



# Trail Program Status Report

**Background:** The WO Trail Program engaged 290, mostly district-level staff, from all regions to assess current challenges to sustain trail operations and public trail access. Similar challenges are present in wilderness and developed recreation programs.

**Bottomline:** Public access, visitor satisfaction, and recreation-based economic contributions will continue to decline in 2026 and beyond without direction to prioritize investments in recreation generally and the trails program specifically. This would include action in hiring, clearer communication, and improvements around grants and agreement (G&A) management. Without this support, the agency risks losing decades of investment in trail infrastructure.

## Current Challenges & Impacts

- **Districts lost up to 100% of trail staff.** Critical vacancies, staff reassignments, seasonal hiring restrictions, and G&A delays are impeding trail maintenance and partner support. Many AmeriCorps and YCC programs are no longer available. The agency is losing out on tangible partner and volunteer contributions without the staff to coordinate and provide technical oversight. While partners and volunteers augment capacity, they cannot entirely replace agency staff.
  - **Hundreds of years of trail expertise lost.** Lost skills are weakening the agency's ability to implement technical projects and oversee partner, volunteer, and contractor work, which is leading to unpassable trails, unsafe bridges, and negative environmental impacts. Skill gaps are in dry stone masonry, rigging, blasting, saw use, construction, mechanized equipment, project management, and partner/volunteer coordination. Animal packer positions are vacant and pack stock programs are at risk; both are critical to keeping wilderness trails open.
  - **Widespread burnout and declining morale.** Staff report high stress, unclear priorities, poor communication, inconsistent messaging, and misalignment of priorities and resources. Public access is a department priority, but recreation and trail access programs lack support to be effective. Low morale is leading to staff departures from agency and trail program, loss of skills and capacity, and poor customer service.
  - **Operational Gaps**
    - Millions of dollars of unspent grant funds have been returned due to key vacancies, no temporary workforce, and lengthy or stalled agreement processes. Districts are forgoing out-year grant opportunities, resulting in millions of dollars of unrealized future funding.
    - Many districts are unable to conduct basic trail maintenance. Front-country trails are being prioritized; backcountry trails are being abandoned. Deferred maintenance is exponentially compounding.
    - Compliance issues are rising (e.g., illegal motorized use, user-created routes, trash). The public reports missing trail signage, trees blocking access, bridges in disrepair, and tread erosion.
- Impact:** Miles maintained down 22%, miles meeting standard down 19%. Lowest accomplishments in 15 years.
- **Contracting and agreement inefficiencies.** Stalled and unfunded contracts and agreements are putting contractors and partners at risk of insolvency, damaging relationships, and reducing current and future ability to leverage federal investments and partner contributions.

### Immediate Needs

- Expedite temporary seasonal hiring, especially externally-funded. Allow for extensions of externally-funded and disaster-funded Permanent Seasonal Employee (PSE) positions. Exclude temporary seasonals from agency headcount.
- Increase G&A capacity to support the robust partnerships in the trail program
- Provide accurate, consistent messaging from leadership to all levels of the agency. Clearly articulate that recreation and trails are an agency priority.
- Consider restoring direct hire authority for Youth Conservation Corps programs.
- Invest in training in technical trail skills for staff, partners, and volunteers.
- Support continued maintenance of the TACOS mobile app for trail data, condition and accomplishment reporting.

### Voices from the Field

- “My trail program is suffering the worst morale setbacks of all my district programs.” –Acting District Ranger
- “To be honest, I heavily lean toward quitting and reinvention if we go another summer without seasonals. I have never lacked for motivation for trail work until now...it feels like we are on the verge of not passing anything on for the future, and that feels like 24 years of trails and wilderness work rolling back to the bottom of the hill.” –District Trail Manager
- “I have an org chart of 20 rec staff... I have 6 left... and one GS7 tech to cover 200+ miles of trails, Wilderness, and volunteer coordination.” –District Trail Manager
- “We lost 200 years of trail experience this year.” –Forest Recreation Manager
- “With the recent loss of so many key positions, we will lose trails that we won’t be able to maintain.” – Forest Recreation Program Manager
- “We were able to get through the summer doing basic clearing, which kept our overall accomplishment numbers fairly the same, but the reality is the other maintenance tasks such as drainage and brushing did not get done, which maybe wasn't an issue this year, but the cumulative effects will be worse and worse. Then we'll have a huge backlog, even worse than what it was before.” –District Trail Employee