez Perce. Chairman Whitman gave MG permission to attribute his name to the feedback in an effort to support improved tribal relations and communication.

Several themes emerged across all conversations:

I.1 **There is a lack of consistent, proactive, personal, and ongoing communication between Forest Service leadership and tribal leadership.**

- Personal and face-to-face communication is the preferred communication style, particularly in anticipation of a major decision or to discuss a specific issue. Once a relationship has been established through in-person contact, regular and ongoing interpersonal communication by other means, such as by phone, is appropriate to maintain the relationship. A lack of interpersonal communication creates deeper divides and erodes trust. Representatives from more than one tribe mentioned receiving letters in the mail informing

them of major decisions or upcoming work. These letters felt impersonal. Instead they would have preferred a phone call or in-person meeting.

- Depending on forest leadership, there has been inconsistent priority given to working with tribes and conducting outreach and relationship building with tribal leaders. For example, there was a tribal chair in the listening session who had never been contacted by the local forest district office despite the tribal office's being located just a few miles away. Representatives of a different tribe in the same meeting had numerous positive relationships and experiences that they enthusiastically described.
- There were examples of major decisions made in which the affected tribes had not been consulted ahead of time or in which a lack of communication had led to conflicts.

Quotes

"Consultations with the tribes should be in face-to-face meetings. No phone. No webinar. We should be treated like a sovereign nation, not a stakeholder group."

"You get notifications that they are building something, and all you get is a letter. We don't get notification if they have found anything (cultural artifacts) on tribal lands. Do they ever find anything? Likely that they do, but they don't want to slow down the process and bring in our tribal opinion."

"There is no interaction. When people used to have projects with BLM they would come down to the office, and they would tell you about it. We really don't get anything from the Forest Service other than a letter."

I.2 Increased cultural sensitivity and understanding are needed.

- A lack of cultural awareness on the part of some Forest Service leadership was identified as a primary source of past conflicts between tribes and the agency. Forest Service leaders should be knowledgeable and well read about the tribes in their region or should surround themselves with people who have that knowledge. Forest Service employees should feel comfortable asking questions of the tribes; however, such consultation should take place face to face. Tribes are willing to provide training but are rarely asked for this type of support.
- Chairman Whitman shared an example of cultural insensitivity in which the Forest Service approached a different tribe to get its input and approval on an issue affecting Nez Perce lands. This was considered not only highly inappropriate and a violation of the law but also very offensive. The incident was attributed to the Forest Service leader's not having experience working with tribes and not getting proper intelligence from the team.

Quotes

"We will educate you. Don't be afraid to ask."

“Our cultural resources aren’t taken seriously.”

“We have the strongest treaty in the country, with unassailable rights, but somebody needs to tell the foresters that.”

I.3 The Forest Service does not always take into account cultural needs and practices when making decisions that affect tribal lands.

- The Paiute tribes requested that the Forest Service consider a tribal permitting process related to traditional activities such as gathering – whether medicinal, soil, rocks, or ceremonial.

Quote

“There is a process, but it is not for specific cultural reasons. The normal permit process is very cumbersome.”

I.4 A decision to transfer public lands to the states would be considered a violation of tribal rights to the land and would incur tribal intervention.

Quote

“Selling off public lands to the state would add insult to injury because we sold those lands to the federal government, and they screwed the tribes, so transferring them to the state or selling them to private interests would be horrible since they should be returned to the tribes in the first place. If you’re going to be giving away lands in Idaho you better make sure we’re first in line.”

I.5 Tribes have much they can learn from the Forest Service.

- There is a new generation of Indian youth needing to learn about the land and conservation as well as college students who must learn professions that are prominent in the Forest Service such as forestry, wildlife science (elk and sheep management), and cultural science. These are professions and expertise that will help tribes sustain themselves in the long term. All the tribal representatives we spoke with reiterated this need. In the case of the Nez Perce, Chairman Whitman noted that tribal foresters are growing old and there is a need for on-site training for young people pursuing these careers that could be filled by local forests such as the Boise.

Spanish-Speaking Community Members

MG conducted a listening session with 12 Spanish-speaking community members in the Las Vegas area. The meeting was facilitated in Spanish and was held at Community Services of Nevada, a Latino community-based organization. The organization helped MG recruit participants.

The following themes emerged during the session:

J.1 There exists a strong connection to nature and the land and an understanding of the relationship between the health of the forest and the health of individuals.

- Participants enthusiastically shared their love of nature and spending time in the outdoors and also projected a solid understanding of the important role healthy forests play in cleaning the air, protecting wildlife, and contributing to physical and emotional health. All but one participant had visited Mount Charleston (within Spring Mountains National Recreation Area located in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest) at least once within the previous year, and several had visited multiple times.
- Time outdoors was equated with time spent with family and friends. No one had visited the mountain alone. Other motivators for visiting the forest were access to fresh air, peace and tranquility, and wildlife.
- Asthma from urban pollution was cited as a major concern, and some participants felt this could be relieved with more time spent in nature.

Quotes (translated from Spanish)

"The thing I value most in nature is the fresh air, the peace, and the tranquility."

"I like to go up [to Mount Charleston] for about six hours. We go up for barbecues, picnics, have fires, and take pictures."

J.2 There is a lack of awareness of the Forest Service as an agency in connection to the forests that people like to visit.

- Despite nearly all participants' having visited Mount Charleston at least once within the last year, not a single participant knew, unprompted, what the Forest Service was. Likewise, when shown the Forest Service logo, a few who recognized it said there were no forests in Nevada (they did know they had visited some Forest Service lands in California and New Mexico). Some mentioned having visited forests in other states but then proceeded to list national parks (Zion, Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Big Bear). All were surprised when they learned that Mount Charleston is part of the Forest Service. With regard to recognition of other land-managing agencies, two participants had seen television ads promoting visits to national parks and noted how nice it would be to visit, but the ad never told them where they are located or how to get there. There was no recognition at all of the BLM logo or name.

Quote (translated from Spanish)

"I haven't even seen [the Forest Service logo] in a photo. Maybe I have seen it on the police officers and forest rangers in California but not here. In Mount Charleston they have something similar."

J.3 The community is interested in learning more about the Forest Service and receiving education about national forests.

- Following the session, the hosting organization photocopied the list of national forests in the Intermountain Region that had been brought to the meeting because all participants asked for a copy.
- The participants expressed a strong desire for the Forest Service to increase its outreach and engagement in the Hispanic community, particularly in relation to environmental education and providing schoolchildren with access to Forest Service lands. The participants noted that once children are excited, they will bring their parents. Community Services of Nevada invited the Forest Service to participate in its 14th annual (and very popular) Hispanic International Day Parade.
- The most popular media for sharing information with the Hispanic community in the Las Vegas metro area are 1340 AM, 99.3 La Kalle, El Mundo, and El Tiempo.
- In addition, several participants shared that they volunteer at multiple community organizations and were eager to explore opportunities for voluntarism with the Forest Service.
- Outreach conducted by a collaborative of other public agencies was shared as a successful Hispanic community engagement example. The Hispanic Civil Engagement Academy teaches community members about their rights and helps build relationships with law enforcement and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, among other agencies. (The information was relayed to the local district ranger.)
- The participants expressed a strong desire for bilingual information, such as signs, interpretive centers, maps, and guides.

Quotes

"They never reach out to our community."

"We need education. They should come to the schools and teach the children first. I've heard of them going to schools in California, taking students on field trips, but not here."

"Sometimes there are maps, but I've never seen one in Spanish."

J.4 There is an eagerness to interact with rangers and Forest Service employees in the areas visited.

- Participants have the sense that the Forest Service employees they have seen (once they made the connection between Mount Charleston and the Forest Service) do not take the time to share information, explain the rules, and so forth. Many of the interactions participants have had with Forest Service employees were seen as negative, related to enforcement. This perception was exacerbated by the fact that Forest Service uniforms look like the uniforms of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“the only thing different is the patch on their arm”).

Quotes

“They only talk about what not to do: don’t drink, don’t have a fire here, do not enter here.”

“How many times have I visited Mount Charleston and not even noticed it was Forest Service? It would be nice to have someone greeting people so they feel welcome.”

J.5 Lack of a relationship with Forest Service employees combined with widespread misinformation leads to a lack of consideration of the agency as a viable employer.

- When asked if they would consider working at the agency or referring family members to work there, participants unanimously responded that they did not know anyone there, wouldn't know how to go about getting a job there, and most likely would not be considered because there weren't any Hispanics working there.

Quotes

“I don’t even know how to get a job there.”

“There are no Hispanics there. They are all white; not even blacks work there.”

J.6 Implicit fear of and misperceptions about what happens in nature might hinder increased enjoyment of Forest Service lands.

- A number of participants cited safety concerns as a major impediment to their enjoyment of public lands. The following are a few of the concerns mentioned by participants:
 - Pollen’s causing allergies or asthma to flare up
 - Fear of drowning in a river or lake
 - Getting lost on roads accessing public lands
 - Fear of wild animals

- Fear of getting fined for breaking a rule or policy with which they were unfamiliar

Quotes

"I go to Mount Charleston with my boyfriend or with my family and friends in a big group. We don't go alone because it is dangerous. It is dangerous to drive because you could get lost."

"It's dangerous because a lot of people go swimming, get drunk, and drown."

"There is nowhere I can go by myself. People don't go alone; it's too dangerous."

Youth

The youth session was held at Duchesne High School in Duchesne, Utah. Six students ranging from 9th grade to 12th grade participated in the session. It is important to note that Duchesne is a rural area, and in this research we do not have data or perspectives from urban youth.

K.1 **The students have a deep understanding and appreciation of the land and multiple-use land management.**

- While this aligns with overarching findings, it is worth noting that these high school students were well informed about the Forest Service and about their families' reliance on the land for both sustenance and recreational purposes. They were able to describe how they experience multiple use on forest lands in very tangible ways.

Quotes

"Everything I do is in the outdoors. I'd rather be outdoors than anywhere else ... fishing, hiking, hunting."

"We depend on venison. We hunt to feed our family. We'd be in a rough spot without hunting to feed our family."

"Without the forest, there would be more floods, and stuff without vegetation to hold things down."

K.2 **When compared to other public agencies such as Utah Fish and Game and BLM, the Forest Service has a good reputation.**

- The students noted that they hear good things about the Forest Service and have had positive experiences interacting with the agency. Some of the words they associate with the Forest Service include "green pants and khakis," "scouting trips," "family time and spending lots of hours on the mountain," "the majestic wild," and "lots of wildlife."

Quotes

"The Forest Service sees what needs to be done to make that area better, how to make it look better and be better."

"We don't hear bad things about the Forest Service like we do about others like Fish and Game."

"When I see them up in the basin, they are inspecting, making sure you don't have fires too close to the water."

K.3 The students are familiar with Forest Service lands but not with employees.

- The students understood and articulated the Forest Service's many roles and visited Forest Service lands regularly with their families, but they didn't have any direct or personal relationships with Forest Service employees, although they knew of people who worked there. As a result, when sharing career options they were considering, including fish and wildlife management, law enforcement, "something outdoors," and park ranger, they listed agencies such as the National Park Service rather than the Forest Service. When probed, they noted that it was because they would not know how to go about applying with the agency.

Quote

"I don't really know the Forest Service jobs; they're scattered around so much that we don't even see them."

Recommendations

Based on the overarching findings, MG identified three areas of priority for action: **(1) organizational culture, (2) strategic communications, and (3) leadership**. These are not exhaustive but rather offer opportunity to generate immediate results and return on investment, with the long-term goal of increased public engagement, awareness, and support for the US Forest Service in the Intermountain Region.

1) Organizational Culture

The Forest Service has a **long tradition of engaging with and being in community**. In recent years, the once very clearly defined **organizational culture has become unclear and inconsistent in how it is lived and experienced internally and externally across the Intermountain Region**. This focus area will clarify the most important attributes of the organizational culture, determine what keeps people from manifesting it, and determine how best to remove barriers and reinforce desired behaviors that will once again become the norm within the region.

2) Strategic Communications

Enhance employees' ability to communicate with the public and surface creative solutions with a goal of more effectively engaging all of the diverse stakeholders in the region. Develop and implement an external communications strategy for the region.

3) Leadership

Clarify the leadership skills and qualities deemed most desired and effective, and determine the best ways to help *all* employees in the region to embody these qualities.

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John Freemuth – Boise State University
Craig Gehrke – The Wilderness Society
Scott Grasser – Lost Trail Powder Mountain
Jerry Hamilton – Retired Forest Service
Pam Harrington – Trout Unlimited
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Will Whalen – The Nature Conservancy
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NEVADA

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WYOMING

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WYOMING

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